

## THE CONCEPT OF NEO-VEDĀNTA IN VIVEKĀNANDA'S PHILOSOPHY

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### Abstract:

Vedāntic metaphysics spell out the relationship between one and many i.e. Brahman and the world. Though the phenomenal worlds consisting of different things appear to be different in respect of the names and forms but everything partake of the nature of the ultimate reality. Vivekananda takes the vedāntic version as the basis to formulate a social blueprint termed as *Neo-Vedanta*, provides a rationale for building a social order characterized by absence of social discrimination, socio-economic parity, political stability and religious harmony. It envisions a social order where people by and large, embrace the creed of live and let live. Thus an endeavour has been made in this paper to present the central idea of *Neo-vedānta* as presented in philosophy of Vivekananda along with mention of its different degrees, not kind.

**Keywords:** Neo-vedānta, Reality, social, knowledge

In the philosophy of Vivekananda one comes across unique confluence Vedāntic wisdom of the East and scientific knowledge of the West. Needless to say that 'Vedānta' literally means the concluding portion of the *Vedas* i.e. *Upaniṣads*, which mark the culmination of philosophical reflections of the seer-philosophers over the centuries. They constitute the foundational philosophical texts which gave rise to orthodox schools of thought namely *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga*, *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika*, *Pūrva mimāṃsā* and *Uttara mimāṃsā*. In the *Upaniṣads* one comes across a rational and comprehensive worldview (metaphysics), detailed exposition of a theory of knowledge (epistemology) and a system of values (ethics). Needless to say that Upaniṣadic metaphysics provides the basis for discussions in epistemology and ethics. It spells out the nature of ultimate reality and its relationship with world of diversities and place of man therein. *Vedānta*, it is the one primordial reality (*Brahman*) which manifests in form of the world of phenomenal diversities. It is the 'One'

which has become ‘Many’ (*ekoham vahusyam*). *Brahman* is of the nature of truth (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), bliss (*anandam*) and Infinite (*anantam*). Therefore, every manifestation, animate or inanimate, mobile or immobile, microcosmic or macrocosmic contains these properties. The difference among things and beings depend on the degree of manifestation of these characters. Everything is potentially conscious and infinite. So, the differences among things and beings are of degree not of kind. In the process of evolution that which is potential becomes progressively actual. Consciousness which is explicitly manifest in human-beings is less explicit in animals, still less explicit in vegetable kingdom and most dormant in the so-called inanimate matter. Things and beings, in course of the evolutionary march, move towards the state from where they originated. Vivekānanda accepts the Vedāntic metaphysics as the very bedrock of his socio-spiritual philosophy, termed as *Neo-vedānta*.

Vedanta is rich in elucidation of the nature of Brahman, ways of attaining Brahmanhood which is also the state of highest good. But the real challenge consists in finding a transition from ‘knowing’ to ‘being’, theory to practice, from understanding the ‘truth’ to living the life of ‘truth’. He was greatly inspired by the cryptic observation of his master; Rāmakrishna that *ounce of practice is worth tons of wisdom*. Vivekānanda was averse to mere theoretical contemplations. The ultimate truth should not get restricted to discussions in the confines of ivory towers by scholars or pundits but find their expression in thought and action of people, at large beginning from toilers in the field to rulers or people in helm of affairs. Neo-vedānta propounded that Vivekānanda is nothing but the *vedāntic* wisdom translate into existential modules by which people, irrespective of their education, status and religious affiliations live their lives with the *vedāntic* perception and conviction. Indeed, he spelt out the core tenet of *vedāntic* religion i.e. the real ‘knowing’ consists in ‘being’. To know is to become. The knower of *Brahman* becomes *Brahman* (*Brahmavit Brahmeiva bhavati*). The true test of knowledge depends on the extent and degree to which it manifests in one’s thought and action. It is not hard to find scholars who are greatly erudite and conversant with texts and scriptures but their conduct stand contrary to what they teach or propagate. For Vivekānanda, the real challenge for a votary of *Vedānta* consists in translating the ideas and ideals in the way one conducts oneself in real life situations. What is consequential is not simply believing but living. *Neo-vedānta* spells out the social, religious, educational, socio-economic-politico paradigms, with Vedantic metaphysics (worldview), as the foundation and the centre-stage.

Vivekānanda was at pain to witness the extremes of poverty, social discrimination, exploitation, religious divides, communal tensions in the contemporary society which inherits the great Vedantic legacy of handed enriched by the great seers and saints in the past. He was sanguine of the fact that true vision of reality is bound to have its expression in thought, word and action. *Vedāntic* worldview (metaphysics) treats the creation as varied expressions of one fundamental reality

*Brahman* which is of the nature of truth, consciousness and bliss. Every created being, tiny or big, partakes of the essence of the *Brahman*. As the primal cause of the universe the ultimate reality is transcendent, beyond space, time and causality. At the same time, it lies immanent in everything and being as its essence. Man is not simply a psycho-physical being but is physic-psycho-spiritual. Though the selves residing in different particulars are identical they appear to be different on account of the body-mind complex in which they reside. So, there is unity beneath diversity. So long as such knowledge remains confined to debates, discussions, preaching and sermons from the pulpit they benefit neither the individuals who have mastered neither such knowledge nor the society.

The mission of *Neo-vedānta* was to effect a transition from theoretical knowledge to real mode of living. The emphasis of *Neo-vedānta* is to liberate thought from the confines of narrow intellectual circle and bring it to the common man. For him, what is paramount is not believing in the truth but living the truth. A society where people, at large, embrace Vedantic ideas and ideals cannot but live the life of love, tolerance, forgiveness, sacrifice and service in relation to one another. The individuals would no longer look upon people belonging to other caste, communities, and religions as alien or even different. *Neo-vedānta* provides the basis for resolution of social conflicts and religious contradictions. There can be no room for social discrimination, exploitation, violence or even division in the name of caste, colour, creed and gender. Since we are all offsprings of one divine Father one has to look upon the so-called others as one's kindred. He was vocal about the social stratification on the basis of caste which is nothing but a degenerate form of social classification in the ancient time on the basis of *guna* and *karma* as it is explicitly elucidated in the Bhagavad Gītā (*chaturvnam mayasrtstm gunakarma bhivagasah*). Richness of a nation doesn't depend upon economic resources i.e. Per capita Income or gross national product but on the quality of human resources in terms of the cardinal values and ideals which the citizens share with one another. A state or nation, marked by social inequality, economic disparity, religious dogma and blind patriotism cannot prove to be enduring. Cultivation of *vedāntic* ideals in letter and spirit, shall definitely make room for true socialism. Patriotism doesn't mean blind love for people living in one's geographical territory but implies the sense of oneness or belongingness which helps people to live together. Real knowledge doesn't lie in books, scriptures or cultivation of reason but inner growth.

Neo-Vedanta can provide secure basis *for* universal religion, without there being any room for inter-religious intolerance and conflicts. Religions had their origin in man's search for contentment, happiness and harmony. It is evident forms the fundamental urge in every individual to grow from the state of bondage and suffering to that of freedom and bliss. This fundamental urge goads one to pursue one religion or the other. Religious practices consist of prescriptions and prohibitions, rites and observances backed by myths and parables. They appear to be different because of the belief systems, methods of prayer and place of worship etc. But according to *Vivekānanda* the

purpose of every religion is to help man to tread the path of good or righteousness. Real liberation consists in attaining autonomy by which one can overcome the limiting influence of irrational and dogmatic practices. The rites, rituals are peripheral to every religion as the core concern of every religious path is to help its followers cultivate the sense of love, tolerance, mutuality, sacrifice and service. These values are secular in nature and constitute the core concern of every religion. In this sense, Vivekananda construes such values to be the secular basis of the sacred.

Perception of oneness extends the boundary of empathy generates love for every other. Love is the most fundamental of all values which brings tolerance, mutuality, forgiveness, service and sacrifice. Diversities are facts of life and individuals do differ in respect of the language they speak, religions they profess, political ideologies they subscribe to, communities they live, colour of the skin and so on. But such differences are peripheral. Behind the apparent diversities lies the same reality. Such realisation instils love in everyone irrespective of the apparent differences. This would pave the way for universal brotherhood.

In this framework, there is no room for incompatibility between individual and the collective good. The real well-being of an individual lies in the well-being of all. Hence, the ultimate motivation behind every action should be tempered by love and concern to promote the well-being of one and all termed as *lokasamgraha* in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. When these ideals are translated into a social paradigm it shall certainly give rise to social norms and laws which would enable everyone to have fair opportunity to grow into completeness. Though people differ from one another in respect of their mindset and ability everyone has the potentiality to grow into perfection. Hence, it is moral imperative of the individuals, society and state to provide congenial environment to everyone to grow and realize one's potentiality. While championing the cause of 'Humanism' he was vocal against the manmade evils such as superstitions, parochialism, exploitation, injustice and social discrimination. Significantly, 'Humanism' of Vivekānanda was grounded on the spiritual vision of unity. It is not confined to the domain of human species whereof the humans care only for other members of their human species but the whole creation, the flora and fauna which are nothing but the temples where God resides. Animals, poorest of the poor, toilers in the field are the very objects of our service (*sevā*) in relation to whom we should consider ourselves to be the humble servants to do their good to the best of our ability. He goes to the extent of saying that he would prefer to court the afflictions of the hell to do good to other than to strive for liberation (*mukti*) Humanism of Vivekānanda has been aptly termed as 'Spiritual Humanism' as it embraces non-humans within its ambit.

Vivekānanda was aware of the real challenges in bringing about a transition from knowledge to practice. Therefore, he considers 'Education' as the effective means to infuse the cardinal in the educands. Since everyone is potentially divine and holy the real purpose of 'education'

is to arouse dormant divinity in everyone so that one begins to perceive divinity in every being and feel the intimate kinship with others. When we are prompted by love and concern for others and embrace the life of '*Live and let live*' the *vedāntic* ideal of cosmic fraternity (*Vasudeva kutumbakam*) shall not remain a far-off dream.

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