Journal of Business, Ethics and Society (October_2023) (V-3_I-2) 102-110

Title: - Guru to the World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda

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Year :- 2022

ISBN :- 978-0674291607

Publisher The Belknap Press

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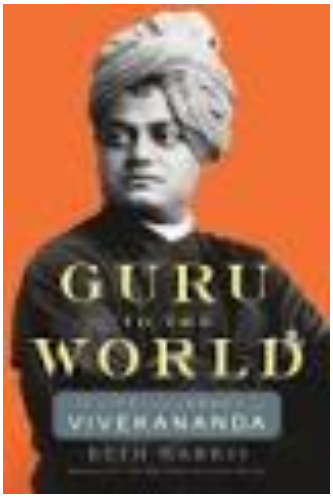

It is not rare to come across historiographic works on Indian themes, produced in the last five decades, wherein historiography's linkages with the narrative mode get obscured by an overarching preoccupation with positivism. Certain writers practice historiography as if it were to be counted as a social science discipline, and, as such, had no or only tendentious connections with the humanities. Relieved of such pretences, *Guru to the World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda* – Oxford historian Ruth Harris's latest – contains some very welcome signs contrary to the positivistic trend in the historiography of Indian themes.

From the outset Harris makes explicit her geo-cultural position, wherefrom she observes and approaches the historical subject and phenomena associated with her chosen theme in this book; and makes a palpable attempt to not confine herself to any one ideological window or outlook or worldview – although it is impossible to circumvent such pitfalls altogether. One hopes that new and aspiring authors in the field would take a leaf out of her book and make similar honest attempts at registering their perspectival location – especially when writing on themes that belong to a culture other than their own.

Just as the awareness of perspectival location is evident throughout Harris's book, so is her careful approach that seeks to ward off retrojective readings and interpretations of historical personages and

phenomena. For example, in the Preface, the author confesses that "nothing was more humbling than [her own] novice attempts at understanding Indian metaphysical thinking and historiography." (Harris, 2022; p. xi) Such humility is a necessary but increasingly rare virtue among historiographers in particular, and humanities and social sciences scholars in general, who focus on Indian themes. It helps add to their work a quality of authenticity, which not only makes the dialogue between the author/narrator and the reader more open and richer with possibilities, but also draws our attention to the limitations of the former's methodology and tools. Contrary to appearances, this adds to the rigour of the work.

Embarking on an analysis of divergent legacies of the historical figure under scrutiny, Harris issues a warning which is both instructive and insightful: "[t]hese different legacies suggest that history rarely contains lessons in inevitability; they also warn us against the dangers of reading back from current characterizations and the urgent need to return Vivekananda to his late-nineteenth-century context." (p. 4) This warning becomes all the more relevant in the context of our animated contemporary discourses, in India and abroad, about nineteenth-century Indian Renaissance figures (including but not limited to Swami Vivekananda) who are often (unfairly) judged by commentators from across the ideological-political spectrum according to the standards of present-day morality, law, updated scientific and historical knowledge as well as the ever-evolving and burgeoning demands of political correctness.

In yet another display of her methodological integrity, Harris makes an important disclosure in the preface: that she has "never practiced meditation with any seriousness" and "had no luck with yoga as a form of physical strengthening or spiritual advance." (p. ix) This point may at first glance seem of little or no relevance for historiography. However, upon careful reflection, one realises that association with yoga – especially as a discipline of spiritual advancement – has a crucial epistemological significance. Anyone familiar with Indian philosophy would recall the value attached by several systems of *Darśana*, as well as bhakti-based spiritual disciplines, to *Citta-śuddhi* or purification of the mind as a cognitive instrument for attaining exact knowledge of reality as it is. In the Yoga-Darśana in particular, the concept of "*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*" is central to the attainment of perfection in Yoga, as stated in the pithy aphorism of Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra*: "*yogaścittavṛttinirodhaḥ*", which is translated by Swami Vivekananda as "Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (Chitta) from taking various forms (Vrittis)." (Vivekananda, 1998) Although the historiographer is under no obligation to attain perfection in Yoga before embarking on her scholarly project, the Harris's acknowledgement of this yoga-based Indian epistemological approach to attaining clearer visions of the object of enquiry – especially when the object happens to be the life and legacy of an Indian spiritual figure – as well as her inability to exploit that approach, offers necessary clarification on what her work can and cannot offer.

In describing how she arrived at her historical questions, Harris admits to her "fascination" with themes like the fin de siècle, and the "topics where science, religion, and healing mingle with politics and the

lives of individuals" (p. ix). She places these areas of interests within the purview of scholarly work in 'global history', which, she observes, "has been extraordinarily productive in shifting some aspects of a Eurocentric approach to history." (pp. 9 – 10) She thus frames some of her principal historical questions for the book as follows:

1. "How and why Westerners, and particularly Americans, could become interested in Eastern spirituality without having any deep matching interest in the East itself"; because she observed her close American acquaintances "who had long abandoned conventional Jewish or Christian beliefs for yoga, mindfulness, and Hindu- and Buddhist-inspired ideas and practices, spiritual notions that were matched by a preoccupation with wellness and optimal health." (pp. ix – x)
2. The author's desire to "engage with global and trans-national history, to look at parallel and virtually simultaneous happenings in new ways" led her to investigate parallels between embodiments of mysticism and "inspired religious renewal in places where the local population felt downtrodden and immiserated" across the globe, which attracted the attention of a cultivated audience. From studying the religious experience of the Catholic mystic Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, through examining the life and work of the French Nobel-laureate Romain Rolland, to arriving at a historiographic enquiry on Thakur Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, Harris has surveyed the fin de siècle historical scenario with a special attention devoted to how Indian religious and spiritual ideas influenced "alternative" spiritual seekers. However, while doing so, Harris has made some honest efforts at keeping her approach free of the tendency to prioritise the "Western arena". Neither did she intend to place Swami Vivekananda among the ranks of the "great men" of the West, in a postcolonial effort to rebalance the pantheon of such great men. (p. 6)
3. The author has also attempted to capture in her historical account the complex dialectical relationship between the humanising effects of spiritual emotionalism of the *bhakta* and the analytical acuity of the *jñāni*, a kind of "double-sidedness", which is traceable "both in Vivekananda's personality and in his theology." (p. 68)
4. Finally, through this work the author has sought to enquire about and highlight the role of women – both Eastern and Western – in "Vivekananda's global project" as well as in the emergence of 'Hindu Universalism'. (p. 7)

In the context of her vocation, Harris has shown commendable courage in consulting many of what she calls "spiritual biographies and pious works of the Ramakrishna Mission that many secular historians have eschewed." (p. 13) She has justified her decision in this regard by pointing out that such works function as a rich source of crucial details and chronological data that are absent elsewhere; and the serious historian would consider these studies without necessarily agreeing with the spiritual message they impart. What sort of details do such works provide us with? Precisely those that are excluded in

the sanitised versions of 'social-scientific', 'objective' historiographic interpretation. In Harris's own words,

"Because they prize the emotional and human dimensions of this story, they offer details of spiritual trials, family antagonisms, and institutional conflict. Their approach is not necessarily detrimental to historical interpretation, but rather can provide a gateway into discussions of devotional practices, mysticism, and forms of sanctity essential for probing a religious culture." (p.13)

This awareness – of what is "essential for probing a religious culture" as the one that prevailed in turn-of-the-century India – sets Harris and her work on Swami Vivekananda apart from other contemporary historians and their oeuvre on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

Adopting a framework that imbibes similar attitudes towards one's object of enquiry, and a similar measured approach to one's chosen historical theme will, I think, result in richer historiographic accounts by our contemporary Western as well as Indian historiographers who choose to write on themes from both Ancient and Modern Indian history – especially those themes that are connected to spirituality, religion, cultural and political movements. So far as methodology is concerned, Harris's work will no doubt be counted as a useful benchmark by serious historians of these themes and areas, for many years to come.

In *Guru to the World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda*, Harris helps bring a major focus on Swami Vivekananda's persona as a guru, rather than a philosopher or a figure who inspired Indian nationalists. Those important aspects of the Swami's personality and legacy do find a place in her historical narrative about the late nineteenth-century Hindu monk, but only inasmuch as they help illuminate the nature, reach, and impact of the Swami's role as a guru, especially in relation to his Western disciples. Harris's primary focus lay on the Swami's impact on these Western disciples as well as on Western thought and practices in general – which explains the title of her book as well as her focus on global and transnational history. Through this book, Harris sought to illumine major historical aspects of what she has called "global Vedanta", a term which seems to imply the journey of Vedantic ideas and practices around the globe and their reception by a global audience.

The project to shed light on Swami Vivekananda's role as a guru has expectedly compelled the author to undertake deeply interconnected studies of the Swami's own guru Thakur Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (henceforth referred to as 'Thakur') and the Swami's discipleship under him. Comparing these two personalities and their respective modes of teaching, Harris has foregrounded Swami Vivekananda's power and agility in communicating ideas and feelings to different audiences, which plays a central role in any kind of teaching – but is especially crucial for those who guide others in their pursuit of spirituality and religion. Harris locates the source of the Swami's success as a 'global' guru in his ability to communicate efficiently and adaptively; and she identifies the source of this ability to a significant extent in his guru's teaching. She points out: "Above all, Ramkrishna taught Vivekananda

the importance of speaking in a language that his audience could understand – hence his success in communicating to very different kinds of people." (p. 412)

The author deserves our praise for her attempt to develop and apply an almost comprehensive approach to read and understand the complexities of Swami Vivekananda's life and legacy in this book. I say 'almost,' because Harris has made this attempt apparently without gaining sufficient proficiency in the Bengali and Sanskrit languages. Bengali, being the native language of both Swami Vivekananda and Thakur, is the medium in which much of Swami Vivekananda's writings (including his letters, which Harris claims to have exploited as her "main source") as well as his guru's teachings are recorded. A familiarity with the Sanskrit language is also desirable in this context, primarily because the author had to deal with quite a few metaphysical and epistemological ideas as well as terminology that are expressed in that language. Vivekananda himself referred to Sanskrit sacred texts frequently in his lectures and discourses, and navigating through his utterances becomes much smoother when a scholar studying Vivekananda and his guru has a working proficiency in the 'language of the gods'. I will give a few examples from Harris's book to illustrate what sort of confusions might arise when contextual linguistic proficiency is compromised.

The author explains the Bengali term '*ṭhākur'*, which is most frequently used by Bengali devotees as a form of address for Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa Deva, as "the title of 'Lord' used for Vishnu" (p. 55). This is an example of the kind of confusion that may arise from unfamiliarity with the Bengali language and culture. In Bengal, the term '*ṭhākur*' is used in multiple senses, one of which is definitely as the title of 'Lord' – and in that sense it is used as a form of address for not just Vishnu, but for Shiva, Ganesha, Kartika, or sometimes even for the Goddess in her various forms. Until a few decades ago, the word was commonly employed as either a prefix or in itself in forms of address designated for various members in the family – the grandfather, the brother-in-law, even the husband. But, more importantly, the word '*ṭhākur'* is used to denote and address priests in Bengal, which is how Sri Ramakrishna got the title in the first place and that is how the term became synonymous with him in the Bengali milieu. Because he started his career in Rani Rashmani's temple at Dakshineswar as an assistant priest, helping his elder sibling Ramkumar who was the head priest, he was called '*choṭo ṭhākur*' (deputy priest) by temple officials and several other acquaintances. It was a happy semantic coincidence that later in his life Sri Ramakrishna came to be recognised and venerated as a mystic, a saint, an avatar – which is why the '*choṭo ṭhākur*' of Rani Rashmani's temple became, in time, a deity worshipped in temples and households, the '*ṭhākur*' synonymous with Sri Hari or Lord Vishnu.

Comparing Thakur's religious teaching with that of his most well-known disciple, the author claims: "There is little evidence that Ramakrishna saw Advaita, the union of "self" and "nonself", as necessarily more spiritually advanced in the way that Vivekananda later would." (p. 52) But does that claim hold good? Those familiar with Thakur's deployment of the imagery of the staircase for describing the

hierarchy of spiritual realisation through Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, and Advaita would not readily provide their assent. However, there were several differences between the two with regard to points of emphasis. Thus, the author correctly asserts "Ramakrishna's genius lay in the sensual and emotional experientialism that emphasized the existential qualities of divine play" (p. 83), while Vivekananda achieved an intellectual as well as experiential-spiritual reconciliation of apparent opposites that enabled a *jñānī* like him to channelise Vedanta in the practical path of *sevā*, while encompassing and embracing the whole of India with her glory as well as her shame.

Given the fact that through this book Harris had to carry out the obligations of not only a historiographer, but also those of a theologian to a significant extent, one understands the challenges that such dual role entails. However, Harris has for the most part excelled in that dual role – for example, in passages such as the one here on Sri Ramakrishna's notion of unconditional and all-surrendering, childlike love for the Divine Mother:

"Although he was every bit a guru despite his protests, he wanted to be one that emanates innocence, and so he celebrated "silliness" and nakedness. His acts were shocking or awe-inspiring depending on point of view, but he certainly provided a vivid and spiritualized expression of babyhood. He forced his audience to see how infants had a unique call on the love of the older generation, and especially on their mothers, who wiped them clean without rebuke. It was precisely this form of unconditional, reflexive love that he hoped to inspire in others and to which Vivekananda, despite his many doubts, ultimately turned." (p. 66)

And yet, the tensions of performing such a daunting task involves occasionally going off the mark. Thus, for example, Harris's understanding and interpretation of Advaita Vedanta – which she had to frequently deploy for the purpose of narrativizing Vivekananda's life and legacy – comes across as oversimplified. Harris seems to have internalised the notion that Swami Vivekananda was some sort of pioneer in introducing the dimension of detached worldly activism to the history of Advaita Vedanta, in its otherwise "long and venerated metaphysical pedigree" (p. 15). This is not really the case – Swami Vivekananda's "Practical Vedanta" is a radical re-contextualisation of Sri Krishna's *niṣkāma karma*, or performing one's actions as stipulated by their innate nature and station in life while disowning any claims whatsoever to the results of their work. The radicalness of Vivekananda's intervention in this regard consists in upholding this Vedantic ideal of the *Bhagavad-Gita* for that section of the masses which would be capable of adding value to their society through *sevā* or service offered to the downtrodden and the immiserated – nothing more, nothing less.

The book also contains a few unfortunate errors and strange categorisations in its details – such as in claiming the great artist Abanindranath Tagore to be a brother of the poet Rabindranath Tagore. In fact, Abanindranath was the poet's nephew. An example of incongruous categorisation occurs in the book when it brackets venerable warrior heroes and kings like Shivaji Maharaj or Pratapaditya with saints

and mystics like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Shankara, and Guru Nanak – describing all of them as "Indian Spiritual Figures (Historical)"! (p. 437)

Despite such intermittent jarring notes, the author displays remarkable perceptiveness about Bengali Hindu culture, such as when she alludes to the Goddess Shashthi (*Ṣaṣṭhī*) while discussing Goddess Kali's proclivity to protect her children (who are likened to kittens). In Bengal and certain other areas, the Hindu lore depicts Devi Shashthi as the Divine Protectress of babies and as a goddess who is fond of kittens. Harris's cultural sensitivity and perceptiveness reflects also in her close reading of the *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita*, the well-known collection of Thakur's discourses, recorded for posterity by Sri Mahendranath Gupta – a book which is looked upon as a sacred text by devotees. Harris makes the point that "the *Kathamrita* cannot and should not be reduced to a form of middle-class "appropriation." It conveys something of Ramakrishna's magnetism and differentiates the voices of the disciples, while providing a rich and shifting landscape of classes, castes, and psychological tendencies…" despite Mahendranath's "elaborate literary construction" (p. 56) It is indeed the magnetism of Thakur, conveyed chiefly through the power of his words (with Mahendranath as a mediate author) as well as his strikingly vivid spiritual metaphors to millions who did not meet him in person, that elevates the status of *Kathamrita* from a memoir to a sacred book. The book's great appeal to the people's religious and spiritual imagination means that a serious historiographer of nineteenth-century Indian cultural landscape would not be able to avoid a careful reading of the *Kathamrita*. Harris didn't give it a miss, and her historiographic account of Vivekananda's life and legacy has become all the richer for it.

It is perhaps also due to her close reading of the *Kathamrita* that Harris was able to detect the special element which sets the Hindu religious vision apart from others, and which she has called "radical experientialism" – as opposed to an exclusive emphasis on doctrinal belief – with Sri Ramkrishna as a modern-day exemplar of it.

A significant aspect of the author's methodology in writing this book is the principle that the disciple is the mirror of the master – that it is possible to understand the master's life, personality, work, and philosophy through the disciple's understanding of these, in addition to the corpus of the master's own writings, speeches, and letters. Applying this principle, she turns to Nivedita's writings – which includes her memoirs and letters – to construct her account of Swami Vivekananda's life, work, and legacy. But even such a method of historical interpretation is not without its flaws. Because of the great difference in cultural and civilisational experiences of Nivedita and her guru, there are aspects of Nivedita's personality and opinions which cannot be traced to her guru's teachings or his legacy. Thus, for example, Harris has demonstrated tendencies in Nivedita to characterise Jews in a negative light – showing how she was given to conspiracy theories about Jews that border on antisemitism. Now, if the reader unquestioningly accepts the theory that the disciple's life, utterances, and legacy is a trustworthy reflection of the guru's, then they might be misled to the false conclusion that there are connections

between Nivedita's antisemitic tendencies and Swami Vivekananda's teachings. It is therefore necessary to provide helpful cultural background and contextual caveats to such presentations.

The author should, above all, be praised for making a valiant attempt at leading contemporary scholarly discourse on Ramakrishna-Vivekananda outside the field of binaries.

The author has repeatedly highlighted Swami Vivekananda's key ideas, received from his guru's teaching, that informed and inspired Vivekananda's Hindu vision of universalism for both India and the world at large. These key ideas are: one, looking at an enormous variety of creeds, beliefs, cultures, and customs through Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis on a diversity of beliefs – which, and not uniformity, is the true nature of unity; and two, a disdain for sects and sect-making. In doing so, the author has accomplished the difficult but necessary task of summarising the essential teaching of Thakur (and of Swami Vivekananda), which makes his contribution to the history of religions so special and so relevant for the modern world.

In conclusion, it should be stated that the book makes for an engaging and delightfully enriching contemporary account of Swami Vivekananda's life and legacy, adding to the class of erudite biographies of the Swami by such earlier authors as Romain Rolland, Swami Nikhilananda, and Shankari Prasad Basu. Like Basu's four-volume Bengali work, Harris's offers, albeit at a smaller scale, some crucial perspectives on the eventful epoch of socio-cultural revolutions that was nineteenth-century India. Thus, *Guru to the World* serves as an important milestone in constructing the history of the long-drawn process through which the Western world is slowly arriving at a clear-headed understanding of Hinduism and Hindu transcendence.

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