

## A New Dimension of Vedanta in Bengal

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### Abstract

A school of Indian philosophical thought known as theism. Theistic thinking depends on this Veda. Just as the importance of Vedic civilization cannot be excluded when explaining the context of Indian cultural civilization, it is natural to think that the context of Vedanta cannot be excluded in explaining the cultural civilization of Bengal. Human civilization throws up, from time-to-time serious challenges but human destiny various thinkers have emerged over the ages to solve those problems. When Bengal human civilization was caught up in the cobweb of chaos and confusion, Hindu society was tottering, at that time, Rammohan appeared in Bengal with modern Vedantic thinking. He brought Vedanta to the masses based on the common language of common people, and later in the 19th century in Bengal Sri Ramakrishna opened a new practice of Vedanta which was confined to books. This Vedantic thought of Ramakrishna is a new era of Vedanta which calls Neo-Vedanta. A small attempt of his own in the discussion part.

**Keyword:** Vedanta, Theistic, Sri Ramakrishna, Neo-Vedanta

Just as the German philosopher Kant initiated a renaissance in the world of 'knowledge', a wave of renaissance of Vedanta was created in the minds of the people of Bengal in the ninth century. whose guide by Sri Ramakrishna.' The term Renaissance comes from the French word 'rebirth' (<https://useum.org/Renaissance/What-is-Renaissance>), and refers to the period following Medievalism. It saw a revival of classical art, emphasizing humanism. Renaissance artists moved away from the religious atmosphere that dominated the Middle Ages and instead focused on the beauty and mystery of the natural world and the individual man, who was considered the center of this new era.

Renaissance developed when Humanism, the philosophy that focused on human interests and needs. Renaissance does not come suddenly into human lives; this process has been going on for centuries. The renaissance that took place in the search for socio, political and philosophical theory in Europe, the development of Bengal in India was no less; the history of Bengali civilization has never been based on a one-pointed view. The overall civilization in Bengal was widely understood at different levels of society in the nineteenth century. One of them is the practice of Vedanta which later broke the boundaries of books and was considered as a part of the practical life of people.

Vedas will introduce the entire literature in India. Vedanta philosophy is based on the ancient Upanishads which are called Shruti. In our Vedantic tradition the Shruti texts are a part of revelation like the four Vedas. After the Upanishads we have Badarayana's Brahmasutra or Vedantasutra. But we see that Upanishadic Vedanta is not a single Vedanta. To reduce the different ideas of the different Upanishads and to develop a single unified philosophy out of them Badarayana produced his Vedanta or Brahma Sutra. The vast Vedantic literature

produced in our Middle Ages consists of different commentaries on this basic Vedantic text. Some commentators have approached the Brahma Sutra as an Advaita text and some others as a Dvaita text and some again as Advaitadvaita text etc.

The great Indian civilization stands on it the Vedantic thought. However, it has to be said that the light of the Vedantic civilization did not shine in the life of the people of Bengal before the advent of Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). The social outlook of the people of Bengal at that time was terrible. Bengal people had lost the proper spiritual perspective on life and society. Meaningless ceremonies and dry ritualism had overtaken the life-giving values of Hinduism. Brahmin priests made popular expositions of Hindu mythology, created extravagant stories, and cleverly spread false ideas about religion to suit their selfish interests. The study of the Vedas and Upanishads had become almost extinct. Superstition and irrational orthodoxy had taken the place of reasoning. None could even dare to raise a voice against social and religious abuses. Social vices such as the suttee, throwing children into the Ganges, female infanticide, kulinism along with polygamy. (Gupta, 2003)

At the beginning of the 19th century Hindu society was shaky because it was caught up in the trap of chaos and confusion but in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century incarnate people of India incited the Indian people from their lethargy and brought about them to think and thus helped to end their stagnancy. Its influence is deeply felt in the minds of the people of Bengal. Before the advent of Rammohan, the influence of Tantra, Buddhism, and Shakta literature was a strong Vedantic element in Bengal particularly in the poetry of Ramprasad. (Gupta, 2003) Dinesh Chandra Sen in his writing 'Vangabhāshā O Sāhitya' was the first to draw our attention to Ramprasad being a forerunner of Rammohun's religious ideas (Gupta, 2003). In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bengal's literary history is particularly rich in Shakta, Shaiva and Vaishnava Purana. (Gupta, 2003) Ramprasad was belong to Shakta family, His Shyama Sangit touched the heart of Bengal mind, Ramprasad is acquainted with Vedantic ideas. Now the question how close is the songs of Ramprasad to the Philosophy of Vedanta? William Thompson think that Ramprasad says in one of his song- 'chini hate chain a ma, chini khete bhalabasi ('I like eating sugar, but I have no desire to become sugar'). Ramprasad's song highlights the relationship between devotees and God, in line with the qualified non-duality of Vedanta. He does not compare himself to Brahma. Ramprasad did not mention the distinction between Mukti and Bhakti like the Bengali Vaishnava community accepts. Actually, extraordinary about Ramprasad is that he is free from any constraint of dogma, as a Shakta sādhanika Ramprasad is ready to find his joy in Vaishnava faith. In the image of Bengal at that time a believer in the one and the one can assume many forms. Bengali Tantric scholar looked upon Tantra as Vedanta. Dr. Bhabatosh Datta has written an excellent book entitled 'Vangalaimanase Vedanta' and in this work he has very appropriately quoted the observations of Shivchandra Vidyarnava saying that the tantric ascends to the altitude of advaita through dvaita. (Chakravarti, 1969)

At the end of the Battle of Palashi in 1757, the rule of Bengal passed into the hands of the British, at that time Christian missionaries began to spread their Christian religion in Bengal on a large scale. The Christian missionaries had challenged the very basis of Hinduism and they sought to demolish the entire Hindu religion and philosophy as false and primitive in

order to prove the superiority of their faith. In criticizing the Hindu religion some of them went to far as to say that all the Hindu Gods are nothing else but demons. Thus, on one side, there was diehard Hindus, who enforced meaningless and superstitious customs among the masses in the name of religion. As a result these attacks served a very useful purpose. 'They roused the Bengal people from their slumber and stirred them up to think and thus helped to end their immobility.' (Gupta, 2003)

The modern religious renaissance in India can be said to have originated in the early 19th century through the heroics of the social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy. He accepted the challenge and countered the claims of Christian missionaries. He, for the first time, made Hindu intellectuals realize that Christianity was no more divisive than Hinduism, its practices more heinous than theirs, and their claims of racial superiority a mere myth. Rammohan began his religious movement, which was a reformist movement a strong protest against idolatry, and his movement for religious reform was inspired by Islam. It was essentially a Vedantic movement Raja Rammohan Roy had a synthesis mentality, behind the formation of this synthesis mind-set, the knowledge of several scriptures like the knowledge of Hindu scriptures such as English education, Christianity, Muslim culture especially contributed. (Bose, 1960) Through western eyes he saw the evils of his country and tried to remove them without being impressed by the glitter of western civilization. He discovered the true Indian culture which had been tarnished for centuries and realized the need for reformation of Hinduism. The monotheism of the Vedas and the Upanishads was his rallying point. Puranic religion and idolatry with all its elaborate rituals and sacrifices were the main targets of his attack. His rational thinking did not allow him to accept the concept of form of God. Collecting materials from the Vedas and the Upanishads, he developed a concept of formless God. it was a highly monotheistic religion with a foreign background and out of this ideology the Brahma Sabha was born in 1828.

When Ramprasad died in the year Rammohun was born (1772-1833). The songs which Ramprasad sang reappeared in the voice of Rammohun to inspire a new movement. In 1815 Rammohan was permanently settled in Calcutta and he began work on Vedantic reformist movement. In that year he published his first Bengali work on the Vedanta, a 183-page Vedanta Grantha, his presentation of Badarayana's Vedantasutra. (Gupta, 2003) He also wrote during this year a pamphlet of twenty-two pages entitled Vedantasara. In 1816 appeared his Bengali translation of the Kena Upanishad and of the Isha Upanishad. His Bengali translation of the Katha and Mandukya Upanishads appeared in 1817 and in 1819 was published his Bengali translation of the Mundaka Upanisad. These were the first translation of the Upanishadic texts in Bengali and they form a part of what may be called the Vernacular Vedanta in Bengal and also a movement for a new reformed Hindu religion was based on the Vedanta. Rammohun is the creator of the revival of Vedantism in Bengal. He did not entrust his doctrine to any particular sect of Vedanta, although Rammohun was a follower of Shankaracharya in his belief in one God, a God without a second, that is, like Shankaracharya he believed in Parama Brahma who alone is man's object of worship. But he did not believe in the severe monism or advaitavada of Shankara. Rammohun was also a social reformer and political reformer that's why He could not dismiss the material world as unreal. He does not here say anything about the end of sadhana being losing individuality in

Brahma. Rammohun's Vedantism is a religion that means worship of the supreme Being: he never even suggests that the worshipper must dissolve his identity in the Supreme Being. Actually, Rammohun's idea of worship is rooted in the idea of bhakti; it means love of God and not being God. (Gupta, 2003) So Rammohun's Vedantism was his endeavor to spread amongst his people knowledge of the scriptures which alone can make his people turn away from idolatry and other superstitions and bring them a true awareness of true religion. The 'Brahma Samaj' movement is also the first religious movement in modern Bengal at that time. Rammohun founded the 'Brahma Samaj' as a common place of worship for all theists but in practice it became a Hindu theistic fraternity after the death of Rammohun (1833). In 1843, Rammohan's able successor, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore had entered the Samaj and realized its moribund state. Devendranath felt that the spiritual teachings of Rammohun would not be perpetuated by a mere congress which had no definite dogmas, methods of worship and rituals. So, on the ground prepared by Raja, Devendranath built up a religion called Brahma Dharma. The Brahma movement is known as a reform movement, a kind of India Protestantism, but it was essentially a bhakti movement urging people to love God and worship Him without an image and a priest. Raja believed in the infallibility of the Vedas, Devendranath too began with this but ultimately concentrated all his attention on upanisads. Maharshi believed that unless the soul is purified, there cannot be any chance of knowing and enjoying the eternal and Immutable Being. Maharshi tried to keep the Brahma movement and its rites and practices as close as possible to the basic principles of Hinduism. At the same time Devendranath got Keshab chandra Sen as a comrade of the Brahma Samaj. Unfortunately, after a couple of years, misunderstanding grew up, Devendranath's Brahma Dharma was essentially the Hindu religion and its mission was chiefly religious, as distinguished from social reform. But Keshab Chandra did not like the idea that, Brahma Dharma should be only the essence of Hinduism. He had a catholic outlook on religion and incorporated many elements of Christian religion into the theory and practice of Brahma Dharma. This was totally disapproved by Devendranath. (Sen, 2012)

Another source of misunderstanding between the two was that Keshab had made social reform a pillar of his Brahma Dharma which Devendranath was not willing to accept. (Sen, 2012) This difference in 'Brahma Samaj' weakened the Brahma movement. It became a separate religion most of whose doctrines were directly opposed to traditional Hinduism. Moreover, what was originally a theological difference become a practical one that vitally affected Hindu ceremonies, rites, and practices in day-to-day life. Naturally, it alarmed Hindu society, set up a strong orthodox reaction, and determined opposition to the Brahma movement. Keshab's laudable concept of universal religion failed to find a rightful echo in the hearts of common Hindus. Thus, the campaign failed to bring the masses under its fold.

From the reign of the Pal Sen dynasty in Bengal to the first half of the nineteenth century, the atmosphere of Vedanta that we observed in Bengal, whether it was centered on a particular Vedantic sect or on a particular philosophy; which resulted in conflict in people's minds. In the 19th century, an epoch-making man appeared to bridge this gap. He brought the message of peace to the people in his Vedantic philosophy, the message of accepting each other which we have been emanating from the essence of Vedanta for ages. We hear this Yugapurusha simply explain the meaning of Vedanta and its practical application in front of everyone, He

is a social reformer on the one hand and a devotee on the other, and he is Lord Sri Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna was not acquainted with this vast Vedantic literature. His Vedanta is an attitude of the mind, a spiritual temper and it is a precious possession of the Indian soul. But this Vedanta was in no way different from the Vedanta of books. Vedanta inheres in our spiritual breath. We cannot go out of the Vedanta in our religious life. Sri Ramakrishna absorbed this spirit of the Vedanta in our religious life. Sri Ramakrishna absorbed this spirit of the Vedanta permeating the spiritual life of the Indian people. Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) has said about Ramakrishna that he was 'Vedanta's greatest human exemplar'. (ব্রহ্ম) And Vivekananda knew his master to be Vedanta incarnate.

Before Sri Ramakrishna, Rammohan, Devendranath and Keshab Chandra had also tried to build up a unity. But there was a basic difference among them. The former attempted to build up a unity dominated by a rationalistic, non-idolatrous and humanistic approach and outlook. It was not enlivened by direct realization. But Ramakrishna did not attempt at an intellectual synthesis of religions. His synthesis was spontaneous and it was the direct result of the light of knowledge and his vivid realization. He had realized the synthesis in his own life. It is true that Ramakrishna did not find any new religion. He was just echoing the old religion of India which was founded on the doctrines of the Vedas and the Upanisads, later systematized in the sutras and developed in the commentaries of Sankaracharya and others. Ramkrishna expressed his thoughts in an original style through simple stories, parables and metaphors. The language he used was not a language of the elites, but that of the masses. The view that Ramakrishna presented to all in his early speech is not a particular sectarian view like not a saiba, not a sakta, not a vaisnava, not a Vedantist even the non-Hindus like Muslims, Christians, Sikhs also felt comfortable to him. He realized his spiritual life that was 'joto mot toto poth'. Although Ramakrishna imparted spiritual knowledge through dual devotion in his life but He realized the spirit of Advaita Vedanta has the highest peak of spirituality. (Gupta, 2003)

While discussing the significance of Vedanta, the commentators who explained the nature of Brahman were beyond the comprehension of the common man, but Sri Ramakrishna explained the nature of Brahman very easily from his treasure, which had not been revealed in the writings of any commentators before. According to Sri Ramakrishna the impersonal Absolute and the Personal God are not two different realities unrelated to each other, nor are they different realities inseparably related to each other as substance and quality, they are the same reality in different states and with different names. Brahman and Shakti or Kālī are non-different. Ramkrishna says that when the reality in its essential immutable being (nitya-rupa) is called Brahman and in its sportive creative activity (lila-rupa) is called kali or Shakti the personal God. Sisir Kumar Ghosh said that Ramakrishna's philosophy of the Vedanta we have to understand the significance of all his saying. His Vedanta is specifically his Vedanta. In Ramakrishna new Vedanta even image worship is admissible. Sankar's Advaita Vedanta is admissible jnana is the way that can attain supreme reality, Ramanuja in his Vedantic thought mainly depended on (viśiṣṭādvaita vada) Bhakti, but Ramakrishna's philosophy of Vedanta accepts Jnana, Bhakti, Karma, and Seva. According to Advaita Vedanta Jnani reject the external by neti-neti and reaches to ultimate reality and after he gets samadhi, he knows that

Brahman manifests itself in many forms, jagat is nothing but Brahman ('jiva Brahmaiva nā parah') but Bhakta like Ramanuja, Brahman is Prabhu and Bhakta is Das. Sri Ramakrishna gives an example of Hanuman Ji, Hanuman Ji said to Ramachandra; I feel, you and I are same, and sometime I feel you are lord and I am your servant and sometime I feel you are utmost and I am your part. Here He is speaking of the various states of the spiritual consciousness. While offering his bhakti to God he says that the whole universe is fraught with God.

Sri Ramakrishna is a Neo-Vedantist because his Vedanta is uniquely comprehensive. In the history of western philosophy, we find that the ideas of a distinguished philosopher acquire a new dimension and a new depth in some later philosophers. Plato's philosophy becomes Neo-platonism, Kant's philosophy became Neo-Kantism and Hegel's philosophy became Neo-Hegelianism. But we cannot say that Neo-Vedanta is Neo-Vedanta in this sense, neither Ramakrishna nor Vivekananda used the word Neo-Vedanta. But we do find a new Vedanta in the religious philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna. In His Vedanta, we have a synthesis of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma, and Seva. While he believed in the existence of a personal God he did not discard the Impersonal Brahma of Shankaracharya. But he said Sankaracharya's Advaita is not for the common man.

### **Conclusion**

This universalism is one of the main characteristics of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy. It is not only meant for the sannyāsis or for the scholars but for all people irrespective of their cast, or religion, race and culture. Sri Ramakrishna declared that what Brahman really is cannot be known from the scriptures; it is a matter of direct realization and he who yearns for Him, finds Him. Thus, his teachings have become a tree under which all humanity can rest and be nurtured. He developed this universalism not by denying other systems of philosophy, but by harmonizing several notes he produced a piece of sweet melodious music. This philosophy does not negate nor does it affirm the world, but it transforms the world by divinizing life. Sri Ramakrishna believed that the entire whole and God are identical. He removed all the barriers between man and God, between love for God and love for man. To him God resides in every being, Jiva is Siva. This Jiva-Siva concept clearly shows how to reshape human relationships and conduct man's dealing with his fellow beings. Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual humanism offered a dynamic religion in place of static piety. In fact, the master absorbed India's wit and wisdom into his psyche, gave it a modern texture, and finally made it a viable practical philosophy. The originality of this philosophy consisted of the capacity of adapting Vedanta to its modern needs, recreating it in its present garb, and rejecting the inessentials.

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