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ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 31

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The Implications of the Vedântic World View in the Age of Knowledge

Dr. Lima Antony

The paper analyses the development of the concept of Vedânta from ancient times and traces its implications in contemporary society and suggests ways of incorporating it into the modern knowledge economy. The concepts of Âtman and Brahman are also briefly discussed. The modern world, though scientifically and technologically advanced, has not properly developed the consciousness of its spiritual nature and its shortcomings. This can be achieved through a proper study of Vedântic philosophy, which encompasses all the paradoxes and contradictions of reality and has solutions to the complex problems of the modern world. The paper suggests that the ancient Vedântic philosophy can be a solution to the vexing problems of contemporary society such as spiritual aridity, environmental degradation, political turmoil, economical uncertainty, inequality, materialism and the prevailing sense of meaninglessness.

Key Words: *Vedânta, Âtman, Brahman, Consciousness, Being, Modernism*

Vedânta is a term frequently used in Hindu philosophy and has implications in contemporary knowledge society and its cutting edge scientific pursuits. Vedânta is also called Uttara Mîmâsâ and is one of the six schools of Hindu Philosophy. It is the culmination of the philosophical explorations of the Vedas, the ancient Indian religious

scriptures. It is a philosophical enquiry carried on through ages into various concepts like being, self, consciousness and the Ultimate Being. It has implications in modern scientific pursuits in quantum physics, psychology, mindfulness practices, cutting edge consciousness studies and phenomenology with its tenet that to be conscious is to be conscious of something, “to know something.” It also encompasses the concepts of selfhood, nature, karma and liberation which have implications in our contemporary society.

Many monks and scholars over the centuries have deeply meditated and studied the concepts mentioned above and have developed subtle arguments and innumerable interpretations. S. Radhakrishnan, one of the renowned scholars in this area concludes: “Literally, *Vedânta* means the end of the Veda, *vedasya antah* the conclusion as well as the goal of the Vedas” (Radhakrishnan, 2009 p.24).” Swami Sarvapriyanda in his book “*What is Vedanta?*” has a more insightful interpretation where he defines it as the edge of Vedas and is therefore interpreted as the “cutting edge of knowledge”(p. 6).

The Upanisads, a sub-tradition of Vedânta, have dominated Indian philosophy, religion, and way of life for more than three thousand years and are the basic texts of Vedântic philosophy. In addition to Upanisads, Brahma Sûtra and Bhagavad Gîtâ have also contributed to the concept of Vedânta. The main concern of Vedânta is the search for Absolute Reality and its culmination in a realisation of Brahman.

Swami Sivananda observes that Vedânta “... is entering into the study of Brahman. It is the science which raises man above the plane of worldliness” (1960, p.1). According to the view of the Indian philosophers it is the ultimate knowledge, beyond which there is nothing more to be known. John G. Arapura observes: “It is possible that the sources of a tradition such as Vedânta, if approached properly, will yield something which can be brought within the ambience of the contemporary philosophical quest, at least of its still largely unmanifest undercurrents” (2012, p.1). Vedânta can be understood as a spiritual journey which culminates in the real understanding of the concept of Brahman.

There are many interpretations and various schools of Upanisads that have tried to interpret the concept of Vedânta and

among them the Dvaita, the Viúistadvaita and the Advaita are the most popular ones. Ćankara, Shri Ramanuja and Shri Madhvacharya are the propounders of the three schools. The concept of Brahman is the fundamental basis of all the schools of Vedânta. Brahman is seen as the all-encompassing ultimate reality and the source of all knowledge and existence.

Vedânta didn't develop from a single text and includes a whole lot of ancient religious texts and manuscripts. Bhagavad Gîtâ has played a major role in shaping the concept of Brahman in Vedânta. Advaita Vedanta propounded by Sankara articulates a philosophical position of radical nondualism. Advaitins understand Brahman as transcending individuality and empirical plurality. They seek to establish that the essential core of one's self (âtman) is Brahman. The fundamental thrust of Advaita Vedânta is that the âtman is pure non-intentional consciousness. It is one without a second, nondual, infinite existence, and numerically identical with Brahman. This effort entails tying a metaphysics of Brahman to a philosophy of consciousness.

Brahman and Âtman

Brahman and Âtman are two concepts that are seminal to Indian philosophy. According to Radhakrishnan the word used in the Upanisads to indicate the supreme reality is Brahman. It is derived from the root *brh* 'to grow,'. In all major schools of Hindu philosophy, Brahman is the ultimate cause of existence. It is the metaphysical knowledge that sustains all that is created. Brahman is a key concept in Vedas and it is also found in Upanisads. It is described as Satcitânanda or the highest reality.

Brahman is discussed in connection with the concept of Âtman in most of the ancient Indian texts. Âtman is the manifestation of Brahman in material form. It is personal or impersonal, para brahman, and how it is considered depends on the concerned philosophical school of thought. In Dvaita Vedânta, Brahman is different from Âtman or the individual self, but in Advaita Brahman is identical with Âtman. They are connected in their spiritual oneness. The presence of Brahman cannot be proved through scientific experimentation, it is

only through utmost penitence that one can perceive it. Brhman is nitya (eternal), ananda (supreme bliss) and ananta (infinite).

The Role of Bhagavad Gîtâ in moulding Vedic philosophy

Bhagavad Gîtâ is the most widely read sacred book in India. It is part of Mahabharata and is thought to be penned by Vyasa. It is the conversation between great warrior Arjuna and Lord Krisna who is his charioteer. It is narrated in the background of a great war which is waged between two families. Arjuna is in utter despair because he has to fight against his own relatives. Krisna makes him aware of his duties by giving him advice, which is the essence of Bhagavad Gîtâ. The essence of Vedântic philosophy is seen in the advice given by Krisna.

Ūankara's Contribution to Vedânta

Āankara also known as Adi Āankara is believed to have hailed from Kaladi in modern-day Kerala state. There are different dates ascribed to him by scholars. He is believed to have lived in the 8th Century. There are no clear historical records about Āankara's life except his written works. He considered himself a teacher and renounced worldly life early in his youth. The religious identity of Āankara's is also not very clear. Many believe that he was a Āaiva, (a devotee of the deity Āiva). He visited almost all the spiritual centers in India and is thought to have engaged in debate with sages. He is believed to have died at the young age of thirty-two. "From a historical standpoint, Āankara's textual works define his identity. He composed our earliest complete extant commentaries on the *Brahmasūtras*, *Bhagavadgîtâ*, and the ten principal Upanicads consisting of the *Īsâ*, *Kena*, *Katha*, *Prasna*, *Mundaka*, *Mândūkya*, *Aitareya*, *Taittirīya*, *Chândogya*, and *Bhadâranyaka* Upanicads" (Āankara"). His primary aim was to establish his philosophy of nondual *brahman* as the subject matter of the Upanisads, and to systematize Advaita concept by harmonizing the diverse and contradictory passages found in Upanisadic texts (Neil, 2021).

Advaita is one of the most popular philosophical ideologies pronounced by Āankara. Āankara taught the doctrine of Advaita (non-duality). The aim of Ūankara "was always to purify the teaching of

the scriptures, and to restore the true meaning of Vedânta” (Hodgkinson, 2006, p.13). The concept of Advaita philosophy is central to the teachings of Īankara. “In Advaita the self is not equated with the world, nor merely immanent in it. It is both immanent and transcendent, both in the world and beyond it. To explain how this is possible made great demands even on the acute mind of Āankara” (Hodgkinson, 2006, 14). The contribution of Āankara can be summarised as follows,

Āankara endeavored to communicate nonduality through systematized theories of metaphysics, language, and epistemology. He also incorporated specific methods of philosophical teaching, along with learning methods of listening, reflection, and contemplation. His philosophy and methods comprise a teaching tradition intended to culminate in a direct liberating recognition of nonduality that is synonymous with liberation or freedom (*moksa*). Āankara is one of the most widely known and influential Indian philosophers from the classical period, and the most authoritative philosopher of Advaita Vedânta. He is revered by Advaita Vedânta’s teaching tradition and monastic lineages, and continues to influence virtually all contemporary lineages today” (Neil, 2021).

How to incorporate Vedânta in Modern Life

The world religions have different names to refer to the ultimate reality. The all-encompassing concept for ultimate reality in Indian tradition is referred to as Brahman. In Christian, Jewish and Islamic traditions it is God and it is Dao in the Daoist and Ru in (Confucian) traditions indigenous to China.

It is difficult for us to realize Brahman in our day-to-day mundane life. Most people feel that enlightenment is only for those who forsake worldly life. But we can incorporate the precepts and ideas of Vedânta in our contemporary life and do our dharma in a religious way. Vedânta can guide us in achieving our righteous path, even amidst the all-encompassing mundane reality. The advancements in science and technology and the influence of digital technology are taking people away from spirituality and creating confusion about the ultimate aim in life. Krishna in Chapter three of Bhagavad Gita says:

It is better to strive in one's own dharma than to succeed in the dharma of another. Nothing is ever lost in following one's own dharma, but competition in another's dharma breeds fear and insecurity”

(Eshwara, 2007, p.108)

The principles of Vedânta applied to daily life can bring happiness, fulfillment, and spiritual enlightenment. It can give self-realization of our inner power and guide us from within. It leads to self-awareness and liberates us from the clutches of worldly life.

The Vedântic philosophy is a living tradition in India. Advaita philosophers believe that the world's suffering is due to mâya and jnana can destroy mâya. When one realises the Ultimate Reality one gets liberated from the clutches of worldly problems. According to Shankara Vedic rituals alone cannot lead one to jnana. Vedântic concepts when applied to modern life can benefit the human being who is living in a technology-driven world. The basic teaching of the religions is the same. It exists to lead man to truth and righteousness.

Swami Vivekananda also gave Vedânta a practical approach through his teachings. According to him the Vedânta is not for great men alone, it can be understood and practised by ordinary people. As he asserts, “The Vedânta also says that not only can this be realised in the depths of forests or caves, but by men in all possible conditions of life. We have seen that the people who discovered these truths were neither living in caves nor forests, nor following the ordinary vocations of life, but men who, we have every reason to believe, led the busiest of lives, men who had to command armies, to sit on thrones, and look to the welfare of millions - and all these, in the days of absolute monarchy, and not as in these days when a king is to a great extent a mere figurehead” (Vivekananda, 2021).

The relevance of Vedântic philosophy in the contemporary world may be debatable, but the failure of many world views brought in by different ages makes it all the more relevant. Karan Singh in his article “Vedânta in the Nuclear Age” observes that “the Cartesian Newtonian-Marxist paradigm has broken down, and with it, the materialistic philosophies based upon that view, whether Marxist or

Capitalist, can also be seen to have failed. With the impact of post Einsteinian physics, quantum mechanics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and many other conceptual revolutions, the old structures have begun to crumble. 'Solid matter' dissolves into 'waves of probability', and the new physics seems to be approaching the mystic vision of which seers and sages of all traditions have spoken" (2002, p.145). The spiritual quest of modern science is well known and the relevance of Vedântic philosophy is justified in these inquiries. Singh further observes, "The predominant consciousness of the human race reflects its evolutionary situation, and it would be true to say that at this crucial evolutionary crossroads mankind is groping for a new model, a new philosophy, a new paradigm, a new consciousness to replace the old. And it is no coincidence that this is happening at a juncture when man kind is in supreme peril; not from another species, not from outer space, but from itself" (2002, p.146).

The concept of Âtman as put forward by Rg Veda is very insightful, "Âtman is the principle of man's life, the soul that pervades his being, his breath, *prâna*, his intellect, *prajña* and transcends them. Âtman is what remains when everything that is not the self is eliminated" (Radhakrishnan, 2019, p.73).

The world which has progressed scientifically and technologically lacks consciousness to perceive its shortcomings and that can be corrected by Vedântic philosophy, which encompasses all the contradictions of the world. It has solutions to the mundane and the profane, the good and the evil. Vedânta gives to the modern age practical solutions to their day to day problems. It can remind them to accept and realize the underlying spirituality deep within them. The material possession fails to give ultimate joy and this is where a Vedantic world view can help in attaining inner peace. The concept of Dharma, gives human beings moral force and leads them on the path of righteousness.

Indian philosophy when approached with an enlightened mind can provide solutions to most of the dilemmas faced by contemporary culture. Vedânta involves self-knowledge and can be applied to modern life in a meaningful way. Awareness is a key concept in understanding one's self and it is the core of Vedântic philosophy.

In the technology driven fast changing world there may be doubts regarding the significance of Vedânta. According to Ranganathananda the progress of science and technology has “lifted man from many fears and uncertainties of his primitive past,” but “landed him into new and more gnawing fears and uncertainties” (2007, p. 42). Even though Vedânta has not emerged as an influential movement, it has had a silent impact on many people all over the world. The practice of yoga helps in the manifestation of the ideas of Vedânta in our daily lives. The words such as ‘guru’, ‘dharma’, ‘yoga’ have entered into our daily lives. Many Western literary works have also contributed in popularising the concepts of Vedânta in Western civilization. Robin Sharma’s popular book “The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari” very beautifully brings the message of Vedânta to our contemporary world. The pursuit and the practice of Vedânta doesn’t always require a thorough reading of the original texts and can be carried out by ordinary people even in their mundane existence. The relevance of this ancient philosophical world view in the twenty-first century can give us hope to move to the future with great sustainability and enlightenment.

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