

# Relevance of Swami Vivekananda's : Thoughts in the 21st Century

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Swami Vivekananda was one of the greatest patriots, thinkers, philosophers and spiritual leaders, India has ever produced. He lived only for thirty nine and a half years, of which he devoted the last nine and half years totally to the service of humanity. Though he left the world well over a century ago, Swamiji's teachings remains very relevant to us in the twenty-first 21st Century. This is more so because mankind is struggling more now to adjust to more frequent socioeconomic changes. The very rapid pace at which developments are overtaking us is surely leading to a transitory segment of social confusion, unrest, and apprehension. This produces a very demanding and stressful life style.

When inventions, discoveries and advances in knowledge especially in science and technology but also in other fields like humanities- and in the management of limited Human Resource's flounder, we get declining moral and ethical values. The widening gap between the privileged and under privileged creates a feeling of insecurity all around. One then needs to turn to something else to find peace and our balance of mind. This is when religion offers hope for most of us. For those who have more of a questioning minds, it is the unique combination of faith and intellect that Swamiji preached that appeals the most.

The important point to note is Swami Vivekananda insisted on individual liberation as a priority over the efforts to 'do good to the world'. The idea he preferred is that the individual should strive for special state or plane of consciousness that would lead a person to realise his or her true nature. Thus, religion or spirituality for the Swami was an act of inching higher and higher on the steps of consciousness, from animal consciousness to human consciousness, and from human consciousness to Divine Consciousness.

Let us try to outline a few of Vivekananda's concepts:

**Vivekananda's Modern 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 prevents this degradation, and makes life meaningful and worth living. Swamiji 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.

**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 that is 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.

**Modern Outlook 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.

**Teaching as a 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.

**Vision of Modern India:** Relating to his work in India, Swami Vivekananda was one of the earliest leaders to give the nation the vision of a new India, which was free and enlightened. Swamiji gave Indians proper understanding of their country's great spiritual heritage and thus gave them pride in their past. Vivekananda gave Indians back their human dignity. His ideas influenced most of the great political and social leaders of pre- independent India.

**National Unity:** 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. Through his stirring speeches and writings he awakened the slumbering soul of the nation.

**For the Toiling Masses:** 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 organise large-scale social service.

**Campaign Against Casteism and Gender Discrimination:** He was intensely pained at the caste discrimination prevalent in India and was all sympathy for the poor and suffering of all nations, castes and creeds. He held the neglect of the masses and the subjugation of women to be the two causes of India's downfall. He said to his disciple, Sister Nivedita, **'Never forget it, the word is, women and the people.'**

Swami Vivekananda made a powerful impact in the last decade of the nineteenth century. He conversed with eminent philosophers, scientists, inventors, entrepreneurs, priests and thousands of ordinary people, men and women from all walks of life and all strata of society. All the time he was both teaching and learning. Swami Vivekananda said, **'...I fervently hope that the bell that has tolled this morning in honour of the convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or the pen, and of all uncharitable feeling between persons wending their way to the same goal.'** Today, when the nations of the world, including India in particular, are confronted by religious fanaticism and terrorism, the relevance of Swami Vivekananda's message cannot be underestimated.