



Remembering Vivekananda, Forgetting Vivekananda: Social Orthodoxy, Ethical Contradictions and the Crisis of Value Internalisation in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary Indian public life. He is among the most widely remembered religious and intellectual figures of modern India, celebrated through commemorative events, public institutions, educational programmes, political speeches, statues, portraits and quotations. Yet the historical reception of Vivekananda reveals that the same figure who is now widely revered was once contested by sections of Indian society because his life and ideas challenged established assumptions concerning caste, ritual conformity, monastic identity, food practices, religious authority and social hierarchy. This paper examines the paradox between remembering Vivekananda as an icon and internalising Vivekananda as an ethical ideal. It argues that the transformation of Vivekananda from a contested monk into a cultural icon has created the possibility of symbolic reverence without corresponding ethical transformation. The issue is not that contemporary India has forgotten Vivekananda in a literal sense. Rather, it may have selectively remembered him, preserving his image, quotations and symbolic authority while reducing the disruptive force of his social and ethical thought. The study develops five interconnected concepts: iconisation, ritualisation, selective remembering, symbolic appropriation and value internalisation. It further proposes the distinction between “Vivekananda as Image” and

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“Vivekananda as Ideal.” The metaphor of a house containing Vivekananda's portrait but lacking Vivekananda's values is used as a conceptual device to examine the gap between symbolic presence and ethical practice. The paper also examines caste prejudice and social exclusion as contemporary tests of ethical internalisation and introduces Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a contemporary educational framework. The five CASEL competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making—provide a useful vocabulary for examining whether values associated with Vivekananda have moved from intellectual recognition to lived behaviour. The paper proposes a shift from worship to study, from commemoration to reflection and from symbolic reverence to ethical practice. Its central proposition is that the contemporary relevance of Vivekananda should not be measured primarily by how frequently his image is displayed or his name invoked, but by whether his ethical vision changes the way individuals perceive, relate to and act toward other human beings

1. Introduction

On 4 July 1902, Swami Vivekananda died at Belur Math at the age of thirty-nine. His death marked the end of an extraordinarily brief but intellectually consequential life. Within that short span, he travelled across India as a wandering monk, represented Hinduism at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, established the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, developed a distinctive interpretation of Vedanta and articulated a vision of religion deeply connected with human dignity, strength, service and social regeneration.

The memory of his death is accompanied by a revealing anecdote. It is sometimes claimed that a newspaper following his death described him as the “meat-eating monk of Belur Math.” The exact provenance of this alleged headline has not been established in the primary newspaper material accessible for the present study, and therefore it would be methodologically inappropriate to present it as a verified newspaper quotation. Nevertheless, the persistence of the anecdote points towards a historically documented controversy surrounding Vivekananda's food practices. In 1901, The Tribune published an editorial on “Animal Vs



Vegetable Diet,” while contemporary accounts record criticism of Vivekananda's views on meat-eating from orthodox circles and reformers alike.

The anecdote therefore points towards a larger historical problem. A thinker whose spiritual and social message challenged narrow forms of orthodoxy could himself become the object of criticism through precisely those categories of ritual conformity that he questioned. The historical record contains several such examples. In a letter dated 9 July 1897, Vivekananda referred to reports that he had been “outcasted” after his foreign travels and responded ironically that, as a sannyasin, he had no caste to lose. His letter demonstrates that the controversy surrounding his crossing of the seas was not merely a later construction but part of his own experience and correspondence. Similarly, contemporary newspaper evidence from the period 1893–1902 records criticism of Vivekananda by sections of the conservative Bengali press. Bepin Chandra Pal's report in *The Hindu* in March 1897 referred to criticism from Bangabasi, including objections to Vivekananda's status as a Kayastha wearing the robes of a sannyasin and to his criticism of prevailing rituals and untouchability.

Vivekananda himself was conscious of opposition. In his 1897 Madras lecture, “My Plan of Campaign,” he spoke of circumstances that had tended to “thwart,” “oppose” and, if possible, “crush” his work. The historical Vivekananda was therefore not an uncontested figure. He was a disruptive figure who crossed geographical boundaries, challenged social assumptions, questioned religious conventions and sought to redefine the relationship between spirituality and social service.

Yet the contemporary Vivekananda is something different. He is a cultural icon. His portrait hangs in educational institutions, government offices, homes and public spaces. His birthday is observed as National Youth Day. His quotations circulate through social media. Political leaders invoke him in speeches concerning youth, national development and India's civilisational identity. In January 2025, for example, national political messaging around Vivekananda's birth anniversary connected his vision with youth and the aspiration for a strong and developed India.

Academic scholarship has also examined the political appropriation of Vivekananda, particularly the selective deployment of his ideas within Hindu-right political rhetoric. Beckerlegge's work, for instance, examines how organisations associated with the Hindu Right have deployed Vivekananda's ideas while drawing attention to the possibility that such uses may not adequately represent the breadth and complexity of his philosophy.



This transformation—from contested monk to cultural icon—creates the central problem of this paper. Have we merely remembered Vivekananda, or have we internalised Vivekananda? The distinction is fundamental. Remembering a thinker may involve preserving his name, portrait, birthday, quotations and public symbolism. Internalising a thinker requires something more difficult: allowing his ideas to alter one's assumptions, emotions, relationships, judgements and behaviour. The first is commemorative; the second is transformative.

This paper argues that contemporary India may have achieved a remarkable degree of symbolic remembrance of Vivekananda without necessarily achieving a corresponding degree of ethical internalisation. The argument is not that contemporary Indian society is identical to nineteenth-century society, nor that all contemporary Indians are socially orthodox. Nor does the paper claim that Vivekananda himself was free from historical contradictions. Rather, it asks whether certain social patterns that Vivekananda challenged—particularly prejudice, exclusion, caste consciousness, intolerance and the prioritisation of external identity over human dignity—continue to exist in forms that contradict the values for which he is publicly celebrated.

The central proposition of the study is therefore that a society may remember the image of a thinker while forgetting the ethical challenge of his thought.

2. Research Problem and Objectives

The research problem emerges from a value–behaviour gap. Vivekananda is celebrated for strength, fearlessness, human dignity, service, universalism, social responsibility, education and character formation. Yet contemporary social life continues to contain inequalities and prejudices that raise questions about the extent to which such values have been internalised. Recent scholarship continues to document caste disparities and caste prejudice in contemporary India, including disparities in education, occupation, wealth and social relationships.

The question is therefore not whether India has progressed since Vivekananda's time. It unquestionably has in many respects. The more specific question is why a society can celebrate a thinker who challenged social hierarchy while continuing to reproduce forms of hierarchy, prejudice and exclusion.

The study has six principal objectives. First, it examines the historical resistance encountered by Swami Vivekananda from sections of orthodox and conservative society. Second, it analyses the social assumptions underlying that resistance, particularly concerning caste, ritual conformity, food, monastic identity and religious authority. Third, it traces the transformation of Vivekananda from a contested intellectual and



religious figure into a cultural icon. Fourth, it examines contemporary processes of iconisation, ritualisation, selective remembering and political or cultural appropriation. Fifth, it investigates the gap between the symbolic presence of Vivekananda and the practical internalisation of his ethical values. Finally, it explores Social-Emotional Learning as a contemporary framework through which the internalisation of values associated with Vivekananda can be critically examined.

The study is guided by six research questions: What forms of social and religious resistance did Vivekananda encounter during his lifetime? What forms of caste, ritual and social orthodoxy were implicated in these conflicts? How did Vivekananda move from being a contested monk to becoming a widely accepted cultural icon? How is Vivekananda represented and selectively appropriated in contemporary public and political discourse? What is the difference between the symbolic presence of Vivekananda and the ethical presence of his ideas? Can Social-Emotional Learning provide a meaningful framework for evaluating the internalisation of values associated with Vivekananda?

3. Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative interdisciplinary methodology combining intellectual history, reception history, sociology of culture and educational theory. The historical component draws upon Vivekananda's letters, lectures and writings alongside contemporary newspaper material from the period 1893–1902. Archival compilations of contemporary Indian news provide evidence of debates surrounding Vivekananda's caste identity, food practices, public reception and criticism.

The contemporary component is interpretive rather than statistically exhaustive. It examines public commemorations, political speeches, institutional representations, cultural symbolism, contemporary scholarship on caste and social prejudice, and educational discourse surrounding Vivekananda. The paper deliberately avoids the unsupported proposition that “India has not changed since Vivekananda.” Instead, it investigates the more defensible question of whether certain patterns of social consciousness remain in tension with the ethical ideals associated with him.

The study also employs CASEL's Social-Emotional Learning framework as an analytical lens. CASEL identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. SEL is not presented as a historical theory developed by Vivekananda. Rather, it is used as a contemporary interpretive framework for examining whether values are merely known intellectually or reflected in actual behaviour.



4. Vivekananda as a Contested Monk

The first step in understanding the paradox of contemporary remembrance is to recover the historical Vivekananda. The contemporary icon often appears timeless, whereas the historical Vivekananda was deeply embedded in the conflicts of nineteenth-century India. He lived in a society structured by colonialism, caste, religious competition, social hierarchy and debates about modernity. His response was neither simple rejection of tradition nor passive preservation of tradition. He sought reconstruction, and that reconstruction inevitably produced conflict.

One important example concerns his identity as a Kayastha who became a monk. The conservative criticism recorded by Bepin Chandra Pal is significant because it reveals that religious authority could be filtered through social identity. The question was not merely what Vivekananda taught; it was also whether someone of his social background possessed the legitimate status to teach as a sannyasin. This illustrates a fundamental feature of orthodoxy: the social identity of the speaker can become more important than the substance of the speech. Vivekananda's life challenged this logic.

His journey to the West generated another controversy. The belief that crossing the seas could violate social and ritual boundaries created a conflict between inherited norms and individual action. Vivekananda's response questioned the assumption that such rules could determine his spiritual status. The significance of this episode extends beyond foreign travel. It reveals how social systems maintain themselves through boundary-making. Societies establish distinctions between pure and impure, insider and outsider, legitimate and illegitimate, acceptable and unacceptable. Vivekananda repeatedly crossed such boundaries.

The controversy surrounding his views on meat-eating provides another example. The 1901 Tribune controversy demonstrates that his position was publicly debated and criticised. Contemporary material indicates that Vivekananda did not conceal his non-vegetarianism and that he argued that dietary requirements could differ according to physical condition, occupation and circumstance. The historical importance of this controversy is not whether one agrees with his dietary views. Rather, it raises a broader ethical question: can an external practice become a substitute for ethical judgement? Societies often find it easier to measure visible conformity than invisible character. It is easier to ask what a person eats than how that person treats another human being.

5. From Social Critic to Cultural Icon

Vivekananda's posthumous transformation is central to understanding contemporary cultural memory. A controversial thinker became a revered figure, and a monk who challenged social assumptions became a



symbol through which institutions could express cultural legitimacy. This transformation can be understood as a movement from thinker to icon, from icon to symbol and from symbol to ritual object.

The process is not necessarily negative. Societies need symbols, and collective memory requires public representation. The difficulty arises when symbolic representation becomes detached from intellectual substance. The more symbolic a thinker becomes, the easier it may become to separate the image from the argument. The result is what this paper calls the “Iconisation Problem”: a thinker becomes so culturally acceptable that society no longer experiences the discomfort of being challenged by his thought. The radical thinker becomes safe; the image remains, while the challenge disappears.

This paper therefore proposes a distinction between “Vivekananda as Image” and “Vivekananda as Ideal.” The first is represented by the portrait, anniversary, quotation, worship, public symbol, cultural memory and political invocation. The second is represented by practice, reflection, internalisation, ethical responsibility, personal transformation and social accountability. The presence of Vivekananda's image does not necessarily demonstrate the presence of Vivekananda's values.

A useful conceptual metaphor is the house containing Vivekananda's portrait. Imagine a house in which a large portrait of Vivekananda hangs prominently on the wall. His image is present, his quotations may be displayed and his birthday may be celebrated. Yet suppose that within the same house caste determines social relationships, prejudice determines friendship, domestic workers are treated without dignity, religious difference produces contempt, disagreement produces hostility and social status determines respect. What exactly is present in that house? Vivekananda's portrait is present, but is Vivekananda present?

This metaphor should not be treated as an empirical claim about every household. It is a conceptual device for examining the distinction between symbolic presence and ethical presence. The broader proposition is that cultural reverence can coexist with ethical absence.

6. Ritualisation, Selective Remembering and Political Appropriation

The term “ritualisation” is used here to describe the transformation of a thinker into a repeated set of commemorative practices, including birth-anniversary celebrations, speeches, garlanding of portraits, public statues, quotation-sharing, school competitions and political tributes. Such practices can preserve historical memory. However, they can also produce what may be called “commemorative substitution,” in which the ritual of remembering becomes a substitute for the labour of understanding.



The distinction is fundamental. Celebration requires participation, whereas internalisation requires self-criticism. Celebration can be collective, while internalisation is often uncomfortable and personal. Celebration can ask, “What did Vivekananda say?” Internalisation asks, “What in me must change because of what Vivekananda said?”

Vivekananda's enormous symbolic authority also makes him attractive to political and cultural movements. Contemporary political discourse demonstrates this continuing relevance. National messaging around National Youth Day has explicitly linked Vivekananda with youth, national development and the vision of a strong India. This does not by itself constitute misuse. The analytical question is instead: which Vivekananda is being invoked?

Vivekananda's thought contains multiple strands, including spirituality, nationalism, universalism, Hindu identity, social service, human dignity, education, strength and interfaith engagement. Political or cultural actors may foreground some strands while leaving others in the background. The problem arises when selective interpretation becomes total representation. If one fragment of Vivekananda is presented as the whole Vivekananda, the thinker becomes a political resource rather than an intellectual problem. This paper refers to this process as “Selective Appropriation.”

Selective remembering operates in a similar manner. We have not forgotten Vivekananda historically; indeed, we have remembered him extraordinarily well. But collective memory is selective. It can preserve his image, famous speeches, Chicago address, message to youth and language of strength while paying less attention to his conflicts with orthodoxy, concern for the poor, criticism of social weakness, complex position on caste, insistence on service, challenge to ritualism and demand for character. Forgetting, in this context, does not mean absence from memory. It can mean the absence of difficult aspects from collective memory. This is the meaning of “Forgetting Vivekananda” proposed in the title.

7. Caste and the Contemporary Ethical Test

If Vivekananda is to be studied as an ethical thinker rather than merely as a cultural icon, caste provides one of the most important contemporary tests. Modern India has constitutional protections against caste discrimination and has implemented affirmative-action policies. Yet contemporary research continues to document caste-based disparities in education, employment, wealth and social relations. Recent scholarship also treats caste prejudice as a continuing psychological and social phenomenon rather than merely a historical institution.



This does not mean that contemporary India is equivalent to nineteenth-century India. It means that the ethical question remains alive. If Vivekananda is celebrated for human dignity, social unity and the spiritual equality of human beings, caste-based prejudice becomes a legitimate test case for value internalisation. The question is not an accusation against every individual; it is a sociological and ethical question concerning the relationship between publicly affirmed values and social behaviour.

A person may verbally support equality while maintaining social distance. A person may celebrate compassion while remaining indifferent to suffering. A person may praise universalism while treating difference as a threat. A person may admire Vivekananda while refusing to examine inherited prejudice. Such contradictions are not necessarily conscious. Social norms are frequently reproduced without deliberate intention, and individuals may participate in systems of exclusion while sincerely believing themselves to be ethical. This is precisely why self-awareness becomes crucial.

8. Social-Emotional Learning and Value Internalisation

Social-Emotional Learning provides a useful contemporary vocabulary for understanding this problem. CASEL identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The connection with Vivekananda is interpretive rather than historical. Vivekananda did not formulate the CASEL framework; rather, his ethical thought can be examined through a contemporary framework that asks whether values have become part of human behaviour.

Self-awareness includes understanding one's emotions, values, identities and biases. It therefore offers an especially powerful bridge to the present argument. The first question of Vivekananda-inspired education should not simply be "What did Vivekananda say?" It should also be "What assumptions within myself would Vivekananda ask me to question?" If caste, status, wealth, religion or social identity influences one's judgement of another human being, the problem is not merely a lack of information; it may be a lack of self-awareness.

Social awareness involves perspective-taking, empathy, compassion and recognition of unjust social norms. This is relevant to Vivekananda's emphasis on human dignity and service. A society cannot claim to have internalised a philosophy of human dignity merely by celebrating its philosopher. It must demonstrate the capacity to recognise the dignity of people who possess less social power: the poor, the marginalised, the socially excluded, people from another caste or religion, unpopular individuals and those who cannot offer social advantage. These are the situations in which values become visible.



Relationship skills include communication, active listening, cooperation, constructive conflict resolution, cultural competence and standing up for the rights of others. These skills are particularly important in a society where identity can become socially and politically charged. A society may claim to value Vivekananda's universalism while struggling to maintain respectful relationships across difference. The test is not whether people agree; the test is whether they can disagree without dehumanising one another. Tolerance alone is insufficient if it coexists with a belief in the inferiority of others. Ethical relationship requires recognition of dignity.

Responsible decision-making brings the discussion from ideas to action. Suppose an individual witnesses discrimination. Does that person remain silent because conformity is easier? Does the person intervene, question the inherited norm or protect the dignity of the weaker individual? These are precisely the moments when ethical internalisation becomes observable. The real question is therefore not “Do you believe in equality?” but “What do you do when equality becomes socially inconvenient?”

9. The Vivekananda Value-Internalisation Model

This paper proposes a conceptual model through which Vivekananda's contemporary reception can be understood. The process begins with historical Vivekananda and his resistance to orthodoxy, followed by his social critique and posthumous canonisation. Canonisation contributes to iconisation, which leads to commemoration and, in some contexts, political or cultural appropriation. These processes can produce selective remembering and a portrait–practice gap. The gap becomes visible when contemporary social contradictions involving caste, prejudice, exclusion and intolerance are examined through the lens of ethical values.

The model therefore moves from historical Vivekananda and resistance to orthodoxy, through social critique, canonisation, iconisation, commemoration, appropriation and selective remembering, towards the contemporary portrait–practice gap. Social-Emotional Learning then provides an interpretive bridge through self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, ultimately leading towards ethical value internalisation and potential social transformation.

The model also proposes four stages of Vivekananda's reception. The first is representation, in which Vivekananda becomes visually present through portraits and symbols. The second is commemoration, in which he becomes institutionally remembered through anniversaries and programmes. The third is veneration, in which he becomes culturally revered as an icon. The fourth is internalisation, in which his



values become observable through practice. The first three stages can occur without the fourth. This creates the central problem of symbolic reverence without ethical internalisation.

The portrait–practice gap can therefore be understood as a movement from image to memory, from memory to commemoration and from commemoration to veneration, followed by a question mark where practice should appear. Practice requires self-awareness, social awareness, empathy, relationship skills and responsible action. This is where SEL becomes a bridge between cultural memory and ethical behaviour.

10. From Worship to Study

The central educational proposition of this paper is not that Vivekananda should simply be “worshipped less.” Rather, it is that the study of Vivekananda should become deeper than symbolic admiration. To study Vivekananda means reading beyond quotations, examining historical context, questioning one's own assumptions, studying his social thought, debating his limitations, examining his relationship with caste and orthodoxy, understanding his conception of service and connecting his values to contemporary social realities.

This is a more demanding form of respect. Blind admiration requires little, whereas critical study requires intellectual honesty. Educational institutions can therefore transform the way Vivekananda is taught. Instead of limiting students to essays, quotations, posters, competitions and commemorative programmes, educators can ask questions that encourage self-examination. Students can be asked what prejudices they may have inherited, whose perspectives they rarely consider, how they behave when someone disagrees with them, what they do when social pressure conflicts with ethical judgement and whether they can regulate anger and contempt when confronted with difference.

Such questions turn Vivekananda from an object of celebration into a stimulus for ethical development. CASEL's framework is useful here because it explicitly recognises the importance of examining prejudices and biases, recognising unjust social norms and developing inclusive relationships.

At the same time, a critical paper must resist its own temptation to produce another form of hero-worship. It would be intellectually inconsistent to criticise hero-worship while presenting Vivekananda as an infallible modern liberal thinker. His writings contain tensions concerning caste, social organisation, nationalism, religion and modernity. His thought evolved, and his language was shaped by nineteenth-century India. Some of his claims therefore require historical contextualisation rather than contemporary literalisation.



The purpose of this paper is consequently not to establish that Vivekananda was completely right and contemporary India is completely wrong. The more defensible proposition is that Vivekananda remains valuable precisely because his thought allows contemporary society to interrogate its own assumptions. The appropriate response to a great thinker is neither blind worship nor indiscriminate rejection. It is critical engagement.

11. Implications for Value Education

The implications of this paper extend beyond Vivekananda studies. Modern value education often faces a similar problem. Students are told to be honest, respect others, be empathetic and responsible, and reject discrimination. Yet values become meaningful only when individuals encounter situations in which those values conflict with convenience, peer pressure or inherited social norms.

Value education must therefore move from value transmission to value reflection and finally to value enactment. Vivekananda provides a powerful historical case through which this transition can be studied. His contemporary relevance can be evaluated through the degree to which symbolic admiration becomes ethical competence.

The educational framework proposed here connects Vivekananda's ethical emphasis on human dignity, service, fearlessness, social responsibility and universal human worth with contemporary SEL competencies. Self-awareness can encourage individuals to examine their prejudices; self-management can help them regulate emotional reactions; social awareness can enable them to understand another person's experience; relationship skills can support respectful engagement across differences; and responsible decision-making can encourage ethical action despite social pressure. The desired outcome is value internalisation rather than mere value recognition.

12. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, it does not attempt to provide a statistical measurement of the contemporary internalisation of Vivekananda's values. Second, contemporary Indian society is too diverse to be treated as a single homogeneous social entity. Third, the paper does not assume that all political or cultural uses of Vivekananda constitute appropriation in a negative sense. Fourth, the alleged “meat-eating monk of Belur Math” headline is treated cautiously because its exact primary-source provenance has not been established in the accessible archival material used here. Fifth, the application of SEL to Vivekananda is interpretive and contemporary; it should not be mistaken for a claim that Vivekananda historically formulated modern SEL theory.



These limitations are important because they preserve the analytical integrity of the argument. The paper is principally conceptual and interpretive, and its purpose is to generate a framework for thinking about the relationship between cultural memory, ethical values and social behaviour.

13. Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda has not been forgotten. In fact, he may be remembered more extensively today than at almost any previous moment. His portraits are visible, his quotations circulate, his birthday is commemorated and his name is invoked in classrooms, institutions, public speeches and political discourse. Yet this very visibility creates a deeper question: what exactly are we remembering?

Are we remembering the portrait, the quotation, the monk, the nationalist, the philosopher, the Hindu representative or the youth icon? Or are we remembering the uncomfortable social critic who demanded that religion become service, that strength become responsibility and that spiritual realisation recognise the dignity of human beings?

The historical record demonstrates that Vivekananda himself was not always comfortable for his society. He challenged social boundaries concerning caste, monastic legitimacy, foreign travel, food and religious authority. Contemporary newspaper records document some of the opposition he encountered, while his own letters and speeches demonstrate his awareness of that resistance. Yet the historical irony is that the same figure can later become so culturally revered that the social challenge embedded in his thought becomes less visible.

This is the meaning of “Remembering Vivekananda, Forgetting Vivekananda.” We remember the symbol, but may forget the challenge. We remember the portrait, but may forget the practice. We remember the quotation, but may forget the ethical demand. We remember the birthday, but may forget the question he would have asked us about ourselves.

The metaphor of the house with Vivekananda's portrait but without Vivekananda's values therefore becomes central. A portrait on a wall is visible, whereas prejudice inside the mind is not. A garland around a photograph is visible, whereas indifference toward another human being is not. A public speech is visible, whereas private discrimination is not. This is why the true measure of Vivekananda's contemporary relevance cannot be symbolic visibility alone. It must be ethical internalisation.

Social-Emotional Learning provides a contemporary language for this transition. Self-awareness asks us to examine our own prejudices. Social awareness asks us to recognise the humanity and perspective of others.



Relationship skills ask us to engage across difference. Responsible decision-making asks us to act ethically even when ethical action is inconvenient. Self-management enables individuals to regulate emotional reactions that may otherwise reproduce hostility and exclusion.

The question, therefore, is no longer simply, “Do we respect Vivekananda?” It is, “What changes in us because we respect Vivekananda?” Perhaps this is where the contemporary study of Vivekananda should begin—not with another portrait, another garland or another quotation, but with self-examination.

The time may have come to move from worship to study, from commemoration to reflection, from quotation to practice and from symbolic presence to ethical presence. Ultimately, the task is to move from remembering Vivekananda to becoming accountable to what Vivekananda asked of human beings.

The deepest irony of cultural memory may therefore be expressed in one final proposition: We may have succeeded in remembering Vivekananda as a great man while forgetting that he asked us to become greater human beings.

That is the paradox at the heart of contemporary remembrance. And that is why the question is not simply whether we remember Vivekananda. It is whether, in remembering him, we have forgotten ourselves.

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