

Vivekananda, Sufism and Vedanta

Jharna Bhattacharyya,

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Scottish Church College, Kolkata, India

Abstract

Swami Vivekananda, the forerunner of Indian renaissance, is one of those great Indians from whom the entire nation had got a real path that leads to peace, solidarity, fraternity and humanity as a whole. In this article I tried to show how Swamiji advocated the real essence of Vedanta and how he showed the inner strength of this age old scripture of unification. He, at the same time proclaimed that Islam is the only ism that had taught the power of universal brotherhood to the world. So a combination of Vedantic thought and Islamic doctrine can bring a tremendous change in the world-society. In Swamiji's thought we observe a scientific and practical reasoning depending on which he tried to explain Vedanta and Islam. His intelligence and logical way of thinking gave rise to a theory where Vedanta and Islam can exist simultaneously without losing their own identity. He believed that there are a lot of similarities between the thoughts of Vedantavadin and the followers of Islam. The Sufism that is actually the philosophy of Islamic thought always taught humanity and universal love. In this article I showed that this thought of Swamiji is a unique one and if we can make a living inhabitant where Vedantic wisdom and Islamic brotherhood stay in a mutual collaboration this earth will become heaven. Swamiji dreamt of such a world full of love, faith and humanity.

KEYWORDS- Vedanta, Islam, Sufism, Quietism, Pure Consciousness, Kramayoga, Acceptance, Tolerance.

Introduction –

Swami Vivekananda, a legendary personality of nineteenth century India, was a man of reason and wisdom. His belief and love for mankind made him a man of remembrance. All through his life he did tremendous work and sacrifice for his fellow men. He was a man with profound knowledge and sharp intelligence. His belief in religion was also based on reason and validation. He believed that a human being must have three types of development. Physical, psychological and spiritual. The last one can be achieved by devotion and complete surrender to God. But his belief was not baseless. His writings and various lectures shows that all through his life he tried to establish a religion which is universal in nature and at the same time practical. In this endeavor he brought the truth of Vedanta from the Himalayan cave to the lay man of the society. He told that not the worship of God but the service to the mankind is the actual demand of religion. Vedanta also teaches this practical religion and it is in fact the real truth which all the various religions tried to establish through the ages. He told that if one thinks about the prosperity and development of one's own country and mankind as a whole he or she has to think of a holistic system where variety will exist with all its individuality. He thought of a religion where various ideas will coexist together but no one will lose its originality. He told that Vedanta and Islam can

coexist together and this peaceful coexistence can bring prosperity. He understood that Sufism is a philosophy of love and fraternity. Humanity is the basis of Islam. Vedanta also teaches non duality. One, eternal truth has been recognized there as real and spiritual truth. Sufi saints told about the mystical relation of individual to Lord. Through their songs they show their devotion to that Supreme Being. Swami Vivekananda very sincerely advocated that with all the similarities and dissimilarities of Vedanta and Islam a true India can be made. To him man was nothing but the divine Brahman. His moto was service and sacrifice for mankind which is actually the worship of God. Self-realization and welfare of mankind, he preached. In this 21st century the whole world practically need this doctrine of unification and love of humanity. I think this article will bring some realization of this philosophy of Swami Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda wrote a letter to Mohammed Sarfaraz Husain of Naini Tal on 10th June 1898 from Almora. Some portion of that letter is the most worth referring here as the focal topic is 'Vivekananda, Sufism and Vedanta'. He wrote ***"Whether we call it Vedantism or any ism, the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from which we can look upon all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity....On the other hand, my experience is that if ever any religion approached to this equality in an appreciable manner, it is Islam and Islam alone.For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam- Vedanta brain Islam body- is the only hope."*** (CWS, vol-6, Page -415-416.). It is quite clear from this writing that Swamiji was of the opinion that the future development of our country is very much dependent on the fusion of Islamic thought and Vedantic approach towards life and society which is the foundation of the total human existence. . Though we call it Islam, actually orthodox Islamic thought is not the main part which has been chosen for the present epigrammatic discussion. We, in this article will give stress particularly on Sufism which is in many aspects different from so called Islamic thought. We want to emphasize on the philosophy of Islam, and Sufism is one of the most interesting and mystic philosophical ideal based on Islam that flourished in the humanity at a large for a long time to give them an everlasting fragrance of love, equality and universal brotherhood. The inner philosophical ideal of Sufism has a great similarity with that of Vedanta. Like the philosophical ideal of Vedanta system Sufism also advocates asceticism and a total subjugation of sensual desires. It includes also a total renunciation of worldly requirements. Abnul Hasan Nuri says, ***"Sufism is to posses nothing and to be possessed by nothing"*** (Quoted from ***"Sufism and Vedanta"*** by Roma Choudhury. Page- 2). Here there is a resemblance between Sufism and that of Vedantic thought, we think, as this idea of total renunciation of sensual desires and subjugation of earthly pleasure is actually what the Vedanta philosophy has propounded for the ultimate union to that Almighty. Swami Vivekananda, in his lectures and writings, elaborately discussed about the practical aspect of Vedanta Darsan, the lesson of which actually he received from his Guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Sir Ramakrishna was a perfect embodiment of Vedantic thought. His message of service to man is the service to God, 'Siva Jnane Jiva Seva', and his ideal of 'Yata Mat Tato Path', were Swamiji's ideal of life. In the west the Swami brought the tide of the Vedantic thought especially by propounding the inner strength of Vedanta Darshan which can act as the basis of our inner potency, as the basis of our mutual equality concept, can give us the way to recognize our fellow being as beloved as our own self and finally can raise us to humanity which is

only to be recognized as “Dharma”, (religion). He by his heart was a staunch believer of the Vedantic ideal of equality and universal acceptance. In Islam also Swamiji traced this ideal of all pervading love and fraternity. Islam also is a real believer of equality. So in the Swami’s thought Islam made a permanent position and he sincerely believed that the synthesis of the Vedantic thought and the Islamic ideal can bring enormous change in the socio-political and cultural aspect of our country. Now it will be relevant and necessary to give a brief account of Sufism and a short account of Vedanta in order to show the similarities between these two mostly recognized religious systems and at the same time we will discuss about the Swami’s thought and plan, because that will be helpful for those who are interested in this journey of realizing the real value of Vedanta-Islam amalgamation.

According to some Sufis, the word ‘Sufi’ has been derived from the Arabic word ‘Safa’, which means ‘purity’. It, therefore, signifies that a Sufi must be chaste by heart and by actions. There are other opinions also. Some says that the word means ‘sincere’, that is, a Sufi must be sincere towards God, and God’s blessing is too sincere towards him. Some again says that the name has been come from the word ‘Safi’, that means ‘first rank’. One who is very special to God is a ‘Sufi’. Again ‘Suffah’ may be the root of this word, some think so, which means, a ‘bench’. A man who is as pure as a prophet or resembles such people of the bench is a ‘Sufi’. But the meaning which is accepted by a majority of people is, a Sufi is one who uses to wear rough woolen cloth. Here the word ‘Sufi’ is thought of as a derivation of the word ‘Saf’ means ‘wool’. Junayd of Baghdad a famous Sufi Shaykh says, **“‘Sufism’ is the being chosen for purity. Whoever is thus chosen and made pure from all except God is the true Sufi.”** (Quoted from **“Sufism and Vedanta”** by Roma Choudhuri. Part -1, Page -1). Now, if we consider Sufism from a transcendental and theoretical stand point, we will see that a complete union to that Infinite Lord has been admitted here and Unconditional Love and rapture is the only trail in this endeavor. Here reason and intellect has nothing to do. The Ultimate Being and his grace is the thing that only can help us to realize Him truly and make us free from all bonding of ignorance which is conducive to acquire complete freedom from tremendous sufferings of life. But the path is not very easy to comprehend. The Sufis explained very mystically the nature and the progression of ‘Sadhana’, necessary for attaining the transcendence, from the lower form of humanity to the highest form where the Spiritual Union took place. Many a times the Sufis mystically has chant the name of their beloved and said that He is to be loved as one’s most closest one as He in within us at every time and every moment. We, because of our ignorance are unable to see and feel his existence. He is the essence of everything in this universe and He is within everything. He is omnipotent and omniscient. Though there are some controversies regarding the nature of the Almighty but in general the Sufis have a spiritual thought regarding the ‘Infinite’ and their views are mostly not very much at par to that of Islam. They have a mystic approach towards their Lord whom they try to feel in their heart and want to be completely absorbed in Him. Dr. Roma Chaudhuri in her book ‘Sufism and Vedanta’ wrote about the mystic way which the Sufis declared as the only path to follow for the attainment of complete spiritual Union with God. She wrote, **“Now what is the means to this end? The means is the mystic path through which the aspirer after union with God must proceed in order that he may finally reach his goal. Hence, his attempt towards union with God is described as a ‘Journey’, and he is called a ‘traveller’. The Sufis represent metaphorically the great gulf that separates man from God by the conception of seventy thousand veils.**

The inner half of these is veils of light, the outer half veils of darkness. Thus when a man is born, he passes from light to darkness, and for each veil of darkness puts off a divine quality and puts on a human quality. On this journey back to God he similarly passes from darkness to light, putting off a human quality and putting on a divine quality for each of the veils of light.”(Quoted from “Sufism and Vedanta” by Roma Choudhuri.Part -1, page 29-30) These beliefs in some supernatural entity and the mystical thoughts have made the Sufis mystics. The Sufis have a philosophy of their own and that is differing from that of Islam in many senses, especially from the Orthodox Islam.

Here we are providing some fundamental beliefs of the Sufis in a nut shell so that we can make clear the main tenants of Sufism, that would enable us to investigate more clearly the basic similarities between the two renowned philosophical systems, viz. the spiritualistic view of Vedanta philosophy towards life and that of the ‘Infinite’ as the only surviving factor in this world and the mystical philosophy of the Sufis that tell us about God’s grace and of salvation through renunciation. 1) The Sufis believe in the immanent form of the Lord than that of his transcendental essence. 2) They believe that God is the only real thing and this world is phenomenal. It may be the objectification of God otherwise they said. 3) The Sufis maintain that God is like our own beloved. He is there to be loved. We must love him as Love is his only essence. Only pure love and renunciation can allow us to reach our Beloved. 4) Universal brotherhood and equality, tolerance etc are some of basic ideals of the Sufis. They are not in agreement with the Orthodox Islamic view that the believer in one God, Allah, the prophet and the Quran is different, or, more preferable than that of a non-believer in all of these, who is considered as a Kafir. They believe that a true Musalman is he who has respect in every religion and who believes that inside a non-believer there is a hidden true faith. ***“Shabistari in his ‘ Gulshan-i-Raz’ tries to prove that Christianity, Magianism and even Idolatry are not altogether bad and whatever is good in them must be accepted by the Sufis. ‘Within infidelity,’ says he, is hidden true faith’.***”(Quoted from “Sufism and Vedanta” by Roma Choudhury.Part- 1, Page- 38).

In Islam there is the reference of ‘Holy War’ which actually means that a true Musalman must kill his own lower self. Human Passions and animal instincts may divert him from the right tract of renunciation which is necessary for realizing God and reunion with Him. But the orthodox Islamic view has illustrated it in a typical sense. They announced that a true Musalman must declare a holy war against a non-believer in Islam, whereas the war is in fact a war within one’s own self for inner purification. 5) The Sufis believe in a direct revelation of God to anyone and everyone. They also recognize a complete union with that Almighty if one is really sincere and deserve to apprehend this ultimate end. 6) Asceticism is the most fundamental ideal of Sufism. They use to give up their society, family bonding and marriage also. Total dissociation of social and personal relationship is prescribed by the Sufis. 7) The Sufis advocates the doctrine of priesthood. They think that one must approach to God through a priest or saint, though it is opposed by the orthodox Muslims. 8) The Sufis generally practices begging, music, singing, dancing etc. which are practically disregarded by the so called True Muslims. 9) While Muhammed emphasized on practical and meaningful social life the Sufies gave stress on Quietism, the total rejection of all worldly pleasure and relations. They thought not of God’s grace but of the essence of Lord that, which is the actual reality beyond this phenomenal world. 10) Finally, the Sufis disregard the external rituals and obedience

to the religious laws laid by Quran. God is their beloved one and they try to sense Him in their heart. So the external observances are mere empirical performances to them, having no religious value. 11) The Sufis believe in the incarnation of God. They admit that the prophets are the perfect embodiment of God and they must be worshiped with reverence. On the contrary the Orthodox Muslims think that the prophets are none but the mere servants and messengers of God on this earth. 12) The Sufis believe in the eternity of the soul which is also opposed by the Orthodox Muslims.

Now this is time to convey a brief account of the Vedantic thought and its application in our life both external and internal. Vedanta practically is the cream of the Vedic interpretation of the Universe in general and all the so called worldly matters and happenings in particular. Vedanta, according to Swami Vivekananda is the only religion in this earth that can teach us how and why we should respect all the religions that are prevailing all over the world since from the emergence of this earth and should love everyone whoever is there with us in this creation. He showed us why the Vedantic Philosophy is logically justified and is capable of producing scientific explanations for all the theories it has propounded. So, now, we will see the exact spiritual ideals that have been passed on to us from the ancient sages and how they are contextual even today in our life. At the same time we will also try to perceive the general truths propounded by Vedanta Darsan which are very much analogous to that of the philosophy of the Sufis.

Advaita Vedanta Darsan provide not only a spiritual as well as religious aspect of human life and the universe, it also recommends a process of leading life which is not only spiritual but simultaneously practical and scientific. It is a way to spiritual life specially. As it considers human being as a spiritual organism consisting of Consciousness identical with that of the Pure Consciousness and, therefore, their endeavor must be spiritual, Vedanta gave an immutable path of life that gradually proceeds to the ultimate goal of our life, the freedom of soul and thereby union with that Infinite Super Consciousness, the Infinite Love and Bliss. Swami Bhajanananda wrote in one of his articles, ***“Vedanta, however, is not a mere view of Reality, it is also a way of life—not ordinary life, but spiritual life. Its aim is to enable human beings to solve the existential problems of life, transcend human limitations, go beyond suffering, and attain supreme fulfillment and peace.” (Four Basic Principles of Advaita Vedanta, page – 1).***

Advaita Vedanta has two aspects specially. It may be experienced by us, viz. it must be realized or be felt intensely through intuition. The other one is its practicality that has to be recognized and applied in our day to day life to solve the innumerable problems that are creating a constant nuisance and obliterate our tranquility. Shankaracharya said that Vedanta is necessary because Brahman has to be realized by super conscious perception. No book or reasoning can teaches us the process of knowing God. Vedanta advocates that God is within us and with us all the time. But we are not aware of His existence. We don't even know how to unveil the cover of ignorance (Maya) from our consciousness. Vedanta shows us that reality. It confirms that man is divine. As there is only one reality, no difference can exist because difference means at least the survival of two entities and it also admits limitation. Practically as this universe is identical with that Super Conscious Reality so no 'other' can be acknowledged. In Sruti it is said that “Ekam sad vipra vahudha vadanti”. It is also there in Sruti, “Aham Brahmasmi”. The former speaks about the oneness of the

reality. But man recognizes it in many ways and all the ways lead to Him, the 'Truth'. The later declares the identity between human being and that of the Brahman. So in Vedanta one is real and it is identical with the many. The many, as we recognize it in this phenomenal world, is illusory. And if the veil of ignorance is removed the reality will reveal itself and that will be the utmost end of realization. This is possible only through the observance of three particular ways. Either by acquiring true knowledge of reality,(Gnanamarga) or by surrendering oneself completely and unconditionally to the Lord,(Bhaktimarga) or by performing activities which are devoid of any kind of sensual attachments, (Niskama karma) and desires, (Karmamarga). A man can follow any one of these three and inevitably can achieve unity with God. Vedanta, in this respect also speaks of about the God's grace. It is necessary and it can be achieved only through meditation that is firm conviction and concentration on the object of meditation. There appears a certain stage in the field of meditation where the aspirant gets fused with his Lord, the object of meditation. This is, according to the Samkhya system, Asampragnata Samadhi.

Vedanta Darshan has a philosophy also which makes an effort to give a logical explanation of how the Supra Conscious being appeared or is being apprehend as an empirical world full of mortal, relative, material objects. Acharya Sankar introduced the concept of Maya to explain the existence of the external world that appears as real to our consciousness and thus gave an explanation of duality without affecting the non-dual aspect of Brahman as Reality. After Sankar Padmapada, Sureswar, Vachaspati etc gave emphasize on the discussion of Maya or ignorance and did a vast intellectual and sophisticated analysis of Vedanta. Later on, in the modern age Advaita has gained a new perspective when Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda explain it in an entirely different way and show the world the actual realistic and scientific value of Vedanta Darsan. They inaugurated and presented it simply in a most practical manner and successfully established the pragmatic value of Vedanta. They explained it as a supreme dynamic philosophical and at the same time spiritual doctrine which alone can unite the whole world into universal brotherhood and make man realize his inner divinity, that, which is his true nature. Swamiji marked it as the highest kind of philosophy and as well as a religion that enables everyone to know his identity and solve the world problem. As Vedanta makes no difference among human races total unity of mankind is possible through the practice of Vedantic thought, he explained. As Reality is one and ultimate, so differences are phenomenal. The so called sciences are aspiring for a general truth or a final source from which every matter has been come into existence. Swamiji shows that Vedanta is also assuming and not only assuming, but firmly establish the reality of One Ultimate Reason or Truth that is Brahman, from whom the whole universe has been evolved. So Vedanta is no lesser than science. It also can solve our personal inefficiency and social problems. It is a vast source of energy as it tells us about our divine nature, about our strength and internal heavenly power. It announces man's identity with God and makes man God. Sri Ramakrishna said that service to man is service to God which certainly proves the supremacy of mankind. Swamiji talked about unconditional sacrifice and service to all which advocates that this path of renunciation and subjugation of one's own self to the service of mankind is the best way to achieve freedom. Selfless act and love is needed for purification of one's soul. Vedanta teaches this lesson of self sacrifice which is the ultimate aim of morality. Ethics always says to keep the other before me and if that other is none but myself then there remain no question of sacrifice or compromise, Vedanta thus establish one

world, full of love bliss and happiness all around. Here God's immanence has been highlighted, not his transcendence.

We observe that Vedanta is talking about self- renunciation, sacrifice, and mutual co-existence. It says about total surrender to God and of universal love to each and every one in this earth including inanimate objects, as everything is but the manifestation of that Supreme Lord. The Sufis also emphasizes on these perspectives of religion and morality. Swamiji believed that the synthesis of these two religious beliefs should create a miracle and India will rise at its highest form of spirituality with "Vedanta Brain and Islam Body". He dreamt of a new enlightened and prosperous India and expressed his deep reverence for Islam many a times in his numerous lectures and letters. He wrote once ***"I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Veda brain and Islam body."*** (CWS, Vol – 6, Page – 416).

A harmony of religions is the actual motive that Swamiji wanted to preach actually. In the World Parliament of Religion in 1893 the first address that gave the Swami an outstanding appreciation was "My sisters and brothers of America". If we notice sincerely that in these words the main thing that hypnotized the mass was Swamiji's attitude. His attitude towards every human being dwelt in every corner of the World. He actually addressed the human race as a whole. This uniqueness of his sincere love and affection to all was somehow felt by the Americans. A man like Swamiji, devoid of any kind of self approval and thirst for worldly pleasure, when speaks something, each word coming from his inner self, makes an enormous impact. Swamiji's plan of harmonizing different religious sects was really a mission of his life. Man has made all these differences and this is necessary, Swamiji said. Life without variations is dull. The disputes and argumentation always is necessary for further progress. But man must realize the truth that these are all superfluous. The worship of humanity is the main objective. Swamiji thought of a world where there will be perfect unity amongst diversity. He tried to make the world realize the strength of synchronization. He understood that, by saying that we belong to one sect and we appreciate universal brotherhood, we actually make a barrier that differentiates us from others. If we do not recognize others opinions and show sincere reverence to them, if we don't accept all of them as original and true as my own opinion is, do not accept them from within and give the next seat to sit, nothing productive will be made. So the only way is, the way of acceptance. Vedanta, Islam, Bible, Granthasahib, all these are nothing but the different vehicles that carry us to that Infinity. They are like different spokes of a same wheel that have the common centre, and the wheel is rolling. It is always changing and going on touching different points of our life but the meeting point is the same. Therefore, keeping in mind the all over development of human race, Swamiji asked for universal acceptance, for mutual reverence to each other and for worship to mankind. He alleged for universal religion, tried utmost for the spiritual uplift of every human being and prayed for the universal spirituality – for all humanity.

Bibliography

1. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda. Vol – 6 (Mayavati Memorial Edition). Published by Swami Bodhasarananda Adhyaksha, Advaita Ashrama. Mayavati, Champawat, Uttarakhand, Himalayas. January 2012.
2. Pracyavani-Mandira, Comparative Religion and Philosophy Series, Vol – 1. “Sufism and Vedanta”, Part – 1; Sufism, by Roma Choudhuri. Published by Dr. J.B. Chaudhuri. Calcutta, 1945.
3. Four basic Principles of Advaita Vedanta, by Swami Bhajanananda, Source: Prabuddha Bharat--- Jan/Feb 2010.(Collected from Internet).