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# Philosophical *Essays*

for **UPSC/ State PSC** Civil Services  
& other Competitive Exams

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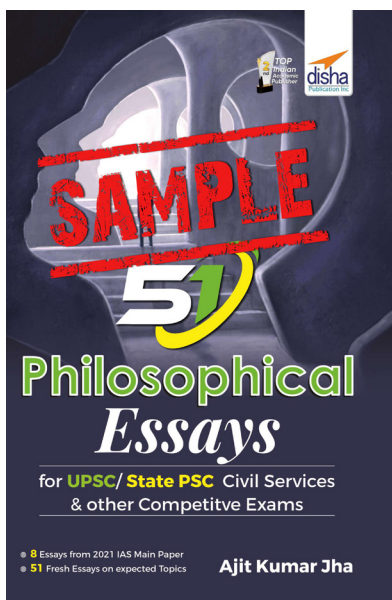


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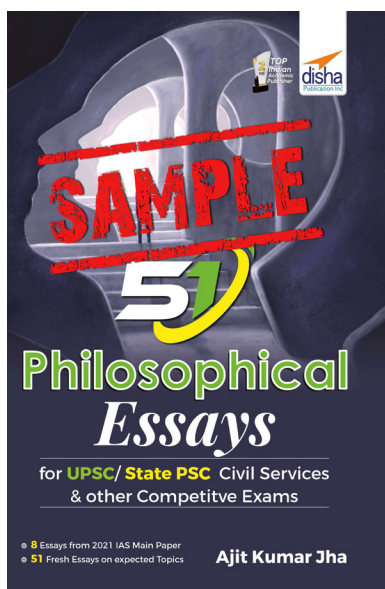
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- The process of self-discovery has now been technologically outsourced.
- Your perception of me is a reflection of you; my reaction to you is an awareness of me.
- Philosophy of wantlessness is Utopian, while materialism is chimera.
- The real is rational and the rational is real.
- The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world.
- What is research, but a blind date with knowledge!
- History repeats itself, first as a tragedy, second as a farce.
- There are better practices than "best practices".

## Are People 'Good' or 'Evil' by Nature?

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Whether humans are born good or evil has been debated by philosophers for centuries. Aristotle argued that morality is learned and that we're born as "amoral creatures" while Sigmund Freud considered newborns a moral blank slate. Anyone who has read *Lord of the Flies* will expect children to be fully-fledged sociopaths just waiting to be freed from their adult-imposed shackles to (spoiler alert) start a cult and brutally attempt to kill each other.

Maybe the two most famous opposing views on this debate are those of Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hobbes describes humans as 'nasty' and 'brutish', needing society and rules to reign in their instincts in order to thrive. Later Rousseau openly criticized him, arguing instead that man would be gentle and pure without the corruption of greed and inequality caused by the class system imposed by our society.

However, developmental psychology studies show that there may be some natural "good" in humanity (or, to be more technical, that at least kids are capable of passing moral judgments at an earlier age than previously thought).

To do this, babies less than a year old were made to watch a puppet show where different colored shapes acted in ways that were clearly recognizable as morally right or wrong. A red circle is shown struggling to climb a hill while an "evil" blue square tries to push it back down. Meanwhile, the "good" yellow triangle attempts to help the red circle by pushing it up.

After the play, the babies were asked which shape they wanted to play with: the evil blue square or the good yellow triangle. As you may have guessed, they all picked the latter, the triangle that exhibited 'helpful' and 'selfless' behaviour. This applied even to babies as young as seven months.

The scene replicates the findings of a 2010 study from the Infant Cognition Centre at Yale University, which went further to prove that babies were



choosing the puppets because of their actions rather than other variables (for example, an innate preference or familiarity with a certain colour or shape). When the show was replayed with the shapes taking on the opposite role, the infants still mostly chose the shape that had taken on the role of the ‘helper’.

A 2017 study from Kyoto University had a similar approach and findings to the puppet study, seemingly confirming these results. Children as young as six months were shown videos featuring three Pacman-like characters, called ‘agents’: a ‘victim’, a ‘bully’ bumping aggressively against the victim and squashing it into a wall, and a ‘third party’ agent. The third-party agent would sometimes intervene to help the victim by putting itself between the victim and the bully, and would sometimes flee instead. After watching the video, children had to choose their preferred character and most chose the intervening third-party agent who had tried to help the victim.

Other studies have also shown babies exhibit altruistic behaviour, like the ‘Big Mother Study’ from Harvard, where infants who didn’t know they were being observed still acted kind and were helpful to others, suggesting that this isn’t just a learned behaviour to avoid punishment or scrutiny.

While these studies can’t completely disprove Freud and Hobbes’ more pessimistic views on human nature, they do seem to suggest that babies are naturally inclined to prefer altruistic behaviour and that parents can be fairly confident that, while leaving their children on a desert island is probably still not the best idea, they at least won’t try to squash the weakest one with a rock.

Everyone believes they are more virtuous and moral than anyone else.

Consider this moral dilemma: if you find a wallet with money, do you keep the cash? Most people say they would return it to the original owner. But assume others wouldn’t. They believe people are not as honest as them.

“Good people do not need laws to tell them to act responsibly, while bad people will find a way around the laws.”—Plato

To put this assumption to test, a team of scientists conducted a large-scale experiment. They planted 17,000 lost wallets in 40 countries. The results of the study published in science busted long-standing economic model. Experts expected people to keep the wallets with money. They were all

caught by surprise. Regardless of country, the majority of people returned the wallets. And they were more likely to do so when the wallets had more money.

As, Alain Cohn, author of the study, explains, “We mistakenly assume that our fellow human beings are selfish. In reality, their self-image as an honest person is more important to them than a short-term monetary gain.”

Researchers posed as people who had found wallets, dropping them in public places. Some wallets were empty. Others had US\$15 or US\$100 in local currency. 72% of people returned the wallets that contain a large sum of money.

The wallet experiment confirms our instinct to do good. And that we care about our image too. The primary motivation to return the wallet was the aversion to being seen as a thief.

What’s our first, natural instinct? To act selfishly or to cooperate? To answer this question, a group of scientists conducted a series of ten studies. They were all based on economic games.

The experts explored the basis of cooperative decision-making. They applied a dual-process framework—self-control and intuition.

They wanted to see if we control our instincts to act selfishly. Or if we use rational thinking to override our natural impulse to cooperate.

Participants made financial decisions to maximize their gain at the group’s expense. Or the other way around. They have to choose between acting selfishly or cooperatively.

The results were striking.

Faster, more intuitive decisions created higher levels of cooperation. Slower, more reflective decisions made people act more selfishly.

As Gilbert Keith Chesterton wrote, “Evil comes at leisure like the disease. Good comes in a hurry, like a doctor.”

To bulletproof their research, scientists manipulated people. They forced them to either make decisions faster or to take extra time. Those who were

forced to use intuition gave much more money to the common good than those who relied on reflection. The findings confirmed that our first impulse is selfless. It makes sense as we live in a world where it pays to cooperate.

72% of people returned the wallets that contain a large sum of money. The wallet experiment confirms our instinct to do good. And that we care about our image too. The primary motivation to return the wallet was the aversion to be seen as a thief.

Based on the above discussion we can conclude that our nature is inherently good. We are born with an ability to distinguish right from wrong. But we are not exempt from acting violently or selfishly. That's what cynics get wrong when they want to describe human nature as evil. Some evidence points to humans being innately cooperative. Studies show that in the first year of life, infants exhibit empathy toward others in distress. At later stages in life, we routinely work together to reach goals and help out in times of need. Yet instances of selfish behaviour also abound in society.

(With inputs from Britannica)



## **“Whatever You Give a Woman, She will make Greater.”**



The quote above is from William Golding and adapted by Eric S. Gray. The complete quotation is as follows: “Whatever you give a woman, she will make greater. If you give her sperm, she’ll give you a baby. If you give her a house, she’ll give you a home. If you give her groceries, she’ll give you a meal. If you give her a smile, she’ll give you her heart. She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her. So, if you give her any crap, be ready to receive a ton of shit!”

In 1954, William Golding, author of *Lord of the Flies*, said: “I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men, they are far superior and always have been. Whatever you give a woman, she will make it greater”.

Women are special for many reasons. They are the most sensitive, caring and maternal people in the world. Women are very sympathetic towards people and things. They use both sides of the brain and men don’t.

Women are special. It is seen in the work she does and in her daily life. Here is an instance:

Husband & Wife were watching TV when the wife said, “I’m tired, and it’s getting late. I think I’ll go to bed.”

She went to the kitchen to make dough for parathas for the next day’s lunchboxes, rinsed out the bowls, took vegetables out of the freezer for the morning, checked the Bournvita box levels, filled the sugar container, put spoons and bowls on the table, and started the coffee pot brewing for the next morning for her daughter.

She then ironed a shirt and secured a loose button. She picked up the game pieces left on the table by her younger one, put the phone back on the charger and put the telephone book into the drawer. She emptied a wastebasket and hung up a towel to dry.

She yawned and stretched and headed for the bedroom.

She stopped by the desk and wrote a note to the teacher and pulled a textbook out from hiding under the chair.

She signed a birthday card for her sister in law, addressed and stamped the envelope & wrote a quick note for the grocery store.

She put both near her bag. Then she washed her face, put on her moisturizer, and brushed her teeth.

Husband called out, "I thought you were going to bed."

"I'm on my way," she said.

She put water into the dog's dish; then made sure the doors were locked.

She looked in on each of the kids & turned out their bedside lamps and computers, had a brief conversation with one kid who is still up doing homework.

In her own room, she set the alarm; laid out clothing for the next day, said her prayers, and visualized the accomplishment of her goals.

Around that time, husband turned off the TV & announced to no one in particular. "I'm going to bed." And he did... without another thought.

One might begin to ask, "Is there anything extraordinary in her?" The answer to this can be understood from the chores, described above, that she does each day in comparison to what her husband does.

Women today are aspiring towards equality. No preferential treatment, but equality; to not have to make a choice between career and home; PTA meetings or board meetings. The balancing act aims at bringing equity in their investment of time and productivity.

The error that many make while championing the cause of women's rights is to perceive the aberration or the ill-informed as the norm. Just as the concepts of equality and equity have to be propagated within the female population, so has it to be to our male counterparts.

The World Economic Forum's 2017 global gap report findings tells us that we are still 200 years away from gender parity, but the promising thing is

that there's been immense progress on bringing up a strong and growing global movement of advocacy, activism and support towards the cause. Women are seen celebrating womanhood like never before, with the global representation of women on top increasing every year! The idea is not to be overtly feministic in approach but vouch for equal human rights. Women today aspire to be challenging the limits of womanhood, make workplace more inclusive, be a role model for equality, and at the same time have a firm voice against any inappropriate behaviour!

Women today aspire to live in a world that celebrates freedom of thought and expression. They want to live in stable and just societies that promote balanced living, equal opportunities, respect for the individual, irrespective of gender, and safe public spaces.

There is no denying that we have come a long way on all these fronts. Be it as a working woman or a homemaker, we are multi-tasking and excelling in all aspects of our lives. However, the very fact that we need to celebrate our gender with a specific day indicates that a lot needs to be done before we can claim true equality.

Women are the beautiful creation of God. They are bestowed to make the world around them more beautiful and cheerful. They are an important part of the society, making up more than 7 billion population, and are driving the change in the present to make the world a better place. There are women who have made their mark in areas of education, business, technology, medicine, space, wildlife etc. and we salute their endeavours.

Women of today have left the four walls of the kitchen and are silently treading their path towards success. They have created the niche place for themselves in this male dominated patriarchal society.

Here are some of the wonderful things, traits or qualities that together make a woman different from others:

Women are the true bearer of grace, beauty and charm. There have been numerous women in the past and present who have been the fantasy of numerous men, poets, warriors and the ruling class itself. The history is adorned with the folklores of beauty of various women like Cleopatra, Nefertiti, Joan of Arc, Lady Godiva, Rani Samyukta, Rani Padmavati, Noorjahan, and many other stories that truly describes the image of

a beautiful woman. Presently, women who are making names as Miss Universe, Miss World and other coveted titles, are making waves around the world with their enchanting beauty.

Women have not just got good looks but they also have an intelligent mind too. Right from the ancient intelligent women like Gargi, Lopamudra, Maitreyi, to the ones belonging to a more recent past, such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Nehru, Pandita Ramabai, are still admired in the society due to their impressive mind and wit. In the present context, the board exam results at the national and state level in India and abroad are enough to prove that girls are surging ahead of boys. If one is still not satisfied, they may want to read about the likes of Kalpana Chawla, Sunita Williams, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, Mary Warnock, Margaret Atwood and a lot many others, who symbolize true knowledge and wisdom.

Women of today are not shy in speaking up their mind and are known as wonderful communicators, negotiators and statesman. Women have the ability to make better deal and personal engagements with people due to their impressive personality and unmatched art of oratory. They can communicate in a much better way as compared to their male counterparts. This is the prime reason why numerous companies around the world have enrolled more women in their hiring and recruitment process.

*(Sources: The Times of India, Adgully.com, fnp.com)*

## **“Happiness is the Highest Good.”**



Happiness is, according to Aristotle, the ‘highest good’ because it is something final, end of the action, and self-sufficient. We choose it for itself, not for the sake of something else. Even intelligence and virtue are not good only in themselves, but good also because they make us happy. We call people ‘good’ if they perform their function well. For instance, a person who plays the flute well is a good flutist.

People from around the world tend to have a similar concept of happiness and can recognize happiness in others. As a result, the specific emotion of happiness is often included as one of a small number of basic emotions that cannot be broken down into more fundamental emotions and that may combine to form other, more complex emotions (in fact, it is sometimes the only positive emotion that is considered to be basic). Thus, happiness is an important concept for researchers who study emotions.

An entire field of research has developed around the more inclusive concept of subjective well-being, which is characterized by a broad collection of happiness-related phenomena rather than a specific momentary emotion. As one might expect, people who are happy in this way tend to experience frequent positive emotions and infrequent negative emotions. This broader form of happiness is not purely emotional; however, it also has a cognitive component. When happy people are asked to think back on the conditions and events in their lives, they tend to evaluate these conditions and events positively. Thus, happy people report being satisfied with their lives and the various domains in their lives.

Aristotle claims that all actions aim towards something good. Actions can have multiple purposes, but they all aim towards something good. “All human activities aim at some good: some good subordinate others.” (Aristotle, *Book 1*, 124 LC). Moreover, Aristotle claims that the highest good must be something we want for its own sake. He states that “The



good must be something final and self-sufficient. (Aristotle, *Book 1*, 125 LC). By final and self-sufficient he means something which not only is self-sufficient for oneself but for fellow citizens. Happiness is according to Aristotle the highest good because it is something final, end of the action and self-sufficient. We choose it for itself, not for the sake of something else-it shows more contentment. This is a strength because it gives us a purpose in life. The argument inspires humans to be excellent and create good habits throughout their whole life, not just parts of it. He prescribes us personal responsibility which gives the strength to his argument. In summary, the weakness of Aristotle's argument is that we evaluate happiness after a complete life. We will never know if we got there and there are no specific rules or checklists, basis which we can evaluate.

The term for happiness that Aristotle uses is 'Eudaimonia' or 'Eudaemonia'. The conventional English translation of the ancient Greek term, "happiness", is unfortunate because eudaimonia, as Aristotle and most other ancient philosophers understood it, does not consist of a state of mind or a feeling of 'pleasure; or 'contentment', as "happiness" (as it is commonly used) implies. For Aristotle, eudaimonia is the highest human good, the only human good that is desirable for its own sake (as an end in itself) rather than for the sake of something else (as a means toward some other end).

According to Aristotle, every living or human-made thing, including its parts, has a unique or characteristic function or activity that distinguishes it from all other things. The highest good of a thing consists of the good performance of its characteristic function, and the virtue or excellence of a thing consists of whatever traits or qualities enable it to perform that function well. (Thus, the virtue or excellence of a knife is whatever enables the good performance of cutting, that of an eye whatever enables the good performance of seeing, and so on.) It follows that eudaimonia consists of the good performance of the characteristic function of human beings, whatever that may be, and human virtue or excellence is that combination of traits or qualities that enables humans to perform that function well. Aristotle believes that the characteristic function of human beings, which distinguishes them from all other things, is their ability to reason. Accordingly, "if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows or implies a rational principle," and if the

human good is the good performance of that function, then the “human good turns out to be [rational] activity of soul in accordance with virtue,” or rational activity performed virtuously or excellently (*Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 7).

In each of his two ethical works, the *Nichomachean Ethics* and the (presumably earlier) *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle proposed a more specific answer to the question “What is eudaimonia?,” or “What is the highest good for humans?” The two answers, however, appear to differ significantly from each other, and it remains a matter of debate whether they really are different and, in any case, how they are related. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle held that eudaimonia consists of philosophical or scientific contemplation in accordance with the intellectual virtues of (theoretical) wisdom and understanding, but he also allowed that action in the political sphere, in accordance with (practical) wisdom and the moral virtues, such as justice and temperance, is *eudaimon* (“happy”) in a “secondary degree” (Book X, chapter 8). In the *Eudemian Ethics*, he maintained that eudaimonia consists of activity of the soul in accordance with “perfect” or “complete” virtue, by which he meant (according to some interpretations) all the virtues, both intellectual and moral (*Eudemian Ethics*, Book II, chapter 1). According to both answers, it should be noted, eudaimonia is an activity (or a range of activities) rather than a state, and it necessarily involves the exercise of reason. Moreover, the intellectual and moral virtues or excellences of which it is constituted are not innate talents or quickly acquired forms of knowledge but rather are abiding traits that arise only through long habituation, reflection, and the benefits of appropriate social experiences and circumstances (including material circumstances). For that reason, eudaimonia must be the achievement of a “complete life,” or at least much of a life: “For one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and so too one day, or a short time, does not make a man blessed and happy” (*Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 7).

In the mid-20th century, eudaemonism, or the philosophical theory of human well-being, and virtue ethics were revived as sophisticated and psychologically more realistic alternatives to action-based ethical theories

such as deontology and consequentialism (see also utilitarianism), each of which seemed to entail counterintuitive conclusions despite complicated theoretical modifications over the course of two centuries.

In conclusion, we note that happiness is the highest good for Aristotle because, it is an end in itself. We do not seek happiness for the sake of something else but because it is in itself the highest pursuit for mankind. Secondly, happiness allows for the flourishing of innate talent. This leads to the development of the highest excellence.

*(Source: Britannica)*





**“Every Man is a Creature of the Age in which he Lives and Few are able to Raise themselves above the Ideas of the Time.”**

---



This quote was given by Voltaire.

Every one would agree with this quote of Voltaire about how every man is a creature of the age in which he lives. What Voltaire states is nothing new. The debate on nature vs nurture is also precisely this. While the debate is whether a man is shaped by nature or his environment, the fact of the matter is that most men are conditioned by the time and the age in which they live. A 15th century man was quite different from the 20th century man.

The influence of ideas is a central but puzzling problem in the social sciences. Parsons insisted that ideas play a central role in social continuity as well as in social change. Basic ideas, that organize experience, become embedded in the public mind and structure the ways in which issues are tackled. Through much of the twentieth century, Darwinism, Freudianism and Marxism are central clusters of ideas. On a smaller scale, ideas that begin in academic settings can quite quickly spread into politics. Voegelin has detected very general notions that may structure whole eras, calling one of the most powerful in our time the “new gnosticism”. It draws on our ideas of knowledge and leads to the search for a universal ideology that dissolves all problems into demands for a totalitarian society.

In other words, an individual is shaped by the influence of society and of the contemporary ideas. For example, every generation of teens is shaped by the social, political, and economic events of the day. Today’s teenagers are no different—and they’re the first generation whose lives are saturated by mobile technology and social media.

In her new book, psychologist Jean Twenge uses large-scale surveys to draw a detailed portrait of ten qualities that make today’s teens unique and the cultural forces shaping them. Twenge names the generation born between 1995 and 2012 as “iGens” for their ubiquitous use of the iPhone,

their valuing of individualism, their economic context of income inequality, their inclusiveness, and more.

So, Voltaire made a statement that is established by common sense and research studies. But the more important point that Voltaire makes is “few are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time.”

It may be noticed that men who left their mark on the world often held ideas beyond their time. They were visionaries who rose above the common thinking of the common men. Why some men rise above the common folks and common ideas of their times? There are several theories explaining it but there is no clear understanding on this issue. One of these theories is the Great Man theory of leadership.

Why is it that some men or women rise above others? And why is it that a specific family can produce multiple highly successful leaders? For most people, the answers to these questions is a mystery. Some theorists, however, claim that these questions have already been answered by the ‘Great Man Theory’.

In short, the ‘Great Man Theory of leadership’ posits that great leaders are born, not made or trained.

Individuals are born with certain traits or characteristics, and these characteristics are different in natural-born leaders compared to others or are only present in such leaders. These specific traits or characteristics enable them to lead people while they shape the pages of history.

The special characteristics that leaders in general, and great leaders, in particular, are born with, that others don’t have include: charm, intelligence, intuition, judgement, courage, aggressiveness, persuasion, etc.

According to Thomas Carlyle, these can’t be learned; someone either possesses these traits or doesn’t. Such characteristics are fixed in the family’s genes and are passed on from generation to generation.

Examples of great leaders that also had these characteristics are: Mao Zedong, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Alexander the Great, Adolf Hitler etc.

These people are credited with having innate qualities and divine inspiration that helped them reach great heights. They weren't trained in leadership nor were they given the opportunity to improve their leadership skills during their lives. Something in their anatomy, personality or physiology set them apart from the common folk. Furthermore, the instinctive drive to take on leadership roles is thought to have made these great men successful. Others turned to them for inspiration, support and comfort.

Voltaire's quote doesn't explain what triggers or causes some men to rise above the contemporary ideas. The Great Man theory doesn't appear quite convincing because this theory imputes greatness as a natural gift. The role of human perseverance and struggle is negligible in this theory.

According to the Great Man Theory of leadership, leaders are God's gift to humanity. No one would be able to become great if there is no such thing as innate leadership traits. The Great Man Theory can be compared to the idea that kings have a divine right to rule and govern their subjects. This divine right is inherited by their descendants.

The Great Man Theory of leadership dates back to the times of the ancient Greek and Romans. Back then, leadership was correlated with unique, specific mental, physical or personal characteristics. Because leadership couldn't be learned or taught, a certain level of divinity was attributed to them.

The famous philosopher, sociologist, political theoretician and biologist Herbert Spencer refuted the Great Man Theory and called it childish, primitive and certainly not scientific. He assumed that leaders were products of their environment and argued that great personalities are formed by society.

In a sociology magazine, Spencer wrote that it depends on a long series of complex influences that shape a great personality. Despite his ideas and arguments, the Great Man Theory remained very popular and a leading argument in research into leadership.

Another important rebuttal of the theory is the fact that there are great leaders who don't possess these so-called natural leadership characteristics. If leadership was an innate quality or characteristic, everyone with these characteristics would end up in a leading position. Instead, however, research

has shown that leadership is a highly complex matter and that countless factors influence the level of success a person will achieve. Furthermore, the Great Man Theory doesn't include any scientific or verifiable explanations on how or when great leaders arise and become effective, what the required critical characteristics are, and why out of two equal leaders, one fails.

In the context of the question raised by Voltaire's quote, we may have to agree with another quote by Shakespeare, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

The men who are able to raise themselves above the ideas of the time and above the creatures of their age can then be classified into three categories – (i) those who are born great (ii) those who achieve greatness, and (iii) those who have greatness thrust upon them.

Some men may have been born great but it requires an event or circumstance for their greatness to shine forth. In this category may be placed persons like Joan of Arc, Rani Laxmibai, Swami Vivekanand and several more. John of Arc lived for a very brief time but she had the opportunity to fight a war in which she demonstrated exemplary quality of a leader. Rani Laxmibai was a brave warrior who rebelled against the mighty British and kept them at a bay with her sword. She died fighting in the battlefield. Swami Vivekanand was an unknown saint waiting for the right opportunity for his brilliance to shine forth. The opportunity was provided by the '1893 International Conference of Religions' where his ideas on Vedantism became a global movement.