INTRODUCTION

Philosophy plays an important role not only in the intellectual life of man, but also in various aspects of his personal as well as social life. Various aspects of the social life of man in a philosophical background can be put under the label of social philosophy. It is generally believed that social philosophy is a new branch of study that emerged recently. But the concept of social philosophy had been there in the early period of human civilization. It enquires into the relationship between the individual and his society and harmonizes personal life with social life through which man can realize the true nature of his self. It also helps to realize social unity by attenuating friction between the individual and society, thus making for the cohesion and betterment of society.

Social philosophy can also be regarded as the philosophy of human values. The dynamic nature of human society causes the existing social mores and concepts to wither away with the emergence of new social developments in the course of time. Though there may be such changing attitudes towards the existing social concepts, the unchanging value system which is the part and parcel of the culture and civilization of each society should be preserved in the social life of man for retaining the cultural identity of society. Usually individual’s personal interest may clash with the existing social order, customs and manners. But, while leading a social life, man should cultivate social values and lead his life in a socially acceptable manner for the growth
and promotion of a stable society. Social philosophy helps the individual to realize the social nature of this value system and assess social ideas by the standard of social values.

The beginning of social thought in India can be traced from ancient scriptures like Srutis and Smritis. The social philosophy in India had originated as the product of the reflective thinking of the ancient Indian seers for bringing about qualitative improvement in the social life of man and so it touches both metaphysical and social dimensions of human life. “Hindu literature abounds in varied approaches and manifold methods of grasping the ultimate reality and of comprehending its true nature. The social philosopher attempts to understand the unity underlying the apparent diversity by seeking continuity of the present with the past in which it is rooted, and its projection into future.” ¹ They interconnected all social and cultural values of society with Spirituality, which they regarded as the unique feature of Indian social thought.

The value system in India emphasizes the need of a society for the material as well as spiritual development of the individual. It regarded ‘Dharma’, ‘Artha’, ‘Kama’ and ‘Moksha’ as the four Eternal Values or ‘Parama Purusharthas’ in the life of man for his spiritual as well as social progress. Among these four eternal values, ‘Dharma’ is regarded as the supreme social value in the life of man. The ancient Indian seers had distinguished between two aspects of
dharma- ‘Varna dharma’ which is based on the social status of the individual and ‘Asrama dharma’ which is based on various stages of spiritual evolution in his social life. These two modes of dharma had been regarded as the determining factors of the social life of man in Indian society.

The social thoughts in India had passed through different stages in its history. It is a great task to review the growth and development of social thoughts in India due to its complex nature. The Vedas and allied scriptures reveal a social life based on a value-system informed with a spiritually inspired humanism called Dharma. It is not the diktat of an autocratic extra cosmic God but the Cosmic law that upholds society. These scriptures show the social stratification that prevailed in ancient Indian society based on varnas or classes and a society functions as a well co-ordinated single unit. The later literatures give us a clear picture on the gradual emergence of the supremacy of the priestly class in the post-Vedic Indian society which had lowered the social, economic and religious status of the lower classes and women. From this it can be assumed that the hierarchy of the priestly classes had led to the emergence of social determinism, economic domination and caste discrimination in the post-Vedic Indian society which had weakened its spiritual strength.

The emergence of various schools of social thinkers in India in the later period had laid the foundations for establishing a new value system against
the priestly hierarchy prevalent in society and succeeded in bringing about some radical changes in the life of the common masses. *Lokayata (Charvaka)* was one such school that had formulated a social philosophy which is hedonistic and naturalistic in outlook. By rejecting the existing customs and manners prescribed by priestly hierarchy, it had captured the minds of the oppressed sections of society. But it could not formulate a social philosophy acceptable to the common masses due to its extreme attitude towards the social life of the people. There also appeared against priestly hierarchy certain spiritual revolts like Jainism and Buddhism which stood against the social determinism of the priestly classes and tried to open a way for spiritual salvation for the common masses. In fact, Jainism and Buddhism had a positive impact in the social life of the common masses during that period.

The priestly classes were against the reflective and dialectical thoughts of the revolutionary thinkers of these schools. They wanted to bring about a revival of their hierarchy in Indian society and regained their lost power during the period of Guptas and Rajputs in the middle age of India’s history. The emergence of innumerable castes and sub castes and the rigidity of the social and moral codes prevailed among the lower strata of society during the period had proved a hindrance to the social progress of the country.

Different cultures brought by Islam and Europeans into India during the later period had effected some changes in Indian culture. The Western thoughts
and culture which were reflected in the socio-religious life of the people with the establishment of the British rule in India had weakened the spiritual and socio-cultural foundation of Indian society and disturbed the rich Indian value system, hindering the overall development of society. Keeping this in mind, social thinkers in India have suggested measures to raise the social, political, economic and spiritual status of the weaker sections of society. Many socio-religious reform movements launched by different social thinkers and organizations were emerged in improving social conditions without losing sight of the essential spiritual ideals that India had always cherished. Contribution of the 19th century patriotic monk Swami Vivekananda attains great significance in this context.

Vivekananda was probably the foremost among the 19th century Indian thinkers who had taken earnest efforts to spread the glory of the cultural heritage of India across the globe, by dedicating himself to reviving the country’s innate culture and heritage. After the demise of his Master, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Narendra, who later became Swami Vivekananda, had travelled the length and breadth of the country as a wandering monk in order to fulfill his Master’s mission which was nothing but the `spiritual salvation of the country through service of man. During this journey, he got the opportunity to mingle with people belonging to different classes, creeds and sex and also to observe many undesirable social evils like caste discrimination, superstition, atrocities towards women and above all decline
of material prosperity. Swami Vivekananda has decided to embark on a mission to find out some concrete measures for the upliftment of the neglected and the oppressed sections of society. With his scientific, logical, dynamic and humanitarian social thoughts rooted in spirituality, he also tried to bind mankind with the thread of divinity leading them towards realization of Universal Oneness.

He was well aware of the fact that the spiritual eminence which India had lost can be re-established only by inculcating spiritual, moral and cultural values in the young generation through the medium of education. His humanistic socio-religious philosophy, neo-Vedantic theory and educational philosophy is fundamentally aimed at inculcating spirituality in the modern generation which meant directing the modern youth towards exploring the dynamic, spiritual potential in themselves.

The Ideal of Womanhood had great relevance in the social philosophy of Vivekananda. Like any other philosopher of India, he fervently believed that women are the custodians of the spiritual tradition and cultural heritage of the nation and so they should be honoured and given greater honour than the other sex. He falls in with the view of the ancient Smriti writer Manu that “wherever women are dishonoured, there all acts turn fruitless”. But he is not in for blindly following all the dictates of tradition if they hamper the growth of women, her mind and freedom. His approach was both traditional and
modern, which advocated the cultivation of a chaste, educated and dynamic woman who can guide the family and society on the path of truth and virtue. Woman of his conception was the very embodiment of all the noble aspects, ‘Sakti’ or strength derivative of chastity, divinity, dynamism and all that are womanly. Nothing can be more potent than the sublimated womanhood, he fervently believed. Activating women in various faculties of national life could take society a long way in its onward march to fulfilment. Hence he had his rousing call given to the renascent India to uplift and empower her women folk. His own efforts to this end were of great significance. His initiation of women into monastic life, propagation of female education and his pugnacity against many of the social ills against them prevalent in his times constituted a glorious chapter in the history of Indian social philosophy and movement for the uplift of women.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In India, gender issues have gained unprecedented relevance in modern times. The emergence of new theories of feminism has added novel dimensions to them. Modern feminist movements which often tend to over reach themselves, seek to promote the image of woman in imitation of its male counterpart. Most of them adopt western assumptions and constructs in their vision of women and woman empowerment. Taking the European paradigms and parameters as models, these advocates of new feminism call upon the
Indian women to fall in line with the western social ideas as the only way to become progressive. These self-styled spokesmen of modernity are quite uninformed about the essentials of traditional Indian sociological thought.

Any sociological criticism will be inadequate if it restricts itself only to the level of phenomena and does not pay due attention to their conceptual foundations. An unfortunate slapdash into the western style of life has badly affected the purity and sublimity attached to the values of womanhood embedded in Indian tradition, bringing into vogue many undesirable social trends. The misunderstanding that what is western is modern and the consequent westernization in the name of modernization or globalization would only destroy the sublimities of the social structure India has been preserving down the centuries.

Considering these facts, the study had stressed the need to develop an Indian Theory of Feminism which could meet the needs and aspirations of modern Indian women. The study also tries to present practically relevant reform measures advocated by Swami Vivekananda which could help the modern Indian feminist thinkers in formulating such an Indian theory of feminism.

**OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The study of the social philosophy of Swami Vivekananda with his idea of womanhood as thrust area can lead to some practical suggestions which can give a healthy reorientation to our approach to the many peculiar problems
plaguing the Indian woman. It also explores Swami’s contributions to Indian society and also the social philosophy as a whole.

**METHODOLOGY**

The methodology falls in line with historical analysis. It seeks to understand the status accorded to women in ancient Indian lore, and how it gave rise to a well balanced society. For this purpose the Dharmasastras are interpreted. Swami Vivekananda’s approach to the Indian woman’s problems, rooted firmly in India’s classical culture, are examined. It is shown how the Swami’s views can act as a connective to modern feminist ideologies. The paper aims at a balanced approach in woman studies, which may be helpful for developing an Indian feminist ideology that will meet the demands of the times.

**REFERENCE**