

# Blending Poetry with Philosophy

## A Study of Swami Vivekananda's Poems

AMAR NATH PRASAD

A close study of Swami Vivekananda's poems, scattered over his *Complete Works*, makes it very clear that his poetry is a work of finest poetic craftsmanship. While fusing together the feeling of a sensitive mind with the sublimity of expression of a poet, it brings into focus the great truths of Vedantic philosophy and makes us see these truths through the lens of everyday experience. The metaphors and similes used in his poems are suggestive and they make a very fine connection between the major and the minor terms. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly holds the view:

The words gushed out as it were, and carried with them the native energy and impetuosity of his mind and his feeling for the common people. . . . Like all great teachers, Vivekananda too made adroit use of figures of speech.<sup>1</sup>

### In Search of God

*In Search of God and Other Poems*<sup>2</sup> (published by the Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata) is an anthology of the poems, songs and hymns scattered over the pages of *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* in 9 volumes. The first section of the book deals with the poems composed by Swami Vivekananda in English. The second section comprises English versions of the poems which Swamiji wrote in Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi. Let us have a look at some of these poems from this anthology.

The opening poem in the first section is *In Search of God* which is also the title of the book. The poem gives a vivid expression to the poet's (Swamiji's) search for God whom he sees coming in the form of Love, Soul and Nature. The poem begins with the metaphor of a lost child in a wild forest:

O'er hill and dale and mountain range  
In temple, church and mosque, In Vedas, Bible  
Al Koran I had searched for Thee in vain  
Like a child in the wildest forest lost. (P3)

The metaphor of the 'lost child' in this stanza is quite apt and suggestive. It says that a man who merely chants the names of God thousands of times and searches for him in the pages of religious scriptures is just like a child lost in the deep forest of ignorance. The image of child denotes that in order to have the glimpse of God one should have a childlike innocence. Sarojini Naidu, the renowned poetess of modern India, in her poem *My Soul's Prayer* similarly wants to ask some questions to God. For this she considers herself like an innocent child and asks God:

In childhood pride I said to Thee  
O Thou madest me of Thy breath  
Speak Master and reveal to me  
Thy inmost laws of life and Death.<sup>3</sup>

In the same way, the seeker in Swamiji's poem cries out like a child to get the love of God, but all his cries seem to fall flat and God



Dr. Amar Nath Prasad teaches at the Postgraduate Department of English, Rajendra College, Jai Prakash University, Chapra, Bihar. He is the author and editor of several books and articles on English literature. □

is not seen anywhere. As a matter of fact, the real abode of God is not in our physical search of God without removing the dross of desire engendered by our five senses, but in our spiritual quest for our own soul which always guides the agile mind at the time of critical juncture. Kabir Das, the great saint of north India, rightly holds the view when he says:<sup>4</sup>

हंसा पाये मानसरोवर ताल-तलैया क्यूँ डोलै ।  
तेरा साहब है घट माही बाहर नैना क्यूँ खोलै ।  
कहे कबीर सुनो भई साधो साहब मिल गया तिल ओले ।

If the swan has reached  
Mansarovar Lake  
No need for it to go to puddles  
of dirty water.  
The lord is in the heart within  
No need to search for him outside  
Says Kabir, O wise sadhu  
The Master [God] permeates the heart of man  
Like oil in the *til* [sesame] oil seed!

This constant search for God reaches the point of culmination one day. The poet's bitter cry is answered by a 'gentle soft and soothing voice':

A gentle soft and soothing voice  
That said 'my son', 'my son'  
That seemed to thrill in unison  
With all the chords of my soul. (P.P. 3-4)

Here the phrases 'lost child' and 'gentle soft and soothing voice' reminds us of William Blake's magnum opus *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, which presents a similar picture of a lost child, rescued by God in his hour of critical juncture. In Blake's poem *The Little Boy Lost*, the lost child says:

Father! father! where are you going?  
O don't walk so fast  
Speak, father, speak to your little boy  
Or else I shall be lost.<sup>5</sup>

The next poem *The Little Boy Found* by Blake shows the love and grace of God. God

appeared like his father and gave him light to his dark road:

The little boy lost in the lonely fen  
Led by the wandering light  
Began to cry; but God, ever nigh  
Appeared like his father, in white.<sup>6</sup>

The lost child in Swamiji's poem tries his best to find the origin of the soothing voice which illumined his thoughts and pierced his darkness. He found it sitting majestically enthroned in his soul. It was nothing but love, the supreme gift of the Almighty God to human being. He observes:

A flash illumined all my soul;  
The heart of my heart opened wide  
O joy, O bliss, what do I find!  
My love, my love, you are here  
And you are here, my love, my all!  
And I was searching Thee!  
From all eternity you are there  
Enthroned in majesty! (P.4)

It is interesting to note here that Swamiji's concept of love is not an outward manifestation of religious sentiments—through chanting God's names hundred times without purging the mind of its impurities. It has rather a very broad and vast significance; it points to man's deep love and sympathy for the poor, the deserted and the marginalized. He thinks that the true way of worshipping God is to serve the miserable and the poor. He observes elsewhere in his *Complete Works*:

There are two curses here, first our weakness, secondly, our hatred, our dried-up hearts. You may talk doctrines by the millions, you may have sects by the hundreds of millions; ay, but it is nothing until you have the heart to feel; feel for them as your Veda teaches you, till you find they are parts of your own bodies, till you realize that you and they, the poor and the rich, the saint and the sinner, are all parts of One Infinite whole, which you call Brahman.<sup>7</sup>

In Swamiji's eyes all human beings—rich or poor, gross or sublime, man or woman—are equal and so they should not be treated differently on account of caste, class, creed and gender. He believed that all human beings are the part and parcel of his *own* self. In his poem, *The Song of the Free*, he clearly and vividly explores this idea of love based on oneness of existence:

Not two nor many, it is but one,  
And thus in me all me's I have,  
I cannot have, I cannot shun  
Myself from me—I can but love! (P.7)

Like William Wordsworth, the great Romantic poet of English literature, Swamiji too sees God in all the objects of Nature, in the song of birds, in the majestic morn and in the soothing light of the stars and the moon. He rightly projects his vision of Nature through his *Song*:

The moon's soft light, the stars so bright  
The glorious orb of day  
He shines in them, his beauty-might  
Reflected lights are they  
The majestic morn, the melting eve  
The boundless billowy sea  
In nature's beauty, songs of birds  
I see through them—it is He! (P.4)

This vision of oneness of existence—God permeating the whole creation, living and non-living—is quite similar to that of the observations of India's great ancient rishes and sages. One feels uplifted by coming in touch with their integral view of Reality. The Upanishads are full of it. A Yajurveda verse<sup>8</sup> bursts into raptures while speaking of this immanence of God:

वेनस्तत्पश्यन्निहितं गुहा सद्यत्र विश्वं भवत्येकनीडम् ।  
तस्मिन्निदमं सं च वि चैति सर्वमं स ओतः प्रोतश्च विभू प्रजासु ॥

The sage beholds That mysterious Being  
wherein this

All hath found one only dwelling.  
Therein unites the Whole, and thence it issues:  
far-spread  
it is the warp and woof in creatures.

In other words, from God everything comes and unto Him everything returns.

As the poems draws toward its close, one begins to see the varied colours weaved in the texture of text. Apart from paying tributes to the power of love, to God and Nature and to the nobler side of life, Swamiji points to the 'the whispering sweet' of the voice of consciousness ('My love, I am near') present with us even when in the hour of crises and deep distress. When Wordsworth's mind is fractured with the frustrations and frictions of society he takes the shelter in the lap of nature:

And then my heart with pleasure fills  
And dances with the daffodils.<sup>9</sup>

But Swamiji, in the hour of his 'dire calamity', remembers his Love (God) and consequently his heart gets strong to challenge even thousand deaths:

Me seems I hear Thee whispering sweet  
'My love, I am near', I am near.  
My heart gets strong, with thee, my love,  
A thousand deaths no fear.  
Thou speakest in the mother's lay  
That shuts the babies' eyes;  
When innocent children laugh and play  
I see thee standing by. (P.5)

Thus one sees the poet in Swamiji is rooted in the mystic in him. His humanness is never disconnected from his spiritual roots. His poetry, therefore, is a perfect blending of the two.

### The Cup

*The Cup* is a connotative poem which deals with the art of living. It shows the ways of getting the supreme bliss of the Almighty God who made the cup of our life. Not only

did he make the cup (life), God has also given us a path, often a painful and dreary one, which often tests our inherent resilience for facing the trials and tribulations without a sigh or sob. Though short, the poem is highly suggestive. Some of the metaphors used in it are so profound and comprehensive that they seem to be not the ornament of thoughts—as poetry is often held to be—but the *thoughts* themselves.

The poem opens with the image of a cup which stands for the body of man. When this vast creation was created by God, the Omnipotent God also made our body like a beautiful cup. But He made only the cup and not the dark drink filled in it. What is filled in the cup—good or bad, nectar or poison—is made by our own merits and demerits or Karma. The phrase ‘dark drink’ suggests the various weaknesses and impurities of our character. So like the tragic heroes of Shakespeare, we all are responsible for the ‘dark drinks’. Our rise and fall, merit and demerit depend upon our own nature. So it is wrong to blame God at the time of our deep distress or critical juncture.

God also made several unwanted stones and bumps in the fresh and clear path of our life. The atheist thinks that God has done so because He doesn’t want to see man happy; but the fact is just the otherwise. God is our supreme Father and Mother. So He (or She) will not want us to be in danger and distress. He gives hurdles in order to check our real worth at the hour of grief and sorrow:

This is your road—a painful road and drear,  
I made the stones that never give you rest,  
I set your friend in pleasant ways and clear,  
And he shall come like you, unto My breast. (P.14)

These lines are highly connotative. The image of stones suggests the sorrows and

sufferings of life. The image of a painful road points to the fact that our life is not full of flowers, but its ways are strewn with thorns. Happiness and unhappiness go together. This poem reminds us of George Herbert’s famous poem *The Gifts of God* in which God gave all the precious gifts of the world to man but withheld ‘rest’ which was the gift of all gifts. The image of ‘breast’ by Swamiji is also quite similar to the last lines of Herbert’s aforesaid poem:

If goodness lead him not then weariness  
May toss him to my breast.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, we use the term ‘breast’ for woman, while ‘chest’ for man. The image of ‘breast’ also implies a motherly affection, a high degree compassion and love. This shows that God is both our father as well as our mother. The image of ‘breast’ has a profound meaning. It shows how in this mortal world we make a difference between the rich and the poor, the high and the low; but in the eyes of God all men in this world are His/Her children. In the abode of God, everybody has to become an innocent child and she/he has to suck the milk of God for existence.

In the last stanza of the poem, Vivekananda, the great poet, takes another suggestive image of ‘travel’. He observes:

But you, My child must travel here  
This is your task. It has no joy nor grace,  
But it is not meant for any other hand,  
And in My universe hath measured place.(P.14)

The image of ‘travel’ or journey has a philosophical import. It indicates that man is a traveller in this vast world. His permanent home is the lap of God where he has to go after finishing his journey. He should always bear in his mind that like the skylark of William Wordsworth, he has to go to his original abode or nest:

Type of the wise who soar but never roam  
True to the kindred points of heaven and  
home.<sup>11</sup>

This image of 'travel' is very near to the image of 'guest' by saint Kabir who takes the image of a temporary guest for human being in one of his celebrated poems:<sup>12</sup>

अब तुम कब सुमिरोगे राम ।  
जीबडा दो दिन का मेहमान ॥

When will you start  
Meditating the Almighty Lord,  
Forget not you are a mere  
Temporary guest here.

The last two lines of this poem come with a resolution like the sonnet of Shakespeare which always ends with a note of solution or an ephoristic touch. Swamiji observes:

Take it. I don't bid you understand.  
I bid you close your eyes to see My face. (P.14)

This last epigrammatic line conveys, through a compelling metaphor, the way to attain the supreme bliss. God says ('I bid') that in order to see His face, the man has to close the eyes. There is a pun on the expression 'closing the eyes'. The first meaning refers to the closing of eyes during worship. In the

second meaning, in a philosophical sense, it suggests the closing of eyes of greed and ambition, wealth and passion, affection and self-aggrandizement. It shows the closing of outer, touchable and visible eyes, and opening of the inner, untouchable and invisible eyes. These intangible eyes find no difference between the rough and the sublime, the possessed and the non-possessed; they *see* such a bright and glittering world where the darkness becomes light, death turns into life and the melody of Eternity is heard without any interruption. Much like what the Kathopanishad says, the closing of eyes means that the seeker of supreme bliss of God should close the eyes from the mundane and materialistic world and should gaze at his own inner being which is the embodiment of God. Kabir also holds the view that the seat of God is not in the outside world of worshipping the false but it is in the heart of the devotee or the seeker of truth. He observes:<sup>13</sup>

हरि हिरदरे अनत कत चाहौ ।  
भले भरम दूनी कत बाहौ ॥

The Lord is in your heart to find  
Wherever else do you wander  
In search of him in vain?<sup>13</sup>

(To be continued. . .)

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