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Practical Vedānta of Swami Vivekananda: An Estimate

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempted to discuss Practical Vedanta philosophy of Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda was an Indian Philosopher of Modern Times. He introduced Indian Philosophy of Vedānta and Yoga in the Western world. He was a major force in the reformation of the Hindu religion in India. He began his search for God by following a scientific approach, in the process of his quest, he met mystic Ramakrishna Paramhansa and became a great spiritualist of Neo-Vedānta. He laid philosophical foundations for Hindu cultural reformation and Indian society utilizing Advaita logic. His success lies in drawing social philosophy from the thoughts of Advaita Vedānta which paved the way for the social reforms in India. He represented Neo-Vedānta linked with transcendentalism new thought, theosophy. He introduced four yoga's model, which made him practical Vedāntin to realize the divine force within every human being. He successfully amalgamated Western materialism with Indian spiritualism. He encouraged the practice of Advaita Vedānta in people's daily life linked with society, he preached spiritual stage through the humanistic stage, and in this process, he denied the evil practices by Indian priest class, Prince Class and trade class and sensitively responded towards the poverty and wretched conditions of working-class (the *Shudras*). He hated the practice of untouchability and laid a solid foundation for nationalism. He explored Indian philosophy and drew ethical Systems based on Advaita Vedānta, offering a solution for the salvation of humankind. He recognized the energy of individual human as a form of divinity and built tremendous positive psychology for humankind. He applied the philosophy of Advaita Vedānta to build humanity and spirituality. It all reflected his practical Vedānta idealism. Thus Vivekananda acted as a great philosopher of Advaita Vedānta and social reformer in colonial India. This article gives the views of Swami Vivekananda on Practical Vedānta.

Keywords: Vedānta, Advaita Vedānta, Practical, Naranarayana, Sevā, Shudras.

Article

The philosophy of Swami Vivekananda may be said to have been rooted partly in the teachings of his great master, Sri Ramakrishna and partly to those of *Kevalādvaita* Vedānta of Śaṅkarācārya. From Sri Ramakrishna, he received the message of rendering unflinching service to human beings, serving *Jīva* as *Shiva* through the unique power of love; from Śaṅkarācārya he learnt the message of *tattvamasi* or *aham Brahmāsmi*, or *Jiva Brahmaiva nāparah*. It will be readily seen that the second message revitalizes the first in so far as it brings the all-pervading supreme Reality very near to us, almost within us and this facilitates the spontaneous service to mankind in general because it ensures the truth that every man is potentially divine. These two great teachings are harmonized by Vivekananda in his characteristic convincing way into what he calls " Practical Vedānta ".¹

Practical Vedānta is associated with the name of Swami Vivekananda. He observes: 'theory is very good indeed, but how are we to carry it in practice? The Vedānta, therefore, as a religion must be intensely practical, we must be able to carry it ours in every part of our lives. And not only this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedanta teaches oneness -one life throughout? At least four points have been made in this passage. (1) The theory is very good but without practice it is incomplete. (2) Practical Vedānta is a religion based on Vedānta philosophy. (3) Practical Vedānta is related to every part of our lives. (4) Vedānta (Advaita) teaches oneness and consequently, the differentiation between religion and the life of the world is unjustified.

Sister Nivedita in the Introduction of the Complete Works of her Guru states: 'No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stem a trust as to quit and to avoid.' She added that none was alien or foreign to her Guru. 'For him, there existed only Humanity and Truth.'²

Practical Vedānta does not reject anything as alien or false. Truth is its ideal and it admits no barrier of caste, creed and country. It speaks in terms of humanity and not for any root in particular. Practical Vedānta is a universal religion. A practical Vedāntin holds that Religion is one as Truth is one and the extant religions are the manifestations of this Religion with Capital 'R'. Vedānta, we all know, has different schools. All of them may be brought under three heads- Dualism, Qualified monism and Non-dualism. The first is associated with the name of Madhva, the second with Rāmanuja and the last one with the name of Śaṅkarācārya. Madhva will consider the other two as false, Rāmajuja will find the other two as unacceptable, whereas to Śaṅkarācārya non-dualism is ultimately true and the other two may be efficacious to some at different stages of spiritual development but their final falsity can never be denied. Swami Vivekananda finds a hierarchy in them from dualism to Non-dualism through qualified monism and considers none of them as false. We do not pass from falsity to truth, he holds, but we pass from lower truth to higher truth. Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita are but three phases or stages in a single development, of which the last-named constitutes the goal.³ This is part and parcel of the still greater and more simple doctrine that many and the one are the same Reality, perceived by the mind at different times and indifferent attitudes. One is not exclusive of the many which are not divorced from the one. One is to be read in the many which should be taken as the manifestation of the one. This is the principle of 'Unity in Diversity'.⁴ This principle can well solve the different problems of the plurality of race, language, religion and states. The differences can never be eliminated, these will exist forever 'Variation', according to Swami Vivekananda, 'is the sign of life and it must be there.' Only the one in the variety is not to be lost right of. The different citizens of India have differences of caste, creed, language, race and the like, still, they are all Indians. Swami Abhedananda, the brother disciple of Swami Vivekananda, later on, accommodated all extant religions, dualistic, qualified non-dualistic and non-dualistic under one universal religion which is Vedānta.'⁵

Nivedita well said in her popular Book-Master As I Saw Him, " I had heard of the spiritual life in Calcutta, as a thing definite and accessible, to be chosen deliberately, and attained by following certain well-known paths. I found it, on reaching the mountains, to have its roots deep in a yearning love of God, in an anguished pursuit of the Infinite, of which I cannot hope to give any description. For this was characteristic of our Master. Where others would talk of ways and means, he knew how to light a fire, Where others gave directions, he would show the thing itself."⁶

According to Vivekananda, a Practical Vedāntin can well be a Hindu with the Hindus, a Mohammedan with the Mohammedans, a Christian with the Christian and of any other religion with its followers. Swamiji says: 'I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan, I shall enter the Christians church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and his law. I shall go into the forest and sit in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the light which enlightens the heart of everyone. Not only shall I do all these but I shall keep my heart open for all that they may come in the future. Is God's book finished? or is it still a continuous revelation going on? , It is a marvellous book - these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are so many pages and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded...Salutation to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present and to all that are to come little future." He adds: 'We want to lead mankind to the place when there is neither the Vedas nor the Bible nor the Koran, yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran'.⁷ The implication perhaps is that Practical Vedānta has respect for all religious texts, faith in their harmony and yet goes beyond them in the actual realization of Truth. Authentic religion does not mean certain texts, it is essentially realization, being and becoming.

About authentic religion, Swamiji observes: Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship or psychic control or philosophy -by one or more,

or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details'.

Six points are to be noted here. First, each soul is potentially divine. Secondly, the goal of human life is to manifest this divinity. Thirdly, religion is the manifestation of divinity already in man. This is a new definition of religion. Fourthly, doctrines or dogmas or rituals or books or temples or forms do not constitute the essence of religion. These are only secondary details. Fifthly, the realization is possible in various ways and all these are equally efficacious. Sixthly, the synthesis of *Yogas -Jñāna, Karma, Bhakti* and *Raja* is possible. Previously we heard of *Jñāna-Karma-samanaya* Combination of knowledge and work. But Swamiji widened the scope of combination and synthesised all the *Yogas*. Swamiji chalked out a new *sādhanā* for the realization of the divinity of man which is service, to man is service to God (*Nara-Nārāyaṇa-Sevā*), This is rooted in the Upaniṣadic text- 'Tattvamasi' understood in the light of the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. One day he was talking about the three main disciplines followed by the Vaiśnavas, viz. kindness to creatures, love for the Lord's name and respect for the devotees of God. He did not like the idea of kindness, as a finite man, according to him, cannot show kindness to another man. A man can only be served as God.⁸

Although many heard this, only Swami Vivekananda, grasped the underlying idea and in later life he gave it a practical shape and propagated the idea of Practical Vedānta. According to Swamiji, If God can be worshipped in images made of clay or metal, He can be worshipped in human form also. This is a new' gospel propagated by Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. One who serves men as God removes human sufferings and hence does good to the society and in doing so he becomes free. This *sādhanā* of *Naranārāyaṇa sevā* is different from the ordinary humanitarian service which is generally inspired by mercy and compassion. In such a case a dualism between *sevya* and *sevaka* or the served and the server, is unavoidable. Moreover, those who serve in this way place themselves on a higher footing as they give and the others receive. But in Swamiji's concept of *Naranārāyaṇa sevā*, there is an identity between *sevya* and *sevaka* as to both of them are potentially divine. When one man serves another, really he serves himself, because essentially and ultimately all are one. *Naranārāyaṇa* is not even identical with ordinary Karma-yoga. In Karma-yoga there is a dualism between *Karmī* (the doer) and *Karma* (the deed). But here in *Naranārāyaṇa sevā*, *Nara*, *Nārāyaṇa* and *seva* represent essential divinity or spirituality. Here God worships God, as according to the Shastras, we are to worship *śiva* by being *śiva*, (*śivam bhutvā.Sivam Yajet*).

Naranārāyaṇa sevā is a new spiritual discipline which synthesizes *jñāna, raja, yoga, bhakti* and *karma*. In this *sādhanā* man has to conceive of God as the self with in to be attached to him through *Bhakti-yoga* with wholehearted devotion and through *karma-yoga* serve him with disinterested, desireless actions. This *Naranārāyaṇa sevā* takes the whole man -his hand, heart and head and so it becomes a worship of the whole being. Moreover, this *Naranārāyaṇa sevā* doctrine assigns to man the highest honour, as the man himself is God there. Human dignity lies in divinity. Swamiji has shown that Advaita which is the basis of Practical Vedānta is harmonious with modern science and acceptable to a critical modern mind.' In this new religion, Swamiji says, theism is the belief in one's self and atheism is disbelief in him. So this religion brings self-confidence and fearlessness. Swamiji explains morality in terms of Advaita. Every religion preaches that the essence of morality is to do good to others.

Practical Vedānta as a religion stands for the religion of man, values of life, universal love and eternal Truth. It (Practical Vedānta) is opposed to any form of privilege for anyone. Swamiji observes: 'The idea of privilege is the base of human life ...there is first the brutal idea of privilege, that of strong over the weak. There is the privilege of wealth. If a man has more money than another, he wants a little privilege over those who have less. There is still the subtler and more powerful privilege of intellect; because one man knows more than others, he claims more privilege. And the last of all, and the worst, because the most tyrannical, is the privilege of spirituality. If some persons think that they know more of the spirituality of God, they claim superior privilege than over everyone else. None can be Vedāntins and admit of privilege to anyone, either mental, physical or spiritual; absolutely no privilege for anyone. The same power is in every man, the one manifesting more, the other less; the same potentiality is in everyone. Where is the claim to privilege Vedānta, thus, paves the ground for true democracy and socialism? Swamiji; frees Vedānta from its traditional limitation and opens its doors to all and presents it as universal

philosophy and religion with a universal appeal.⁹ Thus, Vedānta which was confined to the forest and cave, came out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit and the cottage of a poor man, with the fisher men that are catching fish and with the students that are studying in various disciplines?

Practical Vedānta has nothing to do with politics and any political gain. It has a social bearing as it can bring about social change through the change of the character of the individuals living in society. Its ultimate aim is the realization of one's essential divinity and universal oneness. Swami Vivekananda once said: " Give up Jealousy and conceit; learn to work united for others. That is the great need in our country. Have patience and be faithful unto death. Do not fight among yourselves. Be perfectly pure in money dealings. So long as you have faith and honesty and devotion, everything will prosper. So long as there is no feeling of disunion among you, through the grace of the Lord, I assure, there is no danger for you." ¹⁰

Notes and References

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