Swami Vivekananda: Today and Tomorrow

Dr. Bhabesh Pramanik, Prof. Niranjan Maity & Mr. Arunansu Bera

1Acting Principal, Institute of Education, Haldia.
2Assistant Prof., Institute of Education, Haldia.
3Principal, Zilla Public School, Tamluk West Bengal.

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ABSTRACT Vivekananda is not merely a name, but an institution. After 110 years of his physical existence, he lives in the core of our heart. Along with his words, our every morning begins and ends with his creations. He is our breath. He is the breath of every living civilization- it may be 21st century, 22nd century, 23rd century and so on. We entered into a new century, but essentially, as we turned a page toward a new millennium that, in many respects, imposed us radical changes in our ways of living; and more so: a revolution, in an unconscious manner of perceiving the world, of feeling life and of how to envision our futures. Vivekananda’s ideals are the only weapon to remove all darkness. That is why his new understanding of religion, new view of man, new principle of morality and ethics, concept of East-West, contribution to India, contribution to Hinduism, teaching are still relevant in enlightening us.

Key words- creation, breath, radical change, darkness new understanding of religion, new view of man, new principle of morality and ethics, concept of East-West, contribution to India, contribution to Hinduism and teaching.

Swami Vivekananda was the chief disciple of the 19th century saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa and the founder of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the “Western” World, mainly in America and Europe and is also credited with raising interfaith awareness, bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion during the end of the 19th century. He is considered to be a ‘major force’ in the revival of Hinduism in modern India. He is perhaps best known for his inspiring speech which began: “Sisters and Brothers of America,” through which he introduced Hinduism at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893.

Vivekananda’s Contributions to World Culture:
Making an objective assessment of Swami Vivekananda’s contributions to world culture, the eminent British historian A L Basham stated that “in centuries to come, he will be remembered as one of the main moulders of the modern world....” Some of the main contributions that Swamiji made to the modern world are mentioned below:

1. New Understanding of Religion: One of the most significant contributions of Swami Vivekananda to the modern world is his interpretation of religion as a universal experience of transcendent Reality, common to all humanity. Swamiji met the challenge of modern science by showing that religion is as scientific as science itself; religion is the ‘science of consciousness.’ Swamiji visualized- “As such, religion and science are not contradictory to each other but are complementary. This universal conception frees religion from the hold of superstitions, dogmatism, priest craft and intolerance, and makes religion the highest and noblest pursuit – the pursuit of Supreme Freedom, Supreme Knowledge, Supreme Happiness.”

2. New View of Man: Vivekananda’s concept of ‘potential divinity of the soul’ gives a new, ennobling concept of man. The present age is the age of humanism which holds that man should be the chief concern and center of all activities and thinking. Through science and technology man has attained great prosperity and power, and modern methods of communication have converted human society into a ‘global village’. But the degradation of man has also been going on apace, as witnessed by the enormous increase in broken homes, immorality, violence, crime, etc. in modern society. Vivekananda’s concept of potential divinity of the soul prevents this degradation, divinizes human relationships, and makes life meaningful and worth living. Swamiji has laid the foundation for ‘spiritual humanism’, which is manifesting itself through several neo-humanistic movements and the current interest in meditation all over the world.

3. New Principle of Morality and Ethics: The prevalent morality, in both individual life and social life, is mostly based on fear – fear of the police, fear of public ridicule, fear of God’s punishment, fear of Karma, and so on. Vivekananda has given a new theory of ethics and new principle of morality based on the intrinsic purity and oneness of the Atman. We should be pure because purity is our real nature, our true divine Self...
or Atman. Similarly, we should love and serve our neighbours because we are all one in the Supreme Spirit known as Paramatman or Brahmam.

4. **Bridge between the East and the West:** Another great contribution of Swami Vivekananda was to build a bridge between Indian and Western. He did it by interpreting Hindu scriptures and philosophy and the Hindu way of life and institutions to the Western people in an idiom which they could understand. He made the Western people realize that they had to learn much from Indian spirituality for their own well-being. He showed that, in spite of her poverty and backwardness, India had a great contribution to make to world culture. In this way he was instrumental in ending India’s cultural isolation from the rest of the world. He was India’s first great cultural ambassador to the West.

On the other hand, Swamiji’s interpretation of ancient Hindu scriptures, philosophy, institutions, etc. prepared the mind of Indians to accept and apply in practical life two best elements of Western culture, namely science and technology and humanism. Swamiji has taught Indians how to master Western science and technology and at the same time develop spiritually. Swamiji has also taught Indians how to adapt Western humanism (especially the ideas of individual freedom, social equality and justice and respect for women) to Indian ethos.

**Swamiji’s Contributions to India:**
In spite of her innumerable linguistic, ethnic, historical and regional diversities, India has had from time immemorial a strong sense of cultural unity. It was, however, Swami Vivekananda who revealed the true foundations of this culture and thus clearly defined and strengthened the sense of unity as a nation.

Swamiji gave Indians proper understanding of their country’s great spiritual heritage and thus gave them pride in their past. I.e. pointed out to Indians the drawbacks of Western culture and the need for India’s contribution to overcome these drawbacks. In this way Swamiji made India a nation with a global mission. Sense of unity, pride in the past, sense of mission – these were the factors which gave real strength and purpose to India’s nationalist movement. Several eminent leaders of India’s freedom movement have acknowledged their indebtedness to Swamiji. Free India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: “Rooted in the past, full of pride in India’s prestige, Vivekananda was yet modern in his approach to life’s problems, and was a kind of bridge between the past of India and her present …………. he came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind and gave it self-reliance and some roots in the past.” Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose wrote: “Swamiji harmonized the East and the West, religion and science, past and present. And that is why he is great. Our countrymen have gained unprecedented self-respect, self-reliance and self-assertion from his teachings.” Swamiji’s most unique contribution to the creation of new India was to open the minds of Indians to their duty to the downtrodden masses. Long before the ideas of Karl Marx were known in India, Swamiji spoke about the role of the labouring classes in the production of the country’s wealth. Swamiji was the first religious leader in India to speak for the masses, formulate a definite philosophy of service, and organize large-scale social service.

**Swamiji’s Contributions to Hinduism:**
It was Swami Vivekananda who gave to Hinduism as a whole a clear-cut identity, a distinct profile.

- **Identity:** Before Swamiji came Hinduism was a loose confederation of many different sects. Swamiji was the first religious leader to speak about the common bases of Hinduism and the common ground of all sects. He was the first person, as guided by his Guru Sri Ramakrishna, to accept all Hindu doctrines and the views of all Hindu philosophers and sects as different aspects of one total view of Reality and way of life known as Hinduism. Speaking about Swamiji’s role in giving Hinduism its distinct identity, Sister Nivedita wrote: “... it may be said that when he began to speak it was of ‘the religious ideas of the Hindus’, but when he ended, Hinduism had been created.”

- **Unification:** Before Swamiji came, there was a lot of quarrel and competition among the various sects of Hinduism. Similarly, the protagonists of different systems and schools of philosophy were claiming their views to be the only true and valid ones. By applying Sri Ramakrishna’s doctrine of Harmony (Samanvaya) Swamiji brought about an overall unification of Hinduism on the basis of the principle of unity in diversity. Speaking about Swamiji’s role in this field K.M. Pannikar, the eminent historian and diplomat, wrote: “This new Shankaracharyya may well be claimed to be a unifier of Hindu ideology.”

- **Defense:** Another important service rendered by Swamiji was to raise his voice in defense of Hinduism. In fact, this was one of the main types of work he did in the West. Christian missionary propaganda had given a wrong understanding of Hinduism and India in Western minds. Swamiji had to face a lot of opposition in his attempts to defend Hinduism.
4. Meeting the Challenges: At the end of the 19th century, India in general, and Hinduism in particular, faced grave challenges from Western materialistic life, the ideas of Western free society, and the proselytizing activities of Christians. Vivekananda met these challenges by integrating the best elements of Western culture in Hindu culture.

5. New Ideal of Monasticism: A major contribution of Vivekananda to Hinduism is the rejuvenation and modernization of monasticism. In this new monastic ideal, followed in the Ramakrishna Order, the ancient principles of renunciation and God realization are combined with service to God in man (Shiva jnane jiva seva). Vivekananda elevated social service to the status of divine service.

6. Refurbishing of Hindu Philosophy and Religious Doctrines: Vivekananda did not merely interpret ancient Hindu scriptures and philosophical ideas in terms of modern thought. He also added several illuminating original concepts based on his own transcendental experiences and vision of the future. This, however, needs a detailed study of Hindu philosophy which cannot be attempted here.

Vivekananda and Science:
In his book Raja Yoga, Vivekananda explores traditional views on the supernatural and the belief that the practice of Raja Yoga can confer psychic powers such as ‘reading another’s thoughts’, ‘controlling all the forces of nature’, become ‘almost all-knowing’, ‘live without breathing’, ‘control the bodies of others’ and levitation. He also explains traditional eastern spiritual concepts like kundalini and spiritual energy centers (chakras).

Vivekananda advocated testing thoroughly before making your decision of accepting or denying

“It is not the sign of a candid and scientific mind to throw overboard anything without proper investigation. Surface scientists, unable to explain various extraordinary mental phenomena, strive to ignore their very existence.”

He further says in the introduction of the book that one should take up the practice and verify these things for oneself, and that there should not be blind belief.

“What little I know I will tell you. So far as I can reason it out I will do so, but as to what I do not know I will simply tell you what the books say. It is wrong to believe blindly. You must exercise your own reason and judgment; you must practice, and see whether these things happen or not. Just as you would take up any other science, exactly in the same manner you should take up this science for study.”

In his paper read at the World Parliament of Religions, Chicago (1893), Vivekananda also hinted about the final goal of Physics:

“Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As soon as science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress, because it would reach the goal. Thus Chemistry could not progress farther when it would discover one element out of which all other could be made. Physics would stop when it would be able to fulfill its services in discovering one energy of which all others are but manifestations.”

“All science is bound to come to this conclusion in the long run. Manifestation, and not creation, is the word of science today, and the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language and with further light from the latest conclusions of science.”

The electrical engineer, Nikola Tesla, was influenced by the ideas of Vivekananda "on the link between the soul and Godhead, Prana (life force) and Akasha (ether) and its equivalence of the universe, force, and matter", which were included in his treatise on human condition and the role of technology in shaping world history, in his article in Century. Tesla reportedly took the self-imposed vow of chastity, influenced by Vivekananda’s teaching of chastity as the path to "self-transformation and enlightenment".

Selected Teachings of Swami Vivekananda:
- My ideal, indeed, can be put into a few words, and that is: to preach unto mankind their divinity and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.
- Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.
- We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet.
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.

Whatever you think, that you will be. If you think yourselves weak, weak you will be; if you think yourselves strong, strong you will be.

If you have faith in all the three hundred and thirty millions of your mythological gods, and still have no faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you. Have faith in yourselves, and stand up on that faith and be strong; that is what we need.

Strength, strength it is that we want so much in this life, for what we call sin and sorrow have all one cause, and that is our weakness. With weakness comes ignorance, and with ignorance comes misery.

The older I grow, the more everything seems to me to lie in manliness.

Purity, patience, and perseverance are the three essentials to success, and above all, love.

Religion is realization; not talk, not doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes.

Religion is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man.

Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call God into you. If you think yourselves strong, strong you will be. If you think yourselves weak, weak you will be. Have faith in yourselves, there is no salvation for you. Have faith in the Divinity already in man.

Whatever you think, that you will be. If you think yourselves weak, weak you will be; if you think yourselves strong, strong you will be.

It is love and love alone that I preach, and I base my teaching on the great Vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the Soul of the Universe.

Comment
Swami Vivekananda once spoke of himself as a "condensed India." His life and teachings are of inestimable value to the West for an understanding of the mind of Asia. William James, the Harvard philosopher, called the Swami the "paragon of Vedantists." Max Muller and Paul Deussen, the famous Orientalists of the nineteenth century, held him in genuine respect and affection. His words," writes Romain Rolland," are great music, phrases in the style of Beethoven, stirring rhythms like the march of Handel choruses. I cannot touch these sayings of his, scattered as they are through the pages of books, at thirty years' distance, without receiving a thrill through my body like an electric shock. And what shocks, what transports, must have been produced when in burning words they are issued from the lips of the hero!”

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