

The Impact of Indian Philosophy on Emerson, the Dean of American Literature

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Abstract

This paper aims at showcasing the impact of the Indian Philosophy on Emerson, the Dean of American life and literature. Emerson was a transcendentalist, and his transcendentalist is of the nature of Oriental Philosophy. Emerson had read the Vedas and The Bhagavad Gita, in English translations. He had also read the Sufis and the Mohammadan thought, and had found in all the Oriental scriptures the truth of the Vedas. Through all his essays and poems he displayed the knowledge of Indian Philosophy to indicate to the world an altruistic way for better living. Emerson was born in America but loved to be called a Brahmin.

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Introduction

R.W. Emerson (1803-82) was an Indic scholar in the sense that he was fascinated by philosophy and literature of India and assimilated it to such an extent that he called himself an American Brahmin. He steeped deep into Indian culture and philosophy without understanding the Sanskrit language but going deep into Indian spirit of Indian philosophy through English translations.

To Emerson's mind "Hindu philosophy expressed the essence of Orientalism" as a whole to such an extent that he often "identified the whole Orient"¹ with it. The reading lists of Emerson prepared by Arthur Christy and F.I. Carpenter on the behalf of his journal entries sufficiently show that Emerson had already had a wide knowledge of the Hindu philosophy before publishing his "Nature" (1836) which contains his whole Indic thought. Christy asserts² that Emerson had read in 1820 Ram Mohan Roy's English translation of the *Ishavasyopanishad* along with the commentary of Shankaracharya as this work was recommended to Emerson by his religious minded aunt, Marry Moody Emerson. In 1822 Emerson read *A Hymn to Narayena*³ translated by William Jones who lived in India during the period of Warren Hastings's viceroyship. In 1823 he read two articles⁴ – "*Hindoo Mythology and Mathematics*" and "*Religion and Character of the Hindoos*" – in the *Edinburgh Review* (Vol. XXIX, 1818). Emerson himself admitted it when he wrote to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson that he was more curious to read "your Hindu mythologies, the treasures of the Brahmins."⁵ To satiate his curiosity in 1830 he read the *Mahabharata*⁶ in summary translation in the *Philosophic Cyclopaedia* of De Gernado, the French Orientalist. He also read from this book in details all the Oriental cosmogonies, theogonies and idealism. This entry of Emerson's reading list is important as from this source Emerson got summary knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* which is a section of *Mahabharata*, though the English edition of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Charles Wilkins's translation (1785) is said to have come in his hands in 1843 or 1845.⁷ Besides, in 1831-32 Emerson read also French philosopher Victor Cousin's articles on the *Bhagavad-Gita*⁸ which were based on Wilkin's English translation of this Hindu sacred book written in Sanskrit.

In 1830 Emerson read Anquetil Duperron's French book dealing in details with the *Vedas* – Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva – and translations of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* and the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. Later, as we come to know from Emerson's Journal's entries of reading lists in Carpenter and Christy, Emerson read in 1834 about Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata and the compiler of the Vedas; in 1836 the *Code of Menu* (the Manusmriti) in Sir William Jone's

translation; in 1837 Kalidasa's *Meghdutam* and *Shakuntalam* in the same translator's translations. In 1838 he read the Buddha; in 1839 the Vedas; in 1841-42 Vishnu Sharma's *Hitopadesh* in Wilkins's translation; in 1845 the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vishnu Purana*, and H.T. Colebrooke's essays on the Vedas, the *Upanishads* and the various systems of the Hindu philosophy; in 1856 the principal *Upanishads* including the *Kathopanishad*; in 1859 and 1861 the *Mahabharata*. Emerson read also all 44 Oriental volumes which were presented to Thoreau as gifts by his English friend named Thomas Cholmondeley in 1855. But as Christy writes, "no one Oriental volume that ever came to Concord was more influential than the *Bhagavad Gita*"⁹ and, therefore, to Emerson, the *Bhagavad Gita* was, as he himself admits, "the first of books; it was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence."¹⁰

Naturally then he found in the *Bhagavad-Gita* a practical application of his Transcendentalism. It is no denying the fact that the *Bhagavad Gita* of the Hindus was the dramatic transmutation (in dialogue form) of the philosophy of Transcendentalism, which Emerson was yearning in desire to look for. He immediately understood the actual meaning of transcendentalism from the text of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Its philosophy emanated itself in his poetry and prose. Since then Emerson has rightly been called an "American Brahmin."¹¹

After Emerson understood the practical meaning of transcendentalism from the *Gita*, he got completely intoxicated in the eternal philosophy of *The Bhagavad Gita*, which he reiterated in his prose essays and poetry. He wrote and published several essays on different topics, which were published as *Essays* ("First Series and *Essays*; *Second Series*") such as: "Self Reliance", "The Over-Soul", "American Scholar", "The Poet", "Nature", "The Transcendentalist", "Spiritual Laws", "Gifts", and "Friendship". All these essays of Emerson are a spontaneous outcome of his being one with the Indian philosophy. For example, we take the example of his first essay "Self Reliance" is a natural outcome of Emerson's realization of oneness with the Cosmic Principle, as such it is the best illustration of Emerson as a practical transcendentalist – one who having detached himself from all external objects of the phenomenal world looks within his soul and arrives at an experience of non-difference between subject and object and remains engrossed in the beatitude of the Organic Principle or the Over-soul. Such a man on opening his eyes to see the world around, realizes that the universe is his own manifestation.

He may love the objects of the universe from the core of his heart but he is not at all attached to any of them. Naturally then, this man of high spiritual experience does not depend upon any other object than his own soul. In other words he is man

of self reliance who interprets external nature as a body in which he himself dwells as the soul. Such a man is a “Genius” who believes in his own self and his thoughts are the thoughts of all men. As Emerson says, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men.” He does not depend upon the external knowledge available to him through perception, books and heresy, but solely depends upon the experience that comes from within the soul. The highest merit of Moses, Plato and Milton was that they discarded all recorded knowledge and spoke what they had themselves thought.

Emerson sums up his entire philosophy of transcendentalism in the dictum “Trust thyself” and says, “Every heart vibrates to that iron string except the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of the events. Great men have always done so.”¹² In other words, Emerson believes in Eliot’s formula of ‘tradition’ and “the individual talent’ as two different names of one experience. He emphasizes that the individual should trust himself as an integral of the ‘tradition’, which is the total effect of past and present.

Emerson does not attach much importance to ‘Society’ as an external reality. He says, “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint stock company”¹³ in which members are in agreement for profit, no matter the profit stands in the way of the “integrity of individuals.” Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Society defines the laws of good and bad but Emerson says:

No law can be sacred to me but that of my own Nature.
For self reliant man good is all that transports himself
to the realm of the soul and ‘bad’ is all that pulls him
down from the spiritual regions to the mundane day-
to-day activities of the world (cited in *Essays and
Poems*).

Emerson does not advocate for man’s adherence to even his own notions for one time. He opines that experience is moulding us every time and such inconsistency is the law of nature. He says, “Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a result of wisdom never to rely on memory alone,.... But to bring the past for judgments into the thousand eyed present and live ever in a new day.” Man should act singly and should justify his actions in all respects. This, however, does not mean that Emerson advocates for the justification of the actions of a foolish man. This ‘man’ is that self realized individual who has already realizes the truth of the formula: “Study nature, know thyself.” The study of nature teaches him culture and the knowledge of the self teachers him how to manage culture for a useful

moral purpose. Only that man can be truly self-reliant who has realized himself as one with the organic principle. Only that person's intuition never misleads him. He will always keep himself in touch with God or Over-soul who will direct him to perform useful actions for himself and the society as a whole.

The long and the short of everything is that in "Self-Reliance", Emerson underscores the importance of self-realization which is the realization of the Over-soul existing within an individual. If an individual looks within to form and develop relation with the divine, the divine will in turn will condescend to enter his thought, the translation of which will be his actions. He will then have attained a state of non-difference point between the Over-soul and his Soul, and will then realize himself as an integral part of the perfect Machine of God. It is this man who is the manifestation of Emerson's doctrine of Self-Reliance.

Indeed, Emerson was himself a self-reliant man, a prophet, a Yogi who had realized that the entire perceptible universe was the combination of objects of vegetable nature, animal nature, human nature and even inanimate nature, which are merely illusions or shadows of divinity in man.

Emerson's concept of Self-Reliance is the same concept of "Oneness" as we see in Sankaracharya's philosophy of 'Advait' as detailed in his masterpiece book *Vivekachudamani*.¹⁴ The essay is therefore the spiritual philosophy of the Hindus.

Likewise Emerson's concept of the Over-soul is analogous to the Vedantic principle of the Unmanifested Truth which has emanated itself into various forms and shapes of the universe on the Indian principle of Generation, Operation and Destruction, but is still independent of the act of generation, operation and destruction. Emerson believes that the Over-soul element is the common denominator among all objects which binds them in a single bond of divinity. It is duty of every individual to study nature and to know himself so that he comes to contest with the Over-Soul. This realization is possible through the practice of transcendental search into the self where through all dualities of names and forms get erased the practitioner realizes a blissful state of mind which is the experience of the Over-soul. In all his essays, particularly in "Self-Reliance", "The American Scholar", "The Poet", Emerson exhorts his reader to make efforts to enjoy this blissful inner experience of the "self" within his own "soul".

Emerson believes that man is himself God; the Over-soul is the soul. The Over-soul is the whole while an individual who appears to be a 'part' of the 'whole' is not in fact its part. The Over-soul is the absolute truth. If we believe that soul is the part of the Over-soul, it will be much like believing that truth can be parted. But the

actual reality is that the truth is an absolute whole which cannot be divided into parts; this means that the soul is not a part of the Over-soul but soul is itself an emanation of the same.¹⁵ To consider it different is to remain in duality. As Emerson says:

“Meantime within the man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence: the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related: The Eternal ONE.”¹⁶

Since there is non-difference point of subject and object between Over-soul and Soul. A transcendentalist must perform every action in the visible world as a translation of the directive of the Over-soul.

Although man lives in division, within him is the soul of the Whole: within him is that universal beauty which is the Emanation of the Over-soul. “Men see the world piece by piece as the sun, the moon, the animal and the tree.”¹⁷ The Over-soul is that transcendent reality which tends to take the shape of virtue and wisdom and power and beauty. The Over-soul is Omnipresent. According to Emerson, the soul permeates in all the organs of a human being. The soul is not the intellect and the will but the master of intellect and the will. It is not a faculty, but a light. The soul represents the qualities which are innate in man. It transcends even time and space.

Having a constant contact with the Over-soul or performing actions according to its directive does not enable man to predict several futuristic happenings and events. Emerson regards the desire to know the future as the low curiosity. “Those who resort to this practice of future telling, they vulgarize and commercialize religion.”¹⁸ Questions like what happens to an individual after death have no complete answers. Even Jesus Christ did not answer such complex questions as life after death and immortality of the soul. The very idea that the soul is everlasting conveys the sense of immortality.

Emerson believes that man’s true intellectual growth depends upon the intensity of his realization of the Over-soul. Those who realize themselves as one with the Over-soul are philosophers, and those who make their intellectual growth on the basis of the knowledge of outside world are called ‘teachers’. The former is the man of intuition, the latter are the men of perception: the former are ‘exclusive’ mystics who speak the language of the Over-soul; the latter are ‘inclusive’ people who include themselves among the outside objects and then talk of ‘oneness’. He is in favour of those teachers who have first made their contact with the Over-soul and then interpret every kind of knowledge in the light of their inner experience. He hails Homer, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton as intuitive writers and poets.

To sum up, the final burden of “The Over-Soul” is that nothing exists but the

Over-soul: that all perceptible objects which make the world are only the 'Nature' or the Universal Body of the Over-soul. It is due to man's ignorance that objects appear to be different from one-another. This ignorance gives birth to dualities of happiness and sorrow, good and bad, big and small, rich and poor, timeless and temporal. But when an individual makes efforts to know himself and realizes the Absolute truth seated within his heart, all contradictions and contraries get transcended into Reality, one and only one truth of the Over-soul. The philosophy of Emerson's essay "The Over Soul" is the philosophy of Advait Vedant of Sankaracharya. Likewise, the other essays are also vibrative with the Indian philosophy. He was in for actuating Indic studies for a better world.

References

- ¹ *Emerson and Asia*, p.103.
- ² *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p.283.
- ³ *Emerson and Asia*, p.257.
- ⁴ *Ibid and The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p.284.
- ⁵ Cited in *Emerson and Asia*. P.103.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 258 and *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p.278.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.287 and *Emerson and Asia*, p.107.
- ⁸ John Mc Aleer, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter* (Boston, Toronto: Little Brown Company, 1984), p.156 and *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p.287.
- ⁹ *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p.23.
- ¹⁰ *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes (Cambridge, Mass: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1909-1914), Vol. VII, p.511.
- ¹¹ See: J.P. Pritchard, "The Brahmins", *Criticism in America*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1956), pp. 121-162.
- ¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Poems* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1960), p.39. Hereafter this book will be cited as *Essays and Poems* with relevant page number under the notes.
- ¹³ *Essays and Poems*, p.40.
- ¹⁴ See: *Sri Sankracharya Vivekschudamani*, Tr by Swami Madhaananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1995).
- ¹⁵ It seems Emerson formed his idea from the Vedic Mantra in *Yajurveda* (40.1, 4.2).

¹⁶ *Essays and Poems*, p.**131**.

¹⁷ *Essays and Poems*, p.**137**.

¹⁸ Emerson did not believe in astrology. He thought that it is the 'science' of the weak minded people – R.K.