

Navigating Today's Challenges with Vedānta: A Contemporary Exploration

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Abstract: Vedānta philosophy is presently highly visible in Indian philosophy. Vedānta, an essential notion, greatly influences the way Western thinkers think. More importantly, it has profoundly impacted philosophical psychology, the theory of consciousness, and the idea of knowledge. Notwithstanding this, there is an increasing trend to dismiss this ideology as little more than spiritual. It might seem that the universe is untouched by the moral and virtual influences of Vedānta Philosophy. Most of the time, modern Indian philosophy argues that neither Vedānta philosophy nor the Materialistic Cāravāka philosophy is appropriate for the present circumstances. This is because Spiritualistic Vedānta focuses on abstinence, while Materialistic Cāravāka prioritises material worldly riches and happiness.

Swami Vivekananda, a monk who introduced Indian philosophies to the West, presents a unique perspective on Vedanta Philosophy. Vedanta emphasises the soul's (Brahman) universality and individuality. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Swami Vivekananda revived Vedanta and modernised its teachings. The research begins by situating Vedanta Philosophy in Swami Vivekananda's historical and social-spiritual context. Swami Vivekananda's life and teachings show his conviction in human divinity, universal Religion, and spirituality's pragmatism. Swami Vivekananda's teachings examine Advaita (non-duality) and other Vedic concepts.

This paper discusses the relevance and inspiration of Swami Vivekananda's Vedanta teachings today. His central beliefs—that science and Religion should be in concord, that serving others is essential, and that one should discover one's divine nature—resonate with modern hopes and dreams. Swami Vivekananda's global expansion of Vedanta philosophy shaped modern spirituality. In conclusion, this abstract encapsulates the exploration of Vedanta Philosophy's enduring relevance through the perspective of Swami Vivekananda. The paper shares a deeper understanding of Vedanta's philosophical underpinnings and practical applications, emphasising its timeless wisdom and potential to address contemporary challenges in pursuing spiritual growth and societal harmony.

Index-Terms: Non-duality, Vedānta, Mithyā, Manusattva.

The term 'Vedānta' is constituted with two words: 'Veda', which means The three Vedas, and 'anta', which means the end. Thus, 'Vedānta' may mean either "the end of the Veda" or "dogmas of the Veda" or "the final aim of the Veda". But this sense would be a minimal understanding of the word Veda. Instead, the word 'final' or end would mean the extraction or cream of all scriptural texts..... 'Veda' is derived from the root 'vid', which means knowledge or cognition. The root 'vid' has four meanings. A renowned scholar, Ashutosh Sastri, has talked about four different senses of the term 'vid'-

“sattayam vidyate jñane veti veda vida jñāne
vinte vid vicāraṇe
vidyate vid sattāya
labhe vindati vindate.”

The first sense defines the term as veti or jñāna, i.e. which tells about the final truth, while the second sense carries the logic and argument for the absolute truth; the third sense indicates where the theory of absolute truth relies on, and the fourth sense tells which helps to achieve the absolute truth.

The only reality that the final truth holds is, i.e., Brahman. The term 'Brahman' is derived from the root 'bṛha' and the suffix 'manin', which means all pervaded, omnipresent. Brahman is Ananta and has no end. He is beyond time and space, and he is beyond materiality. In this context, Subesh Kumar Maiti said that the basic mantra of Vedānta, unity, can explain social, economic, state, religious and communal differences.ⁱ

Meanwhile, it is customary to say Vedānta is dry and useless, as it only talks about renunciation and meditation, which seems to have no practical applicability. Those who see Vedānta this way don't know that Vedānta is neither only spiritual nor a way of renunciation; instead, Vedānta is a science and a new beginning of the world. Those who had shaped and polished Vedānta and gave a new life to it, Swami Vivekananda is one of them. His philosophical aspects were primarily derived from Vedic and Upanishad's thoughts, but he didn't establish his philosophical ideas wholly based on them. Like contemporary philosophers, Swamiji tries to reinterpret Vedic Upanishadic thoughts in a modern scientific way. He has acknowledged the reality of pain and suffering but doesn't stop there; he has also shown a path to escape from these. Indeed, through pain and suffering, life gets dignity and human significance. Swamiji's philosophical thinking, in this sense, lies in existential considerations.

Swamiji realised from childhood that life and philosophy are not different and that we cannot separate metaphysics from epistemology. We must require the epistemological equipment to establish the existence or non-existence of metaphysical objects. Similarly, we cannot eliminate life from philosophy and vice versa. Since life is dynamic, there should be a corresponding progressive philosophy that can explain this dynamic life. For this purpose, Swamiji thinks about formulating a completely new version of philosophy. Swami Vivekananda's life and ideals are guided by one goal or philosophy: self-salvation and the world's welfare. By doing so, he has opted for the traditional realm of philosophical thought, which claims that you and I have no distinction- "Tat tvam asi,"ⁱⁱⁱ i.e., "That Thou Art", "Aham brahāsmi"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ or "I am the Brahman." etc. This being

the absolute through the realisation is the idea of Vedānta philosophy, specifically Advaita tradition. Swamiji opted for the Advaita Vedānta philosophy. Brahman is one and only; there is no duality either. The nature of Brahman is Advaita or non-dual. In this connection, Advaitins said, Brahman is free from three kinds of distinction- *sajātīya*, *vijātīya* and *svagata*. Śruti, even, states this, “Sajātīyasvagatabhedahīnamityarthah: viśeṣaṇāntaramādāya vyākaroti-adviṭīymiti. Vijātīyabhedaśūnyamityarthah.”^{iv} However, many works have been done on Vedānta philosophy to explain the essence of the Veda. Nevertheless, it seems the unique characteristic is concealed in the following sloka-

“Ślokārdhena pravakṣyāmi yad uktam granthakotibhiḥ

Brahma satyaṁ jaganmithyā jīvo brahmaiva nā paraḥ”^v

This well-sound verse is taken from Brahmanāmāvalīmālā and though the original sloka is: Brahma satyaṁ jaganmithyā jīvo brahmaiva nā paraḥ/ Idameva tu sacchāstramiti vedāntaḍiṇḍmḥ. (Brahmanāmāvalīmālā-----21)^{vi} It says what has been said in the thousands of scriptures, with half a sloka he is exploring, i.e. Brahman is real, the world is false, and the occupied soul or *jīva* is nothing but the Brahman.

Regarding the notion 'Advaita', Suresvaracariya, in his "vṛhadāranyakabhāṣāvārtika", explains the meaning of the term 'Advaita' is as follows:

Dvidhetam dvītamityāhustadbhāvo dvaitamucyate I

Tanniṣedhana cādvaitaṁ pratyagvastvbhidhīyate II^{vii}

Duality combined with two, i.e. Brahman combined with living beings and the world, is called duality. Advaita is the negation of this duality. So, the philosophy which denies dualism is called Advaitaism. Suresvaracariya's expression clearly states that there cannot be two realities together- the living being and the world.

Like an Advaitin, Swamiji says there is only one absolute reality, Brahman. The absolute is beyond time, space, and causation, beyond any change. He says, "The infinite is indivisible; there cannot be parts of the infinite. The Absolute cannot be divided."^{viii} According to Advaitins, the only reality is Brahman, and the whole universe is false or mithyā or unreal. Samkaracariya escapes the world's reality by saying it is mithyā, which Swamiji feels is unusual. He thinks Vedānta does not intend to display that the world is false or unreal; people misunderstand the word 'mithyā'. He said how Samkaracariya understood mithyā should be and must be formulated again. Mitha, to the Advaitins, is something that has no permanent value, which is dynamic, transitory, and temporary. Mithyā cannot have a fixed character, and if this understanding is accepted, then all the difficulties will disappear.^{ix}

Swami Vivekananda springs from the awareness of the social, religious, and economic conditions of the Indian masses. Sometimes, his philosophy is charged with saying mere spiritual, which is not logically valid. This is because his philosophy and spiritual attention can give a vision of reality and the world, which seems very practical.

Concerning the doctrine of māyā, Swamiji differs from Samkaracariya. Though he has conceived this idea from the Advaitins and he also agrees with the view that māyā is the power of the creator,

yet, he didn't think Māyā is the power that creates an illusion; it is that divine Sakti that has the capacity of deluding man into believing that the world is real. Instead, he says,

"Māyā is not a theory for the explanation of the world: it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction, that whatever there is good, there must also be evil, and wherever there is evil, there must be some good....."^x

Swamiji didn't accept the traditional Vedāntist views that hold māyā as an appearance. Instead, he admits that māyā has a reality as some statement of facts. His philosophy seems so scientific and modern as he didn't see life as being or non-being; instead, he found it an amalgamation of both being and non-being. At some point, facts appear and vanish. Facts are like light and darkness, and the very nature of these facts is inconceivable. Like the Advaitins, Swamiji also affirms that māyā is something which is and at some moment is not; thus, it is indescribable.

He believed the real man was not the man they were seen moving and living. According to him, the real in man is a sort of 'concentration of spiritual energy'. Man, to him, is a spirit. He has talked about two aspects of man: the physical and spiritual aspects of man. The physical aspect includes the bodily, the biological and the psychological aspects. Meanwhile, the spiritual element sees man as a soul force or atman. He defines atman as

"It is the self, beyond all thought, one without birth and death, whom the sword cannot pierce or fire burn, whom air cannot dry or water melt, the beginningless and endless....."^{xi}

Next comes God, which is usually seen as a religious aspect. Śaṅkara's philosophy even defines God as a consequence of māyā, which is unreal. God, therefore, is fictional too. Swamiji has challenged and falsified this Advaitins idea of God. Being a monist, he has conceived the idea of God, but that is personal, which is there everywhere, which is one, and that could be Brahman. He is present everywhere and in everything. This unique and exciting idea may correspond with Western philosopher Spinoza's philosophy.

However, Swamiji profoundly understands how one can get liberation or salvation. To him, the path leading to liberation is the path of discipline and union. Here, one can find an association between Advaita philosophy and yoga philosophy. He has discussed the concept of "tripleH"-Heart, Head and Hand. There must be a union between these "triple H" to make synthesis possible. Whatever has been felt must be connected to the head, and whatever has been thought must be done by action. Only then we can go towards the path that leads to salvation or realisation.

However, what is more interesting in his philosophy is that he does not subscribe to any particular way; rather, one can achieve the goal by holding to the way of acquiring knowledge and gaining actions, devotion, or feelings. This idea reflects his Guru Ramkrishna, who said, "yata mat, tata path." This is entirely a new Vedāntist approach.

The most discussed area where Swamiji has left his impression is 'Religion' or 'Dharma'. In jñāna yoga, he clearly states, "Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destiny of the human race, none certainly is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call Religion."^{xii} By the term 'Religion', he has never understood any organised religion. He has compared Religion as something which is inherently related to every human being. In his work,

"The Religion of Man", he has given a very compact understanding of the concept of Religion. He has defined it as the manifestation of a potency that is there in all that has to be acquired. He has realised the necessity of Religion in life. According to him, Religion has two aspects- inner and outer or external. The ultimate essence of Religion consists of the inner aspect. Swamiji says Religion is growth from within, which is inherent in the very constitution of man. In this connection, we can think of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who, in his *Dharmatattva*, has defined Religion as the proper equilibrium of all our potentialities. He, therefore, talked about humanity or manusatva as the ultimate Religion. Swamiji has described Religion as the realisation of oneness. He says, "Religion is realisation, not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories....it is becoming, not hearing or acknowledging..."^{xiii}

Recently, people with different religious conventions have been quarrelling against each other, claiming their own as superior and trying to impose their norms and principles on others. As a result, there have been conflicts, complexities, etc., both internally and externally. People have mistakenly interpreted the notion of Religion as either for the interest of their system or for their own. Swamiji thinks that having these conflicts does not harm the essence of Religion. The essence of Religion, I should call it, is the original Religion that exists in all these variations, has no further modification, and is one and only. We can call it 'humanity' or 'manusatva', which is the essence of all 'so-called' organised Religion. I think Swamiji's interpretation indicates this. To justify this claim, he introduced a new window, i.e., 'universal religion'. Universal Religion, as he has defined, holds each individual and where each and every religious sect may satisfy their interest. So, to say he was searching for such a religion, I think this is nothing but manusattva. This sort of Religion talks about the union between men and the whole of humanity; this union is between the individual self and the universe. In this way, Swamiji has prescribed a new version of Advaita philosophy, mostly called Practical Vedānta.

The question remains: why do we subscribe to such a form of philosophy? When the basis of duality is clearly perceived, there is no question of any saṃsāra or bondage. How does, then, the spiritual understanding translate itself into action in day-to-day life? Or does the theory have any relevance in the contemporary world? Commonsensically, if we think about the knowledge of the Advaitins, we can discover how relevant the theory is because difficulties and complexities arise from duality, not from non-duality. When people realise the non-dual character, i.e. everything is the manifestation of the one and only Being, when people will realise the uniform essence that holds everything, when people will start to feel you and me are the same, then and only then will there be the avoidance of discrimination, differences, etc., and if there is no discrimination, then there would be only peace and harmony throughout the world. This should be the highest goal in everyone's life. I think the only way to eliminate the recent political, religious, and social conflicts is the realisation of one in all. This cosmic union vanishes all of our dualities required to make a peaceful and harmonious society. To some extent, being uplifted in the manusattva is precisely the same as getting salvation.

ⁱ Subesh Kumar Maity, Swami Vivekanander Navamulyayn Jivan O Darsan p. 129.

ⁱⁱ Chāndogyopaniṣad 6/8/7

- iii Brihadaranyak Upaniṣad- 1.4.10
- iv Chāndogyopaniṣad 6/2/2, Anandagiritīkā
- v Richard Brooks, "The Meaning of 'Real' in Advaita Vedānta," *Philosophy East and West* 19, p385.
- vi Brahmanāmāvalī, Śāṅkaragrantharatnāvalī, Trns. by Akshaykumar Sastri, Edt. by Sree Ashokekumar Bandyopadhyay, 2013, p. 144.
- vii Vrhadaranyakabhasavartika, 4/3/1807
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- ix B. K. Lal, Contemporary Indian Philosophy, p. 16.
- x Swami Vivekananda, Jnana Yoga, p. 64.
- xi Swami Vivekananda, Complete Work, Vol. I., p. 141.
- xii Swami Vivekananda, Jñāna Yoga, p.1
- xiii Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, III, p. 419.