GCE A LEVEL



Eduqas A-LEVEL RELIGIOUS STUDIES



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Glossary Key Terms

Advaita - Non-dualism is a Vedantic view that things only appear to be distinctly different objects, but there is no separateness in the underlying reality

Advaita Vedanta - Non-dual Vedanta teaches that atman and Brahman are identical. One of the 6 'Darshans' (or schools) of Vedantic philosophy.

Tantra - Spiritual path of Shakti-worship

jnana - Experiential knowledge of Brahman.

Upanishads - The section of the Vedas that deals with the philosophical principles underlying the practices documented in the Vedas. The most famous Upanishads, for example, the Chandogya or the Brihadaranyaka, speak of the inherent unity of atman and Brahman, and delineate a monist philosophy.

Brahmo Samaj - An Indian Religion founded under the British Empire, by Ram Mohan Roy emulating Christian congregational practices by taking 'The Upanishads' as its Holy Book and rejecting Hindu deities, rituals and customs.

samadhi - highest point of mental concentration possible for a yogi, whilst still bound to the body. A state of profound focussed contemplation and awareness of the absolute reality

Bengal - A politically significant region in the North East of India, now partitioned between India and Bangladesh

Influence of mystical experiences on his thought

Early Experiences

Ramakrishna was born in 1836 in Bengal to a poor, but devout Brahmin family. At his birth Ramakrishna was named after the local mandir deity (Gadhadhar revered as a local manifestation of Vishnu). This deity had appeared to his father in a dream and said he would be born as his son. Thus Ramakrishna is regarded by many as an Avatar of Vishnu.

By the age of 5, he could recall long poems and plays about the deities perfectly from one recital, but proved otherwise 'unteachable'. At age 6 he had his first ecstatic episode on seeing a flock of cranes 'as white as milk' flying against a black cloud. The sight caused him such intense delight at the beauty of nature that he lost consciousness. Whenever Hindu festivals celebrated deities, the young Gadhadhar would go into a trance-like state, with frozen limbs and tears pouring from his eyes. As a teenager during a play for Shivratri, the festival dedicated to the deity Shiva, he was in costume as Shiva, ready to go on, when he froze and collapsed in deep engrossment of Shiva, and had to be taken home!

Aside from early mystical experiences, there were other clues to his future. A group of boys heard Pandits (Hindu scholars) debating a philosophical problem. Whilst the other boys giggled and mimicked the scholars' gestures, Ramakrishna whispered the solution to one of the Pandits who hugged and praised him, realising he had extraordinary philosophical insight and higher order thinking capability.

Bhakti and Darshan

Bhakti does not quite translate into English as it has multiple uses across Hindu scriptures and traditions. Here it means emotionally-engaged, or loving, devotion to a deity. Colonial Indologists described Bhakti as a 'primitive, ritual' form of Monotheism. However post-colonial scholars describe it as "a developmental love-relationship with spirit, through the medium of the form *most suited to the person*".

It was during his first job in a newly built Kali Mandir near Calcutta, preparing the murtis for worship, that Ramakrishnas's bhakti of the Goddess Kali began. He related to her as the Divine Mother of the Universe. His bhakti expressed as a deep yearning to see the Goddess Kali as an embodied being. This is known as darshan, when a Bhakt experiences a direct visual encounter with a deity. Ramakrishna began an all-consuming day and night meditation until Kali eventually appeared to him. Over time, he began to see her, not only in the mandir, but within himself, in everyone and everything. One day a cat wandered in to the mandir and Ramakrishna lovingly fed it special food intended for puja. Someone tried to report him to mandir administrators, but the administrator was in awe of Ramakrishna's direct vision, saying the mandir had fulfilled its true purpose.

His family became concerned at his spiritual intensity and hoped marriage would bring him out of it. He agreed to marry and gave an exact name and far off location for his future wife, Sarada Devi. She turned out to be only 5 years old at that time. The formal ceremony was able to be performed since child-marriage had become a common Hindu practice to safeguard against the abducting of young unmarried Hindu women as wives or concubines for Mughal raiders and invaders. After the ceremony Sarada was left to grow up at her parents' home as was the custom, whilst Ramakrishna returned to his duties at the Mandir.

Sadhana

However marriage did not deflect his spiritual focus. Having achieved Darshan of Kali, he next resolved to see Rama (the Vishnu avatar). He emulated the attitudes and mindset of Hanuman as the most ardent Bhakt of Rama. Gradually he began to identify completely with Hanuman, eventually achieving Rama-darshan.

As his spiritual practices developed further, so too his yearning to get ever closer to God. He felt God answered this yearning by sending him a series of gurus; each was a master of a different spiritual path. His first teacher was Bhairavi Brahmani. She taught Ramakrishna different Bhakti methods for each of the female deities such as Durga, Saraswati, etc. and he realised that it was the same Mother in the different forms. Bhairavi Brahmani also taught him how to see Sri Krishna and Sri Radha. Bhairavi Brahmani was famously the first to see the advanced level of divinity in Ramakrishna himself, describing his experience as a rare, highly advanced phenomenon of Bhakti called Mahabhav.

'Mother is Brahman and Brahman is mother'

Gospel of Ramakrishna by Swami Nikhilananda

Ramakrishna's direct experiences gave him the personal authority to state that all Hindu deities are manifestations of the same universal reality. Whilst this may not have impacted how Hindus practiced their religion, it helped give Hinduism, with its multiplicity of deities and disciplines, a robust and coherently verbalised theological underpinning, challenging both the Missionary and western 'Liberalist' discourse being taught in schools in India, at the time, of Hinduism as incoherent and superstition-led.

Development of Advaita - his role in promoting Hinduism and developing neo-Vedanta thought

Advaita

It is clear that Ramakrishna did not set out to promote Hinduism or develop new ways of thinking about Vedanta. Instead, he was driven, rather like Gandhi to explore and deepen his own experience of ultimate truth and reality. However his mystical gifts and ability to experience multiple forms of Deity were so extraordinary they brought forth a new way of applying Advaita Vedanta, the idea of ultimate unity, which had been primarily applied to the jnana path described in the Upanishads, to another path for reaching God, namely bhakti.

After 3 years of mastering the bhakti disciplines, the next teacher to appear was Tota Puri a guru of the Advaita Vedanta renunciation path of the Upanishads. Tota Puri required Ramakrishna to become an initiated monk and give up bhakti of deities. Under his tutelage, he practiced meditating on the formless Divine (Nirguna Brahman) and attained Nirvikalpa Samadhi, the highest state of spiritual realisation in the Advaita tradition. Ramakrishna remained in Samadhi for another 6 months until he heard a command from 'Mother Kali' to downshift into Bhavamukha, an intermediate state of consciousness, between maya (normal frame of reference) and moksha (enlightened) enabling him to engage and teach students at all levels.

He continued to see the Divine Goddess everywhere including in his wife when she eventually arrived aged 17, and revered her accordingly, with mantras and flowers. Sarada Devi recognised that Ramakrishna was an advanced soul, as he did of her, and they settled into a Sanyasi marriage of renunciate spiritual service.

Out of his direct experience he was thus able to reconcile what had always been considered two fundamentally distinct Hindu approaches to God. Having experienced all the Hindu paths to the Divine, with and without form, he wanted to see how religions originating in other countries experienced their deities. He took initiation into Sufism, and faithfully prayed 5 times a day using only the name Allah, and had a mystical merging experience. Thereafter, he read from the Bible and reflected deeply on Christian teachings, he found himself drawn to 'Madonna and Child' iconography, and experienced a radiant vision of Jesus Christ.

After performing 12 years of Sadhana in accordance with different religions, he stated that whilst the doctrines and prayer practices differed, the end goal was unity with the same God or divine consciousness and that not only all paths, but all religions were paths to this same destination. He spoke from directly lived experience rather than opinion, belief or scripture, which gave his words an impactful authority.

In the semi-trancelike state of Bhavamukha, he experienced this same unity in the material world, "all things, men and women, cows and horses, wood and earth, etc. rising and merging as different aggregates of ideas in the universal mind". This mystical insight might be usefully imagined as the moment in the film 'The Matrix' when the 'Chosen One' realises that he is in a software program and that objects whilst appearing different are actually all the same 'stuff' or 'programming code'.

Neo-Vedanta

Seeing everything as the Divine Mother, he was able to feel the same deep love for everyone as he did for the divine Mother Goddess, and this was the key underpinning to his message. He wanted to express this love in active service, intended to elevate the most deprived and unite all the different sections of society in mutual compassion and care.

This was an entirely new application of Vedanta, often described as 'neo-vedanta' and it was Vivekananda who most understood and was able to articulate what was potent and new in Ramakrishna's vision: "A man who was as ardent a Dualist, as ardent an advaitist, as ardent a Bhakta, as a Jnani." Describing his teaching as "more liberal, more original and more progressive than all his predecessors."

Societal Impact and the promotion of Hinduism

Having attained this level of insight into the unity of humanity, Ramakrishna began to give lively talks full of philosophical and social insights, through songs, stories and jokes. People of all classes and nationalities came to see him out of curiosity and found themselves impacted by his challenging message and develop a new appreciation of Hinduism and their own way of practising it. He would vary the social challenge in his message depending on the personal ambitions of his audience. He challenged initiates to serve the vulnerable as well as cultivate compassion. He challenged renunciates to accept alms from all castes as well as practice non-attachment. He challenged householders to appreciate and meet wider social as well as personal responsibilities.

Where he had most impact in promoting Hinduism was among the intellectual classes who under British Rule had started to reject Hinduism. Ramakrishna's charismatic jnana (direct experience) approach attracted a following from Bengal's rising middle-class, known as the Bhadralok. In contrast with both the customs-based Hinduism that they were taught, and the western-influenced liberal individualism they espoused in groups such as the Brahmo Samaj (see next section on Ram Mohan Roy), these ambitious Missionary-educated young people were fascinated by Ramakrishna's philosophical activism message. He began to specifically address them. Having these influential, socially confident and articulate young people advocating his message for how Hinduism needed to be practiced in the modern age, brought a fresh Hindu impetus to what became known as the Bengali Renaissance.

Thus Ramakrishna with his advocacy of new-Vedanta played a key role in promoting the resurgence of Hinduism among the educated classes. Ramakrishna died in 1886, having first charged one of these young people, Narendra Datta who would go on to become the world-famous Swami, Vivekananda, with the mission of sharing neo-Vedanta, his message of universalist Advaita combined with social action, with the world.

Importance of Vivekananda including Ramakrishna mission in the development of Hinduism

Social Context

Vivekananda was born into a rapidly changing Bengali society. Many of these changes began a century earlier with the decline of Mughal rule, and India's gradual conquest by the British East India Company. Further shifts came with the arrival of Christian Missionaries, led by William Carey, and the liberal philanthropist David Hare. All of these impacted the thinking of the reformer Ram Mohan Roy whose social, religious and educational reforms brought powerful changes that even 30 years after his death, defined how Vivekananda and other Bengali Hindus were educated.

Interpretation of thinking of Ram Mohan Roy and Ramakrishna

Impact of Ram Mohan Roy

Ram Mohan Roy, founded the Brahmo Samaj about 50 years before Vivekananda joined. Roy was influential during an early period of British Rule over Bengal. Fluent in Persian and Arabic from an early Madrassa education, he was personally inclined towards monotheism and rejected deity or 'idol-worship' (bhakti). His subsequent encounter with Sanskrit and the Vedas was intellectual rather than experiential, and whilst he was impressed with 'the all-pervading divine consciousness' of Vedanta, he saw it as distinct from Hindu bhakti practices. In fact his association with India's first British Missionary – William Carey, who taught him English, convinced Roy that Brahman was closer to the monotheistic 'One True God' of Christianity and that 'Vedantic Truth' had become lost in superstition and 'idolatry' in India but had found its 'elevated expression' in Christianity. Whilst working for the British East India Company over the next few decades, Roy noticed the rising levels of poverty and deprivation of the majority of Indians as well as the shift in the British attitude from indifference to explicit disrespect for native forms of religion after William Carey and other Missionaries arrived.

Christopher Hibbert in looking for causes for the eventual Indian uprising quotes Frank Brown's letter home:

'If a man who left this country thirty years ago were now to visit it he would scarcely credit the changes he would universally witness in the treatment of the Natives, High and Low...restraint is cast away and [the British display] a supercilious arrogance and contempt of the people'.

"...the terms in which I have heard even clergymen and others, who would desire to do good to the Hindoos, speak of them, convinces me that this is the case."

Jamison, I., 'Hinduism', Philip Allan Updates, (2006), ISBN:1844894207, p. 137.

In a crucial move in the evolution of Hinduism in India, Roy resolved to begin an intellectual 'fight-back' for Indian esteem and social upliftment through Educational and Religious reforms, by extracting Vedanta from its Hindu wrapper and 'redeeming' it through more Christianised packaging. With the support of Christian Missionary friends and believing it would improve the lot of Hindus to highlight 'flaws in Hinduism'; from 1816 Roy began writing tracts denouncing Hindu traditions as regressive and responsible for India's social ills. Roy also thought Indians needed to learn English, the language of the new rulers, if they were to progress, so he opened English medium schools teaching his interpretation of Vedantic philosophy.

His collaboration with liberal philanthropist David Hare also unleashed an alternative, 'think for yourself', rational and more individualistic worldview among young Bengalis. Dubbed 'the Young Bengal Movement', these were Brahmin intellectuals, who renounced both Hindu orthodoxy and foreign rule, and became the writers and activists central to the Bengal Renaissance that fed into Indian Nationalism.

Roy's attraction to both Christianity & Western Liberalism also had him help Scottish Missionary Alex Duff set up an Upper Caste Liberal Arts University with a Eurocentric curriculum embedding Christian values. This did not go as Duff expected, with Hindus 'making space' for Christian and Liberal ideas without losing Hindu ones. Whilst Missionaries suggested Christianity as the answer, Roy worked on an 'Indian' solution. He aimed to combine the rational approach of Western philosophers, the holistic inclusivity of Vedantic philosophy and the organisational effectiveness of the Christian church by constructing Brahmo Samaj as 'the answer'.

Brahmo Samaj was a new religious movement complete with authoritative book, monotheistic creed, organised meetings, and a doctrine that explicitly rejected all Hindu practices not scripturally supported by Upanishadic teachings. This was an entirely new way of presenting the Upanishads, mirroring the Bible, as a 'believer's text'. Whilst Roy's aim was to modernise 'native India', his educational strategy sowed deep seeds of disconnection from traditional community-based Hinduism, in many upper-class Hindus who went on, supported by Oxbridge scholarships and administrative careers in the Raj, to seek Eurocentric aspirations.

Vivekananda encountered the thinking of Roy, 30 years after his death, through attending both of Roy's liberal institutions as a teenager. Typical of young uppercaste educated Hindus, he too rejected murti-puja and bhakti, as regressive and superstitious, and even Vedanta, although he had studied and appreciated it as a philosophical work. Inspired by the western philosophers studied in school, he was firmly rational, secular and agnostic.

Vivekananda wanted to help the less fortunate, impoverished and disaffected Bengali youth and joined a social action section of a Brahmo Samaj group, 'Band of Hope'. This particular group was run by Keshab Chandra Sen, a keen follower of Ramakrishna. Vivekananda went along with Sen's group to visit Ramakrishna. For now, it is important to understand how strongly Ram Mohan Roy's educational and social reforms had moulded Vivekananda's sceptical view on Hinduism, to fully appreciate his transformation into one of Hinduism's most articulate and world famous advocates, after encountering Ramakrishna.

Impact of Ramakrishna

Vivekananda was influenced, as Indian education was, by both Liberal & Christian worldviews. He was academically brilliant and English educated. He scored top marks for entrance to a Liberal Arts College (co-founded by Ram Mohan Roy) and studied the Western Enlightenment philosophers in depth – excited at their liberal ideals, particularly those influenced or most resonant with Vedanta such as Kant, Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Spencer, with whom he was in correspondence. Vivekananda liked the rational mastery of materialism through critical free-thinking. He had rejected bhakti and puja but had retained a curiosity about direct experience as described by

both the Upanishads and Western Enlightenment philosophers and was therefore always seeking truer understanding beyond the theoretical. He asked every philosopher, teacher and religious leader, 'have you seen God?'

He attended missionary-founded Scottish Church College (also co-founded by Roy) which had been explicitly funded and created to educate/persuade middle-class Indians to see European Christianity as the summit of civilisation. In fact British administration jobs were exclusively offered to alumni, further incentivising Christian education for aspiring young Hindus. Through his teacher, Vivekananda heard of Ramakrishna as one who he had personally seen in a genuine state of trance, and able to address philosophical questions from direct experience. Vivekananda decided to accompany his Brahmo Samaj friends on their next visit to Ramakrishna.

On meeting Ramakrishna he asked his usual question and finally received the now famous answer:" Yes, I see him as I see you, only infinitely more intensely." He also touched his chest and offered him a direct experience of 'one-ness', which Vivekananda vividly describes in his writings.

"My eyes were wide open, and I saw that everything in the room, including the walls themselves, was whirling rapidly around and receding, and at the same time, it seemed to me that my consciousness of self, together with the entire universe, was about to vanish..."

On thinking he was about to die, he cried out that he had parents depending on him at home:

"When the Master heard this, he gave a loud laugh. Then, touching my chest with his hand, he said, 'All right -- let it stop now. It needn't be done all at once. It will happen in its own good time.' To my amazement, this extraordinary vision of mine vanished as suddenly as it had come. I returned to my normal state and saw things inside and outside the room standing stationary, as before"

"The complete works of Swami Vivekananda", Advaita Ashra, (1947), ISBN:9788185301464.

At their meeting Ramakrishna was moved to tears at sight of him and asked him why he took so long, as though he had been eagerly 'awaiting' the person who was going to take his message out to the world. Vivekananda was highly sceptical, but began to visit Ramakrishna regularly, fascinated and drawn by his embodied presence of 'direct knowledge' more than his actual philosophy/teachings.

After Ramakrishna fell seriously ill with throat cancer, he was advised to relocate to a house in Cossipore for care. Vivekanada and a small core group of young followers travelled with Ramakrishna and his wife, they stayed with them until he died just under a year later. He was cautioned against conversation or trances as too intense for his physical body, but nevertheless, he refused to hold back the flow of advice and insights that flowed for all who asked, and the visitors continued to grow and his health continued to deteriorate. The group were often distressed at the severity of his illness, as he was often unable to eat or drink due to the pain in his throat. However, despite the physical discomfort he seemed to be in a state of spiritual bliss. He

continued to teach his disciples, through his illness, explaining that the pain was in the material body, not his true self.

"The more the body was devastated by illness, the more it became the habitation of the Divine Spirit. It was during this period that he taught us again these truths: 'Brahman is always unattached. The three gunas are in It, but It is unaffected by them, just as the wind carries odour yet remains odourless.' 'Brahman is Infinite Being, Infinite Wisdom, Infinite Bliss. In It there exist no delusion, no misery, no disease, no death, no growth, no decay.' 'The Transcendental Being and the being within are one and the same. There is one indivisible Absolute Existence."'

Sri Ramakrishna, 'The Gospel of Ramakrishna', translated by Swami Nikhilananda, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, (2011), ISBN:9781463727772.

During that time, Vivekananda and the other 11 young students became initiated monastic disciples of Ramakrishna. Even though food was in plentiful supply at the house, Ramakrishna sent them all out with bowls to collect alms and cultivate the renunciate ascetic lifestyle, practicing detachment even from their next meal.

Soon after this, Vivekananda finally attained the thing he had been most curious about and increasingly yearning for, his own Vikalpa samadhi bliss experience. Ramakrishna brought him back and charged him with leading the group after his passing, saying 'I leave these young men in your charge. See that they develop their spirituality'. He also passed on the life-purpose and mission of sharing his vision of the fundamental unity of all humanity to help heal the world. He told him that Vivekananda would not know who he actually was, nor leave his body or return to Samadhi until he had fulfilled his mission.

'Sri Ramakrishna said to him: "Today I have given you my all and I am now only a poor fakir, possessing nothing. By this power you will do immense good in the world, and not until it is accomplished will you return." Henceforth the Master lived in the disciple.'

Sri Ramakrishna, 'The Gospel of Ramakrishna', translated by Swami Nikhilananda, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, (2011), ISBN:9781463727772.

Importance of Ramakrishna Mission in the development of Hinduism

Ramakrishna died in 1886. Vivekananda and the other disciples, true to their promise to Ramakrishna, began to live as a monastic group which Vivekananda named the 'Ramakrishna Math' or Order of Ramakrishna. At this point he renounced his old identity of Narendranath Datta and took on the name Vivekananda (meaning the 'bliss of discernment'). Without funding they became fully alms-dependent travelling monks.

Whilst Ramakrishna had experienced, lived and taught neo-Vedanta, it was Vivekananda and the Order's job to expound and apply this to wider society in a Vedantic mission. The new synthesis of multiple yogic disciplines into a coherently taught framework was the development step for Hinduism that the Mission resolved to take forward. Vivekananda designed a highly significant seal or emblem for the order, comprised of four symbols signifying this development of Hinduism as living the unity of the different types of yoga as harmoniously interwoven paths to the divine as suited the individual's talents, temperament but also society's needs.

He describes it in his own words:

"The wavy waters in the picture are symbolic of Karma, the lotus of Bhakti, and the rising-sun of Jnana. The encircling serpent is indicative of Yoga and awakened Kundalini Shakti, while the swan in the picture stands for Paramatman. Therefore, the ideal of the picture is that by the union of Karma, Jnana, Bhakti and Yoga, the vision of the Paramatman is obtained."

Vivekananda

From the mission's home page:

"The ideology of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission consists of the eternal principles of Vedanta as lived and experienced by Sri Ramakrishna and expounded by Swami Vivekananda. This ideology has three characteristics:

it is modern in the sense that the ancient principles of Vedanta have been expressed in the modern idiom;

it is universal, that is, it is meant for the whole humanity;

it is practical in the sense that its principles can be applied in day-to-day life to solve the problems of life."

Ideology of Belur Math: the headquarters of the Mission

(https://belurmath.org/ideology/)

Vivekananda began to have visions of Ramakrishna, exhorting him to travel and see all of India to better be able to understand the state of the country and its needs before working on solutions to best serve them. For five years he travelled around India with no possessions, met people from all walks of life including Kings, scholars and beggars as well as all religions including Muslims, Christians, Hindus and others, and realised how very poor and difficult most Indian's lives were. During the five years, he approached many of the Indian princes of the time and began persuading

them to do something for their people. In some states such as Mysore, primary education was made free thanks to his advocacy.

Eventually Vivekananda reached the southernmost tip of India and swam out to a rock (now known as the Vivekananda Rock Memorial), where he meditated for 3 days on what to do next given the size of the problem and the need to uplift so many. After 3 days, the answer that came to him was to travel to affluent America and to directly appeal for help to the 'Good people'. He decided to share the vision and philosophy of Ramakrishna for a unified and peaceful world as well as raise funds and awareness of the profoundly decimated plight of Indians, after the famines and entrenched levels of high taxation.

His trip to America included the famous address at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 which introduced America for the first time to yoga as well as the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism. He also managed to meet many influential people, run yoga classes, and address many speaker events and lecture theatres. He also founded the New York branch of the Vedanta Society, which today has grown into an international network covering 22 countries.

Vivekananda officially founded Ramakrishna Mission 11 years later in 1897 on returning from extensive overseas travel, as an organised movement to help the suffering masses through educational, cultural, medical and relief work. Within 2 weeks of establishing the Mission, the young monks came across seriously distressed victims of the severe Bengal famine. The group found themselves fully extended supporting and aiding victims of this catastrophic famine as their first project for the Ramakrishna Service Mission. This has since evolved into an international organisation that aids those suffering from natural or man-made calamities. This now has over 200 branches in 22 countries.

As well as alleviating suffering, the Mission is exemplifying a key teaching of Ramakrishana.

"All these activities are conducted as service, service to God in man. In the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, service is not restricted to a particular type of activity conducted at a particular time, but is a way of life". https://belurmath.org/activities/

In the modern age with so much suffering and inequality, the mission teaches that the contemporary Hindu path to Moksha is a blend of Service (Karma), Wisdom (Jnana) and Love (Bhakti).

For the following 5 years Vivekananda worked tirelessly speaking and writing all over the world sharing this message as well as overseeing projects as diverse as running hospitals, charitable dispensaries, maternity clinics, tuberculosis clinics, and educational institutions from primary to college. It also maintains training centres for nurses and teachers, orphanages and homes for the elderly along with rural and tribal welfare work. (See https://belurmath.org/ for further details).

After all this infrastructure and his teaching materials were completed, Vivekananda finally returned, exhausted to Belurmath headquarters and as predicted, one evening, he quietly went into meditation and died, aged 39.

The impact of Ramakrishna on Hinduism can be unpacked in a range of key ways.

Development of neo-Vedanta

neo-Vedanta is sometimes used for Vivekananda's application of Vedanta to social justice and service. That is the mission based on Ramakrishna's message of Universalist Advaita combined with social action. This was not just a philosophy or idealist principle to share but to bring into action, as a force for uplifting and doing good in the world for and by people of all religions as colleagues on different paths with the same divine aspiration and destination, seeing each other as being of equal value and importance.

Its key components are continuously developing and mastering oneself through Jnana yoga, cultivating love for all through Bhakti and Karma Yoga by seeing the divine in each and every person and serving them with humility.

"When one realises that everyone is essentially divine, one can no longer treat other people badly."

Jamison, I., 'Hinduism', Philip Allan Updates, (2006), ISBN:1844894207, p. 145.

Some Hindus would argue that it is not philosophically new, but rather a renewing of the classical Vedantic approach of interdependent mutual care and active service to community before jati became confused with Varna and applied as a hierarchical caste system across Indian society.

unity of spiritualism and materialism

Ramakrishna highlighted that Advaita was not just a 'spiritual' or metaphysical teaching, but encompassed the material world. He would tell the ancient Puranic story of Ganesh playfully hitting a cat and finding his mother, Parvati (the universal Mother Deity) with a bruised cheek. She explained to him that if you hurt any living creature, you hurt her, as her divine presence is 'in' every living being.

Traditionally Hindu Monks have been reflective, distanced from society. Influenced by the Christian idea of using their own spiritual strength to effect material change for others, the monks from Ramakrishna Mission also served the poor, but adapted the idea by removing the conversion agenda to serve the Hindu universalist approach. Wherever they went people were invited to learn yoga, meditation and Vedantic philosophy without having to 'convert' or renounce their own religion or community.

Creation of popular discourse of Hinduism in the West, development of Hinduism as a world religion; importance of tolerance and respect towards all spiritual paths

Speaking at the Parliament of World religions in May 1893, Vivekananda dominated proceedings and was an unexpectedly massive hit. He not only expounded on the key principle of dharma as a universal brotherhood across faiths but also preached this as a message of peace between faiths too. He opened his session with 'Brothers and Sisters of America' and received a 2 minute standing ovation from the 7000 people assembled. He began by offering greetings to America, the youngest of the nations on behalf of "the most ancient order of monks in the world, the Vedic order of sannyasins, a religion which has taught the world both tolerance, of and universal acceptance" of all faiths.

With Ramakrishna's direct experience and experiments to underpin his ideas, he was able to quote from scripture in support of the rationale for respecting all spiritual paths. He quoted Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him" and illustrated his universalist message with a well-known Hindu metaphor:

"As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take, through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee!"

Vivekananda, World Parliament, 1893 Speech extract

His speech was so well received as it captured the aspiration of the conference, that Parliament President John Henry Barrows said,

"India, the Mother of religions was represented by Swami Vivekananda, the Orange-monk who exercised the most wonderful influence over his auditors".

This level of impact launched Hinduism on the world stage, particularly for the West, for the first time in modern times.

Vivekananda went on to give sell-out lectures and classes in yoga, meditation and Vedantic philosophy in UK, US and around Europe. He made it clear that this philosophy and its associated practices were not just for Indians, but could be adopted by anyone around the world. He had a knack of engaging the principles of Vedanta to the practical problems of everyday people in all walks of life, encouraging them to think critically about their problems and introduced Vedantic ways to address them through meditation, yoga and service. This established Hinduism as a world religion not just an Indian one. Vivekananda was not interested in just making an impression, but actually seeing the Mission do good across the world and so went

on to open branches of the Vedanta Society in New York, San Francisco and eventually all over the world.

Influence on attitudes to caste

It was said of Ramakrishna, that he had the intellect to engage with the intelligentsia and the heart to uplift poor. His philosophy combined both these elements, heartfelt compassion for the marginalised, and a higher order philosophical rationale for educating and challenging the more affluent to identify with the less fortunate and reflect on the meaning and purpose of their own lives

Ramakrishna said, if one loves God, one can see Him in all people and can love them all irrespective of their nationality, religion or social status. As mentioned previously he challenged everyone to seek out and serve people of all castes, to challenge casteism and cultivate universal brotherhood.

He did not campaign to eliminate jati (caste), but rather sought to educate others into seeing the divine, Shiva and Shakti in every living being, in the hope that this would remove casteism, replace it with loving service to all, irrespective of their occupation or level of income.

Influence on 'idol-worship' (murti-puja)

Under the influence of Mughal (Islamic) and then British (Christian) rule, murti-puja had become conflated with the Abrahamically rejected 'Idolatry', and was thus frowned upon, with many mandir deities being destroyed or removed and sold as novelty items. This was a growing trend, as educated people moved away from puja, branding it regressive and superstitious.

Ramakrishna through his direct encounter with deities, was able to state that not only were all deities across all religions emanations of the same divine intelligence, but that intelligence whilst having no inherent form was responsive to loving worship in whichever form was sincerely worshipped. This was expressed and argued with such skill and authority by Ramakrishna, that the status of bhakti-yoga as a valid Dvaita path was re-established. This was in direct contradiction to the trend in the intellectual classes, and convinced some members to think again.

One such member of the Bhadralok, Keshab Chandra Sen, had started his own more Christianised Unitarian off-shoot of Brahmo Samaj called the 'New Dispensation'. However, on encountering Ramakrishna and attending his talks, Sen was impacted enough to amend his group to accept the validity of murti-puja, going against one of the fundamental tenets of Brahmo Samaj as well as the alternative of worshipping God as loving mother. Sen also wrote the first book published about Ramakrishna, 'Divine Sayings', allowing Ramakrishna's ideas to begin to spread beyond his direct talks.

Vivekananda also dealt extensively with this topic in his writings. He wanted people to appreciate that there was a rationale underlying his message.

'It has become a trite saying that idol worship is wrong... I once thought so and to pay the penalty of that, I had to learn my lesson at the feet of a man who realised everything through idols... Ramakrishna Paramhansa.'

He goes on to argue that all human beings employ their imagination when they think of the divine apart from two categories of people: those with no religious sensibility and enlightened ones who have a complete sensibility to grasp the infinite. Everyone else is just insisting that others imagine what they imagine.

"All of you have been taught to believe in an omnipresent God. Try to think of it. How few of you can have any idea of what omnipresence means! If you struggle hard, you will get something like the idea of ocean, or of the sky, or of a vast stretch of green earth, or of a desert. All these are material images, and so long as you cannot conceive of the abstract as abstract, of the ideal as the ideal, you will have to resort to these forms, these material images. It does not make much difference whether these images are inside or outside the mind. We are all born idolators, and idolatry is good, because it is in the nature of man. Who can get beyond it? Only the perfect man, the God-man. The rest are all idolators. So long as we see the universe before us, with its forms and shapes, we are all idolators. This is a gigantic symbol we are worshipping. He who says that he is the body, is a born idolator. We are spirit, spirit that has no form or shape, spirit that is infinite, and not matter. Therefore, anyone who cannot grasp the abstract, who cannot think of himself as he is, except in and through matter, as the body, is an idolator. And yet how people fight among themselves, calling one another idolators! In other words, each says, his idol is right, and the others' are wrong. "

Two sorts of persons never require any image--the human animal who never thinks of any religion, and the perfected being who has passed through these stages. Between these two points all of us require some sort of ideal, outside and inside.

Vivekananda, on 'Image Worship'

Influence on Hindu identity

Vivekananda described Hindu self consciousness as tending to self-identify on one of two levels: upper- and lower caste. He described this as the legacy of how Hindu family occupations had been and continued to be valued by rulers. He did not connect this to Varna at all, but rather to how lucrative the work of any jati (caste) was, initially for the Mughals and then the Raj. Thus landowners and book-keepers were high-caste, landless people such as barbers and labourers were low caste, which had nothing to do with Dharmic philosophy, and Vivekananda denounced this upper/lower calibration as a 'slave-mindset'.

He called on Hindus to awaken to their true divine identity, to recognise their inherent value for themselves and to focus on uplifting all as one human family through selfless service. This together with his many books and speeches on Vedanta and the valid diversity of lifestyle paths (knowledge, love, service and discipline) had a transformational effect on Hindu esteem and identity.

In addition he was able to robustly defend Hindu self-esteem, in confident articulate English, the language that had been used so devastatingly to denigrate and undermine Hindu identity.

Vivekananda's ability to present Vedantic knowledge in lively metaphors and rational arguments. The combination of a rationally held worldview which simultaneously incorporates respect for other worldviews and dignity for all people has proved to be an enduringly popular feature of contemporary Hinduism, both in India and the diaspora of Hindus around the world.

Issues for discussion

To what extent was neo-Vedanta a response to the West?

How did Vivekananda's early training in rational and critical thinking help him promote Hinduism?

What did Vivekananda mean by 'all streams lead to the same ocean' given that religions have different deities and truth-claims?

Useful Resources:

https://resources.wjec.co.uk/Pages/ResourceSingle.aspx?rlid=2941

WJEC Unit 3E: Scheme of Work

Books

Flood, G.- An Introduction to Hinduism, Foundation Books, (2004), ISBN:8175960280 Jamison, I., 'Hinduism', Philip Allan Updates, (2006), ISBN:1844894207.

Rodrigues, H., 'Introducing Hinduism', Routledge, (2016), ISBN:0415549663

Vivekananda, Swami, 'Sisters and Brothers of America, Speech at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1893', Independent, (2017), ISBN: 978-1520649634

Vivekananda, Swami, 'Sri Ramakrishna as I saw Him', Sri Ramakrishna Math, ISBN: 8171201644

Websites

http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/vivekananda/volume 8/writings prose/four paths of yoga.htm The four paths of yoga by Swami Vivekananda

http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/gospel/introduction/last_days.htm The Gospel of Ramakrishna - Last Days

http://www.vedantauk.com/ Home page of the Vedanta Centre UK (UK branch of the Ramakrishna Monastic Order)