

Chapter VI

Impact of Vedanta on Radhakrishnan

The intellectual career of Radhakrishnan stretches through a long duration and covers a wide range of reflection. Like most representatives of Hindu reform movement, the starting point of Rādhākṛishnan's personal development as a philosopher and his philosophical standpoint are entrenched in a crisis. According to him this crisis encompasses the decline of religion and lack of harmony threatening the destruction of all spiritual values on the national and international level. Naturally, his thinking centres around the concept of spirit as he sees it embodied and approached in religion and philosophy. His great commitment and appreciation of spiritual values is expressed implicitly or explicitly in such works of his as the youthful and belligerent *Reign of Religion in contemporary India*, a much later work as *Religion and Society*, his *magnum opus*, *An Idealist View of Life*, the theme of which was restated in *Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, right up to his commentarial works of mature years on the *Brahma Sūtra*. His philosophical thinking is put forth, as he claims, to remedy this spiritual crisis.¹ He writes, "The present crisis in human affair is due to a profound crisis in human consciousness, a lapse from the organic wholeness of life. There is a tendency to overlook the spiritual and exalt the intellectual"². He says, "We are in the midst of one of the great

crises in human history, groping for a way out of fear, anxiety and darkness, wandering in search of a pattern in which we can begin life over again”³. Perhaps, this is why, spirit and unity; tradition, history and evolution; truth, reality and intuition; man, soul and Absolute; science, religion and philosophy—these are some of the central conceptions of Radhakrishnan’s thought. The kind of philosophy that he engages in, the sort of large idealistic world-view that he eschews, the ethical and spiritual concerns that he exhibits, incorporate all the essential elements of Vedantic thought; yet these cannot be understood simply from the background of the classical philosophical tradition.

We should keep in mind that compared to his predecessors, Vivekananda and Raja Rammohun Roy, Radhakrishnan occupies a unique position by virtue of the fact that he was trained in academic philosophy and had a professional career as a teacher of philosophy, leader in higher education, and statesman. In order to appreciate his philosophy we need to remember that he came in close proximity to great minds as the poet Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and many front-ranking leaders of the Indian freedom movement. All these coloured his Advaitism. It was not a scholastic understanding of Advaita but a syncretistic Advaita, which incorporated in it a sort of belief in emergent evolution, belief in the spiritual progress in human history and the cause of liberal social morality. This provided the philosophical idealism needed to support the practical idealism that characterized the freedom movement.

Radhakrishnan regards our tradition as the repository of universal truths, but he has the firm conviction that our tradition needs to be continually recreated. In every generation it has to be renewed. In his words, 'Tradition should be a principle not of conservatism but of growth and regeneration.'⁴ This, perhaps, explains the presence of Vedānta as a recurrent theme in his philosophy. He is by no means a blind follower of tradition. He recommends the free use of reason and experience. As he says, 'By the free use of reason and experience we appropriate truth and keep tradition in a continuous process of evolution ... By reinterpreting the past afresh, each generation stamps it with something of its own problems and preoccupations'⁵.

There are problems raised in the *Brahma-sūtra*, e.g., views on cosmology, which are perhaps not essential today. But these views have suggested some ultimate questions of philosophy and religion, which are of value to us even today. That there are generations of commentators on the *Brahma-sūtra* and works have been produced on it independently is self-explanatory. To Radhakrishnan the commentator is not outside the time he represents. "He is a product of his time. He looks at the past from his own point of view"⁶. This applies with special force to the *Brahma-sūtra* but can be extended to classical teaching in general. What leads Radhakrishnan to the *Brahma-sūtra* is basically the spiritual emptiness of our time, induced by technological civilization. When Radhakrishnan looks back at tradition, particularly Vedānta, he has this in mind, namely how far tradition can help

us to get over the crisis of modernity. He had wide and stupendous scholarship in Western philosophy and culture, particularly the Western Idealist tradition. All this is harnessed to the endeavour of presenting Indian thought as embodying the supreme spiritual wisdom of mankind. This current of patriotism and national pride runs through all his writings and speeches.

With these prefatory remarks we would like to focus on one particular aspect of Radhakrishnan's thought, namely, the significance of Vedānta in providing an answer to the problem which plagues man in the modern world. Although Radhakrishnan has written voluminously over the years, in the essentials his answer, to the question is remarkable consistent. The answer he finds in an idealistic view of life. "An idealist view", says Radhakrishnan, 'finds that the universe has meaning, has value. Ideal values are the dynamic forces, the driving power of the universe'⁷. The idealist tradition rests on the fundamental 'inseparability of the highest value from the truly real', and 'endows man with a destiny that is not limited in the sensible world'⁸. The operative ideas of idealism in this sense are a 'truly real' which is 'not limited to the sensible world'. Elsewhere Radhakrishnan writes, "The idealist tradition both in the East and the West has asserted the supremacy of spirit in man"⁹. On this account, philosophies which have a non-idealist conception of the Real, e.g., naturalism, atheism, materialism, humanism, although they may contain valuable insight, come in for stringent criticism in his writings.

Radhakrishnan's definition of idealism cannot be stated in one sentence. In his view this is not problematical : "An idealist view of life is not expressed in any one pattern. It is many-coloured and its forms are varied"¹⁰. The first section of *An Idealist View of Life* is entitled "What is Idealism?" He begins by rejecting two views of "idea". An idea, he says is not a particular mental image. Neither is it a universal notion. He writes :

There is a third sense in which the term 'idea' is used. When we ask with reference to any thing or action, 'What is the idea?' We mean, what is the principal involved in it, what is the meaning or purpose of its being, what is the aim or value of the action? What is it driving at? This idea or value is the operative creative force. An idealist view finds that the universe has meaning, has value. Ideal values are the driving forces, the driving powers of the universe. The world is intelligible only as a system of ends¹¹.

He thus theorises that an idea, ideal or value has teleological efficacy. Incidentally, "idea" and "ideal" are virtually synonymous in Radhakrishnan's usage. The definition of idealism given by P. T. Raju, one of his students, follows closely and helps clarify the nature of Radhakrishnan's idealism. In Raju's words :

We may now define idealism as the theory, which asserts the reality of the ideal, and explains the

world in order to maintain this conception of reality. This conception may be maintained by explaining the world in terms of the ideal reality, or by saying that the imperfect vanishes or is transformed at the level of the perfect¹².

Radhakrishnan's own idealist position is a creative restatement of the basic categories of Advaita Vedānta. In his earlier important works—the two volumes of *Indian Philosophy* and *The Hindu View of Life*, Radhakrishnan expresses his firm faith in the Advaita philosophy. In fact, he consistently interprets Hinduism, other religions and the nature of religion itself from the standpoint of Advaita. Advaita, often referred to by the generic term 'Vedānta', represents the essence of Hinduism. "The germinal conceptions of Hinduism", declares Radhakrishnan, "are contained in the Vedānta standard . . . The Vedānta is not a religion, but religion itself in its most universal and deepest significance"¹³. The Advaita stance is the Hindu stance *par excellence*, and by extension, quintessentially the idealist stance.

The burden of Radhakrishnan's teaching in all its forms is the presence of the spirit in man. Radhakrishnan conceives the spirit not as a substance but as life. "Spirit", he says, "is life, not thing, energy not immobility, something real in itself and by itself, and cannot be compared

to any substance subjective or objective”¹⁴. In *An Idealist View of Life*, he says :

If we are asked to define what the spirit in man is, it would be difficult to give a definite answer. We know it, but we cannot explain it. It is felt everywhere but seen nowhere. It is not the physical body nor the vital organism, the mind or the will, but something which underlies them all and sustains them. It is the basis and background of our being, the universality that cannot be reduced to this or that formula¹⁵.

Spirit is the old theme of the *Upasiṣads* and partly of the great idealists of the world. But Radhakrishnan reinterprets it with special reference to the present world and its needs. For Radhakrishnan, the truly Real is Spirit, alternately called the Absolute, the Unconditioned which underlies all the differentiations of being in our experience. The plurality of being arises out of spirit and must find its consummation in it. In human terms the nature of the Spirit may be described as ‘perfect being, perfect consciousness and perfect freedom, *sat*, *cit* and *ānanda*’¹⁶. In itself the Spirit is already perfect *Saccidānanda*. It is the fullness of Spirit that is progressively manifesting itself through the developments of the world, drawing all things towards their spiritual fulfilment. Man exists on two levels, the finite level of nature and the infinite level of Spirit. At the

deepest or second level, 'the true and ultimate condition of the human being is the divine status'¹⁷, for there is a 'consubstantiality of the spirit in man and God'. He says, "Man always has been a dual being participating in two worlds, the higher, the divine, the free world, and the lower, the natural and the determined in which he is immersed.. "The task", he continues, "which man has to fulfil . . . is to liberate his spirit from the depths of nature, to affirm the spiritual purity and priority of human nature ...". This consubstantiality makes of man an end-in-himself and it is the goal of human existence to realize this oneness with the Spirit. In man's striving to bridge the gulf between nature and supernature lies the transformation and fulfilment of the world. The ultimate goal of man is perfect oneness in the Spirit. It is on account of the presence and operation of the divine principle that the nature of man preserves its unity amidst change, creativity and progress. Radhakrishnan goes further to consider the function of philosophy as providing us with a spiritual rallying centre. He firmly believes that philosophers should be active in nurturing the spirit-life of humanity. He challenges philosophers to change the world and interpret it¹⁸.

At this point we intend to indulge in a little digression which may not be completely besides the point. We may note that Spirit or *Geist* is the central concept in Hegel's philosophico-religious quest too. Radhakrishnan had, as a student, a grade deal of exposure to Hegel's and Hegelian conceptions and thoughts, particularly the British variety of Neo-Hegelianism. And it is not just by accident that the question arises whether

the 'Spirit' in Hegel's philosophy and that in Radhakrishnan's are indeed the same. 'Spirit' is a central term in Christian theologian's vocabulary and it embraces the *logos* tradition of classical Greek philosophy as well. These are not negligible cultural differences. Yet, Radhakrishnan with his deep commitment to Vedānta chooses this key concept of Christian theology and locates it in the *Upaniṣads* and the early *Dharma śāstras*. However we may venture to point to a similarity between the two thinkers in one respect – and this may be no more than a conjecture on our part. Hegel uses the term *Geist* (Spirit or Mind) as the unifying agency. "... mind connotes the living unity among diversity so that the latter becomes living"¹⁹. In Radhakrishnan's writings too we find recurrent allusions to the Spirit as the unifier. The basic idea is that the root of the conflict which we find in the socio-political field and which cause such immense suffering in our present world, lies in the lack of unity in the individual, in society and in the world at large. Attempts have been made, from time to time, to find out principles of unity. But Radhakrishnan is not content with any existing unifier, but insists that only 'Spirit' can give the true kind of unity. In the same fashion as Hegel he speaks of a religion of Spirit.

The realisation of the Spirit in man need not be eschatological. The goal of human life before the final consummation may be achieved. Radhakrishnan is content to refer to it by phrases borrowed from different religious traditions, e.g., the Kingdom of God (from Christianity) or the *Brahmaloka* (from Hinduism). In this state, all conscious individuals, in

harmony with the world, enjoy a mutually loving anxiety-free communion bonded by the presence of God. Referring also to the Buddhistic tradition, he says, “He who lives in *Brahma* shall deceive none, entertain no hatred for anyone and never wish to injure any one through anger. He shall have measureless love for all creatures, even as a mother has for her only child whom she protects with her own life”. That is the way the Buddha describes *Brahmavihāra*²⁰.

So we see that the process by which human beings may further their destiny is called in general spiritual or religious experience. There are two sides of this experience : One is a seeing, a visionary realization of the underlying oneness of all things, the other is an ever-widening, felt integration of diversity. By growing through this process man furthers his own and the world’s destiny. Those who see with increasing clarity, the diverse elements of the world, not least in the mind-body dichotomy of their selves, reveal more or less perfectly the fruits of the Spirit within them: peace, tolerance, wisdom, love, joy, accord, redeeming self-sacrifice, freedom. When we lack this realization – fleeing the spiritual centre – that we succumb to discord, hatred, ignorance misery, selfishness, strife. Spiritual visionaries of the East and the West – the Upanisadic seers, Buddha, Plato, Christ etc. have in their own ways had this vision. It is for us to grow into this experience and to make it accessible to increasing number of people in ever-increasing circles.

Spirituality in its absolutely pure form appears in the Vedantic philosophy of absorption in the eternal *Brahman*. In this highest kind of ineffable and mystical experience, one is utterly free, and therefore, he goes forth into the world to participate in its life, unbound by the constraints either to do so or not to do so. Radhakrishnan cites Samkara to show that in the absorption into *Brahman* when one attains the universality of Spirit, one retains one's individuality 'as a centre of action as long as the cosmic process continues'²¹.

There are readily available scriptural texts like *Brahma Sūtra* which says that as long as persons who have attained release have still an office, *adhikāra*, to fulfil on earth, they will continue on earth even after the attainment of release²². Radhakrishnan in his commentary on the *Brahma Sūtra* speaks of 'office', *adhikāra*, also as a 'mission', which, citing Samkara, he explains, is given by 'the highest Lord'. The mission is shown to be one of a necessity that is made of nothing but freedom, and yet a matter of *Karma*, *prārabdha* that remains loosely attached²³. This is, of course, the basis of the *jīvan-mukta* ideal, whose immense serviceability for the perfection of humanity is all too meagrely grasped or utilized. The promise of such an end, Radhakrishnan affirms, is the meaning of our corporate existence on earth.

The ecstasy of divine realization can tempt one to disregard the secular world. Mystical union can lead to an attitude of other-worldliness. As Radhakrishnan cautions, 'the sudden discovery through religious

experience of the ultimate reality of spirit inclines us sometimes to look upon the world as an illusion²⁴. The same point is made in Radhakrishnan's 'Introduction' to his translation of *The Principal Upanisads*. "The ecstasy of divine union, the bliss of realization tempts one to disregard the world with its imperfection and look upon it as a troubled and unhappy dream²⁵. Indeed, if, as Radhakrishnan believes, human beings have a purpose and destiny and if the world is getting better, then the world cannot be rejected as illusion. It is in contexts such as these that Radhakrishnan reexamines the meaning of *māyā* in the Hindu tradition. We shall confine ourselves to Radhakrishnan's rejection of an interpretation of *māyā* which says that the world is an illusion. If the world is *māyā*, and if *māyā* is interpreted to mean illusion, how could ethical seriousness be possible? If one's interest is directed towards a world other than the world given in the perceptual mode of presentational immediacy, why should one's actions in this world be taken seriously? In his Introduction to his translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Radhakrishnan explains:

It is incorrect to assume that Hindu thought strained excessively after the unattainable and was guilty of indifference to the problems of the world. We cannot loose ourselves in inner piety when the poor die at our doors, naked and hungry. The *Gītā* asks us to live in the world and save it²⁶.

In the translation of the *Gītā* Radhakrishnan insists on the possibility of pursuing spiritual release while acting or working in the world. Liberation or emancipation from this perspective is not simply a matter of withdrawal or retreat but involves the task of transformation or transfiguration affecting human life as a whole. "Liberation is not the isolation of the immortal spirit from the mortal human life but is the transfiguration of the whole man; it is attained not by destroying but by transfiguring the tension of human life"²⁷. The ideal man of the *Gītā* acts in the spirit of *karma-yoga*, though free from personal desires, he works actively on the task of saving and holding the world together and thus on practicing world-solidarity, *lokasamgraha*. Indeed, Radhakrishnan repeatedly speaks of 'perfection of the world', striving for 'a profound co-operative spiritual commonwealth with freedom and harmony as its marks'.

It is clear that Radhakrishnan would not be an illusionist about the status of the world. Radhakrishnan sees no logical necessity in the traditional Advaita Vedānta argument that *Brahman* is the sole reality and that the world is therefore unreal. He writes, "The first argument used in support of the 'illusion' hypothesis is that the *Upanisads* assert the sole reality of Brahman. It follows that the world is unreal"²⁸. Does this really follow? Radhakrishnan emphatically answers in the negative. Such an unqualified proposition is hard to understand according to him. He distinguishes between phenomenality and unreality in the sense of illusory. He contends that the world is phenomenal but not unreal. In support of his

contention he refers to the *Chāndogya* (ii. 2. 26), the *Mūndūkya* (ii. 2. 11), the *Kātha* (ii. 5. 2), the *Taittereya* (iii. 1) and other *Upaniṣads*²⁹. He argues that the reality of the world and the reality of Absolute are radically different. The Absolute has non-created divine reality, all else is dependent, created reality. Radhakrishnan takes up the problem of *māyā* via this inapproach to an understanding of reality split into two ontological levels. He rejects the illusionist interpretation of *māyā*. A careful reader will discover that throughout his writings Radhakrishnan has used the term ‘*māyā*’ in several different senses and in none of these senses is *māyā* illusion. Radhakrishnan summerises the meanings of *māyā* five times in his works cited : *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, pp. 546-47 (appendix I); *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. II, pp. 573-74 (appendix II); *The Bhagavad Gītā*, pp. 42-43 (appendix III); *History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western*, Vol. I, p. 249 (appendix IV) and *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, ed. by P. A. Schilpp, pp. 800-802 (appendix V). Each of these summaries contains six parts. It is therefore reasonable to assert that Radhakrishnan gives a six fold meaning of the term *māyā* although he does not give exactly the same six meanings. In each the meaning of *māyā* is other than illusion³⁰.

With regard to the status of the world *māyā* signifies its phenomenality. Radhakrishnan refers to the phenomenal character of the empirical self and the world answering to it and says that the fragility of the universe is denoted by the word *māyā*. *Māyā* does not mean that the empirical world with the selves in it is an illusion, for the whole effort of

the cosmos is directed to and sustained by the one supreme self, which though distinct from everything is implicated in everything. The mutability and passingness of all things are illustrations of *māyā*. The world has the character of perpetual passing away, while the real is exempt from change. Hence the world depends on the Absolute but the Absolute does not depend on the world. *Māyā* means the one-sided dependence of the world on the Absolute without affecting the integrity of the Absolute in any way. Radhakrishnan thinks that this one-sided dependence is what Samkara means by his example of the rope and the snake.

The doctrine of *māyā* is utilized by Samkara and Radhakrishnan in different ways in connection with the status of the world in their respective schemes of reality. Samkara's *māyā* saves the *Brahman* from duality. Radhakrishnan's '*māyā*' is intended 'to save the world and give to it a real meaning'³¹.

Radhakrishnan undoubtedly subscribes to Samkara's brand of Vedantic thought. He interprets it liberally so as to rub off the rugged edges of *māyāvāda* and acosmism. He makes an effort to give a concrete setting to the Absolute of Samkara which is taken to be Pure Being devoid of attributes. Radhakrishnan presents a two-tier theory of the ultimately Real, one is the Absolute free of all characteristics and the other, a God manifest in the empirical world of man and nature. The absolutistic and theist trends are discernible all through his presentation of the Real, and he moves freely from one position to the other. He says that the contrast between them is not

sharp in the *Upanisads*. In his words, “The impersonality of the Absolute is not its whole significance. The *Upanisads* support divine activity and participation in nature and give us a God which exceeds the mere infinite and the mere finite”³². He further says, “The supra-personal and the personal representations of the real are the Absolute and relative ways of expressing the only reality”³³. Again he says, “The *Upanisads* imply that *Īśvara* is practically one with *Brahman*”³⁴.

The question may arise whether Radhakrishnan stretches the perimeter of Advaita Vedānta beyond recognition. He does not. Traditionally, *Advaita* Vedāntins have used the following logic: *Brahman* is the sole reality; all else is unreal. Radhakrishnan’s contention is that the reality of *Brahman* conceived as the whole includes the reality of the world. Yet, the objection may run, oneness of the *Brahman* and the plurality of the world are incommensurable. The philosophical dream that everything is so related that reality is a single whole is thus shattered. Radhakrishnan would not accept this charge, we apprehend. The characteristic monistic thrust in the apprehension of the Absolute emphasizes the transcendence of the Absolute to make room for the “specifically religious consciousness” in which there is “communion with a higher than ourselves with whom it is impossible for the individual to get assimilated”³⁵.

Supporting Radhakrishnan we may add one further argument in an idiosyncratic manner. The levels of reality announces, we may say, the primary demand and opportunity for creativity. The demand that a radical

discontinuity between bound and boundless consciousness, between the temporal and the timeless, makes upon us is that we acknowledge its implications and be and act accordingly. It makes fully possible our realizing the contents of experience, the given conditions of our being, the everyday constraints of nature and society, to be the material with which we must articulate ourselves and our world, or be utterly lost in it. Either there is nothingness or creativity. Creativity, we believe, always strives toward unique presentations of formed content, whether exhibited aesthetically, epistemically, morally. Being non-ego-centric, yet working with all the materials and conditions of one's own individual being as an historical being, one can become what one ought to become, a creative, loving person.

Metaphysically, in keeping with his own rich and deep philosophical tradition, Radhakrishnan teaches us that Reality is changeless, undifferentiated. It is a fullness of being which knows no distinction between itself and anything else. When we are not fully at one with reality this may lead us to believe that it is a terrible abyss, which swallows up everything into a hollow emptiness or it may be our most vital source of creative play. Creativity is a kind of *māyā*.

But we are deluded only when we take what is created as an ultimate reality. Creativity requires that it be carried out with the understanding that there is another domain of being to which man aspires. Only when we are unattached to the temporal can we rightfully articulate it – and this detachment is consequent upon there being a split in the levels of reality –

the ultimate and the penultimate. Radhakrishnan's Neo-Vedānta convincingly shows this. In large measure, what such a new reading involves is a transplantation of metaphysical teachings from the levels of knowledge or cognition to the domain of metaphor and other literary symbols. This, however, is just a thought of my part. I will move on to my final remarks.

The greatness of Radhakrishnan lies in reinterpreting the Vedānta, with special reference to the present world and its needs. He sets the most desirable goals before us : the unity of all human beings, their harmony with one another and the world in which they live, and each person's growth into that joyous freedom which is the mark of all true religion. Radhakrishnan's vision has a grandeur and magnanimity that inspire and ennoble, and in a world where despair looms large, gives the energetic hope that the goals are within our reach. But it is also a prophetic vision. Again and again, he insists that we face the challenge of a new age of Spirit and that we must meet this challenge with unshakeable faith in human nature, for it is the Spirit within us that has guided us to this threshold.