

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED**THE ROLE(S) OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND DR. B.R.
AMBEDKAR IN SOCIAL REFORMATION: A BRIEF STUDY IN
COMPARISON**

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Introduction:

Both Swami Vivekananda and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar believed that all Indians were part of a single stream, and that any distinction among them was merely the result of their division from the union. The development of Indian spirituality into a vehicle for social change in modern times is exemplified by Swami Vivekananda, a monk who advocated practical Vedanta, and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who is revered as the modern *Bodhisattva*. It is fascinating to observe how these two influential contemporary Indian architects who established the moral tenets of social emancipation, converged at pivotal moments of the country's revival.

Swami Vivekananda, who is the embodiment of an Indian monk and he also known as a national hero, is recognised particularly for introducing the western society in the soil of India. He is generally discussed as the spokesperson of the Hindu religion. His works can be categorised into two perspectives like, social and spiritual improvements. As Nandini Saraf writes, it is especially the blend of traditionalism and modernism in Swami Vivekananda's philosophy and outlook that makes him special among the Indian social reformers and philosophers.¹ We have perceived that he gave preference to his spiritual self and social self. The extensive value of the word 'Swami' that have given him the celebrated name 'Vivekananda' which are prevalent throughout the globe. It is declared by Swami Vivekananda that *mukti* and the others seem to him not the first preference. This is knowing by all that he was a trailblazer of India who significantly contributed for the improvement of the country's modern identity. The basic tenets of Swami Vivekananda's social reforms were including socialism, secularism, mass uplift and power, compassionate treatment of the untouchables, universal literacy, women's freedom, and the inculcation of social work as a component of religious devotion. The well-known advice of him which influenced the young

¹ Saraf, Nandini. (2012). *The Life and Times of Swami Vivekananda*. New Delhi: Ocean Books Pvt. Ltd., p.9.

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people of India - ‘awake, arise, and stop not until the goal is reached’², that sparked their depressed spirits and social conscience.

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, also identified as ‘Babasaheb Ambedkar’, was a politician, lawyer and social reformer. His other moniker is “Father of the Indian Constitution.” His attempts to alleviate social ills like untouchability and caste limitations. He promoted for the basic rights of *Dalits* and other socially underprivileged groups throughout his entire life. In Jawaharlal Nehru’s cabinet, he was originally appointed as the first minister of law of India. In 1990, he received the topmost civilian award of India, the *Bharat Ratna*, posthumously.

This paper proposes to explore some key attainments of Swami Vivekananda and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the social reformers of the 20th century and their philosophy as guiding light to us. Swami Vivekananda worked extensively to uplift the downtrodden and stressed on the importance of education for all. The Indian Constitution was drafted by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and he struggled diligently against social disparities and untouchability. As Yogita Vashisht writes, Ambedkar’s whole life – like Vivekananda’s – was dedicated towards ‘establishing India [as a country] of equals, a country which provided greater opportunities for people who were historically disadvantaged’³. Both emphasised on the all-round development of the masses of India and eradication of the class and caste system; however, their ways are different. Vivekananda opined that everyone is the Supreme Being, and the divinity is already within us; so one cannot feel degraded than and by another. On the other hand, Ambedkar emphasised on the discriminatory structure of society. On that time, a person acquires a position in society by birth which is pre-determined rather it must be affirmed by the capacity or the capability of the individual for doing a particular work. Because of the similarities between them regarding the process adopted by the two philosophers for uplifting society that I have chosen to focus on them, comparatively.

² Vivekananda, Swami. (1907). *Jñāna Yoga*. Part- II. New York: The Vedanta Society, p.139.

³ Vashisht, Yogita. (2021). *Famous Indian Social Reformers*. New Delhi: K.K. Publications, p.53.

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(i) Swami Vivekananda and the Social Order:

Constantly outspoken as a social activist, Swami Vivekananda outrightly called India's dealing of the poor 'a national sin'. He has also given thoughtful observances regarding the social standing of women of India. For him, India's ethnic and religious variety was never a cause for concern because India has always aspired to be one in her love and respect for many religions and communities. He envisioned a new social structure and a new civilization in which the best spiritual practises of India would coexist with the most recent scientific and technological developments. He announced that "*Jīve is Śiva,*" or that element of God is present within us. However, at the age of 39 the young eminent Indian monk has taken his last breath on 4th July 1902. Prior to that, in the name of his spiritual guru, Sri Ramakrishna, he founded *The Ramkrishna Mission* by which his work is still being done in the Mission today. He gave the assurance to his followers that he will act silently and never stop himself for working until and unless each people will realise their actual nature that there is an identical relationship between I and Thou that is the inspiring speech of him which produces strength, energy and peace of mind to every people. Tagore advised to Romaine Rolland, "If you want to know India, study Vivekananda"⁴. Within the period of 39 years of his life, yet he has introduced eternal works like *Jñāna*, *Bhakti*, *Karma* and *Rāja yoga*, too. He delivered numerous speeches, composed several poetries. He was renowned as a spiritual mentor to innumerable seekers who have always try to pursue his guidance. In one point, he has declared himself as a '**Condensed India.**'

Despite being a man of meditation and devotion, Swami Vivekananda tried to act for employment which can increase the output and can decrease poverty. With his mentor Ramakrishna Paramahansa he acknowledged always that "religion is not for empty stomachs." The citizens of contemporary India were inspired by the *Rājasic* virtues that were proclaimed by him. He opined that their situation can be improved by their motivation. The social reformation of a nation will be driven by religion opined by Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda expressed his profound outrage at the exploitation of rights and his sincere concern for the upliftment of women in general and other socially disadvantaged individuals. We cannot entrap ourselves according to the western ways of life like a slavish

⁴ Ray, Hem, Shankar. (2012). *Symbols of India*. India: Rupa Publications, E-version.

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imitation, however he desired to reform society in a distinct manner by the help of western ideas and technology. Sadly, no one ever helped them, though our contemporary reformers are working very hard on widow remarriage. Of course, he supported every reform, but the welfare of the people, not the number of husbands widows receive, determines a country's fate. As he constantly opined, "So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them."⁵ Swamiji's teachings and ideas were a major inspiration for Mahatma Gandhi's dynamism and Jawaharlal Nehru's socialism.

In ancient India the educational theories which are prevailing in the country, the theories on education of Swami Vivekananda's are more contemporary in comparison. From the beginning he dedicated himself for the **mass development** that is the symbol of the development of Indian people. In addition, he was the one who developed, what we now refer to as informal education, many years ago. He gave a lot of importance on technical education and industrial training, which are at present time the basic components of India's contemporary educational system.

He also struggled for **women's rights** in education. He has given priority of classical family values and the chastity of women; however, he also vehemently criticised for woman's subjugation. He fervently claimed that women can access all educational opportunities. He has founded the Ramakrishna Mission and advocated a new path for *Sanyāsīns* and Indian monks. For reducing human suffering, they have supplied different facilities like establishing hospitals, facilities in education, dispensaries, institutions for orphans, and other different community establishments.

(ii) Swami Vivekananda on the Cultural History of India:

Without a doubt, Swamiji was extremely proud of India's historical legacies. However, he has a divergent opinion that all the things of the past were not admirable. His **Vedantic Socialism** included so many things like, the elimination of poverty, the eradication of illiteracy, restoration of human dignity, the liberty from fear, the accessibility of spiritual and secular knowledge to everyone, irrespective of class or caste, and the suspension of all

⁵ Pathak, Avijit. (2024). *Indian Modernity: Contradictions, Paradoxes and Possibilities*. New York: Routledge Publications, E-version.

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forms of social, economic, religious, intellectual and cultural monopolies. He introduced his Vedantic Socialism, or *Vedānta*, in terms of the intellectual, cultural, and social realms.

By reinterpreting *Vedānta*, Swamiji revived India and his enduring concern for the general populace and their problems. He wanted to make India as powerful, prosperous and independent state. It is true that India is built on the masses, the small group of patriots having the spirits, brave and strong with “muscles of iron, nerves of steel, and gigantic wills,”⁶ was that he constantly emphasised.

Swamiji has presented an innovative idea of religion that suggests the secularist notion which are now an essential segment of the Indian Constitution. He stated that different religions were merely different routes leading to the same end. His concepts were a growth of Indian culture. His ideas were based on universal respect and tolerance as well as a shared understanding of the fundamental truth that unites all different religions. He was adamantly opposed to the untouchability practise. He became an outspoken opponent of the idea of untouchables because of his Vedanta education as according to him, the practise of untouchability had neither religious justification nor secular justification for it.

(iii) Swamiji as an Ideal of Everyone:

Among the social reformers of India, Swamiji as a trailblazer has dedicated himself to give India a modern identity that is the significant contribution of him. He was a social reformer and made an effort to combine modernity and ancient traditions in India. In proportion to their issues, he proposed solutions for the Indian society. For him, **each of us belongs to the same *Brahman***. Thus, each and every one is divine and the divinity is inherent in us. He advocated this in order to boost people’s self-confidence. This was a very brave move. However, he was unable to restrain himself from demonstrating to the Indian populace that religion only entails self-realisation. The caste system was relentlessly deteriorated at that time. It was born-based. He demonstrated that a person's quality determined not by their births or their castes. His goal was the **nation’s complete development**. He, therefore, proposed an educational system that is adequate for students’ overall development. We can stress on the two things of his educational reform. First of all, only a small number of people

⁶ Arrington, Robert, and Tapan Kumar Chakrabarti. (2001). *Swami Vivekananda: A Companion to the Philosophers*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, E-version.

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had access education at that time. Vivekananda advocated for **mass education** for all. One of his most significant contributions to society was the provision of **informal education**. When we examine his course of study, we find that it covers every subject necessary to develop a person's mental and physical stamina and independence. Thus, his philosophy had benefited India's working class. These are adequate to evident his social reformer status.

As a result, Vivekananda acted for eliminating the origin of social evils. Following him, the problem can be resolute by applying to the root of the problem, allowed to burn upward, and a new Indian nation can be created. Vivekananda mentioned it as radical reform. He opined, "My method of treatment is to take out by the roots the very causes of the disease and not to keep them merely suppressed."⁷ Vivekananda constantly conveyed support for the oppressed and marginalised people existing in society. The social ills are discussed in social philosophy. Social philosophy has a responsibility to establish ideals for eradicating these social ills so that everyone can live respectfully and peacefully in society. Like Vivekananda the other social reformers who made priceless contributions to the country like - Ishwar Chandra, Mother Teresa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was also the social reformer of the twentieth century who was named as Babasaheb, born in a low-caste Mahar family that was classified as 'untouchable' by the social caste system that predominated in India at the time. He was an inspiring jurist, celebrated political figure, perfect philosopher, inspirational teacher, creative writer, economist, reformer of society, re-interpreter of Buddhism, and principal designer of the Constitution of India. He received the Bharat Ratna posthumously from the Indian government in 1990 for his outstanding contributions.

Indian society is a long-standing and incredibly complex one. Indian society and the caste system are indissolubly associated and founded on *Catūrvarna*, a caste system established by Hinduism. The practice of caste, which is believed to have its genesis in the *Puruṣa Sukta* hymn 51 in the *Rig Veda* (1200—900 BCE)⁸. In the system of graded inequality,

⁷ Vivekananda, Swami. (1989). *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Vol.1, Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, p.128.

⁸ *Sukta* 90, in *Book X* of the *Rig Veda*, tells the story of the myth of creation. It describes the sacrifice of the Purusha (primeval man), from whose body the four varnas and the entire

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Brāhmins considered themselves superior to *Kṣatriya*, *Kṣatriya* thought for greater to *Vaiśya*, *Vaiśya* greater than *Śūdra*, and *Śūdra* remaining at the lowest part of the ranking. For many centuries, the untouchables were the lowest class in Hindu society. Physical contact with people was forbidden under the untouchability system due to erroneous beliefs about ritual purity and pollution. For the untouchable community, suffering from exclusion, subordination-humiliation, and exploitation was unavoidable. They were denied a great deal of opportunities that were reserved for the upper caste. “There cannot be a more degrading system of social organisation than the caste system,”⁹ opined Ambedkar. For him, “It is the system that deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity.”¹⁰

Thus, in India, untouchability is a social institution that upholds and legitimises the discriminatory practise for the people who were born into particular castes. Additionally, it supports some exploitative, exclusive, and humiliating behaviours. The caste system, which is untouchability's parent institution, is a phenomenon that is exclusive to the Indian subcontinent.

(i) B.R. Ambedkar was a Social Activist: On the Abolition of Untouchability:

Ambedkar started a tenacious campaign to end untouchability in Indian society for improving lives of the underprivileged classes. Ambedkar advocated for the untouchable community's share of power because without it, their complete uplift would not be possible while also supporting the demand for self-government. Ambedkar fought for the untouchables' **basic human rights** so that they could stand on their own two feet in contemporary India.

Ambedkar was not believed on fixed norms of any society. For him, norms which are the principles that are good and necessary also. A society or an individual cannot do anything without a norm, however a norm should be changed according to the time and surroundings.

universe emerged. When (the gods) divided the Purusha, his mouth became Brahmin, his arms Kshatriya, his thighs Vaishya and Shudra sprang from his feet. See Doniger (translation,2005). Some scholars believe that Sukta is a latter-day interpolation into the *Rig Veda*.

⁹ Ambedkar, B.R. (2022). *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 17.7 (online version).

¹⁰ Ambedkar, B.R. (2014). *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi: Navayana, p. 6.

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There will be no norm which can be fixed forever. The values of our norm can be reassessed. In respect of this, he vehemently criticised *Varṇa-vyāvasthā* which was the indicator of the fixed norm of society. In his social philosophy the cardinal principle was the **authoritative power of reason**. Based on that he criticised the sacred literature and the past. He thought that the Hindus are not liberal to follow their reason. Ambedkar strongly criticised the graded inequality prevailing in Hinduism which was too much discriminatory in those days. He thought that **true religion, reason and morality** go corollary with each other; it will be the foundation of peace, hope and solace.

For the advancement of the oppressed, he proclaimed the following rights:

- I. Rights to equality;
- II. Protection against dissimilar behaviour;
- III. Reservation in services that are Governmental;
- IV. For the development of the oppressed class a separate Department has to be assigned;
- V. Careful consideration has to be needed to protect the society from discrimination and exploitation and he criticised the caste system by burning the *Manusmṛiti* and claimed for innovative a code of behaviour.

For the abolition of caste system, at the completion of his journey, he adhered the way of constitution. Human rights, one man one value, president's emergency power, abolition of untouchability, equality before law, fairness in opportunity have been amalgamated into the Indian constitution only to perceive that the oppressed and the weaker sections could protect their interests in this class-ridden society.

(ii) Ambedkar's Belief in Religion for growth of Self-reliance:

Ambedkar was deeply influenced by Buddhism. His greatest contribution was the revival of Buddhism which is based on the four noble truths of teaching, meditation, wisdom, and unwavering faith in human potential. His views on religion were the outward signs of a political figure who was striving for the **civil rights of untouchables**. He held the opinion that genuine religion supports social institutions and fosters a commitment to the greater good. He participated in the discussion of the Hindu Code Bill in the Indian parliament in 1951 and provided **an explanation of secularism**. He contends that in a secular state, the

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parliament should not have the authority to impose one particular religion on the rest of the populace.

In respect of religion he was drawing the attention on –

1. For a liberal society religion is necessary requirement.
2. Not all religion is worth having.
3. Religion is not the speculation of God and soul rather it must assimilate with the facts of life.
4. It is not that God only the center of Religion rather it will be something more.
5. It is mistakenly considered that renunciation of the soul is the core of Religion.
6. Animal sacrifices cannot be the center of Religion.
7. The heart of the man is the residence of true religion but not the *Śāstras*.
8. Religion will be the unpleasant superstition if it is not attached with man and morality.
9. Religion is not the explanation of its origin or its end rather the goal of practising religion is to restructure the world.
10. By following the *Aṣṭāṅgika Mārga* any type of unhappiness or conflict of interest will not be occurred.
11. That possession of property brings power to one class and misery to another.
12. The sorrow will be removed by removing its cause which is essential for the betterment of the society.
13. Each and every human being will be treated as equal.
14. The scale of measurement of man not be dependent on birth rather it will be determined by the ability.
15. What is essential is **great ideals and not the noble birth**.

By these observances it can assume that he desired to introduce a society that is new and there will no differences, inequalities, injustice and wanted to construct an ideal society that will be based on **liberty, equality and fraternity**. He introduced **Neo-Buddhism** that was comprised with morality and equality and it also brings self-reliance in the people. Following him, this can be said that the three basic principles like- liberty, equality and fraternity is the fundamental requirements of a religion and he said, “unless a religion

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recognise these three fundamentals of social life religion will be doomed.”¹¹ Following Ambedkar, in the religion of Buddhism the preceding rudimentary principles were found and for the eradication of untouchability he comprised Buddhism. He said, “Buddhism is part and parcel of *Bharatiya* culture. I have taken care that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of the land.”¹²

(iii) Ambedkar as an Apostle of Introducing Social Justice:

A “just society,” or an ideal society, can be created by pursuing “**social justice**,” in Dr. Ambedkar’s opinion. He had visions of a **caste-free society** that upheld social justice. He held that the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity must serve as the foundation of a “just society.”

No less significant is Dr. Ambedkar’s influence on the Indian economy. He had voiced his opinions regarding farming practises and land reform. His ideas on land reform focused on improving the lot of the untouchables, who were primarily landless or had small plots of land to cultivate. He made a point of highlighting how important industrialization is to the growth of India's agricultural sector and its economy as a whole. His theories of economy based on state socialism, and he has been rightfully hailed as a champion of social justice. In Ambedkar's vision, India would be a nation free from exploitation, untouchability, and other forms of degrading behaviour towards people.

The battle Ambedkar fought for human dignity could be portrayed on a very large canvas. His entire body of work—writings, concepts, and outlook—led to the intellectual movement known as **social humanism**. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar will live on forever in the annals of world history as a great social philosopher and revolutionary and he has contributed his life for improving the oppressed.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we can say that by the path of spirituality and the path of practical reason Swami Vivekananda tried for awakening the people of India for their upliftment and the progress of the country. In another pole, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has applied practical reasons

¹¹ Ambedkar, B.R. (1979). *Writings and Speeches, vol.1*, Bombay, p.12.

¹² Keer, Dhananjaya. (1962). *Life and Mission of Ambedkar*, Bombay, p. 495.

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and the constitutional laws through which we can achieve our supreme goal. Both of them discussed different issues like caste system, untouchability, the religious, educational, social, economic development related with the society.

(i) **Swami Vivekananda** for his insightful works known as **the Messenger of Indian Wisdom** and **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** also for his social assistance and the builder of the Constitution of India well-known as the **Father of Indian Constitution**. Both have devoted for the country and for the progress of the people of India.

(ii) Showing the path of morality and spirituality as well as the path of practical reason Swami Vivekananda tried to awake and conscience the people of India for their upliftment and the development of the country. On the other hand, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has applied practical reasons as well as the constitutional laws through which we can achieve our supreme goal. Both of them discussed different issues like caste system, untouchability, the religious, political, social, economic development related with the society which are still relevant and inspiring in the 21st century.

(iii) Despite their dissimilarities, Swamiji and Ambedkar shared an ambition of constructing a more **equitable society**. Their work contributed to significant social and political change. Swamiji thinks that *Brahman* is in all of us and we have to realise it. So, he treated every people in equal basis. Ambedkar also supported the principle of equality because at the last stage of his life he was converted to Buddhism from Hinduism and he was basically influenced by Buddhism because this is the religion which advocated the principle of equality.

(iv) Swamiji has followed the path of spirituality. He reinterpreted the *Vedānta* and it becomes as **Practical Vedānta** where he mentioned that we have the capacity to resist the opponent party and this is our fundamental right to enjoy independence of India. Ambedkar, by making the Indian constitution and by some amendments, he also said about the particular issues.

(v) The principles of Swamiji and Ambedkar remaining extremely significant in contemporary India. Vivekananda's opinion regarding religion is extremely influential for removing any type of religious bigotry. In another pole, Ambedkar's works on the elimination of the caste system and he also has given protection for marginalised communities by implementing the legal and political safeguards that inspire the modern movements are associated with caste-based disparities and violence.

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(vi) Both of them has given the similar views regarding casteism. Swamiji vehemently criticised the caste system because for him individual should not be judged by their birth rather than they must be treated by their merit and their spiritual development. Dr. Ambedkar envisaged a society excluding any caste barrier.

(vii) **Suspension of untouchability** was Ambedkar's topmost priority. For Swamiji, among many activities, eradication of untouchability is one of them. In this respect, Swamiji's approach was that of reform whereas Ambedkar's approach was that of a struggle.

After independence, untouchability was reckoned an offence (Cf. Constitution of India, Article. 17). Ambedkar had learned from Buddhism that there is an equality in every man and they are capable to free themselves by their own efforts. So, he called upon his people to embrace a casteless Buddhism by leaving Hinduism through which Mahars got a social status. Swamiji's efforts had own the untouchables' facilities within the Hindu framework.

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