



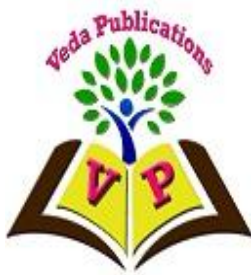
THE NEO-VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY OF SWAMI VIVEKANANDA

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ABSTRACT



This paper aims to evaluate the interpretation of Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta philosophy. Vedanta is the philosophy of Vedas, those Indian scriptures which are the most ancient religious writings now known to the world. It is the philosophy of the self. And the self is unchangeable. It cannot be called old self and new self because it is changeless and ultimate. So the theory is also changeless. Neo-Vedanta is just like the traditional Vedanta interpreted with the perspective of modern man and applied in practical-life. By the Neo-Vedanta of Swami Vivekananda is meant the New-Vedanta as distinguished from the old traditional Vedanta developed by Sankaracharya (c.788-820AD). Neo-Vedantism is a re-establishment and reinterpretation of the Advaita Vedanta of Sankara with modern arguments, in modern language, suited to modern man, adjusting it with all the modern challenges. In the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century many masters used Vedanta philosophy for human welfare. Some of them were Rajarammohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Sri Cattampi Swamikal, Sri Narayana Guru, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Ramana Maharshi.

Keywords: *Female subjugation, Religious belief, Liberation, Chastity, Self-sacrifice.*



Vedanta is the philosophy of Vedas, those Indian scriptures which are the most ancient religious writings now known to the world. Dr. Hajime Nakamura says: "The Vedanta tradition has a great significance in the intellectual history of India, and it is the representative philosophy which forms the principal current of thought in that country. The Philosophy of Vedanta is handed down through the ages in the blood of the Indian people. It is inseparable from the soil of this great Asian continent." Literally, the word 'Vedanta' means the end of the Vedas or conclusion of the Vedas. In the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century many masters used Vedanta philosophy for human welfare. Some of them were Rajarammohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Sri Cattampi Swamikal, Sri Narayana Guru, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Ramana Maharshi. Vedanta is the philosophy of the self. And the self is unchangeable. It cannot be called old self and new self because it is changeless and ultimate. So the theory is also changeless.

There are three forms of Vedanta which spread in the West:

- The Neo-Vedanta inspired by Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission, and also developed by Aldous Huxley in the last twenty years of his life before his passing away in 1963.

- The recent Vedanta teachers which are keen to come back to the essentials and to speak very simply to the western audience. In this endeavor, they may end up far away from the Indian roots of Advaita; still, they communicate a message important for the West still recovering of two thousand years of a forcible dualist religion.

- The Vedanta of academicians, more interested in comparative philosophy and Sanskrit.

The basis of the Neo-Vedanta philosophy was led by Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and its superstructure was built by his ardent disciple Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). They both emphasized the practical nature of Vedanta. Neo-Vedanta is the traditional Vedanta interpreted in terms of modern thought and applied in practical life. Vedanta has

always been new; it has been constantly undergoing the process of self-renewal. This is, of course, true for all the religions of the world. A religion which does not renew itself, which cannot adjust itself to changing circumstances, will die. The renewal process of Vedanta has been brought about not by destroying other religions and cultures, but by integrating their best elements.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati was a great Vedic scholar and one of the great leaders of the modern Indian renaissance. Swami Dayananda was a powerful human dynamo, physically, mentally and spiritually. According to Sri K.M. Munshi, he was "the first among the moderns who lived and taught others to live up to the permanent values of our culture". A distinguished religious leader, social reformer, system builder Swami Dayananda was a gifted speaker and prolific writer, too. ; He was born in 1825 in the village of Tankara in the old Morvi state of Kathiyavar, which now forms part of Rajkot district in Gujarat. He left his home in 1846, at the age of 21, following a dispute with his father. The father wanted the son to get married, but he was not prepared for it. The boy, Mulbhaskar as he was called, became a sanyasin later and came to be called Dayananda Saraswati. The boy wandered all over India for nearly twenty years and learnt the Vedas. During 1860-63 he was with Virjanand of Mathura the blind saint with a giant intellect, who taught him the sacred works and inspired him to uphold his life mission to reestablish the Vedic religion. During the years from 1863 to 1875, Swami Dayananda extensively toured the country and held scholarly disputations with men of different faiths and leaders of protestant movements. His voluminous writings include commentaries on the first three Vedas, an encyclopedic work on Hinduism called Satyarthaparka's, a book of prayers and a work on Sanskrit grammar. Though his mother tongue was Gujarati, he spoke and wrote mainly in Hindi.

Vivekananda was the first Indian participant of Parliament of Religion (1893) who not only succeeded in establishing NeoVedanta, the central theology of Hinduism but he also perpetuated his views both to India and outside India. He claims that



Hinduism (neo-Vedanta) is the only true religion that acknowledges the religious diversity by preaching the message of tolerance and religious harmony (King, 1999, pp. 135-136) in the nineteenth century. The contextualized interpretation of the Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta is fabricated in historical perspective of the pluralistic society of Bengal. It does not focus on the doctrine and principles of his NeoVedanta rather emphasizes on socio-historical factors of nineteen century Bengal that transformed classical Advaita Vedanta into neo-Vedanta. This transformation took place in the nineteenth century Bengal while Hindus, Muslims and Christian interaction can be noticed from date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth century

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The Vedas, particularly the mantra part of them, are the words of God. He who is called Brahman or the most high or the Paramatman permeates the whole universe. Dharma, which is truthfulness in thought, word and deed, is the will of God as embodied in the Vedas. Salvation is to be attained through worship of God, the performance of time-honored ritual deeds and the acquisition of true knowledge. Samskaras are those rituals which contribute to the physical, mental and spiritual improvement of man. Swami Dayananda rejected idol worship and polytheism. He fought against superstitions, child-marriage, hereditary caste system, untouchability and enforced widow-hood. He advocated women's education, a scientific education grafted on to an essentially Indian education, a single national language and the study of Sanskrit. 'Back to the Vedas' was his classic call. He said: "The Vedas are the scriptures of all-time knowledge. It is our paramount duty to teach them to others, to hear them and to recite them to others".

Swami Vivekananda's vision of Vedanta is his lasting legacy to contemporary spiritual thought.

When his work in America needed an organizational structure, he chose to name it as Vedanta Society. Vivekananda was the first Indian participant of Parliament of Religion (1893) who not only succeeded in establishing Neo-Vedanta, the central theology of Hinduism but he also perpetuated his views both to India and outside India. By the word "Vedanta" Vivekananda means religion with a capital R, which (as he once said) is the "one eternal religion." According to Swamiji, it is this one eternal religion that "is applied to different planes of existences, is applied to the opinions of various minds, and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways."

To conclude, we have seen some of the important ways in which Vedanta is understood and identified. Technically it is the most appropriate name for the religion practiced by present-day Hindus. Popularly it is considered one of the many traditions within Hinduism and often identified with the no dualistic approach to reality. Literally—and this is how Swami Vivekananda generally employs the word—Vedanta is simply "the essence of knowledge." Every true seeker of knowledge can be considered to be a Vedanta student.

We can say that no matter what Vedanta means to us, one thing is certain: the roots of Vedanta are neither in the East nor in the West, neither in any particular culture nor in any particular language. The roots of Vedanta are neither in books, nor in persons, nor in places. The roots of Vedanta are in the hearts of every one of us. If we can reach out and touch those roots, they will guide us upwards along the tree until we discover the fruit of knowledge in the palm of our hands. The purpose of the Vedanta Societies in the Western world is to water the roots and facilitate the growth of a healthy plant. The flowers of this plant are peace and joy, and its fruit is knowledge—the knowledge that frees us from bondage and gives us total fulfillment.

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