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The Pragmatic Relevance of the Traditional Indian Philosophies in the Contemporary Meaning of Spirituality and the Cultural World-View

I have divided my paper into three parts. I have, in the first section, briefly explicated the traditional philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga, alongside a reference to the *Bhagvadgita*.

I have then alluded to Vivekanandas's revision of this traditional wisdom and his methodology of using them during his time, i.e., the late 19th century context of India and his comprehension of Hindu spiritual humanism.

In the last part, I have tried to use both of these (the traditional philosophical and Vivekananda's revision) as viable and sustainable models for understanding spiritualism and culture in the present day world of global linkages and emphatic local identity.

Section-1

The traditional Indian Philosophies

- A. **Vedanta philosophy**, as has been compiled in Badrayana's *Brahma-Sutras* is an exposition of the philosophy taught in the Upanishads. Sankara is the most popular and systematic commentator of primary Upanishads and the *BrahmSutras*, and propounded non-dualistic (advaita) meaning of the truth. According to Sankara, the ultimate and absolute truth is the Self known as Brahman or *ātmā* (parallel to the concept of soul as a spiritual principle), and is one or the singular truth. 'The world as apart from us, the individuals, has no reality and has no other truth to show than this ultimate self or Brahman. All other events, mental or physical are, according to him, nothing but passing appearances, and can be ascribed as *māyā*. Saṅkara's argument while commenting on Vedanta is that the existential world of our experience is a mere product of *māyā* or a nescience. **The world appearance is ultimately false but is not a non-existent. It has its locus in ignorance.** It subsists in ignorance of truth. So, it plays a dual role—that of a projection, projecting the falsity- and the other of hiding the real truth. This duality is effective because of the attachment to the life of experience.¹

While the self-realization or overcoming the leads to liberation, an association with *māyā* or an association with ego leads to 'attachment', or an insatiable aspiration for selfish desires, an obstruction of reasoning, and these in turn cause experiences of pain and pleasure. The attachment or ego that is accrued entails notions of mine and thine, multiplicity of cognitions, and world of experiences consisting of recurring desires, emotional upheavals et al. Mukti or salvation, according to Vedanta is the state of dissociation of the self, the spiritual singular principle, from the subjective psychosis, and the world of experience.²

B. **Yoga**, according to Patanjali in his *Yogasutra* has been expounded as the cessation of mental functions or modifications of mind. These modifications carry a negative terminology of denoting diversions from the right kind. Yoga philosophy has its theoretical sustenance in one of its preceding traditions, Sankhya. Saṅkhyā means right knowledge, and this in turn implied knowing difference between intellect in association with worldly diversions, and spirituality in abstraction from worldly experiences. It does not mean any kind of contact between the individual self and some other reality like God or the Absolute. The aim of Yoga is to prevent the self from identifying itself with mental modifications. But this is not possible so long as the modifications are there and the self has not realised its distinction from chitta or the mind. So what yoga really stands for is the arrest and negation of all mental modifications or diversions due to association of the self or spirit with ego and psychological impediments.³

For the purification and enlightenment of chitta or the mind, the Yoga gives us the eightfold means which consists of the disciplines of (a) yama or restraint, (b) niyama or culture, (c) asana or posture, (d) pranayama or breath control, (e) pratyahara or withdrawal of the senses, (f) dharana or attention, (g) dhyana or meditation, and (h) Samadhi or concentration. These are known as aids to yoga. When practised regularly with devotion and dispassion, they lead to the attainment of yoga, both samprajnata and asamprajñātā.⁴ **Traditional Yoga philosophy emphasised on seeking a mind-body interaction to enable liberation from psychological diversions.**

In what can be referred to as a **detailed Psychology**, Yoga philosophy analyses five conditions or levels of the mental life (chittabhumi). The chitta is constituted by the elements of sattva, rajas and tamas. Its different conditions are determined by the different degrees in which these elements are present and operative in it. These conditions are called kṣipta or restless, mudha or torpid, vikṣipta or distracted, ekagra or concentrated, and niruddha or restrained. In each of these there is some kind of repression of mental modifications. One state of the mind excludes other different states.

Here the succession of mental states and processes is completely checked, and the mind (chitta) is left in its original, unmodified state of calmness and tranquillity. These last two levels are conducive to yoga insofar as both manifest the sattva element of the mind to the highest degree and are helpful for the attainment of the ultimate goal, viz. liberation. There are, then, two main kinds of yoga or Samadhi, viz, the samprajnata and the asamprajnata. This is the state of Samadhi or meditation where all mental modifications get stopped, and there are no ripples in the placid surface of citta or the mind. Both these kinds of Samadhi are known by the common name of Samadhi-yoga or the cessation of mental modifications, since both conduce to self-realisation.⁵

Contemporary teachers of yoga have selectively emphasized various aspects described in the *Yogashāstra*, sometimes arguing that the entire eight-limbed path can be accessed by an intense focus on parts of the path. Additionally, many contemporary practitioners of yoga have read the *Yogashāstra* with lenses assuming a nondual nature to reality (based on *Advaita Vedānta*) and *bhakti* (devotion to God), which became more dominant applied philosophies in India after the codification of the *yogashāstra*.

C. The Bhagavadgita (literally meaning “The Song of the God or of the Divine One”) is a Sanskrit text from the epic *Mahabharata*. Lord Krishna as the narrator of the *Bhagavadgita*, is referred to as the Bhagavan (the God or the Divine One), and the verses themselves are written in a poetic form that is traditionally chanted; hence the title. The teachings of the Gita are narrated as a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, a warrior prince, taking place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra just prior to the start of a climactic war. Responding to Arjuna’s confusion and moral dilemma about going to war with his evil cousins, Krishna explains to Arjuna his duties as a warrior and a prince. Importantly, Krishna elaborates on a number of philosophical tenets for everyday living, with examples and analogies.⁶

In many ways seemingly a heterogeneous text, the Gita reconciles many facets and schools of Hindu philosophy, and the central thought of it is to be dutiful and work with a detachment / *nishkama* from the fructified result of your action.

Domains of Wisdom Described in the Gita are: (1) Knowledge of life , (2) Emotional Regulation , (3) Control over Desires (4) Decisiveness, (5) Love of and Faith in the God , (6) Duty and work/the detached karma,(7) Self-contentedness , (8) Compassion and Sacrifice , (9) Insight/Humility and (10) Yoga (Integration) .⁷

The Gita has primarily elaborated upon Karma and detachment from ulterior motives as being the responsible acts done by an agent- where the ownership of action needs to have the moral intent of seeking it without claiming any beneficial entitlements that accrued. This has led to the Gita, which consists of 18 chapters, being described as a concise guide to Hindu philosophy and also as a practical, self-contained guide to life despite its historical antiquity.

Section-2

Swami Vivekananda’s Application of these Philosophies and Wisdom

These virtues of detachment, rigour of mind, understanding the difference between the true nature of self and its apparent / projected character have been contextualised in neo-vedanta of Swami Vivekananda(1863-1902) in the late 19th century, and still hold a significant key to solve the contemporary problematic in life issues. Vivekananda's philosophy arises from the awareness of the social, religious and economic conditions of the Indian masses. Vivekananda, a rationalist and a spiritualist, at the same time, had also a realisation that at least some of the social evils were due to the orthodoxy and superstitions prevalent in the society of the time. He strongly held that this culture of dogma arose due to a loss of faith in spiritual values of humanism.

Consequently, he aimed at, what could be called a spiritual awakening and accepted with gratitude whatever he could learn from faiths and disciplines emphasising the ultimate relevance of spiritual values.

Vivekananda always emphasises the need of re-interpreting Vedanta in accordance with the demands and needs of the time; in fact, his philosophy itself is an attempt in that direction, but this remains a fact that some of the basic ideas of the philosophy of Vivekananda are derived from ancient Hindu philosophy – specially the Vedanta, and an application of the Yoga, especially the trend as espoused in the *Gita* (the concepts of selflessness and faith). But the profoundest influence, in the light of which every other influence was remodelled and shaped, was that of his master – Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa. In fact, the story of the life of Vivekananda would have been entirely different, had he not come under the influence of Ramakrishna. It is said that Ramakrishna brought about a spiritual transformation in the personality and the mental make-up of Vivekananda. Following Parmahansa, Vivekananda advocated the divinity of the soul, the non-duality of God-head, the unity of existence, and the universality or harmony of all different religions. Ramakrishna initiated him to spiritual discipline and meditation or Yoga..

It is somewhat philosophically unusual to treat reality and God under the same head. But, in the philosophy of Vivekananda, they are not distinct concepts. Traditional philosophy treats reality as a metaphysical concept and God as a religious concept. For Vivekananda such distinctions are irrelevant. Consequently, we find two currents flowing almost side by side in the philosophy of Vivekananda – one that resembles Advaita Vedanta, and the other that reminds one of the theism of the Bhakti-cult. **Vivekananda revised the traditional philosophy to revive Hinduism as a philosophical tradition with a religious intent. The new religion was religion of universal love. Vivekananda advocated this as that true religion which can overcome the divisive, and disruptive tendencies. True love must be universal.** He says, 'when we come to the real, spiritual universal concept, then, and then alone, religion will become real and living, it will come into our very nature, live in our every movement, penetrate every pore of our society and be infinitely more a power of good than it has never been before."

For the present paper, I shall focus on his reference to applying knowledge of self-truth as delineated in vedanta, and difference between knowledge of spiritual and ego self, as suggested by Yoga, and his insistence on doing the karma with faith, besides his central thesis of ‘Universal Love’/ monistic character of religion, following the *Bhagvadgita*. Combining the three, in a way conducive to living well, and well-being, Vivekananda has put forth the following arguments:

- i) Jñāna Yoga: The way of knowledge is based on the realisation that bondage is due to ignorance. Ignorance, according to Vivekananda, is the ignorance of the real nature of things, it is the inability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. This kind of knowledge cannot be had merely through study or by listening to the words of wise

- teacher. This requires the practice of concentration on the nature of the truths learnt. Vivekananda says that renunciation is a necessary stage in the practice of Jnana yoga, since detachment from anxieties and unnecessary conflicts leads to concentrate on knowing the real meaning of righteous living.
- ii) Bhakti Marga: This is the way of knowing God through intensity of feeling. Vivekananda says that strong emotions have the capacity to awaken and activate the potential powers of man. The Bhakti-marga is the way of pure love in which the object of love or devotion is not the finite or the limited, but the Supreme. This love will be universal love, love for all, because this will be based on the realisation of oneness of everything.
 - iii) Karma Yoga: Vivekananda says, Karma-yoga is a system of ethics and religion intended to attain freedom through unselfishness and by good works. The Karma-yogi need not believe in any doctrine whatsoever. Man has to remain in the world, in the midst of evil and good, and pain and suffering. And he has to work, - has to keep on working as well as he can. Vivekananda seemed to be quite impressed by the Gita ideal of *Nishkama*/ detachment from entitlements followed by a moral karma. The secret of action is that one must not expect anything in return of the action done.
 - iv) Raja-yoga is the way to the realisation of immortality by controlling the mind and the body. This control is not like the control recommended by the Jñāna yogi, it is controlling the mind and the body by subjecting them to certain physical and mental disciplines. Patanjali laid the foundation of such a yoga in his Yoga-sutra, and according to some, it is the surest- the most direct and the quickest method for attaining salvation. By definition, its aim is the realisation of unity with God. Raja-yoga is the way of physical and mental discipline. It is based on the pre-supposition that bondage is due to the distracting activities of the body and the mind.

Section-3

Application of all the mentioned traditions on the 21st century Indian and Global world-view

Vedanta's influence: This world of experience, comprising of pain and pleasure, and known as the jagat or samsara has no real existence. It is a projection, a phenomenon lasting till the real knowledge culminating in oneness of universe or self- realization happens. This illusion or false projection was called *māyā* by Sankara. In the present day world, as I have tried to use, it can be used to explain a relation between real life world and the virtual world. Real friendships and human contacts vs online and social media constructed virtual friendships and relationships. Vedanta philosophy's dictum that maya or ignorance has an apparent existence, and lasts till the truth dwells upon the knowing self/person. About the ethical implication of the overtly transcendental and metaphysical concept like *ātmā* or *brahman*, it is inferred by many

scholars(and I have also followed it here) that Shankara had not taken an amoral or non-humanistic stance.

In the present day world view, it can be emphatically inferred that the probable delusional character of web/ online media, obsession with selfies can be countered and corrected by realising the truth of real life world experience and in understanding the real and ultimate meaning of the self, as explicated in section-1. The status of *māyā* as a category of truth remains relative to our being attached, and hence swayed by it or detached, and be liberated from inundating effects of emotional upheavals , compulsions of competitive aspirations, parochial selfishness etc. Just as the *māyā* cannot be an absolute truth or untruth , likewise the technology aided world view can be understood as having a contextual relevance by a discerning mind. A discerning mind knows and lives a life of detachment from constraints and obstructions to true knowledge.

Likewise **Yoga**, with its insistence on controlling body, senses and mind represents a holistic method of achieving physical and mental well-being, and hence being in control. Yoga has assumed an iconic status among preachers of wellness. **The popular version stresses upon the physical side or only on a fit body type. But, if understood and imbibed in its essential tenet, Yoga is a viable medium to provide control over breathing, the vital part of a living being, and is a guiding mechanism to keep mind and heart in tandem with each other, and thereby keeping a person happy in heart and in having lesser turmoil in mind. In today's context, this placid sense of mind will enable in pragmatically resolving the malady of the breakdown of holistic personality of an individual.** A person or jiva cannot realise spiritual truths so long as his/her mind is tainted with impurities and his intellect vitiated by evil thoughts. It is in the pure heart and the clear understanding that the truth of the spirit is revealed and directly experienced. The Sankhya -Yoga system's analysis comes in handy in the present day world's comprehension of wellness and holistic living.

The influence of the **Gita** which carries out the practical philosophy of Sankhya-Yoga extends well beyond India and the Hindu religion. Based on the Gita, specific models for administration, management, and leadership have been described variously, and there are innumerable references based upon it in the present day works on life management skills. It shows us how to free our emotions of love and care from jealousy, envy, control etc. so they flow without any distortions and encompass the whole humanity. Bhagavad Gita enables you to realize your potential to be that person who is mature and responsible by unravelling the ethical goal of leading a life of pragmatic virtue of acting upon duty, and thereby having a mind free of anxiety and narrow-minded selfishness. Bhagvadgita's holism facilitates a comprehension of mind, feelings, faith to understand disinterestedness. The basic goal promoted in the Gita is that of rich knowledge of life in a broad sense, i.e., realizing one's personal limits within the context of the large universe) leading to humility, and at the same time, fulfilling obligations toward others through appropriate work that enhances societal well- being. This requires regulation of emotions so that rational social judgment supersedes one's selfish needs. Living in the face of uncertainty and understanding real and potential conflicts between personal and societal goals is

essential; however, such moral or practical dilemmas should lead, not to inaction, but to well-chosen and decisive action.

It is remarkable that the basic concept of wisdom described thousands of years ago in one corner of the world resonates so well with modern conceptualization of wisdom. The focal point of the Gita which suggests that duty and work are more important than personal feelings, and calls for action done with full passion but not consumed by the resultant benefits thereby enabling a check on shameless consumerism, marks it as a guideline to follow the spiritual culture of humanism for all times and epochs.

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