

Swami Vivekananda's Interpretation of Vedanta

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Abstract :

This article attempts to highlight Swami Vivekananda's view about Vedanta philosophy. The Vedanta Philosophy appears to us as a highly complex and metaphysical principle. It is difficult to understand its main essence and its relation with our spiritual and ethical life. But Vivekananda has given a new interpretation of Vedanta in a simple and practical way that everybody can easily understand it. He wanted to free 'Vedanta' from metaphysical and theological dogma so that it may be acceptable to all. In interpreting Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda did not formulate a new philosophical system, he only explained Sankara's Advaita Vedanta in modern terms. Vivekananda said that Sankara left his Advaita Philosophy in the hills and forest, while I (Vivekananda) have come to bring it out of these places and scatter it broadcast before the work a day world and society.

Introduction :

Swami Vivekananda is one of the most prominent figure of modern India among the great thinkers and philosophers of India. He is also a great exponent of Vedanta Philosophy in modern terms. Vivekananda always emphasized the need of re-interpreting Vedanta in accordance with the demands and need of the time. He said that as soon as time as and cultivation change, the ideas mentioned in Vedanta philosophy could not be applicable in all times. So, he tried to bring reformation of Vedanta. In interpreting Vedanta he did not formulate a new philosophical system, rather tried to explain Sankara's Advaita philosophy in reliance with modern period. As we know, Vedanta philosophy appears to be related with spiritual and metaphysical and theoretical dogmas.

Objectives of the study :

The main objective of the article to present Swami Vivekananda's new interpretation of Vedanta philosophy and to highlight some defects left by Sankara in Advaita.

Scope of the study :

This topic tries to summarize the meaning of Vedanta, the notion of Reality (Brahman), the world, maya as the power of God, man and religion in Swami Vivekananda's philosophy.

Methodology :

The study of article is purely theoretical based. Data is collected from primary and secondary books. It has been adopted analytic and explanatory method for preparing the given topic.

Discussion of the Subject matter :

Swami Vivekananda was a spiritual leader. His stoxy messenger of Indian spiritualism was the first effective expound of the Vedanta in the modern age. He gave a new interpretation of Vedanta in a simple and practical way that everybody can easily understand it. He wanted to free Vedanta from metaphysical and theological dogma. So that it may be applicable to all.

'Vedanta' literally means the 'end of the vedos.' Subsequently, Vedanta came to mean all the thoughts that developed out of the Upanisads. Under the name of Vedanta there are various schools in Indian Philosophy namely. Visistadvaita Vedanta (qualified dualism) and Advaita Vedanta (non dualism). By Vedanta, Vivekananda did not mean any particular system. To him, the word 'Vedanta' means all the systems had arisen out of the Upanisada.

In interpreting Vedanta, Swami Vivekananda did not formulate a new philosophical system, he only explained it in reliance with modern times. However, Vivekananda accepted Sankaracharya's Advaitism as the essence of Vedanta. The central doctrine of Advaita is that Brahman is the only Reality, except him all are illusion. Vivekananda asserts that the eternal idea of the spiritual oneness of the whole universe is there in Advaitism. Further, Advaitism shows that believed that idea of the unity of the whole show 'the real soul is one', "The infinite oneness of the soul in the eternal sanctions all morality that you and I are really one. This is the foundation of old vedantic faith, of the great Advaitism, the deepest and purest expression of the ancient spirit of Indian."¹ Like the Advaitism, Vivekananda also admits that reality is one absolute Brahman and he goes ahead and says that reality is one, but not a whole'. He conceives that "the concept of whole implies that there must be parts, which when organized, give the whole"² The absolute is sat-cit-ananda to Vivekananda as well as to Sankara. Regarding the concept sat-cit no difference is there, but the concept of ananda (bliss) has been greatly enriched by Vivekananda, Influenced by both Buddhism and Christianity. Vivekananda considers 'Love' has a universal appeal. In human society, love is justifiable-socially and morally. Active love i.e. to serve others, to hold other is love proper to Vivekananda. Vivekananda expresses 'it is love and love alone that I preach.'-'Thus the absolute, the impersonal Brahman is also viewed as supremely good and loving Vivekananda so emphasizes the all pervasive nature of God. He is the reality in nature. He is the soul of your soul.'³

According to Vivekananda the difference between the personal God arises on account of our different ways of thoughts. He was very much aware of the fact that the religious urges and aspirations of common man could not be satisfied without the admission of a personal God. Love through devotion is a method of the realization of divinity. Here God is personal. The same Reality is Impersonal for the jnani (the man of philosophic insight) and it is personal for the man who is a devotee. The ultimate aim of 'Vedanta' is the 'reunion of God.', 'with the divinity of ourselves.' This divinity comes through knowledge, but knowledge comes through love. To a true lover the whole universe in full of love. In this stage he has absolutely merged in the object of worship. Thus Vivekananda gives an integral view of Vedanta' where all controversies are merged in realization of oneness.

According to Advaita, the world is a vivarta or appearance of Brahman. Brahman does not change into the world rather it appears as the world. In the view of Sankara, world is a appearance is produced by Maya, an inscrutable power resting on Brahman. According to Ramanujana, Maya is the real power of Brahman which creates the world. Vivekananda's opinion is that the metaphysical theory of maya does not mean that the world is unreal and that it does not exist. To Vivekananda maya is the combination of the space, time and causation and further reduced into a namrupa. Suppose there is a wave in the ocean, the wave is distinct from the ocean only in its form and name, and this name and form can have no separate existence apart from the wave, they exist only with the wave. The wave may subside, but the same amount of water remains, even if the name and form that were on the wave vanish forever. So, this maya makes the difference between me and you, between all animals and man, between gods and man. It is not theory but statements of fact. So maya is a screen that veils the truth of reality or the absolute. It hides our real nature and projects the unreal. Vivekananda holds that the absolute the Brahman becomes the finite, the universe through maya.

Through Sankara is a upholder of the doctrine of identity, he could not exhibit great universal heart which Buddha showed in practical life. In the application of principle of Adhikaribheda in practice, Sankara made a distinction between man and man and refused to allow a man to enter into the temple simply because he was a Sudra by birth. To Vivekananda the fictitious differentiation between theory and practice, between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedanta' Teachers oneness-one life through out. He emphatically declared that the Vedanta' as a

religion must be practical. Deeply moved by the sights of unfold sorrows the sufferings of Humanity Vivekananda declared that 'he who see Shiva in the Poor, in the weak and in the Distressed really worshiped Shiva. He who has serve and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him without thinking of his cast or race or anything with him Shiva is more pleased than the man who sees him only in temples.'⁴ Clarifying the role of Vedanta' in our day to day life Vivekananda said that Sankara left his Advaita Philosophy in the hills and forest, while I have come to bring it out of these places and scatter it broadcast before the work-a-day world and society. One defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out on long on the spiritual planes only, and nowhere else. Now the time has come when you have to make it practical. Instead of being confined to books of philosophy to be studied only by the learned, instead of being the exclusive possessions of sects and a few of the learners, they will all be soon broadcast over the whole so that they may become the common property of the learnt and ignorant. Vivekananda not only introduced a new meaning of Vedanta' but also has brought out its undiscovered aspects. This is his most outstanding contribution to the world of thought. Never before it was shown that Aranyaka Vedanta'- a philosophy born and brought up in the forest has so much to do with this mundane world. Vedanta' though it is intensely practical it is always so in the sense of the ideal. In one word this ideal is that you are all divine, 'Thou art that'. This is the essence of Vedanta'. The question naturally arises. What would be the impact of it on society, when this is accomplished? Vivekananda's reply was, 'If the fisherman thinks that he is the spirit, he will be a better fisherman, if the lawyer thinks himself to be a spirit, he will be a better lawyer. Caste is a natural order. Man must form themselves into groups and you cannot get rid of that wherever you go, there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be privileges. If we teach Vedanta' to the fisherman, he will say I am as good a man as you, I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I am the same God in me as you have in you. And that is why you want, no privilege for any one, equal chances for all, let everyone be taught that the divine is within and everyone will work out of his own salvation,'⁵ Thus Vedanta' which was taken as a Mokshashastra, the doctrine of liberation for a few spiritual aspirants have been convert into a doctrine of social evolution by Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda believed that all religions would receive a new orientation from the non-dualistic doctrine and spread goodwill among them. With a immense optimism and with keen hope for humanity. Vivekananda held that men and women are pure divinity meaning that every individual is the self, the Atman. This is perfect non dualism and the pure spiritual philosophy of democracy. This recognition of recognizing the true nature of the individual person would held in rectifying the inequality amongst men. Vivekananda says, I believe it (Advaita) is the religion of the future enlightened humanity.⁶ The whole bulk of his philosophic thoughts appears to be an outcome of his unfathomable love for mankind and he holds that it is only Vedanta' which can give us a base or foundation on which 'the edifice of universal amity' can be build up for the benefit of mankind. He interpreted Vedanta' in such a way that it must cover the whole field of life and must enter into all our thought and find expression in all our actions.⁷ Vedanta' is not only concerned with life here after but also with the present existence. Vivekananda explains Vedanta' in such a way that it inspires and stimulates our thoughts and applied into the framework of human society even in this age of science in this age of multiple problems.

Notes and References :

1. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol-III, page- 373
2. Ibid, Page-192
3. Ibid, Page- 236
4. Ibid, Page- 142 (11th Edition)
5. Ibid, Vol- XVII, page – 245-246
6. Ibid, Vol- VI, Page-415.
7. The Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, Santwana Dasgupta. The Ramkrishna Missio Institute of Culture, 2005.