

Introduction

Of all the nine systems of Hindu Philosophy, Vedānta has come to enjoy a wide-range broadcast and paramount importance in modern Indian thought. This may be looked upon as a significant cultural phenomenon demanding serious reflection. Accordingly, my intention in the context of this thesis is to seek an answer to the question : What does Vedānta signify to a philosopher of modern India? There have been compendia like Mādhavācārya's *Sarvadars'ana – Saṁgraha*¹ and Haribhadra Suri's *Saḍdars'anasamuccaya*². These contain impartial and descriptive accounts of diverse philosophical persuasions. In these two works equal weightage has been accorded to all the philosophical systems, without any special preference being given to Vedānta. The authors of these compendia have sought to find out common points that bind the systems together even though the respective ontological and epistemological positions of these systems are diverse and different. For example, Madhavācārya has said that except the Cārvākas all the rest of the philosophies declare *vairāgya* as something desirable. Haribhadra Suri has bestowed equal importance upon all the six systems of thought by calling them all *dars'anas*, as these systems differ only in respect of their deities.³ Thus, according to Haribhadra Suri Buddha is the deity of Bouddha *dars'ana*, Lord Siva is the deity of the Naiyāyikas and so on.⁴ Suri has dispensed with the āstika/nāstika distinction.

It has been, of course, a cultural fact that these systems of thought, at least in medieval times, were distributed all over India. In point of fact these systems enjoyed territorial patronage. For instance, the centres for Jaina thought lay in Western India, whereas the schools of Vedānta originated mostly in the south and Nyāya enjoyed popularity from Mithila eastwards.

If we reflect on the cultural scenario of the nineteenth century Bengal, we find Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, standing at the frontier of two cultures—those of orthodox Hindu and modern Bengalee. His religious thought did not contain any reference to *Vedānta Sūtra* or *Bhāṣya*. The concept of a qualityless *Brahman* had little appeal for Bankim. This exclusion of the Vedānta from Bankim's writings poses a difficult problem for us. True, he never completed his works on religion. Even if that ever happened, it is doubtful whether interpretation of, or commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtra* would have had an important place in it. However, Bankimchandra did reveal an inclination for Vedānta by way of his interpretation of the *Gītā* (which, however, remained unfinished), emphasising the *Karma*-aspect, rather than *jñāna* or *bhakti*. The interesting fact is that Bankimchandra who was very anxious about the intellectual achievements of Bengal had mentioned the culture of Nyāya in Bengal. He did not mention Vedānta. In his own words:

Along with... poetic literature, Bengal was developing within itself two other systems which were the peculiar properties of the

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... . The Bengali ... had not lost his acuteness of intellect⁵.

Bankimchandra's reverence and adoration for Nyāya was not unfounded. In point of fact, the extent of popularity this highly sophisticated mode of thought enjoyed in Bengal can be had from a report on the state of education in Bengal during the early part of the nineteenth century. Ward, the English missionary, who made the survey, stated in his report that while more than three hundred students were enrolled for the study of Nyāya, the number of students in Vedānta, Sāmkhya and Mīmāṃsā was a meagre five or six.⁶

This fact appears to be very significant, because Rammohun Roy who is said to be the father of modern age or the father of modern India, leaned heavily on Tantra and Vedānta.⁷ Rammohun Roy's contemporaries⁸ even suspected that the *Brahma Sūtra* which Rammohun translated into Bengali with Samkara's commentary was a Sanskrit work of Rammohun himself. Hence the question could be asked as to why should Rammohun who studied at Varanasi picked up Vedānta?

Decades later Vivekananda highlighted in the United States the glory and the significance of Vedānta. It is a historical fact that his Guru was initiated by a mendicant of the Puri-Order founded by Samkaracarya. This does not, however, sufficiently clarify why should Vivekananda uphold the

cause of Vedānta? But he did. From Vivekananda or even before him from Rammohun Roy to Radhakrishnan Vedānta has reigned supreme as a cultural force in modern Indian thought. This emphasis on Vedānta as a source of inspiration to the exclusion of texts dealing with the canons of sound argument or with the criteria governing rational assent, or with ground or philosophy of language needs explanation.

It is a fact worth-noticing that K. C. Bhattacharya writing in the preface to his 'The Advaita and its Spiritual Significance'⁹ has made two significant remarks :

- (1) That of all systems of thought relevant among the Hindus, Vedānta alone holds the spiritual depths that are possible for man to follow.
- (2) Vedānta is not a system of thought created for 'academic philosophy-mongers', but for all who are interested in enjoying an aesthetic view of life and existence.

If what K. C. Bhattacharya says is true, which I believe is the case, then it is implied that it is not for nothing that Vedānta came to command widest possible appeal for the nation under the British rule.

According to Radhakrishnan Indian Philosophy is "essentially spiritual" dominated by the spiritual motive, stimulated by the problems of religious, subjective, speculative and synthetic nature. "The whole course of

Hindu Philosophy”, he says, “is a continuous affirmation of the truth that insight into reality does not come through analytical intellect.” His own antipathy toward logic is grounded in his belief that logic has nothing to do with the real purpose of philosophy, namely the attainment of spiritual insight. In his words :

With its profound sense of spiritual reality brooding over the world of our ordinary experience, Indian thought may perhaps wean us moderns from a too exclusive preoccupation with secular life or the temporary formulations in which logical thought has too often sought to imprison spiritual aspirations.¹⁰

Again,

Logical knowledge is comparable to a finger which points to the object and disappears when the object is seen. True knowledge is awareness, a perception of this identity with the supreme, a clear-sighted intuition.¹¹

It is both remarkable and significant that someone as well-acquainted with the original sources as Radhakrishnan should propound such a view of Indian thought. The promotion of texts whose theme is the introspective methodology underlying what was called the science of soul (*ātmavidyā*) is,

to my mind, a matter of deliberate choice. The choice or selection was to a great extent, a product of the colonized Indian intellectual struggle for an indigenous, non-European identity. The Indian nationalist movement attempted to find in India's past something radically non-European with which to confront the colonial intrusion. What the protagonists found was a Vedānta system grounded in certain fundamental *Upanisadic* texts.

Tapan Roychaudhuri, the Oxford historian, in his study of nineteenth century Bengali attitude captures this mood in the following observation :

The emerging national consciousness adopted the heritage of the Hindu culture as the focus of its identity and glorified in the Hindu past. A selective veneration for elements of the Hindu culture was the cultural bed-rock of the nationalist awareness.¹²

Indeed, from Rammohun to Radhakrishnan Vedānta has stood for a message, a case of arousal from centuries' old stupor and torpidity. It is through and in terms of Vedānta that the hibernating psyche of India awakens to meet the challenge of the West, a mighty civilization that had reached our shores in the guise of a religion, namely Christianity. Islam had already been there, but its presence was largely ignored, but Christianity had colonized us. In Rammohun and Vivekananda we find a sort of counter attack, a challenge taken up, in a virile manner to defend the spiritual

heritage, and to give a reply to the vilifications of the Hindu ideals of life and practice by Christian missionaries. Rammohun's pamphlets against the missionaries of Christianity are landmarks of India's self-assertion. It was no less a war of independence fought on the intellectual plane.

What was of moment was that the entire reaffirmation was articulated in terms of a philosophy which enables one to hold one's head high on the conviction that one is non-different from or one with the Reality itself. All the philosophers of our discussion had taken this to be an invigorating thesis which humbled all that was paltry, outworn and degenerating in a colonial existence.

To make our point clear let us look to what Karl Marx has said about Kant's 'good will'.¹³ This term belongs to the domain of commerce. Shops are said to have good will, even though they are turned over for good will. This transfer from the realm of commerce to that of moral philosophy is really interesting. If we look at the history of Europe in Kant's time, we find that Germany was fragmented into small kingdoms. The neighbouring Holland traded successfully in the far east. France was the land of revolution. It has given to the world the *mantra* of revolution. Napoleonic France became the hope of mankind. England was developing her industries by leaps and bounds and was on the way of founding an empire in India. Compared to these achievements Germany was nothing, not even a twinkle in the firmament of the European political scene. In the *German Ideology*.¹⁴ Marx goes on to remark that by propounding a deontological,

non-consequentialist theory of ethics, Kant was acting as an unconscious tool of history. An ethics based on the notion of the 'good will' wrested a cultural boosting for Germany as a whole. The German people thought that even though they were denied the fortunes of nature and life, they had 'good will' to fall back upon. If Marx's sociological analysis of Kant's ethics is true, then can we not interpret the role played by Vedānta as boosting the self-respect of a colonized people in India?

To my mind what Marx said about Kant, applies in no less a manner to our philosophers. They sought to bring back our self-esteem through Vedānta and again to have one of Marx's famous thesis to our advantage, our philosophers did not simply interpret the world, but their task was to change it. All of them wanted to change the Indian social conditions in the light of the highest spiritual knowledge. Thus the reason that Indian thought came to be synonymous with the speculative, spiritual Vedānta lies in the Indian intellectual quest for an Indian critique of colonial social policies within the framework of an emergent national movement.

Let us consider the Vedantic word '*mokṣa*'. This term is to be distinguished from such other terms like '*mukti*', '*Kaivalya*' and '*nirvana*'. It is to be noted that these terms are not freely interchangeable and they bear connotations derived from respective philosophical systems in which they are employed. The term '*mokṣa*' is unique in the fact that it is still in use in the Hindu almanac for solar and lunar eclipses. The sun or the moon is said to undergo the stage of *grahaṇa* when its glory is diminished by being

overcast by a shadow: '*mokṣa*' connotes a restoration of the original, glorious nature of the sun or the moon. This mode of explanation of the astronomical phenomenon of eclipse corresponds exactly to the concept of *adhyāsa*, and the consequent removal of the *āvaraṇa*. This line of thinking may be used as a metaphor for understanding the loss and the recovery of self under colonialism. A colonized people loses glory, their history is distorted, they are humiliated and suffer indignities. Culturally they stand in need of a message philosophically potent enough to assure them that their cultural and national eclipse is but a temporary phenomenon and it should be possible for them to regain their lost glorious heritage.

It will be true to say that Vedānta played the crucial role of cultural rendition by instilling a faith in the mind of the people so that they can win their place of pride among the nations of the world. I do not mean to suggest that the culture of other system of philosophy was stalled in India in modern times. These were being carried on in academic fashion but they hardly touched the main stream of our national life. On the other hand, our leaders of thought who have been culturally effective have attached greater importance to Vedānta. The reason, as we have stated a little earlier, may lie in the fact that Vedānta somehow was taken to be potent enough in instilling a faith in our original glorious nature. It lightened the burden of slavery. Moreover, reformist movements in respect of social traditions and customs needed the premise of human unity and oneness of mankind. Such a premise was also provided for by Vedānta. To add to these considerations,

it was possible on the basis of Vedantic tradition to align India with the greater traditions of mysticism and spiritualism throughout the world. To put the matter in short, Vedānta came in handy as the *philosophie perrenis* on which modern India could stand and find solace in spite of being colonized by a foreign power.

At this juncture a historical postscript may appear in order. It is that the need to rediscover our heritage became all the more acute after the Sepoy Mutiny. The suppression of the Revolt of 1857 initiated a new chapter in the history of British administration in India. The new system laid down by an Act passed by the British Parliament in 1858 brought the end to the East India Company's rule in India, and the British Government took over complete and direct control of the administration of India. The intentions of the British Government in India were incorporated in the famous Queen's Proclamation (1st November, 1858). It promised the principle of religious toleration and assured that no distinction would be made on grounds of race and creed in public service. The proclamation disclaimed any intention of extending territories in India. It also promised to pay due regard to the ancient rights and customs of the Indian people, and to follow a policy of justice and benevolence. The assurance given by the British Government raised high hopes amongst all classes of the Indian people. The middle class and the educated young Indians thought that new opportunities for their advancement would be opened. But in reality the new administration aimed at furthering the cause of British imperialism rather

than the advancement of the Indian people. It became clear in course of Indo-Afghan and Indo-Burmese Wars that the British Government was utilizing Indian resources for imperialistic intentions.

The promise to pay due regard to the ancient customs and usages degenerated into a policy of perpetuating obsolete social mores in India. The new administration aimed at the preservation of the old social stratifications, and saw to it that reforms could start only on Indian initiative. The Queen's proclamation came to appear hollow to the Indians and the new administration came as a shock to the Indian mind. The resentment of the people ultimately found its expression in the growth of national consciousness and organized political movement against the British.

We know that as early as 1827 British apathy to social reforms in India led to movements pioneered by Rammohun Roy by founding the *Brāhma Samāj*. Under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen the movement assumed an all India character. The *Veda Samāj* was established in Madras in 1864, and the *Prārthana Samāj* in Bombay in 1866. When R. G. Bhandarkar joined the *Prārthana Samāj* the movement gathered momentum and the Indian National Social Congress was held in 1887. Dayananda Saraswati founded the *Ārya Samāj* with its slogan, 'Back to the Vedas'. Contemporaneously, Swami Vivekananda initiated a sort of religious rethinking in line with his mentor Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan introduced reforms among the Muslim community by

criticizing the narrow interpretation of the *Quran* and suggesting social reforms. As educated Indians came to be familiar with the ideas of democracy and nationalism of the West and the political thoughts of Voltaire, Rousseau and Thomas Paine, a new political consciousness disclosed itself on the mental horizon of the Indians. Ironical as it is, Indian's exposure to European thought and practices ushered in an awakening—critical of authority, of degrading and uncivilizing social customs. This awakening, a *renaissance*, as it were, in the shape of a regained Indian confidence incorporated a re-looking at and reinterpretation of India's own tradition of spirituality, particularly the spiritual monism of Vedānta. For, the spiritualism of the weak and suppressed people may articulate or keep alive the values of a non-oppressive world better than the ultra-materialism of those who live in visionless worlds.

To wind up, we intend to clarify what we propose to mean by terms such as 'Vedānta' and 'modern India' in the present context. There is no simple answer to the question: what is Vedānta? It means so many things. In this introductory portion we go by its customary sense. The matter will be taken up for detailed discussion in Chapter I. By 'Vedānta' is ordinarily meant the *Brahmasūtras* as non-dualistically interpreted by Samkara. This meaning is all right on the colloquial plane. But literally speaking 'Vedānta' signifies the concluding portions of the *Vedas*, i.e., the *Upaniṣads*, the *Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtra*. The *Upaniṣads* are the *S'rūtiprasthāna*, the *Gītā* is the *Smṛitiprasthāna*, while the *Brahmasūtras* comprise the

Nyāyaprasthāna of Vedānta. The commentaries on the *Sūtras* and the *prasthanās* are rendered in terms of non-dualist humanities. In this sense, Vedānta synthesised all the *Ātmabādi* schools under one banner. In course of years there emerged other schools of Vedānta, as those of Rāmānuja, Mādhava, Nimbārka and others. In the present context it will not do to say that the term 'Vedānta' denotes the summation of the highest spiritual awarenesses that may be found in the *Vedas*. This would be a tautology hardly bearing a mention. As we have stated earlier, the Vedānta carried a message so to say, and acted as a potent force to uphold national esteem and self consciousness in the psyche of a colonized people.

By 'modern India' we understand the nineteenth century India, particularly the later half of it, which was characterized by a reawakening in almost every spheres of national life—social, political and cultural. The guiding spirit of this reawakening was a sense of unity, which sought to bind plurality and multiplicity. It is to be noted that many of the spokesmen of modernity were very much inspired by humanistic ideals whether in the construction of a new society, a new nation or a new race. Vedānta supplied the philosophical foundation for this humanism. The realization of *Brahman* is the realization of *Ātman*, the self that makes possible the union of oneself with all others. Vedānta's linkage with modern India lies in that it supplied the cultural force, which helped the Indian society to survive the colonial experience with a redefinition of its selfhood.

While we proposed to keep our final remarks for the concluding proportion of this thesis, there is one singular fact I beg to submit. All our philosophers, in this context, have been of the *advaitic* inclination. Whether dualists, qualified or not would have performed the same historical role is another question, and I have not engaged myself to examine the issue in the present context. But it remains a historical truth that much of the modernization of India has been effected by *advaita* Vedānta. Sociologists and historians would do well to look for the reasons. But the fact remains we have our great modernisers in the ideas of the philosophers we have attempted to discuss as best as we could.

One of the distinguishing features of Vedānta in modern India is its non-political character, and further, no one school is strictly appealed to. Ramakrishna's metaphor of the snake, coiled and hibernating or moving, for the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* aspects of *Brahman* is quite telling. The snake remains the same. Modern Indian mind has sought to unify the schools of Vedānta, far less to counter the arguments of other schools.