

Article

On Swami Vivekananda and Caste Prejudice: Ethical Implications of the Experience of Non-Duality

Jeffery D. Long 

Religion and Asian Studies, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA 17022, USA; longjd@etown.edu

Abstract: The well-known modern Hindu reformer and pioneer of Vedānta in the West, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), based his ethical vision on mysticism: specifically, on the direct experience of non-duality and the ultimate unity and organic interconnectedness of all beings. This paper will explore the implications of this experientially based ethos for caste prejudice. Caste remains a hot-button issue in India to the present day and was no less so in the time of Swami Vivekananda. This system of social organization is rightly criticized by social justice advocates for the inequities it enshrines and enforces in Indian society. Because it has historically been justified by reference to Hindu textual sources—specifically such *Dharma Śāstras* as the *Manusmṛiti*—prejudice based on caste, or *casteism*, has frequently been depicted, especially by critics of Hinduism, as essential or inherent to Hindu traditions. The implication of this identification of caste with Hinduism, and caste with social injustice, is that Hinduism is an intrinsically wicked and unjust religion. Such simplistic equations fail to consider the extent to which caste prejudice has been condemned by authoritative Hindu teachers, not least, by Swami Vivekananda himself. It is thus important to rearticulate Swami Vivekananda’s rejection of caste prejudice—and indeed, of all prejudice—based on Advaita Vedānta both to make the case against such prejudice in today’s world and to address criticisms of Hinduism as inherently or essentially casteist. Finally, it will be noted that Vivekananda’s criticisms of caste anticipate those of a contemporary anti-casteist voice from the Advaita tradition: that of Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan, who has also argued against prejudices of various kinds, including caste prejudice, based on Advaita Vedānta.

Keywords: Advaita Vedānta; caste; casteism; Hinduism; Vedānta; Vivekananda; Swami



Citation: Long, Jeffery D. 2024. On Swami Vivekananda and Caste Prejudice: Ethical Implications of the Experience of Non-Duality. *Religions* 15: 889. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080889>

Academic Editor: Cristobal Serran-Pagan Y Fuentes

Received: 3 July 2024
Revised: 22 July 2024
Accepted: 23 July 2024
Published: 24 July 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Swami Vivekananda: His Importance and Position within Hindu Traditions

Except for Mohandas K. Gandhi, few, if any figures of the modern Hindu tradition are better known than Swami Vivekananda. Born Narendranath Datta in Kolkata on 12 January 1863, Vivekananda—as he would come to be known after taking this as his monastic name on 31 May 1893 (Banhatti 1995, p. 24)—is best known for addressing the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and for establishing the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894 and the Ramakrishna Mission at Belur Math, India, in 1897.

These achievements are best understood as coming at the end of a century of cultural ferment, a period of intensive self-reflection and reform on the part of Bengali Hindus widely known today as the Bengal Renaissance. Arguably, the emergence of Swami Vivekananda onto the world stage at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions could be seen as a culmination of this century of reform.

During Vivekananda’s lifetime, Kolkata was the administrative center of British rule in India. The region of Bengal, of which Kolkata was and remains the largest urban center, was the first part of India to experience British culture. Western thought was inculcated in the minds of middle-class Bengalis through English education and Christian missionary activity.

Bengalis were not passive recipients of European thought. Bengal had long been home to vibrant intellectual traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Islamic. Bengali intellectuals

responded to the West with a movement of Hindu reform which sought to incorporate the best of both India and the West into a Dharmic model of civilization. This process was initiated by Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), who is widely known as “the father of modern India” (Richards 1985, p. 1). He responded to the criticisms of Hinduism by Westernizing rationalists and Christian missionaries not by renouncing Hinduism, but by affirming what he took to be the original ideals of Hinduism, found in the Vedānta of the Upaniṣads. He rejected elements of the tradition that its critics attacked, such as casteism, as later corruptions of an originally monotheistic, and ultimately monistic, doctrine of the inherent divinity and dignity of all beings. This is essentially the pattern followed by Swami Vivekananda’s critique of casteism as well. This pattern was no doubt derived from his experiences with the organization established by Roy: the Brahmo Samāj.

For Roy, reforming Hinduism was a matter of both principle and practicality. In a letter dated 18 January 1828, Roy writes to a friend:

I agree with you that in point of vices the Hindus are not worse than the generality of Christians in Europe and America; but I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions and sub-divisions among them, has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling, and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise. . . It is, I think, necessary that some changes should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort. (Richards 1985, pp. 8–9)

Roy’s legacy of reform has endured largely due to the activities of the organization—the *Brahmo Samāj* or ‘Community of Brahman’—that he established in 1828. Its first president, after Roy, was Devendranath Tagore (1817–1905). Tagore is known, among other things, for being the father of the famed Nobel laureate, playwright, poet, songwriter, essayist, and all-around Bengali cultural hero, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). The long-lived elder Tagore presided over the Brahmo Samāj for most of the nineteenth century. His long tenure in this role placed him in a position to exert a major influence on the current of Hindu thought that Roy had initiated.

More so than Roy, Tagore was a man of deeply mystical inclinations, and the direct experience of divinity is a major theme of his writings. His moving, frank, and painfully honest reflections on his mystical experiences are well represented by the following quote:

Then I went out and sat underneath an ashvattha tree and according to the teaching of the saints began meditating on the Spirit of God dwelling in my soul. My mind was flooded with emotion, my eyes were filled with tears. All at once I saw the shining vision of Brahma in the lotus core of my heart. A thrill passed through my whole body, I felt a joy beyond all measure. But the next moment I could see Him no more. On losing sight of that beatific vision which destroys all sorrow, I suddenly rose from the ground. A great sadness came over my spirit. Then I tried to see Him again by force of contemplation, and found Him not. I became as one stricken with disease, and would not be comforted. Meanwhile I suddenly heard a voice in the air, ‘In this life thou shalt see Me no more. Those whose hearts have not been purified, who have not attained the highest Yoga, cannot see Me. It was only to stimulate thy love that I once appeared before thee’. (Richards 1985, p. 27)

Another leader of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chunder Sen (1838–1884), emphasized what he perceived to be commonalities shared between Hinduism and Christianity. He envisioned what he enthusiastically dubbed the ‘New Dispensation’, or *Nava Vidhān*—a new religious order—which he described in the following terms:

It is the harmony of all scriptures and prophets and dispensations. It is not an isolated creed, but the science which binds and explains and harmonizes all religions. It gives history a meaning, to the action of Providence a consistency, to

quarrelling churches a common bond, and to successive dispensations a continuity. It shows marvelous synthesis how the different rainbow colours are one in the light of heaven. The New Dispensation is the sweet music of diverse instruments. It is the precious necklace in which are strung together the rubies and pearls of all ages and climes. It is the celestial court where around enthroned Divinity shine the lights of all heavenly saints and prophets. It is the wonderful solvent, which fuses all dispensations into a new chemical compound. It is the mighty absorbent, which absorbs all that is true and good and beautiful in the objective world. Before the flag of the New Dispensation bow ye nations, and proclaim the Brotherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man. (Richards 1985, pp. 43–44)

These words of Sen would not be out of place in the *Complete Works* of Swami Vivekananda. In his youth, Vivekananda found himself deeply drawn to the Brahmo Samāj and its teaching of a primordial monotheism as the wellspring of both Hinduism and Christianity. He was especially drawn to the teachings and charismatic personality of Sen, whose home he began to frequent in 1880, attending regular gatherings there where Sen would give talks and devotional songs would be sung.

During this same period, Sen met and came under the influence of a most unconventional Bengali mystic known as Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886). Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's paths would first cross at a gathering in Sen's house.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that Sri Ramakrishna is one of the most remarkable figures of not only Indian, but of world religious history. Barely literate, Ramakrishna had no specialized training in the study and elucidation of Hindu sacred texts. Born to a poor Brahmin family in the Bengali village of Kamarpukur, when he was nineteen years old, he and his elder brother were hired as priests at a temple of the Goddess Kali in Dakshineswar, on the outskirts of Kolkata. Before this time, Ramakrishna was known locally for periodically going into ecstatic mystical states, in which he would lose consciousness of the outer world and become immersed in divine bliss. Both during and after his lifetime, many skeptics expressed the view that he might have been suffering from a neurological disorder.

Ramakrishna came out of these experiences, though, believing he had become absorbed in God-consciousness, and with a deep knowledge of many topics discussed in the Hindu scriptures, even though he had not studied these texts formally. The belief of the community of devotees which developed around him was that his knowledge came from direct experiences of the realities the scriptures described. Some even believed him to be an *avatār*: a divine incarnation (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 19).

Ramakrishna, according to accounts of his life, performed *sādhana*, or spiritual practice, following a variety of traditions. His aim was to realize God in as many ways as possible. He thus followed various Hindu traditions—Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Advaitic—as well as Christianity and Islam, until he entered a state of *samadhi* through their respective practices (Miller et al. 2019, pp. 41–60). According to the beliefs of the community that developed on the basis of his life and teachings, he achieved God-realization in all of them, thus establishing an experiential basis for religious pluralism, the belief that many religious paths can lead to the ultimate salvific goal (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 60).

Young Vivekananda, an adherent of the Brahmo Samāj, was also a skeptic. He had absorbed the thinking of many modern European philosophers in the course of his English education. He was encouraged by one of his teachers, a Scottish theologian named William Hastie (1842–1903), to seek out Ramakrishna, whom Hastie had heard was a 'man of God'. Having met Ramakrishna in passing at the home of Keshub Chunder Sen, Vivekananda dutifully visited him at Dakshineswar. Initially thinking Ramakrishna to be insane, Datta nevertheless found himself mysteriously drawn to this holy man, who seemed more a product of ancient India than the modern world in which he was immersed. Many young men of Kolkata who found themselves torn between the traditional Hinduism of their upbringing and the modernity of their English education, felt similarly drawn to Ramakrishna. After his death from throat cancer in 1886, these men took monastic vows,

forming a new group of Hindu monks known as the Ramakrishna Order. Their leader was Vivekananda.

From 1886 to 1893, Vivekananda traveled the length and breadth of India as a wandering *sādhu* or *sannyāsi*: a renouncer. In 1893, he undertook his first voyage to the United States, speaking at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions and then undertaking a successful lecture tour across the United States, which included his establishment of the first Vedanta Society in New York in 1894.

A major theme of Vivekananda's lectures and writings during this period was the pluralism taught by his guru, Ramakrishna, and reflected upon the teachings he had previously absorbed from Keshub Chunder Sen as well. His understanding of the final aim of all religions was deeply tied to the idea of mysticism: to the direct experience and manifestation of divinity as the ultimate reality of one's existence. In his own words,

The ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one—re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men.

Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English "yoke", meaning "to join", to join us to our reality, God. There are various such Yogas, or methods of union—but the chief ones are—Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Rāja-Yoga, and Jñāna-Yoga. (Vivekananda 1979, Vol. 5, p. 292)

The yogas described by Vivekananda refer to four types of spiritual practice, each of which draws upon the strengths of particular personality types. The yogas are not mutually exclusive but are in fact seen by Vivekananda as mutually reinforcing. He differentiates them as follows:

- (1) Karma-Yoga—The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty;
- (2) Bhakti-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God;
- (3) Rāja-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through the control of [the] mind;
- (4) Jñāna-Yoga—The realization of a man's own divinity through knowledge (Vivekananda 1979, vol. 5, p. 292).

Swami Vivekananda did not focus exclusively, however, on his pluralistic mysticism. He covered many topics in his numerous lectures, including the institution of caste, and he often expressed his opinions on this topic in very frank and explicit terms. We shall see that his views on caste—and in particular, caste prejudice—are informed by his pluralistic mysticism, which is itself rooted in his understanding of non-duality.

2. Defining Our Terms: Mysticism and Non-Duality

In the course of introducing Swami Vivekananda and the broad contours of his thought thus far, I have already employed the terms *mysticism*, *non-duality*, *caste*, and *casteism*. At this point in the discussion, it would be good to pause and reflect on the meanings of each of these terms, especially as they function in Swami Vivekananda's philosophy.

As already suggested by my usage in the preceding section, *mysticism* refers to practices and an overall approach to spiritual life that involves the cultivation of a direct experience of what one sees as a divine reality or divine realities. When Swami Vivekananda defines the goal of religion as "re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man's true nature", in just a few words, he equates what many religious traditions—including multiple Hindu traditions—have regarded as quite distinct realities: namely, the personal God of theistic religions (such as the Abrahamic traditions and multiple devotional Hindu traditions, such as the Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta traditions) and the idea of an indwelling divinity within oneself, like the *ātman*, or Self, of Advaita Vedānta; the *jīva*, or life force of the Jain tradition; one's Buddha nature; the Dao within; and

so on. For Vivekananda—as for Sri Ramakrishna before him—these are not two distinct realities or types of reality but rather two modes of experiencing one ultimate reality that is infinite and therefore characterizable in infinitely many true ways. This is the basis of pluralistic mysticism. It is pluralistic because it allows for many forms or manifestations of divinity to be the object of one’s spiritual striving. It is mysticism because its aim is the direct experience of one or more of these forms.

According to Vivekananda scholar Swami Medhananda, Vivekananda’s conception of mysticism was thoroughly pluralistic:

... Contrary to what some scholars have claimed, Vivekananda did not subscribe to the ‘common core’ or ‘perennialist’ thesis that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical. Indeed, he frequently distinguishes three fundamental types of mystical experience: the realization of one’s own individual soul, the theistic experience of a personal God, and the non-theistic realization of the impersonal nondual Brahman/Ātman. (Medhananda 2022, p. 174)

Another important component of Swami Vivekananda’s thought, particularly with regard to his understanding of ethics and his application of this understanding to the question of caste, is non-duality. As we have seen, Swami Medhananda refers to the “impersonal non-dual Brahman/Ātman” which Vivekananda affirms. This, of course, is a central teaching of Advaita Vedānta, with which Vivekananda’s philosophy has often been identified. As both Advaita Vedānta scholar Anantanand Rambachan and Swami Medhananda point out, however, Vivekananda’s philosophy is not simply identical to what is sometimes called the ‘classical’ Advaita Vedānta of the historical founder of this school of thought, Śaṅkara. Rather, Vivekananda’s affirmation of pluralism—which affirms non-duality as *one of* the possible valid modes of mystical experience—is distinct from Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, inasmuch as Śaṅkara, at least as he is often interpreted, does not view the varied mystical states realized through the four yogas as equivalent. Śaṅkara, rather, views jñāna yoga, the path of knowledge, as the way to the final realization—namely, the realization of the impersonal non-dual Brahman/Ātman—with the other yogas serving as purificatory or preparatory practices leading up to the yoga of knowledge (Rambachan 1994). For Rambachan, it seems, this is a defect in Vivekananda’s thought, inasmuch as it is a discrepancy between Vivekananda’s thought and Śaṅkara’s. For Medhananda, though, it is a virtue, opening Vivekananda’s philosophy up to being a wider cosmopolitanism and pluralism with regard to the means by which one attains, conceptualizes, and finally experiences ultimate reality.

However, while Swami Vivekananda does view non-duality as one of many modes through which ultimate reality might be experienced, he also believes that non-duality is the ultimate truth of our existence. I would argue that this is why Vivekananda sometimes sounds more like an Advaitic inclusivist than a genuine pluralist, seeming to subsume other forms of mystical experience to the Advaitic one. Medhananda argues that there was a real shift in Vivekananda’s thought from a more traditional Advaitic inclusivism, which places the experience of non-duality at the top ‘rung’, as it were, on the ladder of realization, to a more thoroughgoing pluralism based on the four yogas. I do not take issue with Medhananda’s claims here. I would suggest, though, that, not in terms of a hierarchy of mystical experience (which he finally rejects), but in terms of his basic philosophical *worldview*—his ontology—his pluralism is still functioning within an Advaitic understanding of the ultimate nature of existence. It is this non-dual ontology that forms the basis for Vivekananda’s views on ethics and, so ultimately, his views on casteism as a morally reprehensible attitude that must be superseded.

3. Further Defining Our Terms: Caste and Casteism

Caste, as is now relatively widely known, is an anglicization of a Portuguese word—*casta*—which means *color*. It is, therefore, a quite literal—and therefore deceptive—translation of the Sanskrit *varṇa*, which can also mean *color* but also refers to the fourfold grouping of society found in such texts as the *R̥g Veda* into Brahmins (who are conceptual-

ized as intellectual and religious figures), Kṣatriyas (warriors and secular leaders), Vaiśyas (commoners, people engaged in economically productive trades), and Śūdras (servants).¹ The rendition of *varṇa* as *color* is deceptive, inasmuch as it fed into nineteenth-century theories about ancient light-skinned Aryans invading India and imposing a race-based social order upon the indigenous peoples. Indeed, there is some evidence that *varṇa* was at one point based on personal preference or aptitude and only later became based on birth: what one might call one's ethnicity.²

In any case, *varṇa* has been, to some extent, a theoretical construct for much of India's history. The effective social units have been not the *varṇas*, but the *jātis*. *Jāti*, meaning *birth*, refers to a specific birth-based community that one joins by being born into it. It is the *jātis* to which people in India are typically referring when they speak of castes. At various times and locations in the subcontinent throughout history, *jātis* have been identified with or assigned to particular *varṇas*; but the precise *varṇa* with which a *jāti* is identified (and thus its position in the social hierarchy) varies by region. Such variation traces back to ancient times, as suggested by variances in the assignments of *jātis* in different *Dharma Śāstras*, the texts in which the *varṇas* and *jātis* and their various duties have been delineated. The *jātis*, as conceptualized in the contemporary Indian legal system, are defined largely based on the practices of British census takers, whose assignment of *jātis* to *varṇas* was not always accurate³ and sometimes had unfortunate effects for those persons who found themselves assigned to what was regarded as a low status.

The system of *varṇas* and *jātis*—what has come to be known as ‘the caste system’—is controversial for a variety of reasons. The one that concerns us the most here is the fact of *casteism* or prejudice against persons based on the *jāti* that they are held to inhabit.

To be sure, this system has lent itself to a wide array of abuses by those who regard themselves as being ‘higher’ in its postulated hierarchy than others. The leading social justice issue in India today is certainly the treatment of *Dalits*, the oppressed, as those who are regarded as being at the very bottom of this system have come to refer to themselves. Notably, the constitution of India, which was written by B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a distinguished attorney and a revered *Dalit* activist, forbids prejudice on the basis of caste. There is also an elaborate system of ‘reservations’ in place in India that are intended to secure jobs for *Dalits* and other underprivileged groups and to right historical wrongs against these communities. Not unlike racism in the United States, however, it is not the case that enlightened changes in the legal system have led to the eradication of casteism in the hearts of many members of society, or of casteist practices, particularly in rural areas.

Despite the existence of *jātis*—of castes—amongst practitioners of all religions in contemporary India, the caste system is overwhelmingly identified by scholars and commentators with Hinduism, even to the point of its being seen as essential or inherent to the Hindu tradition.

This, however, disregards the fact that prominent Hindu leaders, including Swami Vivekananda, have condemned this system and the injustices associated with it. It is to Vivekananda's objections to caste on the basis of his ethic of non-duality that we now turn.

4. Swami Vivekananda's Ethics of Non-Duality

For Swami Vivekananda, the fundamental ontological truth that all beings are Brahman—that we are all ultimately non-dual and inseparable—is the foundation of all ethics:

... [E]ach individual soul is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul, which is infinite. Therefore in injuring his neighbour, the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical truth underlying all ethical codes. (Vivekananda 1979, Volume One, p. 394)

Elaborating upon this teaching, a Vedanta teacher in the tradition of Swami Vivekananda, Pravrajika Vrajaprana, states that in order to be truly happy, you should “Love your

neighbor as yourself because your neighbor *is* yourself” (Vrajaprana 1999, p. 14). As she further explains,

Love, sympathy, and empathy are the affirmation of this truth; they are a reflexive response because they mirror the reality of the universe. When we feel love and sympathy we are verifying—albeit unconsciously—the oneness that already exists. When we feel hatred, anger, and jealousy we separate ourselves from others and deny our real nature which is infinite and free from limitations. (Vrajaprana 1999, p. 39)

In short, for Vivekananda, non-duality is the foundation for the Golden Rule: that we should treat others as we would wish for ourselves to be treated (if we were in similar circumstances). Therefore, any form of oppression or social injustice is to be rejected as contrary to the nature of reality itself.

Contemporary Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan, mentioned previously, similarly affirms an ethic of empathy based on the metaphysics of non-duality (Rambachan 2006, pp. 11, 14, 49). Moreover, he specifically connects this ethic with the issue of casteism:

... [T]here is a theological vision at the heart of Advaita that invalidates the assumptions of inequality, impurity, and indignity that are the foundations of caste belief and practice. From the perspective of Advaita, it is clear that the highest value is attributed to *brahman*. In creation, *brahman* enters into every created form, and it is the presence of *brahman* that gives value and significance to the human being. The dignity and worth of the human being is the consequence of the fact that she embodies the infinite. *Brahman* includes everyone; caste excludes. (Rambachan 2015, p. 177)

5. Swami Vivekananda and Caste Prejudice

With this understanding of the non-dual ethos of Swami Vivekananda’s worldview, we can see that his pronouncements on caste prejudice are of a piece with the idea of the inherent divinity, and thus the inherent dignity, of all living beings and certainly of all human beings.

Swami Vivekananda fiercely ridiculed what he called “Don’t-touchism”—or untouchability, the most exclusionary of caste-based practices—deriding it as “kitchen religion” for its emphasis on rules regarding dining between the members of different castes:

The present religion of the Hindus is neither the path of Knowledge or Reason—it is “Don’t-touchism.”—“Don’t touch me.” “Don’t touch me.”—that exhausts its description. “Don’t-touchism” is a form of mental disease. Beware! All expansion is life, all contraction is death. All love is expansion, all selfishness is contraction. Love is therefore the only law of life. See that you do not lose your lives in this dire irreligion of “Don’t-touchism.” Must the teaching (*Atma-vat sarvabhuteshu*)—“Looking upon all beings as your own self”—be confined to books alone? How will they grant salvation who cannot feed a hungry mouth with a crumb of bread? How will those, who become impure at the mere breath of others, purify others? (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Six, pp. 319–20)

Vivekananda viewed caste as not a religious institution at all, but a purely social one, and he was critical of previous reformers who conflated it with Hinduism as a whole. He was also quite blunt in his view that it was an institution whose time had passed:

Beginning from Buddha down to Ram Mohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste together, and failed. But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality. (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Five, pp. 22–23)

Finally, Vivekananda viewed the most vital service that could be rendered to the poor of India, of all communities, as education:

The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, *to develop their lost individuality*. That is the great task between our people and princes. Up to now nothing has been done in that direction. Priest-power and foreign conquest have trodden them down for centuries, and at last the poor of India have forgotten that they are human beings. They are to be given ideas; their eyes are to be opened to what is going on in the world around them; and then they will work out their own salvation. Every nation, every man and every woman must work out their own salvation. Give them ideas—that is the only help they require, and then the rest must follow as the effect. (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Four, pp. 361–64⁴)

This is the mandate that has driven the educational efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission since its establishment by Swami Vivekananda in 1897.

6. Critical Reflections on Swami Vivekananda's Views of Caste

To be sure, much as Swami Vivekananda repeatedly stated his opposition to prejudice based on caste—what, in contemporary discourse, is often referred to as *casteism*—his view on caste as such, as a way of organizing society, is much more ambiguous and open to critique.

Like other Hindu reformers of his era, Vivekananda drew a distinction between caste-based prejudice and what he regarded as the original ideal of the system of *varṇa* and *jāti*. Given the fact that caste was frequently held up in the Christian missionary discourse of his time as an example of the perfidy of Hinduism, he often took pains, particularly when he addressed audiences in the West, to point to what he regarded as the advantages of this system, particularly when compared with the social hierarchies of the Western world. Comparing status based on caste with status based on wealth, for example, he said:

You say we are heathens, we are uneducated, uncultivated, but we laugh in our sleeves at your want of refinement in telling us such things. With us, quality and birth make caste, not money. No amount of money can do anything for you in India. In caste the poorest is as good as the richest, and that is one of the most beautiful things about it.

Money has made warfare in the world, and caused Christians to trample on each other's necks. Jealousy, hatred and avariciousness are born of money-getters. Here it is all work, hustle and bustle. Caste saves a man from all this. It makes it possible for a man to live with less money, and it brings work to all. The man of caste has time to think of his soul, and that is what we want in the society of India. . . Caste has kept us alive as a nation, and while it has many defects, it has many more advantages (Vivekananda 1979, Volume Two, p. 489)

The strongest critique of this perspective on caste—not specifically directed at Swami Vivekananda, but at the general tendency among Hindu reformers to seek to rescue and differentiate a supposed original ideal of caste from the caste prejudice of the modern era—is that of B.R. Ambedkar, who argues that caste as such, due to its intrinsically hierarchical nature is violent and beyond remediation (Ambedkar 2018).

7. Conclusions

Based on his pluralistic mysticism, ultimately rooted in an ontology of non-duality, Vivekananda was deeply committed to the proposition that all living beings are manifestations of Brahman and are thus bearers of inherent dignity. We ultimately cannot differentiate the other from ourselves. This insight, for Vivekananda, is the source of all ethics.

Like Rambachan in the present day, he sees this as basic to Hinduism. Thus, despite centuries of being validated by Hindu texts, caste is to be seen, for Vivekananda, as, at best,

an outdated social institution that has ceased to serve—if it ever did serve them—those whom it should be serving: the poor and marginalized members of society. He characterizes prejudice based on caste as “a form of mental disease” and the system itself as “filling the atmosphere of India with its stench”.

Although the potential of this vision has yet to be realized in practice, inasmuch as caste prejudice still exists, and although Vivekananda himself expressed ambivalence about caste as such—whether it is an intrinsic evil, as claimed by Ambedkar, or whether it has some virtues which can justify its continuance in some form—one can see in the social thought of Swami Vivekananda an example of mysticism with at least the potential, based on its inner logic, to translate into a vision of universal social justice.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: All data utilized in this article is publicly available. See the list of references below.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See, for example, the *Puruṣa Sūkta* or ‘Hymn of the Cosmic Person’ (*R̥g Veda* 10:90) (Doniger O’Flaherty 1981, pp. 29–32).
- ² See, for example, *R̥g Veda* 9:112:3, in which the speaker proclaims that he is a singer by profession, his father is a physician, and his mother grinds corn: all distinct professions within the same family and so not based on birth. There is also the story of Satyakāma Jabāla, from *Chandogya Upaniṣad*, who is accepted as a Brahmin on the basis of his honest character, although he is of uncertain parentage (Panikkar 1995, p. 257; Olivelle 1996, p. 130).
- ³ ‘Accurate’, meaning ‘based on the customs of particular regions of India at the time’.
- ⁴ Emphasis in the original.

References

- Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. 2018. *Annihilation of Caste*. Chennai: Maven Books.
- Banhatti, Gopal Shrinivas. 1995. *Life and Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. Chennai: Atlantic Books.
- Doniger O’Flaherty, Wendy, trans. 1981. *The Rig Veda*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Medhananda, Swami. 2022. *Swami Vivekananda’s Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, Christopher Patrick, Michael Reading, and Jeffery D. Long, eds. 2019. *Beacons of Dharma*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Nikhilananda, Swami, trans. 1942. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
- Olivelle, Patrick, trans. 1996. *Upaniṣads*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Panikkar, Raimundo, trans. 1995. *The Vedic Experience: An Anthology of Hinduism’s Sacred and Revealed Scriptures*. Kauai: Himalayan Academy.
- Rambachan, Anantanand. 1994. *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda’s Reinterpretation of the Vedas*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Rambachan, Anantanand. 2006. *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rambachan, Anantanand. 2015. *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two is Not One*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Richards, Glyn, ed. 1985. *A Source-Book of Modern Hinduism*. Richmond: Curzon Press.
- Vivekananda, Swami. 1979. *Complete Works*. Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama.
- Vrajaprana, Pravrajika. 1999. *Vedanta: A Simple Introduction*. Hollywood: Vedanta Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.