

RESEARCH ARTICLE



BEYOND SPIRITUALITY: SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S VISION OF SOCIAL REFORM AND ITS CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

Maheen Rehman^{1*}, Dr. Shachi Sood²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of English, BGSSBU, Rajouri, J&K

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, BGSSBU, Rajouri, J&K

Emails: maheenrehman67@gmail.com ; shachisood@bgsbu.ac.in

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ABSTRACT



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Spiritualism is generally tied to religion, mysticism, or withdrawal from social life. Traditionally, spiritualism in India focused on Moksha or liberation, individual or personal salvation, and renunciation. However, the spiritual masters and leaders of Modern Bharat played an impressive role in social upliftment by addressing social inequalities and promoting social reforms. They redefined spirituality and used it as a means of social reform. Spiritual masters and leaders of modern Bharat offered more than mere religious guidance and tools for liberation. They worked tirelessly to curb social evils, uplift women, advance caste reforms, expand education for the masses, foster national awakening, and promote national integration, bringing major social changes. This paper explores the ideas and thoughts of Swami Vivekananda and his active role in advocating social reforms. This paper will delve deeply into Swami Vivekananda's philosophy and critically analyse his various social activities. Swami Vivekananda addressed several social inequalities and evils, pointed out the evils of the caste system, uplifted women and humanity, highlighted the importance of education, encouraged service to man, focused on building character, moral courage, and self-confidence, and critiqued the colonial mindset. This paper examines the contemporary relevance of his ideas, thoughts, and social reforms. Swami Vivekananda played an active role in advocating social reforms aimed at uplifting humanity.

Keywords: *Spiritualism, Social reform, Modern Bharat, Swami Vivekananda.*

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INTRODUCTION

Born into the Datta family on 12th of January 1863, Narendranath Datta, who later came to be known as Swami Vivekananda, was the first son of Sri Viswanath Datta, a lawyer, and Bhuvaneshwari Devi. Narendranath's skepticism grew with his age, and the questions "Does God exist?" and "Has anyone seen God?" troubled and distressed him the most. To seek answers to his questions, he visited many religious leaders, such as Maharishi Devendranath Tagore, but none satisfied him, and he gradually lost faith in many teachings of Hinduism. His visit to Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa at the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, on the advice of his professor, Hastie, brought a wave of spiritual revival upon him. Under Ramakrishna's guidance, Naren metamorphosed into someone who was not fascinated by worldly things. Nearing his death, Sri Ramakrishna commissioned Narendranath for future work. After the death of Sri Ramakrishna in 1886, Narendranath stayed at Baranagore for two years, performing the commissioned work until 1888, resisting the irresistible desire to embrace a monk's wandering life. His travels made him see the real, authentic condition of his country's downtrodden and poor people. He declared that his life is useless if he is unable to help the poor and needy. The experiences he had during travelling as a monk changed his whole outlook. He devoted himself wholly to serve humanity and advocated serious social reforms. At the Maharaja's request, Narendranath Datta assumed the name of Vivekananda at the court of the Maharaja of Khetri. This personal realization of his fellow citizens' condition redefined his understanding of spirituality, shifting him from mystical spirituality to practical Vedanta.

OBJECTIVES

The following are the objectives of this research paper:

1. To analyse the reforms brought by Swami Vivekananda.
2. To assess the significance of Swami Vivekananda's reforms in his period.
3. To check the contemporary relevance of Swami Vivekananda's reforms.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is theoretically grounded, examining the various reforms introduced by the social reformer Swami Vivekananda. This paper employs *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, published by Advaita Ashrama, as the primary text to analyse his various reforms. Moreover, the paper seeks to explain the contemporary relevance of his reforms using new evidence.

Swami Vivekananda lived during the late 19th century when India was under shackles of British rule and huge problems existed within the society such as lack of education among masses, poor condition of women, caste discrimination, gender discrimination, social inequality, national identity crisis, sense of inferiority among Indian masses, communal divisions, child marriage, poor health conditions, high illiteracy rate among the women population etc. Swami Vivekananda tirelessly worked to reform Indian society, advocating reforms that remain relevant and urgently needed in the 21st Century.

PROMOTION OF MASS EDUCATION

Swami Vivekananda perceived the word "education" in a unique way. He states, "Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must



have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas" (Vivekananda 929). In volume III of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, in the section 'Lectures from Colombo to Almoro,' he pointed out the necessity of spreading spiritual as well as secular knowledge among the masses. He examined how most of the reforms over the past century were ornamental and benefited only the first two castes in Indian Society. He encouraged the spread of education among the masses. He stated:

The first work that demands our attention is that the most wonderful truths confined in our Upanishads, in our scriptures, in our Puranas must be brought out from the books, brought out from the monasteries, brought out from the forests, brought out from the possession of selected bodies of people, and scattered broadcast all over the land, so that these truths may run like fire all over the country from north to south, and east to west, from Himalayas to Comorin, from Sindh to Brahmaputra. Everyone must know of them. (Vivekananda 871)

Swami Vivekananda not only focused on spiritual education but also paid equal attention to spreading secular education among the masses. He speaks, "and after preaching spiritual knowledge, along with it will come that secular knowledge and every other knowledge that you want." (Vivekananda 872).

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

An article from 2023 in *The Hindu* reports that, according to economist Amir Ullah Khan, 50% of Indian Children do not have access to quality education after primary school. 21st-century India still faces the challenge of equitable education for all. Only the privileged section of society has access to quality education at all levels. Such prevalent

conditions make Swami Vivekananda's reformative step towards promoting mass education relevant and crucial.

WOMEN'S UPLIFTMENT AND EDUCATION

Swami Vivekananda recognized the differences in mind, capacity, and power to do things that naturally exist between a man and a woman, advocating that everyone do his/her best. Men and Women vary individually. In his book, Swami Vivekananda highlighted the bad condition of Women. He pointed out evils like Sati, child marriage, secluding women in the name of honor and dignity, etc. He talked about equality between the sexes, with no gender-based discrimination. Swami Vivekananda, in his *Complete Works*, states, "We should not think that we are men and women, but only that we are human beings, born to cherish and to help one another" (1747). Swami Vivekananda emphasized women's chastity very much. He states, "The women of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita, and that is the only way." (Vivekananda 896). For him, Chastity is of uncompromising importance. He emphasized fundamental equality that goes beyond gender and social status. He says, "Look upon every man, woman, and everyone as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve; serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege" (Vivekananda 889). He believed that the only way to reform society and the nation was through the education of both men and women. Swami Vivekananda says, "The Salvation of your country depends upon its women" (Vivekananda 1076). He questioned the inaccessibility of education to Indian women. He states, "Every American woman has far better education than can be conceived of by the majority of Hindu women. Why cannot we have the same education? We must." (Vivekananda 1471).



Swami Vivekananda advocated for the education of women, but his idea of women's education is not identical to modern feminist thought. He opposed the educational exclusion of women but linked women's learning to motherhood, religion, and spirituality. Hence, drawing close ties between women's education and cultural, moral, and religious values. He also believed that women should be capable of solving their own problems.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE:

In 21st-century India, women still face gender discrimination, inequality, violence, unequal opportunities, and a lack of education. In a news article published on 30 July 2026, The Indian Express stated, "Girls' dropout rates at the secondary level (classes 9-10) remain the highest across school stages, though they have fallen from 12.6% in 2023-24 to 8% in 2025-26. State-level disparities persist, with Ladakh (15.6%) recording the highest dropout rate, followed by Assam and Karnataka (13.9% each)." This news report makes the need for Swami Vivekananda's philosophy evident. With Swami's vision and philosophy, we can transform the current situation of women. Girls leave their schooling and education because of various reasons such as Household expectations, child marriage, money, and gendered expectations. India Today published a news report in July 2026 stating that Money and Household chores push girls to drop out in classes 9-10. The availability of schools is not an indication of equal access to education. Even in contemporary times, people believe in not educating the girl child and treat her as inferior and a burden. Swami Vivekananda's practical spiritualism can help to change the condition of women for the better. His focus on fundamental equality and call for better education are the two most important reformative steps.

REMOVAL OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION:

Swami Vivekananda did not write any treatise on caste; his views and opinions on caste are revealed in his lectures and writings. Swami Vivekananda used a practical and rational approach towards understanding caste and caste discrimination. He did not criticize the division of society along caste lines. For him, caste is a natural order. In an interview, he said that caste is a good thing. He stood against caste-based discrimination. In his book, Swami Vivekananda speaks of caste as:

It is the nature of society to form itself into groups, and what will go will be these privileges. Caste is a natural order; I can perform one duty in social life, and you another; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country? I am clever at mending shoes; you are clever at reading the Vedas, but that is no reason for you to trample on my head. What if one commits murder? Should he be praised, and if another steals an apple, why should he be hanged? This will have to go. Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever you go, there will be caste. However, that does not mean that there should be these privileges. (Vivekananda 888)

This extract from the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, a compilation of his speeches, clearly demonstrates that he supported caste, viewing it as a natural social order. However, he also rejected privileges and spoke to eradicate caste discrimination.



The reforms of the past century benefited only people from the upper castes. Swami Vivekananda criticized hereditary privileges, exploitation of the lower castes, their social exclusion, and inferior treatment towards individuals belonging to lower castes. However, he retained the concept of Varna and division of society into a hierarchical structure, preserving aspects of traditional Hindu Social thought. He did not call for the destruction of the Varna system and the removal of this hierarchical setup. The present-day inequalities in employment, education, social mobility, and everyday life based on caste show that caste discrimination is not simply linked to an individual's prejudice but is deeply associated with the structural system of social hierarchy. Swami Vivekananda's views on the upliftment of the lower caste and the eradication of hereditary privileges are of utmost importance but have some limitations, such as relying on moral and spiritual reform without addressing structural and institutional inequalities.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Caste discrimination, inequality, and social exclusion cases are very common in India. A news report published by The Times of India in August 2026 stated that villagers of Mugadthi refused to send their children to the center after the appointment of a Dalit Anganwadi worker. This shows caste discrimination in employment and public institutions. Casteism, caste prejudices, and discrimination based on caste still exist in present-day India, showing the contemporary relevance of Swami Vivekananda's vision for the elimination of caste discrimination and privileges.

PROMOTING MENTAL STRENGTH AND WELL-BEING

Swami Vivekananda places great emphasis on self-control and self-awareness and discusses several

practices to promote mental health and well-being. He, in his book *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, says, "The man who has practiced control over himself cannot be acted upon by anything outside; there is no more slavery for him. His mind has become free. Such a man alone is fit to live well in the world." (75) People with higher self-control function effectively and also possess great mental strength. Such people can manage stress effectively. Swami Vivekananda recommended Kriya yoga to gain control of the mind. Moreover, he spoke about meditation as a way to control hatred and anger.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

In present times, anxiety, stress, and depression are as common as a cold. The present lifestyle induces stress and anxiety, making normal functioning of the body and mind difficult and tiresome. NDTV reported that one in seven Indians is affected by Mental health disorders. This current situation makes the practices and philosophy of swami Vivekananda extremely crucial and relevant. His words and practices can help to address modern mental health challenges.

PROMOTION OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

India is a diverse nation, home to people of different religions. Swami Vivekananda, in his address at the Parliament of the World's Religions, emphasized religious harmony. His ideas were secular. He treated all religions as unique paths to reach the same destination. He states, "All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to the same goal" (Vivekananda 86). He accepted all religions and spoke ill of none. He placed importance on religious tolerance and open-mindedness. Swami Vivekananda declared service to man, irrespective of caste, gender, or religion, to be service to God. He states, "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the



world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true" (Vivekananda 15). The secular thoughts and open-mindedness of Swami Vivekananda extend to the point that he not only speaks about religious toleration but also regards other religions as true.

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The present time is marked by tension among different religious groups, pointing to declining cooperation and tolerance. In such times, the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and his ideas of harmony and tolerance can lessen rising tensions and help restore religious harmony.

CONCLUSION

Swami Vivekananda is an exemplary figure who not only articulated his ideas, thoughts, and philosophies but lived them. He believed that one ounce of practice is worth more than twenty thousand tons of big talk. As someone who went through a personal transformation, he draws his teachings from real experiences and learning. Swami Vivekananda advocated social reform and contributed significantly to the intellectual and ethical transformation of Indian society. His reformatory steps to educate the masses and foster religious tolerance and harmony remain effective today. His philosophy was not limited to spiritual teachings but focused on practical reform of society. The evils and issues that existed in the late 19th century persist in the 21st century, so his vision remains relevant.

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