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## Vivekananda's vision: Religion and modernity

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### Abstract

Swami Vivekananda's vision of India was to have a new society inspired by the vision of dignity of man, his freedom and individuality, his strength and his capacity to love and serve human beings through egalitarian society free from notions of high or low. He blended religion with nationalism, and applied his reinterpretation to various aspects of education, faith, character building as well as social issues pertaining to India. He also advised his followers to be holy, unselfish and to have faith.

**Keywords:** Theocratic, reiterated, nucleus, superimpose

### Introduction

On 12<sup>th</sup> January 1863, in Kolkata, a son was born to an attorney Vishwanatha Datta and his erudite wife, Bhuvaneshwari Devi, named Narendranath Datta, who later came to be known as Vivekananda. He was their sixth child out of 10 children. An exceptional troublemaker as a child, Narendra had an eidetic memory and could concentrate on multiple things simultaneously. He had mastered the Sanskrit Vyakarana texts and was well-versed in epics like Ramayana and Mahabharatha before he turned seven years old.

In 1870, when he was seven years old, he was admitted to the metropolitan school run by Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar. After completing high school education, he joined the Presidency College for higher education in 1879. He later joined the General Assemblies Institution, where he studied Western Philosophy and World History.

Narendra considered everyone as equals. He did not believe in distinctions based on caste or colour. He showcased exceptional comprehension skills. Narendra was known for making logical arguments and never insulting anyone. He never ran away from problems and believed in tactfully facing problems with composure. He understood that one should experience the divinity that atheists rejected and theists praised for oneself. The question of whether one can experience divinity became his central concern.

Nobody could appease Narendra's curious mind, which was filled with questions about the Universe and God. In the November of 1881, Sriramakrishna visited Narendra's neighbour, Surendranath Mithra. At Mithra's suggestion, Narendra sang a devotional song that pleased Sriramakrishna and invited Narendra to Dakshineshwara. On reaching Dakshineshwara after some days, Narendra was welcomed as a long-awaited guest by Sriramakrishna. It was not an ordinary meeting. The question of whether one can 'see God' was answered by Sriramakrishna, who said that 'if one sincerely wishes to see God, God will appear before them'. The meeting with Sriramakrishna was life-changing for Vivekananda. Narendra found his spiritual guide in Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna, in turn, found his successor in Vivekananda. Paramahansa's words further erased thoughts of atheistic philosophy from Narendra's mind. He understood that Vedas, Ithihasas and Puranas are not mere words but are stepping stones on the way to knowing God. He recognised that unlike philosophy's logic and intellectual characteristic, these texts are the culmination of experiences. Narendra, who was a miraculous personality charged with the task of leading humanity into a new renaissance, rescued Hinduism from the clutches of theocratic antiquity with his proficiency in communication and elevated its status. Spreading Indian culture and its messages and ideals all over the world became his new goal in life.

During Vivekananda's speeches, he always touched upon how important it is for the human race to stand united. He reiterated the importance of attaining world peace everywhere he went. He convinced the Western world of how much the Upanishads valued peace.

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Solving the problem of poverty in India and spreading Hindu scriptures and ideals were his goals. To lead every single person towards perfection was his motto. His proclamation that 'religion is for men, and men are not for religion' still rings true. He considered Hinduism to be a universal religion. Vedas, Ithihasas, Puranas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, etc., are the storehouses of ancient Indian culture. The Puranas were written to ensure that the values imparted through the Vedas and Ithihasas reached the common people. Everything from the moment of creation to historical facts, parables, philosophical and theological texts, Vedanta tattvas, geography, art, etc., are propounded in the Puranas. The Puranas also give accurate accounts of the lifestyle led by the people of ancient times. They play a very important role in helping people walk the path of righteousness.

On close inspection of his interviews and speeches, his views on Puranas become clear. While discussing the ways in which one can adopt the path of Sanathana or 'Eternal' Hinduism, he talked about the greatness of the Puranas:

"What isn't present here? So many topics are covered in the Vedas, Vedantas, Darshanas, Puranas, and Tantras. A single verse from them is enough to break the continuity of life and death forever".

In an interview that Vivekananda gave *The Hindu* in February 1897 at Madura, he was asked some questions about the Puranas:

"Do they contain historical veracity or are they mere allegorical representations of metaphysical truths, or are they representations of the highest ideals for the conduct of humanity, or are they mere epic poems such as those of Homer?"

He made his stance clear by stating thus;

"Some historical truth is the nucleus of every Purana. The object of the Puranas is to teach mankind the sublime truth in various forms; and even if they do not contain any historical truth, they form a great authority for us in respect of the highest truth which they inculcate. The sublimity of the law propounded by Puranas does not depend upon the truth of any personality, and one can even hold that such personages never lived, and at the same time take those writings as high authorities in respect of the grand ideas which they place before mankind. Our philosophy does not depend upon any personality for its truth. The object of the Puranas was the education of mankind, and the sages who constructed them contrived to find some historical personages and to superimpose upon them all the best or worst qualities just as they wanted to, and laid down the rules of morals for the conduct of mankind. There stands the grand philosophy contained in the Puranas."

His views on religion are fascinating. The speeches he delivered during the first World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 at Chicago highlighted the divinity of man in theological history. He held that divine realisation is the goal of all religions, and there is no place for separatism in it. Peace is the most important goal. Vivekananda strongly condemned religious fanaticism that led to disruption of peace and harmony, spilt the blood of men and prevented development. He declared that penance, purity and charity are not acts that are exclusive to any one religion.

Even when Vivekananda toured Western countries and gave sermons, he continued to impart his knowledge and guidance for the development of his followers in his motherland through frequent letters. He called upon the

youth of India and told them that Indian society needed to awaken and eradicate poverty and attain peace and wellness. To achieve that, strong and capable youngsters had to volunteer and organise themselves.

In Swamiji's speeches, he reiterated that Indian society needed to prioritise scientific education and advancement. It needed to be hospitable and kind to others.

According to him, a monk prays not just for his salvation but for the salvation of the whole population. A monk lives not just for himself but for the entire world. Every human being should dedicate their life to help their fellow beings have a better life. Men should help solve the troubles of other men. Individuals should console widows with words of comfort and help the oppressed and illiterate people by educating them. All men are equal. They are not to be differentiated based on colour or caste. Every monk should balance 'dharma' and 'karma'. The main aim of his sermons was to build a courageous and energetic society.

In 1897, Swamiji assembled his followers and decided to start an organisation called Ramakrishna Mission. The main objectives of this organisation were to; spread the teachings of Sriramakrishna, promote equality of all religions and encourage peace between followers of different religions, give education to all, promote arts and handicrafts, and propagate the Hindu philosophy of Vedanthas as directed by Sriramakrishna.

### Conclusion

Swamiji was one of the greatest figures in modern history in the field of philosophy and a major proponent of Spiritualism. His influence was felt worldwide. He gave birth to a new chapter in the history of Indian culture and Hindu philosophy. Swamiji gave a new interpretation to the Ancient Indian Hindu religious philosophy propounded by the likes of Sri Rama, Sri Krishna and Sri Shankara, and it fell in line with the scientific thinking of the new age. He is considered as a spiritual guide who elevated the status of Hindu spirituality in modern times by bridging the gap between religious culture and modern scientific and technological advancements. He demonstrated to the world that religion is not at odds with modernism, reasoning or scientific thinking.

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