

## ADVAITA VEDĀNTA AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

It is generally thought that philosophy or philosophical discussion is such that a lay man can hardly follow it and can hardly be benefited by it. It is something chilly abstraction. There is a very interesting story regarding philosophical discussion. Once a university professor was asked by his little son as to what a philosophical discussion was. His father gravely said, 'If A talks to B and B talks to A and neither understands the other, then you have, what you may call a philosophical discussion.' It is this attitude of so-called philosophers that is responsible for all the ugly terror that metaphysics causes in the ordinary man. Wittgenstein remarks about metaphysics in his book 'Tractatus' as follows, 'Metaphysics is a kind of mental perplexity, a puzzling inclination to make assertions absurdly at variance with obvious facts.' A. K. Krishnaswami Iyer's remarks, in his book, 'Vedānta or the Science of Reality' about the philosophical systems of the East and the West, are worth quoting here :

"While the history of the philosophical systems of Europe shows that the popularity of each has been temporary and that the number of their adherents has dwindled away in the course of time, till later generations came to look upon them as speculative curiosities. While no Western school, even when it dominated contemporary thought, materially affected modes of life or principles of action in general, the influence of Vedānta on its followers, has been deep and lasting. Its truths have coloured national ideals and aspirations have insinuated themselves into every rite or ceremony and are perennial source of consolation and patience, of fortitude and hope."<sup>1</sup> Thus Indian philosophy in general and Advaita Vedānta in particular has a definite agreed aim and has never been cut off from life. It has been as practical as any science of today can claim to be. In the present paper an attempt has been made to show as to how far Advaita Vedānta system is helpful in bringing about social integration; how far its teachings are applicable in bringing the whole human race into universal brotherhood.

### Meaning of Society

In order to understand the social integration, it is necessary to understand the meaning of society. According to Oxford dictionary, 'society' means associations of persons united by a common aim, interest or principle. The word 'integration' means combining into whole. According to sociology, 'a society is a group with certain characteristics',<sup>2</sup> such as definite territory, comprehensive culture etc. It is where man acts and interacts, while integration of society deals with the relations between individuals and sub-groups. This integration depends upon several things; such as common values; widespread acceptance of norms; a near-monopoly of the means of force in the government etc. To sum up, society is a group of persons, living together in a particular place and its integration stands for association or relations of persons combined into a whole for a common interest. But at the very outset, I would like to point out that the technicalities of sociology do not form a part of my present discussion.

Society, according to Advaita Vedānta, is the mental conception of the aggregate (Samastī) of individuals (Vyastī) in the same way as a forest is an aggregate mentally conceived of individual trees in a particular place. Hence society does not exist apart from its individual units as persons. The social integration, therefore, in Advaita Vedānta means a complete harmony—Samanvaya—of society. This integration means to remove all kinds of apparent contradictions and distinctions by laying stress on underlying reality. *Sūtrakāra Bādarāyaṇa* uses this word *Samanvaya* (1.1.4) in the very beginning of his Vedantic aphorism. The implication of the term—*Samanvaya*, therefore, is the removal of all apparent contradictions or discordant factors and clashes of individuals by bringing out the ultimate factor of unity i.e. *Ātman* as the ultimate cause and the controlling power of all apparent diversities or manifestations in the world. Western thinkers such as Aristotle, Kant, Bishop, Butler, etc. have also tried to bring a harmony between individual and society, between the inner and the outer perspective of morality. According to Aristotle reason establishes control over all the impulses—egoistic and altruistic—and justifies both if excesses are avoided and the

golden mean is observed. For Kant 'Duty' rather than love is the expression of highest virtue. Butler begins his moral theorising by making conscience the balancing force between 'self-love' and 'benevolence'. These thinkers, though they hinted at various factors of integration, yet have failed to make a direct approach to one underlying unifying factor. It is Advaita Vedānta alone which takes account of one Reality, one eternal existence—and solves the problems of the practical world by accepting three categories of existence, viz., (1) illusory existence, (2) phenomenal existence, and (3) the absolute existence.

By illusory existence is meant the experience of the existence of a snake in a rope. This is called illusory because the illusion of snake in a rope is removed by the perception of rope, the substratum. Phenomenal existence stands for our everyday life experience of the existence of worldly objects such as pots, houses etc. This phenomenal existence of things continues till the realisation of self.

The experience of absolute existence which is not different from the eternal Reality i.e. Ātman, is never sublated at any time either in waking condition, dream or sound sleep. Everyone is conscious of the existence of his own self, and no one thinks, 'I am not'. Śāṅkara Bhāṣya, 1.1.1. Even when one tries to negate it, he cannot do so 'for it is the essential nature of him who denies it'. Śāṅkara Bhāṣya 2.3.7. As the substratum of an illusory object is the phenomenal object, so the substratum of all phenomenal imposed objects is the eternal existence i.e. Ultimate Reality, the Ātman. When this Ultimate Reality is seen by the mind imposing names and forms over it, the phenomenal world comes into existence, just as the wood. The substance e.g. wood is one but when a name and a form are added to it, it becomes a table, or a chair etc. in our everyday life. In reality there is no difference between wood and a table or a chair, except the addition of names and forms to it<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, the ultimate existence or Reality is not different from the existences of phenomenal or illusory objects. All differences are created by the imposition of names and forms on the Ultimate Reality. They are, therefore, called apparent as they are sublated by the perception of the substratum. Ultimate Reality continues in all

our existence, in waking, dream and dreamless sleep conditions. All the sciences—physical, social, economic, ethical etc.—are based only on our waking condition and as they neglect the conditions of dream and sound sleep, their generalizations and laws have only partial truth arrived at by faulty observation of facts of only our waking conditions.

It is now clear from the above discussion that all questions and problems of society, its conflicts and clashes and the problem of its integration find place only in the second level of existence. It is this second level of existence (Vyāvahārika Sattā) on which our worldly affairs depend. But in the third stage of existence (Pāramārthika Sattā) which we call transcendental existence or Ultimate Reality or pure consciousness, social questions, its problems and integration find no place. This is a state of existence, the Pure Consciousness, the Ultimate Reality, where one without second alone remains.

But it does not mean that this system of philosophy is a way of escape, a speculative intellectual exercise, or it overlooks the practical problems of the world. On the contrary, it takes account of all kinds of problems, distinctions, diversities and discordant factors present in the everyday world. It faces them boldly and lays down incontrovertible convincing solutions based on our everyday experience of life. On the basis of analysis of rope-snake experience we find that it is an amalgamation of real and unreal. (Brahma Sūtra Adhyāsabhāṣya). Similarly, in all our phenomenal world experiences and problems, we find a mixture of truth and falsehood, the substratum and the superimposed, the real and the unreal. In all these experiences, the transcendental Reality continues as substratum. All dualism is due to our ignorance of this Reality. This nescience of the Real is called *Avidyā* or *Māyā*, the factor which causes world illusion. It divides one into many and causes a mixture of reality and falsehood, giving birth to all kinds of problems.

Before proceeding further, it is worthwhile to understand the nature of nescience or ignorance, the cause of diversities and distinctions within unity. In Advaita Vedānta, nescience is described as something positive, a beginningless factor which can only be removed, by the knowledge of *Ātman*. This factor

cannot be described in terms as real i.e. *Sat* or non-real i.e. *Asat* or real and non-real both i.e. *Sadasat*. As it is indescribable in terms of real and non-real it is called *Anirvacanīya*. Being of such nature it is also regarded as unreal or *Mithyā* as has been said by the Advaita Siddhikara, as that which one can neither accept as true nor reject as non-real. (p.544) Had it been real, it could not be removed. Had it been non-real, like a son of a barren woman, or the horns of a hare, it could not be experienced as appearance. It cannot be real and non-real both, as these terms are self-contradictory. Its creation is also regarded as unreal or *Mithyā* in Advaita Vedānta.

This nescience or *Māyā* is an object of our experience. This nescience or ignorance has two functions : concealment of the real i.e., *Āvaraṇa* and the projection of the unreal i.e., *Vikṣepa* in the form of diversity e. g. ignorance of the rope not only conceals the rope from the eyes of a perceiver but also projects a snake in it which is unreal. All differences and diversities are therefore, due to this nescience : the ignorance of Self. It envelops the true knowledge; hence the follies of all creatures as has been said in the *Gītā*. (5-15)

This ignorance, which is natural to man is, therefore, the cause of disintegration and diversities in the form of super-imposition. It is said to be beginningless, endless, natural, possessed of the form of wrong knowledge, the cause of agency, enjoyment and activity of the individual souls and is patent to all. ( *Brahma Sūtra Adhyāsa Bhāṣya*.)

Identity or integration, therefore, means the removal of this divisive factor. It can be established by proving all that appears to be other than Reality as essentially identical with the latter or utterly unreal. The author of Advaita Siddhi has given four ways to establish this identity<sup>4</sup>. Identity is proved by —

1. Superimposition of one thing upon another; or
2. by sublation of what is appearance out of the two, the other of which is reality and emerges finally as the surviving factor; or
3. by proving a state of apposition between two things; or
4. by proving that there is an essential unity between two

entities, though appearing to be distinct from each other. Advaita Vedānta takes into consideration the last to prove identity in diversity.

It has already been pointed out that society is a concept based on aggregate of individuals. The question is how the distinctions and diversities, in the form of different castes, creeds etc. found in society can be removed in order to achieve social integration? Is social integration possible, if there is no integrating underlying principle at the root? If society is disintegrated, if we find it divided into different units such as castes, creeds, groups, religious sects and if all these discordant factors are real, it is futile to talk of social integration. If man by nature has an unique individuality, real and lasting, it is impossible to unite such individuals, and their distinguishing features can hardly be demolished. But if all these distinctions and diversities of individuals are mere appearance or superimposed, there is every hope to remove them by realising the underlying reality. Because what is nonexistent cannot be brought about into existence and what is really existent can in no case be annihilated, as says the Gīta. (The Gīta 2 : 16) e. g. if there is no oil in the sand, one cannot bring it out by whatsoever means. It is only Advaita Vedānta which proves on logical grounds that these distinctions and diversities of castes, creeds etc. are mere appearance superimposed on Reality, one without second, which is the underlying unifying principle, the only practical solution for the problem of social integration. All differences are due to nescience of our own real nature. They continue to exist as long as our vision is distorted and coloured by ignorance and we are not perceiving the ultimate principle behind them. But as soon as we cross the boundary of ignorance, these differences totally disappear. When we look at these divergences from a higher standpoint, that is from the point of transcendental existence, persons belonging to different castes, creeds, nationality etc. become one, pure consciousness, the very self of the "seer". This is not an impractical utopian ideal. But this has been proved as a practical way of life by such realised souls as Ramana Maharsi and Rāmkrīṣṇa.

The cosmic consciousness which manifests itself clearly in the states of waking, dream and sound sleep, the soul consciousness

bears witness to whole universe threading the physical bodies of all beings, beginning from *Brahma* to insignificant ant. A person who realizes that I am verily the same consciousness and not this seeing physical self and who possesses this strong conviction or wisdom, let that man be a Brahmin or a Cāṇḍāla, he is verily the preceptor of the world; this is my firm opinion. Lord Kṛṣṇa also declares the same truth in his Gīṭā (5.18)

The wise looks with the same eye on a Brahmin endowed with learning and scriptural discipline, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a Cāṇḍāla. Here all the orthodoxies and heterodoxies melt into transcendental catholicism. In this state all approved distinctions and diversities lose their existence. The problem of one and many thus, has been solved by Advaita Vedānta on the principle of oneness. It tells us that the essence of man is one and only one. But it is our ignorance that hides this truth of oneness, or unity and creates the illusion of many. It is this ignorance that gives birth to the feeling of duality : 'I'ness, 'mine' and 'thine'. It generates a chasm between individual and individual and between individual and society. It divides the whole world into nations, states, high and low and the whole human race into different clashing classes, creeds, sects etc.

Advaita Vedānta does not close its eyes to the existing order of diversities and apparent distinctions. But it clears our vision by removing the veil of ignorance and thus broadens our outlook. In other words, it changes our way of looking at things. Prior to the dawn of knowledge, a man sees things from the point of view of diversity. Just as a man who does not know what gold is regards bangles, earrings etc. as different ornaments but when he comes to know that their material cause, the underlying principle of unity, is one i.e. gold—though he still perceives those ornaments as different, yet regards them as one. The same is the case with an enlightened soul. Thus Advaita Vedānta takes into consideration the underlying principle of unity without which political, social, religious, cultural, national and international problems cannot be solved, as they exist on the mental level of ignorance.

From ethical point of view, we come to the same conclusion. Sin, according to Advaita Vedānta, is nothing but selfishness,

caused by the ignorance of our true divine nature. The moment we realize our divine nature, we begin to feel that we are one with the universal spirit. We begin to see our own self reflected in all living beings. We rise above the plane of senses and mind, we rise above selfishness. We regard others as ourselves. This is real social integration, real universal brotherhood. Nay, something rather superior to universal brotherhood. At this stage every human being becomes equal, because the unifying principle i. e. *Ātman* is neither man nor woman etc. as is said in the Śwetā-Śwetara Upaniṣad<sup>5</sup>. In Upaniṣadic language it is called identity of all *Sarvabhāvāpatih* or *Sarvātmabhāva*. It is at this stage that we give up those petty interests which create hatred in human minds and divide man from man and nation from nation. This truth has beautifully been declared in Īsopniṣad :

“One who looks upon all the living beings in his own self and his own self in all living beings, one bears no hatred to anyone.” This ‘*Sarvātmabhāva*’ of Vedānta makes man noble and virtuous. The conflict between ‘mine’ and ‘thine’ arises when there is the feeling of ‘otherness’, but when there is nothing outside, the service of humanity becomes the service of self. As Coleridge has said,

‘He prayeth best, who loveth best

All things both great and small’ . . etc.

So when we come to realize that we are one with our friends and foes, there is no scope left for hatred or malice. This realization of oneness may be called Love or Divine Love. When Christ said, ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’, he did not give a rational explanation for it. But Advaita Vedānta explains this aphorism in a logical way. It says that because we are one, we cannot but love our neighbours. This love does not rest on some worldly selfish motive or consideration done towards us by our neighbour, but on a firmer ground which is oneness of all souls. Similarly, there are other sayings of Christ which refer to this unity of God and man e.g. ‘I and my father are one’, or ‘the kingdom of God is with you’, ‘you are gods’. But as these remarks lack logical interpretation, they are set aside as mystical utterances. Advaita Vedānta clears this mystery convincingly.



This realization of *Ātman* or *Sarvātmabhāva* is not the loss of mundane individuality, the merging of our personality into the ocean of nothingness. This *Sarvātmabhāva* is the highest development, enhancement and fruition of our finite self into the Infinite. Infinite in the sense as it is all-embracing and inclusive and thus is the universal self. A philosophical understanding of the inner nature of things fills us with a sense of unity and joy, awakens our feelings of universal brotherhood and love. The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the whole world is one family—can be realized on this alone. It endows us with a sense of human dignity and responsibility, awakening in us the Divine Nature which is our true self. We learn to respect man. We treat others as an end and not as means as has been said by Kant<sup>6</sup>. We stand for righteousness, virtue and universal good. There remains no barrier of egoism, hatred, jealousy, caste, creed and colour. Under the banner of universal self, co-existence becomes true. This effacement of ego of man leaves room for all individuals to develop themselves according to their inherent potentialities to perfection. Moreover, the Vedānta system does not believe in demolishing of existing distinctions and diversities by force—social, political or religious—but to elevate these diversities by wisdom and give them a turn so that they merge in the high ideal of oneness. The discordant factors, upto now existing as obstacles, change into helpful means and stepping stones to reach the high ideal of universal love and harmony. This is real and everlasting social integration. Keeping into consideration the question of fitness of persons or *Adhikāri*, this philosophy also provides a solid foundation for a universal religion. It regards other religions of the world as many paths leading to the same goal as has been said by *Puṣpadantācārya* in the *Mahimnastotra*, just as different rivers flow and become one with the ocean, similarly as men are of different tastes, they adopt different forms of religion, some of which are simple and straightforward while others are not. But ultimately they all go towards God and become one with Him. This is integration of Society from the point of view of religion.

Considering the applicability of Advaita Vedānta, it may be said that it is a system which can be applied even today. By the process of discipline, the superimposition, namely the ego is

dissolved. The ego is the separative principle, which separates man from man and man from the rest of the world. For so long as man egoistically regards himself a doer and an enjoyer and does not dedicate and resign himself to the highest divinity, the controller and sustainer of all, he blindly rushes to the evil path of self-suicide and miserable self-destruction.<sup>7</sup> But when this ego is gone, diversities disappear, One pervasive principle remains throughout. In the language of the West, it is 'Cosmic consciousness.' It is that stage where love overflows. In the *Gītābhāṣya*, Shankar has explained the process thus : one whose mind is subject to evils of desire and aversion there cannot indeed arise a knowledge of things as they are, even of the external world; it may be said of a man whose intellect is overpowered by passion that there cannot be a knowledge of the innermost self, in as much as there are many obstacles in his way. Just as in a tank which is full of waves a gem lying in the bottom can not be seen, similarly in a mind, tossed by passions such as selfishness etc. the inner truth cannot be seen. Consequently mind should be purified of its passions. These passions are like jaundice of the eyes, which colours a white object to appear as yellow.

To conclude, it may be said that absolute harmony can be established under sectarian doctrines, dogmas, faiths, rituals, beliefs, castes and creeds only through Advaita Vedānta. If we follow this ideal, we shall find that we are all one, not merely as a nation, but as whole humanity. Lord Buddha, Mahāvīra, Christ and others preached the ideal of love, no doubt, for the whole of human race, but it is Advaita Vedānta alone that included in its sphere of love all the living creatures.

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#### NOTES

1. *Vedānta or the Science of Reality*. Intro. P. 14
2. Johnson, H. M.—*Sociology : A Systematic Introduction*. pp. 9-13.

3. Śāṅkara also says that just as things made of gold are basically gold alone, similarly things being created by *Brahman* are not different from Brahmanhood.
4. *Advaita Siddhi* p. 425.
5. Śvetāśvatara 10, 4-3-4, *Kaṭhapaniṣad* 2-2-9.
6. *The Moral Law* p. 96
7. *Īśopaniṣad* 3.

