

THE RELEVANCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA*
TARAK NATH NANDI

In the nineteenth century, we came across a galaxy of enlightened minds. Among them Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) have devoted themselves for removal of profanity, impurity, evil, dishonesty from society. The service, they have rendered for our society is not forgettable. That's why, till today also, we are looking back and remembering them as legendary souls.

The present paper deals with how Vivekananda understands Vedānta philosophy and how according to him, the social evils can be removed through the application of the concept of Vedānta. He has shown the applicability of Vedānta in our everyday thought and action and he teaches to serve *Jīva as Śīva* following the ideology of Vedānta. Somebody may say that the philosophy of Vivekananda is out of date. So, it is nothing but the waste of time to discuss on his philosophy. However, I cannot agree with them. Sun is equally useful in all ages. The thinking of all great men is as useful as Sun in all ages. The relevance of their thinking cannot be time-bound. It transcends the boundary of a particular time and space.

It is important to note that, Vedānta philosophy has been understood by Vivekananda in broader sense. Generally by Vedānta school one understands '*Brahma-sūtra*' and the different commentaries on it. But, according to Vivekananda, the term '*Vedānta*' refers not only to '*Brahma-sūtra*', but also to '*Upaniṣada*' and '*Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*'. Literally, the term '*Vedānta*' means 'the end of the *Veda*', but *Vedānta (Upaniṣada)* is not only the end of *Veda*, it is 'the final aim of the *Veda*' or 'the essence of the *Vedas*'⁴⁶. The knowledge of *Brahman* is called *Upaniṣada*, which is belonging to the *jñāna-kānda* or knowledge portion of *Veda*. There are three sources of entire *Vedānta (Prasthān-trayī)* viz. *Śruti-Prasthāna*, *Nyāya-Prasthāna* and *Smṛti-Prasthāna*. The *Śruti-Prasthāna* is *Upaniṣada*, the *Nyāya-Prasthāna* is *Brahma-sūtra* and the *Smṛti-Prasthāna* is *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*. These three

* I am thankful to my supervisor Dr. Nirmal Kumar Roy for his valuable guidance.

⁴⁶ Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2nd Edition, 2008, p. 398.

Prasthānas taken together are called *Vedānta*. Vivekananda also accepts *Prasthān-traya* as *Vedānta*. In his own word:

“The *Upanishads*, the *Vyāsa-Sutras*, and the *Gīta* [*Gītā*], therefore, have been taken up by every sect in India that wants to claim authority for orthodoxy, whether dualist, or Vishishtādvaitist [Viśiṣṭādvaitin], or Advaitist [Advaitin]; the authorities of each of these are the three *Prasthānas*. ...Therefore, it would be wrong to confine the word Vedānta only to one system which has arisen out of the *Upanishads*. All these are covered by the word *Vedānta*.”⁴⁷

Mostly, there are three commentators of Vedānta philosophy (*Nyāya-Prasthāna*), one is the dualistic (*Dvaita*), second is the qualified non-dualistic (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) and third is the non-dualistic (*Advaita*). According to Vivekananda, one beginning with the dualistic, stay with the qualified non-dualistic and ending with the non-dualistic. He accepts dualistic accompanied by qualified non-dualistic as a means and non-dualistic as the aim of our life. He writes:

“... the dualistic, qualified monistic, and advaitic theories, and reconciled them by saying that each one of these was like a step by which one passed before the other was reached; the final evolution to Advaitism was the natural outcome, and the last step was ‘*Tattvamasi*’.”⁴⁸

Swami Vivekananda observes that apparently one may think that one sect of Vedānta school contradicts the other sects, but in fact this is not true. Our close and careful analysis shows that one sect is complementary to the other sects to reach for the ultimate truth. If the dualistic view is the initial step, then the Advaitin view is the final and last step towards the ultimate truth ‘*Tattvamasi*’ (*That thou art*). Vivekananda says,

“All the sects of India — Dualists, Qualified-Monists, Monists. ... Each one that dares to come within the fold of Hinduism — must acknowledge the *Upanishads* of the *Vedas*. They can have their own interpretations and can interpret them in their own way, but they must obey the authority. That is why we want to use the word Vedantist instead of Hindu.”⁴⁹

The main verse of Advaita Vedānta is “*Brahman Satyaṁ jagannithyā jīvaḥ Brahmaiva nāparḥ*” i.e. *Brahman* is only true, *Jagat* (world) is false and *jīva* is nothing but *Brahman*. Vivekananda agrees with the view of Śaṅkarācārya to a great extent. He believes like Śaṅkarācārya that there is no difference between the *jīva* and

⁴⁷ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3, Advaita Ashram, Kolkata-14, 9th Edition, 1964, p. 396. [Henceforth CWS].

⁴⁸ CWS, Vol. 3, pp. 438-439.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

Brahman, but unlike him, he does not believe that the world is false. The explanation of *māyā* rendered by Śaṅkarācārya is not acceptable to Vivekananda. Śaṅkarācārya says that *māyā* is indescribable (*anirvacanīya*) and *māyā* is the power of *Brahman* which creates the illusory knowledge. But, Vivekananda did not accept this view. For him, *māyā* is as real as *Brahman*. As *māyā* is real the world, the creation of *māyā*, must be real. *Jīva* is the part of the *Brahman*. Regarding *Māyā*, he writes:

“... *Māyā* is not a theory for the explanation of the world; it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction, that wherever there is good, there must also be evil, and wherever there is evil, there must be some good, wherever there is life, death must follow as its shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice-versa.”⁵⁰

Another important issue should be highlighted. One may say that, there are two aspects of Vedānta philosophy, i.e. theoretical and practical. The former is associated with the name of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva and so on, whereas the latter is associated with the name of Swami Vivekananda. But, I think, this is not the case. Each and every school of Indian philosophy by the nature is very much practical. All other schools of Indian philosophy, excepting Cārvāka philosophy, have an aim to attain liberation. But, attainment of liberation is not practical? The schools which help us to find the path of liberation and thereby makes our life completely free from suffering must be practical. This is equally true in the philosophy of Śaṅkarācārya. But, it is well known to us that the philosophy of Vivekananda is known as ‘*Practical Vedānta*’. So, the question comes – what is the significance of it? The *Vedānta* of Vivekananda is practical in the sense that he made home the Vedānta philosophy to common people. In this context, it is very important to note the comment made by P. K. Sengupta. He says,

“The distinctive character of the Practical Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda lies in his tremendous effort to bring the philosophically sophisticated ideas and doctrines of Advaita Vedanta to the understanding or it may be said, to the conviction of common man in a simple but triumphant way. If Vedanta provides a ‘house’ for the millions of Indians, Practical Vedanta of Vivekananda gives them their ‘home’.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ CWS, Vol. 2, 10th Edition, p. 97.

⁵¹ Sengupta, Pradip. Kumar. (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata-73, 2012, p. 2.

The main intention of Vivekananda's *practical Vedānta* is to make possible a development of a 'universal attitude' towards the common people. The 'universal attitude', as understood by Vivekananda means to see one's own-self into others, and other creatures in one's own-self. I think the philosophy of Vivekananda is highly relevant for the turmoil situation we are running through. Today we are being affected by the sense of alienation because of communalism and racism. To restrain the force of alienation we need to realize the essence of one being with others. According to Vivekananda, if it is realized that as a being one is identical with others, then there cannot be any sense of alienation among them. That is the only essence of 'Practical Vedānta' which is also known as 'neo-Vedānta'. One can use the word 'neo' in two different senses, one is as 'new' and another is as 'something which was existed before in the perverted form but now it manifests in the proper form'. The philosophy of Vivekananda is called 'neo' in the second sense, because, previously the Vedāntins view was misinterpreted, but Vivekananda interprets it properly and shows how this view can be applied in our day to day life. Śaṅkarācārya holds that a *sannyāsin* is a right person to follow Vedānta philosophy, but Vivekananda does not agree with him. He thinks that Vedānta philosophy can be followed by a *sannyāsin* and *grhī* as well. I think, we can cite the following lines of Tagore in order to substantiate this view of Swami Vivekananda,

*"Vairāgya sādhanē se mukti āmār noi,
Asaṁkhyā bandhan mājhe laviba muktir swād."*⁵²

Vivekananda believes each and every human being potentially is *Brahman* and the aim of us is to realize this truth. *Practical Vedānta* advises one to perform any activity, keeping in mind that he himself is God, and then no doubt our activities will be better and perfect. Thus, he writes:

"All power is within you; you can do anything and everything. Believe in that, do not believe that you are weak; do not believe that you are half-crazy lunatics, as most of us do nowadays. You can do anything and everything without even the guidance of any one. All power is there. Stand up and express the divinity within you."⁵³

⁵² Tagore, Rabindranath. 'Naibedyā Kabyā', Kobita: 30, In *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 8, Visva-bharat Granthan Bibhag, Kolkata, Falguna 1392, p. 30.

⁵³ CWS, Vol. 3, p. 284.

In this regard, Vivekananda says that if one follows the ideology of Vedānta philosophy properly in one's life, then the potentiality in him be manifested and he becomes more perfect. If one considers oneself to be *Brahman*, then thereby one regains one's greater self-confidence and energy. Thus, a fisherman will turn into a better fisherman through the application to the *Vedānta* in his life as far as possible of his potentiality, if a student thinks himself as *ātmā* (a part of *Brahman*), then he will also be a better student and so on. So, Vivekananda advises us to think ourselves as a part of *Brahman* and perform our duties in each and every state of our life. Thus, he says,

“One defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out so long on the spiritual plane only, and nowhere else; now the time has come when you have to make it practical. It shall no more be a Rahasya, a secret, it shall no more live with monks in caves and forests, and in the Himalayas; it must come down to the daily, everyday life of the people.”⁵⁴

The Philosophy of Vivekananda plays an important role both in the life of common and uncommon people. It is important to note that though Vivekananda was *sannyāsin*, he was not a *sannyāsin* like others. Most of the *sannyāsins* have devoted their lives to attain liberation for themselves, but Vivekananda never thought to attain the same for his own, rather he tries his best to restore the salvation for the whole society. In this regard he says, “Those of you who are sannyasins must try to do good to others, for sannyasa means that”.⁵⁵

The eroding human values in every aspect of our life become a matter of high concern for our society. He observes that by the proper application of *Vedānta* we can remove social evil, i.e. lying, cheating, stealing, murdering, suicide, raping and so on. If the ideology of Advaita Vedānta is practiced and implemented properly, then no doubt, man gains self confidence, courage, vigor, strength and broader outlook. He says, man is actually much higher and greater than what he is. We are the part of *Brahman*, so we are infinite and unlimited like *Brahman*, though we do not know it. Vivekananda says that, the ultimate goal of each and every human being is to manifest this divine potentiality within. If an individual realizes *Brahman* in the sense that he himself is *Brahman* (*Tattvamasi*), then thereby he himself becomes *Brahman* (*Brahmavid brahmaivaḥ bhavatiḥ*). This is a spiritual force that elevates man from his

⁵⁴ CWS, Vol. 3, p. 427.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 446.

limitations. He advises us first to believe in ourselves and then in God, it is said, '*Self-help is the best help*'. In this regard, he says,

"The help comes from yourself. ... There is no help for you outside of yourself; you are the creator of the universe. ... Ever tell yourself, 'I am He'. These are the words that will burn up the dross that is in the mind, words that will bring out the tremendous energy which is within you already, the infinite power which is sleeping in your heart."⁵⁶

Swamiji advises us to sacrifice for others. A mother can sacrifice for her child, because she loves her child. She loves her child as she identifies herself with her child. But, day by day we are going to be highly selfish; we forget to sacrifice for others. Advaita Vedānta teaches us that essentially all souls are identical as all of them are ultimately nothing but one. Keeping in mind the essence of Vedānta, Swamiji has started his lecture in Chicago by saying that '*My sisters and brothers of America*' and '*the whole world is my family*'. For this reason he resorted to '*Niṣkāma Karma*' in his own terminology as '*sevā*' throughout his life for ensuring the welfare and happiness of all (*bahujana-hitāya bahujana-sukhāya*). He enjoyed through sacrifice as a mother enjoys through sacrifice for her child. In the *Īsopaniṣad* mentioned:

"Īśāvāsyamidam sarvaṃ yat kiñca jagatyām jagat.

*Tena tyaktena bhunjīthā mā ḡḍhaḥ kasyasvīddhanam"*⁵⁷

The life of man becomes meaningful due to his sacrifice. Here, Kabir rightly says,

"Vaḍā huyā to kayā huyā yaisā baḍī khejur,

*Pānthoko chāyā nāhi phal lāgi atidūr"*⁵⁸

The meaning of this statement is expressed beautifully by Raghunath Ghosh as 'what is the use of being born in a high family? Just as big date-palm tree has no significance to the society in as much as it does not provide the travelers with shadow and as the fruits exist in a such a high altitude that they cannot be collected by the

⁵⁶ CWS, Vol. 3, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Sen, Atul. Chandra. (Ed.), *Īsopaniṣad* - 1, In *The Upanishadas*, Reprint 2013, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Kabeer, *Dohawali*, Citing References [Online]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnwkL4nuQ80> [Accessed 23rd July 2015].

social beings, a person born in a high society or having higher education is insignificant to the society if he does not perform social welfare etc. It is known to us that a man proves his real existence by way of doing auspicious works like social welfare etc., but not through his birth in the high family or race etc'.⁵⁹

Sri Ramakrishna also advices Vivekananda to be as great as a banyan tree under the shade of which millions of poor and destitute can take their shelter. It is important to note here that in the philosophy of Vivekananda there is no place of showing kindness (*karunā*) to others, simply because all of the individuals are *Brahman* or God. He says, 'Yatra jīva tatra Śiva', 'naro rūpe Nārāyaṇa'. So, rendering *sevā* to *jīva* amounts to rendering *sevā* to God himself, 'Bahurupe samyukhe tomār chārī kothā khuñjicha Īṣvar, / Jīve prem kare jei jan sei jan seviche Īṣvar'. I think this idea is excellent mainly for two reasons. First, if we render our *sevā* to *jīva* in the sense of *Śiva* or God then it must be perfect. Secondly, here our ego does not find any role to play.

Thus, it is seen that Vivekananda applies the *Vedānta* philosophy in our life properly. In this regard, it is important to note what is said by S.C. Chatterjee,

"Such is Vivekananda's practical Vedanta [*Vedānta*], a living Vedanta and not a dry and dead theory of the Vedanta. It is the Vedanta of the forests come back to our homes, our city and our society; it is the Vedanta entering into our ordinary life and conduct, it is the Vedanta that may inspire our individual life, social life, national and international life. Swami Vivekananda wants us to carry the eternal message of the Vedanta to every door and to every corner of the world".⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ghosh, Raghunath. (Ed.), 'Philosophy of Man According to Swami Vivekananda', In *Humanity, Truth and Freedom*, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, 2008, p. 125.

⁶⁰ Chatterjee, S.C. In *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume*, Dr. R.C. Mazumdar (Ed.), Swami Vivekananda Centenary Committee, 1963, p. 281.