INDIAN RENAISSANCE - A HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

1.1. General Background

A brief analysis of the conditions of the period before Indian Renaissance reveals the fact that it was passing through a socio-cultural and philosophical crisis of grave consequence, especially with the western invasion. It is regarded as really a period of darkness in which the spirit of Indian heritage and culture was threatened with destruction by the transgression of western ideas and values. Under the western influence, the young generation questioned all traditional beliefs, conduct and character, and glorified everything western. They developed an attitude of contempt and disregard towards the great spiritual and cultural traditions of our country. Religion as revelation or dogmas or superstitions had not appealed to the believer in science. The foundation of Ancient Indian religious tradition was Varnasramadharma. The four-fold order of the Hindu society includes Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyās, Vaisyas, and Śūdras. The Brāhmaṇas, the sole intermediary between God and individual, enjoyed the highest status in the hierarchical system of castes and the monopoly over the study and interpretation of Hindu scriptures and sacred texts. Religion came under
the complete domination of the corrupt priestly class who tried to keep the
downtrodden lower classes in ignorance and with false hopes of rewarding
after-life. The lower classes were always subjected to humiliation and
exploitation by the higher classes. Hinduism was in a moribund state. It
was characterized either by extreme asceticism or by excessive ritualism.
The real spirit behind the religion was always overshadowed by the evil
practices. The social evils like child marriage, untouchability, sati, general
degradation of women and the division of people into endless castes and
sub-castes weakened the whole human society. Bigotry, intolerance, mass
ignorance and communal rivalry shattered the entire structure of the
country, as a result, mutual hatred and discontent sustained in the social life
of the individual. In the beginning, the British Government was very
cautious not to upset the social traditions of India. They adopted the policy
of non-interference in social affairs, simultaneously the Christian
missionaries propagated their religion against the Hindu religious spirit and
social order of the society. They not only criticized and defamed Hinduism,
but also tried to convert people in large number into their fold by various
means. Referring to this situation, D. S. Sharma observes: " the zealous
missionaries.... never failed to point their finger of scorn at our religious and
social institutions."1 Religious reformation became necessary at this time
because the social and cultural development of the individual was mainly based on the religious principles.

1.2. **Origin and Development of the Indian Renaissance movements**

Indian Renaissance movement originated in Bengal during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This period is generally considered as the dawn of a golden era in the history of India because of the presence of a galaxy of great men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Dayananda Saraswathi, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Vivekananda. They were born in response to the compulsions of extra ordinary circumstances of the times and therefore a historical necessity.

The main objective of Indian Renaissance movement was to face the challenge posed by the importation of western ideas and values on Indian culture and social outlook. It has contributed to the revival and restoration of lost individuality, the re-construction of faith in man in the light of secularized view of life. It tried to modernize Hinduism by discarding the irrational rituals, false doctrines, and monopolistic priest craft. The movement has universal rather than sectarian outlook. The aim was the emancipation of the whole humanity from worldly miseries and the radical divine transformation of life.
The pioneers of Indian Renaissance, being conscious of the social, political and religious degradation of Indian culture, are forced to interpret the inestimable value of the glorious Indian tradition and its practical significance in daily life. Respecting the religious sentiment of the people, they declared that they were not ready to reject the authority of the scriptures. They wanted to reinstate Vedānta in a correct way in the light of scientific knowledge and changed conditions in order to achieve harmony between present and past and to meet the new requirements of the modern era. Under the influence of western education they became conscious of individual freedom and a sense of human dignity. Inspired by the ideas and values, both religious and secular, they reacted against the social evils in life. Collecting evidences from classical Sanskrit texts, they claimed that these practices of Hindu society were only later developments and that they had no sanction of the śāstrās. They spread a new light of renaissance in all spheres of life— in politics, religion, literature, education, industries and social reorganization, which paved the way for removing the darkness of the ages.

The advancement of English education and scientific knowledge exercised a fruitful influence in stimulating the process of social renaissance. Meanwhile the Christian missionaries undertook humanitarian works for the welfare of the entire humanity irrespective of caste, creed, age, sex and
the economic and social status. They started educational institutions for educating girls as well as boys belonging to the lower and untouchable castes. The rise of new renaissance caused a wave of reforming activities first in Bengal and then throughout the country.

1.2.1. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Brahmo-Samaj

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the leading figure in the awakening of modern India. He has rightly been described as the father of Indian Renaissance. Deeply devoted to the work of religious and social reform, he founded the Brahmo-Samaj in 1828 as a protest against certain orthodox beliefs, unnecessary rituals and superstitions of Hinduism such as idol worship, polygamy, child marriage, enforced widowhood and social ostracism of those who crossed the black water. The character of Indian resurgence was social and moral rather than political. His greatest contribution was the abolition of sati-system, the cruel practice of burning the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. He justified his views by the light of reason and humanitarian principles. He accepted the Upanishads as his authority and declared the fact that man can realize the spiritual goal of his life by means of meditation of the divine and not by sacrificial rituals. His aim was to promote monotheistic worship and adoration of the One Eternal Immutable God with the abolition of cast
consciousness and recognition of equality of women. No doubt, that the Brahmo-Samaj is firmly rooted in the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Brahma-Sūrās. But at the same time, it is ready to break with the tradition. As a universalist, he stands for the solidarity of religions. He advocated a rational approach to religions based on the comparative study of the scriptures of other religions with a view to discover the fundamental unity of all religions. He showed how the essential values of the great Indian heritage were to be preserved and how the non-essentials were to be discarded. His conclusion is that there are successive stages of growth and degeneration of each particular religion and consequently falsehood is common to all religion without distinction. He has adopted the process of elimination of the crude stages of each religion, which is essential for the survival of religions and for the social progress. According to him, the Universal Religion can be formed by the assimilation of the common truths of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and other faiths. The creed he has formed is called Neo-Theo-philanthropy, a new love of God and Man.

1.2.2. Keshab Chandra Sen and New Brahmoism

New Brahmoism is a movement started by a new set of radicals from the fold of Brahmoism under the leadership of Brahmananda Keshab Chandra Sen with the aim to modernize the Hindu society. The new group
championed not only female education, widow remarriage, temperance and monogamy but also inter-caste marriage implying formal renunciation of caste and other unorthodox practices. According to him, every religion as represented by its central essence is true but it does not contain the whole truth, which has to be viewed only from an eclectic standpoint. Influenced by the spirit of Christianity, he introduced Christian rituals of baptism and western methods in his New Brahmoism, as a result, he alienated himself from the main Samaj and from the Hindu society. There is a popular saying that this “Brahmoism is Christianity minus Christ.”2 He has selected from each religion what he considered its essence, both theoretical and practical. His religion of The New Dispensation is based on the collation of all these partial truths.

1.2.3. Dayananda Saraswathi and Arya Samaj

The life and mission of Dayananda Saraswathi was socio-religious in nature. He founded Arya Samaj in 1875 with the main aim to reform the Hindu society by improving the status of women by education and widow remarriage. “The Arya Samaj”, says Jawaharlal Nehru, “was a reaction to Islam and Christianity, particularly the former. It was a crusading and reforming movement from within as well as a defensive organization for protection against external attacks.”3 Realizing the necessity of the
reformation of Hindu religion, he turned back to the Vedas for reforming Hinduism. He interpreted the teachings of Vedas as the sources of true knowledge for all and infallible. He called them as the One Universal Religion that contained the first and last word of God. His inspiring personality with his burning zeal for truth and reason shook the whole nation from its dogmatic slumber. As a revivalist, he preached Unity of God-head and tried to restore the monotheism of the Vedic religion in place of the multiplicity of Gods and Goddesses. At the same time, he denounced many prevalent degenerated practices like idol worship, blind superstition, hypocrisy and casteism, which are not in conformity with the Vedic precepts. He encouraged proselytization into Hinduism and thus became a defender of everything Hindu, against what it considered as the encroachments of other faiths. According to Dayananda Saraswathi, truth, acquisition of rational knowledge, and the performance of righteous deeds are the means to achieve at salvation, the final goal of life. The process of reconstruction could be possible only through the revival of the Vedic culture and civilization. He emphasized Truth and Self-sacrifice as the basis of his humanism. He wrote a book called, 'Satyārtha Prakāsha' in 1875. It is known as the Bible of the Arya Samaj. It contains a criticism of Islam, Christianity, Jainism and Buddhism, and seeks to prove the superiority of Vedic Hinduism to all other religions. Through this book, he made an
attempt to show that other religions had their shortcomings and that the Vedic religion advocated a scheme of the division of society into four classes based on character and not on birth. Truth, self-sacrifice, knowledge of the Vedas and cleanliness are the qualities that could help a sudra to enter into a higher class. Likewise, untruth, ignorance of the Vedas and uncleanliness could degrade a person belonging to a higher class to a lower class. He declared that there is an inherent right for all people to study the Vedas. Instead of trying to justify the Hindu faith from the criticism of Christian and Muslim missionaries, he obliged them to defend their own position. He stressed the need of understanding the real spirit of religion against its conflicting interpretations.

1.2.4. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Neo-Vedānta

The universal and synthetic attitude to religion seems to be developed since the advent of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, one of the greatest saints of modern India. He has a unique personality with full divine manifestation. He derived wisdom neither from any book or scripture, nor from any prophet, but directly from the eternal fountainhead of all knowledge and wisdom. He is revered and recognized by all as the prophet of universalism and harmony of religions. In his view, realization of God is considered to be the ultimate goal of human life. He experienced God as the
nameless, formless, transcendental Absolute and that the entire diversity of appearance that we call nature was nothing but a manifestation of the same Impersonal God. He realized through a multitude of spiritual visions that the same Impersonal God does appear as Personal God before the pure minds of earnest devotees. Standing on the basis of his rich and varied spiritual experience, he declared that all creeds, Hindu, Islamic, Christian or of any other denomination, based on monism, qualified monism or dualism, are so many distinct paths leading to the same goal, namely the realization of God. He states as follows: "God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope." He approached different religions not as a scholar but as a devotee. By realizing the great truths of different religions, he demonstrated in practice that there is nothing but unity and that all men are the children of the same Reality whether it is called by different names. His faith in the fundamental realization of unity that exists among religions has universal importance. His spirit of finding out unity in the world of diversity is clearly evident in his own words: "Exactly as water can exist in a liquid, solid and invisible form." again, "As water is called by different names, in different languages, so different religions called God by different names Hari, Siva, Allah, Christ etc., but all denote the same God." He would be a Hindu with the Hindu, a
Muslim with the Muslim, and a Christian with the Christian in order to experience the whole truth of each religion. Religions do not consist in knowing but in doing and following it constantly. Ramakrishna explains this fact with an illustration that “Some have heard of milk, others have seen it, still others have tasted it. But the point is to absorb it in our blood and bones and to make it a part of the body.”6 They are only the means for the enlightenment and glorification of all mankind. His philosophical and religious convictions are found in his sermons. Mahatma Gandhi expresses the essential practical character of Ramakrishna’s thought and his personal vision of Truth as follows: “The story of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa’s life is a story of religion in practice...His sayings are pages from the Book of Life.”7

Vivekananda can be understood only in the light of the realizations of his Master, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. Unlike other great prophets of religions, he did not create a new religion of his own. According to him, each religion gives ample scope and opportunity to realize God. Therefore conversion from one religion to another is not a means to it. Emphasizing the futility of changing one’s own religion Ramakrishna says: “Every man should follow his own religion. A Christian should follow Christianity; a Mohammedan should follow Mohammedanism and so on. For the Hindus the ancient path, the path of the Aryan Rishis, is the
best." He re-established the ancient truths of Hinduism in his own experience and at the same time believed that all religions are true.

1.3. Vivekananda's Life and Mission

In the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Infinite Reality is described to be incarnated from age to age when evil is rampant and righteousness is in danger of extinction. He comes down to earth in human form in order to re-establish truth and spiritual order. The birth of Vivekananda, like his Master Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, is probably the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to mankind. Vivekananda maintains that all the great prophets of the world religions as the incarnations of Infinite God and are the "fairest flowers of human life."

Narendranath Dutta, or Swami Vivekananda as he became known to the world later, was born into a well-to-do Kshatriya family of Calcutta on Monday, January 12, 1863 as the son of a well-known lawyer, Vishwanath Dutta, and a very intelligent and pious lady, Bhuvaneshwari Devi. His father often had scholarly discussions with his clients and friends on politics, religion and society. He would allow Narendranath to join in these discussions and to express his views on the topics under discussion, and even to suggest arguments in support of his stand. Naren learnt the two great Indian Epics, the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata, and Purāṇas from
his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi. He also inherited her memory among other good qualities and in fact, owed much to her as she wove the pattern of his divine life. He acquired all-round in sports, namely, boxing and wrestling, swimming and riding and a mastery of philosophy and poetry. Naren's boyhood was largely like that of any high-spirited, dynamic and healthy young boy, who showed immense curiosity about the world around him. Unlike other boys of his age, he practiced meditation. This power to concentrate gave him prodigious memory and the capacity for reading and remembrance. About his memory and grasping power he himself says: "I could understand an author without reading every line of his book...I could follow the whole trend of a writer's argument by merely reading a few lines, though the author himself tried to explain the subject in five or more pages." 11

As a student of philosophy, the question of faith in God very much haunted his mind. He looked to persons who could say that they had seen God, but found none. He wanted to meet a person who could talk about God with the authority of personal experience of God. In 1881, however, he happened to meet with Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and asked him straight away if he had seen God. He said he had, and if Naren so wished, he could even show God to him. His question was satisfactorily answered for the first time and from that moment he realized the fact that
Ramakrishna was an extra-ordinary man. Ramakrishna had, from the very first meeting, found in Naren all those qualities, which were necessary to spread his message all over the world. Gradually he led him into the spiritual realm by easy stages and at last to the highest realm of inward experience. Three days before his death, he had handed over all his spiritual wealth to Naren and reminded him that he was born to accomplish great things in the world.

After the death of his master on 16th August 1886, Naren took up the leadership of the great mission, which the master had assigned for him in his mind. He traveled all over India as a Parivrajaka, from Himalayas to Cape Comorin, in order to know the cultural, social and economic conditions of India. He impressed the people by his way of life, genuine love and sympathy for all. Through it he obtained the direct experience of the misery of the downtrodden masses, dreadful social injustice, poverty and social backwardness of the people of India. He acquired the unique knowledge of “the great Book of Life revealed to him what all the books in the libraries could not have done.” He realized the great truth that it is futile to preach religion among the poor without trying to remove their poverty and their sufferings. He also realized the cultural and spiritual wealth, traditional strength and assimilative power of India.
The most outstanding mission in his life is to revitalize Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma, the religion developed out of the Vedas and the Upanishads. He considers the term 'Hinduism' in its wider sense, as a religion that leads mankind to the path of everlasting peace, love, and freedom. Hinduism is not a mere religion or a creed with superstitious practices. It is mainly concerned with certain fundamental spiritual laws for the righteous conduct of human beings in all spheres of activity. It is a way of life, a safe guideline for practical life. Being conscious of the spiritual poverty of the west and the neglect of material factors by the East, his aim was to reveal the universality of Hinduism not only to the East but also to the West. It is clear when he declares: "I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East." It is to bind the people together to exchange ideas and enrich their respective cultures with new knowledge. The spiritual resurgence of the whole mankind is the scope of his message.

Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Matt and Mission in 1896 to propagate the teaching of his Master Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. It was based on the dictum 'Ātmanomokṣārtham Jagaddhitāyaça', for the salvation of one's own soul and the welfare of the world. He was deeply influenced by his Master Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, which culminated in the spiritual
transformation of his entire personality and marked out a turning point in his life. He describes this experience as follows: "The touch at once gave rise to a novel experience within me. With my eyes open I saw that the walls, and every thing in the room, whirled rapidly and vanished into naught, and the whole universe together with my individuality was about to merge in an all-encompassing mysterious void!" His central ideas spring from the influence of Ramakrishna paramahamsa. In the words of Swami Nikhilananda: "It was his Master who taught him the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of the God-head, the unity of existence and one more thing—that is universality or harmony of all religions." He was also influenced and inspired by the cultural and human values preserved in the scriptures of the three main religions, namely, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. He emphasized that the realization of human values as the central principle of all religions. His life and teaching may be described as a source of inspiration and stimulus for the contemporary modern thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru and Radhakrishnan.

He is generally regarded as a great soul, a spiritual luminary of a very high order. He was a man of great philosophical wisdom and social action, "who put his heart and soul into the words he uttered." Though he was deeply rooted in the past, he was fully conscious of the social, economic
and political conditions of his own age. He practiced what he preached, Vedānta, with unshakable conviction and missionary zeal. He devoted his time to built the gulf between the East and the West, the ancient tradition of monasticism and the western tradition of materialism, by adopting a synthetic approach. He combined the Ancient Indian spiritualism with the intense practical philosophy of social service in order to create a new order suited to the needs of modern man. He tried hard to root out poverty, class privileges, weaknesses, untouchability and other social evils of life with the aim to establish a casteless, classless society. For him, the idea of privilege is an obstruction to the realization of the spiritual oneness in mankind. He declares as follows: "We must give up the idea of privilege, then will religion come. Before that there is no religion at all." He revolutionized traditional Vedānta in order to liberate the noble ideas in it from the clutches of few, who monopolized it. He reconstructed it in a simple, concrete and practical form, which helped the common masses to know the secret of the sacred texts. For centuries, Karma-sannyāsa or complete renunciation with its implication that jnana alone is the means of Moksha or Self-realization, which is possible only for a few enlightened ones. Vivekananda clearly indicates the harmony between the fourfold ways of spiritual disciplines in action, love, knowledge, and meditation. All these paths are considered as necessary steps to Moksha at different stages of spiritual evolution. He has
also stressed the importance of the material values as well as personal, social and moral values of mundane world for the welfare of the all mankind. For him, religion is an integral and all-comprehensive philosophy of life and existence. It takes the whole man into consideration with all his physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual aspects. The purpose of human life and religion is one and the same. It is the higher evolution of man and not stagnation in animality. Here, human development and moksha are inseparably related to each other.

Though his teaching is essentially spiritualistic, its foundation, on the other hand, is rationalistic. His exhortation is categorical in nature. It is evident when he asserts: "Begin with disbelief. Analyze, test, prove everything, and then take it."18 There is no question of any blind belief, superstitions, and performance of rituals based on the authority of persons and scriptures. Therefore, it is acceptable even to the modern scientific man. He examines the nature of Reality or Truth, God, nature, and man in order to establish the harmonious relationship between them. He interprets facts both from the rational and supra rational level of existence. The divine-human relationship is mystical because it is the experience of the whole man to the whole Reality. It is a matter of immediate experience or direct intuition in which he turns inwards and loses himself in Reality. Vivekananda describes it as follows: "It is a vision, an inspiration, a plunge
into the unknown and unknowable, making the unknowable more than known, for it can never be 'known'.

It is the transformation of one's personality into the plane of Universal Spirit. There is an element of mystic trance, which is universal in character in the religious urge of man, but the presence of this element does not make his religion unscientific. His mission is to reconcile faith with reason by separating all irrational elements from religion. In the words of Romain Rolland: "He of all modern men achieved the highest equilibrium between the diverse forces of thought, and was one of the first to sign a treaty of peace between the two forces eternally warring within us, the forces of reason and of faith." Being conscious of the attitude of the modern mind, he allows persons to use their reasoning faculties and conceive God in the light of their thinking.

According to Vivekananda, the word 'faith' in its wider sense, means faith in oneself. It is faith in the inherent infinite potentialities within man. This faith in oneself is considered as the first essential pre-requisite for the faith in God. He declares as follows: "The great thing is to have faith in oneself, even before faith in God; but the difficulty seems to be that we are losing faith in ourselves day by day." This faith in God is possible only with the realization of God within us or with the knowledge of the real Spirit. Wherever there is true faith, there is right knowledge, which enables one to reduce the distance between man and man, man and nature, and finally
even between God and man. Faith in oneself indicates faith in all because all are one and the same. He has quoted the Upanishadic description of men as "Children of immortal bliss." It implies the highest expression of the nature of man. It is significant since it is sufficient to inculcate self-confidence and self-respect in man. This faith in oneself forms the foundation of his religious philosophy. It is also an inevitable condition for achieving the social, economic and political aspirations of humanity.

He has interpreted social, economic and political ideals in terms of spiritualism. Since the man is divine in nature, there is scope for freedom and equality. Freedom signifies selfless service, the spirit of social equality. The freedom in the social, economic and political spheres are indispensable for the spiritual liberation of man. It also promotes harmony and mutual goodwill. His religion is consistent with the three fundamental democratic values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Liberty means freedom, the unlimited freedom of the spirit from bondage. Equality is the logical corollary of the idea that there is underlying oneness and sameness in all. Fraternity is the manifestation of the Universal Brotherhood in the world.

Another outstanding mission in his life is Man-making, the regeneration of man as man through a silent spiritual revolution in the world at large. It is based on the fundamental idea that there is divinity in
man and the synthetic vision of the immense potentialities inherent in the human soul. The practical realization of this divinity is religion, which signifies spiritual freedom. He declares his ideal as follows: “To preach unto mankind their divinity and how to make it manifest in every movement of life.” In the light of this truth, Vivekananda aimed to bring about a radical psychological and spiritual transformation in man.

1.4. Vivekananda's Teaching - Characteristic Features

The entire teaching of Vivekananda is based on the central truth of Vedanta, the realization of the essential identity between Brahman and Atman. The meaning is that the individual consciousness or atman and the Universal Consciousness or Brahman is basically one and the same. The similar idea is embodied in the Mahavākyas - Aham Brahma Āsmi, Tat Tvam Asi, Sarvam Khalu idam Brahma etc. All these assertions indicate the message of the unity of macrocosm and microcosm. Brahman, the first principle of universe, is known through atman, the inner self of man. The keynote of his teaching is the reconciliation of the two worlds, the inner spiritual world and the outer external world into one. He stresses strongly the idea of spiritual oneness of whole existence, that is to say, the idea of non-duality (Advaita).
The secret of the charm and power of the Universal Religion lies in the non-dual philosophy of oneness of all existence. Its origin can be traced back to the most Ancient Rig Vedic utterance: "Ekam sad vīrā bahudhā vadanti."²⁴ (The Supreme Being is One learned men call it by different names). It implies the glorious vision of the One in the many. Truth is one, but it is manifested many forms by more who have experienced it. Though the soul of religions is one, it is expressed in multitude forms. Therefore, it is not a new phenomenon. It is as old as the Vedas and Upanishads, the great undying spiritual heritage of India. It is the reconstruction and re-establishment of the truth contained in the scriptural texts for the universal application of humanity.

A careful analysis reveals the fact that it is the combination of two terms, 'universal' and 'religion'. In philosophy, the term 'universal' is used in contrast with 'particular'. It is applied to those underlying abstract properties common to all the particulars of a certain class or kind. Moral and social values such as humanity, virtue, and justice are all universals in this sense. They are not limited to any particular space and time and are therefore indivisible, unchangeable and immortal. Particulars are concrete individuals or objects of reference with a particular position in space and time. For Heraclitus, particulars are real since he accepts change or momentariness of this universe. They are observed as many, changeable
and mortal. Plato ascribes real existence to the universals while particulars are unreal. But he does not mention the exact relation of universals to particular sensible things. For Aristotle, the universal exists only in the individual thing and is just its essential or intelligible character.

Vivekananda used the term 'universal' to denote the universality of the Ultimate Reality or Truth or to emphasize its all-inclusive and dynamic character. Religion stands for that which is 'Universal' which includes all the particulars. At the same time it remains free from the association of all the particulars. Reality is all-inclusive since it includes all and excludes nothing from it. It explains the particular through the general and moves on to the universal. Whatever exists in this earth, and whatever we discover in the future are also included in it. It is dynamic, active and self-manifesting which expresses itself in its continuous manifestation in several directions. It is the source of all cosmic existence and is the One Reality. It is not confined to any particular nation or race or individual or group or sect or tribe. It is the fundamental principle of unity of existence, which contains within it the harmony of all religious faiths and philosophies of the world.

The striking feature of his religion is that it cannot be identified with mere idol worship and blind adherence to rites, dogmas, myths and
ceremonial practices. He states that there is no need to criticize the different form of religions since they all belong to the same Universal Truth. According to him, the different forms of religious faiths and practices, from the lowest fetishism to the highest philosophy of absolutism are nothing but the various efforts of the human mind to realize the Truth. They are merely the methods to protect the soul in its right path. He describes it as follows: "A sapling must be hedged about for protection, but when it becomes a tree, a hedge would be a hindrance." 25 It indicates that the belief in rites and ceremonies is a stumbling block in the path of spiritual freedom.

The supreme knowledge is the knowledge of the Ultimate Truth or Reality, which is superior to any particular partial truths of religions. Each particular religion represents only partial truth, not the whole truth. The contradictory opinions among different religions are due to the insistence on these partial truths. Vivekananda points out that the photographs of a church taken from different angles look differently but represent the same church. Similarly, though the different religions give different descriptions of Truth from different angles, they are all descriptions of the same Truth. Consequently the great religions of the world are not contradictory but supplementary to each other. They are merely the means, but not the end. Truth or Reality is the end in life. According to him, Religion is man's journey from truth to truth, from lower
truth to higher truth. He expresses his viewpoint as follows: "Man is not travelling from error to truth but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth." He believes that the religious urge remained deep-rooted in every human being until a very high level of spiritual unfoldment was reached.

Vivekananda declares that his religion is the search after this Truth. It is beyond the sacred scriptures like Vedas, Bible, and the Koran, the spiritual revelations to the world. These scriptures are written in human languages, which are inadequate to express super sensuous experience. They describe certain spiritual truth, but are not yet the whole Truth, which transcends human comprehension. In the words of Vivekananda: "The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded." The founders, prophets and messengers of all the religions of the world declared that they had an experience of super sensuous state. The realization of this super sensuous experience is the basis of all the religions. The nature of such experience is trans-empirical and trans-rational.

The appearance of Vivekananda on the world scenario at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 may be considered as a landmark as it marked out the turning point not only of inter-religious understanding and universal brotherhood, but also the proper understanding of the true
spirit of religions. It also signified the death-knell of fanaticism, bigotry and sectarianism of all kinds in the name of religion. The New York Herald spoke of Vivekananda as follows: “He is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the parliament of religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation.” Almost all world religions were represented and their respective religious leaders had arrived fully prepared to establish their own credentials and supremacy of their faith and beliefs. The universal Religion of Vivekananda is really a call for unity among great religions. It is not only the synthesis of the elements taken from all the religions of the world, but also the realization of the fact that religions of the world preach the same Truth in different ways. The different religions of the world are different pathways to the common spiritual goal. They are like the pearls strung harmoniously upon God’s necklace. The passage cited by sister Nivedita in this context is significant. "All these are threaded upon Me, as pearls upon a string." It indicates that there is an underlying thread of unity in the form of God that is running through all these religions. Realization of this fact is essential for the smooth running of great religions.

Despite his universal spiritual outlook, he was a humanist in its true sense. His message is not against the material development of the man. But it gives mankind a warning against the threat of excessive materialism. Opposition to material surfeit does not mean neglecting the improvement of
the basic needs of man's life. Such advancement is necessary for the physical and mental development of man, which is an essential preparation for the spiritual evolution. He even crossed the ocean with the hope of getting material aid for the poor and down-trodden brothers and sisters. He argues that there is no use of talking about religion to a starving man. He has expressed his love for the poor in a letter to his friend as follows: "I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth." His religious humanism is based on the realization of the fact that the service to man is service to God itself. Religion is not confined to gods and goddesses, temples, churches and the holy places. It is the creed of the poor, which leads to the identification of humanity with divinity. Human body is the temple in which God dwells irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The living God is not outside, but resides in all beings, both inanimate and animate. It advocates sacrifice of man in favour of every body and everything.

The gospel of Vivekananda proclaims the infinite spiritual dimension of the true nature of man as divine. Human birth is considered as a rare and precious privilege attained because of good deeds performed in several births. It is of great significance as it marks a turning point in the long process of transmigration that a soul undergoes. This world of action provides man the greatest and the finest occasion to become perfect. Every
moment of his time is a gateway to the final goal of timeless freedom. He declares as follows: "The man form is higher than even the angel form, and of all forms it is highest; man is the highest being in creation, because he attains to freedom."\(^{31}\) Man is conscious of his superior status and of the greater possibilities of spiritual development. Every individual, however degraded and fallen he might be, is capable of infinite growth. He never becomes imperfect. The essence of man is changeless spirit. In the words of Vivekananda: "A brute is like the diamond in the dirt and dust-brush the dust off and it is a diamond, just as pure as if the dust had never been on it, and we must admit that every soul is a big diamond."\(^{32}\) Religion is the realization of the inherent divinity of the spirit in man as eternal, everlasting and pure. It teaches man not only to refrain from evil but also to insist on doing well to others. It elevates man to the supreme position of God. Vivekananda describes the task of religion as follows: "Religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man, and man unto God."\(^{33}\) It is the spirit in man that forces him to go beyond his animal nature and to behave like a real man. He is considered as the crown of creation and has the privilege of realizing God immanent in him. He asserts as follows: "Rise, thou effulgent one, rise thou who art always pure, rise thou birth less and deathless, rise almighty and manifest thy true nature . . ."\(^{34}\) It implies the demand to listen to the call of divinity inherent in man.
Another important feature is that his teaching is the source of infinite strength and fearlessness. For Vivekananda, strength is goodness and weakness is sin. True religion emerges out of strength, not from weakness. It saves the soul from the bondage of fear. Fearlessness grants man freedom from all kinds of external and internal enemies. It provides calmness and ineffable peace of mind. The positivistic and constructive force of his teaching is evident in his own words: "Arise, Awake! Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. None is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent, and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you, do not deny Him!" The significant step towards the acquisition of fearlessness is the living faith in God within man. His teaching has the power to fill the mind with boundless energy. It is the illumination of one's own consciousness, which empowers man with a new view of life in a more unified and glorious world.

Lastly, his teaching enables man to attain freedom within himself in order to realize the eternal truth of kinship with the whole world. Man should utilize this freedom to meet the requirements of the social progress. Everyone becomes member of a family and of a society, then of a nation, and finally of Humanity, which is made up of all the nations of the earth. For Vivekananda the whole humanity belongs to one family, 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'. When the whole mankind work together as a global family,
not merely belonging to a particular race, religion or nation, world peace and blissfulness will once again prevail on this earth, which are drenched with the tears of division and conflict. This oneness of humanity is the ultimate goal of his religion.

1.5. The Relevance in Modern Age

Vivekananda gives more importance to the practical teaching of Vedanta because he was convinced of the fact that it could alone be regarded as the Universal Religion as it was more suitable for the modern scientific era. The philosophy of this religion is so simple that there is no difficulty to accept it even for the scientific man. It is rational, scientific and practical in its nature. It satisfies the demands of the modern science in regard to the highest generalization that the explanation of a thing comes from within itself. Brahman is such a concept that has nothing outside of Him. In Taittiriya Upanishad, it is described as that from which these beings are born, that by which when born they live, and that into which when departing they enter.

The necessity of the realization of the fundamental truth of Vedanta in our daily life is widely recognized. The truth of Vedanta is capable of verification not only for the saints and sages living in the caves of forest but also the monarchs and ordinary men, in the laboratory of their
own soul. The liberated souls take their higher births to guide the rest of the humanity on their way to spiritual perfection. The greatness of Vedânta lies in the fact that it is suitable for all mankind in whatever position it is. The door to salvation is equally open to all through the proper practice of yoga. Every one of us can ascend to the higher plane and can experience the truth, which is the ultimate explanation of everything. He declares as follows: "These prophets were not unique; they were men as you or I. They were great yogis. They had gained this super consciousness, and you and I can get the same. They were not peculiar people. The very fact that one man ever reached that state, proves that it is possible for every man to do so. Not only is it possible, but every man must, eventually, get to that state and that is religion."36 It provides a meeting ground for all contradictions in the name of religion. It is the only religion in which the whole superstructure of nonsensicality in the name of religion can be collapsed and disappeared to a great extend. The content of Vedânta is harmonization by manifesting the similarities between the religions of the world. It is broad, liberal and universal in its attitude towards other religions. There will be no distinction in the name of caste, creed or religion. The universal message of Vivekananda is valid and relevant in a world steeped in hatred, violence, suspicion and prejudice.
Man's progress on the spiritual plane is essential to bring about an era of peace and prosperity. Modern man is always searching the truths that govern the physical world for material advancement. He is leading a mechanical social life in which he has no ideal, no freedom and no outlook. He is totally ignorant of the moral and spiritual truth that governs the human behaviour. The realization of the knowledge that this truth is not outside, but is within man enables him to open his eyes with a fresh outlook and to understand things in a new light and spirit.

The Universal Religion of Vivekananda upholds love, peace, religious tolerance, co-operation and goodwill among nations. It describes the universal eternal truths embodied in all the great religions of the world, which constitute an everlasting unity. It is the result of realization of the necessity of harmonizing the essence of Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. It is acceptable to all people irrespective of differences in race, religion, language, customs and traditions. In the religion of Vedanta the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian are all one, the children of the Almighty God. His teaching has the power to transcend the barriers of fanaticism and exclusiveness into a communion of Universal Brotherhood.

The present critical situation of India is mainly due to the spiritual ignorance. There is an urgent demand to bring about spiritual renaissance
all over the world. Vivekananda clearly states that religion is the most suitable way for the awakening of spirituality in man. His universal message is an antidote to the pseudo-religious practices, and superstitions in the name of religion. Religion can be used for the progress and welfare of humanity as well as for the exploitation and destruction of the masses. If it is properly understood and practiced, it could serve as a source of inspiration for human progress. Most of the people talk too much of religion but do not practice it in their daily life. Mere knowledge without practice is futile. There is a need to enter into its spirit and to live with it.
NOTES

2. Ibid., Hinduism Through the Ages (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1955) 68.


18. Ibid., Vol.II., 28.

19. Ibid., Vol.III., 1.


24. Rig Veda, 1.164.46


32. Ibid., Vol.VII, 420.

33. Ibid., Vol.V, 409.

34. Ibid., Vol.II, 337.

35. Ibid., Vol.III, 193.