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Humanity; in the light of Practical Vedanta: An Analysis

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Abstract

India has a great tradition of living a religiospiritual life, here religion is used in a restricted sense. Religion in Sanskrit is *dharma* so practicing *dharma* is very important to Indians. Whatever the seer preaches is also practiced in their life; in other words *dharma* and *jibana* are amalgamated. *Darshana* is basis of *dharma*, so the word Indians have used simultaneously is *jibandarshan*, traditionally all Vedanta schools has maintained this path. But gradually the system has deteriorated, in one time *darshana* been only intellectually discussed as a matter of intellectual pleasure and separated from life. This is quite obvious when some of the thinkers said that “*भावाद्वैतं सदा कुर्यात् क्रियाद्वैतं न कर्हिचित्!*”¹ which means that Advaita should be practiced in thinking not in action. Then one can interpret it as if Advaita is not applicable in our day to day life, being the matter of only intellectual examinations and hermeneutic analyses. In 19th century Swami Vivekananda pointed out the main problem of Indian society was the separation of *jibana* with *darshana* therefore the tradition of religiospiritual life was no more existent. If possible Swami Vivekananda would take the chance of conjoining these two-- *jibana* and *darshana*-- in accordance with Advaita tradition. Swami Vivekananda would conjoin *jibana* and *darshana* through a new concept of service which would be applicable to our daily life. Vivekananda tried to set up new aspects of life which would concern all living beings, and his social approach was supported by *Advaita Vedanta*. The current undertaking attempts to analyse in the light of Swami Vivekananda's philosophy how he would introduce the concept of service and humanity through applying *Vedanta* thought in our daily life.

Key words: Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, Humanity, Practical Vedanta, *dharma*, Society,

To set the tune of the paper I would like to remember the aphorism of श्वेताश्वतरउपनिषद् “सदाजनानां हृदये सन्निविष्टः”² It means supreme God resides in every human being. Upanishad is a philosophical part of Vedanta. Being a Vedantin Sri Ramakrishna used to accept this view. Not only he was accepting but he realised it. Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, also accepts this

¹ Tattvapodesh, P- 87

² Tyagisananda, Swami, Shvetashvatara Upanishad, Sri Ramakrishna Math (Madras 1949), P. 70, Sloka 3/13

view. Swami Vivekananda takes this idea as an ideal of his thought. when Swamiji went to West then he used to teach humanity in Vedantic perspective.

One-day Swami Vivekananda went to Dakshineswar to meet his guru Sri Ramakrishna. In that holy place suddenly Ramakrishna uttered a holy sentence “*Jive doya noy, siva jnana jiva seva*”³, which means that one should not act with the thought of helping the human being but rather act in a spirit of service to the human being as they are God or *Siva*. When Sri Ramakrishna uttered the sentence, Swamiji immediately responded to it and said “*Bhagavan jodi kokhono din den to aj jaha sunilam ei advut satya sangsar e sarbatra prochar koribo*”⁴ means if God wishes then I shall proclaim this truth everywhere. In this conversation we may find the root of humanistic insight in Swamiji’s Practical Vedanta-- his philosophy. So It is clear and obvious that Swami Vivekananda’s view is influenced by his guru Sri Ramakrishna and Advaita Vedanta. One may ask that how one could claim that Swami Vivekananda was influenced by Advaita Vedanta? I propose to give the answer in this paper.

Swami Vivekananda repeatedly uttered that only Advaita Vedanta is the universal basis of all ethics and *dharma* (*dharma* here does not merely mean the conventional religious views). In his own word “The more we think ourselves separate from this Whole, the more miserable we become. So, Advaita is the basis of ethics.”⁵ Swamiji quotes the aphorism of Bhagavat Gita where we find the humanistic approach, like Chapter 12 verse 3 and 4

ये त्वक्षरमनिर्देश्यमव्यक्तं पर्युपासते | सर्वत्रगमचिन्त्यञ्च कूटस्थमचलन्ध्रुवम् ||⁶

सन्नियम्येन्द्रियग्रामं सर्वत्र समबुद्धयः | ते प्राप्नुवन्ति मामेव सर्वभूतहिते रताः ||

it means those who worship the formless aspect of the Absolute Truth—the imperishable, the indefinable, the unmanifest, the all-pervading, the unthinkable, the unchanging, the eternal, and the immoveable—by restraining their senses and being even-minded everywhere, such persons, engaged in the welfare of all beings, also attain Me (ie, God). Let’s take another verse from Gita, this aphorism says I regard them to be perfect yogis who see the true equality of all living beings and respond to the joys and sorrows of others as

³ Saradananda, Swami, Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga. https://web.eecs.umich.edu/~lahiri/LilaPrasanga/05_09_013.html

⁴ Saradananda, Swami, Ramakrishna Lila Prasanga, https://web.eecs.umich.edu/~lahiri/LilaPrasanga/05_09_013.html

⁵ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, The cosmos and the self, Vol-5, P-1322

⁶ Sen, Atulchandra, Bhagavat Gita, Chapter-12 Verse-3 and 4, P-487

if they were their own. आत्मौपम्येन सर्वत्र समं पश्यति योऽर्जुन | सुखं वा यदि वा दुःखं स योगी परमो मतः ||⁷

These aphorisms express humanistic approach in its purest form.

Not only in the Bhagavat Gita but also in many Hindu text like *Mahabharata*, *Manu Samhita*, and many *dharmashastra* we may find the humanistic approach. In *Mahabharata* and in *Manu Samhita* it is mentioned that *dana* (offering) is the *srestha dhrama*. These texts immensely influenced Swami Vivekananda. Actually, in ancient Hinduism, there is an emphasis on humanity. When Swamiji went through these texts then his mind grasped these notions. Swamiji revisited this text and he developed the new version of Vedanta in its modern form. In Vivekananda's understanding *dana* or offering means *annaya dana* or offering of food, *prana dana* or offering of life, *vidya dana* or offering of education, *dharma o adhatmikata dana* or offering of religion and spirituality. All *dana* is assembled in one term which is service or *seva*. According to Swami Vivekananda *seva* encompasses all this issues; by this understanding Swamiji implements *seva bhaba* through his mission. When Swamiji established Ramakrishna Mission the moto of this institution was decided to be आत्मनो मोक्षार्थम् जगत् हिताय च ||⁸ meaning, for the salvation of our individual self and for the well-being of all on earth. Here we find the *seva bhab* which leads to humanity at large. *Srimadbhagavad* says *yo mām sarveṣu bhūteṣu santam ātmānam īśvaram hitvārcām bhajate maudhyād bhasmany eva juhoti saḥ*.⁹ that means, One who worships the Deity of Godhead in the temples but does not know that the Supreme Lord, as Paramātmā, is situated in every living entity's heart, must be in ignorance and is compared to one who offers oblations into ashes. The text places emphasis on the divinity which already in human being.

So in Upanishad prescribes the *atmatattva*, Gita suggests service and self –realisation, *Mahabharata* and *dharma-sastra* says the *dana* or service is the highest ideal of humanity. In view of this ancient text Sri Ramakrishna combined all of these and said “jive doya noy, Siva jnana jiva seva.” Swami Vivekananda accepted all of these and he gave a new dimension of humanity through service. Vivekananda more vividly explained the notion of service in relation to humanity and salvation with modern outlook. His outlook is

⁷ Sen, Atulchandra, *Bhagavat Gita*, Chapter- 6 Varse-32, P- 303

⁸ https://www.rkmpune.org/rk_order/rkm_philo.html

⁹ *SrimadBhagavatam* 3/29/22

based on Advaita Vedanta, but in a new approach. Swami Vivekananda's new approach is often called Practical Vedanta or Applied Vedanta.

Someone may think that in Buddhism there is a concept of service. Vivekananda mentioned the greatness of Buddhism in many of his lectures and writings. Buddhism has very important role of *dana* or offerings and *seva* or service. But we have to remember that the philosophical basis of Buddhism regarding the concept of service and Vivekananda's philosophical basis of service is completely different. In Buddhist approach humanity and service are not associated with the concept of self-realisation or God realisation. For them pain is just a matter of grief or woe and it is not at all acceptable, so we must try to eradicate it for myself and others, and so we always have to be active to eradicate this sorrow. For removal of pain we have to be active and be of service to others. This is the philosophical basis of service in Buddhism. In other words, they just want to exterminate the grief through the help of service. Vivekananda's philosophical position regarding service is different; he was not merely thinking to exterminate the grief but service is a type of worship which would lead to the goal of human life. For Sri Ramakrishana the goal of life is to attain God, '*jiboner uddeshyo Iswar labh*'¹⁰. Swami Vivekananda accepted this theory. Swami Vivekananda thought that only Advaita Vedanta can explain the ethics. The question of ethics is why should we do good to others? That can be logically explained by only Advaita Vedanta, Swamiji Said "Advaita and Advaita alone explains morality. Every religion preaches that the essence of all morality is to do good to others. And why? Be unselfish. And why should I? Some God has said it? He is not for me. Some texts have declared it? Let them; that is nothing to me; let them all tell it. And if they do, what is it to me? Each one for himself, and somebody take the hindermost — that is all the morality in the world, at least with many. What is the reason that I should be moral? You cannot explain it except when you come to know the truth as given in the Gita: "He who sees everyone in himself, and himself in everyone, thus seeing the same God living in all, he, the sage, no more kills the Self by the self.".... Advaita alone, is morality explained. The others teach item but cannot give you its reason. Then, so far about explanation."¹¹ By uttering this statement it is vividly clear that Swami Vivekananda was influenced not only by Advaita Vedanta but also the basis of his idea of service is dependent upon the Advaita philosophy; the idea of service is altruistic development of human being in other words, which is

¹⁰ Ramakrishna Kathamrita, Sri M (Mahendra Nath Gupta), Udbodhan Karyalaya, Kolkata, P-854

¹¹ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, THE VEDANTA, delivered at Lahore on 12th November, 1897, Vol-3, P- 870)

‘service to man is service to God’. This, his guru Sri Ramakrishna said in different form ‘*siva jnane jiva seva*’.

One may think that though Vivekananda said Advaita is able to explain morality, Christianity also has the concept of universal brotherhood in their philosophy they also admit the concept of service, they also think that through service can lead to altruistic development to man. So one may think that Swamiji was influenced by the concept of service of Christianity. Yes, Swamiji also tried to improve the status of life of human being and believed that through service this can happen. But that the philosophical basis is different therefore the nature of work is different. Interestingly, both of these notions of service lead to altruistic development but in Christianity the meaning of Service is help to others and the meaning of Service in Vivekananda’s view is offerings or worship to God, because *jiva is a siva*. So there is a basic difference in their understanding of service. Swamiji says “According to Advaitism, love every man as your own Self and not as your brother as in Christianity. Brotherhood should be superseded by universal Selfhood. Not universal brotherhood, but universal Selfhood is our motto. Advaitism may include also the "greatest happiness" theory.”¹² Swami Vivekananda was aware that maintaining Advaita position is very difficult in practice. So that Swamiji said the highest ideal is very difficult to practice in practical life. In one occasion he clearly said Pure Advaita form cannot be applied in the life in his word “The highest Advaitism cannot be brought down to practical life.”¹³ Not only Swami Vivekananda but Advaita Vedanta school also opine the same. According to Advaita Vedanta “*भावाद्वैतं सदा कुर्यात् क्रियाद्वैतं न कर्हिचित्*”¹⁴ That implies Advaita should be practiced in thinking, not in action.

Swami Vivekananda clarified his thought about the Practical Vedanta. In his words “Everything goes to show that this philosophy must be very practical; and later on, when we come to the Bhagavad-Gita — most of you, perhaps, have read it, it is the best commentary we have on the Vedanta philosophy — curiously enough the scene is laid on the battlefield, where Krishna teaches this philosophy to Arjuna; and the doctrine which stands out luminously in every page of the Gita is intense activity, but in the midst of it, eternal calmness. This is the secret of work, to attain which is the goal of the Vedanta.”¹⁵ Swamiji

¹² Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, NOTES TAKEN DOWN IN MADRAS, 1892-93, Vol-6, P-1501

¹³ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete works, Advaita Ashrama Calcutta (1963) Vol. 6, P-122

¹⁴ Tattvapodesh. 87

¹⁵ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, Vol-2 Practical Vedanta Part-1, P-1

said that most of the ancient text are not written in some secret place, so these teachings are applicable in our society. We should apply these teachings with great veneration and importance.

Application of the Vedanta (Advaita) means to always remember the freedom and purity of soul, with this remembrance one has to work with attachment and be calm. By virtue of this one should live a life with happiness. This is called Vedantic attitude or application of Vedanta. If Vedanta is not applied in life then it will be intellectual gymnastics merely. Swamiji says in his lecture delivered in London 10th November 1886 “I have been asked to say something about the practical position of the Vedanta philosophy. As I have told you, theory is very good indeed, but how are we to carry it into practice? If it be absolutely impracticable, no theory is of any value whatever, except as intellectual gymnastics.”¹⁶

Swamiji expressed that Vedanta (Advaita) must be practiced otherwise it will merely be intellectual gymnastics. In everyday life how we think about an action was clarified by Swamiji. But in practice how should we act should be a matter of discussion. Swami Vivekananda developed a new approach of Advaita Vedanta which is called Practical Vedanta or Applied Vedanta. This Vedanta is based on the teachings of his guru Sri Ramakrishna, as I said earlier in this paper. If we try to focus the term ‘*Practical*’ one of the meaning of this term is service towards mankind in relation of Vivekananda’s practical Vedanta. Here I focus on this humanistic approach.

Swami Vivekananda had deep respect for Bhagavat Gita. He used to think that Gita was not written in the forest and it has to be applied to everyday life. He added that Gita is an applied interpretation of Vedanta (Advaita). So on the basis of Gita he used to further explain Vedanta within his time framework. Here I just mention one aphorism of Gita that indicates concern for living beings directly. अव्यक्तोऽयमचिन्त्योऽयमविकार्योऽयमुच्यते | तस्मादेवं विदित्वैनं नानुशोचितुमर्हसि ||¹⁷ means Those holy persons, whose sins have been purged, whose doubts are annihilated, whose minds are disciplined, and who are devoted to the welfare of all beings, attain God and are liberated from material existence. The teachings of Ramakrishna have been depicted to be the same as Gita’s. Swami Vivekananda has described or interpreted it more vividly with poetic expression. In his word

¹⁶ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, Practical Vedanta Part-1, Vol-2, P-291

¹⁷ Sen, Atulchandra, Bhagavat Gita, Chapter-5 Verse-25 and 4, P-274

Brahma hote kit paramanu, Sarvabhute sei premamay,

Man prana arpan karo sakhe, e sabar paye.

Vahurupe sammukhe tomar chhari kotha khunjicha Iswar?

*Jive prem kare jei jan sei jan sevichhe Isvar.*¹⁸

It means God is all pervading, God does not reside only in the shrine but he lives in all living beings. By virtue of this we may apply sincere effort to serve all living beings; by the service we can attain self-realisation and thereby attain ultimate peace. In the case of one's own work it has to be from the view of service, not getting attached with the result of an action, to be free from the desires. The poem reflects the idea of 'siva jnane jiva seva' which indicates that Brahman is all pervading also that this idea is the path of the knowledge of Advaita. By this way one can practice Vedanta after having knowledge of Advaita (*buddhi*). Sankaracharya says this body is a shrine and the resident of the body is soul, this soul is God or *sada siva*. Swami Vivekananda in his lecture at Rameswaram temple on topic of Real worship he says "He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples."¹⁹ This is the key concept of humanity as well as practical Vedanta. Acharya Sankara gives the definition of *jnani* and *sadhu* in his famous book *Vivekachuramani*, his definition is "वसन्तवल्लोकहितं चरन्तः"²⁰, that means, just as spring spreads happiness among all living beings, similarly the knowledgeable or *sadhu* strives to bring about welfare for all of mankind without expecting anything in return. Now I shall share the whole idea which is articulated in some of the lines in Swamiji's writings. His own words: "Look upon every man, woman, and every one as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of His children, blessed you are; do not think too much of yourselves. Blessed you are that that privilege was given to you when others had it not. Do it only as a worship. I should see God in the poor, and it is for my salvation that I go and worship them. The poor and the miserable are for our salvation, so that we may serve the Lord, coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper, and the

¹⁸ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, Vol-6 P-210

¹⁹ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, Vol-3, P-1

²⁰ Sankaracharya, Vivekachuramani, Trans, Vedantananda, Swami, Udbodhan Karyalaya, Sloka: 37, P- 22

sinner! Bold are my words; and let me repeat that it is the greatest privilege in our life that we are allowed to serve the Lord in all these shapes.”²¹ Many times Practical Vedanta is called as Applied Vedanta, it may be understood as ‘*Siva jnane jiva seva*’; this application through service it is now clear. Swamiji repeatedly asks us to feel pain when others are in distress. He asks us to feel unity or oneness as no one of us is separate in nature. Gita appreciates this view of seeing the true equality of all living beings and responding to the joys and sorrows of others as if they were their own. This is the main idea of Practical Vedanta; it should be applied in every action.

In the perspective of Swami Vivekananda, we may try to analyse the main idea of Practical Vedanta or Applied Vedanta, which is Humanism which we may say is applicable to all living beings. It is clear that Vivekananda’s perspective of service and the concept of service laid down in Buddhism and Christianity are completely different. They have their own philosophical standpoint. Swamiji’s thinking is that we have to apply Vedanta in our life because we have the potential to actualise the purpose of human life. Lastly we conclude with his word when he trusted us that we should follow the path that he made for us, Swamiji said “There will be lots of further developments in future. Some portion of it I shall live to work out. And I shall infuse into you fellows various ideas, which you will work out in future. It will not do merely to listen to great principles. You must apply them in the practical field, turn them into constant practice. What will be the good of cramming the high-sounding dicta of the scriptures? You have first to grasp the teachings of the Shastras, and then to work them out in practical life. Do you understand? This is called practical religion.”²²

²¹ Vivekananda, Swami, Complete Works, VEDANTA IN ITS APPLICATION TO INDIAN LIFE, Vol.3, P-7

²² Vivekananda, Swami, CONVERSATIONS AND DIALOGUES, Vol-7, P-2