CHAPTER - 13

The Practical Vedānta of Śvāmi Vivēkānanda

The new profile given to the ancient Vedānta by Śvāmi Vivēkānanda has come to be known as Neo-Vedānta, which in a very important and distinguishing sense emphasizes practicalism in religion. This is a very important contribution of Śvāmi Vivēkānanda. He showed the vista of a sunlit land of glory and godly perfection of man. It was Śvāmi Vivēkānanda's clarion call that left an indelible impression on the minds of all alike. His words give not only a direction and inspiration but also generate hope and implant deep faith in all the trials and tribulations of life.

To express the profound uniqueness of Śvāmi Vivēkānanda's Practical Vedānta, Sister Nivedita says, "It is this which adds its growing significance to one Master's life, for here he becomes the meeting point, not only of East and West, but also of past and future. If the many and one be indeed the same reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realisation. No distinction, henceforth between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion."

"Religion", for Śvāmi Vivēkānanda, is synonymous with "Universalism" of the spirit and it is not until religious

conceptions have attained to this universalism that religion is fully realized. It was Swāmi Vivēkānanda's firm belief that religion is a matter for the future far more than for the past. It is only when we come to the real, spiritual, and universal concept that religion will become real and living, it will come to our very nature, live in our every moment, penetrate every pore of our society, and be infinitely more a power for good than it has ever been before. And such a religion he believed existed in the Advaita Vedānta of India.

To bring out his ideas on the reinterpretation of Hinduism in the light of practicality, an excerpt from a letter dated 7th February 1896 says, "The abstract Advaita must become living poetic in everyday life; out of the hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms, and out of bewildering Yōgism must come the most scientific and practical psychology and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. This is my life's work.

According to Swāmi Vivēkānanda, the Vedānta philosophy is intensely practical in the sense of the ideal it stands for. If it were to be impractical it would have no other relevancy in living life. Ideal as we commonly understand is always way above the real and practical, but the ideal of religion, according to the Vedānta is such, that must cover the whole of life and thus find its expression in all our actions of life. Vedānta no doubt preaches an ideal but it does not advocate any impossible ideal.

So, Vedānta as being practical, means that there is a high ideal, which at the same time can be put into practice without any compromise or dilution. This is again, because the actual, according to the Vedanta, should confirm to the ideal that is to say, our present life should be made such so as to coincide with life eternal.

The essence or ideal of Vedānta lies in the assertion of the divinity of man, as embodied in the cryptic saying, "That Thou "Art". Swāmi Vivēkānanda believed that human nature is fundamentally divine. He exhorts that the human soul is the manifestation of the ultimate Truth or Brahman. According to him "It is impossible to find God outside ourselves." Our own souls, contribute all the divinity that is outside of us, we are the greatest temple. From these words ensued a great teaching of Vedānta which is that men should have faith in themselves first. All the powers of the profound Universe are ours already and it is now only upto man to realise them, for the Vedānta emphasizes that it can be realised by all alike, since the ideal is not only practical but has always been so and that this ideal is nothing different from the Reality which is our own nature. Also since Vedānta is the doctrine of oneness, it quite naturally stands for not only faith in oneself but faith in all, for you are all. If religion is to be a potent force in the life of man, it must provide man with strength and inspiration in all situations of life and the Vedāntic teaching of faith in oneself based on the idea of one's inherent Divinity is the best means for generating

this strength and inspiration. Today what the world's crying call needs is this strength of faith and love that each have for all, bound with the feeling of oneness.

Swami Vivekananda exhorted that the God of Vedānta is identical with the self and therefore is the nearest of the near. It is though the self that we know everything. Without knowing Him we can neither live or have our own being. This makes the God of Vedānta the most known of all. The Vedānta says: "Him whom you are worshipping as unknown, I worship as thee". Him whom you are seeking for, all throughout the Universe, has been with you all the time. You are living through Him and He is the external Witness of the Universe. He is the light and life of the Universe". In this way Vedānta puts forth the notion of a known practical God whom we see before us for He is the oneness, the unity of all and the Reality of all life and existence.

According to the Practical Vedānta, if a religion cannot help man in all walks of life is does not remain of much use. In fact the truth is shown through everything that man is familiar with in his everyday life. One of the most important aspects of practical Vedānta "It does not destroy the world, but explains it, it does not destroy the person but explains him, it does not destroy the individuality but explains it by showing the real individuality ..... the theme of the Vedānta is to see the Lord in everything, to see things in their real nature, not as they appear to be." The early sages were more practical in the

2. Swāmi Vivekananda - Complete Works, Vol.1, P.80
field of religion, for them, the truth as not an intellectual
type but a lesson learnt by the heart through every aspect of
Nature. It was only through patient investigation and discovery
that they found the truth.

Coming to the practical nature of the Vedāntic idea of
salvation, all religions deal with the destiny of man and the
'after life' that awaits him. Vedānta makes a distinction between
going to heaven and attainment of salvation. According to the
Vedānta, Swami Vivekananda says that all heavens are merely
transitory and the duration of stay is bound to terminate. For
there are only temporary regions where one undergoes enjoyment or
suffering according to one's merits or demerits. After the
exhaustion of these they return to earth consciousness to struggle
for further evolution and ultimately for salvation. On the other
hand those who have realised the Impersonal Absolute, to attain
whom one need not go anywhere or even wait for the falling of the
body, they recognising their oneness with the all encompassing
being, transcend all bondages of karma and become one with all.
It is only when one gains freedom from the oppressive hold of
Nature that one can view all life in detachment. Again it is
necessary that we should understand that a life of contemplation
or detachment does not aim at a complete separation from the
world, but on the other hand it uses material things as means to
annihilation but their transmutation into spiritual energy, for a
sanctified body best expresses the Divine.

Swami Vivekananda saw an urgent necessity to re-establish a
fellow feeling not only between the different prevalent religions but also between religion and science, for it is hopeless to even attempt to turn one out for the so called benefit of the other. Especially in modern times man can dispense with neither science nor religion. As a solution to this Swāmi Vivēkānanda brought forth a modus-vivendi between the two, a rationalistic religion or in other words, the Advaita i.e., Non Dualism and Unity, which he viewed as the only religion that can have any hold on intellectual people. This he believed will be the religion of the future and if it can be worked out for all times and all people.

The Vedāntic teachings are scientific and rational for they are formulated in agreement with the two important laws of scientific thought. One that knowledge consists in that, that the particular is explained by the general and arriving at universally applicable laws and the second is that explanation of the facts of Nature are to be got from within Nature itself and not from extraneous sources. Vedic thought starting with a large number of Devas as objects of worship and adoration arrive at the one god of whom the others are all expressions. Again regarding Nature from several elements and forms of energy, they arrive at one Akasa as the source of all elements and prana as the centre of all energies. Finally Akasa and Prāṇa are unified into he all embracing Prakriti or nature of which they were mere manifestations.

The truth according to the Advaitā is that there is only one Entity which is experienced at a time either as change only or as
changelessness only, as attributes only or as substitution only, the mistake lies in considering them as two separate entities or as two parts of an entity. As actuality see: it experience never vouches for the simultaneous self apprehension of both nor does reason sanction it. Man wants to preserve his individuality. But, here dualism, which takes each individual as a separate unit evolving towards perfection is acceptable to Vedanta in order to accommodate people who cannot rise to the level of Non-duality. This shows that Vedanta as practical never condemns the world views which help man in the early stages of spiritual growth but its aim is to ensure that man understands its limitations and gets himself out of such situations which cause limitations and thus become obstructions to his ultimate realisation.

The practical teachings of Swami Vivekananda are predominantly humanistic and intensely activistic and dynamic and spiritual. This spiritual humanism of Swami Vivekananda advocates identity of humanity with divinity and recommends very strongly humanitarian work and service of humanity. He ardently preached that, "It is God within your own self that is propelling you to seek for him - to realise H im". Swami Vivekananda says, "He works best who works without any motive neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else, and when man can do that, he will be a Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world". Hence a continuous performance of selfless work and constant practice of non-

1. Ibid Vol. IV P-176
attachment in all actions of life enables a man to rise above his self and to have a feeling of oneness with everything around. It is in such homogeneity that we can today attain absolute peace and bliss in this world. Serving humanity is the important feature of practical Vedānta of Swāmi Vivēkānanda, for he believed that service of man must be regarded as service to God.

It is Swāmi Vivēkānanda's belief in human purity which elevates the position of man in society and the whole world at large. In such a society all men are free and deserve equal opportunity. This thought leads men not only to equality but also to the feeling of universal brotherhood in the world. He preached perfection through individual Self effort to attain the glory of the Universal Self. Supreme emphasis was laid on service to humanity with a spiritually oriented self dedication.

Another distinguishing feature of the Practical Vedānta of Swāmi Vivēkānanda is that although it is highly spiritualistic and idealistic, at the same time it not against material development. He believed that it is necessary for the upliftment of the poor masses, he said "Material civilisation nay, even luxury is necessary to create work for the poor..... I do not believe in God, who cannot give me bread here, giving my eternal bliss in heaven." Swāmi Vivēkānanda's exposition of Vedānta dehypnotises man out of his feeling of weakness and inferiority and instead induces glory and strength into the corpus of the

nation and heralds a glorious awakening of the entire nation.
This he taught comes from perfect knowledge, selfless actions and
universal love.

The implication of Vedāntic practicalism is clear in his
saying that trampling on every privilege and everything in us
that works for privilege; let us work for the knowledge which
will bring the feeling of sameness towards all mankind. As
V.K.R.V. Rao says "This practical Vedānta that Vivēkānanda
preached was thus even more radical in its implications for human
relations than that what we find in the most radical socialist
doctrines, and its relevance for India today is even greater than
when he preached it so many years ago." Thus while propounding
practical Vedānta Swāmi Vivēkānanda gave to men a spiritual
meaning in his day to day striving and aspirations and also gave
them a new and higher position. He showed them the way of the
Vedānta which has a message to give in all aspects of life. The
message of goodwill, love and truth. Today the world lies divided
and torn in the agony of religion. There is no much fighting and
violence in the world today. Many are trying hard to change this
state of affairs and have been trying to establish universal
brotherhood and build 'One World', so that all can live on this
earth with mutual fellowship and love. This can be achieved if
modern man with his pragmatic outlook can make use of the
Vedānta, which is nothing if not practical. The Vedāntic concept
which says that in every heart there is the manifestation of the

1. V.K.R.V. Rao, Builders of Modern India (Swāmi Vivēkānanda
Publication Division, Delhi, 1990) P.119

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same God, here in this essential divinity of man is to be found that secure foundation for building the edifice of universal brotherhood and the one world of all humanity. Hence, Śwāmi Vivēkānanda believed that the practical Vedānta is the only solution for all the ills of the present day society.
SECTION - IV
A COMPARATIVE STUDY