

Chapter III

Vivekananda and the Practical Vedānta

There is a gap of more than sixty years between the death of Rammohun Roy and the Chicago lecture of Vivekananda. The arch, however, which spanned the time gap and touches the two men, was Vedānta. Rammohun Roy intended to transform the pure philosophy of *advaita* into a philosophy of life. Through his syncretism, it became a living faith. Vivekananda accentuated this process further.

The process of integrating the speculative philosophy of Vedānta to the social context at large was greatly intensified under the influence of the national ideology at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The major social and political leaders while working out the theoretical basis for the ways and means of the liberation struggle paid much attention to religious and ethical problems as well. Idealistic religious traditions were reconsidered and re-appropriated. The aims and tasks facing the Indian people at this stage of its historical development called for a new orientation of traditional values and principles. Notably the most creative representative of this stream was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-94) whose novels and essays were attempts to marginalize the earlier models of critical Hinduism, and suggested a new framework of political culture.¹ Bankim Chandra, however, was not interested in Vedānta. But the

temper of national self-consciousness, which was projected into the Hindu past, was seldom missing in his writings.² Vivekanandar shared and developed further this consciousness. But there is a difference. Bankim's religious discourses were built on the *Mahābhārata* and the five *Purāṇas*. Vivekananda entered the scene when the colonial culture had made deeper inroads into Indian society. He inclined himself more to Rammohun Roy than to Bankim Chandra. Like the Raja, while accepting the texts and symbols of Hinduism, Vivekananda sought to blend them with elements of nationalism, socialism, religion and morality.

Referring to Rammohun's works Sri Aurobindo said that many of its impulse and many of its influences continued. In his words :

The reaction marked the beginning of a more subtle assimilation and fusing, for in vindicating ancient things it was obliged to do so in a way that would at once meet and satisfy the old mentality and the new, the traditional and the critical mind. This in itself involved no mere return but consciously or unconsciously hastened a restatement. It sought to arrive at the spirit of the ancient culture and, while respecting its forms and often preserving them to revivify, yet did not hesitate also to remould, to reject the outworn and to admit whatever new motive was assimilable to the old spirituality. Of

this freer dealing with past and present, this preservation by reconstruction, Vivekananda was in his lifetime the leading exemplar and the powerful exponent”.³

Vivekananda called himself a neo-Vedantin and his philosophy practical Vedānta. It seems evident that Vivekananda takes the concept of Vedānta in a wide sense as founded on the basic insights expressed in the *Upaniṣads* though his main focus was on the monistic form of it formulated by Samkara. He accepts Samkara’s *advaita* as the essence of Vedānta. About the Vedānta he says, “When materialism came to the fore ... then Sankaracharya revived the Vedānta philosophy. In the *Upaniṣads* the arguments are often very obscure ... By Sankaracharya the intellectual side was laid stress upon. He rationalized and placed before men the wonderful coherent system of Advaita ...”⁴.

Practical Vedānta, according to Vivekananda is Vedānta in practice. He holds, “theory is very good indeed, but how are we to carry it into practice? The Vedānta, therefore, as a religion must be intensely practical. We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives. And not only this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedānta teaches oneness – one life throughout”⁵.

At least three points have been made in this passage, (1) Theory is very good but without practice it is incomplete. (2) Practical

Vedānta reaches out to every part of our lives. (3) Practical Vedānta teaches oneness and consequently the differences between religion and the life of the world is unjustified.

Let us try to delve more deeply into the meaning of the expression 'practical Vedānta'. 'Practical' has the connotation of *acting for the production of some ends or just performing the action well*. In none of these sense is Vedānta practical. Nowhere does Sankara present the *Ātman-Brahman* as a goal to be reached. On the contrary, his approach is that the *Ātman-Brahman* is not something to be acquired since it is one's own nature, and one's own nature is not something that can be attained. This approach has its corollary in his method of negation : the removal of superimposition in order to discover what is already there although concealed, as it were, by all sorts of false identification based ultimately upon the ignorance of who we really are. Such an approach is different from that of *nirvikālpasamādhī*, which one has to achieve to gain liberation.

In his discussion of the role of action in the matter of liberation. Sankara specifies that actions can only be of four kinds: an action can produce something or it can modify a thing, or it can be used to obtain something or to purify it⁶. He takes up each kind action in turn and argues that liberation is not something that can be either produced, attached, modified or purified by any action whether physical, oral or mental. His main argument is that if liberation is an effect of some kind of action, then liberation would have a beginning and would be time-bound and hence non-

eternal, and that such a consequence would go against the whole tradition that teaches that liberation is eternal. Sankara's view is that liberation is nothing but being *Brahman* and that is one's inherent condition, although it is obscured by ignorance. He says that the whole purpose of the *Upaniṣads* is just to remove duality, which is a construct of ignorance⁷. There is no further need to produce oneness with *Brahman* because that already exists. Sankara's frequent use of the phrase 'na heya, na upādeya (cannot be rejected or accepted)⁸ along with the word *Ātman* indicates that the self cannot be made the object of any kind of action whatsoever. Sankara has summarized all this in his commentary on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.⁹ On the *Advaita Vedānta* then, only knowledge, *Jñāna*, can remove ignorance – no amount of practice can. The seemingly paradoxical nature of the claim is rather this : a purely theoretical cognition will lead to the highest practical interest.

Speaking summarily Samkara is ontologically committed to the reality of the *Brahman* and is epistemologically skeptical of the reality of the empirical incidence of the objects of perception. That is to say, for Samkara, the general problem of philosophy consists in the attempt at determining the relationship between *Brahman* on the one hand, and *Jagat* on the other. In other words, the *Brahma-Jagat* relationship was for Samkara the problem of one and many. As a consequence the concept of practical reason is null for him. In his commentary, he categorically asserts that *jñānāt mukti, na karma sammuccayād*.

Although Vivekananda declares himself to be a *Vedantin*, he is so with a difference. He employs the terms *mithyā*, *advaita*, *mokṣa*, *māyā* etc. from Vedānta but uses them differently or we may say persuasively defines them. He uses the word *Mithya* in a special sense to mean that the world cannot have an absolute or fixed status. It really means the deification of the world, giving up the world as it appears to us and knowing what it really is. Similarly he interprets *māyā* as a simple statement of fact about what we are and what we see around us. The world of experience oscillates between freedom and bondage, knowledge and ignorance, love and passion, reality and unreality. This character of *māyā* involving contradiction of opposites is a statement of the fact of this universe. Similarly, he undertakes a hermeneutics of the term *advaita* as unity. He says ‘... the Vedānta teaches oneness-one life throughout’. We have already referred to that. This does imply that for Vivekananda, *advaita* is a sort of concrete universal and not an abstract unity as Samkara’s *Brahman*. It is abstract in the sense that nothing real in the ordinary sense corresponds to it. The manifold things and persons of commonsense are not the *parināma* of *Brahman* changing into the world. The unity that Vivekananda has in mind is an ideal, which is present potentially in the multiplicity of things and persons. The striving for unity is a process of self-realisation in which something comes to be that which it has in it to be. We can say that Vivekananda is never so preoccupied with the relationship of *Brahman* and *Jagat* in the manner of Samkara nor is the practical reason null for him. He asks us to understand that “... Vedānta though it is intensely practical, is always so in the sense of

the ideal. The ideal is that you are divine, ‘Thou art That’.¹⁰ The point to be noted that this Vedantic ideal is not a mere ideal but is also reality, so it can be realized by knowing the truth; it is, therefore, practical – meaning that an ideal is practical if it can be actualized *a la* Kant’s dictum ‘Ought implies can’.

Apropos of his hermeneutics of *advaita* as unity, Vivekananda’s main concern is a social translation of the notion. His motivation is a religious one. It is religious in the sense that he accepts religious pluralism as a fact, while looking for the highest common factor (HCF) of all the religions. He says, ‘Religion is one, while there are religions’. Mathematically speaking, if the factors are not real, the highest common factor cannot be valid. Hence the reality of the religions implies the highest common factor, that all religions are partially true, but none false. The partial truth of the variety of faiths implies that there are as many models of good life as people are there. And in so far as they are models of good life, it is necessary that they must not meet in conflict. Unity or *advaita* for Vivekananda is a regulative notion both for religious pluralism and social cohesion of divergent forces. The domain of the relative, the diversity or the variety is what obtains and is given. The unity is to be looked for, invoked as though it informed the empirically diverse. If the alleged unity were empirically real, there would not be any need to exhort us to live by the principle of unity. The unity is then transcendently ideal. Thus Vivekananda explicates the principle of unity. In his words, “The Eastern

mind could not rest satisfied till it had found the goal, which is the end sought by all humanity, namely unity".¹¹

The truth of religion may be variously interpreted by different religions, but they are all interpretations of the same truth. The basic idea of the Vedantin is that we must allow infinite variations in religious thought, and not try to bring everybody to the same opinion, because the goal is the same. India has witnessed the rise of many philosophies and systems and sects. "But the Vedānta philosophy stands at the background of all these various sects, ..." ¹². That is because Vedānta lays down the principle, "that man is divine, that all this which we see around us is the outcome of that divinity, that all that which we see around us is the outcome of the consciousness of the divine"¹³.

Vivekananda did not fail to see that the little word 'in' in unity in variety is big enough to contain a metaphor so poignantly expressed by the poetic language of the Vedic sage, "As so many rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down, crooked or straight, and at last come into the ocean – so, all the various creeds and religions taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come unto Thee".¹⁴ The force of the argument here is founded upon the model of variation in organic life, that variation is something natural.

It is plain from the above considerations that when Vivekananda characterizes Vedānta as religion, he does not mean any sectarian, creed-

based, institutionalized religion. Religions provide ideals, higher goals of life. If one has faith in such an ideal, it will encompass one's whole life. For carrying it out in practice, the distinctions between private life and public life, life at home and life at the place of work, secular life and so-called religious life etc. would be irrelevant and should be transcended. If there be such a thing as total goodness or freedom or wisdom, can it be confined to one segregated segment of one's life and debarred from others? In such characterization of religion one can hardly separate religion from ethics. Indeed, the mainspring of Vedantin religion, as Vivekananda saw it, is morality. Morality is practical. It has to do with how we are to act in relation to other members of society. Morality is nothing other than the extension of our self. Various theories have been proposed in the East and the West regarding what should be the basis of morality. Vivekananda finds it in the philosophical anthropology shaped by the *Vedantin* insight that man is divine. As he says, "... there is no difference between man and man essentially, all being alike divine"¹⁵. He says again, "Consciously or unconsciously, every man is trying to unfold that divinity". Still again he tells us "... all that we call ethics and morality and doing good to others is also nothing but the manifestation of this oneness"¹⁶. This reiteration of oneness which is but another name for love and sympathy, is the basis of ethics and morality. This is precisely what is conveyed succinctly in the celebrated Vedantic aphorism, *Tat tvam asi*, "that thou art".

In the course of his first lecture on “Practical Vedānta” he insists not only on the oneness of all beings, that differences in this world are one of degree and not of kind, but what is more important, that “... in all our actions we have to judge whether it is making for diversity or for oneness”¹⁷. Again, “Everything that makes for oneness is truth. Love is truth and hatred is false, because hatred makes for multiplicity ... Love binds, love makes for that oneness”¹⁸. Thus Vivekananda gives what may be called a deduction of morality from the Vedāntic thesis of the oneness of all beings.

There is a close parallel between Kant’s categorical imperative and Vivekananda’s supreme ethical principle. Kant’s principle requires that the principle of your action should be universalizable. “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become a universal law”. That means you ought to do only that which at the same time you can also will that others do. This principle of universalizability excludes any action, which the agent claims only he can do whereby he claims himself to be an exception. This principle shows that we are all members of the kingdom of ends. But the Kantian principle does not require the stronger metaphysical commitment that we are at bottom one. Vivekananda claims much more. Since on the Vedānta thesis we are all already – though potentially one, the goal of moral life should be to love everyone, develop this potentiality to the maximum – in the long run, to ‘realize’ the oneness of all beings. Not only that. We must also make others realise they are potentially divine. Any

course of action that which promotes this goal is morally right, any course of action, which hinders this goal is not morally right.

By calling attention to the divinity implicit in man, Vivekananda is not speaking of striving to realize it and to make it manifest for oneself only. He is clearly exhorting us to give up our small selves. This little personalized self is the cause of all misery. It is equally our duty to help to bring out the divine nature of man in such a way that he can feel himself as one with the human community. The potential divinity and the moral values of rightness and goodness coincide. The realization of potential divinity entails taking a moral standpoint. To say that one is aware of his divinity and yet does not act accordingly on the moral plane means either he does not understand the meaning of 'potential divinity' or is not aware of its presence. And we all know that the core of Vivekananda's missionary activity is to rouse the hearts of men to make them aware of the glory in their souls, that he is a free being. His subjugation is a temporary eclipse of this freedom. The preaching of *advaita* is to urge every soul to awake from this hypnotism of weakness to assert themselves.

The Vedantic concept of *ānanda*, bliss, which is an ontological concept, is made equivalent to freedom, a moral concept. This signifies a bridge between an ontological theory and a theory of action. Advaita monism has a persuasive function in Vivekananda's thought. He takes help of this to arouse the drooping hearts of the Indian youth. The identity of the one and the many serves in his hand as a mighty weapon to dispel the

inactivity and ignorance that was hanging heavily on them. He feels that the traditional Hindu belief in *mokṣa* as a kind of personal liberation or salvation is really based on selfishness and constitutes surrender to the private self. Salvation is of no consequence if there is no harmony between the individual and the society. Herein comes the urge for the eradication of poverty, his criticism of the caste system, backwardness of women and religious intolerance. He says, "Remember that the nation lives in the cottage. But alas! nobody did anything for them". Service to man; *naranārāyana* is better for him than quiescent meditation. He is aware that we cannot talk of religious harmony or moral regeneration without intervening into the social processes. The novelty of Vivekananda is to have attempted a reconciliation of the lofty metaphysics of Vedānta with the demands of individual and society. Before we conclude we want to draw critical attention to a couple of points. The first concerns the dialectics of the ideal and the real. If the ideal is also real, it makes no sense to make that ideal a practical goal. Ordinarily, if the ideal is removed from the real, one expects that it makes sense to make that ideal a practical goal. The goal, let us assume, is capable of being realized. Then it is a truly practical goal. But what guarantee is there that it *can* be realized? Here, Vedānta assures us, it can be realized because I am in truth, that.

Here a paradox arises. If the ideal is already real, then it does not enjoin a genuine ought. The only moral obligation is to know what is real. But whether action follows from knowledge gives rise to a problem. On the

other hand, if the ideal and reality fall apart, then also there is a doubt whether ideal can be realized or it is a mere ideal, an idle ideal. Thus a paradox is generated. The solution from Vivekananda's standpoint would be, although the ideal is real, it is potentially so, not in actuality. This is what Vivekananda says, '... all differences in the world are of degree, and not of kind ...'¹⁹. In that case we have a genuine imperative addressed to us and to the world at large, namely, develop your potentiality to the highest degree. In Vivekananda's words, 'Manifest your self in a high degree'. But such an interpretation of Vedānta amounts to a radical departure from the classical *Advaita*.

Against the above deduction of the ethical from a supreme metaphysical principle, we may mention two objections. The first of them, pressed by Hegel against Kantian ethics, would run like this : it already presupposes that a system of ethical laws, rules and principles is already to the community, so that at most the highest principle can only serve as a *test* of the given rules and those which pass the test shall be admitted into the 'higher' morality. And the 'test' can apply only to some general maxims such as 'love all beings' and 'hate none'. What about such maxims as 'Respect your parents'. 'Be loyal to your family and friends'? It would seem that only the most general moral precepts claiming validity for all under all circumstances pass the test of promoting the sense of oneness. But morals require many other subordinate maxims and any philosophical deduction of these, or even testing is not possible. There must be in the

ethics of a community a sort of 'practical rationality' so that one need not have to back up every moral rule by some higher rational principle. This is why, if we may say so, Vivekananda's position appears rather ambiguous. It is as much Vedānta becoming practical and practice becoming Vedāntic..

The second question that arises is :do loving the other, unselfishness, charity, and such virtues presuppose the thesis of oneness of all beings? Does not loving require that the other be respected as a genuine other? To such an objection, it may be replied that clearly Vivekananda is speaking about 'love' in a sense that is very different from the sense in which one usually speaks of love. His love is not the love of an other-ego, but is a kind of love that grows and is sustained by a sense of unity. All that we can say is in love the 'I' and the 'non-I' are united. Perhaps the above queries are not very satisfactorily dealt with. But queries and needs for interpretations will persist for, every great work and great man will continue to provoke human mind by its sheerest depth and sublimity. Let the dialogue go on, for there is no finality in philosophy, nor it should be desirable.