



# Swami Vivekananda & His Role in Social Reform in India

**Mangsatabam Runabala Devi,**

Research Scholar, Glocal School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences,  
The Glocal University, Mirzapur Pole, Saharanpur (UP)

**Prof (Dr.) Ritesh Mishra,**

Research Supervisor, Glocal School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences,  
The Glocal University, Mirzapur Pole, Saharanpur (UP)

## Abstract

Swami Vivekananda was immensely influenced by the Brahmo Samaj and his guru Sri Paramahansa Ramakrishna. Swami Vivekananda was deeply inclined towards spirituality and being influenced by his guru Ramakrishna, he learned that all human beings are images of Divine Shiva and one should see Lord Shiva through mankind's services. In 1886, Sri Ramakrishna passed away leaving all his disciples and socio reforms work to be directed by Swami Vivekananda. In 1888, he founded the Ramakrishna Mission, one of India's leading charitable institutions. The main teachings of the Ramakrishna Mission were about social service regardless of any returns, unconditional love for mankind and nature, and considering all humans, religions, divisions, and sects on equal grounds. The Ramakrishna Mission spreads the teachings and preaching of Ramakrishna. According to Sri Paramahansa Rama Krishna "whichever path one follows with sincerity and full devotion to reach God, that sincerity and Devotion will surely pave the way and reaches the ultimatum in finding God".

**Keywords**—Swami Vivekananda, social reform, religions

## 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 Namenda. 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 sannyasa and renunciation and felt the need of wandering life of the sannyasa. 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.

#### **Role of Swami Vivekananda as a Social Reformer**

Swami Vivekananda, a renowned scholar, and philosopher of that time worked in different fields as he was very much inclined to Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa of selfless work for mankind and humanity.

#### **Social Reforms for Women Upliftment**

Swami Vivekananda held high for the rights of women and gloried them. He promoted women's Upliftment and was deeply concerned about the right of women and the oppression against them. According to Swami Vivekananda, women had the power to build a nation and shape the future thus should be given proper education. He had many literary works and documentaries speaking about Women's upliftment and such as **Swami Vivekananda on India and Her Problems**. He considered women as "**Shakti**" the ultimate power.

#### **Social Reforms on Religion**

Swami Vivekananda was highly influenced by Vedantic philosophy and was one of its great admirers. Though he considered Hinduism as the mother of all Religions, he also believes in monotheism- the concept of all God. He believed that all religions teach "Peace, Harmony, Humanity, through different ways but with one common goal".

#### **Social Reforms on Education**

Swami Vivekananda's educational aspect was based on inculcating education as the fundamental right of all masses and believed in mass education. He was a modern thinker and tried instilling modern and western Education in women, rights of education for lower sections of society and all are more modern than the educationists that prevailed in ancient India. He paid more attention and focus on instilling Technical and industrial training as considering the economic prospect of the masses.

#### **Social Reforms on Poverty**

Although Swami Vivekananda was a meditational man. He has taken some pioneer steps in productivity and the eradication of poverty. Inspired by his Guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa, has inspired people to come into action and do the welfare of society. Swamiji stimulated the culture of modern life in India by motivating the Rajasic

virtues in the Indian citizens. According to Swamiji, religion can be the steering force in executing all the social changes in the country.

### **On India's Cultural History**

Swamiji took great pride in India's cultural history in the past. But he was totally opposed to the fact, that almost everything that came from the past was worth appreciation or consideration. For him, Ideal India would be one that is for the masses. It means an India free of poverty, removal of illiteracy, dignity for all, human liberty, Free from all monopolies with socially strong and culturally sound. These were all inspired by his Vedantic ideas. He stood against feudal and colonial oppression.

### **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".

### **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, especially 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 self-reliant. 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, especially 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 the 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 another 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**

The Social reforms especially through Ramakrishna Mission impacted the Society and elated Swami Vivekananda’s essence in history. Swami Vivekananda’s teachings of Vedantism and Philanthropic ideas not only inculcated the Indian youth to work for the welfare of society but also instill in them feelings of sacrifice, and love for the country. Swami Vivekananda’s representative figure in Chicago gave him immense popularity as a monk and open the gates of India to the Western world and made India find its presence in the world. Swami Vivekananda was not only a social reformer, and philosopher but also a Monk of par excellence and this made him leave an epoch mark in History. With a short life of fewer than forty years, he inspired the youth to fight against social issues like Poverty, superstition, illiteracy, women’s upliftment untouchability, and tyranny of the society. In his life journey as a monk traveling from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari, mixed with all classes of people and treated them with humility and love, thus making a great place in their hearts and leaving a great mark and Footprint in History.

### **References**

- Adiswarananda, Swami, ed. (2006), Vivekananda, world teacher: his teachings on the spiritual unity of humankind, Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths Pub, ISBN 1-59473-210-8
- Badrinath, Chaturvedi (2006). Swami Vivekananda, the Living Vedanta. Penguin Books India. ISBN 978-0-14-306209-7.
- Banhatti, G.S. (1995), Life and Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, p. 276, ISBN 978-81-7156-291-6
- Bhide, Nivedita Raghunath (2008), Swami Vivekananda in America, ISBN 978-81-89248-22-2
- Bhuyan, P. R. (2003), Swami Vivekananda: Messiah of Resurgent India, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, ISBN 978-81-269-0234-7
- Burke, Marie Louise (1958), Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama,

ISBN 978-0-902479-99-9

- Burke, Marie Louise (1985), Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries (in six volumes) (3 ed.), Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, ISBN 978-0-87481-219-0
- Chakrabarti, Tapan Kumar (2001), "Swami Vivekananda", A Companion to the Philosophers, Blackwell Publishing, ISBN 978-0-631-22967-4
- Chandrakantha K.M. (2015), A Role of Swami Vivekananda in Social Reforms – A Study, International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews Volume 2, Issue 4.
- Chattopadhyaya, Rajagopal (1999), Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography, Motilal Banarsidass, ISBN 978-81-208-1586-5
- Chetananda, Swami (1997). God lived with them: life stories of sixteen monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. St. Louis, Missouri: Vedanta Society of St. Louis. ISBN 0-916356-80-9.
- Clarke, Peter Bernard (2006), New Religions in Global Perspective, Routledge
- Dalal, Roshen (October 2011). Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide. Penguin Books India. ISBN 978-0-14-341421-6.
- Das, Sisir Kumar (1991), A History of Indian Literature: 1800–1910, Western impact: Indian response, Sahitya Akademi, ISBN 978-81-7201-006-5
- Dhar, Shailendra Nath (1976), A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda (2 ed.), Madras, India: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, OCLC 708330405
- Dutt, Harshavardhan (2005), Immortal Speeches, New Delhi: Unicorn Books, p. 121, ISBN 978-81-7806-093-4
- Dutta, Krishna (2003), Calcutta: a cultural and literary history, Oxford: Signal Books, ISBN 978-1-56656-721-3
- Farquhar, J. N. (1915), Modern Religious Movements in India, London: Macmillan
- Ganguly, Adwaita P. (2001), Life and Times of Netaji Subhas: From Cuttack to Cambridge, 1897–1921, VRC Books, ISBN 978-81-87530-02-2
- Von Dense, Christian D. (1999), Philosophers and Religious Leaders, Greenwood Publishing Group