

# A Role of Swami Vivekananda in Social Reforms – A Study

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## Abstract

Swami Vivekananda was born on 12 January 1863 in Kolkata to Vishwanath Dutta and Bhubaneswar Devi .Swami Vivekananda' s childhood name was Narendranath Dutta. His father was an Attorney-at-law in the Calcutta high court. He was proficient in English and Persian .he had also in depth knowledge of bible and Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit. His mother was a deeply religious lady, well-versed in the art of story -telling .swami Vivekananda was very much attached to his mother. She used to tell him mythological stories which he heard with great concentration and interest. He often said that it was his mother who had been the source of constant inspiration in his life. He had learnt epics and Purina's from his mother.Since his childhood Vivekananda was very intelligent and had great attraction for spiritual matters. Vivekananda retained everything he was once told. He always spoke the truth and always wanted to test the truth of whatever he was told. He was very bold and courageous even in the middle of danger. He was equally good at singing and sports. He was born leader.

Swami Vivekananda is mainly popular as a flag bearer of India, monk par excellence. He is generally credited with putting forth the soul of India to the Western society. He is referred to as the spokesperson of the Hindu Religion. He had a two fold personality- spiritual and social reforms. Often it has been seen that his spiritual self has got the better of social self. It may seem that "Vivekananda", was fully drowned under the immense weight of "Swami". Swami Vivekananda said that "Mukti and all else appear of no consequences to me". And "sell it, if necessary we are Sanyasins, We ought always to be ready to sleep under the trees and live on what we beg every day". Thus, one sees Swami Vivekananda is a pioneering figure in India who has played in integral part towards shaping of modern India. Socialism, secularism, mass uplift and mass power, treating the untouchables with compassion, universal literacy, women's liberation and inculcation of social service as a part of religious worship-these constituted the basic points for reforms by Swami Vivekananda. His famous words; 'Awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached' still resonated among the youth of the nation, rousing their social consciousness and kindling their damp spirits.

*Keywords— Swami Vivekananda, social problems, untouchables, India, society, Mukti, compassion, spiritual, Hindu Religion*

## Introduction

Swamiji passed his entrance examination from the metropolitan institute. He did graduation from Christian college Calcutta .Hastie, the principal of the college was highly impressed by him. Mr. Hastie was known to have made his remark about Narendranath,"Narendranath is really genius. I have travelled far and wide, but I have never come across a lad of his talents and possibilities, even in German Universities among philosophical student. He is bound to make a mark in life."He had a wide range of interests ranging from sports and music to wrestling, philosophy and poetry. He had great love for the poetry of Shelley, Wordsworth Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. Narendra did not enjoy worldly pleasures. He was always on the look for something beyond worldly and materialistic world. His life completely changed when he met with Sri Ramakrishna. He became Swami Vivekananda from Narendranath Dutta after he met Sri Ramakrishna for the second time.

As a child, Vivekananda was strong-willed and restless. as a student of philosophy ,he had various questions related to god such as ,if there was any God ,how He looked ,why he created this world ,what relationship does He has with the people and the like , but there was none who could satisfy his queries. Narendra loved and admired Ramakrishna, but never surrendered his independence of judgement. Sri Ramakrishna suffered a deadly disease and very soon passed away. Before his death Ramakrishna brought his young disciples under the leadership of Narendra. He also transmitted his power to Narendra and said,"By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you." When Sri Ramakrishna passed away in august 1886, all his young disciples under Narendra laid the foundation of Ramakrishna brotherhood at baranagore. It was during this time that Narendra along with his disciple brothers took the vow of sannaysa and renunciation and felt the need of wandering life of the sannaysa. And towards the close of 1888, Narendra too began to take temporary excursions away from the monastery. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission, one of India's leading charitable institutions.

Narendra wanted to have a good understanding of Indians, Indian cultures and traditions. For this he undertook extensive travelling, taking leave of his brother monks with the firm resolve to cut himself free from all ties and to go into the solitude of the Himalayas. This was a great departure .like a diver he plunged into the Ocean of India and the Ocean of India covered his tracks. He was an unidentified monk with exceptional genius. He met many leading personalities' lawyers, teachers, and rulers .He appealed them all to do something for the suffering masses. A few among them came forward and provided him financial support so as to take a journey to the west and make them known of the eternal religion of the modern world.

Carrying forward his noble mission, Narendra, with the help of subscription rose by some of his young disciples, visited America to attend the parliament of religions convened at Chicago. At the young age of 30, he reached Chicago to represent Hinduism there. The appeal of his simple words of burning sincerity, his great personality and his bright countenance were so great that the next day the newspaper described him as the greatest figure in parliament of religions. When this quite unknown young man of thirty appeared in Chicago at the inaugural meeting of the parliament of religions opened in September 1893, by cardinal gibbons, all his fellow members were forgotten in his commanding presence. The thoughts of this warrior prophet of India left a deep mark upon the United States. This simple monk had become the man of the hour. His address to the parliament of religions established him as an exponent of India's age old values. Overnight he became a great national hero of India. Suddenly it brought to the Indians that there must be something in the Indian thought that the Western intelligentsia feel compelled to admire. It is for the first time that they awoke to the richness of their heritage .His visit to Chicago was a tremendous success. After he made visit to England and Switzerland. He spread his message there .He got the chance of meeting and lecturing various kinds of people .Swami's lecture at these places aimed at raising big funds to help relieve the suffering and poverty of Indian masses as well as to bring to the West the ancient Indian wisdom of Vedanta and practices of classical yoga.

**Objective:**

This paper intends to explore some of the important achievements of swami Vivekananda as the social reformer with his philosophy as guiding light.

**Swami Vivekananda and world social order**

Vivekananda stayed in America for more than three years. This long stay was full of intense activity .Vivekananda began to offer classes, free of any charge to his sincere students. After delivering numerous lectures and classes in New York during this time, he founded first Vedanta Society in America. He also trained a group of close disciples at Thousand Island park. Swami saw in Margaret a great future in the work for India. Swami's lectures in England form Janna yoga. The results of his work produced such an impression that he was offered the chair of Eastern Philosophy at both Harvard University and Columbia University. He had laboured hard to give this message to the West that Vedanta forms the universal principle basic to all religions and his efforts resulted in the establishment of the first centre for yoga work on a permanent basis in the United States. He returned to India at 1896.At madras he delivered public lectures which was a call to rise and build a new India.

He described India's neglect of masses as a national sin. The social status of women in India was also a matter of grave concern for him. India's ethnic and religious diversity for him was never a matter to be worried about, for India had always sought her unity in love and respect for different sects and communities .He aspired for a new social order and new civilization in which best spiritual traditions of India would be combined with the latest advancement in the field of science and technology. He preached "Jive is shiva", meaning every being is a part of God. He gave this call to Indians to "Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached.". This great man of India died at the young age of 39 on the 4th of July 1902.He established two monasteries in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, one at baronage and the other at blur, near Calcutta. Till today his work is carried out in these Missions. He said to his followers, "It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body-to cast it off like a worn -out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere, until the world shall know that it is one with God."Tagore once advised Romaine Rolland,"If you want to know India, study Vivekananda". In a short life of 39 years, he produced classics such as Janna yoga, Bhatia yoga, Karma yoga and raja yoga. He delivered numerous lectures, composed many poems and was spiritual guide to many seekers who came to him for instruction.He organized Ramakrishna order of monks. Swami Vivekananda once spoke of himself as a "Condensed India".

**Social reforms On Poverty**

Although Swami Vivekananda was a man of meditation and religion, he was game for activity and work that would lead to rise in productivity and eradication of poverty. He along with his mentor, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, has always said that "religion is not for empty stomachs." He has literally helped to shock people out of their comfort zone and inspired them into action. So we see that Swamiji triggered the course of life in modern India by motivating the Rajasic virtues in the Indian denizens. He also inspired them to enhance their present condition and not be content with the current life of degradation and poverty. According to Vivekananda, religion had to be the primary and steering force in executing al the social changes in the country.

### **On India`s Cultural History**

There is no doubt that Swamiji took immense pride in the India`s inheritance from the past. But he was totally against the fact that almost everything that came from the past was worth admiration. To him, India was a representation people, and people meant masses. Eradication of poverty, removal of illiteracy, restitution of human dignity, liberty from fear, availability of spiritual and secular knowledge to all, irrespective of their class, caste, and ending of all the monopolies, economic, religious, intellectual, cultural and social- all these together made up a part of what he got from his Vedantic Socialism or Vedanta.

With his re-interpretation of Vedanta, and is deep rooted concern for the masses and their issues, Swami Vivekananda gave India a new lease of life. He raised his voice against the feudal and colonial oppression, and at the same time Swamiji looked for answers regarding the India`s historical destinies, and ways to transform it into strong, wealthy and independent state. He always reiterated the fact that India could only be built with the help of masses, small groups of energetic patriots, brave and strong with "muscles of iron and nerves of steel and gigantic wills".

### **On Women social upliftment**

Swami Vivekananda was never in active politics, yet he had a political sense on the modern India which was far superior and much ahead of his time. He expressed immense outrage over exploitation of rights and showed genuine concern for uplift of women mass and other socially backward people. He wanted a distinct social reform with the help of Western ideas and technology, yet not entrapped us with slavish imitation of the Western ways of life. In his book, "On India and Her Problems", he wrote: "Remember that the nation lives in the cottages. But, alas, nobody ever did anything for them. Our modern reformers are very busy about widow-remarriage. Of course, I am a sympathiser in every reform, but the fate of a nation does not depend upon the number of husbands the widows get, but upon the condition of the masses". Vivekananda went a step further and said, "So long as millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor." The revolutionary doctrine he propounded has serious influence on the social reformers that followed- dynamism of Mahatma Gandhi and the socialistic ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru were highly inspired by Swamiji`s ideas and teachings.

### **On Religion**

Swami Vivekananda`s thoughts on religion were unique. He gave India, its secularist ideas which now form an integral part of Constitution of India. His views on religion were based on common objective. He propounded all religions were but different paths that led to the same goal. His ideas were an extension of what is present in India. His thoughts were not only based on mutual respect and tolerance, but mutual realization of basic truth that underscores all individual religions. He was completely against the practise of untouchability. His learning from Vedanta made him a staunch critic of the concept of untouchables. He found neither religious sanction nor secular logic behind the terrible practice of untouchability and he went all out to condemn it.

## On Education

Swami Vivekananda's ideas on education are modern than the educationists that prevailed in ancient India. Right from the beginning he was instrumental in mass development and uplift. Furthermore, he had conceived of so many decades back what we now call informal education. He laid special stress on technical education and industrial training which have now become an essential part of the educational system of modern India.

Vivekananda worked towards educational rights for women. He laid special stress on conventional values of family life and chastity for women, but was totally against their subjection. He passionately pleaded for the extension of all educational facilities to women. His social reform ideas reflected greatly on his efforts to give India its traditional religions a new orientation of social service. With the establishment of Ramakrishna Mission, he propounded a new path for Indian monks and Sanyasins. So now we see that Hindu monks do not live an isolated life, on the contrary they are concerned with proving their service to the society. They have set up hospitals, educational institutions, dispensaries, orphanages and other community institutions for alleviating human misery.

## As a Role Model

Thus, one sees Swami Vivekananda is a pioneering figure in India who has played an integral part towards shaping of modern India. Socialism, secularism, mass uplift and mass power, treating the untouchables with compassion, universal literacy, informal education, women's liberation and inculcation of social service as a part of religious worship- these constituted the basic points for reforms by Swami Vivekananda. His famous words; "Awake, arise, and stop not till the goal is reached" - still resonated among the youth of the nation, rousing their social consciousness and kindling their damp spirits.

From the above discussion it has been surveyed that Swami Vivekananda can be rightly said a social reformer. He tried to revitalize India with its ancient traditions along with modern science. One special character of Vivekananda's reform is that he did not try to abolish the systems prevalent in then India. Rather he wants to make them grow in their true form. Vivekananda undoubtedly took immense pride in the India's inheritance from the past. Eradication of poverty, removal of illiteracy, restitution of human dignity, liberty from fear, availability of spiritual and secular knowledge to all, irrespective of their class, caste, and ending of all the monopolies, all these together made up a part of what he got from his Vedantic Socialism. With his re-interpretation of Vedanta, and its deep rooted concern for the masses and their issues, Swami Vivekananda gave India a new way of life. He raised his voice against the feudal and colonial oppression. At the same time Vivekananda looked for answers regarding the India's historical destinies, and ways to transform it into strong, wealthy and independent state. He always reiterated the fact that India could only be built with the help of masses, small groups of energetic patriots, brave and strong.

He had immense outrage over exploitation of rights and showed genuine concern for uplift of socially backward people. He wanted a distinct social reform with the help of Western ideas and technology, yet not entrapped us with slavish imitation of the Western ways of life. He wrote: "Remember that the nation lives in the cottages. But, alas, nobody ever did anything for them. Our modern reformers are very busy about widow-remarriage. Of course, I am a sympathizer in every reform, but the fate of a

nation does not depend upon the number of husbands the widows get, but upon the condition of the masses".[1] Vivekananda went a step further and said "So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them." [2] The revolutionary doctrine he propounded has serious influence on the social reformers that followed-dynamism of Mahatma Gandhi and the socialistic ideas of Jawaharlal Nehru were highly inspired by Vivekananda's ideas and teachings.

### **The prophetic words of the ascetic and towering social reformer**

So we may now conclude that Vivekananda is a great social reformer. He offered solution of the Indian society in proportionate to their problems. During the time of Vivekananda, religion, specially the Hindu religion was nothing except priest craft. He through his religious lectures has shown that religion consists only in self-realization and realizing the same self in others. We all are part of the same Brahman. So we all are divine. And divinity is within us. This he preached to arouse the self-confidence in people. This was really a bold step. Because at that time the priest had an overwhelming power on society. But he could not stop himself in showing the people of India that religion consists in self-realization only. Again at that time the caste system was much degenerated. It was based on birth. He showed that caste is not based on birth, but on individual's quality. His aimed at the full-fledged development of the country. Therefore he offered an education system which is sufficient to all-round development of students. Society consists in individuals. If the individual rises society will automatically rise. In his educational reform we can bring out two points. First, at that time education was restricted to limited individuals. Vivekananda offered universal mass education. His provision of informal education was one of the greatest contributions to society. Secondly, the education system of then India was not good in his view. According to him it was negative in character. A full-fledge education system is that which helps us to become mentally and physically strong as well as to become self-reliant. If we look into his educational curriculum we see that it includes all those subjects which are sufficient to make people mentally-physically strong and selfreliant. The common masses of India thus had been benefited by his philosophy. These are enough to establish him as a social reformer.

Generally speaking, his contribution to India and to the larger world may be summed up in the following ways. First, in modern India, it was Vivekananda who first emphasized that our everyday lives would become more meaningful only when spiritualized. It was in this spirituality that he re-discovered, as it were, India's message to herself and to the world. For Vivekananda, this spiritual self-realization leads people more fully realizing their own potentialities, specially in the context of a colonized society like that of 19th century India. Second, even though He rejected political praxis and West inspired social and religious reforms, his essential message was the empowerment of the people: through education, collective thought and action but above all, realizing he underlying unity of all human existence. In the Hindu tradition, ascetic detachment from the world had been criticized even before Vivekananda but it was he who first actively joined the idea of individual renunciation to committed social service. In this sense, he gave new meaning or signification to the very idea and institution of sanyas.

Swami Vivekananda's ideas on education are modern than the educationists of ancient India. From the very beginning he was instrumental in mass development and uplift. He laid special stress on technical education and industrial training which have

now become an essential part of the educational system of modern India. Vivekananda worked for the educational rights of women. He laid special stress on traditional values of family life and chastity for women. But he was totally against their subjection. He pleaded for the extension of all educational facilities to women. He tried to give India its traditional religion with a new orientation of social service. With the establishment of Ramakrishna Mission, he propounded a new path for Indian monks and Sanyasins. We now see that Hindu monks do not live an isolated life, on the contrary they are concerned with proving their service to the society. They have set up hospitals, educational institutions, dispensaries, orphanages and other community institutions for alleviating human misery. Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstition and social obscurantism. Hinduism as Max Weber observed had become a compound of magic, animism and superstition. Abominable rites like animal sacrifice and physical torture had replaced the worship of God. The priests exercised an overwhelming and, indeed unhealthy influence on the minds of the people. Idolatry and polytheism helped to reinforce their position. As suggested by Raja Rammohan Roy, their monopoly of scriptural knowledge and of ritual interpretation imparted a deceptive character to all religious systems. The faithful lived in submission, not only to God, but even to the whims, fancies and wishes of the priests. There was nothing that religious ideology could not persuade people to do. Indian women even went to the extent of offering themselves to priestesses to satisfy their carnal pleasure.

The condition of the women was the most distressing. The birth of a girl was unwelcome. Her marriage was considered a burden and her widowhood inauspicious. Attempts to kill girl infants at birth were not unusual. Those who escaped this brutality were subjected to the violence of marriage at a tender age. Often the marriage was a device to escape social ignominy and hence marital life did not turn out to be a pleasant experience.

Other debilitating factor was caste. It sought to maintain a system of segregation, hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status. The rules and regulations of caste hampered social mobility. It fostered social divisions and sapped individual initiative. Above all were the humiliations of untouchability which militated against human dignity. There were innumerable other practices marked by constraint, credulity, status, and blind fatalism.

Like other social reformer of the 19th century India, Swami Vivekananda was also greatly influenced by the golden past of India. He did not like to condemn even the most superstitious and the most irrational institution. He says, "Have no word of condemnation even for the most superstitions, for they also must have served some good in the past. Remember always that there is not in the world any other country whose institutions are really better in their aims and objects than the institutions of this land. I have seen castes in almost every country in the world, but nowhere is their plan and purpose so glorious as here." [1] He says that even those customs that are now appearing very low have been positively life-giving in times past. According to him if we have to remove these customs, we must not do so with curses, but with blessing.

Vivekananda did not want to reform India only with the western means and methods of work. He says, "I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been inconsiderate imitations of western means and methods of work, and that surely will not do for India; therefore it is that all our recent reform movements have had so result." [2] It is because Indian reformers tried to reform the Indian society with the help of imitation of the western methods and by utter denunciation of our own, they have failed in their aims. Vivekananda says that most of the reform proposals in India are good. Most of the social reformers are also good, well-meaning men and their aims too are very laudable on certain points. But it is quite a patent fact that hundreds of years of social reform has produced no permanent and valuable result appreciable throughout the country. He says, "platform speeches have been made by the thousand, denunciation in volumes after volumes have been hurled upon the

devoted head of the Hindu race and its civilization and yet no good practical result has been achieved and where is the reason for that? The reason is not hard to find. It is in the denunciation itself.”[3] Thus it is clear that Vivekananda was in favour of reforming the Indian society with the help of the methods of India. He was of the view that former reformer did not pay any heed to our own methods and that is why their efforts went in vain.

While reforming India society Vivekananda did not try abolish the systems prevalent in India. His role was like a doctor who tries to root out the causes of the disease, but not to kill the patient. He says “my method of treatment is to take out by the roots the very causes of the disease and not to keep them merely suppressed.”[4] Mere suppression of any problem always carries the fear of rising it again.

Vivekananda therefore tried to root out very causes of social evils. He says we must go down to the very root of the matter, then to put the fix there and let it burn upwards and make an Indian nation. This is called radical reform according to Vivekananda.

## Conclusion

In India, there are many social reformers who change the thought of people. They struggled a lot with the revolution of India. We mentioned here some of the social reformers who had given a precious contribution to the nation. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Baba Amte, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mother Teresa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda

There is the view that Vivekananda consistently exhibited for the socially marginalized and oppressed. It is he, who even before Gandhi, reinvented and effectively used the older religious idiom of God especially residing in the lowly and the poor (daridranarayan). Social philosophy discusses the social evils. It is the duty of social philosophy to set ideals to remove these social evils so that every individual of the society can live respectfully and peacefully. The philosophy of Vivekananda is mainly originated due to the evils of Indian society prevailing at that time. Before we go to the reforms of Vivekananda we just have a look into the socio-economic condition of India in the 19th century. During the time of swami Vivekananda India's socio economic condition was miserable. Problems like poverty, superstition, sati etc. were widely prevailing at that time. Moreover the British at that time were ruling the country. Though the British rule had some good aspects like establishment of telegraph, railway etc. they ruined country's economy.

Swami Vivekananda was really an epoch maker with a life span of less than forty years inspiring his brothers to fight against poverty, illiteracy, superstition, untouchability, priest craft, and tyranny of the wise. In his wanderings from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari, he mixed with all classes of people, ate and slept with them, shared their Joys and sorrow. His heart always throbbed with the masses and in their degradation he found himself humiliated. He vehemently criticized the orthodox brahmanical caste system and viewed 'untouchability' as a type of mental disease of upper classes.



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