

# Swami Vivekananda's Visionary Legacy: Relevance in Today's World

Lalnundika Darlong

Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Sociology, Tripura University, Agartala, India

Email: ndikadarlong@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *An exploration into the profound philosophical legacy of Swami Vivekananda. This article transcends cultural and temporal boundaries to draw relevance for contemporary society. It is based on a scholarly analysis that delves into Vivekananda's humanistic principles, which were developed through Advaita Vedanta's synthesis, along with his standpoints on religious pluralism and efforts towards social reforms. Although he faced criticism during his time, Vivekananda emerged as a cosmopolitan patriot and visionary philosopher whose teachings continue to advocate for principles of humanity, such as the need for oneness, self-reliance, and compassion. His vision depicts a society where individuals recognise their inherent divinity, leading to efforts by others towards collective welfare; this depicts spiritual values above material wealth as highlighted by Neo-Vedanta philosophy for holistic well-being, which offers relevance irrespective of any debates since his assertion remains inspiring and relevance in contrast to contemporary ethos of today's religious extreme fundamentalism.*

**Key Words:** *Swami Vivekananda, Neo-Vedanta, Advaita Vedanta, religious pluralism, social reform, and cosmopolitanism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Vivekananda's legacy is not easily described in a word or even in one sentence; it is indeed multilayered, consisting of elements that pertain to spirituality and social reform as well as pride for his nation 'Bharat'. But understanding his beliefs means delving into the depths of his philosophy, continues to teach—inspiring self-realisation, inner peace, and harmony on a global level. Swami Vivekananda's contribution to Indian philosophy is immense; there are not enough words to capture it all. His teachings based on Vedanta have given birth to generations who have found wisdom (which is ageless) and values that are centred around humanity. This article seeks to examine how relevant Vivekananda's ideas still are today while placing him within this world, contextually speaking information from different sources and analyses to understand various dimensions of his philosophy, including but not limited to humanism standing at its core, Advaita Vedanta synthesis, pluralism towards religions, etc.

## 2. HUMANISTIC VISION:

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta philosophy underscores the imperative for individuals to recognise their inherent divinity and to extend that recognition to others, viewing every individual as a manifestation of the divine (Sooklal, 1993). He emphasised the oneness of all life, asserting that each person is interconnected and equal, with no inherent superiority of one over another. Vivekananda's humanism is deeply rooted in Vedantic principles, advocating for the elevation of humanity through self-realisation and service to others. Central to Vivekananda's humanistic approach is the belief that individual liberation is incomplete without the upliftment of society as a whole. He espoused a philosophy wherein the happiness and welfare of all are contingent upon promoting freedom and equality for everyone.

Vivekananda envisioned a society where unity is not merely a superficial concept but is accompanied by a genuine desire to uplift the marginalised and disadvantaged. Vivekananda's humanism extends beyond societal boundaries, encompassing an acceptance and respect for diverse religious paths. He advocated for the recognition that all religions are valid avenues for spiritual growth, emphasising the universal truth inherent in all faiths. Vivekananda's vision of universalism transcends sectarian divides, aiming to foster a sense of unity and understanding among people of different religious backgrounds. Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta philosophy emphasises the fundamental importance of knowledge, particularly spiritual knowledge, in the quest for liberation. Rooted in Vedantic principles,

his philosophy offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between knowledge, liberation, and the ultimate goal of humanity. Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedanta goes beyond traditional Advaita Vedanta, presenting a synthetic approach that reconciles dualism and non-dualism (Chatterjee, 1963, p. 260).

### 3. PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY:

Swami Vivekananda's emphasis on the practical nature of Vedanta is a cornerstone of his teachings, highlighting its relevance in all aspects of life. He illustrates how Vedantic principles were not merely abstract concepts but were practiced by ancient rulers and were imparted to Arjuna on the battlefield, emphasising their applicability in real-world scenarios (Vivekananda, CW2, 1983). The Neo-Vedanta philosophy, as delineated by Sri Ramakrishna and expounded upon by Swami Vivekananda, diverges from traditional Advaita Vedanta, particularly that of Sankaracharya. While Sankara's Advaita is characterised by unqualified monism, Neo-Vedanta presents a synthetic approach that reconciles dualism and non-dualism, as well as other theories of reality (Chatterjee, 1963).

Vivekananda envisions Vedanta not as a theoretical doctrine confined to the secluded few but as a practical philosophy that permeates every aspect of life, including city, country, and national life. He asserts that a religion's true worth lies in its ability to uplift humanity in all circumstances, from the depths of degradation to the heights of purity (Vivekananda, CW2, 1983). Vedanta, according to Vivekananda, must be adaptable and capable of aiding individuals in any situation. Central to Vivekananda's interpretation of Vedanta is the call for self-reliance and faith in oneself. He posits that faith in oneself is paramount, as it empowers individuals to overcome obstacles and achieve their potential. This self-belief is not selfish but is rooted in the recognition of the interconnectedness of all beings, fostering love and compassion for others.

### 4. KNOWLEDGE AS HUMANITY'S ULTIMATE GOAL:

In his essay "Karma-Yoga," Swami Vivekananda asserts that knowledge is humanity's ultimate goal (Vivekananda, CW 1, p. 13). This claim can be interpreted in various ways, depending on assumptions about Vivekananda's broader philosophy and his relationship to Śaṅkara and Advaita Vedānta. One interpretation is that knowledge is the essential means to mokṣa (liberation) (Vivekananda, CW 1, p. 28). This seems to contradict Vivekananda's assertion that karma yoga, bhakti yoga, jina yoga, and rja yoga are all direct paths to mokṣa. However, some, like Anantanand Rambachan, argue that Vivekananda views these yogas as means to the knowledge that liberates (Rambachan, 1994).

Vivekananda claims that knowledge is humanity's primary goal. This claim can be interpreted instrumentally, suggesting knowledge is the means to mokṣa, or intrinsically, suggesting knowledge is the final goal itself (Vivekananda, CW 1, p. 13). The instrumental view posits knowledge as essential for achieving mokṣa, while the intrinsic view holds that knowledge is pursued for its own sake, with no higher end. Despite the initial plausibility of the instrumental reading, Vivekananda argues that knowledge is the final goal of humanity. He contends that pleasure is impermanent and thus not a true goal, while knowledge is enduring, making it the ultimate aim. Vivekananda's argument hinges on the permanence of knowledge, contrasting it with the transience of pleasure. If knowledge is indeed permanent, it stands as a more viable final goal for humanity than pleasure.

Vivekananda compares secular and spiritual knowledge, suggesting that the highest gift is spirituality and spiritual knowledge, while secular knowledge is secondary (Vivekananda, CW 1, p. 28). On the instrumental interpretation, spiritual knowledge is an essential means to liberation (mokṣa). Its value derives from its role in achieving mokṣa, making it a necessary and sufficient condition for liberation. Thus, spiritual knowledge is the only direct means to mokṣa and, by extension, an intermediate goal. Moreover, if spiritual bliss is an essential constituent of mokṣa, then it too is a final goal. Therefore, spiritual pleasure, like spiritual knowledge, is an essential part of mokṣa and thus a final goal (Vivekananda, CW 1, p. 13). Another candidate for a final goal is spiritual freedom, which meets the criteria for a final goal due to its permanence and essential role in the state of mokṣa.

### 5. SCHOLAR DEBATES AND DISCOURSES ON SWAMI VIVEKANANDA:

Scholars have engaged in debates regarding the extent of Hindu fundamentalist inclinations in Vivekananda's ideologies. Dixit (2014) argues that Vivekananda's support for caste distinctions and the existing social hierarchy provided ideological justification for Hindu communal movements. Similarly, Baier (2019) suggests that Vivekananda's ideas continue to shape contemporary religiously-tinged Indian nationalism. Conversely, some scholars assert that Hindutva ideologues have misconstrued Vivekananda's teachings. Beckerlegge (2003) demonstrates that figures like M.S. Golwalkar and Eknath Ranade selectively used Vivekananda's ideas to suit their agendas, overlooking the broader context of his philosophy. Raychaudhuri (1998) contextualises Vivekananda's views within the colonial environment of the late-nineteenth century, challenging the portrayal of Vivekananda as a militant Hindu. Others take an intermediate

stance, recognising both liberal and supremacist elements in Vivekananda's thought. Sen (1993) highlights an "apparent contradiction" between Vivekananda's universalist appeals and his belief in the superiority of Hinduism.

Jyotirmaya Sharma's (2013) book, "A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism", argues that Vivekananda was instrumental in the rise of Hindutva. Sharma contends that Vivekananda was a Hindu supremacist who supported the caste system and diverged from his guru, Sri Ramakrishna's, teachings on religious equality. But Vivekananda's views within the broader spectrum of Hindu thought. He never act as Hindu fundamentalist, but instead present as a cosmopolitan patriot who laid the spiritual foundations for India's independence movement. Vivekananda's nuanced perspective on caste challenges the notion that he favoured the hereditary caste system as well. He prophesied the demise of the caste system and advocated for its reform, emphasising individual freedom and social equality. Vivekananda's vision of caste was based on natural variation rather than inequality, rejecting notions of privilege based on birth. Furthermore, contrary to the notion of him supporting the hereditary caste system, Vivekananda explicitly attributes "India's downfall" to the replacement of the original caste system with its hereditary counterpart. His stance on Hinduism, religious diversity, caste, and Ramakrishna indicates a broader perspective. His nationalistic statements, when contextualised, depict him not as a proto-Hindutva ideologue but as a cosmopolitan patriot. Vivekananda aimed to lay the ethical and spiritual groundwork for India's independence movement, urging fellow Indians to shed their "slave" mentality and embrace India's profound spiritual heritage while assimilating valuable ideas from other cultures.

A new, diachronic interpretation of Vivekananda's views on religious diversity has been defended by some and criticise by others as seen above. Through a chronological analysis of his lectures and writings, it emerges that Vivekananda harmonised world religions not on the hierarchical basis of Vedanta's three stages but on the egalitarian foundation of the four yogas. This perspective, evident from late 1895 to 1901, emphasises each yoga as a direct path to salvation, echoing Ramakrishna's teachings. Moreover, recent scholarly work has been leveraged to challenge the view that Vivekananda favoured the hereditary caste system. He vehemently criticised the existing caste system and anticipated its demise, advocating for a return to the original caste system based on inherent qualities and conduct rather than birth. This aligns with scriptural teachings found in works like the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. While Vivekananda is not exempt from criticism, it is argued that some of the criticisms levelled against him, particularly by Sharma and others, stem from an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of his multifaceted body of work.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND REMARKS:

Swami Vivekananda's teachings on practical Vedanta resonate with timeless wisdom and offer a blueprint for personal and societal transformation. He champions the principles of oneness, self-reliance, and compassion, envisioning a world where every individual recognises their inherent divinity and contributes to the betterment of humanity. His Neo-Vedanta philosophy presents a dynamic and practical approach, advocating for the integration of spiritual values into daily life. It emphasises compassion, equality, and universal acceptance, striving for the holistic welfare of individuals and society.

Despite debates and critiques, Vivekananda's assertion that spiritual knowledge leads to the experience of eternal bliss remains a profound insight into the nature of existence. He inspires seekers to explore consciousness deeply, aiming for liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Vivekananda's legacy defies simplistic categorisations, reflecting a rich scope of spirituality, social reform, and national pride. By critically engaging with his teachings and understanding of his thought's nuances can be seen multitude of its relevance in contemporary discourse. Furthermore, Vivekananda's evolution in attitude towards Ramakrishna underscores the complexity of his character and beliefs. While criticism is inevitable, it is essential to approach Vivekananda's legacy with nuance and understanding, recognising the multifaceted nature of his contributions. Ultimately, his teachings continue to inspire individuals worldwide, urging them to pursue self-realisation and work towards the upliftment of humanity, echoing his timeless message of harmony and spiritual growth.

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