



Decolonising Nationalism: Insights from Swami Vivekananda

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ABSTRACT

The idea of the nation and the sentiments of nationalism originated in the European political and cultural milieu. As this idea spread across the world, it became a political instrument for organising modern societies into states around new collective identities. The era of loyalty to monarchs and empires gave way to an era of allegiance to the nation, consolidating nations into states—the nation-states of modernity. Rooted in the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Western nationalism emphasised rationalism, ethnocultural unity, territoriality, political sovereignty, and the state as the embodiment of the people's will. Swami Vivekananda's thought emerged from his deep rootedness in Indian spiritual and philosophical traditions, combined with a direct encounter with Western nationalism and its colonial manifestations. Yet, rather than rejecting Western ideas outright, Vivekananda recognised their potential value for India's national regeneration. He sought to reinterpret nationalism in an Indian idiom, drawing from Vedantic philosophy, cultural unity in diversity, and service to humanity. For him, nationalism was not merely political but moral and spiritual—centred on education, character building, and the uplift of the poor and marginalised. While Western nationalism is often seen as territorial, state-centric, and materialistic, Vivekananda envisioned a form of spiritual nationalism grounded in ethics, cultural confidence, and universal humanism. This paper, however, moves beyond the



binary opposition between Western and Vivekananda's concepts of nationalism. It interrogates the commonly held dichotomy by suggesting that Vivekananda appropriated and transformed the Western framework of nationalism to serve India's civilisational revival. His nationalism fused spirituality, social service, and universalism, offering a vision that transcends narrow political sovereignty and remains deeply relevant in today's interconnected world.

Introduction

The idea of the nation and the accompanying sentiment of nationalism have historically emerged from the European political and cultural experience. The rise of nationalism in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, and the consolidation of the modern state. In this context, nationalism became a political and cultural force that reorganised societies around collective identities rooted in shared language, history, and ethnicity. It created a sense of belonging that replaced older forms of loyalty to monarchs, empires, or local communities. Nationalism, as articulated in Western political thought, rested on principles of territorial sovereignty, political unity, and the belief that the state embodied the general will of its people. This idea, while emancipatory in Europe, turned into a tool of domination and control when exported to the colonies, including India.

As the idea of nationalism travelled beyond Europe, it encountered societies with diverse civilisational histories and philosophical worldviews. In many non-Western contexts, including India, nationalism was not merely an imitation of European ideas but a creative adaptation shaped by indigenous cultural resources. The encounter between the colonised and the coloniser generated new questions about selfhood, identity, and freedom. The colonial experience was not just a political or economic subjugation but also a cultural and psychological domination that demanded a redefinition of the self and society. The response to colonial modernity therefore required both a critical engagement with the West and a rediscovery of indigenous intellectual and spiritual traditions.

In this wider framework of decolonisation, Swami Vivekananda's ideas on nationalism stand out as one of the earliest and most profound attempts to reinterpret the concept from within the Indian philosophical tradition. Vivekananda (1863–1902), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, lived in a period of intense colonial oppression and cultural subordination. His travels to the West exposed him to the power and vigour of Western nationalism, but also to its moral and spiritual limitations. He observed that while



the West had attained material progress, it lacked the spiritual depth and universalism that characterised Indian civilisation. Conversely, India, despite its rich spiritual and philosophical heritage, had fallen into social stagnation, caste divisions, and a lack of national consciousness. For Vivekananda, the task was not to reject Western modernity but to reinterpret and integrate its strengths with India's own values to restore the nation's vitality.

Vivekananda's nationalism thus represented both a critique and an appropriation of the Western model. He accepted the necessity of national awakening and unity but rejected the materialist and exclusionary aspects of Western nationalism. Instead of defining the nation in terms of race, language, or territory, he located its essence in spiritual and moral unity. The Vedantic principle of the oneness of all existence became, for him, the philosophical foundation of Indian nationalism. In his vision, a true nation was not merely a political entity but a collective embodiment of the spiritual ideals of its people. National regeneration, therefore, required moral uplift, education, and service to humanity rather than mere political sovereignty.

Vivekananda's emphasis on "man-making education" and "service of the poor" reflected his conviction that a nation's strength lay in the character and consciousness of its people. He urged Indians to overcome social divisions and rediscover their dignity through collective action grounded in ethics and compassion. In this sense, his concept of nationalism was both **inclusive and transformative**, combining the moral ideals of spirituality with the practical necessities of modern nation-building. While the West separated religion from politics and emphasised competition among states, Vivekananda envisaged a nationalism that harmonised spirituality with social responsibility and universal brotherhood.

This paper approaches Vivekananda's idea of nationalism not as a simple antithesis to the Western model but as a process of **decolonising and re-signifying** the concept itself. It argues that Vivekananda's thought exemplifies an early form of intellectual decolonisation, where a borrowed concept is reinterpreted through indigenous categories to serve emancipatory purposes. His engagement with the West was marked by openness and discernment rather than rejection or imitation. He believed that while the West had mastered the art of organisation, discipline, and material development, India's contribution lay in spirituality, philosophy, and universal ethics. A synthesis of the two, according to him, would lead to the creation of a balanced and humane civilisation.

The continuing relevance of Vivekananda's ideas lies in his ability to transcend the binary opposition between East and West. In today's interconnected and globalised world, where nationalism often degenerates into exclusivism and aggression, Vivekananda's vision offers an alternative that reconciles



national pride with global solidarity. His thought provides a framework for rethinking nationalism as a moral and spiritual project rather than a merely political one.

The following sections of this paper will therefore explore:

1. The evolution of nationalism in Western thought and its colonial implications;
2. Vivekananda's reinterpretation of nationalism through Vedantic philosophy and cultural revival;
3. His vision of education, service, and moral regeneration as foundations of nationhood; and
4. The contemporary significance of his spiritual nationalism as a model for decolonised national identity.

Through this exploration, the paper aims to demonstrate that Swami Vivekananda's idea of nationalism represents not only a response to colonial domination but also a universal model of nationhood rooted in ethics, inclusivity, and the unity of humankind.

Western Nationalism and Its Colonial Implications

The emergence of nationalism in the Western world is closely tied to the processes of modernity that transformed Europe between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment together reshaped the relationship between individuals, communities, and the state. The gradual decline of feudal loyalties and the rise of secular rationalism created the intellectual conditions for the birth of the nation as a new locus of identity and legitimacy. Thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Gottfried Herder, and later, Ernest Renan, contributed to shaping a discourse in which the nation came to be seen as the natural and moral community of people bound by shared culture, history, and destiny.

In this intellectual environment, nationalism emerged as a unifying and emancipatory force. It was a response to the fragmentation of medieval Europe and to the search for a new collective identity in the age of reason. The Enlightenment emphasis on human reason and autonomy, combined with Romanticism's focus on culture and emotion, produced two broad currents within Western nationalism: the **civic** and the **ethnic**. Civic nationalism, rooted in Enlightenment liberalism, defined the nation as a voluntary association of citizens united by shared political principles, as exemplified by the French Revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ethnic nationalism, on the other hand, drew



inspiration from the Romantic movement, emphasising common descent, language, and culture, as seen in the German and Italian national unifications.

Both forms of nationalism, however, shared certain fundamental characteristics: a strong attachment to territory, the centrality of the state, and the idea of sovereignty as the ultimate expression of the people's will. The modern nation-state thus became both the symbol and the instrument of collective power. National identity was tied to political boundaries, and the state was seen as the guardian of the nation's integrity and destiny. This convergence of nationalism and statehood produced unprecedented energy for political mobilisation, industrialisation, and social reform within Europe. Yet, it also laid the groundwork for domination and exclusion beyond its borders.

As Europe expanded through colonialism, the same ideology that had once served as a force for liberation within Europe was turned outward as a mechanism of control. Nationalism became intertwined with imperialism, as nations sought to project their power globally in the name of civilisation, progress, and destiny. The Enlightenment ideals of reason and liberty were selectively applied; the rhetoric of universal humanity masked a hierarchy that placed Europe at the pinnacle of civilisation. Colonised societies were often portrayed as backward, static, and in need of Western tutelage. The very idea of the nation, which in Europe implied self-determination, was denied to the colonised world.

In the Indian context, the colonial project operated not only through political and economic subjugation but also through **epistemic domination**—a redefinition of knowledge, culture, and identity in European terms. The British colonial state used the discourse of Western nationalism to legitimise its rule by claiming to bring unity and order to a supposedly fragmented subcontinent. The construction of India as a land without historical consciousness or national unity served as a justification for imperial governance. This produced what Partha Chatterjee later called the “derivative discourse” of nationalism, where the colonised adopted the modern idea of the nation but had to reinterpret it within their own civilisational framework.

Western nationalism, with its emphasis on political sovereignty, territorial integrity, and industrial progress, did inspire sections of India's emerging intelligentsia. Leaders and reformers in the nineteenth century—Rammohan Roy, Dadabhai Naoroji, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, and later Aurobindo and Gandhi—each grappled with the challenge of translating the idea of the nation into the Indian social and cultural context. However, the transplantation of the Western model was neither complete nor uncontested. India's pluralism, spiritual traditions, and hierarchical social structures made it impossible to replicate the European trajectory of nation-building.



It is in this historical moment that Swami Vivekananda's thought assumes critical significance. His exposure to the West during his travels in the 1890s enabled him to observe both the strengths and contradictions of Western civilisation. In his speeches in America and England, Vivekananda praised the discipline, organisation, and social service of the West, yet he also critiqued its excessive materialism and moral individualism. He recognised that Western nationalism had succeeded in creating powerful, united societies, but he warned that such unity was often sustained through competition, imperialism, and the pursuit of power.

The colonial implications of Western nationalism lay precisely in this contradiction: while professing universal human rights and freedom, it produced hierarchies of race, culture, and civilisation that justified domination. The moral vacuum of material progress, in Vivekananda's view, was symptomatic of a deeper spiritual crisis. His critique, however, was not an outright rejection but a call for balance—a synthesis in which the organisational and political strengths of the West could be combined with the spiritual and ethical depth of the East.

Vivekananda's reimagining of nationalism thus arose from the need to reclaim the concept from its colonial distortions. He sought to turn the Western idea of the nation, which had been used to dominate, into a force for India's self-awakening and liberation. In doing so, he transformed nationalism from a political ideology into a moral and spiritual project. This transformation marked the beginning of what may be termed a **decolonising nationalism**, in which the colonised subject reclaims the power to define nationhood on its own philosophical and cultural terms.

Therefore, while Western nationalism provided the structural framework—the idea of unity, collective identity, and political purpose—Vivekananda supplied it with new ethical and spiritual content drawn from the Vedantic tradition. His reinterpretation turned nationalism into a means of self-realisation and service rather than domination and competition. It is this transformation that the next section explores in detail, examining how Vivekananda's spiritual and philosophical worldview redefined the meaning of nationhood for a colonised India.

Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of Nationalism: The Spiritual and Philosophical Foundations

Swami Vivekananda's conception of nationalism cannot be understood merely as a political response to colonial domination; it must be situated within the broader philosophical framework of Vedanta and the civilisational ethos of India. For Vivekananda, the nation was not simply a territorial or political entity but a spiritual organism — a living manifestation of collective consciousness shaped by moral, cultural,



and metaphysical ideals. His nationalism sought to awaken this latent consciousness and reorient it toward self-realisation and social service. Unlike the Western conception of nationalism rooted in sovereignty, power, and material progress, Vivekananda's idea of the nation was inseparable from dharma, self-knowledge, and compassion.

1. The Vedantic Foundation: Oneness and Universalism

The philosophical foundation of Vivekananda's nationalism lies in the Vedantic idea of the unity of existence — the belief that all beings are manifestations of the same divine reality (Brahman). This metaphysical vision translated, in social and political terms, into a call for unity amidst diversity. The Upanishadic dictum “Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti” (Truth is one, the wise call it by many names) resonated deeply in his interpretation of nationhood. For Vivekananda, the Indian nation could only be strong when it recognised its underlying spiritual oneness, transcending the barriers of caste, creed, and region that had fragmented society.

He saw the nation as the collective expression of this divine potential. Each individual, by realising the divinity within, contributed to the moral and spiritual elevation of the whole community. National strength, therefore, was not a product of conquest or power, but of inner self-realisation. Vivekananda often declared, “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within by controlling nature — external and internal.” When applied to the national sphere, this statement becomes a vision of social empowerment and moral regeneration through spiritual awakening.

2. Religion, Morality, and National Regeneration

Vivekananda's approach to nationalism placed religion — or more precisely, spirituality — at its core. He did not advocate a theocratic state but rather a spiritually inspired society where ethical conduct and selfless service formed the basis of collective life. He often lamented that India's degeneration was due not to a lack of faith, but to the misinterpretation of religion as ritual and dogma divorced from human welfare. True religion, he argued, was the realisation of oneness and the practice of universal love.

This emphasis on practical spirituality became the moral foundation of his nationalism. He repeatedly urged the youth of India to channel their religious energy into social service, declaring, “They alone live who live for others; the rest are more dead than alive.” In his vision, service to humanity was not charity but worship — the worship of God in man. The poor, the illiterate, and the oppressed were not objects of pity but embodiments of divinity. This idea, which later inspired the concept of “Daridra Narayana Seva,” transformed the ethical basis of nationalism from self-interest to compassion and duty.



Vivekananda's call to "Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached" encapsulated his belief that national freedom must begin with inner awakening. Political independence without moral regeneration would be meaningless. Hence, for him, nationalism was not a movement of exclusion or competition but a moral and spiritual project aimed at the uplift of all — especially the most marginalised.

3. Education and Character Building as Instruments of National Strength

Education occupied a central place in Vivekananda's conception of nation-building. He regarded it as the primary means of awakening the latent power within individuals and societies. However, his idea of education went beyond literacy or vocational training. He defined it as "the manifestation of the perfection already in man." The purpose of education was to build character, instil confidence, and awaken a sense of duty and service.

Vivekananda believed that the crisis of India under colonial rule was fundamentally a crisis of character and confidence. Centuries of subjugation had produced a psychology of dependence and inferiority. Therefore, the foremost task was to regenerate self-respect and cultural pride. "We must have faith in ourselves first," he insisted, "and then we can have faith in God." His educational philosophy thus aimed at developing strength — both moral and intellectual — to stand up against oppression and ignorance.

He also saw education as the bridge between India's spiritual heritage and the modern scientific spirit of the West. The integration of these two, he believed, would produce a generation capable of harmonising reason and faith, action and contemplation — the true foundation of a strong nation. In this synthesis lay his vision of decolonised knowledge and self-reliant modernity.

4. Synthesis of East and West: Towards a Universal Nationalism

Vivekananda's encounter with Western civilisation during his travels led him to admire its organisational efficiency, discipline, and respect for human dignity. However, he also warned against the excesses of materialism and individualism. His approach was neither rejection nor imitation but synthesis. He envisioned a future where the spiritual insight of the East and the material progress of the West would unite to form a balanced and humane civilisation.

In his famous address at the World's Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893), Vivekananda declared the message of universal tolerance and acceptance that, to him, lay at the heart of Indian civilisation. This universality was also central to his conception of nationalism. He did not see India's nationalism as isolationist or chauvinistic but as part of a larger mission — the spiritual enlightenment of humanity.



“India will rise,” he said, “because her birthright is the spiritual gift to the world.” Thus, Indian nationalism, in his thought, was inherently internationalist and humanitarian, grounded in the ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* — the world as one family.

This universalism distinguished his nationalism from the aggressive, exclusionary forms that emerged later in the twentieth century. For Vivekananda, national pride was inseparable from global responsibility. The true measure of a nation’s greatness lay not in its military might or wealth but in its contribution to the moral and spiritual advancement of humanity.

5. Nationalism as Self-Realisation and Social Transformation

Ultimately, Vivekananda’s reinterpretation of nationalism can be understood as a process of self-realisation at both the individual and collective levels. Just as the individual attains freedom through the realisation of the Self, the nation achieves liberation by awakening to its moral and spiritual essence. This liberation, however, was not inward-looking; it demanded active engagement with the social realities of poverty, ignorance, and inequality.

By combining spirituality with social action, Vivekananda redefined the relationship between religion and nationalism. He provided an ethical foundation for collective identity that transcended both sectarian divisions and colonial definitions of civilisation. His vision transformed nationalism into a movement for self-purification and collective empowerment — a process through which India could reclaim its dignity and fulfil its historical role in the moral evolution of humanity.

In essence, Vivekananda’s nationalism was **spiritual without being theocratic, modern without being materialistic, and universal without being rootless**. It offered a model of decolonised nationhood grounded in ethics, unity, and selfless service. While Western nationalism emphasised sovereignty and power, Vivekananda’s vision centred on self-knowledge, character, and compassion — qualities that remain crucial in a world increasingly divided by narrow identities.

Education, Social Reform, and Service: Practical Dimensions of Vivekananda’s Nationalism

Swami Vivekananda’s nationalism, though deeply rooted in spirituality and Vedantic philosophy, was never abstract or otherworldly. It was a call to action — a dynamic movement aimed at transforming Indian society through education, service, and moral regeneration. His conception of national awakening rested on the conviction that true freedom could not be achieved through political means alone; it required the awakening of the collective moral and intellectual energies of the people. In this sense,



Vivekananda's nationalism was both **constructive and transformative**, seeking to rebuild India from within by empowering its people through self-knowledge, education, and service.

1. Education as the Engine of National Regeneration

Vivekananda regarded education as the most powerful instrument for social transformation and national reconstruction. His philosophy of education was inseparable from his vision of nationalism because he saw ignorance, fear, and social division as the primary causes of India's decline. For him, the goal of education was not merely to accumulate information but to manifest the innate potential within each individual. "Education," he said, "is the manifestation of the perfection already in man."

This conception of education had both a moral and a social dimension. It sought to create individuals who were self-reliant, courageous, and imbued with a sense of duty toward the nation. He opposed the colonial education system, which, in his view, produced clerks and imitators rather than thinkers and leaders. British education had alienated Indians from their cultural roots and eroded their confidence. To counter this, Vivekananda proposed an education system that harmonised modern scientific knowledge with spiritual wisdom.

He envisioned an education that built character and cultivated discipline, moral integrity, and compassion. For him, education was a means to produce strong individuals who would serve as the moral backbone of the nation. "We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one's own feet," he declared. Such education, he believed, would not only uplift individuals but also revitalise the collective life of the nation.

His emphasis on education also extended to women and the poor, whom he saw as the key to national progress. He argued that India could not rise until its women were educated and its downtrodden masses uplifted. "There is no chance for the welfare of the world," he said, "unless the condition of women is improved." This inclusive approach made his educational vision a powerful instrument of social justice and national integration.

2. Social Reform and the Reconstruction of Indian Society

For Vivekananda, national regeneration required a radical transformation of India's social order. He was deeply concerned about the divisions of caste, superstition, and inequality that had crippled Indian



society. However, unlike many social reformers of his time, he did not advocate a wholesale rejection of tradition; rather, he sought its reinterpretation in the light of rationality and spirituality.

He saw the caste system not as an eternal religious order but as a historical institution that had degenerated from a system of functional organisation into one of oppression. True religion, he maintained, recognised the divinity in every human being and could not sanction social inequality. His famous declaration, “It is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics,” captured his conviction that religion must serve the living and the poor, not perpetuate privilege or orthodoxy.

Vivekananda believed that India’s regeneration would come not through political revolution but through a **spiritual and social awakening** that restored human dignity and solidarity. He urged the youth to dedicate themselves to the service of the oppressed, calling them to be “man-making” and “nation-building” workers. In this sense, his social reform was inseparable from his nationalism — it aimed not only at improving material conditions but also at reviving the moral and spiritual foundations of society.

His critique of ritualism, caste exclusivity, and inertia was therefore part of a broader project to cleanse and rejuvenate Indian civilisation. The true measure of India’s greatness, he insisted, lay not in its rituals or temples but in its capacity for compassion and moral leadership. “So long as millions live in hunger and ignorance,” he said, “I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated, pays not the least heed to them.” These words capture the moral urgency of his vision — a nationalism that identified service to the poor as the highest form of patriotism.

3. The Ideal of Service: Karma Yoga and Nation-Building

Service (*seva*) was central to Vivekananda’s reinterpretation of both religion and nationalism. Drawing upon the Bhagavad Gita’s philosophy of *Karma Yoga* — the path of selfless action — he redefined service as the highest spiritual discipline. To serve humanity, he argued, was to serve God, for “the living God is the poor, the miserable, the weak.” This identification of service with worship gave his nationalism a profoundly ethical and inclusive dimension.

For Vivekananda, service was not charity but **empowerment** — a means to awaken divine consciousness in oneself and others. He saw the act of serving the poor as an expression of spiritual realisation and national duty. The establishment of the **Ramakrishna Mission** in 1897 embodied this vision in institutional form. The Mission combined spiritual training with social service — building schools, hospitals, and relief programmes while nurturing moral character and discipline among its members. It became the practical embodiment of Vivekananda’s synthesis of spirituality and social responsibility.



Through the Ramakrishna Mission, Vivekananda demonstrated that religion could be a force for social progress rather than superstition or passivity. He transformed the ancient ideal of renunciation (*tyaga*) into one of active engagement with society — a **spiritual activism** that made service the foundation of nation-building. This transformation marked a decisive departure from the Western model of nationalism based on competition and power politics. In his vision, the strength of a nation lay in the selflessness of its people and their capacity for organised compassion.

4. National Unity and Cultural Confidence

Another central theme in Vivekananda's nationalism was the idea of cultural unity as the moral basis of national identity. He viewed India not as a political construct but as a spiritual civilisation held together by shared values and ideals. Despite its diversity of languages, customs, and beliefs, India had, in his eyes, a common spiritual core expressed through Vedanta. "It is religion that has been the life-blood of this nation," he observed, "and if you take away religion from India, she will die."

This statement, often misunderstood as a call for theocracy, was actually a call for cultural self-confidence. Vivekananda believed that India's decline was due to a loss of faith in her own traditions. National regeneration, therefore, required a rediscovery of the inner vitality of Indian culture. His message was one of revival, not regression — to adapt ancient ideals to modern needs without losing their moral and philosophical essence.

In this sense, Vivekananda's nationalism was **decolonising in the truest sense**: it sought to liberate the Indian mind from colonial inferiority by reasserting the value of indigenous thought. He did not advocate isolationism but intellectual self-respect — an ability to engage with the world from a position of moral strength. His famous exhortation to the youth, "Be proud that thou art an Indian; and all glory to God that thou art born in this great land," was not mere rhetoric but a psychological strategy for rebuilding collective confidence after centuries of subjugation.

In sum, Vivekananda's practical programme of education, social reform, and service transformed his philosophical vision of nationalism into a living movement of social renewal. He demonstrated that a nation's progress depends not on political power alone but on the moral awakening of its people. His emphasis on self-reliance, compassion, and education continues to provide a model for inclusive and ethical nation-building.



The Contemporary Relevance of Vivekananda's Nationalism: Decolonisation, Global Ethics, and the Modern Nation-State

Swami Vivekananda's reinterpretation of nationalism — grounded in spirituality, ethics, and service — remains one of the most profound responses to the dual challenges of colonial domination and cultural disintegration. More than a century after his passing, his thought continues to resonate in contemporary debates on nationalism, decolonisation, and global ethics. In an age marked by aggressive ethnonationalism, economic inequality, and ecological crisis, Vivekananda's vision offers a corrective: a model of nationhood that harmonises spiritual depth with social responsibility and global solidarity.

1. Decolonising the Idea of Nationhood

The first aspect of Vivekananda's continuing relevance lies in his contribution to **decolonising the very idea of the nation**. The modern concept of the nation-state, as inherited from Europe, was built upon the principles of territorial sovereignty, competition, and exclusivity. In the postcolonial world, this model often resulted in the replication of colonial hierarchies within new states. Nationalism, instead of serving as an emancipatory force, frequently became a mechanism for asserting power or suppressing internal diversity.

Vivekananda's nationalism, by contrast, was **inclusive and spiritual rather than exclusionary and political**. He did not conceive of the nation as a uniform or centralised power but as a living organism united by shared moral and cultural values. His emphasis on *unity in diversity* anticipated later models of pluralism and multiculturalism that define many modern democracies. For him, national unity was not the suppression of difference but the harmonisation of many voices into a shared ethical purpose.

By locating the foundation of nationalism in spiritual oneness rather than ethnicity or race, Vivekananda effectively **decolonised the concept of identity**. He refused to define nationhood in opposition to others; instead, he saw it as an internal awakening — a process of self-realisation that freed India from both political and psychological subjugation. This vision challenges contemporary forms of nationalism that rely on exclusion, antagonism, or superiority. His message that “the more we come out and do good to others, the more our hearts will be purified, and God will be in them” transforms nationalism from a self-centred ideology into an ethical duty to uplift all humanity.



2. Ethical Nationalism and Global Humanism

Vivekananda's nationalism transcended narrow patriotism to embrace a **cosmopolitan and ethical humanism**. His idea of *spiritual nationalism* did not advocate withdrawal from the world but active participation in it with compassion and responsibility. The Vedantic vision of the unity of all beings formed the moral core of this worldview. It led him to affirm that service to one's nation was inseparable from service to humanity.

In a time when global politics is often characterised by materialism, competition, and the pursuit of power, Vivekananda's thought invites a reorientation of national purpose. He envisioned nations as moral communities that should contribute to the collective advancement of humanity. "Each nation," he said, "has a destiny to fulfil, a message to deliver, and a mission to accomplish." For India, this mission was spiritual — to offer the world a philosophy of harmony, tolerance, and moral strength.

This universal dimension makes his nationalism profoundly relevant to the **globalised world of the twenty-first century**, where national boundaries are increasingly porous, and interdependence is a defining condition of existence. In the face of global crises — climate change, displacement, and moral fragmentation — Vivekananda's emphasis on the unity of life and ethical cooperation offers an alternative to the destructive rivalries of power politics. His vision anticipates the need for what may be called "**ethical globalisation**" — a global order rooted in compassion, justice, and shared responsibility rather than domination and exploitation.

3. The Moral Basis of National Strength

Vivekananda's insistence that the strength of a nation lies in the character of its people is a message of enduring significance. He repeatedly warned that without moral integrity and self-discipline, political freedom would degenerate into chaos and corruption. This insight remains crucial for postcolonial societies that have gained independence but continue to struggle with inequality, social fragmentation, and moral disorientation.

For Vivekananda, nationalism was not a matter of external sovereignty alone but of **internal sovereignty** — mastery over ignorance, selfishness, and fear. His call to "Arise, awake" was not only political rhetoric but a summons to moral awakening. The regeneration of India, he believed, depended on the development of courage, self-respect, and a spirit of service among its people. The true patriot, in his eyes, was one who dedicated his life to the uplift of others.



This moral understanding of nationalism provides a powerful critique of contemporary trends where economic growth and political power are often pursued without ethical responsibility. In the global context, it challenges nations to measure progress not merely in terms of material wealth but in their capacity to promote justice, equality, and compassion. In this sense, Vivekananda's teachings anticipate the modern discourse on **human development** and **ethical governance** that links individual dignity with collective well-being.

4. Spiritual Nationalism and the Crisis of Modernity

Vivekananda's thought also addresses a deeper civilisational concern — the crisis of modernity itself. The modern world, he observed, had achieved unparalleled material progress but had lost its moral compass. In the West, he saw a society that had mastered the external world but remained enslaved to desire and competition. In the East, he saw a civilisation rich in spiritual insight but weakened by inertia and superstition. His life's work was to synthesise the best of both: the scientific spirit of the West with the spiritual wisdom of the East.

This synthesis remains vitally relevant today as societies across the world grapple with alienation, ecological degradation, and the erosion of ethical values. Vivekananda's call for **balance between material and spiritual development** anticipates contemporary discussions about sustainable growth and ecological consciousness. His belief that service to humanity is the highest expression of religion resonates with modern ideas of social responsibility and environmental stewardship.

By integrating spirituality with rationality, and moral vision with practical action, Vivekananda proposed a model of civilisation that could overcome the dualism of modernity. His nationalism, far from being insular, became a bridge between cultures and civilisations — a means of creating global harmony through self-knowledge and ethical engagement.

5. Relevance to India and the Postcolonial World

For India, Vivekananda's ideas continue to provide a moral compass for nation-building. His emphasis on character, education, and service offers a vision of development that goes beyond economic indicators. In a society still confronting inequality, communal tensions, and moral disarray, his call for unity based on compassion and mutual respect remains urgent. His warning that "religion has to enter into the making of character, not of dogma" is particularly pertinent in an era where religious identity is often politicised.



In the wider postcolonial world, Vivekananda's synthesis of spiritual heritage and modern rationality provides an example of how non-Western societies can modernise without losing their civilisational integrity. His nationalism was not derivative but dialogical — engaging with the West on equal terms and reinterpreting borrowed concepts through indigenous categories. This approach embodies the essence of **intellectual decolonisation**, which seeks neither isolation nor imitation but creative synthesis.

6. Conclusion: Towards a Universal Ethic of Nationhood

Swami Vivekananda's idea of nationalism represents a transformative synthesis — one that unites the individual and the collective, the spiritual and the material, the national and the universal. He transformed nationalism from a doctrine of power into a philosophy of service, ethics, and self-realisation. His vision was at once deeply Indian and profoundly human, rooted in the Vedantic truth of oneness and expressed through active compassion.

In the contemporary world, where nationalism often breeds division, his thought reminds us that the true purpose of national identity is not to dominate others but to realise the divine potential within and to contribute to the common good. A decolonised nationalism, inspired by Vivekananda, is thus one that affirms dignity without arrogance, unity without uniformity, and progress without moral decay.

Vivekananda's words — “The nation lives in the individuals; they die, and the nation dies” — encapsulate his timeless message: that the health of a nation depends on the moral and spiritual vitality of its people. His legacy calls upon individuals and nations alike to strive for harmony, justice, and self-transcendence. In an age of uncertainty and fragmentation, his message offers a vision of hope — that a nation grounded in ethics, knowledge, and service can indeed lead humanity toward a more compassionate and united world.

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