

Swami Vivekananda and Asian Consciousness

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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA should be credited with inspiring intellectuals to work for and promote Asian integration. He directly and indirectly influenced most of the early proponents of pan-Asianism. Okakura, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and Benoy Sarkar owe much to Swamiji for their pan-Asian views.

Swamiji's marvellous and enthralling speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago on 11 September 1893 and his subsequent popularity in the West and India moulded him into a spokesman for Asiatic civilization.

Huston Smith, the renowned author of *The World's Religions*, which sold over two million copies, views Swamiji as the representative of the East. He states:

Spiritually speaking, Vivekananda's words and presence at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions brought Asia to the West decisively. For, reading correctly the spiritual hunger of the West that his words and presence brought to the surface, Vivekananda went on to found the Ramakrishna Mission whose centres in almost every major city of Europe and America launched the influx of Asian spirituality that has changed the religious complexion of those continents permanently. Buddhism, Sufism, Sikhism, Baha'i and others have followed, but Vedanta was the pioneer.¹

Swamiji and Buddha

Swamiji was viewed not merely as a Hindu monk but as someone who had come from the East with a new message. The US was on the cusp

of transformation into a great power. On the other hand, Asia emerged as the land of Buddha. Edwin Arnold, who was then the principal of Deccan College, Pune, wrote a biographical work on Buddha in verse titled *Light of Asia* in 1879. Buddha stirred Western imagination. The book attracted Western intellectuals towards Buddhism. German philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche saw Buddhism as the world religion.

Swamiji also fulfilled the expectations of Transcendentalists across the West. He did not limit himself merely to Hinduism; he spoke about Buddhism at length during his Chicago addresses. He devoted a complete speech to 'Buddhism, the Fulfilment of Hinduism' on 26 September 1893 and stated: 'I repeat, Shakyamuni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus.'² He further mentioned: 'Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism, nor Buddhism without Hinduism' (1.23).

No doubt he was viewed as a Buddhist as much as a Hindu during his lifetime by many people of the US. On 19 March 1894 Swamiji spoke at the Detroit auditorium on 'Buddhism, the Religion of the Light of Asia' and concluded that 'Buddhism was the foundation of even the Christian religion, that the catholic church came from Buddhism' (7.430). He allowed this image to be cultivated: that he belonged to the Orient and was also the true representative of the *Light of Asia!*

When he returned to Detroit, the local newspapers attacked him severely. The *Detroit Evening News* wrote: ‘The Hindoo-Brahmin-Buddhistic fad of an effete and rotten orientalism has run its course in the west, and it has been found that there is nothing in it.’³ John Lincoln Blauss, a US citizen, wrote a long letter to the *New York Times* on 19 May 1897, under the caption ‘Dropping into Buddhism: How Members of the Brooklyn Ethical Society Came to It’, regarding a report that the Brooklyn Ethical Society performed Buddhist rites. Blauss blasted Swami Vivekananda who, in his view, represented Buddhism at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago. He held Swamiji responsible for the growing popularity of Buddhism.⁴

Swamiji himself admits that he was following the path of Buddha. In fact, his close disciples like Sister Nivedita and Sara Bull were convinced that he was Buddha’s reincarnation. Swamiji referred to a vision of Buddha he had in his childhood:

I saw the wonderful figure of a monk appear suddenly—from where I did not know—and stand before me at a little distance, filling the room with a divine effulgence. He was in ochre robes with a Kamandalu (water-pot) in his hand. His face bore such a calm and serene expression of inwardness born of indifference to all things, that I was amazed and felt much drawn to him. He walked towards me with a slow step, his eyes steadfastly fixed on me, as if he wanted to say something. But I was seized with fear and could not keep still. I got up from my seat, opened the door, and quickly left the room. The next moment I thought, ‘Why this foolish fear?’ I became bold and went back into the room to listen to the monk, who, alas, was no longer there. I waited long in vain, feeling dejected and repenting that I had been so stupid as to flee without listening to him. I have seen many monks, but never have I seen such an extraordinary expression on any other face.

That face has been indelibly printed on my heart. It may have been a hallucination; but very often I think that I had the good fortune of seeing Lord Buddha that day.⁵

Sister Nivedita mentions, in the diary she kept during their pilgrimage to Kashmir and North India, the swami’s reaction when he was passionately speaking of Buddha: “Why Swami, I did not know that you were a Buddhist!” “Madam”, he said, rounding on her, his whole face aglow with the inspiration of that name, “I am the servants of the servants of the servants of Buddha.”⁶ Sara Bull, whom Swamiji addressed as ‘mother’, identified Swamiji as Buddha before her untimely death in 1911.⁷

Swamiji’s devotion towards Buddha can be gleaned from the fact that a few months before Sri Ramakrishna left this earthly abode, Swamiji undertook a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya in April 1886. At Kashipur the Master’s disciples used to discuss the life and message of Buddha. They had also inscribed on their meditation room the famous saying of Buddha: ‘Let this body dry up on its seat; let its flesh and bones dissolve: without attaining the Enlightenment which is difficult to achieve even in aeons, this body shall not rise from its seat.’⁸ Swamiji again visited Bodh Gaya just before his early *parinirvana* in February 1902, along with Japanese art historian Okakura Kakuzo. He had an inkling that he would not survive long enough to establish a fusion of Buddhism and neo-Hinduism after this visit. In a letter to Swami Swarupananda from Gopal Lal Villa, Benares Cantonment, Swamiji wrote: ‘A total revolution has occurred in my mind about the relation of Buddhism and Neo-Hinduism. I may not live to work out the glimpses, but I shall leave the lines of work indicated, and you and your brethren will have to work it out.’⁹

Though Swamiji is often represented as the enunciator of modern Hinduism and the

establisher of the Vedanta movement in the West, his appropriation of Buddha's growing popularity to represent himself as the 'Light of Asia' often goes unnoticed.

Swamiji and Japan

Swamiji was preparing to stir the Asian consciousness. He wrote a series of articles—from 1899 to 1901—articulating his conception of Asia in *Udbodhan*, the Bengali monthly of the Ramakrishna Order. The series was later published under the title 'The East and The West'. In this work he reflected over Japan, China, the Arab world, and the Persian civilization on the one hand, and on France, Britain, and the US on the other. Swamiji was building up his ideas for his Eastern mission. He passed away on 4 July 1902 and his dream of revisiting Japan and other Asian countries to champion the cause of a confident and united Asia did not materialize. But he passed the baton of this great ideal to the Japanese art historian and philosopher Okakura Kakuzo (1863–1913).

Swamiji had a fleeting brush with maritime Asia. His life was too short to make a foray into continental Asia. But he could see a thread of commonality among Asian cultures by even a brief encounter. His first visit to Japan was en route to Chicago in 1893. The first port he arrived at from Canton was Nagasaki. He also went to Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo, and Kyoto. He was surprised to discover Sanskrit mantras written in old Bengali characters in some of the temples there.¹⁰ In this very early encounter he expressed his desire to establish a greater exchange between China, Japan, and India: 'I cannot write what I have in my mind about the Japs in one short letter. Only I want that numbers of our young men should pay a visit to Japan and China every year. Especially to the Japanese, India is still the dreamland of everything high

and good.'¹¹

In 1901–2 Okakura Kakuzo, famous for his work *The Ideals of the East* and credited with raising the 'Asian consciousness', came to Calcutta. The first reference to the interaction between the two Asian heroes occurs in a letter written by Swamiji from Belur Math, on 14 June 1901, to Josephine MacLeod, who was then in Japan. Swamiji wrote in the postscript that he received an invitation to visit Japan and a cheque of 300 rupees from Okakura. After his reflections on 'The East and The West' articles, Swamiji was gearing up to establish a connection between India and Japan as the first step towards harmonizing Asia. In a letter dated 14 June 1901 Swamiji responded to Josephine: 'You are perfectly correct in saying that we will have to learn many things from Japan. The help that Japan will give us will be with great sympathy and respect, whereas that from the West unsympathetic and destructive. Certainly it is very desirable to establish a connection between India and Japan' (5.162).

Okakura arrived in India accompanied by Josephine MacLeod. They had left Shimonoseki on 5 December 1901 and arrived in Calcutta on 6 January 1902. Okakura met Swamiji on the same day, and Swamiji exclaimed: 'It seems as if a long lost brother has come.'¹² Okakura described in his letter to Oda Tokunou, a Buddhist celibate monk, that 'the master is truly a distinguished person bestowed with surpassing spirit and wisdom and everybody here venerates him.'¹³

Swamiji was extremely happy to meet Okakura and wrote to Sister Christine, who was staying at Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, that Okakura and Mr Hori, a brahmacharin, had come along with Josephine MacLeod to Belur. While Hori came to India to study Sanskrit and English, Okakura 'came to see India, the Motherland of Japanese culture and art.'¹⁴

Later, in the first week of February, Okakura and Swamiji went on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya. It was at Bodh Gaya that Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment and became Buddha. He later gave his first sermon at Sarnath and reset in motion the wheel of dharma. This pilgrimage is of historic importance, since the great revivalist of the Eastern spirit, Swamiji, was accompanied by the father of modern pan-Asianism, Okakura, to one of the most important places associated with Buddha, whose ideas have reverberated and united Asia for millennia.

Swamiji was in bad health and suffered from influenza. His plan to visit Japan could not be fulfilled. Though Swamiji left this world in July of the same year, his influence on Okakura can be seen in the sensational book *The Ideals of the East*. It was later published in 1903 from London. The very first words stirred Asians: 'Asia is one.'¹⁵ This is the highest possible non-dualistic concept of a geographical and cultural idea. The idea of Asian unity was clearly an important concept of Swamiji. Okakura sought to convince Asians to 'feel and revivify the dormant life of the old Asiatic unity' (97). The manuscript of the book was edited by Sister Nivedita.

Okakura also wrote *The Awakening of the East* in 1902, but it was published posthumously. This book too was heavily influenced by Swamiji and Sister Nivedita and was replete with explicit references to the worship of Kali. It is in this work that he exhorted Indians to fight against the British colonial government. It begins with 'Brothers and sisters of Asia!', almost a replication of Swamiji's 'Sisters and brothers of America' in Chicago. The



Yours respectfully
Okakura Kakuzo

book concludes: 'The cowards shrink before the brilliant image of freedom. The cautious pause on the threshold of a great revolution. Do they prefer Death in Life to Life in Death? A crisis has now arrived in our history and the dread ordeal has to be faced.'¹⁶

It is seen that Okakura had already formulated his vision about the unity of Asia while Swamiji was alive. The concept of oneness traversed Asia to reach the Indian political shore in 1905 under the slogan 'Bengal is One' in the movement against the Partition of Bengal. Okakura, Nivedita, and Swami Vivekananda wove the warp and woof of Asian consciousness meticulously.

After the passing of Swamiji, Okakura met Tagore and left a lasting impression upon the latter, who became a lover of Japan and an ardent enthusiast for the Asian renaissance in the realm of art and culture. Tagore was also directly influenced by Swamiji, and in many of his writings during the Swadeshi movement, he exhorted his countrymen to read and know Swami Vivekananda in order to know the country.

But was Swamiji enamoured only with Japan and the Japanese? It was not so. If he would have lived longer, he would have appealed to China as well and hastened the national awakening brought about by another pan-Asianist: Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925).

Swamiji and China

Huang Xin Chuan, a professor of history at Beijing University and deputy director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Beijing, wrote *Modern Indian Philosopher Vivekananda: A Study*. The book contains Swamiji's views on China. Huang Xin Chuan delivered a speech on 'Vivekananda and China' at the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, on 4 January 1980 and asserted: 'Vivekananda stands out as the

most renowned philosopher and social figure of India in modern China. His philosophical and social thought and epic patriotism not only inspired the growth of nationalist movement in India, but also made a great impact abroad. ... He made a prophecy that the Chinese culture will surely be resurrected one day like the "Phoenix" and undertake the responsibility of the great mission of integrating the Western and the Oriental cultures.'¹⁷

Professor Huang explained that 'when Vivekananda went to America for the first time, he hoped that country would achieve this [integrating] mission. But during his second visit abroad, he realised that he was deceived by dollar imperialism. He, therefore, came to the conclusion that America could not be an instrument to accomplish this task, but it was China which could do it' (100). This might be the context for Swamiji's growing interest in Japan and China. Professor Huang claims that Swamiji pinned his hopes on China.

Swamiji visited China only once. On his way to Chicago by ship, he spent three days there in June 1893. He saw Hong Kong and Canton—now called Guangzhou. He even managed to travel 80 miles up the Pearl River to Canton and visited one of the Chinese Buddhist temples. In a letter to Alasinga, Balaji, and his friends in Madras, he wrote about his first-hand experience in China. He was appalled by the poverty he saw and considered it to be the root cause of India's and China's problems. He wrote: 'Their extreme poverty is one of the causes why the Chinese and the Indians have remained in a state of mummified civilization. To an ordinary Hindu or Chinese, everyday necessity is too hideous to allow him to think of anything else.'¹⁸ But he could foresee that the downtrodden would rise within each nation and also internationally.

In March 1901 Swamiji went to East Bengal. He stayed at Mohini babu's villa at Farashganj, Dacca. Hemchandra Ghose recorded Swamiji's prophecy for Asia. It happened when Swamiji was met by young boys from Shyamakanta Parshanath's Gymnasium. He spoke prophetically: 'Yes, the Sudras of the world will rise. And that is the dictate of Social Dynamic that is *Sivam*. It is as clear as day-light that the entire Orient will have a resurrection to build anew a human world. Lo! the future greatness of China, and in the wake of it, of all the Asiatic nations. ... You take it from me, this rising of Sudra will take place first in *Russia* and then in *China*. *India* will rise next and will play a vital role in shaping the future world.'¹⁹ On another occasion Swamiji also said about China: 'I see before me the body of an elephant. There is a foal within. But it is a lion-cub that comes out of it. It will grow in future, and China shall become great and powerful.'²⁰

Swamiji was of the opinion that there was an ancient philosophical link between India and China: 'There is, the Swami says, distinct evidence of Vedanta's missionary enterprise [in China] long before the advent of Buddha' (2.132).

Asian Visionaries in India

Sister Nivedita was infused with the power of Swamiji. She had been instrumental in carrying forward Swamiji's unfinished mission of electrifying the Asian consciousness. Sitting at Swamiji's feet on board ship to England in 1899 she noted: 'I knew that here I was but the transmitter, but the bridge, between Him and countless host, of his own people, who would yet arise, and seek to make good his dreams.'²¹

Swamiji's Asiatic dream was transferred to multiple centres through her. Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Coomaraswami, Okakura, Subhashchandra Bose—each of them were associated

with Sister Nivedita, who also died very young on 13 October 1911. Sri Aurobindo popularized the idea of 'Asia' through his editorials in the newspaper *Bande Mataram* and claimed to have direct spiritual communion with Swami Vivekananda while he was in the Alipur jail in 1908.²² Sri Aurobindo's close associate, Paul Richards, went to Japan and wrote *The Dawn over Asia* in 1920.

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswami wrote classics on Asian aesthetics and enunciated the 'Asiatic philosophy of art' underlying its essential 'unity in diversity'. He boosted the idea that India was the wellspring of all Asian civilizations. He tried to bring Hinduism and Buddhism closer, and Sister Nivedita coauthored with him works like *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (1914) and *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (1916).

The combined influence of Okakura and Coomaraswami over Tagore made the latter envision a resurgent spiritual Asia. The baton of the resurgent spiritual Asia passed from Swamiji to Okakura to Rabindranath Tagore.

Similarly, Benoy Sarkar (1887–1949), one of the greatest Indian scholars of the last century and author of a brilliant exposition on the material basis for the Asian unity, titled *Futurism of Young Asia* (1922), was directly involved with the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement and much inspired by Swamiji's '*sakti-yoga*, energism, the vigour and strength of freedom.'²³ 'To put India, nay Asia, on an equal footing with the West was what he sincerely longed for. It was this that brought Benoy Sarkar close to the life and teachings of Vivekananda and made him an admirer of Vivekananda's activities to bring home due honour to his motherland.'²⁴

Subhashchandra Bose, who later participated in the Japanese vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, was a follower of Swami

Vivekananda throughout his life. He paid tribute to Swamiji with the following words: 'If he had been alive, I would have been at his feet. Modern Bengal is his creation—if I err not.'²⁵

With the passing of Tagore in 1941, the defeat of Japan in World War II, and the disappearance of Netaji Subhashchandra Bose, the pace of crystallization of Asian consciousness decelerated. The unity also suffered under the ideological bifurcation of Asia due to communism. With the end of the Cold War, the ongoing implosion of Western powers, and the reemergence of Asia to its preeminent position, Asia's siren song started to sound around the world. Swamiji, while presiding over a meeting at the Star Theatre in Calcutta at which Sister Nivedita delivered a lecture on 'The Influence of Indian Spiritual Thought in England' on 11 March 1898, commented: 'Mark you this—the most marvellous historical fact—that all the nations of the world have to sit down patiently at the feet of India to learn the eternal truths embodied in her literature. India dies not. China dies not. Japan dies not.'²⁶

It is true, Asia dies not. The mission of Swami Vivekananda was to build a spiritually vibrant, interconnected, and prosperous Asia. That was the eternal message from the missionary of the East for the East!



References and Notes

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8. *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 1.172.
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