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Vedāntic thought & society: A vision of Swami Vivekananda

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Introduction

The word 'Hindu', by which it is fashion now-a-days to style ourselves, has almost lost its meaning. As this word merely meant for those who lived on other side of the river Indus i.e. Sindhu in Sanskrit. This name has murdered into Hindu by ancient Persians and all the people living on the other side of the river Sindhu were called as Hindus by them and during the Mohammedan rule we took up the word ourselves. However, in modern times, the people living on the side of Indus River do not follow the same religion as they did in ancient times. So, the word covers not only Hindus proper but Mohammedans, Christians, Jains and others who live in India.

Most of the great religions of the world owe allegiance to certain books, which they believe are the words of God or some other super-natural beings which are the basis of their religion. Now of all these books, according to modern savants of the west the oldest are Vedas of the Hindus. A little understanding therefore is necessary about the Vedas. This mass of writing is not the utterance of any person. Its date has never been fixed. So, they are said to be eternal. All other religions of the world claim their authority being delivered by a personal beings, angels or special messengers of God, while the claim of the Hindus is that the Vedas do not owe their authority to any human form. They are themselves the authority, being eternal. The end part of the Vedas is called the Vedānta. It was discovered by personages called Rṣi (Mantra Dṛṣṭa), a seer of thought. However, the thought was not his own. So, by following the Vedas or Vedānta philosophy, we are following those universal principles which could make our lives better. The Vedānta which is poetry, religion and philosophy all in one is sometimes called Pantheism, Theosophy, Psychology or Metaphysics. It is the knowledge of the infinite wisdom and the unchanging eternal righteousness which proclaims to all ages and countries. The vast treasures of most vitally essential and sublime truths and thoughts which if rightly understood could lead to the highest goal i.e. the Mokṣa.

The excellence of this philosophy is the fact that it begins with the idea of God, who is a circle and whose centre is everywhere, however circumference is nowhere. It 'is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge'. The main object of Vedānta is the reconciliation of religion with philosophy and of philosophy with religion. Restores the relation of God and the self and thus enables us to find heaven on earth by discovering God in Jīva and Jīva in God.

Whether in the East or the West, there is one great ideal which forms the backbone of that race. With some it may be politics, with others it could be social culture or intellectual culture for their national background. But our motherland has religion alone for its basis and backbone. This is the line of life, the line of growth and the line of well-being in India.

However, in other counties religion is only one of the many necessities in life and they have many other occupations as well. Politics, social improvements etc. in one word 'this world' is the goal of mankind in the west and the God and religion comes in as helpers to attain that goal. However, Vedānta is the philosophy which teaches that this world is not the aim of all because it is fleeting.¹ The thoughtful men of the west find the new impulse of thought in our ancient philosophy Vedānta. Except ours, almost all the other great religions in the world are inevitably connected with the life or lives of one or more of their founders. All their theories, teachings, doctrines and ethics are built round the life of a personal founder, from whom they take their sanction. Strangely enough, upon the historicity of the founder's life, is built the

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fabric of such religions. Every great religions of the world except ours, is built upon such historical characters, but ours rests upon the principles. There is no man or woman who can claim to have created the Vedas, sages have discovered them.

Vedāntic view of Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda holds the same view point. He is called a neo-vedāntist. He was not merely a theoretician, an arm chair philosopher but an idealist too. He has given the message of spirituality as embodied in the Upanisads or Vedānta. He was a personality believing – “the one without the second”.² With a practical bent of mind. He wonderfully reconciled the way of knowledge (jñāna-yoga) with the way of action (karma-yoga). He subscribed to the theories of Vedānta and gives the interpretation which is relevant in the modern times.

His words testify his realistic bent of mind. “.. How could that perfect God have been deluded? He never was. How could a perfect God have been dreaming? He never dreamed. Truth never dreams. The very question as to whence this illusion arose is absurd. Illusion arises from illusion alone. There will be no illusion as soon as the truth is seen. Illusion always rests upon illusion. It never rests upon God. You are never in illusion; it is illusion that is in you, before you. For example, a cloud is here, another comes and pushes it aside and takes its place. Still another comes and pushes that one away. As before the eternal blue sky, clouds of various hues and colors, come, remain for a short time and disappear, leaving it the same eternal blue, even so are you, eternally pure, eternally perfect. It is a mistake to say you and I, say ‘I’. It is I who am eating in millions of mouths, how can I be hungry? It is I who am working through an infinite number of hands, how can I be inactive? I am beyond all life, beyond all death. Who can bind me, the God of the universe? The scriptures of the world are but little maps, wanting to delineate my glory.”³

This is the Vedāntic thought which he ever worked with, which made him alive even after the finish of his body. He practically brushes aside the theory of delusion of māyā and says injure none, deny the position of none. If you can, lend him a helping hand and put him on a higher platform. All will come to truth in the long run. This synthesis by Vivekananda is a most original contribution to the ideal philosophic thought. It is even interesting to note that how Vivekananda brings the Advaita (Monistic) philosophy into line with modern scientific thought. “When the scientific teachers asserts that all things are the manifestation of one force, does it not remind you of the God of whom you hear in the Upanisads. ‘As the one fire entering into the universe express itself in every soul and yet is infinitely more besides. The Hindu nation preceded the study of the mind, through metaphysics and logic. The European nation start from external nature and now they are coming to the same results. We find that searching through the mind; we come to that oneness, the universal soul. Even through the material science we come to the same oneness. Science says that all things are the manifestations of one energy which is the sum total of everything which exists.”⁴

Vivekananda says that his position is analogous to that of the scientist because both in science and in the metaphysics the source of everything is sought to be traced is matter or energy. Matter itself being a form of energy or force. In metaphysics (Advaita) the source is traced to be the Ātman or Brahman. Hence, the Vedānta philosophy has the broad approach. It is the great mine of strength through which the whole world can be energized.

The Vedānta preaches the ideal and the ideal is always far ahead of the real i.e. practical in this context. There are two

tendencies in human nature: one to harmonize the ideal with the life and the other to elevate the life to the ideal. The former tendency is the temptation of our lives. What I think is the only practically in the world. If I am a shopkeeper, I think shop keeping is the only practical pursuit in the world. If I am a thief, I think stealing is the best means of being practical, others are not practical. Hence, we use the word ‘Practical’ as the way we like and for the things we can do. But the Vedānta teaches the practically in an ideal sense and the ideal, in one word is the realization of the Mahāvākya i.e. ‘You are divine’ (Thou art that).⁵

It teaches men to have faith in themselves. And a person who does not believe in himself is an atheist i.e. not believing in the glory of our own soul. This could seem a terrible idea to many people, however, the Vedānta insists that it can be realized by everyone only if we do not put our hands before our eyes and cry that it is dark. The Vedānta recognizes no sin, it only recognizes error and the greatest error is to say that ‘I am weak and miserable creature’. Śri Śaṅkara was the first person who says that this can be realised in the depths of forests or caves but by men in all possible conditions of life. He was the person who said that even Grihasthas may also study the Upanisads. It is there for everyone in every occupation of life. So, these conceptions of the Vedānta must not remain only in the forest, or in the cave but they must come out to work at the bench, in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen who are catching fish and with the students who are studying etc. They call to every man, woman and child, whatever be their occupation.

The ideal of faith in ourselves is of the greatest help to us. If faith in ourselves had been more extensively taught and practiced, the large portion of the evils and miseries could be vanished.

Footnote References

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