

An Exploration of Vēda Samāj and Its Philosophical Teachings



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Abstract

The Vēda Samāj was an important religious reform movement of the 19th century. It was founded by Keśab Caṇdra Sen and Śrīdhāralu Naidu with the mission of reviving the true spirit of the Vedic tradition. The leaders of the movement believed that the original message of the Vēdas had been misunderstood and distorted over time. They argued that rituals, idol worship, the caste system, and social inequalities were later human additions, not part of the authentic Vedic teachings. Swāmī Dayānand Sarasvatī shared similar concerns. His primary objective was to return to the essence of the Vēdas, which he viewed as the ultimate source of truth, wisdom, and moral guidance. He addressed not only the spiritual needs of society but also emphasized social reform. He advocated for the removal of caste-based discrimination, the promotion of gender equality, and the expansion of education.

The Vēda Samāj laid the intellectual and ideological foundation for the Ārya Samāj, which became a broader and more influential reform movement. Its legacy continues to shape modern Indian religious and social reform efforts. This assignment examines the Vēda Samāj and its philosophical teachings, highlighting its key principles and reformist agenda. It focuses on how the movement challenged long-standing traditions and contributed to a wider social awakening in India.

Keywords:

Vēda Samāj, Keśab Caṇdra Sen, Śrīdhāralu Naidu, Swāmī Dayānand Sarasvatī, Vēdas, Religious Reform, Rituals, Idol worship, Caste System, Gender Equality, Education, Ārya Samāj.



1.1 Introduction

Vēda Samāj was established by Keshab Chandra Sen and K. Sridharalu Naidu when the former visited Madras in 1864. K. Sridharalu Naidu later visited Calcutta to study the Brahmo Samāj movement and when he returned, he renamed the Vēda Samāj as Brahmo Samāj of Southern India in 1871¹. He translated the books of Brahmo Dharma into Tamil and Telugu and undertook missionary tours to propagate the faith. This movement was inspired by Brahmo Samāj. That is why they followed the path of Brahmo Samāj. Their missions were almost the same. The Brahmo Samāj inspired the Vēda Samāj. Vēda Samāj's main philosophies were very similar to those of Brahmo Samāj. It worked to eliminate caste distinctions while also encouraging widow remarriage and women's education.² Both of these movements were opposed to polygamy and child marriage. They condemned orthodox Hindu superstitions and rituals. They do have a strong belief in a single God. They spoke out strongly in favour of rejecting all sectarian views. They never offend anyone's feelings.

1.2.1 Religious and Social Conditions in 19th-Century India

In the 19th century, India was undergoing significant changes due to British colonial rule and the emergence of Western education³. At this time, Indian society got corrupted. Caste system, idol worship, and ritualistic practices were on top. This has removed the spiritual wisdom of the Vēdas. Hinduism was a popular religion. It had deviated significantly from the original teachings of the sacred scriptures.

The social inequality prevalent in the caste system, the treatment of women, and the exploitation of the lower castes were major social challenges. Hindu society was controlled by superstition, blind faith, practices like child marriage, sati and untouchability etc. These all have been practiced in the name of religion. Sati was burnt alive to consider her sacrifice very sacred. Similarly, child marriage was considered good. These all traditions were practiced as something so sacred. Child marriages have destroyed generations. These evils have given traumas to generations. Even today; these are still practiced. In this regard; These evils needed to end. That's why reformists worked so hard to remove these evils.⁴

1.2.2 The Need for a Reform Movement

As a response to the growing social unrest and discontent with traditional practices, many reformers began questioning the relevance of outdated customs and beliefs. The need⁵ for a comprehensive reform movement was increasingly evident. Swami Dayanand Saraswati emerged as a key figure who recognized the necessity of returning to the original teachings of the Vēdas, believing that they contained universal truths that could bring about lasting change in society. His mission was not only spiritual but also social to bring about a more just, rational, and enlightened society based on the timeless wisdom of the Vēdas.

1.2.3 Influence of Brahmo Samāj:

Influence of Brahmo Samāj The Vēda Samāj cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the influence of the Brahmo Samāj. This movement was initiated in Bengal by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828. Mission of Brahmo Samāj was to establish monotheism, the rejection of idol worship, and promoting social causes such as widow remarriage and female education. Keshab Chandra Sen, one of the most influential leaders of the Brahmo Samāj, extended its reformist ideals beyond Bengal. He inspired the formation of parallel movements in other parts of India, including the Vēda Samāj in Madras. That's why they followed the path of Brahmo Samāj. They were also believing and promoting the worship of one God⁶.

1.3 Founder of Vēda Samāj:

Sridharalu Naidu⁷ was the founder of Vēda Samāj. Keshab Chandra sen was not the direct founder of Vēda Samāj but he was the spiritual inspirer of Vēda Samāj.⁸

1.3.1 Early Life and Background of Naidu

He was the founder of Vēda Samāj and leader in the Justice. He was also the first Mayor of Madras in the 1930s and 1940s⁹. He belonged to the Velama caste. His father was the chief

translator of the Madras Presidency for the British and was knighted by Rao Bahadur by King George VI, for his service to the crown. He was a philanthropist who donated Kandappa Chetty Street, George Town, to the use for marriages and other functions. Including marriages, collecting only lighting and utility charges. He also donated hundreds of acres of land to the government on which the Chennai International Airport is currently situated.¹⁰

- **Full name:** Sridharalu Naidu
- **Birthplace:** Madras Presidency (now part of Tamil Nadu, India)
- **Period:** 19th century
- **Community:** He belonged to a respected South Indian Hindu family.
- **Education:** He was well-educated, especially in English and Indian philosophy. His exposure to Western education made him open-minded about social and religious reforms.
- **Beliefs:** From early on, he was deeply spiritual but critical of superstitions, idol worship, and caste-based discrimination in Hindu society.
- **Inspiration:** He was influenced by the teachings of Raja Ram Mohan Roy¹¹ and became even more inspired after attending Keshab Chandra Sen's speeches in Madras in 1864.
- **Turning Point:** After meeting Keshab Chandra Sen, he felt a strong need to reform Hindu society in South India and promote monotheism and social equality.
- **Major Step:** He went on to found the Vēda Samāj which was originally Brahmo Samāj of Southern India. He founded that to spread these reformist ideas.

1.3.2 Early Life and Background of Keshab

Keshab Chandra Sen was born on November 19, 1838, in an affluent Hindu family in Calcutta (now Kolkata), West Bengal. His father, Peary Mohan Sen, was a well-educated man and a follower of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's ideas. This early exposure to reformist ideals had a deep impact on Keshab.

Keshab Chandra Sen was a visionary thinker, reformer, and spiritual leader who worked tirelessly for moral and social upliftment. He was born in a well prosperous Bengali family. He was not from a Brahminic family but he does have a good reputation. He joined the Brahmo Samāj at a young age and quickly got popularity due to his passion and dedication.

Sen's visits to South India¹². He visited Madras in the 1860s. That visit developed the ideas of religious reform and spiritual monotheism. In Madras, Sen's teachings found a dedicated follower in Sridharalu Naidu. Naidu was a civil servant and scholar. He was inspired by Sen. Naidu became the key figure in institutionalizing the Vēda Samāj in 1864. While Keshab Chandra Sen's philosophical foundation laid the groundwork. It was Sridharalu Naidu's organizational efforts that gave the Vēda Samāj a formal structure and public presence.¹³

- **Family:** His family originally belonged to a village. His grandfather was Ramkamal Sen. He was a well known pro-sati Hindu activist. His father, Peary Mohan Sen, was a well-educated man and a follower of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's ideas. He died when he was ten, and Sen was brought up by his uncle. His upbringing combined traditional Hindu values with Western liberal ideas. In his upbringing the principles of rationalism and humanism were also included which shaped his reformist outlook.
- **Education:** As a boy, he attended the Bengali Pathshala elementary school and later attended Hindu College in 1845. He received his education at the Hindu College, where he studied English literature, philosophy, and Western science.
- **Visit to England in 1870:** Sen visited England in 1870,¹⁴ where he gained significant attention in liberal circles. He was warmly welcomed and even met Queen Victoria. The British press admired his presentations of India's religious reform movements and his critiques of colonial injustices. His speeches emphasized inter-religious harmony,

and he presented himself as a symbol of India's spiritual renewal. He was admired by Britishers. That admiration of British culture and monarchy also drew criticism from Indian nationalists and traditionalists.

- **Later Years and Controversies:** He was an opponent of child marriage but in 1878, Sen arranged the marriage of his 14-year-old daughter to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Maharaja was younger than her. This action arose hypocrisy and damaged his reputation. In response, he formed a new sect called the Nababidhan Brahmo Samāj, attempting to reassert his spiritual authority. However, this move turned away many of his followers.
- **Death and Legacy:** Keshab Chandra Sen passed away on January 8, 1884, at the age of 45. Despite the controversies in his later years, his legacy as a pioneer of modern Indian reformist thought remains significant.

1.3.3 K. Sridharalu Naidu's Contribution in Vēda Samāj

- Founder of Vēda Samāj in Madras (1864).¹⁵
- After listening to Keshab Chandra Sen's speeches, he was deeply inspired to bring social and religious reform to South India.
- He formally established the Vēda Samāj. Which was originally under the name Brahmo Samāj of Southern India.
- He worked to spread the ideas of monotheism, fight caste discrimination, and promote women's rights like widow remarriage and female education.
- He organized meetings, lectures, and social programs to make people aware of religious reforms and social issues.
- He adapted the Brahmo Samāj principles to suit South Indian society and traditions

Conclusion

K. Sridharalu Naidu was the founder and active leader of the Vēda Samāj

1.3.4 Keshab Chandra Sen's Contribution:

- He was spiritual inspirer of the Vēda Samāj, although not its direct founder.
- During his visit to Madras in 1864, he delivered influential lectures on religious reform, social equality, and monotheism.¹⁶
- He encouraged South Indians to reform Hinduism by removing idol worship, superstitions, and caste inequalities.
- His ideas gave the moral and intellectual push that motivated Sridharalu Naidu and others to start a movement like the Vēda Samāj.
- Keshab Chandra Sen also kept guiding and inspiring Vēda Samāj reformers even after returning to Bengal.

Conclusion

Keshab Chandra Sen was the inspirer and guide whose speeches led to the formation of the Vēda Samāj

1.3.5 Establishment of the Vēda Samāj

The Vēda Samāj¹⁷ was officially founded in 1864 as the "Brahmo Samāj of South India" but was later renamed to reflect its rootedness in Vedic tradition. The founders believed that the Vēdas should be interpreted rationally and morally. By that timeless wisdom can be learnt which is applicable to contemporary life. The organization promoted monotheism, spiritual introspection, and moral conduct, while rejecting idol worship, caste discrimination, and ritualism.

The society held regular prayer meetings, published spiritual literature, and engaged in public discussions on religion and ethics. These efforts were designed to educate the masses, particularly the youth and educated classes, about a reformed, rational, and ethical form of Hinduism.

1.5 Objectives and Ideals of the Vēda Samāj

- The Vēda Samāj¹⁸ had clearly defined aims that aligned with the broader reformist vision:
- Monotheism: A belief in one eternal, omniscient, and formless God, devoid of anthropomorphic qualities.
- Vedic Authority: The Vēdas were accepted as divine texts, but their interpretation was to be guided by reason and ethical principles.
- Social Reform: The Samāj aimed to combat deeply ingrained social issues such as casteism, untouchability, child marriage, and gender inequality.
- Women's Empowerment: The education and social upliftment of women was central to its mission. The Samāj advocated widow remarriage and opposed practices like sati.
- Moral Development: Members were encouraged to live morally upright lives, emphasizing truthfulness, compassion, and self-discipline.

1.6 Core Activities and Methodology

To achieve its goals, the Vēda Samāj undertook various initiatives. It organized public lectures, discourses, and interfaith dialogues that brought together people from diverse backgrounds. Educational institutions and libraries were established to spread knowledge. The society also published magazines and pamphlets in local languages to make its teachings accessible to the common people.

The prayer meetings of the Vēda Samāj were unique. It was not like other traditional Hindu temples. These gatherings involved the recitation of Vedic hymns, readings from spiritual texts, and sermons focused on ethical living. There were no idols or rituals. There was just sincere devotion to one God.

1.7 Response and Reception Initially

The Vēda Samāj attracted members of the educated middle class, including teachers, civil servants, and lawyers. Its rational approach to religion promoted Western education. Western education was against the rigid orthodoxy of Hindu traditions and cultures. However, the Samāj also faced opposition from conservative Hindu factions who saw its rejection of rituals and idol worship as heretical.

Despite these challenges, the Vēda Samāj managed to create a lasting impact. It laid the foundation for future reform in the South, such as the Theosophical Society and the Ramakrishna Mission's activities in the region.

1.8 Vēda Samāj's Broader Influence

It was limited in geographic reach compared to the Arya Samāj or Brahmo Samāj. But it significantly influenced South Indian society's spiritual and ethical discourse. Its schools and reading rooms became centers of learning and dialogue. Its members contributed to India's nationalist movement by advocating social justice, rational education, and cultural pride.

In many ways, the Vēda Samāj was a pioneer in making religion a tool for ethical and social transformation. It illustrated that the ancient Vedic tradition, when freed from superstition and casteism, could offer a spiritual path compatible with modern ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

1.9 Legacy and Conclusion

While the Vēda Samāj did not evolve into a mass movement, its historical importance lies in its efforts to modernize Indian spirituality. It challenged blind faith and worked for a religion grounded in morality and humanism. The ideas it propagated continue to inspire reformist thought in contemporary India.

Keshab Chandra Sen's dream of a unified, moral society found a meaningful expression through the Vēda Samāj. Sridharalu Naidu's efforts ensured that these ideals took root in South India that contributed to the intellectual and spiritual awakening of the region.

1.10 Conclusion

Vēda Samāj was more than just a religious movement; it was a revival of Vedic thought. That was for a society that were fully involved in traditions and modernity. Its emphasis on unity, reason, and ethical living remains relevant in the ongoing quest for spiritual and social harmony.

2.1 Introduction to Vedic Philosophy

The foundation of the Vēda Samāj's philosophy lies in the ancient Vēdas. Vēdas are regarded as the oldest sacred texts of Hinduism. Unlike traditional interpretations that emphasize ritualism, the Vēda Samāj emphasized a rational, ethical, and spiritual reading of the Vēdas. The Samāj believed that true religion is universal, moral, and rooted in reason. It reinterpreted the Vēdas not as religious scriptures but as guides for ethical conduct and inner realization.

2.2 Core Philosophical Beliefs

- The Vēda Samāj adopted a rational theistic framework. Its teachings were grounded in a few essential philosophical tenets:
- **Monotheism:** The belief in one supreme, formless, eternal, and omnipresent God. The Vēda Samāj rejected polytheism and idol worship. They focused that God could not be represented by images or rituals.
- **Unity of All Religions:** The Samāj held that all true religions teach the same fundamental truths, love, morality, and service to humanity. It promoted interfaith harmony and universal spirituality.
- **Self-Realization and Inner Purity:** According to Vēda Samāj teachings, spiritual progress comes through self-discipline, moral conduct, and introspection. It is not an external ritual. The true temple lies within the heart of the seeker.
- **The Vēdas as Ethical Guides:** While affirming the authority of the Vēdas, the Samāj emphasized their ethical and philosophical content rather than ceremonial aspects.

2.3 Ethical Living and Social Responsibility

One of the most notable aspects of Vēda Samāj philosophy was its emphasis on ethics and duty. Members were encouraged to cultivate personal virtues such as:

- Truthfulness
- Monotheism
- Reflection of idol worship
- Reflection of superstitions
- Compassion
- Non-violence
- Humility
- Service to others
- Against childmarriage¹⁹

Samāj also focused its active involvement in social reform, especially in the domains of:

- Women's rights and education
- Upliftment of marginalized communities
- Opposition to caste-based discrimination

2.4 Opposition to Ritualism and Superstition

The Vēda Samāj firmly stood against the practice of blind rituals, astrology, and superstitious beliefs that had crept into popular Hinduism. It viewed these practices as obstacles to true spiritual growth and reasoned religious life. In its place, it offered a simplified, accessible form of worship involving meditation, moral reflection, and collective prayer.

2.5 Education as a Path to Enlightenment

Education for both spiritual and secular was key to awakening individual and societal consciousness. Educational reform was not just a social mission but a spiritual mission. The

Samāj established schools and reading rooms and encouraged study of the Vēdas, philosophical texts, and contemporary science and literature.

2.6 God and the Human Soul

The philosophical outlook of the Vēda Samāj upheld the idea of the individual soul as divine and inherently pure. Salvation or moksha was not about escaping the world but realizing one's unity with the divine through righteous action and introspection. The divine spark within every human made social equality and universal brotherhood natural extensions of its theology.

2.7 Influence of Upanishadic Thought

Although the Vēda Samāj traced its roots to the Vēdas, its philosophy was deeply influenced by the Upanishad²⁰. Concepts such as Brahman (universal soul), Atman (individual soul), and karma (action and consequence) were interpreted not mystically but ethically and rationally. This led to a humanistic spirituality that placed personal responsibility and moral integrity at the heart of religion.

2.8 Practical Worship and Devotion

Worship in the Vēda Samāj was simple and meaningful. Gatherings included:

- Recitations from the Vēdas and Upanishads
- Moral discourses
- Collective singing of devotional hymns
- Prayers for universal peace and harmony

Devotion was expressed not just through words but through compassionate service and ethical conduct.

2.9 Role of Reason and Conscience

Another important philosophical dimension of the Vēda Samāj was its affirmation of reason and conscience as the guiding lights of religious life. It maintained that God had provided humans with intelligence and moral sense. This should be used to question, understand, and apply religious teachings. Faith is not blind submission but a conscious and deliberate commitment to truth.

2.10 Lasting Relevance of Vēda Samāj's Philosophy

The philosophical teachings of the Vēda Samāj remain relevant in today's world:

- Its stress on interfaith harmony can counter religious intolerance.
- Its ethical emphasis offers a framework for moral living amid modern complexity.
- Its rational spirituality provides an alternative to both blind ritualism and atheistic materialism.
- Its call for social justice continues to inspire activists and reformers.
- In an age marked by rapid technological growth and moral uncertainty, the Vēda Samāj's blend of ancient wisdom and modern ethics offers a path to inner peace and societal well-being.

2.11 Conclusion

The philosophical teachings of the Vēda Samāj represent a profound effort to blend the wisdom of the ancient Vēdas²¹ with the demands of modern ethical and rational thinking. By emphasizing monotheism, moral conduct, education, and social reform, the Samāj presented a holistic spiritual philosophy that remains relevant to this day. It is a legacy of enlightened thought that continues to inspire those who seek a harmonious blend of tradition and modernity, faith and reason, spirituality and service.

Summary

The Vēda Samāj aimed to purify Hinduism by returning to the monotheistic ideals of the Vēdas, rejecting idol worship, caste discrimination, and superstitious practices. The movement emphasized ethical living, rational thinking, and promoted progressive social reforms such as women's education, widow remarriage, and inter-caste marriage. Although it played a significant role in the early stages of South Indian reform. The Vēda Samāj gradually declined due to limited mass support and resistance from orthodox Hindu society.

Despite its noble aims, the Vēda Samāj faced several challenges. It struggled to gain widespread support in a society deeply attached to traditional religious customs and caste structures. Furthermore, its influence remained mostly limited to a small circle of educated elites in urban areas. Over time, as other regional and national reform movements gained momentum. However, it remains an important part of India's 19th-century reform era, symbolizing the efforts of early modern thinkers to blend spiritual tradition with social progress.

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