

The Universality of the Vedas

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Abstract:

The Vedas constitute a repository of all knowledge required by mankind to live and lead a successful and complete life “here,” paving the way at the same time for release from the cycle of birth and death and for “attaining” Bliss “thereafter.” For this the Vedic Sages had set forth in the Upanishads a methodology of arriving at the absolute Truth through a delicate system of enquiry and meditation preceded by strict physical, verbal and mental disciplines prescribed on the basis of prolonged experimentation and perseverance. The Vedic teaching in this context appeals to the whole of mankind as it transcends colour, creed or community and is of concern and interest to all individuals, whatever be their beliefs and their calling in life. The individual self, the Jīva, is no different from the Universal Self, the Ātman or Brahman, knowing which all forms of geographical, social, cultural or physiological differences melt down into the Absolute Reality, the Eternal Truth, the underlying Consciousness of the whole Universe, the Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma. This Upanishadic teaching is unique in itself, and is not limited by time and space. It is eternal and universal, for freedom and eternal happiness is that the whole of humanity is seeking. And this, only the Vedas can give.

Keywords: *Jñānam, Brahman, Reality, Enlightenment, Upaniṣad*

Introduction: The Vedas conceive Reality as One, prevailing over the whole Universe like the King: “*Eka id rājā jagato babhūva.*” (R.V.X.121.3) Later the Upanishads describe Brahman as “*Satyam, Jñānam, Anantam*”¹ Brahman is presented here as *Satyam*, i.e, the Cause of the Universe. The word *Satyam* is generally understood as what “is” i.e. as what exists.² Anything that is that exists can be said to be *Satyam*. Existence relates to time. Material objects, with specific names and forms exist in one point of time, the past or the present. As names and forms, they have no future. But Brahman, i.e God as projected by the Vedic sages, as seen above, is *Anantam*, i.e eternal. It is bound by time. “*Anantam Satyam*” means that which obtains in the same form in all the three periods of time, which does not subject itself to time³-which is therefore unoblitable - “*Satyatvam bādha rāhityam.*”⁴ “*Trikāla-abādhyam Satyam,*” says

¹ Taittirīya Upaniṣad-II.1.1

² Sw. Dayananda Saraswati- Mahāvākya Vicāra, Rishikesh- p.37

³ Ibid

⁴ Pancadas’ī-III.29

Śankara on his part. Every change implies that the object undergoing change is being subjected in time. At one time it is in one form, at another it is in a different form. Whatever has *nāma – rūpa*, i.e name and form, is subject to change. Brahman as projected in the Vedas transcends *nāma-rūpa*, and is therefore, *Anantam Satyam*, that is free from the limitations of time. The term *Ananatan Jñānam* denotes limitless Consciousness.⁵

Discussion: *Jñānam*, as synonymous of Brahman, is not limited to either knowledge or knower or known, as is the case in the ordinary sense of the word. Brahman as *Anantam Jñānam* is God that is not limited to either knowledge or the Knower or the Known. It is limitless Consciousness. The Vedas are telling us here that there is only one source of consciousness in this world, and that Brahman, that is *Ātman*, which itself is *Īśvara* from the *Jagat* point of view, and *Jīva* from the individual point of view. *Īśvara*, the total and *Jīva*, the individual, have their common being in Brahman which is *Anantam Satyam* and *Anantam Jñānam*.⁶

The Vedas go a step further and tell us also that this *Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahman* is the *jagat-karāṇam*, i.e, the cause of the world. Brahman itself becomes the world without undergoing any change. The world is therefore the *vivarta* of Brahman, not the *vikāra* of Brahman, for Brahman is *nir-vikāra*, changeless. This “becoming” of Brahman into world is only seemingly so. It is only an appearance just as the ocean becoming waves. The change is *Mithyā*.⁷ The difference is purely apparent. Non-difference is truth. This truth is Universal. It is the same everywhere at all times, and is not subject to any variation whatsoever.

Indian Philosophers right from the Vedic Sages till date have recognized this truth. The heights and profundity explored by the Indian thinkers are on indication of the great powers of human mind. Indian philosophical thought is not mere speculation. It goes further deep. It is actual experience resulting from experimentation with one’s own mind and self. Man’s mind and soul have been subjected to the highest enquiry possible in Indian Philosophy especially in the Vedāntic traditions.

“The chief mark of Indian Philosophy is its concentration upon the spiritual. Both in life and in philosophy the spiritual motive is predominant in India.”⁸ The Vedic seers conceive man to be essentially a spiritual creature whose prime interest lies in is spiritual progress and who looks at the universe also as basically spiritual in character.

Neither man or the universe is looked upon as physical in essence, and material welfare is never recognized as the goal of human life. Philosophy and religion are viewed as being intimately related to each other because philosophy itself is regarded as a spiritual adventure, and also

⁵ Sw. Dayananda Saraswati, Loc Cit, p.41

⁶ Ibid, p.40

⁷ Ibid, p.44

⁸ S. Radhakrishnan & CA Moore- A Source Book in Indian Philosophy, p.xxi.

because the motivation both in philosophy and in religion concerns the spiritual way of life in the here-and-now and the “eventual spiritual salvation of man in relation to the universe”.⁹ Practically, all of Indian Philosophy, right from its beginning in the Vedas to the present day, has striven about a socio-spiritual reform which has given rise to philosophical literature of such variety as cannot be found elsewhere.

One basic characteristic of Vedic Philosophy, especially of Vedanta, is the belief in the intimate relationship of philosophy and life. This attitude of the practical application of philosophy to life makes it a matter of interest to the whole of mankind because of its universal appeal. This close relationship between theory and practice, doctrine and life, percept and precept is so striking in the Vedas and in Vedanta Philosophy that the very mention of these names takes us to another plane of reality and perforce give a totally different view of life compared to the mundane and material view. These two viewpoints, referred to as the *Śreyas* and the *Preyas*¹⁰ respectively in the Upanishads, are vividly brought with a view to cautioning man against the pitfall of utter materialism.

Vedic knowledge aims at the discovery and realization of the One Truth, the One Reality, knowing which man becomes free – “*Brahmavidāpnotiparam.*”¹¹ It is not simply knowledge for the sake of knowledge: Lower knowledge is a means to higher knowledge – “*Avidyayā mṛtyuṃtīrtvā Vidyayā mṛtamas’nute.*”¹² at which level all elements of difference between knowledge, the Knower, and the Known get dissipated, resulting in the realization, “All here is Truth” – “*Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma.*”¹³

Knowledge is not worth having, if it does not address itself to man’s problems in life, his distress, his despair, his inquisitions – Vedic Philosophy not only addresses itself to all these mundane, narrow concerns of the “man animal”, but goes beyond this material world, reaching out to the Absolute, the All-Pervasive Atman – the One and Only Truth – to That Brahman from where there is no coming back into the cycle of birth and death, which itself is epitomous of all forms of sufferings.¹⁴ It is this aspect of the Vedic Philosophy which represents the very crux of all philosophical deliberations in India and it is this itself that captivates the attention of man wherever he is, to whichever religion, creed or community he belongs, whatever be his calling in life. For man as a living entity craves for happiness- unalloyed and everlasting. And for that there is only one way – the Vedic way, the way shown and drawn by the ancient sages, who were verily the guardians of Truth, of Reality, of Freedom, of Enlightenment.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Vide, Kathopanishad- II. 2

¹¹ Taittiriya Upanisad II.2

¹² Īso’panishad-11

¹³ Chandogya Upanishad-III.14.1

¹⁴ Vide Kathopnishad I.3.8

In India Philosophy is for life; it is to be lived. It is not enough to know the truth; the truth must be lived. The goal of the seeker is not to know the Ultimate Truth, but to realize It, to become one with It”.¹⁵ This is why the Vedas prescribe “*darśanam*”, i.e. “seeing as the means to know the Truth – *Ātma vā arē drastavyah*,”¹⁶ so do they teach. “Seeing” here, does not have the same connotation as for any perceptible object. It rather refers to direct intuitive experience of the Truth within, the realization of the *Jiva-ātman-identity*, which itself is the summum-bonum of Vedic Philosophy, as is declared in *Vedantasāra*, “*Jīva – Brahmaikyam Śuddha-Caitanyam Prameyam tatra eva Vedāntānām tātparyam.*”¹⁷

According to the Vedas, this goal cannot be attained without *viveka*, i.e. the discriminative faculty that makes it possible to distinguish between the eternal and the non-eternal, the Absolute and the apparent, the All-pervading and the all-pervaded – in brief the subject and the object – the *Asmad* and *Yuṣmad* as Śankara puts it.¹⁸ Vedic Philosophy is necessarily introspective in nature. It is dominated by the pursuit for the subject, i.e the external world. The Subjective, then, rather than the objective, becomes the focus of interest to the seeker of Truth, and therefore psychology and ethics are given greater importance than anything else¹⁹, as is to be seen in Śankara’s prescriptions for the prerequisites for an inquiry into the self, viz., “subjugation of all desires, renunciation of all mundane and selfish motives; tranquility, self-control, patience, peace of mind and faith, and above all, an unquenching thirst or an undauntable desire for release,”²⁰ The Vedic seers had adopted a synthetic approach to all aspects of experience and reality. Religion and Philosophy, knowledge and conduct intuition and reason, man and nature, God and man, noumenon and phenomenon: these are all brought in harmony by the Vedic Seers.²¹ The Vedas treat not only one phase of reality and experience, but the full content of philosophic sphere. Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics, Religion, Psychology, facts and value are all treated in their natural unity and integrity in life.²² It is this synthetic vision of the Vedic Sages that has made possible the religious and intellectual tolerance in India which give to the Vedic religion this universal appeal, the need for which is so much felt to-day all over the world.

Indian Philosophical thought is characterized by a fundamental unity of perspective. Philosophers in India show a concern for man’s practical problems: beginning with his limitations and sufferings and culminating in an enquiry into the scope and nature of freedom. The motivation is practical rather than theoretical. Mokṣa, i.e. Liberation or freedom, is man’s ultimate objective, attainable through renunciation and non-attachment. This is a mental attitude developed and adopted by the individual to fulfill his duty in life here, while exploring at the

¹⁵ S Radhakrishnan, etc. – Loc.cit. P.xxii

¹⁶ Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad – I.4.5

¹⁷ Vide, Vedāntasāra, I.27

¹⁸ Vide, Adhyāsa-bhāṣya

¹⁹ S.Radhakrishnan, etc.Loc.Cit.P.xxv

²⁰ Vide, Vedāntasāra, I.6

²¹ S.Radhakrishnan, et. Loc.Cit.Pxxv

²² Ibid, P.xxvi

same time the avenues of Knowledge and Self-realization. By so doing, he attains a mental and spiritual superiority over worldly values, and never allows himself to be enslaved by them. It is indeed living and acting without any sense of attachment or belonging to mundane things, with an attitude of selflessness and dedication to God. The Vedas believe that man must be morally and spiritually perfected before he can attain freedom. The Vedic Seers believe in a moral order of the Universe, the *Rta*, on which is founded the Universal doctrine of Karma and Rebirth – through which the Moral Order functions.²³

The marked shift Vedic Religion from a personal God to an impersonal God in Vedanta is a shift from parochialism to universalism, opening the doors to the whole of mankind, whatever be the age and whatever be the beliefs. Hymns to Gods and Goddesses gave way ultimately to a search for the reality underlying this world of flux. And this gave rise to an in-depth inquiry into the *Antarātman*, the *Sūtrātman*, the essential truth, the very essence of existence, starting with queries such as, “What is that which being known, everything else becomes known.”²⁴ “What is that for fear of whom fire burns, for fear of whom the sun shines, for fear of whom the wind, the clouds and even the Lord of death perform their duties?”²⁵

The Real which is at the heart of the Universe is reflected in the infinite depths of the Self. The All-pervading, Uncaused, Beginningless, Eternal, Impersonal Brahman is Itself the *Īśvara*, the personal God, when viewed as the constitutive reality behind this world of apparent plurality. Thus is set forth an apparent plurality. Thus is set forth an apparent distinction between Brahman, the Cause, and Brahman, the effect in the form of the Universe. The distinction is therefore between the transcendent beyond manifestation and the transcendent in manifestation, i.e., the Self as Brahman and the Self as *Jīva* and *Īśvara*.²⁶

The Vedas set forth the way in which the Ultimate Reality, i.e., the Inner Self can be realized through an inward journey to be covered in different stages. For this spiritual journey, aimed at the discover and realization of one’s own reality, the aspirant requires certain preparations and qualifications, without which this goal cannot be attained. The focus here is on an absolute control over the mind which is the instrument or the vehicle through which this journey, one is warned of the futility of attempting this journey without the prescribed prerequisites. “The Self is not to be attained by one without fortitude, nor through slackness nor without distinctive marks of discipline”, avers the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad.²⁷ whereas the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad declares that “to realize the Self one must become calm, controlled, quiet, patiently enduring and contented.”²⁸

²³ Ibid, P.xxviii

²⁴ Vide, Mundaka Upaniṣad-I.13

²⁵ Vide, Taittīriya Upaniṣad-II.7

²⁶ S Radhakrishnan, etc. L.oc.Cit.P.38

²⁷ Vide, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad – III.2.4

²⁸ Vide, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad – IV.4.23

The Vedas adopt a synthetic method to approach the Self or Brahman – It consists of a synthesis of the objective way and the subjective way. What obtains in the universal obtains in the individual. Say the Vedas – “*Yathā Piṇḍe tathā Brahmāṇḍē*”. This is what is meant by the terms “*Adhyātma*”, *Adhidaivata*, etc. which occur in the Upanishads so frequently. The Cosmic ether is spoken of as identical with the ether of the heart.”²⁹ Says the Daittīviya Upanishad, “*He who is the Puruṣa and he who is in the Sun, he is one.*” “*Sa yaścāyam Pusushē, Yaścāsavādityē. Sa ekah*”³⁰

In the same manner, the Chandogya Upanishad also discusses how from Sat, the One without a Second, springs forth this whole world of plurality. After describing in detail, the process of the objective manifestation of the Self of the Universe, the Upanishad declares that the Universal Self is identical with the individual self.³¹ In the same manner the Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad also declares that this “Self” is Brahman, the Whole.³² This is the synthetic method of investigation characteristic of Vedānta. “It is through this method that Advaita Vedānta apprehends the non-dual Absolute, which can be characterized neither as objective nor as subjective.”³³

“Vedānta regards existence neither as the appearance of reality nor as a species of the real, but as the characteristic nature of the Absolute,³⁴ as is stated in the Bhagavad Gītā, “*Nāsato Vidyate Bhāvaḥ Nābhāvo Vidyate Sataḥ*”³⁵ i.e. ‘of the real there is no non-existence, and of the unreal there is no existence’ There cannot be non-existent reality, nor can there be unreal existence. The objects of the world of *nāma-rūpa* are very much existent according to Vedānta, but “existence”, i.e. “*Sat*” is not their essence. Brahman alone is Sat. – “*Brahmaivedam Sarvam Saccidānanda – rūpam.*”³⁶

The Seeker of truth therefore has first of all to be trained to discriminate between the Real, i.e. the Self, and the unreal, i.e. the body. The guiding principle behind this *sad-asat-viveka*, i.e. this discrimination of the real from the unreal, is the unshakability of the Real.³⁷ Commenting upon this, Śāṅkara, says that, “That itself is real whose nature, by which it is cognized, is subject to change.”³⁸ Says he, “*Satyam iti yad rūpeṇa yan niścitam tad rūpam na vyabhicarati, tat satyam, yas rūpeṇa yan niścitam tad rūpam vyabhicarati, tad amṛtam iti ucyate.*”³⁹

²⁹ TMP Mahadevan-The Philosophy of Advaita,p.113

³⁰ Taittirīya Upanishad-VII.viii.5

³¹ Chandogya Upanishad-VII.25.2

³² Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad-II.5.4

³³ TMP Mahadevan, Loc, Cit, p.114

³⁴ Ibid, P.115

³⁵ Bhagavad Gītā .1Ii,16

³⁶ Vide, Nṛṣihopaniṣad – VII.3

³⁷ TMP Mahadevan, Loc.Cit.P.115

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Vide,sankara-bhasya on Taittiriya Upanishad

This is what the Bhāmati-kara, Vācaspati Mīśra also stresses upon when he says, “*that which is constant in whatever is variable, is different from the latter (i.e from the variable element), just as a string is different from the flowers.*”⁴⁰

“*Yeṣu vyāvartamāneṣu yad anuvartate tat tebhyo bhinnam, yathā kusumbhyaḥ sūtram.*”⁴¹ To make the task of the Seeker easier, the *dr̥g-drishya-vivek* gives a picture of the world as it presents itself to us, differentiating the characteristics of “Sat” from those of the “*asat*”. It says that five characteristics are discernible in every worldly object: these are: *asti, bhāti, priyam, nāma and rūpa*, i.e existence manifestation attraction, name and form. Of these five, while name and form vary from object to object, the first three, i.e. existence, manifestation and attraction are constant they are not subject to any change whatsoever. These three therefore constitute the characteristics of the Real, while the last two, i.e. *nāma* and *rūpa*, constitute the characteristics of the unreal. Vide,

“*Asti bhāti priyam rūpam nāma ca iti aṃs’a-pañcakam,
Ādya-trayam brahma-rūpam, jagat-rūpam tato dvayyam*”⁴²

The Pancadas’I on its part, avers that, “what is unreal at the beginning and unreal at the end cannot be real”, “*Na Vyakteḥ Pūrvamastyeva na Paścāccāpi nāsataḥ; ādavāntē ca yannāsti vartamane’pi tattathā*”⁴³

Any creature is unmanifest at the beginning gets manifested in the middle and again becomes unmanifest at the end’, says the Bhagavad Gita – “*Avyaktādīni bhūtāni vyaktamadyāni Bhārata, Avyakta-nidhanānyeva tatra kā paridevanā*”⁴⁴ In contrasts to this, Sat, the Real, persists all the time, at the beginning, in the present and at the end. This is what the Vedic Sages mean when they declare that “*Existence alone was this all in the beginning, one without a second.*” [(i) “*Tadā Stimita-gambhuram na Tejo na Tamastatam: anākhyam-anabhivyaktam Sat Kiñcidavaśiṣyate.*”⁴⁵ (ii) “*Sadeva Saumyedamagra āsīdekamadviṭīyam.*”⁴⁶ (iii) *Brahma vā idamagrēāsīt.*]⁴⁷

⁴⁰ TMP Mahadevan, Loc. cit. p.116

⁴¹ Vide, Bhasya on pancadasī

⁴² Drg-drśya-Viveka-V.20

⁴³ Pañcadāsī-XIII.68

⁴⁴ Bhagavad Gītā - - 11.28

⁴⁵ Vide, Pañcadāsī - 11.19

⁴⁶ Vide Chandogya Upanishad - VI.2.1

⁴⁷ Vide Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad - 1.4.1

Conclusion:

After obtaining this discriminative knowledge, i.e. *Viveka-buddhi* the Seeker develops an attitude of non-attachment to worldliness, after which arises in him an ardent desire for release, as the **Pañcadasī** put it.: *Yogēnātma-vivekena dvaita-mithyātva-cintayā; Brahmānandnam Paśyato'tha' vidyānando nirūpyate*⁴⁸. “So equipped, he becomes an *adhikārin*, i.e., qualified aspirants for Brahma-jñana, for self-knowledge. Thereafter he approaches a S'rotriya and Brahmaniṣṭha Guru for guidance. {- “*Tadvijñanārthan Sa Gurumevābhi-gacchet samitpāṇiḥ śrotriyam Brahmaniṣṭham.*”⁴⁹] On his satisfactory completion of internship, the disciple is guided by the Guru through the three-fold methodology of *Śravanam, Mananam and Nidhidhyāsanam*. i.e.: exposure to Brahma-vidyā, reflection of same until removal of all doubts and inhibitions, and then contemplation on the self as the final means to self-realization. With total subjugation, perseverance and consistency, the seeker attains liberation, realizing in the end the *Jīva Brahma-aikyam*, i.e. The identity of the Self and the Universal Self, as described by the Vacaspati Mishra – “*Tatra Śravaṇa mananādibhir yad viveka-jñānam tena vivekāgrahē nivartite adhyāsāpabādhātmakam vastu-svarūpāvadhāraṇam vidyā cidātmarūpam svarūpe vyavatiṣṭhate*”⁵⁰

This key to the infinite bequeathed to us by the Vedic Ṛṣis is, it will be appreciated, the loftiest of all teachings, open to all, at all times, at all places. And it is this that gives to the Vedas this universal appeal.

⁴⁸ Pañcadasī – XIV.I

⁴⁹ Muṇḍaka Upanishad – I.2.12

⁵⁰ Vide, Bhāmati on Adhyāsa-bhāṣya