VIVEKANANDA'S CONCEPT OF EMERGING INDIA

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CHAPTER III

VIVEKANANDA'S CONCEPT OF EMERGING INDIA

The awakening of India in the nineteenth century infused into her people a new life and hope. The foundation for this new spirit of resurgence was laid by Swami Vivekananda the great nationalist, "the prophet and the patriot - monk"\(^1\) of India. Though Swamiji was a spiritual leader, he was a true nationalist, a fire-brand of social revolution. A man of great vision, he believed that freedom or liberation would be the logical consequence of the awakening of the country. In 1890's itself he had envisioned the dawn of a New India (Modern India), how and what it should be.

According to Swamiji, future India would be the proud home not only of the advanced sections of Indian society, but also of its backward sections. As he put it:

Let new India arise . . . out of the peasant's cottage grasping the plough; out of the huts of the fishermen, the cobbler and the sweeper. Let her spring from the grocer's shop, from beside the oven of the fritter seller. Let her emanate from the factory, from

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\(^1\) This epithet well suits him. Vivekananda was endowed with a prophetic vision. A patriot of the first order, he defined what true patriotism was and the new definition of patriotism inspired many contemporary nationalists. He was also a monk who gave a new orientation to Indian asceticism by founding the Ramakrishna Order of Monks.
marts and from markets. Let her emerge from groves and forests, from hills and mountains.²

This concept of emerging India did have a profound impact on the social and political ideology of the freedom struggle.

The writings of Vivekananda clearly indicate that he came to have the vision of New India during his meditation at Kanyakumari. As his biographers have recorded, after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna in 1886, like many other disciples, Vivekananda went over the length and breadth of India as a Parivrajaka or wandering monk. During his travel he met the princes in their palaces and beggars in their huts. His travel was a great educational experience to him, since it enabled him to study the people of India, their very confusing customs, dogmas etc. He was deeply grieved to see the tragic face of real India, the millions of battered, bruised and broken men and women of his country. The travel also did enable him to meditate on the factors behind the degeneration of the country and the way for her regeneration. In fact his life as a wandering monk has immense significance for the reshaping of India's destiny in the modern age.

As recorded by his biographers, at the end of his journey Swamiji sat in meditation at the southern most tip of India, the rock at Kanyakumari. There emerged before his vision the past glory of India, the present degradation and the

future eminence. To quote the words of Swami Vivekananda from a letter written by him after the Parliament of Religions. "... At Cape Comerin sitting in Mother Kumari's temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock, I hit upon a plan".  

He goes on to say that sitting on the last stone of India, he passed into meditation upon the present and future of his country. He sought for the root cause of her downfall and with the vision of a seer he understood "why India had been thrown from the pinnacle of the glory to the depth of degradation". In those moments, he thought not of Bengal, or of Maharashtra or of Punjab but of INDIA and of its very life. The letter further reads that the whole history of India unfolded before his vision and he became identified as it were with the achievements and failures, sorrows and triumphs of his motherland. Her past glory and continued existence through milleniums filled him with inspiration, but her present condition filled him with dismay and dejection. Yet presently future filled him with hope.

An important discovery of Vivekananda was that in spite of diversities, there was a spirit of unity underlying in Indian culture, which the foreign rule was trying to undermine. He saw her greatness and weakness as well, the central evil of which was that the nation had lost its individuality.

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
It has been remarked that it was during his meditation on the rock at Kanyakumari that Swami Vivekananda discovered his mission in life, which was to dedicate himself to the regeneration of India, to reawaken her from her long slumber. And this reawakening was to be the real good not only to herself but also to the whole world as awakened India was to be a complete synthesis of the past and the present, of the East and the West.

For the enlightenment or realization which Swamiji got at Kanyakumari, he has been called the Second Buddha, because he emerged from his meditation with the same determination which impelled Buddha 2500 years ago to preach his great gospel - "for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many - "Bahujana hitaya, bahujana sukhaya". In other words he realized the need of dedicating the vast reservoir of India's spiritual energy to the urgent work of the social, economic, cultural and all-round betterment of the millions of her people. Meditation combined with action resulting in the evolution of a perfect national character i.e., synthesis of spiritual strength with modern scientific and technical efficiency was the need of the hour. There is no doubt that his vision of a reconstructed and revitalized Indian Society was born in those moments of his meditation at Kanyakumari.

INDIA'S DEGRADATION

It has been noted that his parikrama or tour of the country was a great educational experience for him. "Like a medical doctor with gifted clinical eyes
and experience" Swamiji diagnosed the root causes of the ailments from which India was suffering.

Neglect of the Masses

A humanist to the bottom of his heart, Vivekananda attributed the most important reason for India's degradation to the neglect of the masses. He considered neglect of the masses a "national sin". His concern for the poor is revealed in a number of letters written by him from America to the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission in India. In one of these letters he said:

The peasants, the weavers and the rest who constituted the lower classes in India have always been uncared for by the conquerors as well as by the so called upper caste. From time immemorial these classes have been working silently without getting the remuneration for their labours.

He further stated:

The poor, the low, the sinner in India have no friends, no help - they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and

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6 C.W., V, p.152.

7 C.W., VIII, p.538.
lower every day, they feel the blows showered upon them by a
cruel society and they do not know whence the blow comes.\textsuperscript{8}

The egalitarian outlook of Vivekananda and his sympathy for the labouring
classes of India are well revealed here. No other reformer of the period has held
the upper classes responsible for the degradation of the masses as Swamiji did. By
an analytical study of the particular social situation, Swamiji came to the
conclusion that the main trouble in India was the loss of her individuality as a
nation and that the lost individuality could be restored only by raising the masses.
Thus the regeneration of India depended upon the upliftment of the masses who
had been practically reduced to the position of slaves. Swamiji pointed out that no
amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India were educated
and well cared for.

**Monopoly of Education**

Another factor which Vivekananda ascribed to the fall of the nation was the
"monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land, by the dint of
pride and royal authority among a handful of men".\textsuperscript{9} Education had been denied to
the common man. Lack of education made the Indian masses illiterate and
diffident. This faithlessness and the resultant sense of inferiority made the Indians


incapable of resisting the foreign attacks. According to him the main reason why it was easy for the English to conquer India was because they were a nation while Indians were not. India lacked educated men, according to his evaluation. He remarked:

A nation of 30 millions has the smallest field of recruiting its great ones compared with nations of thirty, forty or sixty millions, because the number of educated men and women in those nations is so great . . . . This is the great defect in our nation and must be removed.\textsuperscript{10}

Unlike other reformers of the time, Vivekananda realized the need of rectifying this great defect from which the nation suffered. Dissemination of true knowledge alone will restore self-confidence among the masses. With self confidence will come self-respect and thereby the lost individuality of the nation could be restored.

\textbf{Religious Oppression}

From his wide travel which gave him an opportunity to witness every aspect of Indian life, Vivekananda came to the conclusion that religion was the very blood and life and spirit of India's millions, but it was being practised in a wrong manner. In fact it was mass oppression in the name of religion that was taking place. He

\textsuperscript{10} C.W., VIII, pp.306-307.
pointed out that "no religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism".\textsuperscript{11}

An important discovery of Vivekananda was that religion was not the cause of India's downfall, but the fact that true religion was nowhere followed. For, religion when dynamic would be the most potent of all powers. It is true that India had produced big leaders in the past; but for the past two thousand years, they were discussing only trivial matters like "whether to take food with the right hand or the left, whether to take water from the right hand side or from the left".\textsuperscript{12} Swami wondered whether such a country did not go to ruin, what else would be. So it was this kind of attitude on the part of the masters which paved the way for India's subjectification by alien power. In his opinion religion should answer social needs; Religion should address the problems of the masses. Religion should be scientific and reasonable. Further, he was convinced that since Religion was the very blood and life of India, Indian regeneration would be possible only through the renewal and restoration of true religions. i.e., dynamic religion. The kind of religion which India needed was Dynamic Religion. He made it clear in a letter that he wrote to Sister Nivedita on 4\textsuperscript{th} July 1897:

\textsuperscript{11} C.W., IV, p.75.

In India lectures and teachings cannot do any good . . . India shall rise only through the renewal and restoration of that highest spiritual consciousness which has made of India at all times the cradle of the Nations and the cradle of the Faith.13

The point needs an explanation. Swamiji was fully convinced that the main current in Indian life was religion and that India was sure to gain her lost stature in the comity of nations through the force of religion, the mainstay of Indian culture. Therefore he stressed the point that before her political and social emancipation, India needed religious upheaval. In the words of Vivekananda "before flooding India with socialistic and political ideas, first deluge the land with spiritual ideas".14

His attitude to religion was marked by liberalism, humanism and a refreshing boldness. His concept of religion was free from dogmatism, ritualism, racialism and communalism. So when he spoke of "deluging the land, with spiritual ideas", what he meant was that the ancient wisdom of Indian thought and the spiritual heritage assimilated from elements drawn from various sources like the Upanishads, the Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatam must be translated into

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14 C.W., III, p.221.
the service of the poor and the ignorant millions of countrymen. He regarded
religion as a weapon for social and moral regeneration of India.  

Laziness and Meanness

With the true instinct of a psychologist, Vivekananda studied the mind of
Indians and came to the conclusion that the general character of the Indians was to
a great extent responsible for the degradation of the country. The general character
of the Indians was described by Vivekananda in these words:

We would do nothing ourselves and would scoff at others who try
to do something. That is the bane that has brought our downfall
as a nation. Want of sympathy and lack of energy are at the root
of all misery and you must therefore give these two up . . . . Let
all have opportunities and leave the rest to the Lord. It is indeed
very difficult to have an equal love for all, but without it there is
no Mukti.  

According to him, "speaking parrot like and doing nothing" had become a
habit with the Indians and he believed that this sort of weak brain was not able to

15 For details see in Reply to the Maharaja of Khetri in Vivekananda, Complete Works, IV,
p.324.
16 C.W., VI, p.357.
do anything and therefore it had to be strengthened. Moreover, everyone in India, irrespective of caste, class or creed must be given opportunities to grow himself.

**Lack of Organizing Capacity**

One of the original observations of Vivekananda was that the faculty of organizing capacity was entirely absent in the nature of Indians. But this had to be infused, because it was this shortcoming which again gave an incentive to foreigners to invade the country in the past. His evaluation as to why the Indians, in spite of their numerical strength, were subjugated by the British, is worthy of note. To quote him:

> why that forty millions of Englishmen rule three hundred millions of people here? What is the psychological explanation? These forty millions put their wills together and that means infinite power and you three hundred millions have a will separate from the other. Therefore to make great future of India, the whole secret lies in organization, accumulation of power and coordination of wills.\(^\text{17}\)

According to him foreign conquerors were fully aware of the unwillingness on the part of Indians to make a common cause and they exploited this weakness to

\(^{17}\) C.W., VII, p.250.
their advantage. If the Indians wanted to make a great future of their country, he believed that they must learn to organize themselves.

**Exclusiveness**

In his opinion one important reason for the degeneration of India was India's isolation from the rest of the world for the last few centuries. This had narrowed her views and narrowed the scope of her actions. In a speech which he made at Madras in 1897 he said:

> Perhaps a factor contributing to India's misery and downfall has been that she narrowed herself, went into her shell as the oyster does and refused to give the life giving truths to the thirsting nations outside the Aryan fold. That has been the one great cause; that we did not go out that we did not compare notes with other nations...  

A thorough study of the past led Swamiji to analyse the reasons for the isolation. According to him, ancient India had never shut her doors against noble ideas, since her ideal was the great Rigvedic mantra - "Let noble thoughts come to us from every side". But it was sad that the very same country later narrowed her views and built a wall of customs of isolation round herself. Swamiji ascribed the

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18 C.W., III, p.317.
abandonment of this ideal to a spirit of hatred of others developed in India, with the passage of time. To quote him:

To my mind the one great cause of the downfall and degeneration of India was the building of a wall of customs, whose foundation was hatred of others, round the nation and the real aim of which in ancient times was to prevent the Hindus from coming into contact with the surrounding Buddhist nations.\(^{19}\)

To Vivekananda, the isolation finally resulted in the degeneration of the isolating country.

**Neglect of Women**

Swamiji observed that two great evils that existed in India were "trampling on the women and grinding the poor through caste restrictions". Women in India remained a depressed and backward section in the society for several centuries. In his opinion ill-treatment of women was one of the greatest sins of India. Analysing the then prevailing situation in the country, he remarked "why is it that our country is the weakest and the most backward of all countries? Because Sakti\(^{20}\) is held in

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\(^{19}\) Nirvedananda, n.12, p.28.

\(^{20}\) The concept of Sakti, the female representation of infinite energy took deep roots in India in the Vedic age. According to this concept, woman is the symbol of universal motherhood. This elevation of womanhood to the status of divinity is unique to Hinduism.
dishonour there". Women in ancient India occupied a prominent place in the intellectual field, but later they were relegated to an inferior position by denying them equal rights with men in education and in knowledge of scriptures. This situation should however change. He believed that no country or nation that does not respect its women can become great. In his opinion there is no hope of rise for that family or country where "there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness".

THE QUESTION OF REGENERATION

The fact that India had degenerated over the centuries did not make him a pessimist. Swamiji was an optimist and as Tagore has remarked, "everything was positive in him". With his keen eyes, he had studied the conditions of India and with a prophet's vision he foresaw the emergence of an awakened India. To his mind, what had happened in India was that the land was being exploited on all sides. Indian culture was not receiving its due share of appreciation from foreigners and even from Indians. The common people were a sunken mass. To the superficial eyes it appeared that this giant tree of India would soon wither and perish. But in reality, all this gloom on the Indian surface had not affected in the least the roots of its existence. The sap was still strong in India's plant. A passing

21 Letters, n.8, p.181.

22 C.W., VII, p.213.
mist had just spread itself over the foliage. It will disappear soon and the light will come again.

Swamiji believed that India had a glorious past and she will have a glorious future. The stupor to which she had fallen was only a temporary phase in her history. "She will be awakened and will be seated on her eternal throne rejuvenated more glorious than she ever was".23

Swamiji had an obsession for the past of India because "India's future is to take shape from that background". He also believed that out of the consciousness of our past greatness we must build an India yet greater than what she has been. Periods of decadence there have been, but out of these India emerged always as something greater, as a mighty tree from a decadent fruit.

He assessed the Indian situation in the following words:

A mighty tree produces a beautiful ripe fruit. That fruit falls on the ground, it decays and rots and out of that decay springs the root and the future tree, perhaps mightier than the first one. This period of decay through which we have passed, was all the more necessary. Out of this decay is coming the India of the future. It

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is sprouting, its first leaves are already out and a mighty gigantic
tree is here, already beginning to appear.\textsuperscript{24}

The interpretation that he made of India's decline in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was
aimed at arousing a slumbering sub-continent. An awakened India with a "still
more glorious" future was his dream. But how was it possible to awaken her? A
lover of suffering humanity, he believed that India would wake up again, if any one
could love with all his heart the people of the country, "the poor, ignorant masses of
India".

He expressed his firm faith in the emergence of an awakened India, in these
lines:

I too believe that India will awake again if anyone could love
with all his heart the people of the country - bereft of the grace of
affluence, of blasted fortune, ever starved, quarrelsome and
envious. Then only will India awake when hundreds of large
hearted men and women giving up all desires of enjoying the
luxuries of life, will long and exert themselves to their utmost for
the well-being of the millions of their country men who are

\textsuperscript{24} C.W., III, p.287.
The above passage indicates that India's national regeneration depended upon the upliftment of the masses. A real patriot is one who loved the masses, who engaged oneself in uplifting them.

**Upliftment of the Masses**

Swamiji believed that the awakening of India was possible only with the upliftment of the masses. He had always felt that the real strength of the country lay in the masses. He discovered that millions of the poor, not the few rich of the upper classes constituted the backbone of the Indian society. No plan to liberate the country would succeed unless the power of the masses was harnessed to that cause.

More than any other nationalist of the time, Swamiji loved the masses with his whole heart and soul, with an intense sincere devotion that was absolutely unselfish. In his speeches and writings, he made clear of the necessity of a dedicated programme of action for them. With unfailing vigour and never damped enthusiasm he exhorted all to take up his supreme and sublime vow of service of the masses as divine duty. According to him the greatest service that one could do

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for them was to educate them, so that they might develop their lost individuality killed by the tyranny of priests and foreign conquests. He stated:

They (masses) are to be given ideas, their eyes are to be opened to what is going on in the world around them, and then they will work out their own salvation. Every nation, every man and woman must work out their own salvation. . . . Ours is to put the chemicals together, the crystallisation comes in the law of nature.26

Role of Education

A keen observer, Vivekananda linked the degradation of Indian society with the denial of education to the masses. And he discovered that education was the panacea for the ills of society like poverty and illiteracy. Once the light of education is given to the downtrodden masses, they will wake up, realise their problems and fight for their rights and remedies. So the watchword of Swamiji for the uplift of the masses of India was education. He gave expression to his ideas on it in a letter:

Education, education, education alone! . . . I see it before my eyes, a nation is advanced in proportion as education and intelligence spread among the masses . . . . Through education

comes faith in one's own self and through faith in one's own self, 
the inherent Brahman is waking up in them, while the Brahman 
in us is gradually becoming dormant.27

Education should also make the masses self reliant. "All the wealth of the 
world cannot help on a little Indian village if the people are not to help 
themselves".28 i.e., Vivekananda considered self help as the best help. Any kind of 
assistance to an individual will be of no avail unless he becomes self-reliant, for, 
only a self reliant man can solve his problems by himself. Therefore he proposed a 
scheme of education which would enable the society to solve its own problems.

But Vivekananda was alive to the fact that poverty was a great hindrance to 
the path of education. The poor boys preferred to go to the field to work with their 
parents instead of going to schools. Even free education would not serve any 
purpose for them, because due to extreme poverty they were compelled to earn 
their bread themselves. In such a hopeless condition Vivekananda thought of 
another grand plan to educate the poor boys of the country. He said that if the poor 
boys would not come to school, education must go to their huts. He observed thus:

27 Letters, n.8, pp.328-29. Also see C.W., IV, pp.482-83.
28 C.W., VII, p.504.
Now if the mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain. If the poor boy cannot come to education, education must go to him.\footnote{C.W., IV, p.363.}

This work of educating the poor, he thought, would be taken up by thousands of single minded self sacrificing Sanyasins in India going from village to village teaching religion. They would go from place to place, from door to door not only preaching but also teaching secular matters.

This was his practical plan for educating the poor people of India. He suggested this programme with the full conviction that "the nation lives in the cottage". There were reformers in the 19th century India, who pondered over the ills of society, but no one did think of a radical and practical solution for them as Swamiji did.

Again, at a time when other reformers were advocating piece-meal reforms, Vivekananda came out with a still loftier ideal. He called the people not to dabble in petty social and religious reforms but to strike at the root - the source of all social problems. His earnest craving was for the uprising of the lowly. And for this, the masses should be educated. The ideal which he placed before his country men was, "not a petty-bourgeoisie moderate aim of social reform, but it was an advanced
social revolutionary programme." By his programme of social reconstruction, he sought not only temporary relief or amelioration for the suffering masses, instead a thorough social transformation, to be heralded by the masses themselves in the Renascent India.

**Emancipation of Women**

The Indian women of the Nineteenth century led a cloistered existence, subsisting on whatever her husband provided and having almost no freedom of expression and action. The age-old repressive social systems like child marriage, dowry system, the taboo against widow marriage, unfair property inheritance laws etc. had worsened the lot of women-folk in this land. It was into this darkness that Swami Vivekananda stepped in "like the autumn sunbeam, with a freshness of wild mountain flowers" and redefined India's age-old ideals of womanhood. He did not consider the condition of women as an isolated social issue, instead, he regarded it as intimately connected with the well-being of society as a whole. Sister Nivedita has recorded that Swamiji had once reminded her "Never forget the words women and the people". This indicates that the backwardness of women and the people in general made Swamiji restless. Therefore, to him, upliftment of masses

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meant upliftment of women also and national regeneration depended upon the upliftment of these sections.

Swamiji's great objection to the treatment of women as second-class citizens was based on two fundamental convictions. The first was his firm belief that all distinctions between individuals based on gender were, from the highest point of view, untenable. The second reason why Swamiji was so passionate about improving the condition of women goes back to his old quarrel with adhikaravada. According to the exclusive practices of adhikaravada, women of all castes were lumped together with Sudras and thus were denied access to the sacred scriptures and forbidden to enjoy certain other religious privileges, such as taking the vows of Sanyasa. Swamiji considered such treatment neither fair nor in accordance with the authoritative writings of Hinduism. In fact, he often spoke of the establishment of a monastery for women as being of a higher priority than one for men.

**Method of Emancipation**

Swamiji's attitude towards the question of women's emancipation was expressed in a letter written to Swami Ramakrishnananda:

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33 As a philosopher monk, he was convinced that every one was in reality non different from the One Universal Self.


35 *Ibid.*, p.482. Swamiji's desire for starting a monastery for women was fulfilled in 1954 with the founding of Sree Sarada Mission in Belur.
There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing.  

What he pointed out was that as a bird with only one wing cannot fly, similarly a nation with her women in shackles could make no progress.

His attitude towards women's rights was very much the same as his attitude towards all social questions. i.e. Help the weaker sections to help themselves. Help should be given only in removing the obstacles impeding progress. Education should be offered when necessary; then "hands off". In a lecture delivered in Madras in 1897 he observed:

Liberty is the first condition of growth. It is wrong, a thousand times wrong if any one of you dares to say "I will work out the salvation of this woman or child . . . . Who are you to solve women's problems? . . . . Hands off! They will solve their own problems.

The above exhortation reveals that for the emancipation of women, Vivekananda laid more emphasis on the growth of education and self dependency among them than on specific social reforms because education will enable them to know what is

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36 C.W., VI, p.328.
37 C.W., III, p.246.
good for them and what is bad. The evils like child marriage could be eliminated if women were given proper education. Swamiji had great faith in women whom he regarded as symbols of Sakti. And he believed that if they were given opportunities and training, they would be able to do great things for the society and nation as well.

Thus, the liberation and education of women in Vivekananda's view was most crucial for national development. But at the same time he held that it had to be for all women, particularly the lower castes. Swamiji's keen perception led him to arrive at the conclusion that in thinking about women many reformers failed to look outside their own social groups. Unlike these reformers, Swamiji wanted that emancipation should start from the level of the masses. As he had said, "put the fire at the level of the masses and let it burn upward and make an Indian nation". In other words, emancipation should aim at raising the lower to the higher.

Though he had been highly impressed by the social independence and freedom of American women, the ideal woman of future India as envisioned by Swamiji was the one who could emulate the greatness of Sita, Savitri, Gargi and Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, each of them representing higher and noble
virtues. Indian women should make themselves models of high idealism based on spiritual excellence, practical efficiency and dynamism.

Vivekananda's ideas on gender justice had a profound impact on the Women's Emancipation Movement in India where feminism and nationalism were closely interlinked. During the long drawn out struggle against colonialism "Indian women established their moral right to equality". As women took to political activity, many of the taboos and restrictions which had been placed on them were either lifted or overlooked. Women were accepted as political comrades and were given equal opportunities for participation in the freedom struggle.

Religion and the Masses

In his scheme of national regeneration, religion occupied the premier place. He had stated:

The problems of India are more complicated, more momentous than the problems in any other country. Race, religion, language, government - all these together make a nation . . . . Therefore a first plank in the making of a future India . . . . is the unification

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38 The special ideal of Indian womanhood according to him was Sita (of Ramayana) - "purer than purity itself, all patience and all suffering". But at the same time, he wanted Indian women to acquire the intellectual brilliance of Gargi (of vedic time), the spiritual resources of Savitri (of Purana) and the physical prowess of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi.

of religion . . . . I do not mean to say that political or social improvements are not necessary, but what I mean is this . . . . that religion is primary.  

By unification of religion, he meant the union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune. Swamiji insisted that "for the well-being of our race, we must give up all our little quarrels and differences. National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune".

According to him "every improvement in India requires first of all an upheaval in religion". In his travels he found that for the uplift of the nation it was necessary to energise the masses which could be achieved only through religion, rejuvenated and revitalized by infusing Vedantic ideas.

Now the question arises as to what he meant by revitalization and why he wanted to revitalize religion. Vivekananda stressed the point that,

Each nation has its own past, peculiarity and individuality with which it is born. Each represents as it were, one peculiar note in this harmony of nations and this is its very life, its vitality. In it is

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41 Ibid.
the backbone, the foundation and the bed rock of national life.

Similarly in each nation as in music there is a main note a central theme, upon which all others turn. Everything else is secondary. India's theme is religion. Everything else is secondary.42

He pointed out that the central theme in each nation was different. For some it may be economic, for some others it may be politics or social life. In the case of India it was religion and it formed "the very core of the national heart".43 The religion was the backbone and the life centre. Therefore he reiterated that India's salvation lay in the revitalization of this life centre. By revitalization he meant making the religion more meaningful and practical. He wanted a religion which would "give us faith in ourselves, a national self-respect and the power to feed and educate the poor and relieve the misery around us".

In his speeches Swamiji had outlined and explained a religious revival encompassing all the religious communities aimed at achieving a common national goal. The importance of his plan of revitalization of religion lies in the fact that "in

42 C.W., III, p.148.
43 Ibid., p.204.
an age when religion was acting as a divisive factor, Swami Vivekananda sought to use religion as a binding force for an all-Indian nationalist upsurge.\textsuperscript{44}

But when religion was referred to be used for awakening the masses, Vivekananda was well aware of the fact that any such action plan should have a populist strategy. A well thought-out and clearly spelt-out strategy for the purpose was made public by him in 1894.\textsuperscript{45} This strategy contained among other things, the following aspects:

1. To raise some money,

2. To build a small lecture hall in an area inhabited by poor and low-caste people

3. The hall would be used to arrange public lectures with magic lanterns and other necessary aids on religion, geography, astronomy, etc.

4. To raise and train a group of young men who would disseminate the message of national awakening far and wide, and

5. The ultimate goal would be to awaken the common masses.


He insisted that persons spearheading such a missionary work have to be selfless workers and not self-seeking leaders. The scheme reveals a comprehensive idea of mass mobilization as enunciated by Swami Vivekananda. In a society where religion was a potent driving force, it was a perfect strategy to start a programme with religious teachings for the common man. Such teachings were aimed at exposing the illiterate people to the real meaning and purpose of religion. Another aspect of this strategy is to stress the role of young and dedicated workers. Finally the essential qualities of the required type of leaders were also indicated. The letter contained a cautionary note for his colleagues in the following words: "Do not try to lead your brethren, but serve them".46

It may be noted that when Vivekananda spoke of religion as a means for regenerating India, emphasis was placed on the inner and real message of religion as a catalyst for national unity and awakening.

Swamiji's Concept of Social Change

Swamiji was one who summoned the new India into existence and he foresaw revolutionary social changes taking place in modern India, and not just a few "cosmetic" or "ornamental" reforms and adjustments. He also foresaw that that was going to be a tumultuous experience and not an easy change-over. And he welcomed that prospect, for he knew that for achieving nation wide and total

46 Ibid.
human development, that was vitally needed. In the course of his lecture on My Plan of Campaign delivered in Madras in 1897, he specially referred to this prospect of revolutionary change ahead. To quote him:

To the reformers I will point out that I am a greater reformer than any one of them. They want to reform only little bits. I want root and branch reform . . . . I do not believe in reform; I believe in growth.\(^{47}\)

Vivekananda had a clear idea of the kind of social change that was needed in India. He had seen the impact of the social reform movement in first hand, during his travels in India and was convinced that the motives and methods of the movement were fundamentally wrong. He admitted that the reformers had been well intentioned. But he pointed out that "the one hundred years of social reform has produced no permanent and valuable result".\(^ {48}\) The reform did not produce lasting result because the reformers were merely imitating the West. They had copied blindly the western means and methods of altering society. Moreover they had adopted destructive rather than constructive attitude towards the Hindu social institutions. In their zeal for reform they wanted to demolish all that was old and traditional and blamed religion for all the social ills. This they did in imitation of

\(^{47}\) C.W., III, p.213.

the west. Swamiji warned the early reformers against imitating the West, as imitations of other societies will never pay; on the contrary they will sap the national vitality. His advice was to assimilate what is good and viable in other traditions, but one should not barter away the soul. In his words "we should not merely approve what the west approves and what the west rejects. For instance . . . the west condemns image worship and so we also reject it as sinful." In this message, he reminded that the question of capital importance is whether the mere disapproval of the westerners be the measure of abomenableness of our customs and manners. Whether these customs are to be rejected or not, is to be decided by the Indians themselves after judging their merits and demerits.

Another point to be noted in connection with the sort of social change advocated by Vivekananda is that he was against reforms affecting only narrow sphere of society's life. He criticised the crying inadequacy of the kind of reforms advocated by the reformers of his time i.e., half-hearted measures and the begging of favours from the colonialists to solve cardinal social (and political) problems of the age. Most of the reforms that had been agitated for during the nineteenth century had been ornamental and every one of these reforms only touched a small section in the society. The question of widow marriage would not touch seventy percent of the Indian women, and all such questions only reached the higher castes

49 Ibid., Also see Swami Vivekananda, Modern India (Calcutta, 1982 edn.), pp.84-85.
of Indian people who were educated and that too at the expense of the masses. He observed:

You talk of social reform. But what do you do? All that you mean by your social reform is either widow remarriage or female emancipation or something of that sort ... Such a scheme of reform may be good to a few no doubt, but of what avail is that to the whole nation?\(^{50}\)

In contrast to such half-hearted reforms affecting only narrow spheres of society's life, Vivekananda sought to put up cardinal demand for a change in the condition of working masses. He wanted the reformers of the time to think of giving the masses their rights. In the place of miserly reforms which they advocated, Swamiji called for "root and branch reform"\(^{51}\) or "a comprehensive reform" which will benefit all sections of society. Such a reform was radical in nature.

When he spoke of a radical reform, he meant a revolutionary change in the social system. He put it in these words: "you must go to the basis of the thing, to the very root of the matter. That is what I call radical reform".\(^{52}\) For his views, he was a revolutionary rather than a reformer. His advocacy of revolutionary changes

\(^{50}\) C.W., III, p.213.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., p.316.
\(^{52}\) C.W., V, p.215.
in the social system was based on a clear understanding of the active role which the masses played in the historical development of India. This is shown in particular by his statement that the influence of the Brahmin, the prowess of the Kshatriya and the wealth of the Vaisya are possible only thanks to the physical work of the Sudra. It is they that formed the true body of any society. Vivekananda was the first reformer to see with his unerring insight that the upper classes prospered at the expense of the physical labour of the Sudras.

Swamiji had a clear vision as to who will launch and lead the social revolution in India. According to him "the new order of things is the salvation of the people by the people". He held that the people themselves should decide whether certain things were evil or not. It is not for a few men to decide it. He observed:

A few men who think that certain things are evil will not make a nation move . . . . First educate the nation, create your legislative body and then the law will be forthcoming. First create the power, the sanction from which the law will spring . . . . the new power of the people.54


54 C.W., VII, p.149.
The above observation points to the role of the enlightened masses in bringing progressive changes in society. Vivekananda's ideal was progress and it could be achieved by any society only by following a constructive method. For any social reform to be effective and successful, the people must be educated first. In other words, a strong healthy public opinion has to be created before any social reform is introduced. A reform that is enforced without the cooperation and understanding of the people is bound not only to fail, but to produce adverse effects. By making this observation, Swamiji had drawn the reformers', attention to the source of the country's strength viz., the masses.

Swamiji also had his own views on the nature of social change that was to take place in India ie. Should the social change be violent or peaceful? He maintained that strength should be the medicine which the poor must have when they are tyrannised by the rich. He also foresaw that the lower classes were gradually awakening to this fact and making a united front against this, to exact their legitimate dues. In European countries this section had already awakened and started fighting. As early as 1897 he wrote to one of his disciples "signs of this awakening have shown themselves in India too as is evident from the number of strikes among the lower classes now a days".\(^{55}\) He also made it clear that in future India a situation would come where the upper class would no longer be able to repress the lower. Moreover the well being of the higher classes lay in helping the

lower to get their legitimate rights. Therefore he asked the upper classes to set themselves to the task of spreading education among the masses and tell them and make them understand that the masses "are our brothers – a part and parcel of our bodies and we love you and never hate you . . . ."56 Vivekananda gave a warning to the upper classes that it was their duty to arouse the lower classes from slumber by imparting learning and culture to them. Thus in future India, Swamiji dreamt of an ideal society where the relation between upper classes and lower classes would be based on mutual understanding, friendship and harmony.

The above discussion of Swamiji's concept of social change leads us to the following conclusion. His attitude towards reform was no "piece-meal reform" but "root and branch reform". Evils will eliminate themselves when circumstances behind them are identified and removed. Again, one could not change society by deliberate attempts at change, for social change has its own laws. All that one could do was to create a consciousness for change through service, example and propaganda and leave it to people to work out their own destiny.

Views on Caste

Vivekananda's vision of future India was a country free from the inequalities of caste. In his scheme of social reconstruction, he gave serious attention to the problem of caste since it was a vexed question throughout the nineteenth century.

56 Ibid.
One of the original observations of Vivekananda was that the evil like caste privileges has nothing to do with religion, instead, it is a political and social ill. He boldly declared that "beginning from Buddha down to Rammohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste together and failed". Religion has no business to interfere in social matters as it "aims at realization of the universal unity". In the same way, caste cannot be held responsible for multiplying distinctions and privileges. Therefore, to him it was not religion which was responsible for the sorry state of things, but the misapplication of religion to social problems.

What is unique about Swamiji's attitude to the question of caste is that he has spoken so much about the nature and role of castes in such great depth and detail. Further, he based his opinions on this institution on the deep study of Hindu society and religion, from its vedic to modern times. In fact, through his deep study, he revealed the secret of caste, its true meaning and its power for good. He had also cautioned against the danger of the current false views about caste. What receives our attention is his approach to the question of caste which is entirely different from that of his contemporaries. The solution which he suggested was also marked for its uniqueness and originality. Let us analyse these points one by one.

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57 Letters, n.8, p.42.
True Meaning of Caste

The principle underlying caste, according to Swamiji, is the following. The word caste stands for 'Jati' in Sanskrit. The original idea of Jati was the freedom of the individual to express his nature. And so it remained for thousands of years. To explain this point further, the original idea behind the caste arrangement in India was that every individual should have the freedom to express his nature, his prakruti. Every individual chose his occupation according to his aptitude which can be characterised as Gunas like Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. In other words castes carry on their function in accordance with their gunas or psychological nature. Thus Swamiji suggests that caste represents individuality, variety or diversity which is the real principle underlying it. The principle of harmony based on a division of labour characterises the Indian caste in its ideal form.

No Privilege

Swamiji interpreted that according to the original idea of caste there is no privilege based on birth. There is no question of superiority and inferiority. Mending shoes is as valuable as reading Vedas. There is no privilege for any one. The chances to rise are equal for all. The position of Sudra and that of a Brahmin under the caste system was defined by Swamiji in the following words:

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58 Sattva (goodness) - characterised by pleasure and illumination. Rajas (passion) - characterised by pain and actuation. Tamas (darkness or dullness) - characterised by indifference and restarint. The characterisation of the gunas is primarily in terms of psychic states or effective conditions.
I can perform one duty in social life and you another; you can govern a country and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country? I am clever in mending shoes you are clever in reading Vedas, but that is no reason why you should trample on my head.  

In this sense caste is a natural order with an emphasis on the performance of one's duty in social life. Under this arrangement the so called lower caste's upward mobility was fully open because of the freedom to choose one's vocation.  

A historical study of the evolution of caste system led Swamiji to conclude that the so called higher castes, superarrogated themselves a purely mythical excellence of birth, converted a flexible and continuously fluctuating arrangement into a rigid scheme of division based on accidental circumstances i.e., with birth as the sole criterion, privileges were grabbed by the upper classes. The religion of the day sanctioned untouchability, what Vivekananda calls "Don't Touchism". Thus with its narrow outlook and separatist tendency, caste has become the "greatest

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59 C.W., III, p.245.

60 His statement that caste is a natural order is supported by historical facts. While narrating the history of the Mauryas, Will Durant has recorded that Megasthenese the Greek ambassador was struck by the "absence of slavery" in India of his time. Durant has quoted him saying that though the population was divided into castes according to occupation, it accepted these divisions as natural and tolerable. See details in Will Durant, *Story of Civilization: Our Oriental Heritage* (New York, 1954 edn.), Part I, p.441.
According to Swamiji it was the monopoly of privilege especially the privilege of spirituality which paved the way for the inhuman practice of segregation.

Though convinced that the days of exclusive privileges and claims were no longer relevant, Vivekananda did not recommend the abolition of the system or a class conflict. He admitted that the caste system had some defects. But at the same, he believed that it had some merits or advantages also and merits outweighed defects. It may be recalled that the opinion of Abbe J.A. Dubois, the French missionary of Mysore (who was more acquainted with Indian society than any other European) on the value of caste is quite relevant in this context.

Swamiji did not favour fighting among the castes as it will further divide weaken and degrade the society. The poor untouchables were to be redeemed

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62 See details in Chapter VIII.
63 In his book Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies he wrote: "I believe caste division to be in many respects . . . the happiest effort, of Hindu legislation. I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism and that she preserved and perfected the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in a state of barbarism. I do not consider caste to be free from many great drawbacks; but I believe that the resulting advantages, in the case of a nation constituted like the Hindus, more than outweigh the resulting evils . . . . such an institution was probably the only means that the most clear-sighted precedence could devise for maintaining a state of civilization amongst the people endowed with the peculiar characteristics of the Hindus". See details in Abbe Dubois, Moeurs, Institutions et Ceremonies des peuples de l'Inde, trans. and ed. Henry K. Beauchamp, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies (New Delhi, 1999 edn.), Vol. I, p.28.
socially and the higher castes are not to be degraded. In his opinion "the solution is not by bringing down the higher, but by raising the lower upto the higher". In order to remove the misery of the lower castes, the Brahmin need not be crushed out, because Swamiji regarded Brahminhood as the ideal of humanity in India. He defined the term Brahminhood in the light of the true and original Vedantic conception according to which a Brahmin is one who has killed selfishness and who lived and worked to acquire and propagate wisdom and the power of love. For enabling the Sudras to reach "Brahminhood" they were to be imparted knowledge both spiritual and secular, which would raise them to new realization of intellectual and moral strength. The culture and education, which is the main stay of higher classes should be appropriated so as to bring about the levelling of caste. He urged the Brahmins themselves to work to that end, for according to him, it was their duty to work hard to raise the rest of Indian people by teaching them culture they had accumulated for centuries. At the same time he advised the Sudras to acquire knowledge through education which is the strength of the higher castes.

Swamiji advocated both education and industrialisation for removing inequality based on caste. Education should enable a man "to stand on his legs" and industrialisation would provide employment to the youth and thereby the economic status of the lower classes could be raised. Swamiji was confident that in due course the rigid walls separating caste from caste would vanish due to

64 C.W., III, p.295.
economic causes and there was no need of destroying caste. Moreover he believed that "liberty is the first condition of growth". Social progress was possible only if the country was liberated from foreign rule which was only perpetuating social evils like untouchability. His new interpretation of caste aimed at eliminating the barriers that divided man from man and it was hoped that the process would ultimately promote unity and integrity in the nation which was necessary for the liberation of the country.

Swamiji’s views on caste particularly his view that the institution should not be destroyed had a profound impact on Indian Nationalists. Eg. in 1920's Gandhiji "defended caste by describing it as a creative social institution." Making his position clear he said:

I am one of those who do not consider caste to be a harmful institution. In its origin caste was a wholesome custom and promoted national well-being. In my opinion the idea that inter-dining and inter-marriage is necessary for national growth is a superstition borrowed from the west.

These words indicate that like Vivekananda, Gandhi also rejected the practice like untouchability as characteristic of the institution of caste and held that

65 Ravinder Kumar, Essays in the Social History of Modern India (Delhi, 1983), p.55.
caste was not an institution to be reformed on Western lines.

Even a bitter critic of untouchability like Dr. Ambedkar seems to have been influenced by Swamiji's views on caste when he said in a paper presented at the Anthropological Seminar held in 1916 at the Columbia University, New York that there existed in olden days in India only class system and not caste and that individuals according to their qualification could change their class at any time.67

His Concept of Shudra-Raj

In the New India which he envisaged, he foresaw the rise of the labouring classes. A patriot - Prophet, he envisioned the advent of the 'Shudra Raj'68 a government run by the toiling sections of the society. His vision of the 'Shudra Raj' was not merely the wishful thinking of a sentimentalist. It was based on an intelligent interpretation of history and a sound grasp of sociological phenomenon which reassured him that the high handedness and tyranny of the strong over the weak could not go on for long. Analysing the trend of world history, he sensed that the Indian masses have to be given the legitimate status in society. The shudras or

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67 For details of the paper see The Indian Antiquary No. XLVI (May 1917), Bombay, pp.81-95. One may recall in this connection what Swamiji said more than one hundred years ago that there was nothing wrong in recreating the caste system in its original form where there was the liberty for people to move from one class to another according to one's qualification or temperament. Dr. Ambedkar's view appears to be an echo of Swamiji's views.

68 This idea was expressed by him in an essay titled "Varthuman Bharat" originally written in Bengali and published in March 1899 in Udbodhan, the organ of the Ramakrishna Order. Its English version entitled "Modern India" is included in the Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. IV.
the toiling masses will be the future rulers in the next historical phase of human civilization, he prophesied.\(^69\)

What is significant about his prophecy is his pronouncement that the depressed and the downtrodden castes will gain prominence without leaving the kind of work which they have been doing for ages, i.e., the Sudras will rise to power without leaving their Sudrahhood.

When Swamiji used the term depressed or Sudra, he did not intend to convey any sense of inferiority. He maintained that in the new age these classes would attain power and prestige on the basis of humanitarian principle without abandoning their class or cult. He also dreamt of an ideal state in which the good features of all the four castes (the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra) would be kept in tact minus their evils. It may not be possible to translate this ideal into action. But one can appreciate the kind of harmony which he found desirable in human society.

It has to be seen that it was with this picture of an ideal society in his mind that he exhorted "Let new India arise out of the peasant's cottage . . . ."\(^70\) The history of India after independence is a testimony to show how his prophecy has come true. The country in the last fifty years witnessed the political power

\(^69\) For a detailed analysis of his concept of Shudra Raj see Chapter VI of this thesis.

\(^70\) Vivekananda, n.2.
gradually coming to the deprived sections of Indian society and these sections utilizing the power for their emancipation.

**Hindu - Muslim Unity in Future India**

Though a Hindu to the backbone, Swamiji had the highest respect for other religions particularly Christianity and Islam. He was convinced that a country like India where people of various faiths lived, could be kept united only through mutual "tolerance and acceptance." He was saddened by the vituperations of Christian missionaries, but he warned his country men against understanding the positive side of Christianity. Swamiji's evaluation of Islam shows the same flexibility. He was deeply conscious of the important role of Islam especially as represented by medieval Sufi Saints, in the evolution of India's national culture. Similarly Akbar's vision of a universal faith extracted Swamiji's unstinted admiration. What attracted him to Islam was the spirit of equality and brotherhood which enabled the Prophet and his followers to build a strong social organization in a vast area comprising many nations and in a remarkably short period.

As a prophet who foresaw the communal or religious problem arising in New India, he unfolded his vision of future India in these words.

... I am firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism however fine and wonderful they may be, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind. We
want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonizing the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION which is Oneness so that each may choose the path that suits him. For our own motherland, a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam - Vedanta brain and Islam body - is the only hope. I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible with Vedanta brain and Islam body.71

When Swamiji speaks of the junction of 'Vedanta brain and Islam body' he is not suggesting that the former is superior to the latter. By Islam he meant the democratic and egalitarian social polity as envisaged by Islam. By Vedanta he meant the highest spiritual ideas. Spirituality in essence is knowing man as the manifestation of God. Therefore, the idea is that philosophical wisdom should be combined with practical wisdom.

Again, when he speaks of a place "where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible nor the Koran" he is not suggesting that the scriptures of the major religions should be superseded, but that none of them should have exclusive claim to truth so

71 Letters n.61, p.452.
that to repeat his words "each person may follow the path that suits him best."
Actually it was with such a broad mind that Swami Vivekananda found a solution
to the Hindu - Muslim communal divide and he hoped that a just society in India
could be built up on the basis of these ideals. It may be noted that his ideal of
Hindu - Muslim unity was accepted by the Congress under Gandhiji as one of its
programmes. Later events in India showed that politically such a pious dream
failed to be realized. Yet it had left a mark on the minds of those who would have
liked to see a non-communal India survive and prosper.

Future India's Mission to Mankind

Vivekananda was the "discoverer of India's long lost mission in the world." The optimist in Swamiji always looked forward to India having her mission in the world. He believed that India had been a teacher to the world in the past, in spiritual matters and she will continue to lead the mankind in that field. His conclusion was that the very fact that India could produce a spiritual giant of the magnitude of Sri Ramakrishna even when she was in a state of political subjection and cultural decadence was positive proof of her undying spiritual vitality. In the many sidedness of the Master's personality and the all-inclusiveness of his teachings, Swamiji found the channel through which the spiritual thought of India

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could flow to all parts of the world. To him, the Master had heralded a new age in India’s cultural life by the quickening he had given to its spiritual energies. He foresaw the great material changes that were going to take place in the country and the Master was the spiritual ballast that would hold the equilibrium of India’s national life.

Swamiji’s penetrating mind also realized the plight of the West. Science and technology no doubt gave the west material prosperity, but they did not give it inner peace. A materialistic culture contains the seeds of its own destruction. In a competitive society mutual war and hatred become inevitable. In such a situation what the west was required to do, according to Swamiji, was that it must deepen its spiritual outlook and in this could be helped by the ancient wisdom of India. Hinduism, he thought, could especially teach the West, Universal compassion, the ideal of seeing unity in diversity and the harmony of religion.

But at the same time Swamiji keenly felt that both the West and India needed each other for their mutual welfare and for the ultimate good of humanity, a new society, a synthesis of the East and the West, a synthesis of Science and spirituality was needed.

Swamiji who lived at the dawn of the era of Indian nationalism summoned the new India into existence. The message of spiritual hope that he gave to India proved a powerful force in the course of Indian awakening. In his scheme of
thought he emphasized the upliftment of the individual as well as the collective
march of the people towards progress and prosperity. By advocating the upliftment
of masses he was advocating the principles of social justice and equality which
influenced the nationalists of the time. Religion related to social service,
opposition to social hierarchy based on birth, the need to uplift the lower castes and
communities, keen awareness of the poverty of the common man – these were the
stages through which Vivekananda made his progress till he reached the advocacy
of social equality and removal of injustice. By holding fast to these principles, he
made a valient effort to awaken the national spirit which forms the basis of
patriotism. Of course, patriotism took an important place in his scheme of thought.
He would present social thoughts while talking about religion and at the same time
advocate patriotism. Through his ideas on upliftment of masses, he had advanced a
new definition of "true patriotism," which went a long way towards shaping the
socio-political ideology of Freedom Struggle.

The ideas which he advocated for the remaking of Indian society, had
elements of eclecticism. They combined in themselves a spontaneous, rebellious
spirit against social injustice and inequality. He presented such ideas with a fervent
desire to make India march forward. Again, the ideal of the harmony of religions
which he preached was to become the bed rock of nationalism of future India.
Without this concept of harmony of religions and tolerance to all creeds, the spirit
of national consciousness could not have been built up in this country with
diversities. The history of India after the demise of Swamiji is a testimony to the fact that his ideas played a constructive part in the development of national liberation movement, in rallying the Indian people against colonialism.