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Vedānta Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda: A New Dimension **Amit Kumar Batabyal**

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Abstract:

The Vedānta 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 Śiva through the unique power of love; from Śaṅkarācārya he learnt the message of tattvamasi (You are that) or aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahman), or Jīva Brahmaiva naparah (Jīva is nothing but the Brahman). Vedānta is one of the world's most ancient religious philosophies and one of its broadest. Based on the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of India, Vedānta affirms the oneness of existence, the divinity of the soul, and the harmony of religions. Vedānta is the philosophical foundation of Hinduism; but while Hinduism includes aspects of Indian culture, Vedānta is universal in its application and is equally relevant to all countries, all cultures, and all religious backgrounds. In this paper, I discuss the Vedānta Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda and his new dimension or perspectives.

Keywords: *Vedānta, Māyā, Mukti, Brahman, Jīva, Śiva*

Introduction: A closer look at the word Vedānta' is revealing: Vedānta' is a combination of two words: 'Veda' which means 'knowledge' and 'anta' which means 'the end of' or 'the goal of'. In this context, the goal of knowledge isn't intellectual-the limited knowledge we acquire by reading books. 'Knowledge' here means the knowledge of God as well as the knowledge of our divine nature. Vedānta, then, is the search for Self-knowledge as well as the search for God. What do we mean when we say, God? According to Vedānta, God is infinite existence, infinite consciousness, and infinite bliss. The term for this impersonal, transcendent reality is Brahman, the divine ground of being. Yet Vedānta also maintains that God can be personal as well, assuming human form in every age.

Swami Vivekananda's Vedānta differs from the ancient Vedānta of Śaṅkara in several ways. The Śaṅkara Vedānta, with its doctrines of the world as an illusion, Brahman as the only Reality, and Jīva as identical to Brahman, has significant spiritual worth. Everyone is God. As a result, because he or she is all-powerful, anyone can achieve anything. He was an atheist who did not believe in God, according to the old faith. According to the new

Vedānta, he is an atheist who does not believe in himself. The Vedānta's central idea is to recognise Brahman in everything, to see things for what they truly are rather than what they appear to be. It offers fresh meaning to everything in our environment, such as fire, earth, sky, sun, moon, and so on. As a result, when Vivekananda states that nothing in spiritual life is greater than realizing one's identification with the entire cosmos, he's introducing a new concept. Oneness is the basic principle of Vedānta. There are no two people, no two lives in the world. Everything is that One; the distinction is in degree, not kind. Vivekananda, however, pointed out that this part of Vedānta had been hidden from the knowledge of Vedanta exponents for so long.

Swami Vivekananda not only established a new meaning for Vedānta, but he also revealed previously unknown components of it. This is his most significant contribution to the field of philosophy. Never before has it been demonstrated that a Vedānta philosophy born and raised in the forest has so much to do with the everyday world. The issue inevitably arises as to what effect it would have on society if it were to be implemented. The question naturally arises, what would be the impact of it on society, when this is applied to it? Vivekananda's reply is- "If the fishermen think that he is the Spirit, he will be a better fisherman. If the lawyer thinks that he is the Spirit, he will be a better lawyer, and so on.....I can perform one duty in social life, and you another, you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of old shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I? There is no reason why you should trample on my head? Why if one commits murder should be praised, and another steals an apple why should he be hanged? This will have to go." Vivekananda goes on to say, "if you teach Vedānta to the fisherman, he will say, I am as good a man like you. I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same good in me as you have in you and no privilege for anyone, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the divine is within, and everyone will work out his own liberation." Thus privileges break down when Vedāntic doctrines are accepted to form the basis of society. Thus Vedānta which was taken as the doctrine of liberation for a few spiritual aspirants has been converted into a doctrine of social evolution by Vivekananda. The significant role of Vedānta in this respect has been indicated by Swamiji in the following manner: "The knowledge of Vedānta was hidden for a long time in the forest and caves. It was given to me to make it more to come forth from its seclusion, and to carry it into the heart of family life and society until they are interpenetrated with it. We shall make it more to come forth from its seclusion and to carry it into the heart of family life and society until they are interpenetrated with it. We shall make the drum of Vedānta sound in all places, in the markets, on the hills and through the plains." ¹

But the practical aspect of Vedānta philosophy concerning the mystery of birth and death of beings, the way of the fathers and the way of the gods, the cause of non-existence of fullness of the world was known by the kings, not the priests. In reply to the questions regarding the above asked by Āruni, the father of Śvetketu, the king of Pāncala ² said that these things had been hitherto known only among kings, the priests never knew them. In different Upaniṣads, we find that this Vedānta philosophy is not the result of meditation in

the forests only but that the best parts of it were thought out and expressed by persons who were busiest in everyday affairs of life.³

Like Śaṅkara, Vivekananda admits that Brahman is the only one and that the world is unreal in a generic sense. But unlike Śaṅkara, he refuses to stop at that. He introduces the policy of giving and taking. What he loses by one hand gains by the other. In other words, he is one with Śaṅkara in rejecting the reality of the world, but soon unlike Śaṅkara, he defies it. What Śaṅkara rejected as unreal, gets the status of Brahman itself in the hands of Vivekananda. Swamiji is determined to supplement and transform the famous assertion of Śaṅkara. 'All this is nothing' into "All this is nothing to Brahman." In other words, he transmits, transforms and extends the concept of Brahman. This is what Vedānta teaches it cannot be said that no other Vedānta has given a better status to man than Swami Vivekananda. He once said, "I have never seen the man who was not at least my equal. That you and I are not only brothers...every literature voicing man's struggle towards freedom has preached that for you..that you and I are one."⁴

Vivekananda was confident that by properly putting the life-giving principles of Vedānta into practice, the individual, social and national problems of India could be solved in the best possible way. This is an aspect of 'Practical Vedānta' and it may be more appropriately called 'Vedānta in Practical Vedānta' and it may be more appropriately called 'Vedānta in Practical Life.' Swamiji is not satisfied with the deification of human beings, he is also ready to deify all creatures who also belong to the world. He claims that if a person serves God manifest in all beings...not only in man but also in other creatures, without regard for name and fame, or for going to heaven after death, and with no expectation of retribution from those whom he serves, that service is truly the highest and best, and benefits him alone. In this way, service conducted in the appropriate spirit of Karma-yoga produces Jīva worship in Jīva and is one of the most efficient ways of self-purification and God-realization.

Vivekananda points out that there is an ideal of Vedānta. But it is not an impossible ideal. In one word this ideal is that everyone is divine and all is one. "Thou art that"⁵ this is the essence of Vedānta. In course of interpretation of this Mahāvākya Swami Vivekananda says, "Oneness includes all animals. If man's life is immortal, so also is the animal's. the difference is only in degree and not in kind. The animal and I are the same, the difference is only in degree; and from the standpoint of the highest life, all these differences vanish. A man may see a great deal of difference between the grass and a little tree, but if you mount very high, the grass and the biggest tree will appear much the same. So, from the standpoint of the highest ideal, the lowest animal and the highest man are the same."⁶

Vedānta teaches that it is the heart that is of most importance. It is through the heart Brahman is realized and not through the intellect. The intellect is only the street-cleaner and cleaning the path for us is the function of a secondary worker. Again the feeling has great importance in spiritual life. It is the feeling that works, that moves with speed infinity superior to that of electricity or anything else. If we have feelings, we will see the Lord. We

can realize oneness in everything, i.e., God in everything through the feeling. But the intellect can never do that “Different methods of speaking words, different methods of explaining the texts of books, these are for the enjoyment of the learned, not for the salvation of the soul.”⁷

Vedānta advises us to know ourselves and to have faith in ourselves. “The old religions said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The New religion says that he is the atheist who did not believe in himself.”⁸ But that faith does not confine itself to the limited self which stands opposed to other-selves. It is faith in the universal self, the self that is in me, that is in us, that is in all. It means, therefore, faith in all, because we are all one. Love for yourselves means love for all, i.e. for men, animals and everything since we are all one. To quote Swamiji, "Love binds, love makes for that oneness. You become one, the mother with the child, families with the city, the whole world becomes one with the animals. For love is Existence, God himself; and all this is the manifestation of that one love, more or less expressed. The difference is only in degree, but it is the manifestation of that one love though out. Therefore in all our actions, we have to judge whether it is making for diversity or oneness. I for diversity we have to give it up, but if it makes for oneness we are sure it is good. So with our thoughts; we have to decide whether they make for disintegration, multiplicity, or for oneness, binding soul to soul and bringing one influence to bear. If they do this, we will take them up, and if not, we will throw them off as a criminal."⁹ " he who sees Śiva in the poor, in the weak and the distressed, really worship Śiva, and if he sees Śiva only in the images, his worship is but preliminary.

Swami Vivekananda saw the highest expressions of divinity in Sri Ramakrishna who was a combination of the intellect of Śaṅkara and the heart of Buddha. Vivekananda was a part and parcel of Sri Ramakrishna. So what he visualized in Sri Ramakrishna's life and teaching, he expressed them in his philosophy of New Vedānta which though a combination of the intellect of Śaṅkara and heart of Buddha assumes a new stature and dimension in the hand of Vivekananda. It is not mere Śaṅkara that is speaking through him in a new voice, it is not even an amalgamation of Śaṅkara and Buddha. It is beyond and above these. If traces of Śaṅkara can be marked in Swamiji it can be stated that Śaṅkara is transformed, transmitted and magnified and made more refulgent and glorious by Swamiji's genius and spiritual vision and realization. That is not to say that Śaṅkara was not himself 'Śaṅkara' that is 'Śiva' as he was held by enlightened. But there was the historical necessity of another 'Śiva' so to speak, in the person of Swami Vivekananda who reinterpreted, added and remoulded the philosophy of life in the light of Advaita Vedānta revealing newer aspects of it coalescing, collaborating and strengthening all apparent contradictions and anomalies. Buddhism played a vital role, acting as an anti-thesis to Advaita Vedānta.

Man is a living god, so to say, god not in abstraction but flesh and blood-moving, feeling and acting. Thus philosophy is not a mere abstraction in the hand of Swamiji, it is a practical religion. Hence Swamiji is a Vedāntin who made Advaita Vedānta practical, a way to live, a way to find God, a way to find salvation. Swamiji is never tired of seeing that Jīva

is no other than Śiva and hence God-realization is possible through the service of Jīva considering them as Śiva.

Unlike other Vedānta scholars, Swamiji does not consider *adhikāra* to be a prerequisite for Vedānta study. At times, he chastised *adhikāravāda*, claiming that all that was required was courage, just as the word “impossible” has no place in Nepolean's dictionary. Likewise, according to Vivekananda, the word “fear” has no place in the Vedanta. His Vedanta's main point is to be brave and fearless because God is within us... We can do anything because we are almighty, according to his Vedānta Vivekananda said that- “the different sectarian of India all radiate from one central idea of unity or Dualism. They are all under Vedānta, all interpreted by it. These various names mark only differences of degree in the expression of that One. The worm of today is the God of tomorrow. These distinctions which we so love are all parts of one infinite fact and only differ in the degree of expression. That one infinite fact is the attainment of Freedom. However mistaken we may be, as to the method, all our struggle is real for Freedom.”¹⁰

Swami Vivekananda's Greater contribution to Vedānta lies in his emphasis on collective liberation as opposed to individual liberation. He says that if we feel oneness with all we cannot go forward without taking all with us. To quote Swamiji, “You will feel the whole sentient and insentient world as your own self. Do you think so long as one Jīva (a living being endues in bondage, you will have liberation? Every Jīva is a part of yourself. So those that are working for their own salvation will neither have their own nor that of others. It is wrong to hanker after one's own liberation. Liberation is only for him who gives up everything for others, whereas others who tax their brains day and night harping on "my liberation" "my liberation" wonder about with their true well-being ruined both present and perspective, and this I have seen many a time before my own eyes. The intense desire for liberation of the entire human race has been expressed by Swamiji in the following sentences...” It may be that I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the world shall know that it is one with God.”¹¹

While accepting the traditional idea of Mukti as liberation from the cycle of births and deaths, he freed the conception from a touch of escapism that surrounded it, by redefining it as the manifestation of the Divinity already latent in man. Perfection as opposed to escaping from an unpleasant situation- he placed this as the ideal for competent aspirants. Appreciating the contributions of Śaṅkara in Philosophical thought and Buddha as a living example of his teaching, Swamiji combines the contributions of these two great architects of classical Indian thought and culture in his philosophy of new Vedānta. He attempted to unite the intellect of Śaṅkara with the heart of Buddha in his new philosophy.¹²

The basic concepts of the new Vedānta are to be found in the life and teaching of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Vivekananda has developed the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. Swami into the philosophy of new Vedānta and laid the foundation of practical Vedānta. In this context, Dr. S.C. Chatterjee says that the main outline of the new Vedānta Vivekananda was drawn by Sri Ramakrishna and it was Swami Vivekananda who filled it in with elaborate

reasoning to work up a philosophy proper. Swami Vivekananda is a commentary of Sri Ramakrishna. But the commentator with his giant intellect and profound understanding made such distinctive contributions that his commentary becomes itself a philosophy, just as Śāṅkara's commentary on the Vedānta Sūtra is itself a philosophy.

Vedanta created awareness that there is a higher goal and that a stage must come in everybody's life. When he must transcend the hungers for these pleasures, and be dedicated to higher and higher causes. This mood has been created by constant preaching, over thousands of years. Man knows by instinct that it is good to be of a sacrificing type, but it is also necessary that he must be able to feed himself first.¹³

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For Swami Vivekananda, Brahman as Infinite Existence, Infinite Knowledge and Infinite Bliss (*Sat-Cit-ānanda*) is the ultimate reality and the only reality. These are the only attributes we can ascribe to Brahman, and they are one. It is nothing more. It is without a name, without a form or stain. It is beyond space, time and causation. It is one without a second. It is all in all, none else exists. There is neither nature, nor God, nor the universe, only that One Infinite Existence, out of which ,through name and form, all these are manufactured. All this universe is the reflection of the One Eternal Being on the screen of Māyā-the triad of space, time and causation. These are only ideas or concepts of our mind, and have no place in Brahman. The world is the creation of name and form, of Māyā. The waves of the sea are not really different from the sea . What make them appear as different are only name and form: the form of the wave, and the name which we give to it, 'wave'. When name and form go, the waves are the same sea. We are looking upon the One Existence in different forms and under different names, and creating all these images of objects upon it."All these heavens, all these earths and all these places are vain imaginations of the mind. They do not exist, never existed in the past, and never will exist in the future. This world is but a dream, and this dream will vanish when one wakes up and becomes free from Māyā. There is but One. In him is Māyā, dreaming all this dream.¹⁵

After Vivekananda, it can be stated that Indian Philosophy has three main pillars- Advaita Vedānta., Buddhism and New Vedānta of Vivekananda. So Indian philosophy is three-dimensional. Vivekananda gives the third dimension. What is the source and nature of third dimension? It came through Sri Ramakrishna. He is the fountainhead of Vivekananda's philosophic thought. Vivekananda's speeches and writings provided the third dimension in Indian Philosophy. Vivekananda completed the arch of Indian Philosophy which had its beginning in the Veda, the upaniṣads. Buddhism and the philosophy of Śāṅkara.

Conclusion: In Conclusion, it can be said that, Swami Vivekananda saw Sri Ramakrishna as the highest expression of divinity, a combination of Śāṅkara's intellect and Buddha's heart. Sri Ramakrishna included Swami Vivekananda in his life. So he expressed what he

saw in Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings in his philosophy of New Vedānta, which, through a combination of Śaṅkara's intellect and Buddha's heart, takes on a new shape and dimension in Vivekananda's hands. It's not just Śaṅkara speaking in a new voice through him; it's not even a mix of Śaṅkara and Buddha. It's something else entirely. Swamiji's genius and spiritual vision and realization transform, transmit, magnify, and make Śaṅkara more refulgent and glorious if traces of it can be found in him. That isn't to say that Śaṅkara wasn't himself ' Śaṅkara,' or 'jīva,' as the enlightened regarded him. But there was a historical need for another 'jīva' in the person of Swami Vivekananda, who reinterpreted, added to, and remoulded the philosophy of life in the light of Advaita Vedānta, revealing newer aspects of it while coalescing, collaborating, and strengthening all apparent contradictions and anomalies. Buddhism served an important role as an antidote to Advaita Vedānta.

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