

Swami Vivekananda and his Practical Vedanta

Dr. Akhilesh Mani Tripathi*

*Assistant Professor (Political Science) PMCoE, Govt. Autonomous P.G College, Satna (M.P.) INDIA

Abstract - Practical Vedanta is the ethical philosophy on which the entire socio-political philosophy of Swami Vivekananda is based. Out of various branches of the Vedantic philosophy, Vivekananda accepted the Advaita Vedanta, propounded by Shankaracharya, as the most reasonable one. He found only this Advaita Vedanta satisfying the demands of the scientific world¹ and explaining morality in complete sense. However, he found that the Advaita Vedanta, due to its application only on spiritual plane hitherto, had remained in exclusive possession of the spiritual seekers, and its benefits could not extend to the practical life of humanity inspite of the fact that it is the only philosophy that could universally be applied to solve the actual problems of the practical human life.

Keywords: Vedanta, Practical Vedanta, Self –Abnegation.

Introduction - Swami Vivekananda has made a great contribution in respect to the appropriate comprehension of the natural evolution of the Vedanta philosophy. By evolving his own interpretation, Vivekananda not only reconciled the various Vedantic theories which so far have been taken as contradicting each other, but also dissolved the bone of contention among various schools of Vedanta. Vivekananda's propositions with regard to the Vedanta is given in brief as follows:-

1. The Vedanta is a comprehensive philosophical body which contains all theories of dualism, qualified monism and absolute monism as its integral organs.
2. These theories of dualism, qualified- monism and absolute monism are not contradictory, but, as an unfoldment natural necessity of human souls, work like the distinct steps starting from the lowest step of dualism and culminating in the highest step of Advaitism.
3. Thus various schools of Vedanta do not essentially contradict each other, rather they represent the various philosophical steps gradually leading to the final stage of Advaitism.

Swami Vivekananda as an Advaita Vedantist: Swami Vivekananda treated each school of Vedanta as an authentic system of the Vedanta philosophy, and philosophically he is seen firmly standing on Advaitistic School. We find Vivekananda repeatedly appealing to raise the 'mighty banner of Advaita', and also reminding that 'the time has come when this Advaita is to be worked out practically.'² Actually, these utterances made out by Swami Vivekananda are not mere sentimental expressions out of his theological conviction. On the other hand, he found that

from amongst all the schools of Vedanta, it is Advaita Vedanta alone that can reply to the questions put by the modern sciences, and that can equally explain the ground of morality in human life as well. According to Vivekananda, Advaita Vedanta alone deserves to be treated as scientific religion which satisfies the rational as well as ethical demands of the modern minds.

Practical Relevance of the Vedanta: Swami Vivekananda was the first man to notice the practical relevance of the (Advaita) Vedanta; and, emphasizing the need to practice it in public life, he said, "But one defect which lay in the Advaita was its being worked out so long on spiritual plane only, and nowhere else; now the time has come when you have to make it practical."²

Practical Vedanta as a new dispensation: He announced that the Practical Vedanta, as a new 'dispensation', is the call of the present time. "The time has come when this Advaita is to be worked out practically. Let us bring it down from heaven unto earth, this is the present dispensation" He wished that the Vedantic teachings must permeate the world and enter in to each and every pore of society, till they have become the common property of everybody.³ Practical aspect of Vedanta was so much pertinent to Vivekananda as to lead him claim that the Vedanta shall no more be a 'Rahasya', a secret, to live with monks in cave and forests, and that it must come down to the daily, everyday life of the people.⁴ He stated, "It shall be worked out in the Palace of the king, in the cave of the recluse; it shall be worked out in the cottage of the poor, by the beggar in the street, everywhere; anywhere it can be worked out. Therefore do not fear whether you are a woman or a Shudra, for this religion is so great says Lord Krishna, that even a

little of it brings a great amount of good.”⁵

Practical Vedanta as the democratized version of Vedanta: Actually, in his effort to provide a new philosophy of Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda was serving to humanity with the democratized publication of the Vedanta which had been monopolized for centuries in the hands of the priesthood. It was quite a relevant task, because a philosophy, which claimed to be the universal doctrine of freedom and democracy, must itself be democratized at first to ensure its access to everyone.

Vedanta for the removal of privilege in society: Why Vivekananda was motivated to propound the concept of Practical Vedanta is also a relevant question that needs discussion. Vivekananda found that the entire problem of the social world is rooted in the idea of privilege, and the Advaita Vedanta is the only philosophy that provides such an ethics that breaks down all the forms of privileges.⁶ Vivekananda realized that this practical side of Vedantic morality has become much relevant for the modern world, than it ever was, because “this privilege claiming has become tremendously intensified which the extension of knowledge”.⁷ It is this privilege claiming that has promoted selfishness causing the exploitation of others in the capitalist system. He diagnosed the real disease of the materialistic nation, which despite having excess knowledge and power, “makes human beings devils.”⁸ He says,

“Tremendous power is being acquired by the manufacture of machines and other appliances, and privilege is claimed today as it never has been claimed in the history of the world. That is why the Vedanta wants to preach against it, to break down this tyrannizing over the souls of men.”⁹

Vedanta as the highest moral philosophy: According to Vivekananda, the Vedanta is the only system which, as an ethical philosophy, teaches to realize the whole sentient and insentient world as your own ‘self’; and, as a religion, provides the path to realize it in practical life. If this truth is once realized that the Brahman, the Self, is one, but is the sometime appearing to us as many, on the relative plane, the whole practice of privilege will disappear along with exploitation, suppression and subjugation as its offsprings;

and true love will grow in the heart. “Then you can’t help treating all with the same kindness as you show towards yourself. This is indeed practical Vedanta.”¹⁰ The practical Vedanta conceives of a man, who ‘must liberate the whole universe before he leaves his body’, because no one “feels happy to taste of a good thing all by oneself”.¹¹ Thus the practical Vedanta, as a moral philosophy, is based on the doctrine of self- abnegation, and asks everyone for its practice. The traditional Vedanta preached men to give up the world to help their own salvation. The practical Vedanta, according to Vivekananda, preaches, “Throw away everything, even your own salvation, and go and help others, you are always talking bold words, but here is practical Vedanta before you, Give up this little life of yours.”¹²

Conclusion: Swami Vivekananda was staunch supporter of the Advaita Vedanta of the Shankaracharya and he attempted to utilize this grand philosophy for the removal of social maladies. He found that unless humanity is trained in spiritual practices it will never be freed from its social sufferings. He firmly believed that if human society has to become a moral one, it will need the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta because it is the only philosophy which is scientific and gives all the answers to the modern mind.

References:-

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