

## **Vedanta and its Modern Understanding:**

### **A Critical Study of the Concept of Anekānta Vedanta**

#### **Introduction:**

Taking Indian Philosophical schools as different branches of a tree, we find that they are extended from the same stem, namely the Veda. As springs come down from the mountain peaks, in the same way, the schools of Indian philosophy have been developed from their origin— the Vedic scriptures. There are four parts of the Vedas, namely Samhitā, Brāhman, Āraṇyaka and Upanishad. The philosophical school that developed directly on the first two parts is called Mīmāṃsā, while the school that is founded solely on Upanishad is known as Vedanta. The thought embedded in the Upanishad found philosophical tenet in the ‘Brahmasūtra’ of Vādarāyaṇa. Several commentaries are written on ‘Brahmasūtra’ by different scholars; in accordance with those commentaries, several sects are developed. In this way, Vedanta has left an impact not only in the philosophical literature of India, but a clear impression of Vedanta is witnessed in the ethos and culture of Indian societies.

Although Vedanta reigned supreme in ancient India, it is owing to the inability to make the subtle thoughts of Vedanta accessible to the common people; a large part of the society became disinterested in the Vedic culture. In this way, the rise of non-Vedantic thoughts was witnessed in medieval India. Taking rest in heterodox culture, the Vedantic tradition found reinforcement and ultimately got modest expression in the thoughts of Indian philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There were many great poets and essayists, politicians and social workers, seers and others— who nurtured and cultured the Vedantic thought in their ways. This modern understanding of Vedanta is the current research context.

There were many thinkers like Rammohan, Debendranath, Sri Ramakrishna, Bankimchandra, Rabindranath, Sri Aurobindo, Krishnachandra, Radhakrishnan and others in whose writings Vedanta got its expression in different ways. However, it is Kalidas Bhattacharya, in particular, in whose writings Vedanta received a unique formation. Taking Vedanta from his own viewpoint, Kalidas has explained all philosophical schools of Indian tradition as varied manifestations of the same Vedanta– in other words– ‘Anekānta of Vedanta’. Prof. Bhattacharya’s concept of ‘Anekānta Vedanta’ is the main area of this research work. How does Kalidas’s understanding of Vedanta differ from the classical viewpoint? How far is it different from the understanding of other modern philosophers? In what sense Vedanta can be claimed as ‘Anekānta’? Is it a mere re-iteration of the ‘Anekāntavāda’ of the Jain? To what extent is it innovative? Why is it markedly different from Ramakrishna’s ideal of ‘Jata mat tata path’ on one hand and the non-absolutism of Krishnachandra on the other? Is there any moral or social compulsion that led Kalidas Bhattacharya to reach this viewpoint? These are the questions addressed in this research work.

To find out answer to those queries, the entire research work has been divided into four chapters. Those chapters run as follows:

Chapter I: Introducing Vedanta.

Chapter II: Impact of Vedanta on Modern Indian thinkers.

Chapter III: Kalidas Bhattacharya and the Concept of Anekānta Vedanta.

Chapter IV: Exploring the background of ‘Anekānta Vedanta’.

### **First Chapter: Introducing Vedanta**

Before understanding how much Vedanta has been reflected in contemporary philosophy and how far Professor Bhattacharya’s idea of ‘Anekānta Vedanta’ fits with the traditional idea of

Vedanta, it is necessary to have an understanding of what exactly Vedanta traditionally means. The first chapter of this research paper is dedicated to the analysis of traditional schools of Vedanta. Although ‘Brahmasūtra’ of Vādarāyaṇa is the common philosophical source, different schools originated based on commentaries written on that text. In this chapter, the conventional commentaries of Vedanta, which have been written on ‘Brahmasūtra’, are discussed. From this compulsion, the literal and traditional senses of expression ‘Vedanta’ are elaborated. After clarifying the concept of Vedanta in this chapter, the researcher has endeavoured to reveal the differences among the schools of Vedanta that are developed on various commentaries written on ‘Brahmasūtra’. In the very next step, an attempt has been made to go through the accounts founded and propagated by different commentators, namely by Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Nimbārka, Madhva, Vallabha, Bhāṣkara and Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa.

## **Second Chapter: Impact of Vedanta on Modern Indian thought**

The second chapter of this work aims to establish the impact that classical Vedanta left on contemporary philosophical thought in India. It is undoubtedly true that classical Vedanta has left an indelible impression on contemporary Indian thought. Particularly, the philosophical thoughts developed in India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been greatly influenced by Vedanta. To establish this claim, the researcher has gone through an analysis of the writings of some contemporary Indian philosophers.

In the writings of the thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, an urge is seen to return to the root of Indian philosophical thought, i.e. to the Upanishadic tradition of ancient India. In most of the Indian thinkers who appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we observed a tendency to follow either Advaita or Viśiṣṭādvaita or some other sect of Vedanta. Although in their writings we do not find the classical convention of defending the original text with sufficient elaboration, however in developing their poetical, political or social-literary works, they have

maintained the Vedantic traditions of ancient India in some way or other. In this chapter, an attempt is made to go through the philosophical world views of some of those thinkers of modern India, particularly the metaphysical views of Rammohan, Debendranath, Bankimchandra, Sri Ramakrishna, Rabindranath, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Krishnachandra and Radhakrishnan.

After giving brief accounts of the philosophical thought developed in the writings of the contemporary philosophers mentioned above the researcher proceeded to make a comparative study among those views. It is seen that the thinkers mentioned above are not follower of the same sect of Vedanta. In Rammohan, primacy is given mainly to jñāna or knowledge. However, he was not a pious person, rather a social activist who wanted to remove the superstitions that were embedded with the observation of Vedantic as well as Hindu culture. Even being a hard-core follower of Śāṅkara Vedanta, Rammohan didn't deny the reality of this world, nor consider it as an illusory reflection of Brahman.

Debendranath Tagore, on the contrary, was deadly against the interpretation of Upanishads put forward by Śāṅkara. Like Rammohan, he belongs to Brahmasamāja, but instead of jñāna (knowledge), he emphasized on bhakti and anubhuti (devotion and feeling) in his writings. At the very outset, he seems to be a follower of Madhva. However, in his later writings a tendency is seen to go beyond the binary of Svatantra and Paratantra, which fits better with the philosophy of Rāmānuja.

Advocation of almost all variants of Vedanta is noticed in Sri Ramakrishna's teaching and perching. Hence, it is really puzzling to conclude about the position he was in favour of. But if we do justice to Pramahansa's thought, it can aptly be said that his philosophical position is the synthesis of all Vedantas.

Unlike the former two, Bankimchandra was a hard-core follower of Hinduism. He was clearly an advocate of qualified monism, who observed the relation between worshipped and worshiper as *śānta*, *dāśya*, *sakhya*, *vāstaly*, and *madhura*. He believed in the reality of Krishna, who is endowed with all sorts of good qualities. A harmonious culture of knowledge, devotion and action is prescribed by him in his 'Dharmatattva'. However, preponderance to *niṣkāma* karma, i.e. renunciation in action is the hallmark of Bankim's Vedanta.

From Tagore's poetic writings, it is really difficult to judge in which school he belongs. It is true that he believes in the non-duality of everything. In man's universe, he has described how, through the process of evolution, everything has come out from one ultimate reality. But unlike Śaṅkara, he admits this world and the worldly life as real and non-illusory. The type of liberation he aspires is not transcendent, but a matter of having the feeling of oneness of all in this earthly life that leads a person to attain '*Ānanda*', i.e. the feeling of joy, love and bliss together. So, the form of Vedanta he is in favour of would be described as one type of 'Concrete Monism' or 'Mukta Advaitavāda'.

Vivekananda, unlike the formers, has lived an ascetic life. It is vehemently declared by Swamiji himself that he is a follower of Advaita Vedanta. But many points of departure from Śaṅkara's Vedanta are also noticed in his writings. His life was an experiment to put Vedanta into practice. That's why the type of Vedanta he follows is often called neo-Vedanta or practical Vedanta.

Sri Aurobindo was exceptional from his predecessors to a great extent. In his integrated monism, unification between matter and consciousness is proposed. It is in matter, he believes, the pure consciousness is expressed in a synchronized form. Hence, there can be evolution and liberation in the case of matter also. The type of Advaita theory he attempted to defend is popularly known as Puraṇadvaitavāda or Perfect Monism. Tagore was in favour of giving

emphasis to a particular state of mind, only knowledge or feeling or action. In Vivekananda, we observed an alternation of those mental states. In addition to Jñāna, Bhakti and Karma yoga, Swamiji spoke of Raja yoga too. While in Sri Aurobindo, a way of Integral yoga is prescribed where Jñāna, Bhakti, and Karma all ways are incorporated together.

To Krishnachandra Bhattacharya, Ultimate reality is beyond understanding or intellectualisation. At this point, his claim resembles with the view of Śaṅkara. However, he is not in favour of approaching that reality through any positive means, like, jñāna, bhakti, karma etc. In his opinion, it is only through negation or denial that one can reach to that ultimate. The researcher finds some sort of similarity with Śaṅkara in this approach also. In Śaṅkaras non-dualism, the entire worldview is fabricated on the basis of adhyāropa or illusory ascription. As snakeness is ascribed on a rope, in the same way, the world appearance is wrongly fabricated on Brahman. Only when one proceeds through the path of apavāda, i.e. denial or negation of the predicate, he can reach to the reality.

Radhakrishnan's understanding is an admixture of Advaita Vedanta of Śaṅkara and the Absolute idealism of the West. Like Śaṅkara, he admits consciousness as one and supreme reality is beyond attributes and forms. However, it is expressed in different ways in the form of animate and inanimate things. Like Brahman of Śaṅkara, Absolute to Radhakrishnan is not a distant, unknowable entity, rather, it is pure consciousness that permeates everything. Neither by sense nor by intellect we can have awareness about that ultimate reality; it is only by intuitive feelings for a type of mystical experience that one can be aware about this all-pervading consciousness. One would be able to achieve his goal of life only by transcending the illusion of dualism.

### **Third Chapter: Kalidas Bhattacharya and the Concept of Anekānta Vedanta**

Professor Kalidas Bhattacharya is one of the most original philosophers to emerge in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many great philosophers appeared at that time, in whose writings Vedanta received various manifestations. However, in the writings of contemporary Indian thinkers, we find a re-appearance of traditional Vedantic schools in different ways. Prof. Kalidas Bhattacharya is such a philosopher of the academic tradition, in whose writings; we witness a modern and unique interpretation of Vedanta that has not been seen in any of his predecessors. The philosophical approach witnessed in his writings makes him different from all other thinkers of the time. He points out Vedanta can be defined in such a way that the multifaceted Indian thoughts can be mingled into one. By providing a new definition of Vedanta, he has not only narrated the various forms of Vedanta in one unit but also explained almost all Indian sects, regardless to orthodox or heterodox, as variations of the same of Vedantic culture. In this chapter, an attempt is made to go through the philosophical approach of Kalidas Bhattacharya, particularly the modern interpretation he introduced in the field of Vedanta— in other words, his concept of '*Anekānta Vedanta*'.

Traditionally, by Vedanta, we understand the philosophical system or systems which are founded on the last part of the Vedas, i.e. the Upanishads. But this way of understanding Vedanta, which is commonly approved, is not endorsed by Kalidas; nor does he observe Vedanta as the extract of Prasthān trays— namely Śruti Smṛiti and Nyāya. In his view, Vedanta has two foundations (lakṣana)— one is 'tolerance to other views' ('paramata sahiṣṇutā') and the other is 'indifference' ('udārata'). He feels that if any philosophy has influenced Indian culture, tradition and lifestyle, it is none other than Vedanta. According to Kalidas, the trust in one absolute and the tendency to judge the multitude of things in terms of that one, have given rise to the idea of 'tolerance' and 'indifference'.

If we look back to the philosophical tradition of India, we see that there are conflicts, disputes, adversaries, and refutations on epistemological, metaphysical and moral issues. Not

only among the schools of different traditions, minute points of departures are noticed, even within the womb of a particular system. If we focus our attention on the nine popular schools, it is brought to our notice that while some of them are orthodox, some are heterodox, some advocate theism and some other atheism; even the theists differ from one another in many issues: whether God is only omniscient or omnipresent too, whether He is the creator of the world or not; even if God is the creator, does He play the role of efficient cause only or both material and efficient etc. Taking all these differences into account, one may object, do we have any right to claim that all schools of Indian philosophy, without having any exception, are manifestations of Vedanta?

Prof. Bhattacharya acknowledges that there are many philosophical theories and ideas. But in his opinion, amidst them, only those views were retained which maintained compatibility with the Vedantic outlook— particularly the belief in oneness, the ideal of tolerance and indifference. Wherever deviated from this outlook, they failed to make the mark in Indian culture and society. After explaining the contribution of other philosophical schools in this manner, Kalidas comes to the conclusion that whatever philosophical schools appeared and survived in Indian tradition that can be viewed as a manifestation or duplication of Vedanta.

#### **Fourth Chapter: Exploring the background of ‘Anekānta Vedanta’**

Every exceptional or innovative thought has a background of its origination; it crops out in the mind of a thinker in a typical situation. The same holds true in the origination of Prof. Bhattacharya’s modern understanding of Vedanta. The alternative Vedanta he tends to defend also has its roots, which branched out and took the form of a banyan tree through the long journey of philosophical understanding. Although it was western thought, to a great extent, which led him to reconcile the conflicting epistemological and metaphysical claims to reach



his philosophy of alternation, there are contributions of classical Indian schools in giving birth to his noble view.

If we notice his family tradition, particularly the academic environment in which he was developed, it becomes clear that there was an urge for alternation from the very beginning. If we go through the philosophical writings of his father, Krishnachandra, we notice that there was a search for the nature of the Absolute, which ended in one type of non-absolutism. Behind cognitive relativity, there is a tendency to think of an Absolute entity, which is unchanging or eternal. This is the approach which the religious thinkers often advocate. But Krishnachandra was not in favour of this type of absolutism, rather, on the background of the plurality of knowledge, Krishnachandra thought of multiplicity of reality– a plurality of the Absolute. In a sense, it amounts to a denial of the absolute. In his opinion, corresponding to the alternation of cognition, there is alternation in the realm of reality. This philosophy of alternation has greatly influenced the thoughts and writings of his son Kalidas. In his research work, he has nurtured and nourished this standpoint and that approach received maturation in his idea of ‘Anekānta Vedanta’.

## **Conclusion**

After providing exposition and explanation of Prof. Kalidas Bhattacharya’s concept of ‘Anekānta Vedanta’, it is necessary to enquire justification in its favour. It is also necessary to show that the view Prof. Bhattacharya endeavoured to defend is neither a baseless imagination nor is it coined from any other philosophical thought. In conclusion, the researcher has tried to establish the plausibility and originality of the thought by nullifying the claims like– it is an application of Jain ‘Anekāntavāda’ in the domain of Vedanta or a slide modification of the view of religious pluralism of Sri Sri Ramakrishna. Finally, it is also shown that though his father’s philosophy of alternation cast a spell on his mind, the credit for applying this method

of alternation in the field of Vedanta goes absolutely in favour of Kalidas. Not only that, although like Krishnachandra, Kalidas also advocates one type of disjunction of the alternative views, the disjunction he opts for is a type of inclusive one, whereas the disjunction Krishnachandra intended to defend is an exclusive one.