

### Appendix To Chapter III “Vivekananda’s Advaita”

It is only after I completed drafting the present thesis finally, and it was sent for type setting that I chanced upon the book entitled *The Advaita of Vivekananda : A Philosophical Appraisal* by Thomas Mannumel. Towards the end of the book Mannumel has summed up and appraised many advaitic expositions of the Swami which are critically stated and evaluated in the earlier chapters. One of the points made by Mannumel is that compared to Samkara Vivekananda is a popular expositor, not a patch on the original propounder of advaita. The point is hardly well taken, and is somewhat stupid. I propose to say something about it before I move to another of Mannumel’s remark.

There is a point of view, and quite a convincing and cogent one, that Samkara is hardly an original propounder of the *advaita* view of life and existence. Sri Aurobindo himself notes and talks quite at length about the “true” or the “original” Vedānta of the *advaita* variety. That apart, Mannumel is not a good student of *history* of Indian philosophy. Samkara had a different set of audience to whom he addressed, and his intention has to be accordingly judged. Advaita, for him, is a philosophy of life, and considering the times and the situations in which Samkara found himself, his exposition, apart from its rhetoric, logic and the dialectics, was an historical necessity. The Islamic invasions had already begun, there was collapse of values, and signs of spiritual disintegration must have been surfacing at places. Samkara could be seen as responding to the call of the

times. Philosophy is not an affair of building castles in the air, it should have its roots in the culture and tradition of the milieu in which it originates. Similar considerations should also be made in respect of Vivekananda, perhaps a little more. Vivekananda, while expounding *advaita*, in his own way, took the agonies of a colonised psyche in his heart. That is one of the reasons why he was so deeply attracted to Buddha as embodiment of *Karunā*, in spite of his admiration for Samkara. But in respect of *advaita*, Samkara was not his teacher. His teacher was his Master, Ramakrishnadeva, who he adored as *advaita Vedānta* incarnate. Mannumel does take note of the matter, but not as fully and responsively as he should.

Vivekananda was a child of the modern age, exposed at once, perhaps more, to western thought and science than Indian thought and ideas of spirituality. That had given him an added advantage in formulating *advaita* for us in our own country as elsewhere. Nivedita, who listened him lecturing on *māyā* in London, has noted that the concepts of *Vedānta* or for that matter *advaita*, are not at home in English language. For Vivekananda, his discourses on *advaita* in English was “a struggle to express an idea which is clearly apprehended in a language which is not a fit vehicle for it” (*The Master as I saw Him*, 16, Udbodhan, Calcutta, 1987). Samkara did not have to face this difficulty. He could wield and employ concepts and ideas that were a commonplace with his audience. Considering this Vivekananda’s was a remarkable feat.

There is more to the story. Vivekananda was, by training and temperament an agnostic or sceptic in the tradition of Hume, Kant and Herbert Spencer, and his endeavour was a sort of return of the prodigal son to his spiritual home. And once his agnostic self was bowled over by Ramakrishnadeva, he emerged with a new self, like a lion out of the meshes of unrealised and borrowed notions. Religion was, for him, nothing short of *realisation*. He delighted him in saying that he was bringing the Vedānta of the forest (*baner Vedanta*) to city home (*ghare*). A programme such as that must savour different. Mannumel has missed this point. And also that Vivekananda wanted to assert India's cultural identity, in spite of her being a colony of British in terms of his discourses on *advaita*. He considered *advaita* as a life-giving concept, calling for heroism and sacrifice, instead of resignation and giving up. He always drew attention to the fact that fearlessness (*abhih*) was the unique teaching of the *Upaniṣads*. His Master rebuked him for "selfishness" when he wished his experience of *nirvikalpa samadhi* to be prolonged. It is no less a point for philosophical consideration that Vivekananda's *Karma Yoga* was a sort of bible with the heroes who faced the gallows of the British. No account of Vivekananda's ideas would be complete if it profanes these facts. Tagore had once said that Vivekananda's testament called upon the soul of the people" (*ātmā ke dekecho*), not their "fingers" (*āngul ke noi*), alluding to the mechanical cult of the *charkha* by Gandhi. This is a great perception. Vivekananda's is a Vedānta as never before.

Mannumel misunderstands also another of Vivekananda's remark that man proceeds from truth to truth, and never from error to truth. This remarks occurs in the (*complete works*, Vol. IV, p. 141). Mannumel asks a Cārvāka turned a Vedantin, shall one say that he proceeded from truth to truth? Or from error to truth? The Cārvāka may not believe in the *Vedas*, but he does believe in truth, he believes in the *prāmānya* of *pratyaksa*. Even Samkara, who has nothing to do with the Cārvāka, did not hesitate to quote the Cārvāka against the Vijnānavādin as regards the primacy of *pratyaksa* and the given character of the external world. This shows that Samkara did not throw the Cārvāka lock stock and barrel into the pit of philosophical nonsense. As Sri Aurobindo says that materialism too has served the ends of the Divine (see *The Life Divine*, New York edition, 1949, p. 25). And Vivekananda too did not disdain materialism of science as a search for unity in nature. The passage from truth to truth connotes quite a lot, for example, from relative truth to absolute truth, from lesser to greater truth, from lower to higher truth, and even degrees of truth. Truth is preferred in terms of its explainability. The Helio-centric theory has greater explainability and confirmation than the geo-centric theory in astronomy. In saying that man proceeds from truth to truth Vivekananda has a perspective view that is comprehensive enough to reconcile apparently non-congruent points of view. Consider his analogy of taking photographs of each stage of one's journey to the sun. The photographs of the sun from each stage of the ascent will be different from those taken from lower heights. When one comes back he brings "so many photographs of so many different suns ...,"

yet ... the same sun was photographed by man at different stages of his progress" (*Selectiosn*, 163). So it is with truth. No vision of truth is wholly worthless. It could be comprehended by or into a wider and more comprehensive vision. The process is to go till the goal is reached. The goal is transcendent to the process, but unless there is a process we cannot even talk significantly of the goal. The process indicates the goal. There may come a time when we may kick the ladder off. But before that we have miles to go. And we may have Vivekananda with us.

Philosophy matters only in the domain of *vyāvahara*. The finality of the *pāramārthika* is a correlative notion. Man, as viewed by Vivekananda is ever in the process of becoming, is never finished. No existential system is possible, not even in mathematics, as the Göedel's theorem shows. Reality is said to be a system, but a system only for *Brahman*. The logical character of *Brahman* is that it does not contradict itself, its metaphysical character is that it is one, and the epistemological character is that it is experience. We can go on thinking about the logical consistency of the unity of Brahman, as with Kant's Ideas of Reason, but hardly ever get to know it, unless of course we are smiled upon by experience, which Vivekananda calls *realisation*. Nothing avails without it. In Ramakrishnadeva's tantalizing paradox, the almanac may forecast heavy rainfall, but however much you press the almanac not a drop of water can be wrenched. Vivekananda believed in that.

There is another aspect in which Vivekananda's concerns could not have been Samkara's. It cannot be gainsaid that Samkara was an elite both on social and philosophical grounds, and defended the Brahmanical orthodoxy, and even quoted Manu as to disqualify a *s'ūdra* from having access to or the attainment of *mokṣa* resulting from the study of the *Vedas*. Vedānta is Śrutijñāgamyā and only a *brahman* is entitled to Śrutijñāna. This is somewhat surprising from Samkara's own philosophy of *advaita* with its widest possible and far-reaching implications. Vivekananda never reconciled himself to any defense of orthodoxy. That Vedānta was projected as the national philosophy (*a la* Brajendranath Seal) when the teeming millions had no access to the *Vedas* needs serious pondering. In discoursing on *advaita* Vivekananda's intentions were neither exegesis nor interpretation of old sacred texts. He was a man of many moods, and in some of his moods he even dared challenging the philosophical respectability, and did not rule out the possibility of alternative interpretations of the *Upaniṣads* other than the *advaita*. At home, he busied himself with the task of applying Vedānta to Indian life, the future of India and education of the masses. He even forces on the coming of a *S'udra* Age, and called him a "socialist". He made his own 'discovery of India'. These are some of the facets of Vivekananda's *charisma* (the word in Greek means 'power and grace') which should be taken in one's stride in judging his 'advaitism'.