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Prerna Gandhi

Research Associate, VIF

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National Development through Character-Building: A Saga of Vivekananda Kendra

निश्रेयस एवं अभ्युदय (Material Wellbeing, Spiritual Wellbeing)

The emphasis on social welfare and community living has since time immemorial been a part of the Hindu tradition. Dharma, eternal timeless principles, that govern human life beyond religious rituals have long been the guiding core of individual and social values in India. Over the centuries, many social movements in India have sought the beacon of Dharma in working tirelessly for the upliftment and betterment of the Indian society. In choosing an ethos of service before self, many men and women, boys and girls give up their own individual desires to live the tough-disciplined life of social workers. With a meagre lifestyle, they reach out from mainstream to the far flung areas of society as educators, health care workers, social activists, environmentalists, meditation and yoga teachers etc. In this long history, one movement in contemporary time notably stands out, that is the 'Vivekananda Kendra'. With the ideals of the revered 19th Century saint, Swami Vivekananda, and the charismatic leadership and vision of its founder, Shri Eknath Ranade, the Vivekananda Kendra has focused on holistic living through its trained cadre of workers. The aim is to ensure modernity with tradition so that the Indian society has inner sustainability.

Shri Eknath Ranade initially conceived the 'Vivekananda Rock Memorial' in Kanyakumari as a tribute to his spiritual teacher Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda during his meditation on the mid-sea rock contemplated on the glorious past of India, current miseries inherent in India at the time, and in December 1892, envisioned a future 'Glorious India'. With contributions as small as Rs one's and two's from all corners of the Indian society to create an all-encompassing national monument at the time, the imposing granite memorial was inaugurated in 1970. The Rock Memorial's location at the mid-sea rock formation later came to embody the spirit of the Vivekananda Kendra (established in 1972) where confluence of



confluence of three seas constantly pay homage to the Indian peninsula. The Kendra, with its spiritually-oriented service mission has since then dedicated itself to man-making, nation-building and spreading a world-unifying message inspired by the ideals of Swami Vivekananda. To achieve Swami Vivekananda's mission of glorious India in action, it has 220 branch centers traversing the whole of India from Kashmir in North to Kanyakumari in South, Gujarat in West to Arunachal Pradesh in East. In fact training institutions for its cadre represent its inclusive approach with Vivekananda Kendra Ashram at Nagdandi in Kashmir, Vivekanandapuram in Kanyakumari, Vivekananda Kendra Prashikshanva Seva Prakalpa in Nashik, and Vivekananda Kendra Laipuli in Tinsukia.

With 800 plus activity centers in more than 22 states, the Kendra carries out various service activities through yoga classes (Yoga Varga), informal value education classes (Samskar Varga), study circles (Swadhyaya Varga) and training camps to do with issues of rural development, education, development of natural resources, tribal women empowerment etc., deriving inspiration from life and message of Swami Vivekananda. Through volunteer workers (sevavrati and sthanikkaryakartas) including 200 life workers (jeevanvrati) who pledge their lives to the Kendra's mission, the Kendra has reached out to the most difficult and far-flung terrains of Kashmir, Northeast India, Andaman and Nicobar Islands etc. The Kendra's most powerful contribution has been in promoting education in Northeast India and other remote areas. It presently runs around 68 schools (many of them girls schools) enrolling more than 28,000 students into the modern Indian educational system. In fact, there is a Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya (VKV) in the 15 out of 16 districts in Arunachal Pradesh.

Teachers in the VKVs are highly respected by the local populations for their immense devotion and discipline to ensure that the next Indian generation grows up freely in a clean and healthy environment, with a strong sense of discipline, self-confidence, and duty towards motherland. All the five spheres of child development, i.e., Physical, Mental, Emotional, Intellectual, and Spiritual, are given equal importance in VKVs. The Kendra's efforts have led to a pool of first generation tribal students emerging as doctors, engineers, and civil servants, professionals in fine arts, and businessmen in India today. In addition to VKVs, the Vivekananda Kendra also runs more than 300 plus 'balwadis' and 'anadalyas' for informal education along with many vocational training centers. With an emphasis on national pride, the Kendra has given importance to issuing variety of publications, periodicals and books in local languages. There are more than 470 titles in 12 languages today covering a diversity of languages such as Hindi, English, Marathi, Gujarati, Telugu, Bengali, and Punjabi etc.

The Kendra also runs many projects on rural welfare, centers of cultural eminence and medical care facilities. Vivekananda Kendra Rural Development Program (VK-RDP) aims to inculcate



pride for local traditions (through mantra-chanting and prayers) and extend educational and medical support to the remotest rural populace. With a motto of “IsavasyamidamSarvam” (All Existence is permeated by Divine), the Vivekananda Kendra Natural Resources Development Project (VK-NARDEP) was started in Kanyakumari in 1986. It has a variety of programs encompassing cost effective construction, renewable energy, water management, sustainable agriculture, holistic health and a strong focus on inner sustainability. With a project cost of Rs 1.5 crore, VK-NARDEP renovated some of the 16 Holy Theerthams for the 150th birth centenary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda in 2013. Impressed with Kendra’s work at the time, Shri A.P.J Abdul Kalam, former President of India expanded the scope to cover all aspects to make Rameswaram (his hometown) a Green-Pilgrimage or Eco-Pilgrimage Center. Another major project includes the Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture (VKIC) established in 1993 at Guwahati to nurture roots through seminars, research, documentation and publications on Northeast India. Its focus has been on understanding the richness of Indian traditional systems, identifying the unifying elements that bind to provide meaningful continuity in a fast-changing complex lifestyle through the adage of ‘Development through Culture’.

The third phase of the mission has also now been embarked upon with the establishment of the Vivekananda Kendra International to spread Swami Vivekananda’s message of selfless service and universal harmony around the world. The first meeting of the Vivekananda Kendra International, was held under the auspices of Shri Eknath Ranade himself during his last days at Vivekanandapuram, Kanyakumari. In the new millennium, the third phase started with a legislation setting up a think tank in 2004 to bring together the best minds in India to ideate on key national and international issues under the then Prime Minister Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee. The Vivekananda International Foundation, a New-Delhi based independent, non-partisan think tank, inaugurated in 2009, carries the message of ‘Vasudeva Kutumbakam’ (world is one family) through its work on national security, international relations and issues of economy and policy governance. Swami Vivekananda’s message has constantly emphasized the divine being inherent in all beings. In one of his lectures on Vedanta, he reiterated that “throughout history of mankind, no motive power has been more potent than a deep faith in oneself in lives of all great men and women”.

The Vivekananda Kendra thus strives to instill this self-confidence and spirit of pride in Indian society, so that the Indian Nation can assume a leadership position in the comity of nations. In a clarion call to fellow Indians which hold as true today, Swami Vivekananda said, “My countrymen should have nerves of steel, muscles of iron, and minds like thunderbolt.”

About VIF

Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.

VIF is not aligned to any political party or business house.

Vivekananda International Foundation

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: info@vifindia.org

www.vifindia.org

 [@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)

