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Glimpses into the Vedānta philosophy and the Tantric philosophy

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(Indian civilization is based on the Vedic and the Tantric cults. In respect of philosophy and some rituals, these two cults are complementary to each other. In spite of other differences, it is observed that the Tantric conception of Śakti is Vedāntic in its philosophical outlook and several Upaniṣads treat devotion of Māhatripurasundarī. Tantras contain the essence of the Upaniṣads.)

"The essence of the Knowledge of the Veda was called by the name of Vedānta, which comprises the Upaniṣads.... Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom are the watchwords of the Upaniṣads..... The Upaniṣads are the Bible of India."

—Swami Vivekananda.

Introduction:

Since the dawn of civilization two streams in the spiritual world have been dominating the people of India. These two streams are known as Vedic stream and Tantric streams. The Vedic stream stands on the plinth of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. The Tantric stream is based on the innumerable Tantric texts. The Vedas are called Nigama, on the other hand, Tantras are known as Āgama.¹ In spite of differences between Vedānta and Tantra both are inter-related. In this article our aim is to present some important elements of both Vedānta and Tantra in order to show the similarities and dissimilarities between Vedānta and Tantra. We begin this paper

with Vedānta philosophy.

What is Vedānta:

The word 'Vedānta' means 'the end of the Vedas'. The Upaniṣads are the concluding portion as well as the cream of the Vedas. They are called Vedānta either on account of their position at the end of certain books of the Vedas or on account of their representing the essence or conclusions of the Vedas².

Indian Philosophy and Vedānta:

Vedānta is included in the six systems of Indian Philosophy. These six systems are Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya and Yoga, Pūrva- Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. Everyone of these systems claims to derive its authority from the Upaniṣads. It is the Vedānta that bases itself wholly on them.

Other names of Vedānta:

Vedānta philosophy is also known³ as Brahmasūtra, Vyāsa-sūtra, Bādarāyaṇasūtra, Śārīrikasūtra, Bhikṣu-sūtra and Uttaramīmāṃsā.

Interpretations of the Brahmasūtra:

The commentators explained the Brahmasūtras according to their own views. The sūtras were written in a cryptic way. So the meanings and the interpretations of the sūtras differ. As a consequence, the Brahmasūtras suffer the same fate in the hands of the commentators as the Upaniṣads.⁴

Chapters of Vedānta philosophy:

Vedānta philosophy consists of four chapters. Each Chapter is divided into four padas. The four chapters i.e., samanvayādhyāya, avirodhādhyāya, sadhanādhyāya and phaladhyāya contain 556 sūtras.

Emergence of isms based on the commentaries of the Brahmasūtra:

Various isms based on the basis of the commentaries on the

Brahmasūtra. The commentary of Śankarācārya is known as Śārīrikabhāṣya, the commentary of Rāmānujācārya is known as Śrībhāṣya and the commentary of Madhvācārya is called Pūrnaprajñabhāṣya.⁵ On the basis of these commentaries the following isms in Indian philosophy came to light.⁶

Advaitavāda of Śankarācārya, Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda of Ramanuja, Dvaitavāda of Madhvācārya, -Dvaitavāda of Ballabhācārya.

Meaning of Tantra:

In Sanskrit lexicons the term Tantra has been used in many senses. We may pick out only a few meanings and place here as follows-

A system of doctrines⁷, a loom or paraphernalia, principal matter, characteristic feature, system, main part⁸, a religious treatise generally in the form of a dialogue between Śiva and Durgā, teaching peculiar and mystical formulae for the worship of the deities⁹, sacred works of the worship of the female energy of God 'Śiva'¹⁰, loom¹¹, the Sun¹², a line of descendants¹³, administration¹⁴, procreation¹⁵ etc.

According to a famous historian¹⁶, In its present widely sense. Tantra means a literature which spreads knowledge and particular knowledge of profound things with the help of mystic diagrams(yantra) and words possessing esoteric meanings(mantra) and helps the attainment of salvation.

Origin of Tantra:

Most of the scholars are in favour of the divine authorship and origin of Tantra.¹⁷ Lord Śiva Himself authored Tantra in different forms for various purposes and caused Tantra seers reveal Tantra for the benefit of human kind.¹⁸

Tantric sects and sub-sects:

Tantra's mystic practices and fragrance attracted all- from the sannyasis to the householders, from the philosophers to the laymen, from the gurus to the śiṣyas, from the kings to the subjects, from the bhogins to the yogins, from the rich to the poor, from the landlords to the peasants, from the teachers to the students, from

the old to the young, from the males to the females and from the brahmanas to the sūdras. This entry of the great number of the masses resulted in the emergence of different sects according to the modes of worship and the deities worshipped.¹⁹

Scholars classify broadly tantric sects into five²⁰-Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, Śāktas, Sauras and Gāṇapatyas. These sects are again divided into many sub-sects.²¹

In spite of differences among the sects and sub-sects, they are not divergent paths, but different phases of the ascent consciousness.

In this article we are tempted to discuss some elements, factors and features of both the Vedānta and the Tantra philosophies in order to dispell ignorance and remove misconceptions about Tantra philosophy.

Ātman :

In the Kaṭhōpaniṣad the Ātman is said to be the ultimate reality. The objects are the roads, the body is the chariot, the senses are the horses, the mind is the reins, the intellect is the charioteer, the ego is the enjoyer and the Ātman is the Lord sitting in the chariot.²² The Ātman is one universal, super-consciousness. This Ātman is Brahman.²³

In Tantra, Ātman is not recognized as a unity. Rather it is designated as prāṇa or puruṣa. The puruṣa as Ātman has been developed in to a various degree according to diverse forms which puruṣa adopts as man, beast, plant etc.²⁴

Way of liberation :

Vedānta preaches the renouncement of all the worldly enjoyments for the attainment of liberation. Ignorance is the cause of bondage and transmigration. True knowledge is the cause of liberation from bondage.²⁵ Tantra advocates emancipation through enjoyments.²⁶

Way to Sādhanā :

According to Vedānta, the means of reaching the goal is

bhavanā (contemplation, meditation).

According to Tantra, it must be accompanied by Kriyā (action). Vedānta accepts the eternal Śivahood of jīva. Tantra holds that Śivahood is attainable by practices of special kinds.²⁷

End of Sādhanā:

Vedānta prescribes means whereby jīvātman (individual soul) is metamorphosed into Paramātman (the Supreme Soul). Tantra says that Kuṇḍaliṇī is the inner spiritual power dormant within the human body. By sādhanā man can reach the stage when the human is transformed into the divine. The Jīva becomes Śiva.²⁸

Vedānta's Brahma and Tantra's 'Śiva-śakti' – Monism and Dualism :

Vedānta regards Brahman, the infinite, eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and pure spirit as the ultimate reality. Para Brahman and Apara Brahman are the two aspects of the powers of all senses.²⁹ It is invisible, unusable, incomprehensible, indeterminate, indescribable, non-phenomenal, undifferentiated, good and one homogeneous consciousness. It is the Ātman or self.³⁰ Apara Brahman is the determinate Lord or Išvara related to empirical world and the individual souls. All created being spring from Him and absorbed in Him.³¹ Brahma is the creator of the world, and the maker of all. The world is His. It is indeed, Brahman.³²

Tantra teaches that Paramātmā Nirguṇa Śiva is Sacchidānanda.³³ Kulārṇavatantra says.³⁴ Śiva is the impartite Supreme Brahma, the all knowing (Sarvajña) creator of all. He is the stainless One and the Lord of all. He is One without a second (advaya). He changes not, and is without beginning or end. He is attributeless and above the highest. He is Sacchidānanda. Tantra embraces both Dualism and Monism. Worship involves the dualistic idea. Spiritual experience gained through Upāsana, merging the individual soul into Absolute, involves the idea of one-ness, between the worshipper and the worshipped.³⁵ It also proclaims that Paramātmā and Jīvātmā are one. So it affirms the Grand Words (Mahāvākyas) of the Vedas³⁶ 'tat tvam asi' – thou

art that, aham brahmāsmi- I am Brahma, 'ayamātmā brahma' – The self is Brahman, 'sarvam khalu idaṃ brahma'- All this verily Brahman.

In the Kulārṇavatantra Śiva says,³⁷ some desire dualism (Dvaita), others non-dualism (Advaita) but my truth is beyond both (Dvaitādvaitavarjitaḥ).

Śabda Brahman :

In Vedānta Śabda Brahman is denoted by the term 'Prajña' or the sound 'Om'. In the Chāndogyopaniṣad it is said to be a single-sounded word denoting Brahman.³⁹ In the Kathopaniṣad and the Praśna Upaniṣad it is regarded as both the Śaviśeṣa or determinate Brahman and the Nirviśeṣa or indeterminate Brahman.³⁹

The Śāktatantras generally derive the whole material world from Śabda Brahman. The Sāradaṭilaka says that from Śiva emerges Śakti or Power, the universal mother; from Śakti parā-nanda (higher sound); from para-nanda parā-bindu (higher potentiality); and bīja (seed). When at the time of emergence of these elements, para bindu breaks up, an avyakta or inarticulate sound is produced out of it, which is called Śabda Brahman. Śabda Brahman is the Caintanya pervading all creation and is the source of letters of the alphabet, of words and other sounds by which thoughts are exchanged. From Śabda there arises Pañcabhūta. This universe of moving and motionless objects is composed of pañcabhūtas – earth, water, fire, air and ether.⁴⁰

Rebirth :

According to the Vedānta philosophy, Ātman transmigrates to another body after death. A mortal being dies and is reborn according to its moral deserts. It washes off merits and demerits and acquires identity with God, when it knows Him.⁴¹

Tantra also accepts the doctrine of rebirth. The Kulārṇavatantra says that as a leech goes from one gross to another gross, so Jīva goes from one body to another body. Getting the next body, it leaves the previous body.⁴² Tantra compares this rebirth to the journey from one house to another house.⁴³

Guru :

Upaniṣads accept the necessity of a guru for the acquisition of esoteric philosophy. The Kaṭhopanīṣad says, ⁴⁴“This knowledge cannot be obtained by ratiocination, it can be understood well only when expounded by another.”

The Chāndogya upanīṣad says ⁴⁵“Sir, I have heard from men like you that only knowledge that is learnt from a teacher leads to real good.”

Tantra places Guru in the zenith of the spiritual world. Guru is the living incarnation of God. He is the repository of the secret lore of the mantras and their applications in rituals and meditation. Lord Śiva Himself assumes the form of Guru for the salvation of mankind. ⁴⁶ He is the highest tattva. ⁴⁷ Guru is none other than Śiva without His three eyes, Viṣṇu without four arms and Brahma without his four faces. ⁴⁸

Dīksā :

Dīksā or initiation from a Guru is an essential sacrament of the Vedic tradition. The Chāndogya Upanīṣad says that it is only a man who acquires proper knowledge from an ācārya or preceptor that can repel his ignorance about the Self on Brahman. ⁴⁹

In Tantra Dīksā is a mystic passport to get entrance into the kingdom of the Tantric cult. There can be no liberation without Dīksā. It is self-refining process. The Kulārṇavatāntra says, ⁵⁰“As iron is turned into gold when iron is compounded with mercury, so initiated soul attains Śivahood.”

Cakra :

The Kaṭhopanīṣad and the Śvetāśvetara upanīṣads say that the highest puruṣa exists in the lotus of the heart in the shape of the thumb. ⁵¹ The Chāndogya upanīṣad refers to the hṛtpuṇḍarīka or heart-lotus. ⁵²

According to Tantra, ⁵³ human body is divided into ṣaṭcakra. These are—Mūlādhāra, Svādhīsthāna, Maṇipura, Anāhata, Viśuddha and Ajñā.

Makaras:

Tantra has vehemently opposed and bitterly criticized Pañcamakaras i.e. madya(wine), matsya(fish), māṃsa(meat), mudrā(parched grain) and maithuna(copulation).

But the Vedic cult is not totally free from Pañcamakaras. In some Upaniṣads it is found that some verses are connected with the description of the parts of the body of women. Woman is conceived as the sacrificial fire, her lower private portion as the sacrificial wood, the generative organ as the flame and so on. ⁵⁴

Tantra looks upon the body as the primary requisite of all kinds of sādhanā. It says that all the substances available in this universe are found in human body. Hence all the five makaras are related to body. Out of five makaras the first four makaras are meant for gaining physical strength and the last one maithuna is for the awakening of the dormant energy through magnetic charges of two opposite sexes.

Conclusion :

Whatever differences there may be regarding the Vedānta philosophy and the Tantra philosophy, we may agree to the following views of the scholars.

The Tāntric conception of śakti is Vedantic in its philosophical outlook. ⁵⁶ Bhaskar Raya in his commentary Setubandha on the Vāmakeśvaratantra mentions several upanīṣads treating devotion of Mahātripurasundarī. ⁵⁷ He further views that the Tantras contain the essence of the Upaniṣads. ⁵⁸

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