



## TRANSCENDENTALISM: THE VEDANTA OF AMERICA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reflects the working-thought-process of two nations - India and United States of America. India has immense heritage of an unknown epoch, while America is a younger nation of fresh existence and new experiences. The study probes the source of inspiration from which these countries have derived their working principles. India has always moved inwardly by seeking her perennial inspiration from the source of religion. Even her political aspirations are religious. Thus the nation is firmly footed on the ideals of freedom, harmony, tolerance, and non-violence. On the other hand, as a mere scattering of European Colonies, and an evolving young nation, the United States of America derived such aspirations from various value systems. Transcendentalism is one among such value systems expounded by Ralph Waldo Emerson. He introduced the spirit of freedom and self-reliance in the American national life. Transcendentalism was the movement thrived to abandon the emerging religious imperialism and communal socialism originating from the west. Emerson approach to the national life shows his ingenuity and application of mind, which enabled the new nation to transgress the traditional barriers of European influences. Thus United States of America has taken up the concepts of freedom, equality, and human dignity as the watchwords for its national principle. The analysis explores the role of transcendentalism in the nation building of America, and concludes with the possibilities for both India and United States of America to get benefitted from their good-will and exchange of ideas.

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***“Oh, East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet...”*** It is worth quoting the refrain of “The Ballad of East and West,” opens with an indication of two extreme worlds that never shall be of same. But the modernistic approach of literary globalization enables to identify the cross currents of social patterns and development of civilizations in newer lights for mutual understanding and appreciation.

INDIA AND AMERICA are often cast as polar opposites of locations, ages, and cultures. India has

a tremendous heritage of 5000 years with an impressive continuity, while America is a younger nation of 400 years of fresh existence. Yet the philosophical undertones of these nations are interesting and remarkable at the core. The thought currents that run across these nations are hidden, unknown, and unseen. They were less spoken and discussed over the open forums of Indo-American tables. But the effect of which are complementary and beneficial to the spirit of both the nations.

In every nation's life there runs a spirit inspiration – the moving power, by which the whole country progress. This spirit of inspiration may be based on political supremacy, economic prosperity, or religious authority. India and America have synthesized their spirit of inspiration from different hues and strides. How best they are alike or different from each other; evoke a great interest in this study.

As far as India is concerned, the nation's moving energy has evolved from its long cherished religious experiments and its vibrant culture. One must remind that India is a land of multi-religious and multi-cultural society. It is the birth place of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, collectively known as Indian religions. Hinduism, the prominent religion of the subcontinent has been in long practice for ages by different sects of people. It unfolds Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktha, and many more sub-sects within, which have manifested with the traits of different nature. It is the same light coming through glasses of different colours, the Hindu philosophy embraces all of them as a single religion by its enormous attitude of harmony, tolerance, and non-violence.

As different food habits suit different appetites, the Hindu philosophy has the universal attitude to look upon all the God-seekers as one and the same, though their denominations are different by their approaches. The Hindu philosophical thinking holds the view that "If God is infinite, then there must be infinite ways to realize Him." This simple logic that India has accepted is the experience of the whole culture and of the tradition practiced over ages. The ideas of such experiences are vividly manifested in the sacred verses of Hindu religion. The *Upanishads*, best known as *Vedanta*, (meaning the end of *Vedas*) exceptionally reveals the truths concerning to the divine nature and ultimate reality of human existence, and describes the character and form of human salvation, namely the *Moksha*.

The theme of salvation has an intended meaning of freedom from the nature of cause and effect. *Vedanta* accepts all kinds of freedom, it asserts that the whole world is born in freedom, living in

freedom, and going back to freedom. *Swami Vivekananda*, the exponent of Hindu tradition in the modern times holds this view, "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy – by one, or more, or all of these – and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details" (*Vivekananda*, 1).

The motto of attaining freedom by manifesting divinity, unity (in diversity), and tolerance are well-taken and considered as bed-rocks of the Indian philosophy. The freedom by no means political or social freedom, but it is the liberation inwardly from the darkness of ignorance, and moving towards the light of knowledge. The harmony is the act of accepting the essence of pluralistic attitude. And tolerance is avoiding the animosities. For ages all the social developments happened in the Indian national life centering round these qualities of freedom, unity, and tolerance. It is because of these tenets, the world history accounts fewer acts of aggression or invasion by India beyond her territories. Throughout the centuries the subcontinent developed a rich intellectual life in the fields of philosophy, economy, mathematics, astronomy, and architecture based on these philosophical aspirations. Thus, India is firmly footed on the ideals of freedom, harmony, tolerance, and non-violence. Even the later national movement of Indian Independence led by Mahatma Gandhi has taken such themes as guiding principles.

On the other hand, as an emerging nation America had to undergo a flux of choosing such inspiration from various sources. A few centuries back, the land was a mere scattering of the European Colonies of different denominations. Though the colonies expanded politically and economically after the war of Independence, they still required a solid foundation and unification in the progressive thought process of the nation. The reasons were many that the European settlers arrived to this new land for varied reasons. Some were seeking adventures, some for commercial profits, and still

others expecting for freedom of wayward life-style. The people, who were variety in denomination had little consensus over their national aim and aspiration. Either it was religion or trade, or science or literature; the people of America were looking back to their ancestral lands for inspiration.

Hence the need for social commitment towards country's democratic possibilities, and eagerness for American identity had been keenly felt by many nationalists. Thinkers and philosophers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, Walt Whitman and many others had immensely contributed to a new thinking-pattern to the then national life, by which they believed that the edifice of America can be firmly footed.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the prime contributor to the American new thinking is phenomenal to the American unification and social aspiration. In a way, this self-styled man is unique as naturalist, freedom lover, champion of social inspiration and campaigner of individualism. He disseminated his thoughts through myriads of poems, essays, journals, and lectures. The sense of aesthetic beauty, conscience of universal oneness along with individual existence, insight of self-esteem, and concern for individual, society and values are the corner-stones of his new thinking.

Joel Porte writes, "Emerson sits at the crossroads in a critical moment of American history and like his own Sphinx asks the unanswered questions of our collective life – questions about the relative claims of conservatism and radicalism, the establishment and the movement, private property and communism; questions about slavery and freedom, the rights of women, the viability of institutions, the possibility of reform, the efficacy of protest, the exercise of power; indeed he asks perpetually about the meaning of America itself and its prospects among nations"(Joel Porte, 2). Emerson encountered all the uncommon elements of social unrest, civil war, and slavery in his life-time.

At this juncture, Emerson introduced his new policy of nonconformity (avoiding tradition), which very well suited the spirit of the nation. Emerson

believed that the common people had blindly followed the English way of life in every aspect. As a strong hearted rationalist he condemned the blind following up of the other traditions. America, in his view, was in dire need of its national identity in every respect. In 1844, at a lecture in Mercantile Library Association, Emerson expressed his anguish, "We in the Atlantic states, by position, have been commercial, and have, as I said, imbibed easily an European culture... We build railroads, we know not for what or for whom, but one thing is certain... they are essential to the country, but that will be felt not until we are no longer countrymen" (Emerson, 216-218).

Emerson insisted that whether it was literature, or science, or religion people must trust their own instinct. He prepared his grounds to sport "an orthodox role" of Transcendentalist, an implicit idea to abandon the religious imperialism and communal socialism originating from the west. In the Divinity School Address of 1838, Emerson emphasized for the revival of religion, "Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts to communicate religion. As it appears to us... it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual" (Emerson, 81). In other words, he indirectly challenged the deliberation of puritan practice and asserted a careful isolation of America from the influence of western nations and religion.

As a campaigner of individualism, Emerson believed that every individual is potentially capable of creating his/her own destiny. By the term Individualism, Emerson refers to "the intuitions of the mind itself." He finds the intuition a great repository of all manifestations. In the transcendental term he meant it, the sense of personal power without relying on the institutional models like churches, schools, and politics. Irving Howe the author of "The American Newness," marvels at the words of Emerson, "You must be humble because Christ says, "Be humble." But why must I obey Christ? ... Because your own heart teaches the same thing he taught. Why then shall I not go to my own heart? (Irving Howe, 8). The above statement by no means a heresy to Emerson. On the basis of Transcendentalism, Emerson suggests that

God need not to reveal the truth but that the truth could be intuitively experienced directly from nature. He wanted his men to be faithful to the depths, and then their own hearts would speak the melodies of goodness.

Emerson's sense of the past has cautioned the young Americans to look at the world, "in progress of consciousness of freedom". As a freedom lover, Emerson wanted his people to be free from all the cultural impacts, and influences. In *The American Scholar*, he proposes the Americans to walk on their own feet; work with their own hands; and speak their own minds. What Emerson wants and calls for freedom here is not the abandoning and disapproving of other influences, but "why not our own." He writes, "Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his home, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler's trade... Build therefore your own world... draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourses, and heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen" (Josephine, 27).

On the aesthetic side, Emerson loved to be called a naturalist, for he believed that man can draw the immense source of inspiration from nature. But at this age, Emerson points out, man has alienated himself from the spirit of nature and entangled in the "burden of guilt" developed by his own self-division of spiritual consciousness. In his earliest work of Nature he writes, "Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents"(Emerson, 46). He admires nature for its unalloyed beauty, "Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood" (Emerson, 9).

Emerson is aware of the contradictions of scientific attitude and transformation of society. He is also aware that his ideas are not brand new, of course, there are plentiful evident among intellectuals from the Renaissance. In fact, he imbibed the fountain of

inspiration from Hegel, Saint Augustine, Sir Francis Bacon to Coleridge. The Germanic romanticism coupled with individualism and optimism attracted his mind. The Oriental Vedanta and its essence ran below his perennial messages. Hence Emerson explained the meaning of Transcendentalism, "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism... As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness" (Emerson, 193). In another context he said, "They call it Christianity, I call it consciousness."

His approach to social life clearly shows his ingenuity and application of mind in the given social context. Envisioning the future nationalism of the country, and understanding the dominant predicaments (disorder) in which the whole nation was caught in, Emerson stood out to be the "cultural agent" of American society, transgressing not only the boundary of tradition, but also the contradicting parts of spiritual and material worlds.

As a result, national movements like Transcendentalism have paid an immense share for the development of the nation, which is now prominently admired. Thus United States of America has taken up the concepts of freedom, equality, and human dignity as the watchwords for its national principle.

At this stage it is desirable to look at the Indo-American matrix at vantage point of mutual understanding and relationship. There seems to be a closest proximity in the working mechanisms of the two nations. India has the profound tolerance with infinite freedom in the choice of religion. Yet, as a hierarchical society of caste, creed, and economic inequalities the nation suffers a great setback in the social front. On the other hand, America has the liberalization of religion in tune with the liberal spirit in politics and society that the nation is now experimenting with. However, as a younger nation America has limited experience in the field of spirituality that can bring enlightenment to the inner freedom.

Apparently there may be a huge difference with the ancient Indian culture and modern American culture, but there are immense possibilities for the two nations to have a free inter communication of ideas, thereby both can be benefited. Irrespective of the political ups and downs there should be a congenial human interaction, literary and cultural exchanges to be initiated to make their ties stronger and better.

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