

Message of Indian Philosophy to the World Today

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Indian civilization is more than five thousand years old. During this long period, it produced a unique type of highly advanced and variegated culture. In spite of the innumerable regional, social and linguistic diversities of the country, there has always been a basic unity in Indian culture. Moreover, this culture maintained unbroken continuity from Vedic times to the present day, in spite of countless wars within the country, invasions from outside and two centuries of subjugation by the British. This indestructible unity and unbroken continuity of Indian culture are derived from its deep spiritual foundations.

Swami Vivekananda has pointed out that every civilization or culture has a particular life-centre, a dominant characteristic or trend. According to him the life-centre of Indian culture is spirituality. By spirituality is meant a way of life oriented to the ultimate purpose or goal of life which is the realization of the Supreme Spirit or God. Indian spirituality is deeply rooted in the ancient philosophical and religious traditions of the land. Philosophy arose in India as an enquiry into the mystery of life and existence. A parallel situation arose in ancient Greece also. But, as Swami Vivekananda pointed out, the Greek philosophers confined their enquiries to the external world, and the method they employed was only speculation, whereas in India philosophical enquiries were carried out in the inner world. Indian sages, called *Rishis* or 'seers', developed special techniques of transcending the senses and the ordinary mind, collectively called Yoga. With the help of these techniques they dived deep into the depths of consciousness and discovered important truths about the true nature of man and the universe.

The sages found that man's true nature is not the body or the mind, which are ever changing and perishable, but the spirit which is unchanging, immortal, pure consciousness. They called it the Atman. The Atman is man's true Self, the true knower, the true source of man's knowledge, happiness and power. The *Rishis* further found that all individual selves are parts of infinite Consciousness which they called Brahman. Brahman is the ultimate Reality, the ultimate cause of the universe. Ignorance of man's true nature is the main cause of human suffering and bondage. By gaining correct knowledge of *Jivatman* and Brahman it is possible to become free from suffering and bondage and attain a state of immortality, everlasting peace and fulfilment known as *Mukti* or liberation. Religion in ancient India meant a way of life which enabled man to realize his true nature and attain *Mukti*.

Thus, philosophy provided a correct view of Reality, while religion showed the correct way of life; philosophy provided the vision, while religion brought about the fulfilment; philosophy was the theory, and religion was the practice. Thus, in ancient India, philosophy and religion complemented each other. In fact, they together constituted a single endeavour, an integral discipline. This integral religious philosophy or philosophical religion was called *Vedanta*. The term *Vedanta* comes from the fact that its basic principles constitute the last part or culmination of the ancient scriptures known as the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are the oldest and most authoritative scriptures of Hinduism. All other scriptures are subordinate to them. They were not composed by anybody but were 'revealed' to the *Rishis*; hence they are also called '*Shruti*', 'that which is heard'. The earlier part of the *Vedas* may have been composed between 2000 B.C. and 1000 B.C. There are four *Vedas*: *Rig-veda*, *Yajur-veda*, *Sama-veda* and *Atharva-veda*. Each of these has four divisions: *Samhita*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka* and *Upanishads*. *Samhita* is the collection of hymns addressed to various deities. Many of these hymns have deep mystical significance. *Brahmana* deals with various rituals and also with moral principles. *Aranyaka* contains various meditations. Some of these meditations are mental recreations of external rituals. *Upanishads* are the records of the transcendental experiences gained by *Rishis* by following different contemplative techniques. These experiences are actually revelations about *Atman*, *Brahman* and other eternal, universal truths regarding the ultimate Reality. These eternal truths and principles of the spiritual world, lying scattered in the *Upanishads*, were brought together and codified by Badarayana in the form of *sutras* or aphorisms in the 5th century B.C. These *sutras* known as *Brahmasutras* form the foundation of the system of philosophy known as *Vedanta-Darshana*.

In this connection it should be pointed out that five more systems of philosophy arose in India in the early centuries of the Christian era. These are:

- 1) *Sankhya*, founded by Kapila
- 2) *Yoga*, founded by Patanjali
- 3) *Nyaya*, founded by Gautama
- 4) *Vaisheshika*, founded by Kanada
- 5) *Mimamsa*, founded by Jaimini

Vedanta alone remained the main philosophy of India from the *Vedic* period, and *Vedanta* alone got identified with the religion of the land. *Vedanta* is understood as both philosophy and religion. This combined religious and philosophical tradition of India came to be called ***Sanatana Dharma***, “Eternal Religion” and, still later, as Hinduism.

Although the Upanishads constitute the original and most authoritative source of *Vedanta*, they are not the only scripture of *Vedanta*. Several other books also came to be accepted as authoritative. Among these, the most important one is *Bhagavad-Gita*. It introduced several new concepts into *Vedanta* such as God incarnating Himself as the *Avatara* age after age, devotion to personal God as means to *Mukti*, discharging one’s duties of life in a spirit of selflessness and self-surrender to God as a spiritual path, and so on. Over the centuries great teachers like Shankara, Ramanuja, and great saints of medieval period enriched *Vedanta* with philosophical concepts and devotional songs.

The Indian sages of antiquity believed that philosophy was an essential and practical element necessary to lead an optimised life. Therefore, philosophy had to be explained in terms of how it served the purpose of living. At the same time, Indian philosophy applies enormous analytical rigour to solving metaphysical problems, and goes into details regarding the function of the human mind and its relationship with ‘reality’. These analyses were also tempered by the underlying belief that there was a fundamental and unitary order in the universe—all pervasive and omniscient. Most of the Indian philosophical schools concentrated on explaining the existence of such an order and the extraordinary entity at the centre of it that was the sole source that created the universe.

The Indian approach to philosophy illustrates an inherent dichotomy in the overall socio-religious system that has been prevalent in the country from *Vedic* times. This system, while being reorganized through social experiments in modern India, still holds firm in the Indian psyche, manifesting itself in myriad subtle and not so subtle ways in the daily life of the modern nation. On the one hand, the Indian social structure is essentially communal with the society subsuming the individual as part of a group, the basic unity of the system being the joint family. The joint family system was designed to ensure that the weak and incompetent members, including the sick and the aged, were looked after and therefore inherently favored the weak. The corollary was that it hindered the strong from forging ahead since any chain is only as strong as its weakest link. This situation inhibited adventurous Endeavour and brought about a gradual acceptance and subsequent entrenchment of mediocrity across all levels of society. Even the much-maligned caste system was an offshoot of this group dynamics. On the other hand, Indian philosophy is highly individualistic and deals mainly with the growth of an individual’s personality towards inner perfection. Philosophy provided the outlet to a person for free thinking and development of ideas, essentially the freedom to believe. In a paradoxical manner this process was also required to conform to the societal norms, although the more renowned thinkers, mainly sages and seers, broke free of these restrictive chains. The third phase of *Vedanta* was inaugurated by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda in the 19th century. During this period *Vedanta* was transformed from an ethnic religious philosophy into a universal philosophy of life.

Sri Ramakrishna is the real link between ancient India and modern India. Through stupendous spiritual efforts Sri Ramakrishna revealed the entire range of spiritual experiences of the sages and saints of the past from *Vedic* times to his times. He thereby re-established the truths of *Vedanta*. He traversed the paths of *Vedic*, Shaiva, *Shakta* and *Vaishnava* traditions, including obscure and forgotten paths. He brought about the purification of spiritual life by emphasizing its moral foundation, and rejecting occultism, mysticism and miracle-mongering. He made God realization possible for all even in the midst of the distractions of the modern world. He imparted tremendous encouragement to the efforts to realize God. All this has resulted in a thorough rejuvenation of *Vedanta* in modern times.

Another modern sage, Swami Vivekananda's great work was to make ancient *Vedantic* concepts acceptable to modern minds by interpreting the eternal truths in the light of modern rational thought and science. This modernized version is what most of the present-day educated Hindus understand by *Vedanta*. *Vedanta* had split into different schools in the Middle Ages. Swami Vivekananda brought about the reintegration of these schools. He did this by stressing the common ground of different schools, especially the principle of *Atman*, and by showing that the different schools represent different stages of realization of the ultimate Reality.

Sri Ramakrishna taught, from his realization, that all spiritual paths lead to the same ultimate goal, *Yato mat tato path*. "As many views, so many paths to God". This principle, which forms the basis of his doctrine of *dharma-samanvaya* or Harmony of Religions, came to be applied within Hinduism itself in due course. This has given rise to a sense of unity among Hindu sects in modern times, in spite of many differences in customs and traditions. Till the eleventh century A.D. the only challenges *Vedanta* had to face were internal; these came mainly from Buddhism and Jainism and from dissensions of different schools of *Vedanta* and sects of Hinduism each of which claimed superiority over the others. From the thirteenth century Islam began to exert its influence on Indian society in a big way. Many great saints then arose in different parts of India and responded to the Islamic challenge by spreading the ideas of oneness of God, brotherhood of man and social equality among the common people.

However, the greatest challenge Indian society ever faced came from Western culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Western culture brought three major challenges to Indian society, which were: (1) modern rational thought and science puzzled the Indian culture, (2) an open society which values freedom and social justice, and (3) the idea of a saviour God who identifies himself with the poor, the sick and the fallen.

Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda met these Western challenges by revitalizing *Vedantic* spirituality, by interpreting the eternal truths of *Vedanta*, discovered by the ancient sages, in the light of modern rational thought, and by introducing a new gospel of social service based on the practical application of *Vedantic* principles in day-to-day life. By "Practical Vedanta" is meant the practical application of the basic principles of *Vedanta* in solving the problems of day-to-day life. For centuries *Vedantic* principles were intended only to help people to attain *Mukti* or liberation. Swami Vivekananda, however, showed that the highest principles of *Vedanta* can be applied even in ordinary life to solve the day-to-day problems of life. *Vedantic* principles can be applied not only in individual life but also in social life. In fact, Swamiji held that India's downfall took place mainly because the eternal spiritual principles were not applied in collective life.

For many centuries the essential, basic truths of *Vedanta* remained bound up with innumerable beliefs, myths, customs, castes, etc. Moreover, the higher truths of *Vedanta* were available only to a small group of privileged people, and it was believed that to follow the principles of *Vedanta* one had to be born in a certain Hindu caste. Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda separated the essential truths of *Vedanta* from the non-essentials. Swamiji showed that the essential truths of *Vedanta* constitute the eternal, universal truths of the spiritual world which form the rationale and basis of all the religions of the world. As a matter of fact, the eternal principles of *Vedanta* themselves constitute the Universal Religion of all mankind, and the different religions of the world are only manifestations of this Universal Religion in different places and times. Furthermore, through his lectures and books and through the *Vedanta* Centres which he founded, Swamiji made the life-giving principles of *Vedanta* available to all people without any distinction of caste, creed or race.

In this way, through the pioneering efforts of Swami Vivekananda, *Vedanta* has crossed the boundaries of India and has now become the common property of all mankind. The work started by Swamiji is now being carried on by many teachers and organizations around the world

Swami Vivekananda that, "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man". He said that education which does not enable a person to stand on his own feet, does not teach him self-confidence and self-respect, is useless. Education should be man-making, life giving and character-building. He also said that children should be given "positive education", i.e they should be encouraged to learn new things till they gain self-confidence and self-respect. Since a country's future depends on the character of its people, Vivekananda stressed on character building education, he called it "man-making". According to Vivekananda, *Jiva* is *Shiva* or every man is potentially Divine. To become divine (or great), man must give

up suspicion, jealousy, conceit and learn to work unitedly for the common good. Courage, faith in oneself and in God, patience and steady work, according to Swami Vivekananda, is the way to success. He told that purity, patience and perseverance overcome all obstacles.

Swami Vivekananda said that since the *atman* (soul) has neither sex nor caste, it is wrong to discriminate between sexes. He suggested not thinking of people as men and women, but as human beings. According to Vivekananda, there is no chance for welfare in the world unless the condition of woman is improved. He felt that it was impossible to get back India's lost pride and honour unless the condition of women was improved. According to Vivekananda, the ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood and that Sita was the ideal of Indian womanhood. Vivekananda lived at a time when India was quite backward and that many improvements have taken place since that time. Let us now look at what has changed and how much has changed in Indian society. Consider the following statistics of the present-day:

Education: -- It is estimated that, 60 million children out of around 200 million children in the 6-14 years age group, in India, are not in school, and that, even of those children enrolled in school, only 47 out of 100 children enrolled in class I reach class VIII, putting the dropout rate at 52.78%. The figures for female literacy, male literacy, youth literacy and adult literacy are respectively, 65.46%, 82.14%, 82%, 74.04%. The stated figures are only for Primary Education (10th Std. and below), with the figures for Senior Secondary Education, Degree Education and higher being much worse (in single digits!). State wise, Kerala is the most literate state in India (almost 100% literacy), while Bihar is the least literate (63%).

Health: -- India's fares quite poorly in Health, by world standards. Indian children make up one-third of the world's malnourished children. 75% of Indian women suffer from Anaemia. Every year, HIV/AIDS, Malaria, TB, Polio, Diarrhoea, Respiratory infections, Pneumonia and other diseases claim thousands of lives. Infant mortality, maternal health and issues related to child protection, including trafficking and child labour are other serious health concerns.

Water crisis: -- As per the 2010 UN estimates, 626 million people in India (>60%) has practice of open defecation which leads to a very high risk of microbial contamination (bacteria, viruses, amoeba) of water that cause water-borne diseases. India has one of the highest numbers of people in the world without continuous access to water. According to Water Aid, an international NGO, by 2015, 29% of the rural population or 244 million people, and 23% of the urban population or 90 million people, would lack access to adequate safe, sustainable water. Even major cities and urban areas face shortage of continuous water supply. It is said that 13% of Delhi's citizens do not get water supply every day and 40% of households in Madhya Pradesh are not supplied even 40 litres per person per day.

Corruption: -- Corruption, in the form of bribes, evasion of tax, embezzlement, need of paying bribe or peddling influence to get a job done in a public office, is widespread in India. India is ranked 95 out of 179 countries in Transparency International's Corruption survey.

Violence: -- Women and children in India today live under deplorable conditions. Trust Law, a news service run by Thomson Reuters, has ranked India as the worst G20 country in which to be a woman. Female foeticide, domestic violence, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, inadequate healthcare, inequality, dowry deaths, rape and other forms of gender-based violence constitute the reality of most girls' and women's lives in India. Rape is one of the most common crimes against women and is seen as a "national problem" in India. With more than 24,000 reported cases in 2011 alone, the number of rape cases in India has doubled between 1990 and 2008. Deep-rooted social attitudes, deeply entrenched patriarchy, widespread misogyny and a strong preference for sons over daughters are believed to be at the root of bad treatment of women in India.

Although India is constitutionally a secular state, incidents of large-scale communal and caste-based violence occur from time to time. Major religious violent incidents include the Kashmir insurgency, Punjab insurgency, Delhi serial blasts and anti-Sikh riots, Ayodhya violence (1996), Bombay Riots and bombings (1992/1993), Gujarat violence (2002), Amarnath pilgrimage massacre (2000), attacks against Christians in Orissa and Karnataka, Naxal violence in West Bengal, Chhatisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, violence against Dalits & other minorities etc.

What inference can we draw from above figures for our country? Let us ask ourselves: Are the problems of our country related only to poverty, population and inadequate natural resources? What really is our understanding of the core human values viz. respect for women, social equality, individual freedom and justice for all citizens, tolerance towards other castes and religions, basic hygiene, purpose of education? Have we really understood Vivekananda? How much has changed at the basic levels of society during the last 150 years? Are we indeed on the path of improvement?

Let us reconsider once more the most important problems that we, as a nation, are facing. Water and sanitation, Literacy, Equitable distribution of food, Unemployment, Violence, slowly degrading Environment, Population growth, Pseudo-democracy, Corruption in most public systems, very limited opportunities for youth to pursue Higher Education or Research, highly inefficient or inadequate Public Health system, need to pay high price even for essential commodities and so on. Let us now try to develop a template for solving above problems based on Vivekananda's teachings. To solve the problems, we need to not only look at them from the National perspective, but also consider how they have to be implemented at the grass-roots level i.e., what needs to happen at the level of villages if it concerns a Taluk, at the level of localities if it is a city, at the level of families/households, at the level of ordinary people.

Consider a grass-roots level project such as the building of a hospital or the implementation of a modern curriculum for children in a remote village. Its implementation will involve the following phases:

- (1) A satisfactory and feasible solution has to be designed considering all details.
- (2) Moral values should be included in the syllabus from the very beginning of the educational life of the students.
- (2) The Government must frame policies that are fair to all. Then, it must authorize the project and then, it must promptly dispatch money, raw material, resources and expertise to the work-spot.
- (3) The ordinary people and community involved in the project have to play their role by following Vivekananda's teachings i.e., display the spirit of service, show due regard for divinity of fellow Atman, perform an unselfish action, etc.

The project will be implemented if all phases proceed quickly and smoothly. Hence, it should be clear from the above template that any grass-roots level project can be successfully implemented if everyone thinks pure thoughts and plan and discharge all their duties with a pure heart. Indeed, this is what all our leaders – Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Pt. Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sarojini Naidu, Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, – strived to achieve. They worked for the eradication of caste barriers, spread of education, socioeconomic development, emancipation of the weak and suffering, the nurturing of public works and industries and for the building of a strong, vibrant nation. Why are we then a “developing nation” even today? Are all of us working selflessly and unitedly for the common good, performing only pure actions with the spirit of service, with compassion and with due regard for the divinity of fellow *atmans*, as taught by Swami Vivekananda?

I said before that our country is near ruins. I'd like to conclude this essay by suggesting how things can be turned round. I will mention two recent examples that highlight the power of public rallies, Satyagraha and Social movements. Anna Hazare's call for “Anti-corruption Satyagraha” received widespread support from thousands of people all across India, forcing the Government of India to table the Lokpal Bill (Anti-corruption Bill) in Rajya Sabha. International reaction and nationwide protests demanding justice and more protection for women in the wake of the death of Damini, the Delhi gang-rape victim, prompted Central and several State Governments to immediately announce several steps to ensure more safety of women. In India today, Public rallies and Satyagrahas are the most effective ways of raising awareness and mobilizing support for social causes. Hence, more such social movements, public demonstrations and Satyagrahas are needed to create awakening among people on the basic issues or problems that we are facing. More and more Indian youth must enthusiastically organize and participate in Satyagrahas. More and more youth must volunteer to work in NGOs. The present time is the time for action for all Indians! In Swami Vivekananda's words: “Go, all of you, wherever there is an outbreak of plague or famine, or wherever the people are in distress, and mitigate their sufferings..... Die you must, but have a great ideal to die for and, it is better to die with a great ideal in life.... On you lies the future hope of our country. Set yourselves to work – to work!” There is a lot of work to do and the ball is squarely in the court of India's young men and women. If

all we were to follow Vivekananda's teachings, if all were to serve the country in this time of its need, we will achieve the ultimate goal that is Shiva or Brahman or liberation in true sense.

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