



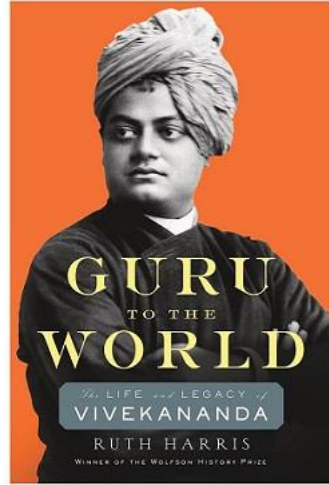
Guru to the World

A Book Review by G Venkatesh

‘We believe not only in universal toleration, but also that all religions are true.’ – Swami Vivekananda

Think back briefly to Donald Trump’s mispronunciation of Swami Vivekananda’s name when he had visited India during his first term as the President of the USA. Stay there for a while if you must, and then slowly return to understanding

more about ‘The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda’ brilliantly sketched by American historian and academic Ruth Harris in the three-part (India, the West, India and the World), 16-chapter, 540-page magnus opus ‘Guru to the World’, published by Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press (Massachusetts, USA), in 2022. Reviewing this book is one thing, and doing perfect justice to such a review is quite another. This, here, is a modest attempt by yours sincerely to place Harris’ magnus opus – an inspired blend of politics, religion and biography in the words of one reviewer - in front of readers of the Bhawan’s Journal and thereby play a small part in exhorting young and old to get to know this ‘pride-instilling, solace-providing rock-star sanniyasi of the 19th century, the apostle of Indian nationalism who taught Hindu Universalism to the world’.



For this book, Harris has travelled around the world, and interacted with a host of individuals who have shed light on several aspects of Swami Vivekananda’s life, work and legacy, and read voraciously, as the Notes at the end of the book will testify.

Rammohan to Ramakrishna

Born on 12th January 1863, to Vishvanath and Bhuvaneshwari Dutta, Narendranath (as he was christened at birth) was a benediction from Lord Shiva to the Duttas. He himself grew up devoted to Lord Shiva. This devotion, coupled with immersion in rational Brahmoism and its concomitant cosmopolitanism, adulation of Raja Rammohan Roy, aversion to polytheism, idol worship, the caste system and the practice

of *sati*, and reverence for women, were among the many initial steps on the ladder to his becoming a ‘Guru to the world’. Multi-talented, endowed with supernatural abilities, extremely service-oriented (an active doer, conscious as an *Advaitist* that the God within him – the Absolute residing in his soul – was the actual actor), an ascetic who defied conventions and focussed on, and encouraged holistic – physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and spiritual – development, this Master of many trades would, within the short span of time allotted to him on *Terra Firma*, ascend to spiritual mastery. The soul after all, is housed within the mental-physical envelope which needs to be attended to.

He was destined to meet Ramakrishna Paramahansa – a vital step on the aforementioned ladder – unlearn and relearn a lot after painstaking introspection, *en route* to leaving behind a rich legacy, which will continue to guide, inspire, counsel and encourage humans, be they Hindus or otherwise. ‘*Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached,*’ is enough to goad the uninspired onward to purposeful action.

Man-God shapes the God-Man

Harris contends that knowing Ramakrishna Paramahansa (the Man-god, incarnation of God) is indispensable for the understanding of the path Vivekananda (the God-man who elevated himself by dint of spiritual practices) followed after 1882, and takes readers through a (semi-)hagiographical account of the mystic’s life, detailing his radical experientialism, his ‘playing’ out of curiosity with a host of spiritual practices, and thereby concluding that all religions and spiritual practices lead to the same end-goal – understanding the Divine.

Ramakrishna’s ‘celibate, spiritual marriage’ to Sarada Devi, his emphasis on the need for lived experiences as a true seeker of the Truth, his fierce, unparalleled determination, and his

ability to elucidate and simplify complex truths by resorting to metaphors of common daily-use objects, were among the attractors which drew Vivekananda towards Ramakrishna. The latter adhered to Bhakti Yoga (being a mystic, that is quite obvious), while the former was more of a Karma/Jnana-Yogi. This difference simply served to consolidate their *Guru-shishya* bond. After Ramakrishna's passing-away, Sarada Devi became the Holy Mother to Vivekananda, blessing, advising and instructing him in his efforts to unite spiritual endeavours (Jnana Yoga and subsequent transcendence), and public service (the Karma Yoga part of realising self and thereby God). Indeed, both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda supported universalism, with the former having also 'experienced' and 'lived' Islam and Christianity, to ascertain that all paths converged to the same end-goal referred to earlier. Harris' account, one must say, tends to bring Ramakrishna back to life in the mind's inner eye.

Blending responsible 'householderism' (devotion and service to his biological mother) with his spiritual quest, Vivekananda became the legatee of Ramakrishna's 'words and deeds', in the interest of an 'expansive spirituality'. As Harris details in the chapters that follow, he would go on to accomplish a great deal to sustain Ramakrishna's spiritual passion for the sake of 'redemption of the world' (he would refer to Jesus Christ here, while exhorting the disciples to understand their true calling in their lives), in the 16 years between Ramakrishna's passing-away and his own *Samadhi*. Harris ends the first part with a chapter focusing on Vivekananda's travels within the Indian sub-continent and his interactions with Dalits, Sadhus, princes, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and Jains...'experientialism' and 'spiritual universalism' as sound and reliable foundations to base one's spiritual ascension and self/God-realisation on. (Mahama Gandhi would likewise learn more about the plight of the poor and underprivileged in India by travelling around the country, and find impetus therein, for India's freedom struggle)

Travelled, observed, contemplated, spoke...

Julius Caesar's 'Veni, Vidi, Vici', can be recast thus, in the case of the imprints Vivekananda has left behind on and for humankind. One may add many more constructive verbs to the mix, and note, as Harris has done, that Vivekananda encouraged the disciples (sons of his Master Ramakrishna, as he referred to them often) to read books outside of their traditions, and expand the scope of their knowledge, to appreciate the fact that all things were somehow interlinked, the interlinkages revealing themselves to the discerning eye. His assumed spiritual name 'Vivekananda' in Sanskrit, translates to Bliss from Discernment! (The author informs that *en route* from Narendranath to Vivekananda, there were 'Vividishananda' and 'Satchitadananda' in the name-train.). Harris points out that though he travelled extensively for sure, he always held the view that '*There is no greater tirtha (holy place with a history and a mythological connection which is considered to be an intersection of the physical /terrestrial and the spiritual realms) than the body of man.*' This links to his aforesaid insistence on holistic personal development, and solicitude for the mortal cage of the spirit soul.

Supported by, *inter alia*, his Tamilian disciple Alasinga Perumal, inspired by dreams of Ramakrishna (who had blessed him and foretold his voyage out of India), and motivated by encouragement from Sarada Devi who urged him to travel to the World Parliament on Religions (WPR) in Chicago (USA), Vivekananda set sail for the North American Pacific coast. Harris narrates how Providence was always by the Swami's side, with help manifesting unexpectedly, and cementing some strong bonds of friendship in the process. Harris introduces readers to different speakers at the WPR, and thereby to varying perspectives on religion, spirituality and life on earth, whom Vivekananda had the opportunity to listen to. The 'listening' enabled the 'speaking' later on, to clear misunderstandings and suspicions about Hinduism and

Vedanta, through, inter alia, the simile of the banyan tree with its branches to indicate the 330 million gods and goddesses linked to One Reality, and parables ‘Jesus-style’.

...and influenced

Vivekananda’s eloquence magnified by the power of his ‘musical, deep-baritone, resonant voice’, and his quick-wittedness and wry humour, endeared him to audiences whenever he spoke/lectured, particularly women in the West, many of whom helped him to disseminate his messages about Vedanta and universalism. Harris has a separate chapter titled ‘Women East and West’, to bring out the importance Vivekananda assigned to women as potential transformers of humankind, with the ability to direct humans onto the path of spirituality to commune with Godhead and arouse faith in an otherwise disenchanted populace. He wanted to rid the world of chivalry and assign a new meaning to the reverence for womanhood, by making women aware of their inherent strengths, and the fact that if they got rid of socio-religious conditioning, they would at once realise that they had it in them to stand on their own two feet, and lead, preach and teach.

Harris has referred to him as a ‘representative of an enlightened ancient culture, and the future of a universal spiritual tendency, the Guardian of the Threshold and the door to new spiritual climes / muscle-building, man-making warrior monk of renunciation, both for the poor and the nation / magnetic personality embodying a set of ideas, sentiments and principles and engendering faith.’ This set of ideas included, among several others, *Advaita* (monism), the power of *Raja Yoga*, and a belief in the fact that modern science and religion/spirituality are veritably comrades-in-arms, and do not work at cross-purposes with each other.

The author brings in several characters (and their ‘nano-biographies’, if such a term could be used) – William James, Sara Bull, Sarah Farmer, Max Mueller, Christine Greenstidel, Josephine MacLeod, Leon Landsberg, Edward Sturdy, Charlotte and Henry Sevier, Margaret Noble (more popular later as Sister Nivedita, after she arrived in India in 1898, to lead a life of service till 1911, the year she passed away), among others - when she discusses the post-WPR experiences and interactions of Vivekananda with people in the USA (especially New York, New England and California) and Great Britain, and the differences/similarities among his ideas and beliefs and those of others. Vivekananda’s influence on those he met and spoke with, as well as those who read his works later on, is communicated both implicitly and explicitly in different chapters.

While he found followers and supporters, there were also detractors who fell out owing to differences and misunderstandings (due to Vivekananda’s habit of smoking and tendency to over-eat, both of which were deemed to be unbecoming of an ascetic).

Homecoming...as foretold by his Guru

After leaving his ‘soul-prints’ and ‘mind-prints’ in the West, Vivekananda returned to India in 1897, and travelled tirelessly across the ‘Motherland’s’ length and breadth doing what he had always resolved to do – infuse ‘practical Vedanta’ into the minds and hearts of Indians (Hindus rather), cultivate self-belief and self-acceptance among them, develop their lost individuality, and democratise/universalise Advaita, so that it would be open to all. ‘Uplift from the bottom instead of destruction from the top’ was what he advocated, in order to realise the practical and spiritual (‘soteriological’) purpose latent in the ‘diversity and dynamism’ of the caste system in Hinduism.

‘You must give your body, mind and speech to the welfare of the world. Spread ideas, go from village to village, door to door, only then can you do real work,’ he used to remind disciples and audiences in general, and advocated doing this disinterestedly, not for name or fame, but in the true spirit of the ethical activism of Karma Yoga – worshipping God in His universal as well as individual aspect, through service. He was of the view that ‘service to the poor, illiterate, ignorant and afflicted is the highest religion.’ Service for him was the primary sacrifice, not the practice of austerities. He urged his followers to combine immense idealism with immense practicality – paradoxical but something one can very well strive towards. Harris notes that Vivekananda ardently wished that India woke up from her age-long slumber and took her true rank in the hierarchy of nations, and describes the roles played by fellow-disciples of Ramakrishna (Trigunatitananda, Akhandananda, Turiyananda, Ramakrishnananda among others), alongwith and after Vivekananda. A large chunk of the third part of the book is devoted to Sister Nivedita – the ‘Celtic lioness’ in Vivekananda’s words - who quite like her Guru, in a short span of time, contributed a lot to the causes espoused by Vivekananda (the Ramakrishna Math and Sri Sarada Math), and left behind a beautiful legacy to treasure and honour. (Sister Nivedita at once reminds this reviewer of Mother Teresa (Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu), who came later to the very same city (Calcutta) to serve the diseased and downtrodden.) Both Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita were prolific writers – Harris has referred to their works contextually - and their writings/books continue to teach and inspire, mould and enlighten.

Vivekananda’s last conversation with Margaret Noble is redolent of that of Jesus’s with the apostles at the Last Supper! The leonine-heart, lofty soul and brilliant mind, had to endure the limits of the mortal frame which bore the brunt of ‘the years of wandering and ferocious schedule’...eternal peace came his way when he was a little over 39 years of age, on the

4th of July 1902...his soul bid adieu to the terrestrial plane. His *Atman* lives on, and his work and teachings continue to guide and inspire anyone willing to take heed, like beacons in the rough seas of worldly existence.

This review must end here, and serve the purpose of motivating readers to fetch a copy of Ruth Harris's *Guru to the World*...not merely to read and relegate to the book-shelf, but ponder and apply whatever they can, in their quotidian existence...to make it a little more special!

Title: [Guru To The World: The Life and Legacy of Vivekananda](#)

Author: Ruth Harris

Available: [Amazon](#)

Venkatesh Govindarajan

Venkatesh Govindarajan was an Associate Professor at the Karlstad University in Sweden till October 2024, wherewith he has been employed since 2015. Currently, he is associated with The Energy Research Institute School of Advanced Studies in New Delhi. He was a Researcher/postdoctoral fellow/PhD candidate at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology earlier, in the period 2006-2015. He holds two master's degrees – Mechanical Engineering (India) and Industrial Ecology (Norway), in addition to a bunch of diplomas in industrial management, mass communication and software engineering. He has a rich publishing background (both peer-reviewed scientific journal articles and popular-science pieces), and has worked in the niche business-to-business print media for five years in the late 1990s-early 21st century. He has set up a family of funds in his late wife Varshita's honour and memory to support a host of charitable causes. He has published a memoir, two novellas four volumes of poems, and five e-books on a range of themes.

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