SOCIAL EQUALITY AND ADVAITA PHILOSOPHY

Dr. T. G. SREEKUMAR

Every individual has the right to equality, that is, the right to be treated equally without any bias. This idea of equality is based on the feeling of oneness which is rooted in the Advaita vision.

Advaita Vedānta holds that every being in this world is not separate from each other. All are different physically but, at the same time, one only; the differences are illusory. Hence there is no question of equality at all, since the idea of equality presupposes many entities becoming equal; this is against Advaita viewpoint.

The Advaita vision has its origin in the Vedas which proclaim: 'truth is one only; the wise call it by different names.' However, this feeling of oneness had been neglected in the society later and discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, etc. gained control over it. But the Advaita vision would help us to overcome this crisis.

The Chāndogyopaniṣad declares:

By knowing a lump of clay everything made of clay becomes known. The products of clay are but mere names; the difference lies in their shape only; they are essentially one- the lump of clay, which alone is truth.[1]

The Upaniṣads suggest that everything in this universe is covered by the supreme soul. That is, we should see ourselves as not being separate individuals but as a single entity[2]. Swāmī Vivekānanda says:

The ideal of renunciation in Vedānta does not really mean to renounce the world altogether. Instead, it means deification of the world[3].

The idea of non-dualism is not something to be preached alone, but it should also be brought into practice through the activities of our daily life. The Great Vedāntins like Swāmī Vivekānanda, Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru etc. worked throughout their life to make Vedānta practical on the lines of Śaṅkarācārya who observed:

the same consciousness shines in all beings- from Brahman to an ant[4]. Śrī Nārāyaṇaguru has brought Advaita Vedānta into practice in his life. He says:

What is called this or that is, in essence, the same ultimate reality, the eternal soul; hence, whatever we do for our personal contentment should be for the good of others also[5]

avanivanennariyunnatokkeyorttāla-
vaniyilādimamāyorātmarūpam.
avanavanātmasukhattinācarikku-
nnavayaparannu sukhattināyvareṇam.

He also says:

those actions which bring good for someone, but at the same time, cause misery to others are against the true spirit of Advaita and are condemnable[6].

Thus, the adherents of Advaita have the feeling of oneness in themselves; they worked among the masses to bring all into this universal religion.

Advaita philosophy never considers human beings as separate individuals; it treats everybody as constituted of the same soul. Hence, it confers no special privilege to any section of the society over the others, nor does it deprive anyone of his rights. Swāmī Vivekānanda says:

The idea of fractions and differentiations is only apparent; God has become the universe; we see God as the universe since we observe Him through the limitations of time, space, etc. The mission of Advaita is to break down all privileges. It preaches against privileges and works to break down the tyrannies. Whenever privilege is broken down, more and more light and progress come to a race[7].

In the Upaniṣadic period there is no evidence for discriminations against women in the quest for knowledge. Women were never barred from acquiring education. This is clear from the Yājñavalkya Maitreyī dialogue in the Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad, where Maitreyī asks her husband, Yājñavalkya:

What shall I do to gain that knowledge through which I may become immortal?[8]

Hearing this question, Yājñavalkya was much pleased and he instructed the Ātman-knowledge to her.

The Upaniṣads also speak of the duties of each individual. The famous convocation address in the Taittirīyopaniṣad reminds a student who has finished his education thus:

"speak the truth; practice virtue; let your elders- father, mother, preceptor, and guests- be a divinity to you; whatever action of your teachers, you should follow only that which is blameless, and not others; good deeds, not others, should you imitate[9]*"*

As time changed, discriminations in the name of caste, creed etc, became intrinsically intertwined in the social set up. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes:

"The recent constitutional changes have helped only to stereotype communal divisions and caste distinctions. Though measures for the protection of certain classes are adopted in view of social justice, they actually have retarded the growth of national unity. The freedom of the individual was not suppressed in the past. The laws were relative and were susceptible to change. But, when these laws became codified, the independence of the individual became fettered[10]*"*

The reason for this deplorable situation is that the Hindu laws were framed on the lines of the Smṛtis and the Arthaśāstra of Kouṭilya which discriminated people on the basis of *varṇāśramadharma*. This is evident in the later portion of the Ṛgveda, i. e., the Puruṣasūkta etc. The Varṇa system primarily was aimed at validating the basic nature of an individual; but later this apprehension was changed caste of an individual determined by birth itself. The Upaniṣads have the main goal as Brahman or Ātman which is one only and they do preach non-dualism and the unity of all beings; but the later Vedānta texts add the precondition that in order to be eligible for Brahman-knowledge, one ought to have studied the Vedas and Vedāṅgas as per the rules and regulations regarding the same[11]. This means that only the first three among the four varṇas, namely, the brāhmaṇas, the kṣatriyas and the vaiśyas, have the right for knowledge, and this discrimination against the working class is against Advaita perspective. This is in consequence of the arguments of Sri Śaṅkarācārya in his Brahmasūtrabhāṣya that the Śūdras have no right for knowledge. The very first sutra says that Brahmajijñāsā or the knowledge of Brahman is preceded by Dharmajijñāsā or the study of the Vedas, which, in turn, suggests that only the first three classes have the right for knowledge[12]. In another place, he devoted an entire section of the text to argue against the right of the Śūdras in knowledge[13]. This discrimination against a section of the society is detrimental to our progress as a nation; it is also in contrary to the Advaita vision of oneness. However, it should not be forgotten that every author is influenced by the socio-political situations of his time and thus, these self-contradictory stipulations which retard social development have crept into the philosophy of non-duality. Besides, the entire literature of ancient India, including the Advaita texts of Śaṅkara and his followers, has come down to us through generations by oral tradition. Thus, the possibility of some misinterpretation or manipulation cannot be overruled. Some later authors might even have contributed their own imaginations to the original and have ascribed his own work to great sages like Śaṅkara in order to gain acceptance.

This makes it difficult for us to determine what the real standpoint of the author is!

However, despite all its weaknesses or limitations, there is no other branch of thought as Advaita which has the high vision of non-difference of all beings. Here, all kinds of differentiations are meaningless and only one without a second remains. This is the teaching of Advaita Vedānta. He who has realized the non-dual self has no misconception or grief regarding anything.[14] This would mean that the same consciousness shines in all and hence, discrimination of any kind is a sin. Thus, Advaita philosophy proclaims that no section of the society should have any special right or privilege over others, nor should any section be deprived of any rights enjoyed by others. Thus, Advaita presents an ideal society where there is no place for inequality. Swāmī Vivekānanda has said:

"If the human beings of today can put aside the ideas of selfishness, narrowness and littleness, this earth will become a paradise tomorrow[15]."

This paradise, where social values are held high, could be made here through the ideals of Advaita and thus would emerge a state where there is no ruler or the ruled, no haves and have-nots, no oppressors or the oppressed – a true socialist world.

1. एकेन मृत्पिण्डेन सर्वं मृण्मयं विज्ञातं भवति वाचारम्भणं विकारो नामधेयं मृत्तिकेत्येव सत्यम्। Ch. Up.VI. 1
2. ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्। -Īśāvāsyopaniāṣda 1.
3. Complete Works vol II, p.146.
4. या ब्रह्मादिपिपीलिकान्ततनुषु प्रोता जगत्साक्षिणी। -Manisapancakam 1.
5. Ātmopadeśaśatakam 24.
6. Oruvanu nallatumanyanallalum cer-
   pporu tozhilātmavirodhiyorttiṭeṇam. ibid 25.
7. Complete Works, vol. I, pp. 417-429.
8. सा होवाच मैत्रेयी येनाहं नामृता स्यां किमहं तेन कुर्याम्.-Br. Up. II.4.
9. सत्यं वद धर्मं चर. Tai. Up. I.11.
10. Basic Writings of Radhakrishnan, pp. 212-215.
11. अधिकारी तु विधिवदधीतवेदवेदाङ्गत्वेन ...-Vedāntasāra.
12. BSSB I.1.1.
13. Apaśūdrādhikaraṇam, Ibid, I.3.9.
14. तत्र को मोहः कः शोकः एकत्वमनुपश्यतः-Īśāvāsya 7.
15. Complete works, vol. II, p. 84