



The Sublime Nature of Socio-Religious String: An Understanding through the Lens of Swami Vivekananda

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Article Info

Accepted : 02 Jan 2025

Published : 15 Jan 2025

Publication Issue :

January-February-2025

Volume 8, Issue 1

Page Number : 185-190

Abstract: Dealing with Swami Vivekananda's ideas, the sublime string of society and religion can be traced easily in his lectures and writings. Focusing on this sublime string, Vivekananda advocated for the betterment of society through spiritual upliftment with the help of his famous concept- 'Practical Vedanta' which is a highly religionized form of an ancient Indian philosophical tradition named 'Advaita Vedanta'. While there are a lot of writings and books addressing the ideas and approaches of the religion and others preached by Swami Vivekananda, none of the works identify and indicate particularly about the sublime nature of society and religion that he upheld. This article offers to fill the research gap and focus on the sublime nature of socio-religious string in his teachings. In this article, the qualitative method will be applied to understand and sometimes denote his concepts regarding the topic to clarify his universalistic approach to religion, which is the tool of emancipation and salvation both.

Keywords: Practical Vedanta, Religionization, Universalistic Approach, Religious Identity, Spirituality, Socio-Religious String.

Introduction- Let Us Start With Rabindranath's Appreciation Of Swami Vivekananda:

"Vivekananda's gospel marked the awakening of man in his fullness and that is why it inspired our youth to the diverse courses of liberation through work and sacrifice."¹

So, when we talk about Swami Vivekananda, though he was a Hindu monk, religion was not his only concern, rather he understood the relation between society and religion from his understanding of Hindu religion, contemporary environmental and scientific knowledge with the traditional intertwined relation of both since the ancient age of India. He suggested liberation by two means- emancipation and salvation- and showed the path to achieve both through each other. And to achieve those, he shared his view that a true religion should inspire individuals and communities to work for the betterment of humankind and that societal reform which is inseparable from spiritual awakening. He had a profound and holistic view of the

1. Majumder, Swami Vivekananda, p- 151

relationship between religion and society, especially in India², emphasizing that religion must serve a social purpose. For him, religion was not merely about rituals, dogmas, or personal salvation, but about the upliftment of humanity³. As a practitioner of Advaita Vedanta, he believed that religion could be a transformative force for both the individual and society when properly understood. let's have a look at some conceptions of him to understand this argument in a broader sense:

Socio-religious thought of Swami Vivekananda- The relationship between religion and society is profound and multifaceted, as religion has historically shaped social structures, norms, values, and institutions. On the other hand, society influences how religion is practiced, understood, and evolved. For India, religion is a natural part of life and regarding this, Vivekananda emphasized that “the vitality of the race, the mission of the race is religion;...”⁴. So, despite being a monk, he preached about the betterment of society and country with masses in both ways- spiritually and worldly⁵ by understanding and developing the relation of socio-religious thought and practice.

As mentioned, religion is the soul of Indian society and civilization, Vivekananda showed that the religion does not shape the society and culture indirectly, rather religion plays a crucial role in the shaping of politics and life - “...if you speak of politics in India, you must speak through the language of religion.”⁶

That is the reason he suggested improving Indian society through religion. However, Vivekananda was eager in the implementation of knowledge rather than preach, he advocated for the concept of ‘Practical Vedanta’- an applied form of Advaita Vedanta with the inherent tune of the particular time and space he lived and the world went through. It is better to understand his views of religion he preached and practiced by his own voice:

“The Vedānta, therefore, as a religion must be intensely practical. We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives. And not only this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedānta teaches oneness- one life throughout. The ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life, they must enter into all our thoughts, and more and more into practice.”⁷

Through his concept, which he addressed as ‘Practical Vedanta,’ the essence is the oneness of all, and by practicing this in day to day life, the betterment of society and spirit can be attained. His advice was to build a society on spiritual values like truth, compassion, equality, social justice, selflessness, etc. He emphasized

2. “... if you want to speak of politics in India, you must speak through the language of religion.” P- 13, my work and mission

3. Religion is a realization, not talk, not doctrines, nor theories, however beautiful all these may be. Religion is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging. It is not an intellectual assent; but one's whole nature becoming changed into it. Such is religion.

<https://www.swamivivekananda.guru/2018/07/10/quotes-901-1000/>

4. , Vivekananda, My Life, p-8

5. “his triumphal march from Colombo to Almora via Madras and Calcutta served to galvanize the youth and enthuse the masses. Vivekananda's speeches are memorable in that they convey his deepest aspirations for India and also outline his method of achieving them. He offered a complete vision for the revitalization and transformation of Indian society.”

Paranjape, Swami Vivekananda, p- 24

6. Vivekananda, My Life, p-13

7. CWSV, vol.- 2, p- 285

service and 'Karma Yoga' as the way to integrate spiritual positions into a person's and society's daily lives. He suggested practicing Vedanta in action for the best of one's own, as "The Vedānta teaches men to have faith in themselves first."⁸ By this, one becomes more and more confident and understands the divinity within, which makes total humankind more efficient in worldly matters and also uplifts its spirituality. Vivekananda's philosophy or religious position impacted the world. Still, for India particularly, the impact was huge and changed the mindset and social-political character of this land on a large scale. Let us take a help from R.C. Majumdar', a profound historian's statement, to understand his impact:

"... he put the other important factor of national regeneration- growth of self-confidence and self-reliance and development of physical and moral strength- also on a religious basis."⁹

Vivekananda advocated practical spirituality through the service to humanity. He suggested 'Karma Yoga' to integrate spiritual principles into daily life.¹⁰ To make his believe practical, he built organizations like Ramakrishna Mission and Belur Math, etc. and in a long run, by the practitioners of his school are devoted into several service for humanity by building hospital and other to serve people a better life and missions, library etc. for the upliftment of their cultural and spiritual merits.

His suggestions were a great means of social reform. They were the most powerful force to fight against evils like caste discrimination, poverty, equality, etc. among all in Indian life. It can be said that his thoughts were the result of his thought of the future regeneration of India. And it will not surprise anyone that he greatly influences the great patriot leaders, spiritual schools, intelligentsia, and masses. He shaped a proper outline of the universal religion to have a great and balanced universe and be liberated from all social evils. But it is better to mention that his concept of liberation was not only for worldly life but also for the ultimate freedom or salvation. According to him, this salvation or spiritual freedom is the highest goal for any religion, and to preach the way and show the way out is the duty for a great soul - "He who gives man spiritual knowledge is the greatest benefactor of mankind."¹¹

Where most of the concepts of liberation that were preached by religious leaders are something spiritual and otherworldly, but his one is not an escape from the world but an active engagement in society. Interestingly, he suggested Karma-Yoga for householders, but for *sannyāsī* also, the service for society is mandatory. The concluding statement is from a historian:

"Swamiji always stressed the fact that the best approach to Hindu mind and one sure to move it was through religion. So he put the organized and devoted service to the masses for their all-round regeneration in intellectual, religious, moral, and material conditions, not as a political programme, but on a religious basis as a means of salvation to every individual in accordance with the neo-vedanta or practical Vedanta preached by him."¹²

8. CWSV, vol. -2, p- 287

9. Majumdar, Swami Vivekananda, p- 101

10. "I will go into a thousand hells cheerfully, if I can rouse my countrymen, immersed in Tamas, to stand on their own feet and be men inspired with the spirit of karma-yoga."

Nikhilananda, p-127

11. Daily Inspiration, p- 125

12. Majumdar, Swami Vivekananda, p- 100-101

Reciprocal relation of society and religion- Society and religion have an interconnected relationship. Talking about Swami Vivekananda, he brought this connection into his preaching. He emphasized the practical application of spirituality for societal progress and it make his philosophy more useful, attractive as well:

“But the most distinctive feature of Swami Vivekananda’s teaching is that he applied his philosophic principles to the affairs of everyday life. He laid emphasis on the fact that we shall seek salvation, no so much in the traditional way, by renouncing the world and taking to the life of a recluse, as by serving the God in man.”¹³

Vivekananda believed in Seva (selfless service) as a means to manifest divine love and foster the well-being of society. He saw society as the field for practicing religious principles. His concept of true religion is the religion that serves humanity and works for the betterment for all. He stressed that spiritual growth is inseparable from one’s duty to society. He eagerly thought and worked for a just society by minimizing the discrimination availing in society and trying to strengthen the mass and bring them into the mainstream:

“Only one idea was burning in my brain – to start the machine for elevating the Indian masses– and that I have succeeded in doing to a certain extent.”¹⁴

Vivekananda believed that religion should not remain theoretical but must address the issues of why people are downtrodden, such as poverty, inequality, ignorance, etc. According to him, religion must evolve to meet the changing needs of society and focus on practical spirituality. He urged the empowerment of marginalized groups and saw spiritual values as the foundation for a just and equitable society.

While religion shapes society, at the same time, society also influences how religion should be practiced and understood. Social conditions, education, culture, economy, and politics also affect the interpretations and applications of religion and religious thoughts. So, Vivekananda suggested the rational, progressive interpretation of religion, aligned with contemporary thoughts and science and technology. He used spirituality for social reform, called for universal brotherhood, and through the unity of all people of different races, castes, creeds, and religions, understanding the oneness in all and finding and cherishing the divinity within.

Natural assimilation of society and religion in Vivekananda’s concept- Vivekananda envisioned a balanced and unified world where religion and society would serve each other as they are interdependent. Religion provides the ethical framework and spiritual energy for societal transformation, and society serves as the stage for practicing and realizing religious ideals without conflict. Through this assimilation, a balanced system develops where spiritual values guide social progress and societal structures provide a platform for the implementation of true religion.

Vivekananda believed that religion is the spiritual core of a society, particularly in India, which influences the values, ethics, culture, and the complete lifestyle of the whole race. So, the customs, traditions, institutions, and others follow the ideal of religion. And for that, religion should show the path with its compassionate attitude, and that can build a great society, a great world where social justice, truth, equality, equity, and love for every being will be practiced.

13. Majumdar, Swami Vivekananda, p- 97-98

14. CWSV, v. – 5, p.- 129

Religion should adapt and exercise according to social and societal changes and need to reinterpret according to time and space while preserving its core spiritual truth and vice versa. This mutual adaptation and evolution can ensure a natural assimilation where society will be deeply rooted in general ethics and values. In this better and balanced society, religion will be relevant day by day.

This religion is not something different or new from the existing religions, but the essence of every religion practiced in the society. To exercise this, he propagated for a true religion, an eternal religion:

“...the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion... One Infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways.”¹⁵

So, he envisioned a universal religion that could transcend sectarianism and be driven by universal truths. To foster global harmony and inclusiveness, society should follow the common spiritual ground of religions, which should be practiced in our lives. For the implementation of religion and its value in daily life, Vivekananda advocated for the ‘Practical Vedanta’, an applied form of ancient Advaita Vedanta philosophy, which shows the oneness in all beings. That practical practice of his philosophy (religion) endeavours to awaken the divinity within and encourage every person to love and serve humanity - “All hatred is killing the “Self by the self”, therefore love is the law of life.”¹⁶

His focus on the empowerment of masses through education and strength is the example of organic integration of society and religion. he promoted education that can combine material and spiritual knowledge, enabling humans to understand the socio-natural causation and its impact with having a proper ethical ground that will foster fearlessness and self-reliance, which in turn, strengthen the society. By absorbing science and technology, Indians should develop their material betterment and can serve the whole world by the spiritual knowledge that will create a balanced world for all- it was Vivekananda’s vision.

He propagated individual to serve the society by different means such as Karma Yoga for the betterment of self and other, service to humanity as worship, self-reliance and nationalism,

When it comes to the concept of nationalism, spiritual nationalism is one of the basic contributions of Swami Vivekananda. He encouraged individuals to serve society by different means. Nationalism is one of these. Vivekananda’s nationalism is derived by very concept of spirituality. “In the well-being of one’s own nation is one’s own well-being.”¹⁷- was his key concept on nationalism. His nationalism was well fabricated with spirituality then gave strength and courage to Indians and motivated the youth for their own right and prestige.

“... he put the organized and devoted service to the masses for their all-round regeneration in intellectual, religious, moral, and material conditions, not as a political programme, but on a religious basis as a means of salvation to every individual in accordance with the neo-vedanta or practical Vedanta preached by him.”¹⁸

Religion is not an isolated domain but rather the very soul of society- it is the teaching of Vivekananda. His vision of an organically integrated society with spiritual realization and social upliftment works together to

15. CWSV, vol- 4, p- 175

16. CWSV, v. – 7, p- 30

17. Daily Inspiration, P- 327

18. Majumdar, p- 100-101

walk faster, ensuring individual enlightenment and collective progress. His synthesis of spirituality and action led the society to build a harmonious and progressive place where life will be free by the service for each other and realization of one's own original nature.

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