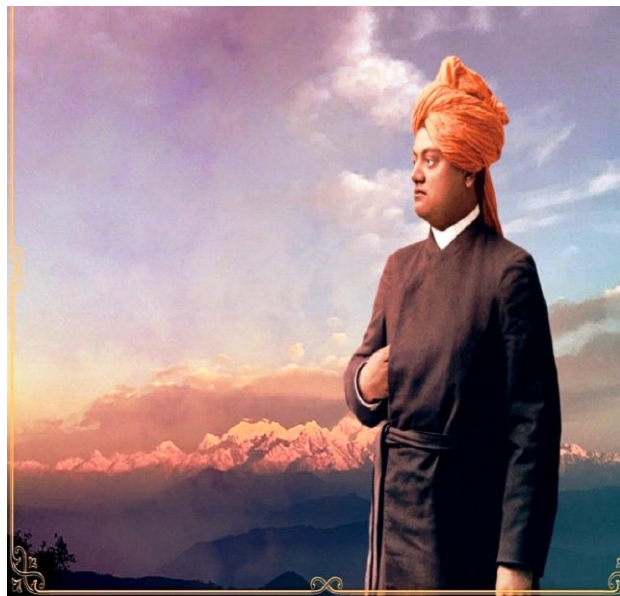


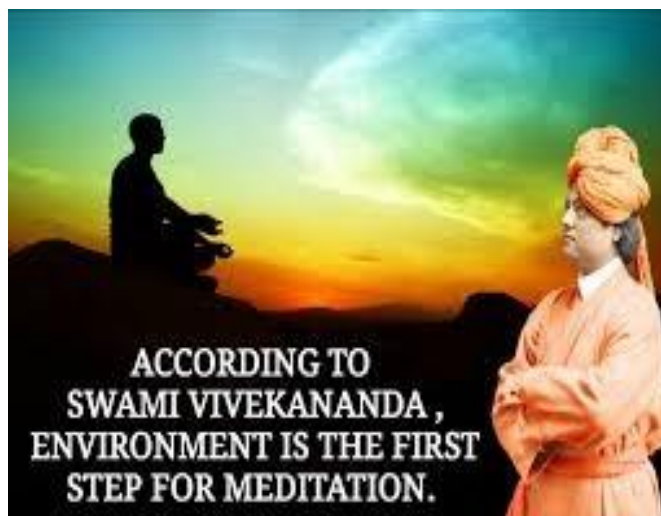
Swami Vivekananda's Thoughts on Nature and Environment



We hardly find Swami Vivekananda's views on environmental pollution and change in the ecology as an obvious outcome of industrial growth and how to take care of these adverse impacts on the society. Does it mean that Swamiji did not attach any importance on such a vital issue? Did Swamiji ignore this issue because the society, in his time, was not very much concerned for the environmental degradation? In fact, neither of these two assumptions is true. Swamiji was very much concerned for the nature and environment. His views and thoughts were so subtle that we could not capture them. But then, how to understand Swamiji on this very important subject? To get the answer, we have to understand first the views of Swamiji on the

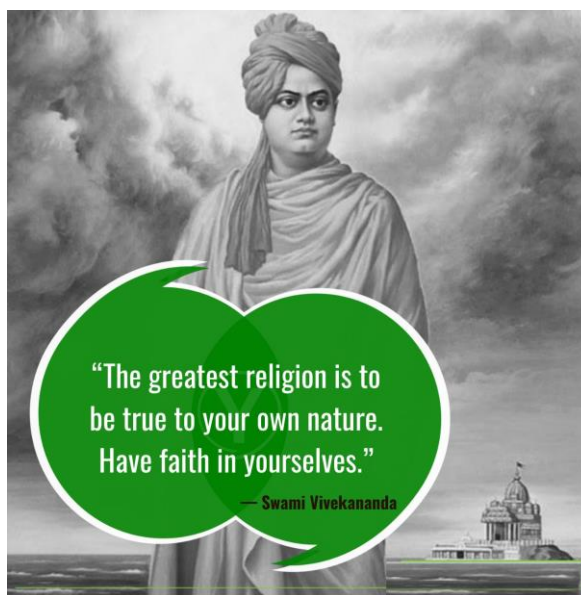
relation between God (creator), Universe (the creation), the nature, the human beings and the environment. This Universe is created by the God. Nature is an essential part of the Universe. Swamiji said, 'All the various forms of cosmic energy, such as matter, force, intelligence and so forth, are simply the manifestations of that cosmic intelligence. Everything that you see, feel, or hear and the whole universe, is His creation. If we pay too much attention to take care of the world, we become materialistic. The nature is both internal and external. 'Not only does it comprise the laws that govern the particles of matter outside us and in our bodies, but also the more subtle nature within, which is the motive power governing the external. It is good and very grand to conquer external nature, but grandeur is to conquer our internal nature,' Swamiji opined.

Swamiji further said, 'All nature is bound by law, the law of its own action; and this law can never be broken. If you break the law of nature, all nature would come to an end in an instant. There would be no more nature.' This means any work, any action, any thought that produces an effect will have its cause. Similarly, wheresoever there is a cause, an effect must be produced there. This is true throughout the whole universe. Peace and poise are the precondition of orderly and sustainable eco-spiritual development. What is needed, according to Swamiji, is to maintain harmony between external nature's organic complexity and



inner nature of human beings. This is possible only when we control our desire by improving our consciousness through spiritual practices. In regard to our improved environmental conscience, Swamiji's views are that desires can only manifest themselves in proper environment. Only those desires will come out for which the environment is fitted; the rest will remain stored up. In this life, we have many godly desires, many human desires, many animal desires. By means of environment, we can check our desires. If we practice to improve our consciousness for the environment, only those actions which are suited to and fitted for the environment will come out. This shows that the power of environmental consciousness is the great check to control our actions against the environment. According to Swami Vivekananda, every living creature is linked to every other creature. They cannot be seen in isolation. It should be recognized as part of its totality, sharing with other living beings their limitations and destiny. This points out that human existence depends on co-existence with the rest of creation of the universe. It implies that nature is not alien to humans; but interconnected parts of the universe that is continually being made and nurtured by the God. This demands human beings to become responsible for taking care of the nature and the environment.

Environmental Crisis

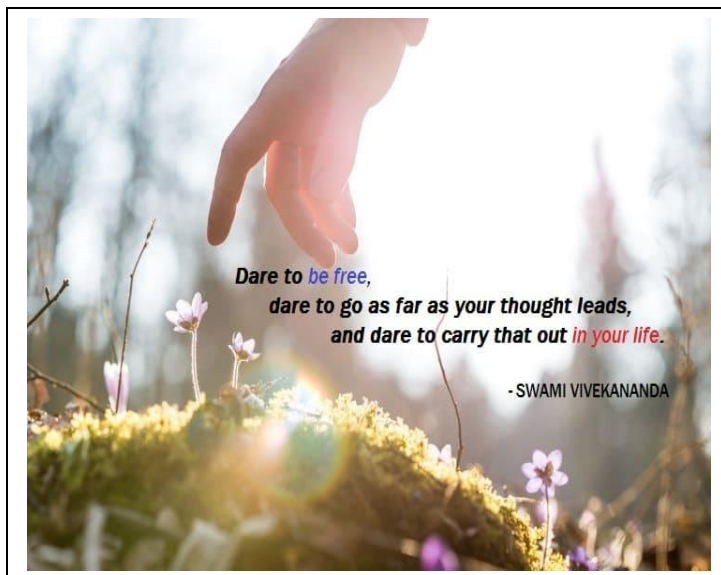


The global environmental crisis is fundamentally an ethical problem. It reflects the crisis in human value system. On the other hand, the concept of materialism encourages individual's selfish gains desired from technological advancement. Unless human beings maintain a healthy natural environment and follow certain religious and ethical principles, other creatures on the Mother Earth will suffer from the laws of harmony and equilibrium. The environmental crisis can, therefore, be captured in its real perspective only when human being rethinks about the relationship between God, universe and nature. This is what Swami Vivekananda propagated through his various writings and lectures. He said that the structure of human being, the microcosm, corresponds exactly to the structure of the universe,

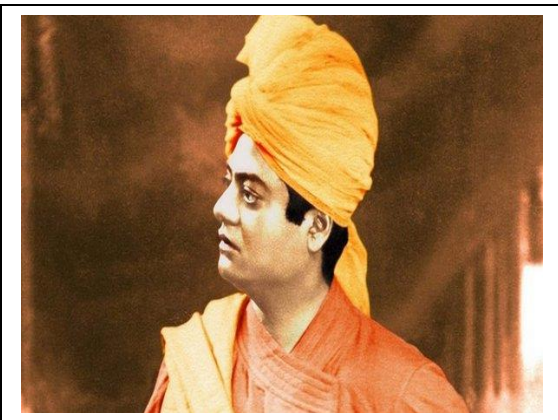
the macrocosm. Swamiji went further and said that each part and each member of human body has corresponding entities or realities in the universe. The breath of human corresponds to the wind. The flesh, bone and marrow of human corresponds to the earth. The blood corresponds to the water. The energies to the fire. The ears to the ether. Each element possesses both material (gross) and spiritual (subtle) qualities. Each sense organ is composed of the same element, the quality of which is sensed by it. With the above explanations, Swamiji wanted to convey to the world that 'Love is the most visible of all visible things. It is the force that is moving the sun, the moon, and the stars. Love manifests itself in men, women, and in animals, everywhere and in everything.

Swamiji's interpretation as to how to protect the environment can now be understood. Swamiji wanted to convey that unless we love the nature, we cannot protect the environment. With a view

to elaborate further, Swamiji clarifies that there is a good deal of similarity between religious thought and modern science in this regard. The science has explained the gradual manifestation into the present form by the theory of evolution. The basic idea is that we are changing from one species to another, and that man is the highest species. In order to solve environmental problems, Swamiji advised that renunciation – non-resistance – non-destructiveness – are the ideals to be attained through less and less worldliness, less and less resistance, less and less destructiveness. None can live in the world without resistance, without destruction, without desire. The world has not come to that state yet when the ideal can be realised in society. The progress of the world through all its evils is making it fit for the ideals, slowly but surely. We must try our best to destroy ignorance and evil. Only we have to learn that evil is destroyed by the growth of good. Swamiji emphatically said, ‘Progress of civilisation does not mean the successful accomplishment of the desired object by the justification of wrong means, i.e. by making the end justify the means.’ From these statements of Swamiji, we can understand that he was not in favour of progress and growth of industrial units just to fulfil the evil desires at the cost of environment.



Carbon Foot Print



Swamiji was very much aware of what we call now ‘carbon foot print’. He knew that more we eat, more we would emit carbon dioxide. He suggested to take food that is substantial, nutritious and digestible. The food should contain the greatest nutriment in the smallest compass, and be at the same time, quickly assimilable; otherwise, it has necessarily to be taken in large quantity, and consequently will cause more emission of carbon dioxide. He was also in favour of drinking pure water after purifying it in eco-friendly manner. Swamiji said, ‘Impure water and impure food are the cause of all maladies.’

Clean Ganga

Swamiji advocated for purity of water of Ganga. At his time, water of Ganga was not polluted. His love and respect for Ganga would be evident from his utterances. ‘Do you remember the Ganga at Hrishikesh? That clear bluish water – in which one can count the fins of fishes five yards below the



surface – that wonderfully sweet, ice-cold charming water of the Ganga. You remember that love for Ganga water, that glory of the Ganga, the touch of its water that makes the mind dispassionate, that Ganga flowing over the Himalayas. See what an atmosphere of holiness is here. The pure air of the Ganga – what an assemblage of sadhus – will you find anywhere a place like this? He was very much passionate for clean Ganga and the environment prevailing at that time along the bank of Ganga.

Conclusion

Ecological degradation caused by massive pollution of earth, water, air and space is severely threatening the very web of life. The secret of nature's permanency lies in the cycle of life by which the various factors function in close cooperation to maintain the continuity of life. Science and technology have opened up the possibilities of making human life richer and comfortable. But, human beings are using science and technology to meet their self interest at the cost of the Nature. The result is acute environmental crisis that we face today. In this context, Swami Vivekananda's concept of nature was of respect and reverence for the earth and for all that exist there. Prosperity, progress and happiness of every person, every society and every nation depend



heavily on the bounty of nature. Her bounties, resources are, therefore, not for one's selfish exploitations. These are to be shared by all creations. Such ecological insights of the Indian cultural traditions have their own specific contributions toward spirituality of ecological harmony. Peaceful co-existence and tolerance of the opposites in a given situation with calmness are spiritual values that are nurtured in an environment of ecological harmony. Swami Vivekananda wanted us to give emphasis on inter-disciplinarity and accessibility of environmental history. He emphasized that we should also think about environmental issues in a harmonious way. Any presupposition that there is a natural environment which is separate from the people who live in it is not correct. Similarly the concept that environment refers primarily or exclusively to the physical environment is equally wrong. The environment, thus, cannot be understood as merely pretty trees and tigers, threatened plants and ecosystems – it is literally the entity on which people subsist, and on which their entire agricultural and industrial development depends. Human intervention may be successful in establishing a new and stable balance between society and nature, yet on other occasions, it may itself turn into the cause of ecological decline. In other words, development without concern for the environment can be carried only to a point and cannot sustain in the long run. Swamiji was of the opinion that development without concern for ecological problems may result in increased human endurance and pain, poverty and oppression. He prescribed that human beings must make themselves free from evil forces, evil design, evil desires to save our Mother Earth. Environmentalism, therefore, needs to be viewed as a social programme, an agenda for action which seeks to protect habits, protest against degradation and prescribe less destructive technologies and lifestyle.