

The Enduring Relevance of Swami Vivekananda's Philosophy for Modern Social Work Practice: A Framework for Service and Transformation

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Abstract

This research paper focused on analysing the complex connections between Vivekananda's fundamental principles – the divinity of all people, the idea of Daridra Narayana (God in the poor), Jnana (Knowledge), Bhakti (Devotion), Karma (Selfless Action), Seva (Service) as worship, universal religion, education as "man-making," and the empowerment of women and the masses – and the values of social work practice. By examining his work, which included his writings, speeches, and the record of the Ramakrishna Mission, this paper revealed that Swami Vivekananda in his work presented a spiritually-based, holistic, and empowering framework that can enhance social work's dedication to social justice, human dignity, empowerment, and liberation from misery, especially in culturally relevant societies like India.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda, Social Work Practice, Vedanta, Seva, Empowerment, Social Justice and Spirituality in Social Work.

1. Introduction

Social work as a discipline focuses on well-being, reducing suffering, and achieving social justice, helping marginalized people to be empowered (IFSW, 2014) and providing evidence-based treatments for improving the functioning of the society as a whole which occur due to dysfunction of various social elements. However, there is increasing recognition among professionals within this field of the significance of the cultural context, indigenous knowledge systems, and the role of spirituality in building human resilience and in the process of healing (Canda & Furman, 2010; Coates et al., 2007). Swami Vivekananda, one of the major figures of the Indian Renaissance, emerged during a pivotal period of India's history; when India was under colonial domination and experiencing extreme social stratification. Vivekananda, a leading intellectual and spiritual voice of the Indian Renaissance was one such thinker whose ideas and philosophies are relevant today. During a time when India was experiencing colonization, social disintegration and extreme inequality, Vivekananda's philosophical contributions centered around the idea that each individual possesses divine nature, the value of service (seva) as a means of achieving

spiritual enlightenment, eradicating social injustice and cultivating inner strength, fearlessness and self-realization. The underlying values of social work are reflected throughout Vivekananda's philosophical framework which includes dignity, empowerment, community involvement and social justice.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how Vivekananda's philosophy provided a meaningful, culturally rich, spiritually inspirational model of practice for social workers. The integration of ideas from Vedantic humanism, spiritually empowering individuals and socially transformative service provide a broader conceptual framework and practice approach for social workers to use as they seek to utilize cultural diversity, spirituality and indigenous perspectives in their practice (a global effort within the field of social work).

Pillars of Vivekananda's Social Philosophy

- The Soul's Divinity (Atman) and Universal Fraternity
- Daridra Narayana: God in the Poor and the Suffering
- Seva as Karma Yoga: Selfless Service as Spiritual Practice
- Jnana (Knowledge), Bhakti (Devotion), and Karma (Action)
- Man-Making Education: Empowerment through Knowledge and Character
- Women's and Masses Empowerment

The Soul's Divinity (Atman) and Universal Fraternity: Vivekananda's entire social organisation rests on the Advaita Vedantic truism: "Each soul is potentially divine" (CW, Vol. 1, p. 257). This simple saying has huge implications:

- **Intrinsic Value and Dignity:** Every person, regardless of caste, creed, gender, economic background, or conduct, possesses inherent, unconditional value and dignity. This is consistent with the core social work value of "respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2021).
- **Equality and Non-Discrimination:** If the universal divine essence pervades all, man-made hierarchies based on birth, wealth, or power lose validity. Vivekananda himself was a strong critic of casteism and a champion of equality: "Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion" (CW, Vol. 3, p. 190). This is consistent with the social work commitment to combating discrimination and ensuring social inclusion.
- **Universal Brotherhood:** Perceiving the divine in everyone creates a sense of deep unity and shared family – Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family). This gives a strong spiritual justification to social work's emphasis on human relationships and interdependence in a global frame.

Daridra Narayana: God in the Poor and the Suffering: This is probably Vivekananda's most revolutionary and directly applicable idea for social work. He urged his followers: "Do you love your fellow men? Where should you go to seek for God – are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak, gods? Why not worship them first?" (CW, Vol. 5, p. 50). "The poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted – let these be your God. Know that service to these alone is the highest religion" (CW, Vol. 7, p. 147).

- **Transcending Pity, Cultivating Reverence:** Daridra Narayana elevates service from a deed of condescending pity or compulsory charity to a deed of reverence and devotion. The recipient of

service is not a "case" or a "beneficiary" but an embodiment of the divine worthy of highest respect and dedication. This profoundly spiritualizes the helping relationship.

- **Motivation for Service:** This idea gives social workers a strong, internal motivation to serve, grounding their work in a deep sense of consecrated responsibility and not just professional duty or emotional drive. It encourages humility on the part of the helper.
- **Structural Sin:** By identifying God with the poor, Vivekananda surreptitiously criticizes the social structures that cause and nurture poverty and suffering, inviting radical action to change them.

Seva as Karma Yoga: Selfless Service as Spiritual Practice: Seva (selfless service) was the supreme way of Karma Yoga – selfless action yoga, as explained by Vivekananda. "Serve the Lord in all. Serve man as God. That is as good as worship" (CW, Vol. 6, p. 319). Points are:

- **Selflessness (Nishkama Karma):** The focus is on doing service without attachment to personal benefit, praise, or particular results. The act itself, when done with the proper spirit, is reward in itself and cleanses the giver. This overcomes burnout by diverting attention from the outcome to the integrity of the action.
- **Service as Purification:** Practicing selfless service is considered a way of purifying the ego, practicing detachment, and ultimately actualizing one's own divinity. It is a spiritual practice.
- **Duty without Rights:** Vivekananda emphasized fulfilling one's duty without claiming rights. For social workers, it means an extensive attachment to service ethics even under systemic difficulties or underappreciation but holding on to the intrinsic merit of the work itself.

Jnana (Knowledge), Bhakti (Devotion), and Karma (Action): An Integrated Approach: Vivekananda disapproved of one-dimensional solutions. Real development and service call for integration:

- **Jnana (Knowledge):** Knowing the aetiology of suffering (ignorance/avidya) at the individual and collective level is important. Social work's focus on assessment, research, and analysis of systems finds resonance here. Vivekananda emphasized scientific temper and rational thinking as much as spiritual insight.
- **Bhakti (Devotion):** Transfusing service with love, compassion, and respect (Daridra Narayana) is vital. This touches upon the affective aspect of social work – empathy, compassion, and therapeutic relationship.
- **Karma (Action):** Knowledge and devotion have to take concrete form in order to help end suffering. This is the essence of social work intervention. Vivekananda demanded practical, tangible outcomes: "What we want is to see the thing done" (CW, Vol. 3, p. 246).

Man-Making Education: Empowerment through Knowledge and Character: Vivekananda proudly announced, "The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion – is it worth the name?" (CW, Vol. 5, p. 347).

- **From Literacy to Life-Building:** His vision of education was integral – "man-making" – with emphasis on the development of character, inculcation of self-confidence (Atma-shraddha), logical thinking, vocational knowledge, and spiritual resilience. This is consonant with social work's empowerment strategy and strengths approach (Saleebey, 2012).

- Education for Liberation: He considered education as the best weapon for the masses, to liberate people from shackles of poverty, superstition, and oppression. This aligns with the Freudian concepts of conscientization (Freire, 1970) and how social work sees education as being used for the betterment of individuals and social change.
- Emphasis on the Marginalized: Vivekananda focused on the education for the poor, lower caste, and women, who were traditionally excluded from education.

Women's and Masses' Empowerment: Vivekananda was a firm believer in women's empowerment and the welfare of the masses:

- Women: "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved" (CW, Vol. 5, p. 231). He was a champion of their education, economic self-reliance, and spiritual status, viewing them as the carriers of divine Shakti (power). This is a precursor to feminist social work approaches.
- Masses (Shudras/Dalits): He strongly denounced the oppression of caste: "It is we who are responsible for all our misery and all our degradation. Who told you to kneel before the feudal lords and the priests?" (CW, Vol. 3, p. 294). He focused on the empowerment of people by making them learn to rise through educating them.

Vivekananda's Philosophy in Conversation with Fundamental Social Work Principles

- Dignity and Worth of the Person: The atman principle offers the most fundamental possible basis for the inherent dignity and worth of each human being. Social workers who work from this framework treat clients with deep respect, looking beyond labels or presenting problems to the underlying nature of the person. This helps to reduce stigma and promote real empathy.
- Empowerment and the Strengths Perspective: Vivekananda's emphasis on "man-making" education, establishment of Atma-shraddha (self-trust), and the stirring of the inborn divinity in every person is essentially an empowerment philosophy. It closely aligns with the strength's perspective of social work (Saleebey, 2012), which emphasizes the identification and mobilization of clients' inherent capacities and resources over their deficits. His appeal to the masses to "Arise! Awake!" is directly an empowerment message.
- Integrity and Ethical Practice: Karma Yoga focuses on unselfish actions, one's duty, the morality of one's intent, and the lack of attachment to personal reward as a strong ethical foundation. Thus, social workers will conduct themselves ethically by acting honestly; avoiding exploiting their positions; maintaining professional boundaries; and prioritizing the interests of their clients above those of their own personal agendas or that of their institutions. The principle of Seva itself implies a commitment to ethics.
- Social Justice and Human Rights: Vivekananda's denunciation of caste, poverty, and oppression of women and the masses was a compelling appeal for social justice. His ideal of Daridra Narayana places the alleviation of poverty and oppression as not merely a social good, but as a fundamental human right to be found in acknowledgment of divine dignity. His focus on education and self-capacity building among marginalized groups directly reflects the empowerment objectives of social justice practice and human rights approaches (Ife, 2012).

- Significance of Human Relationships: The universal brotherhood based on the single divine essence reminds us of the importance of compassionate, respectful, and empowering relationships – the foundation of successful social work practice. Seva as worship promotes a reverence-based, mutual relationship, as opposed to hierarchy.

Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda's ideology worked as a strong and timeless social work model. His fundamental ideas that he majorly mentioned in his philosophy were the inherent dignity of each individual (Atman), the duty to serve the suffering as God (Daridra Narayana), the spiritual practice of selfless service (Seva as Karma Yoga), the wholistic empowerment through "man-making" education, and the holistic strategy of knowledge, devotion, and action – are its ethical foundation. This is the essence of social work with religious objective. Swami Vivekananda's philosophy provides social workers with both an ethical and spiritual basis as well as a very practical, humanistic and practice-based way of thinking about contemporary social work. The affirmation of the divine nature and worth of all individuals is consistent with the central values of social work; it reminds social workers that no matter what their location in society, or whatever their problems may be, all people have inherent value. Through his phrase Daridra Narayana, he transforms relationships based on help, from charity or a relationship of obligation, into ones based on reverence, empathy, and mutual respect. This is consistent with the basic principles of the social work profession, i.e., maintaining the dignity of clients, promoting client self-determination, and building non-hierarchical, empowering relationships between clients and professionals.

The ongoing work of the Ramakrishna Mission continues to be a testament to the practical application and utility of his ideals. Vivekananda's holistic approach (Jnana, Bhakti, Karma) is concerned with treating the entire person – mind, feelings, body, social, and spiritual aspects. This is the only way of attaining the Lord" (CW, Vol. 7, p. 148). In addition, his theory of Seva as Karma Yoga, builds upon social work ethics, and places practice within a larger context of selfless action, integrity, and detachment from personal benefit. An orientation grounded in this view, will provide workers with a sense of emotional stability, and protect them from burn out, by encouraging them to focus on their internal motivation for action rather than external recognition of their efforts. His emphasis on holistic development through "man making" education, cultivating self-confidence (Atma-shraddha), and empowering marginalized populations, parallels many modern empowerment models, strengths-based practices, community development models, anti-oppressive models, and human rights-based frameworks.

Similarly, his call for the integration of knowledge (Jnana), compassion (Bhakti), and action (Karma) is particularly applicable to modern social work, where workers are expected to integrate analytical competence, empathic engagement, and effective intervention. Similarly, his encouragement of workers to develop a multi-dimensional view of clients and communities, which considers psychological, social, structural, and cultural/spiritual aspects of well-being, has become increasingly important for holistic and culturally competent social work practice.

Additionally, his advocacy for the upliftment of women, the eradication of caste systems, and the empowerment of masses, anticipated many of the social justice and anti-oppressive views held by social workers today. As such, these views require social workers to challenge systemic inequities, advocate for

transformative social change, and support community empowerment, core functions of the social work profession today.

As evidence of the applicability and sustainability of Swami Vivekananda's ideals, the Ramakrishna Mission remains active today as evidence that his ideals are not only philosophical, but practical. Thus, his spiritually-grounded yet socially-engaged view of the world provides social workers with a culturally-resonant, ethically-enlightening, and profoundly motivational framework for their service. As such, Vivekananda's philosophy contributes to social work's ongoing endeavor to alleviate suffering, promote justice, and create a more just and equitable society for all.

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