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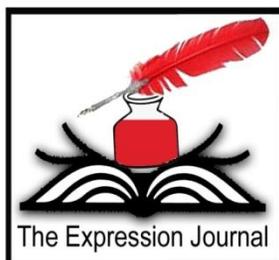
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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S LIFE, IDEAS AND PHILOSOPHY: RELEVANCE IN THE 21TH CENTURY

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Abstract

India is the land of saints, hermits, philosophers, educationists, social reformers and spiritual healers, and the whole world is accepting this fact that India has achieved a noteworthy accomplishment in the field of religion, spiritualism, and philosophy. Many social and religious reformers sacrificed their luxuries and comforts for the upliftment of Indian society because India was suffering from many social evils and was lagging behind in diverse aspects of life. At that time, it looked like it will take few more centuries to bring positive transformation in the socio-economic and political scenario of India. Fanaticism, communalism, idolatry, illiteracy, poverty, caste, religion and gender based discrimination, underemployment, unemployment, corruption etc. social evils had become an integral part of India. Some social reformers could not see the bad pictures of Indian society and they girded up their loins to bring positive vibes, religious revival in the proper direction and social awakening in the society. Though there is a long list of these social reformers but among all these, the role of Swami Vivekananda is outstanding, significant and notable. He is a key figure in changing the mentality of the young Indians. He can be called a flag bearer of Hinduism and a monk par excellence. Through this paper I have tried to examine and explore Swami Vivekananda's life, ideas, philosophy and his socio-religious reforms.

Keywords

Swami Vivekananda, Spirituality, Social Evils, Educational Reforms, Hinduism, Character Building.

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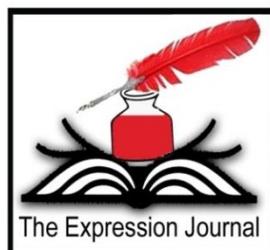
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Swami Vivekananda was born in a Kayasth family on 12 January, 1863 at the occasion of Makar Sankranti in Kolkata which was a Bengal Presidency at that time. His childhood name was Narenranath Dutta. His parents Vishwanath Dutta and Bhuvaneshwari Devi were very affluent His father was a renowned attorney who has a good place in the society and his mother was a god-fearing woman and her religious nature also left an indelible impression on Narendra's mind. He had interest in instrumental and vocational music.

He was a very intelligent boy who excelled in his studies. When he completed his bachelor degree, he had acquired a good knowledge of various subjects. Since his school time Narendra has special interest in sports such as wresting, body-building, and gymnastics etc. He was an avid reader also and he studies the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*. Apart from that he studied the Western Philosophy also.

He is called the most famous spiritual leader of India. He was a prolific thinker, skilled speaker, social reformer and a devout patriot. He believed in free thinking and he was greatly inspired by his guru Ramakrishna Paramhansa. His contribution to the Indian society is really unforgettable. He was the main person who revived the fire of spiritualism in the hearts of Hindus and he told the people that Hinduism is the most revered religion in the world. His philosophy of universal brotherhood and character building are quite important in the present context also. Indian youths have been greatly inspired by him that's why his birthday 12 January is celebrated as the National Youth Day in India.

Swami Vivekananda believed in the existence of a Supreme Being. He got associated with the Brahma Samaj led by Keshab Chandra Sen. Brahma Samaj believed in the existence of one god and criticized the idol-worshipping. Swami Vivekananda wanted to know about the existence of God and he wanted to know further about life, death and salvation. He met his guru Sri Ramakrishna in November 1881 at the Kali Temple in Dakshineswar. His quest for spiritualism,

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as he thought, could be quenched only by his Guru. Swami Vivekananda asked question from Sri Ramakrishna, "Have you seen God?" and Sri Ramakrishna replied immediately, "Yes, I have. I see God as clearly as I see you, only on a much deeper sense." Swami Vivekananda was highly impressed by the answer of Sri Ramakrishna. He made Sri Ramakrishna his spiritual guru but he did not surrender his independence of thinking and judgment.

Vivekananda's father passed away in 1884 and now the family responsibilities came on his shoulders because he was to support his mother and the younger sibling. It is said that he went to his Guru and asked him to pray to the financial security of his family. At the suggestion of his guru, he himself went to pray to the goddess. He did not ask money for himself from the goddess instead he asked for conscience and reclusion. It was the time when he took himself towards the spiritual journey.

His guru Ramakrishna was suffering from throat cancer in 1885 and his condition was serious. Before his death, Sri Ramakrishna ordered his young disciples to follow Swami Vivekananda's direction. His guru gave Vivekananda liberty to use his powers and bring transformations in the Indian society. Sri Ramakrishna said, "By the force of the power transmitted by me, great things will be done by you."

Vivekananda and other people nursed their Guru with devoted care and on 16 August, 1886, Swami Ramakrishna gave up his mortal body. After the death of his guru, swami Vivekananda and around fifteen more disciples started living together in a dilapidated building at Baranagar which is now known as Ramakrishna Math. They renounced their ties with their families and took vows of monkhood. It was the time when he became Swami Vivekananda from Narendranath. Swami Vivekananda left the Math in 1886 for the tour of India on foot as a 'Parivrajak'.

He came to know about the World Parliament of Religions which was to be held at Chicago, America in 1893 and he wanted to represent Indian Hinduism and his Guru's religious philosophies. His disciples raised funds for him and he left for Chicago from Mumbai on May 31, 1893. He faced some problems but he was determined to achieve his goals. On 11 September, 1893, he started speaking and his salutation "My Brothers and Sisters of America" won the heart of every American. He received a standing ovation from the audience and after that his stunning speech on Vedanta impressed everyone.

He told the principles of Vedantic Philosophy and its spiritual significance and this incident put Hinduism on the map of world religion. Due to his impressive personality and wonderful speech on Hinduism, the newspapers described him as a great religious figure of that time. It was the time when he became famous overnight and he was considered a great champion of India's age-old values. Other Indians also came to know that Indian religious heritage has something which the Western intelligentsia also admire and try to follow. Now Indians also learnt that there is in dead something very good in the Vedanta and they also started exploring more and more about it.

Swami Vivekananda remained in American for two and a half years and he founded the Vedanta Society of New York in 1894. Many people became his disciples there also and he trained

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his close disciples at Thousand Island Park. He became so famous that he was offered the chair of the Eastern Philosophy in both Columbia University and Harvard University. Through this chair, he gave the message to the world that Vedanta forms the universal principles of all religions and this religion has more values than that of any other religions in the world.

He also went to the United Kingdom and Switzerland for the spread of Hinduism and he was well-received for his insightful and meaningful speeches on religions. He met various influential figures there while on the tour of his lectures. He not only spread the message of Vedanta, ancient Indian values, its rich cultural heritage, and the practices of classical yoga but also raised big fund to help relieve the Indian masses from their poverty and sufferings. He writes in his book *On India and Her Problems*, "So long as millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor."

Swami Vivekananda was a great religious reformer who returned India in 1897 and he received warm reception by the common and the royal alike. He delivered many lectures in India and tried to bring a drastic change in the Indian society. Indian society was gripped by many social and religious evils and the people's illiteracy was becoming a stumbling block for their liberation.

Swami Vivekananda had exceptional qualities of leadership. He met many reputed people in their professions such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and rulers and appealed them to come forward for the help of the suffering masses of India. Many of them came forward and helped him financially also. It was due to their financial help, he could go to America.

Swami Vivekananda showed his concerns for the Indian women. There were many social evils prevalent at that time. It was a common trend to marry girls in their early age and the widows were not allowed to remarry. It was a man-dominated society and the women were put at the margins. Swami Vivekananda focused on educating the girls and women and he thought that only education can give them an opportunity to take part in all social and economical spheres of life. Swami Vivekananda focused on the education and his efforts of opening many educational institutions were great moves in that direction. He appealed the Indian masses to show empathy towards other beings with his message "Jive is Shiva" i.e. every being is the form of God.

Swami Vivekananda thought that the youths are the real power of any country and they must be physically and mentally strong. He put stress on the physical and mental building of the young Indians. His religious views changed the course of his pupils and they also started following his footsteps.

Swami Vivekananda reached Kolkata after delivering his lectures and he founded the Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math on 1 May, 1897. The main objectives of this mission were to help the poor and the deprived people. This mission laid stress on the Karma Yoga. Ramakrishna Mission started working for the welfare of the society. For that purpose they opened schools, colleges, hospitals and spread the message of Vedanta through different seminars, concurrences and works in different parts of the country so that people also know about the greatness of this religion.

Swami Vivekananda believed that a human being has unlimited power and he can do anything beyond his imagination. His views were much influenced by Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual teachings and his personal internalization of the Advaita Vedanta philosophy. Swami Vivekananda

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thought that the ultimate goal of life is to achieve freedom of the soul. Swami Vivekananda held the views that the ultimate wellbeing and welfare of his countrymen should be his primary motive and he motivated the Indian masses to arise from their slumber and tread the path until the goal is achieved. Such was the courage and belief of swami Vivekananda!

Swami Vivekananda was a great soul but it was an unfortunate thing that such noble person died when he was around forty years old. He did his daily routine works, taught Sanskrit grammar to his pupils and returned to his room in the evening. He was found dead on 4 July, 1904 at 9 PM. It is said that he took Mahasamadhi. His dead body was cremated on the banks of the river Ganga.

In fact, the great men like Swami Vivekananda never die, their views, ideologies and philosophies are imbibed by their followers and such men become immortal through their noble deeds. Swami Vivekananda used to say 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." He achieved remarkable success in his life. Following Ramakrishna Paramahansa's view Swami Vivekananda would say that "religion is not for empty stomachs." His classics such as Janna yoga, Karma yoga, Bhatia yoga, and Raja yoga were his great achievement at the age of 39. He was a legendary figure in the religious world that's why Tagore once said to Romaine Rolland, "If you want to know India, study Vivekananda".

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