



International Journal of Arts & Education Research

VIVEKANANDA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO WORLD CULTURE

Sanjeev kumar*¹, Rajesh Kumar¹

¹Research scholar, Sai Nath University Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

ABSTRACT

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 molders of the modern world...".

INTRODUCTION

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'. 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, priestcraft 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 centre of all activities and thinking. Through science and technology man has attained great prosperity and power, and modern methods of communication and travel 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, Zen etc 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. The current theories of ethics also do not explain why a person should be moral and be good to others. 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 Brahman.

4. Bridge between the East and the West: Another great contribution of Swami Vivekananda was to build a bridge between Indian culture and Western culture. 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.

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.

Furthermore, he 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

1. Identity: It was Swami Vivekananda who gave to Hinduism as a whole a clear-cut identity, a distinct profile. 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 Master 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."

2. 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 Shankaracharya may well be claimed to be a unifier of Hindu ideology."

3. Defence: Another important service rendered by Swamiji was to raise his voice in defence 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.

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. This is my new Gospel.

✓ 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 upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.

✓ They alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive.

✓ This is the gist of all worship – to be pure and to do good to others.

✓ 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.

Rarely does humanity witness a combination of a great Guru (Spiritual Teacher) and equally capable Shishya (spiritual aspirant) as Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Upanishads and the Gita do mention of such noble pairs, when the fully primed aspirant seeking higher knowledge humbly bows down to the Teacher, and says, "O sir, please tell me 'what is that by knowing which nothing else remains to be known'. Give me that, acquiring which all desires nullify. O gracious one, I surrender at your feet; please tell me what is right for me." And the compassionate Teacher describes the nature of Atman and Brahman, starting as external reality to begin with, but culminating into true knowledge of our inner soul as Brahman. As Guru spoke, so did the aspirant (Sadhaka) experience the Truth contained in those words. It was as if a film on Brahman was being run in front of the yearning aspirant. One such pair flourished in the last two decades of nineteenth century, when Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa sculpted the most wonderful masterpiece in the form of Swami Vivekananda out of raw skeptical, rational but fearless and dynamic Narendranath. Their association has unleashed such a tremendous spiritual force that it has already started destroying the dross and dreary ignorance covering the minds and hearts of mankind all over the globe.

To arrest the sectarian influence of onward march of scientific reason, to fight the onslaught of external technological progress, which claimed material prosperity as the only goal for humanity, one required answers in the scientific language alone. Language of devotion and faith was brushed aside as weakness and defeat. Religion was on defensive in the face of clattering advances of science. To combat this destructive march of quasi-purposive science, Swami Vivekananda entered the world arena as a great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

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- Swami Chetanananda. God lived with them. p. 22. "Hastie said, 'I have known only one person, who has realized that blessed state, and he is Ramakrishna of Dakshineswar. You will understand it better if you visit this saint."