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## **Swami Vivekananda-The Artist**

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### **Abstract**

*Young Narendranath's artist identity as an accomplished musician made him to meet his Guru and mentor Sree Ramakrishna, who realizing his immense spiritual potential, transformed him to Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji) -the world teacher on spirituality.*

*This article analyzing Swamiji's identity as an artist- his accomplishment, training and command over the mastery of music, proficiency in drama, views on both eastern and western art, besides excelling as a litterateur in both English, Bengali and Sanskrit, including his poetic talent -have been elucidated.*

*It has been said of him to be the most thoughtful scholar of the age, an artist in thought and idealist in belief. His poetic talent and skill as an excellent litterateur in English, Bengali and Sanskrit has been explored. His poems (English, Bengali and Sanskrit) and Bengali articles are comparable with that of the famous authors.*

*His religious discourses on spirituality expressing infinite in the language of finite, is said to have enriched the English language itself.*

*Since true art expresses truth, bliss and beauty (Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram) a spiritualist is an artist, which Swamiji was, so was his Guru Sree Ramakrishna. While Sree Ramakrishna remained confined for gifted few, Swamiji was open and understandable for all.*

**Key words:** *Art, Dhrupad, Kirtan, Mughal art, Architecture, Totapuri, Kali, Krishna, Satire, George Bernard Shaw.*

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**Introduction:** It was the artist identity of Swami Vivekananda (then Narendra Nath) that brought him to his Guru and mentor, Sree Ramakrishna (the prophet of the nuclear age), who metamorphosed Brahma-Samajist Narendra Nath in the quest of Truth, into Vedantist Vivekananda realizing the Truth (God).

Around 1881 Narendran Nath, an FA student (pre-graduate level) was an accomplished musician in his locality and in the Brahma Samaj social circle. Narendran Nath was studying at General Assmblies College when he first learnt about Sree Ramakrishna from his favourite Irish teacher Fr. William Hasty. Fr Hasty, while teaching Wordsworth's poem Excursion, told his students of attainment of Wordsworth's trance state on intense concentration of mind at a point with supreme stage of purity in mind. He added that he had

seen such state only in Sree Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar and asked his students to visit him and witness it for themselves<sup>1</sup>.

Sree Ramakrishna Paramhansa was visiting the house of Surendra Nath Mitra who was the neighbour of Narendra Nath. Mr. Mitra, invited the young 19 year old Narendra Nath to sing for his Guru Sree Ramakrishna. Narendra Nath was already curious and agreed to sing at the occasion.

At Surendra Nath's place Narendran Nath sang quite a number of devotional songs, wholeheartedly, with great elegance and devoutness to the best satisfaction of all. Sree Ramakrishna was amazed at seeing such a great soul residing in this young boy at the farthest corner in Calcutta, and dearly entreated him to visit Dakshineswar to which Narendran Nath the Brahmo- Samjist seeker of truth, agreed and visited later, accompanied with his neighbor Surendranath. What happened then is a well-known history. The entire spiritual quest of Narendra Nath were resolved. All the questions he had been seeking so long to elite people of well recognized spiritualist like Brahmo Samaj leader Debendranath Tagore (Father of the poet Rabindranath Tagore) and others got answered by Sree Ramakrishna---the simple God-like priest of Dakshineswar Kali Temple; and the metamorphosis of Narendran Nath to Vivekananda (Swamiji) began to bloom<sup>2</sup>. Brahma-Samajist Narendra Nath used to doubt the Advaita Truth that all is God, God is universe objectified. But just from the touch (grace) of his Guru Sree Ramakrishna, he had this experience of all pervading God, which lasted for quite a number of days<sup>3</sup>.

For the next 6 years the rigorous spiritual journey of Narendran Nath continued with the rationalist Narendranath often questioning and testing Sree Ramakrishna till he got convinced of Sree Ramakrishna's all personified Godhead. Sree Ramakrishna passed away barely 6 years after He met Narendra Nath and proclaimed that that it would be Narendran Nath, who will teach the world Sree Ramakrishna's message (spirituality - Bhakti-love) giving clarion call to all<sup>5</sup>. Referring to this Swamiji later wrote to his brother disciple Sashi Maharaj, "I am an instrument, and He (Sree Ramakrishna) the operator....He makes the dumb eloquent and makes the lame cross the mountain.....Remember, it is His (Ramakrishna's) will - I am a *voice without a form*" (the voice of Sree Ramakrishna)"<sup>6</sup>.

Sree Ramakrishna used to say, "If a single ray of grace befalls one from the Goddess of wisdom (Bagbadini- goddess of expression -BANI), then even the great pundits (scholars) would shrink in his presence<sup>7</sup>. On some other occasion, Sree Ramakrishna said, "There is one such power of grace to the then nineteenth century luminary Sri Keshab Chandra Sen, with which he has become world famous. Whilst in Narendra Nath, then just a young boy and a college student, have eighteen such great powers<sup>8</sup>. Such prophesying of glorifying Narendra Nath to the extreme, proved true to his emergence from Narendra Nath to Swami Vivekananda (Swamiji), the world teacher. Our contention is only to understand the *artist identity* of Swamiji, and the degree of his excellence in its different domains.

As per the Oxford dictionary, the very word, 'Art' means- 'the use of imagination to express ideas or feelings; which includes besides painting/drawing and sculptor, music and

dance, as well'; and an artist is one who creates such piece of art.<sup>9</sup> However, taking a broad based view on 'Art', it may also be considered to accommodate, literature, poetry, drama etc, which are also quite powerful medium of expressing ideas or feelings; which can also be considered to signify the basic contention of art. In the 'inspired talk' section of his works, Swamiji wrote, "All poetry, paintings, and music is feeling expressed through words, colour, through sound"<sup>10</sup>.

In the context of relationship between 'art' and 'spirituality', Swamiji's contention was, "Art science and religion...are but three different ways of expressing the same truth. But in order to understand this we must have the theory of Advaita"<sup>11</sup>. He also wrote to an American Lady, (London, 13.12.1896)- "Music is the highest art and to those who understand, the highest (form of) worship."<sup>12</sup>. In fact, Swamiji being a well trained musician was a perfectionist in music and used to tune the associated instrument properly, before singing<sup>13</sup>.

About Swamiji's artistic literary flare, a news paper report in America described him thus, "...his (Swamiji's) choice of words are a gem in English language...his ideas, as new sparkling drop from his tongue in a perfectly bewildering overflow of ornamental language. ....the most thoughtful scholars of the age.....He is an artist in thought, an idealist in belief and a dramatist in the platform"<sup>14</sup>. An American journalist wrote on him, "Eloquent, logical scholar that he (Swamiji) is- to his finger ends, every word of the Talmud, Koran, Bible and the Vedas, a mind electric in rapidity and clearness of perception, infinite in the variety, beauty and perfection of his parallels and similes. He is the artist, the scholar, the high-priest of man glorified. He thinks and make you think"<sup>15</sup>. They also wrote on his clarity of thinking, saying, "He (Swamiji) advances his ideas with as much deliberation as a professor of mathematics demonstrates an example in algebra to his students"<sup>16</sup>.

Thus under the above backdrop, the following shades on Swamiji as an artist, has been examined. They are:

- Swamiji as a musician (vocal as also instrumental) and his concept on music - both Eastern and Western music.
- Swamiji as a dramatist/ in dancing
- Swamiji's views on art/painting and sculpture- with his suggested schemes on pieces of them.
- Swamiji the litterateur- in both English and Bengali, as also on oratory and as a conversationalist.
- Swamiji-the poet using different languages like, English, Bengali and Sanskrit.

A brief account of them are elaborated below.

**Swamiji -the musician:** Swamiji's first music lesson started at Raipur, from his father Mr. Biswanath Dutta, a lawyer, who having known Indian classical music forms like, Ghazal, Thumri, Tappa etc, taught them to his son as well<sup>17</sup>. Later Swamiji had his formal music training (between the period 1879 and 1883) in North Indian classical music -on both vocal

and instrumental music- from the then famous music teacher, Beni Ustad (Beni Adhikari). Thereafter he undertook training from Ahmad Khan, who happened to be the Guru of Beni Ustad himself.<sup>17</sup>

Swamiji's childhood friend Priya Nath Sinha writes that he used to visit Swamiji's (then Narendra Nath) place. Narendra Nath would push away the study books to one side and taught his friend about the beats of tabla and kept on singing wholeheartedly various classical songs/hymns, of Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit quite often at the cost of his studies. No gathering was complete without Narendra Nath's enchanting music. Even in college break hours his songs so impressed the college professor, that he waited outside the class till the song was over, and entering the class was with all praise on the melody for his singer student<sup>18</sup>.

Right from 1879 Swamiji used to visit Debendra Nath Tagore and took membership of Adi-Brahmo Samaj of Sibnath Sastri and Bijoy Krishna Goswami faction (not of Keshab Chandra Sen group). He regularly attended prayer/meetings of Adi Brahmo-Samaj, himself singing devotional songs of Brahma Sangeet composed by Rabindra Nath Tagore, Dwijendra Nath Tagore, Bishnuram Chattopadhyay etc.<sup>19</sup>. He learnt a few songs from Rabindra Nath Tagore whom he got introduced after 1880, on Tagore's return from UK<sup>19</sup>. Sometimes in 1881 also, RabindraNath Tagore taught Swamiji (then Narendra Nath ) three Dhrupad style songs composed by Tagore himself<sup>20</sup>. Tagore's nephew Dipendra Nath was his class friend in college and an admirer for his music talent<sup>21</sup>.

It is to be noted that Brahma Samaj, the then elitist religious association could not satisfy Swamiji's thirst for spirituality. Sophisticated Western thoughts kept him engaged and engrossed for a while, but it could not convince his inner quest. His friends knew him to be of too much a moralist<sup>22</sup>. In this context may be mentioned about the debate Swamiji had with one of his friend who advocated the well known theme that 'art for art's sake only' which Swamiji vehemently opposed; and he quoted famous authors and poets to establish that unless some message on idealism is there, it becomes unacceptable.<sup>22a</sup> The worldly affluence with its apparent attraction also equally failed to draw Swamiji in its whirlpool<sup>22</sup>. It may be relevant to add here the paradigm shift that occurred on Swamiji's overzealousness with too much of puritanical values, getting elevated to same-sightedness to all, reminding of Vedantic doctrine, that Swamiji himself acknowledged to have realized on hearing a devotional song of Surdas, sung by a dancing girl at Khetri, while he was visiting as wondering monk<sup>22b\*</sup>.

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\*While at Khetri, Swamiji encountered an incident which he said to have removed the scales from his eyes. He realised, "All are indeed the manifestations of the One. He could no longer condemn anybody". This incident runs as below:

Swamiji had reservation to attend a musical performance from a dancing girl, himself being a monk. But on hearing from his room, the content of the heart rending Bhajan of Surdas, that she was singing as:

"O Lord ! look not upon my iniquity, you being known for same-sightedness. A piece of iron in a temple or, in butchers hand- both turn to Gold when touched with philosophers stone." (*Hamare Prabhu Abaguna chita na dharo, samadarasi hyay nam tiharo, AAb mohi par koro.....etc in Hindi*)<sup>22b</sup>

On hearing the song from his room Swamiji was immediately reminded of the Vedantic doctrine that Divinity dwells in all and knows no distinction. He himself went to that woman to say, "Mother ! You have opened my eyes, not to discriminate anybody",<sup>22b</sup>.

Having such momentary talk and interaction with Swamiji , the God-man, that woman also turned to pure Gold, as per the theme of Surdas devotional song. She spent the rest of her life singing only in temples and led an austere life of a nun.

Swamiji's music were appealing to the audience since he could bring life to the music, not just the art and style of it<sup>23</sup>. Swamiji told a friend against singing like a professional singer -telling him the tune and pitch is not the only thing in music. He asserted that music must express feelings/ideas and pronunciation must also be clear<sup>21</sup>.

Swamiji considered "the greatest aid to the practice of keeping God in memory is music",<sup>24</sup>. He writes in Bhakti Yoga, quoting Lords assertion to Narada, the great teacher of Bhakti (Love), "...that He does not live in heaven, nor in the heart of Yogi, but where the devotees sing His praise, there He is ! ....Music has such tremendous power over human mind; (that) brings it to concentrate in a moment. ....Even the minds of animals ....become charmed with music.",<sup>24</sup>.

It may be added that Sree Ramakrishna, Swamiji's Guru, used to have *Yoga Trance* (highest spiritual experience/spell, Samadhi), whenever Swamiji sang for him and Swamiji used to sing for him many a times wholeheartedly with deep devotion. It would be of interest to note that Sree Ramakrishna even taught Swamiji a song at Dakshineswar, after Swamiji had the unique realization of Kali the mother, the Shakti aspect of Brahman. The song pertained to the message that such Sakti/Kali is ingrained everywhere and in everything (*the song - Amar Ma Tong Hi Tara- .....Tumi jale... Tumi sthale - etc*)\*.

\*It may not be out of place to mention here that nearly twenty years before, Sree Ramakrishna's Vedanta Guru, Sreemad Totapuri, had also the same realization of Mother Kali/Shakti ingrained everywhere and in everything, which in fact is the other side of Brahma<sup>25</sup>. Such realization of Sreemad Totapuri had been caused by the grace of and with long company of his favourite Vedanta disciple Sree Ramakrishna.

Swamiji mesmerized with his lively and devotional songs wherever he visited, particularly during his visit as a wandering monk; he made huge impact at places like, Alwar, etc. Besides his music talent Swamiji's voice was also an asset. Miss McLeod said, Swamiji's voice was like the violin solo. Ema Kalve, the famous singer used to say that his usual voice was between low and high pitch, deep and vibrating like the Chinese gong<sup>23</sup>.

Swamiji had deep knowledge on the science of music as well. He himself wrote a number of Bengali and Sanskrit songs and was also the composer of them, like the hymns of Shiva & of Sree Ramakrishna oblation songs which were in Sanskrit. In 1885, he wrote a collection of songs, published by Chandi Charan Basak, in which were selected among others, more than 10 Brahma Sangeets, many of which were Tagore songs. The 90 page long preface of this book, *Sangeet Kalpataru* (written in Bengali), was written by Swamiji himself, where he discussed various aspects of the science of music, its tune, beats, as also

aspects on instrumental music. Towards the end of the 18 page epilogue were added the life story of some God-men and poets like RamPrasad, Vidyapati, Candidas, etc.,<sup>20, 26</sup>. He also had a great in-depth knowledge on both Indian classical music and of Western songs.

Swamiji was of the view that there is science in Dhrupad, Kheyal, etc., but it is Kirtana i.e. *Mathur* and *Viraha* and other such composition, where there is real music- for there is feeling in them. Feeling is the soul, the secret of everything. There is more music in the music which touches the soul of the commoners and he wanted that they should be collected together. His opinion was that the science of Dhrupad etc. applied to the music of Kirtana, will produce the perfect music.<sup>27</sup>

He added that India gave to the world her system of notation with seven cardinal notes and the diatonic scale, all of which, ..... as early as 350BC, while it came to Europe in eleventh century<sup>28</sup>. In India music was developed in full seven notes, even to half and quarter notes, ages ago. India led in music, also in drama, sculpture. But whatever was done now is merely an attempt at imitation<sup>29</sup>.

Miss Cornelia Conger (granddaughter of Swamiji host Mr. Lyons at Chicago ) writes in her memoirs, “ My mother took him (Swamiji) to hear a Symphony Concert on a Friday afternoon. He listened with great attention. ....On his reply to my mother’s question whether he liked it or, not, he said, “It was very beautiful....But I am puzzled by two things. First I do not understand ...why the same programme will be repeated on Saturday evening. ...In India... one type of music is played at dawn. The music for noon time is different, and that for evening is also of special character. ...The other thing I do not understand is the lack of overtones in the music and the greater interval between two notes. To my ears it has holes in it like that good Swiss cheese that you give me.”<sup>30</sup>.

Swami Sivananda asked him (Swamiji), ‘What is Western music like?’

Swamiji- “Oh, it is very good; there is in it perfection of harmony, which we have not attained. Only to our untrained ears, it does not sound well, hence we do not like it, and think that the singers howl like jackals. ...but when I began to listen to the music ....and study it minutely, .....I was lost in admiration. Such is the case with every art. In glancing a highly finished painting we cannot understand where the beauty lies. ....Unless the eye is ...trained one cannot appreciate .....the inner genius of a work of art. ....What real music is, lies in Kirtan and Dhrupad. Do you think ....songs in a nasal voice and flitting like lightning from one note to another ...are the best things in the world of music? Not so. ....In music ...you can display any amount of skill by keeping to science and ....pleasing to the ear. ....You do not understand that when one note comes upon another in quick succession .. ..it creates discordance. ....In our music the cadence, or duly regulated rise and fall of voices or sound is very good. The French detected and appreciated it first, and tried to adapt and introduce it in their music ..... . Whole Europe has now mastered it”<sup>31</sup>.

**Question:** “Maharaj, their (Western) music seem to be ...martial, whereas that element is altogether absent in ours”.

**Swamiji:** “We have it also. In martial music, harmony is greatly needed. We sadly lack harmony.....The music of the Western is much advanced. They have the pathos as well as the heroism in their music. ....Every Ragas may be made martial if it is set in harmony and the instruments are tuned accordingly. ....Some of the Raginis can also become martial”<sup>31</sup>.

Swamiji while advocating for heroic manhood even through music, said to his disciple (Sarat Chandra Chakraborty), “ The Damaru (of Shiva) and horn have to be sounded, drums are to be beaten so as to raise the deep martial notes, and with ‘Mahavira’, ‘Mahavira’ on your lips and shouting ‘Hara Hara Vyom Vyom’, the quarters are to be reverberated.....people are to be accustomed to hear Dhrupad music . Through thunder - roll of the dignified Vedic hymns, life is to be brought back in the country. In everything the austere spirit of heroic manhood is to be revived.”<sup>32</sup>

**Swamiji as dramatist/Dancing:** Swamiji learnt Dancing as well, it was the old heroic dance of the Greeks. Swamiji enchanted all with his heart rending devotional songs and heroic dance, and himself also got enraptured with joy<sup>33</sup>.

Analyzing the difference of dance and music between Eastern & Western systems, Swamiji said, “Music and dancing in the West are all pointed in their expression. In dance they look as if jerking the limbs; in instrumental music, the sounds prick the ear like a sword.....so also in vocal music. In this country on the other hand, the dance has a rolling wave like movement and there is the same rounded movement in the varieties of pitch in vocal song, so also in instrumental music”<sup>34</sup>.

Swamiji’s considered Drama to be the most difficult of all arts. An excerpt taken from the notes of his class, it has been noted to have been said by Swamiji that, “In it (drama), two things are to be satisfied -first the ears, and second, the eyes. To paint a scene .....it is easy enough; but to paint different things and yet to keep up the central interest is very difficult. Another difficult thing is stage management, that is, combining different things in such a manner as to keep the central interest in tact<sup>35</sup>. In fact, Swamiji himself took part in a drama when he used to visit Brahmo-Samaj. But he took part only once. Swamiji then acted as a Yogi in a drama Naba-Vrindavan, written by Trailokya Nath Sanyal, mainly for his music talent; wherein famous Keshab Chandra Sen himself acted as Saint Paohari-baba<sup>35</sup>.

**Swamiji’s views on art/painting and his suggested piece of art:** Swamiji’s opined saying, “There must be Art in everything .....The artistic faculty was highly developed in ..Sree Ramakrishna, and he used to say that without this faculty none can be truly spiritual”<sup>36</sup>.

Recapitulating the history on development of ‘art’ in ancient times Swamiji referred to the development on three stages of Greek Art. First one was named as Mycenoan art from prehistoric times to 776BC, which was merely copying Asian art. 776BC to 475BC was the age of Archaic Greek art, which resembled Egyptian artists. Thereafter emerged till 146 BC Hellenic or true Greek art, which was an exact imitation of nature. After its conquest by

Romans, there was decadence in Greek art, which remained confined to copying previous artists and in reproducing photographic image of a particular person”<sup>37</sup>. Commenting on Greek artists’ imitation of nature he said, “The secret of Greek Art is its imitation of nature even to the minutest details; whereas the secret of Indian art is to represent the ideal. Greek painter ...painting a flesh ...is so successful that a dog is deluded into taking it.....The Indian tendency ...is to represent the super-sensual ...(but) has become degraded into painting grotesque images. Now, true Art can be compared with a lily which springs from the ground, takes its nourishment from the ground ....yet is quite high above it. So Art must be in touch with nature ....yet it must be above nature. Art is -representing the beautiful. There must be Art in everything”<sup>36</sup>.

In his write up on ‘The East and the West, Swamiji commented, “The wisdom, learning and arts of ancient Greece entered into Italy (Romans) ....The pulsation and new life took a formidable shape in the city of Florence -old Italy-. .This Renaissance was only a rebirth for Italy but first birth for rest of Europe. ....Italy was an old nation.... she woke up (at the call of Renaissance)....but to fall fast asleep again. ...India (a very old nation) also stirred up a little at this time ....she also did the same as Italy (woke up at Renaissance period, three generations from Akbar) and slept again”<sup>38</sup>.

Swamiji however asserted, “When the real history of India will be unearthed, it will be proved that, as in matters of religion, so in fine arts, India is the primal Guru of the whole world”<sup>39</sup>. Swamiji told to the Jubilee Art College founder Professor Mr. Ranada Prasad Das Gupta, that after having seen the beauties of art, of nearly every civilized country, he held Buddhist and Mughal art in high esteem and mentioned highly on Taj / Jama Masjid etc as regards the beauty of ‘Mughal art’<sup>40</sup>. He was so highly impressed on the art of Taj that he said, “It takes six months to study a square inch of its (Taj of Agra) interior works of beauty”<sup>39</sup>.

His in-depth knowledge on ‘art’ can be appreciated from his conversation with Prof. Das Gupta, where the learned professor ultimately admitted that Swamiji opened up new horizon on concept of art, which he had not thought out before. Swamiji was of the opinion that expression of some ideas are more important in art, which may be manifested even in the carving of the articles of daily use; such as water vessels, or cups and saucers, (wherein) should be used to express an idea”<sup>40</sup>.

On the question of Prof. Das Gupta about the difference between Indian and Western Art- Swamiji said, “Originality is rarely found (now). In those countries pictures are painted with the help of models obtained by photographing various objects. ....The ancient artists used to develop original ideas from their brain and tried to express it through painting. Now the picture being a likeness of photographs, the power of originality .....are getting scarce. ....People who are materialistic (West) take nature as their ideal (in art), ....while people whose ideal is transcendent Reality beyond nature, try to express that in art through the powers of nature. ....To the former class nature is the primary basis of art, while with the second class, ideality is the principal motive of artistic development.....Thus though



starting with two different ideals in art, they have advanced on it, each in its own way. Seeing some paintings in the West you will mistake them for real natural objects. ...In this country in ancient times ...if you look at a statue you forget the material world and transport you to a new ideal world. ....As in the Western countries paintings like the former types are not produced now...in our country also, attempts to give original ideas in art are no longer seen',<sup>40</sup>.

Swamiji held in high esteem over the advancement of art and culture in Paris (France). He noted "Paris is the fountain-head of European civilization. ....from here the city of Paris, travelled with tremendous energy the power of the people and shook the very foundation of Europe.....and a new Europe has come into existence",<sup>41</sup>. He told Prof. Das Gupta of his admiration of a marble carved figure that he saw in Paris exhibition, having the caption 'Art unveiling nature'. He then asked Prof. Das Gupta if he could produce something original like that<sup>40</sup>.

Speaking on the tendency on blind imitation of West, Swamiji was all praise for Japan, saying, "They (Japanese) have taken everything from the Europeans but they remain Japanese all the same and have not turned European. Whereas in our country, the terrible mania of becoming Westernized has seized upon us like a plague....They (Japanese) are great as a nation because of their art. ....The Asian never uses a thing unless there be art in it. ....The Westerners look for *utility* in everything; whereas with us *art in everywhere*. ....What we need is the combination of art and utility. Japan has done that very quickly. ...Now ...the Japanese are going to teach the Westerners"<sup>42</sup>.

Swamiji wrote elsewhere, as to how the Japanese artist Mr. Okakura was charmed at the art of an ordinary terracotta water vessel and he "...intends to visit Agra, Gwalior, Ajanta, Ellora, Chittore, Udaipur, Jaipur & Delhi for further exploration of Indian art"<sup>43</sup>.

As the conversation with Prof. Das Gupta progressed, on the distinctive characteristics between Eastern and Western art form, Swamiji getting highly impressed over Prof. Das Gupta, casually asked him, if he could give in art form the expression of his poem Kali, the Mother, which Swamiji depicted as Kali, the fearsome, and read the poem for him. On mere listening the poem, Prof. Das Gupta was awe-struck visualizing the vision of Swamiji's Kali, the mother<sup>40</sup>.\*

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\*Swamiji's master piece work, Kali the Mother, starts with a grim description<sup>40a</sup>:

*"The stars are blotted out,                      The clouds are covering clouds,  
It is darkness vibrant, sonant.              In the roaring, whirling wind".....*

It then ends with the note:

..... *"Come, Mother, come!  
For Terror is Thy name,                      Death is in Thy breath,  
And every shaking step                      Destroys a world for e'er.*

*Thou "Time", the All-Destroyer!      Come, O Mother, come!  
Who dares misery love,                      And hug the form of Death,  
Dance in Destruction's dance              To him the Mother comes''*

The very next day, Prof. Das Gupta attempted to paint Swamiji's vision of 'Kali, the Mother', but it could not be finished, nor be shown to Swamiji<sup>44</sup>.

.....

Then Swamiji told him about his idea of Ramakrishna mission's seal. Swamiji said, "The wavy waters in the picture are symbolic of Karma, the lotus of Bhakti; and the rising-sun of Jnana. The encircling serpent is indicative of Yoga and the awakened Kundalini Shakti, while the swan in the picture stands for the Paramhansa (Supreme Self). Therefore the idea of the picture is that by the union of Karma, Jnana, Bhakti and Yoga, the vision of the Paramhansa is obtained."<sup>44,45</sup>

Swamiji also showed his ideas and the concept on the proposed 'Ramakrishna temple and the Math', showing a drawing to Prof. Das Gupta. Swamiji said, "In the building of this prospective temple and Math I have the desire to bring together all the best in Eastern and Western art. ....a big prayer hall will be built with roof supported on numerous cluster of pillars. In its wall hundreds of lotuses will be in full bloom. It must ....accommodate a thousand persons sitting in meditation. The Ramakrishna temple and prayer -hall should be built in such a way that from a distance it would be taken for a representation of a symbol 'Om'. Within the temple there should be a figure of Sree Ramakrishna seated on a swan. On the two sides of the door will be ...the figure of a lion and a lamb licking each others body in love- expressing ..that great power and gentleness have become united in love...the Math has to be built in such a way that religion, work, learning. Jnan and Bhakti may spread over the world from this centre."<sup>44, 45</sup>

On hearing such an wonderful expression of art in the seal and of the Math , Prof. Das Gupta said admiringly, "I wish I could learn art from you"<sup>44, 45</sup>. Prof. Das Gupta then sought for Swamiji's blessings who he said to have opened his eyes on the topic of art<sup>44,45</sup>

As regards architecture, Swamiji said, "In Rajputana you can still find pure Hindu architecture. If you look at a Dharmashala, you will feel ..it calls you in open arms to take shelter. ....If you look at a temple, you are sure to find a Divine presence in and about it. If you look about rural cottage, you will at once be able to comprehend the special meanings of its different portions and the whole structure bears evidence to the predominant nature and the ideal of the owner itself. This sort of expressive architecture (in cottages, apart from temple architecture etc) I have seen nowhere else except in Italy<sup>39, 46</sup>.

Swamiji's vision as an artist, can best be understood, wherein he described as to how a true picture of Sree Krishna should be represented. He said, "Shri Krishna ought to be painted as He really was: the Gita personified"<sup>47</sup>..... The historical details/truths must be represented in a proper picture. For example, the chariot used then being not like pagoda-chariot, but rather of the type as used in Grecian mythology, resembling the ones still used in Rajputana, should be maintained accordingly in the picture. It is to be shown Sri Krishna

holding the bridle of the horses (of the chariot) so tight that “they are brought to their haunches with their forelegs fighting the air, and their mouth gasping..... Shri Krishna, whip in one hand and tightening the reins.....turned himself towards Arjun with His childlike face beaming with unworldly love and sympathy, and a calm and serene look ....is delivering Gita to the beloved comrade. ....Intense action in the whole body, and ...a face, expressing the profound calmness and serenity of the blue sky. This is the central idea of Gita. .... to be calm and steadfast in all circumstances’’,<sup>47</sup>.

**Swamiji as the litterateur/oratory:** Swamiji’s span of writing and talks cover just one decade - from 1992-2002. In this short period he made a stir as literary genius with his writings, speeches, letters and poems in English, Bengali and Sanskrit. American news papers bearing the testimony on Swamiji’s literary flare noted that, “Swamiji ..... is a profound scholar and can speak fluently in seven languages, and can read as many more. His English is beyond criticism’’,<sup>48</sup>. They commented about him saying, “The eloquence of the man (Swamiji) with intellect beaming from his face, his splendid English in describing the beauties of his time-honoured faith, all considered to make a deep impression on the audience.’’,<sup>49</sup>. The American news papers in high admiration on the scholastic of Swamiji, besides his command over English, wrote, “He is a charming conversationalist. He is familiar with the works of all the great writers in a dozen different languages, and he quotes long selection from Spencer, Darwin, Mill or others with a fluency that is surprising’’,<sup>50</sup>. Prof John Henry Wright of Harvard University introducing him to Chicago Parliament wrote, “He is more learned than all of us (all the faculties of Harvard) put together’’,<sup>51</sup>.. Speaking about his Chicago address, Miss Lucy Monroe, the poetess reporter reporting on Parliament of religion, wrote, “The handsome monk in orange robe (Swamiji) gave us in perfect English a masterpiece. ...It was human eloquence at its highest pitch’’,<sup>52</sup>. She heard Swamiji many a times and wrote further, “He (Swamiji) speaks without notes, presenting his facts and his conclusions with the greatest art, ....rising at times to a rich inspiring eloquence’’,<sup>53</sup>.

The nine volumes of Swamiji’s write up, covering his decade long speeches, writings and huge number of letters-consist not only the spiritual messages; but also pointed out sharply over social concerns of the global village as the target audience, not just for India.

The spiritual messages that Swamiji imparted, in his volumes of Karma Yoga, Jnan Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Raj Yoga (along with numerous lectures on them), of course speaks of the Hindu faith giving a concise account for spiritual practices to be followed; but all of them have an universal appeal for all faiths as well. This was virtually an impossible task accomplished, *expressing the infinite in the language of the finite*. That is why Sister Nivedita wrote in the preface of these editions, “Long after the English language has disappeared from India, the gift that has here been made, through that language to the world, will remain and bear its fruit in East and West alike. ....he (Swamiji) becomes the meeting point of not only East and West, but also past and future.’’,<sup>54</sup>.

He had also a host of writings and speeches in awakening the dejected dependent famine-stricken India to wake up from its stupor, and in shaking off its lost - self esteem, which in his language is waking up the innate divinity that already exists within. Swamiji called it his man-making mission. On the other side to the abundant West drowned and blinded in the whirlpool of materialism, he satiated their hunger for spirituality, over which they themselves were not aware of. It bore fruit opening up a number of Vedanta centers in these countries.

Besides Swamiji's prodigious mastery over the English language, as a writer, speaker and conversationalist, he can be considered to be one of the pioneers if not the pioneer as an eminent writer in colloquial Bengali. Swamiji himself speaking highly of colloquial Bengali said, "The language in which we naturally express ourselves, in which we communicate our anger, grief, or, love, etc- there cannot be fitter language than that. No artificial language can have that force, and that brevity and expressiveness"<sup>55</sup>. He even stated "... that the language of Calcutta will soon become the language of Bengal"<sup>55</sup> (Bengali literature). A brief sketch on three of such Bengali write up of Swamiji, written in colloquial language of Calcutta, like 'Memoirs of European Travel', 'East and West' and a short satire titled, 'Matter of Serious Thought' -as are worth reviewing, have been elucidated below.

**Memoirs of European travel**<sup>56</sup> - It is virtually a running commentary of the history and culture of the places that Swamiji passed through, during his journey from Calcutta to Europe on ship. It typifies Swamiji's deep knowledge on the cultural nuances (music/art) of these places, as also of their historical background vis-a-vis the then context. As a keen observer the details of the new information that Swamiji passed through illustrating lots of data, on various details and customs of these countries, written in colloquial Bengali makes it quite interesting, being written all through in a light humorous tone and witty comments. This makes Swamiji a unique writer who introduced a new style of Bengali prose writing, on serious topics. His keen sense of humour and the novel style of writing Bengali, makes him a unique Bengali prose writer, who can maintain the interest of the readers making the articles to be easy- reading, without getting them lost in the volume of huge information passed through<sup>56</sup>.

**The East and the West**<sup>57</sup> - The introduction of this article written in a lighter vein in colloquial Bengali, reminds us of the writing of the Great Bengali prose writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's 'Kamalakanter Daftar', where Bankim Chandra lays bare the tantrums and weaknesses of the then Bengali babu's, humorously through the eyes of an opium addict. Swamiji's canvas however is not confined within Bengal, though he confined depicting the sad plight of the then subjugated India in just 1-2 pages of introduction only and placed it quite subtly. As a stern critic, he has then made a very objective analysis of the manners and customs of the two great civilizations- the ancient East with the modern West. Swamiji has also painted the cultural differences of the two great societies making in-depth analysis of the apparent anomalies that exist, with their strength and weakness, making an objective assessment in a humorous note, with malice to none. In fact, such style of Bengali prose writing in colloquial Bengali, is unique in Swamiji and a successor of such serious

writing, making objective analysis in a lighter vein perhaps is yet to be found. Though there are many a Bengali prose writing made on serious topics, but making them easy reading with a writing style of humorous note is rarely visible<sup>57</sup>.

**Matter for Serious Thought**<sup>58</sup> - There is a striking similarity between George Bernard Shaw's satirical dramas where he used the pen as the sword to pierce the ills of the society; and Swamiji's eight page write up narrating a few satirical short sketches, entitled, 'Matter for Serious thought'<sup>58</sup>. The only difference is that Shaw wrote big dramas; whereas each of the few sketches that Swamiji made remained confined to 2-4 paragraph only. Also Shaw's world was society at large, whereas Swamiji's world being religion, his satirical notes pertained to the religious practices normally followed. The style of Swamiji's narration of these short sketches are such, that on first reading it makes us laugh but later on pondering over them a bit one gets the deeper thoughts. In fact, the very title of Swamiji's write up, 'Matter for serious thought', itself is a big satire.

A few examples of these two extraordinary thinkers may be worth citing. Pinching at the so called British Aristocracy, Shaw in his drama *Pygmalion*, in order to show the shallowness of the aristocratic society, prepared within a few months training, a virtually illiterate British flower girl to be passed off as a society queen. But being confused of her nationality identity, all came to the conclusion, that she cannot be an English lady, since she was speaking grammatically correct English with proper English pronunciation (*Pygmalion* -George Barnard Shaw). Likewise Swamiji in order to show the shallowness of the religious practices commonly followed in Hindu community, sketched a towering temple with many Gods placed in it. But the real worship was offered to the God grandest of all of them, was the God of the Gods, to who only all bowed with great reverence. On enquiry it was learnt, this Grandest God of the Gods was the God termed 'popular custom; not the Vedas, the philosophy, or Puranas, but 'Popular custom God' only, who is said to have alone thrashed all Gods and all forms of worship<sup>58</sup>.

In pinching the church and the society, Shaw writes in *St Joan Drama*, 'It took 4 hours to burn Joan of Arc alive, but it took 400 years to canonize (declaring Saint-hood) her'. In the epilogue Shaw speaks through St. Joan, thus:

'Since you (Priests) have at last canonized me, let me then be born/go to the earth and get back my honour'.

Pat came the reply from all, 'No, we will burn you again, as again we will not be able to appreciate your Saintliness'<sup>5</sup>. (Thus shaw gave a dig to the church expressing their shallowness to appreciate virtues and Sainthood).

Almost akin to that Swamiji in making a dig to the so called preachers of religion, writes, "...Ramcharan, you have neither education, nor the means to set up a trade, nor are you fit for physical labour. Besides, you cannot give up intoxication.....tell me how do you manage to make your living'.

Ram Charan- 'That is easy job sir, I preach (of God) unto all.'

What has Ramcharan taken the Lord for.?’’<sup>58</sup>. (Swamiji also gave a dig to the so called preachers, who are so ignorant on the immensity of preaching the message of God- which is the subtlest philosophy and the grandest teaching- that they are not even conscious of their absolute ignorance).

This last line of Swamiji is very important. It is a message to all surpassing his satire, that asks us to ponder over deeply. Here Swamiji’s role surpasses the role of a satire writer to that of a world teacher.

**Letters of Swamiji:** In addition to the above stated works of Swamiji, the huge number of letters that he wrote on varied topics to many a person of his huge acquaintances in wide range of society, is itself a literary treasure; the contents of which even of his informal letters written light heartedly, have a universal appeal for ages to come.

It may be of interest to note that all these letters, whether giving instruction for Ramakrishna Math, or informal letters written in a lighter vein, or making sharp criticism over the points of his dislike- all of them without exception, had some focus on spirituality, directly or indirectly; akin to that of the sun-flower which faces the sun all the while, in all the hours of the day. This particularity is the earmark of all the huge volume of letters of Swamiji.

**Swamiji as a Poet:** It seems from going through Swamiji’s poems, that renunciation was perhaps the spirit of most of his poems; as if he remains sick of this world of the senses, and longs to go back to that world (higher spiritual world) wherefrom perhaps he came, which though remain alien to us. The same longing he expressed to his Guru Sree Ramakrishna, who instead assigned him the task of becoming recluse to all the tiring and turmoil souls, which Swamiji had to accomplish in his last 12 years (1890-1902), till he breathed his last.

It may not be out of place to compare the approach to life, casting shadow over the poems of Swamiji with that of the Great poet Rabindra Nath Tagore. There remain a marked difference on the approach to life between the genius noble laureate poet Rabindra Nath Tagore the house holder, and Swamiji, the monk.

Tagore wrote in his poem -Freedom (*Mukti*), asserting<sup>59</sup>:

“My salvation is not in renunciation,

I shall taste the enjoyment of liberty amongst thousand fold attachments....

My choice would be not to deprive my sense organs to enjoy the beauty of Yours (God/Nature).....

And thereby shall I get fulfilled and enlightened with all joy and bliss’’<sup>59</sup>. (*The original Bengali version of this poem ‘Mukti’ is: “Bairagya Sadhane Mukti Se Amar Noi.*

*Assankhya Bandhan Majhe Lobhib Muktir Swad.....Indriyer Dwar Rudha Kori Yogasane Se Nohe Amar. ....Moha Mor Mukti Rupe Uthibe Jwaliya, Prem Mor Bhakti Rupe Uthibe Folia...’’).*

Tagore wrote it thus at 39, in around 1901, long before being awarded with the noble prize.

Whereas Swamiji at 32, at the pinnacle of his success in 1895, wrote from New York, in his Poem ‘My play is done’ saying as if exasperating<sup>60</sup>:

“...From fleeting scenes to scene ephemeral, with life’s current’ ebb and flow,  
Oh! I am sick of this unending force; these shows they please no more.....  
Take me O Mother, to those shores where strifes for ever cease. ....  
Let never more delusive dreams veil off Thy face from me,  
My play is done, O Mother, break my chains and make me free’’<sup>60</sup>

For Swamiji it was as if a small child’s yearning for his mother (*here Mother is meant for Mother Kali*), who has perchance landed from an unknown world, and who is totally withdrawn from the weal and woes of this world. In fact, the song that Swamiji sang meeting his Guru in his second meet, also speaks of such spirit of renunciation, asking the mind to go to its own real abode, as if it was in an alien land (*Mon cholo nijo nicketane ..etc*).

Swamiji’s poem, ‘No one to Blame’, also makes the same note. It cast the shadow of Thomas Gray’s Elegy poem: ‘Elegy written in a country churchyard’.

Gray starts the poem with melancholy note announcing the advent of the dark evening with the end of the day, which starts with:

“The curfew tolls the knell of the parting day.....The ploughman plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me’’....

Likewise in the said poem of Swamiji also starts drawing more or less, the same silhouette on the advent of dark evening with end of the lighted day, as he starts with<sup>61</sup>:

“The sun goes down, its crimson rays, Light up the dying day ...’’.

But the spirit is different. The main theme of Gray’s elegy draws a melancholy note that declares:

“The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow’r, And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,  
Awaits alike th’ inevitable hour. The paths of glory lead but to the grave’’.

While Swamiji’s poem, sort of an elegy, ends with a philosophic but positive note, saying:

“I give up hate, I give up love, My thirst for life is gone;  
Eternal death is what I want, Nirvanam goes life’s flame; ....  
That death is curse, and so is life, and best when stops to be’’<sup>61</sup>.

Swamiji's Elegy gets elevated to a new philosophic height, opening up the positive note, with the coinage of two words, 'Eternal death' and Nirbanam'; whilst Grays Elegy ends up with the eternal poetic expression of death with melancholy note saying, 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave.'

Speaking on his own identity, Swamiji often used to recite from the scripture, saying:

"I am neither body nor changes in the body; nor I am senses nor object of the senses.

I am Existence Absolute, Bliss Absolute and Knowledge Absolute. I am It, I am It.

I am neither death; nor was I ever born, nor had I parents. ....

I am not misery, nor have I misery. I am not enemy nor have I enemies.

I am Existence Absolute, Bliss Absolute and Knowledge Absolute. I am It, I am It"<sup>62</sup>.

And that is the real identity of Swamiji -the Artist, which is the same as Swamiji the spiritualist.

He composed few hymns on his mentor and Guru Sree Ramakrishna, Shiva and on Mother (Amba) in Sanskrit and as well<sup>63, 64</sup>. Some of his hymns on Sree Ramakrishna are sung for prayer each evening, in all the 180 plus Ramakrishna Math and Mission Centers (and of thousand-fold more of the devotees' worship places and temples) all over the globe.

**Conclusion:** A spiritual person is always an artist though the converse may not be always true. It is because of the fact that real art expresses the truth, bliss and beauty; *Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram*- which are the well-known attributes of spirituality. Thus Swamiji emerged as an artist, because he was a great spiritualist.

Swamiji's Guru and mentor Sree Ramakrishna was also a great artist, who with His heart rending music, and gospels delivered in simple language with simile comparable to the great Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, elevated the mental state of his audience realizing the Truth, experiencing the Bliss and enjoying the Beauty. But unlike the limited gifted audience of Sree Ramakrishna, Swamiji's spectrum covered much wider field, bridging the ancient with modern and the future. Of course Swamiji's message happened to be but only the voice of his Guru Sree Ramakrishna, as Swamiji himself declared , 'I am a voice (of his Guru) without form'.

Thus Swamiji, the mirror image of Sree Ramakrishna, had also to be an artist expressing the spiritual message of his Guru to a wider and bigger audience for days to come for all ages and all the countries. As may be popularly said, if Sree Ramakrishna be said to the 'idol of ideal' preserved carefully in the sanctum sanctorum visible by few gifted ones only, then Swamiji the expressive artist, happened to be the *same idol of ideal*, led in procession with visibility to all -which was entrusted by his Guru Sree Ramakrishna.

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