

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism and Indian Thought

Soni Singh

sonis1143@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper presents Impact of Indian thought on Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a famous philosopher, essayist, poet and renowned preacher of America. He represented America in a different mode in mid of the 18th century. For this aim he tried to know value of eternal power and materialistic world. Therefore he read Hindu texts like the Vedas the Upanishads and the Bhagwad Gita, various religious, and German idealism.

Emerson believed in progress. He had deep faith in improvement by gradual means. Then even Satan, the rebel, becomes an agent of potential progress. Emerson's works reveal his basic philosophical and mystic ideas. He held that God is moral law, that the world is an emanation from God, that man has divinity within him; that self-reliance is a supreme value, and that the religion of the spirit alone is true. This is an ethical idealism.

Indian transcendentalism finds a clear expression in Emerson's writing - Nature, American Scholar, The Divinity School Address, Self Reliance, Rhodora, Bramha and The Over-Soul etc. Here we are told that man and his world formed a project harmony and that one's own institution is more valuable than the voice of tradition or orthodoxy.

R.W. Emerson's Transcendentalism and Indian Thought

In his research paper I have tried to explore the impact of Indian Transcendentalism on Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism. The presence of Indian elements in American consciousness was not accident but it is the outcome of a deeply entrenched tradition that formed the American mind of which one of the best representatives was Emerson. Transcendentalism was the first American intellectual

movement that showed true interests in Eastern philosophy. Emerson started to read about Indian philosophy and mythology in The Edinburgh Review between 1820 and 1825. His interest in Indian thought grew when he was a young Harvard graduate, and it continued until the end of his writing career. We see its evidence in many of his essays, poems, letters, and journal entries. For example, the concept of Brahma plays a central role in his works and ideas. He is also very much interested in the Bhagavad Gita. Some of his essays such as "Self-Reliance" deal with a theme that is very much similar to the concept of Karma.

Emerson's acquaintance in depth with Indian thought began around 1830, when he read some outstanding expositions of Indian philosophy by Joseph Marie Dogerando, Victor Cousin and perhaps by Anquetil Duperron. However, the book that produced an abiding interest in Emerson was the Bhagavad Gita with which Emerson might have become acquainted as early as 1820 with his reading of Southey's Curse of Kehama.

In so far as Emerson's concept of The Over Soul is concerned it is wholly Indian. A close perusal of the idea of "Brahma" as well as its sources reveals that its theme is not so much Hebraic as Indian. A comparative analysis of sources reveals that while Emerson possibly seized upon the idea minus its moralistic tone from the Vishnu Puran, he received the immediate inspiration and phraseology from the Katha Upanishad and the Gita provided him with the proper context and its philosophical depth.

Likewise, Emerson's idea of privacy of evil, sin and suffering, freedom and fate are inspired by Indian tradition. Emerson's conception of the Moral Law which sustains most of his central doctrines, is also based on the Hindu ethics. It is grounded in the Highest Mind or the Over-Soul or God.

It is well known fact that Transcendentalists were enamored of the translation of Indian religion books like the Bhagavad Gita and various Upanishad and Puranas. They were aware of these translations done not only by European but by Indians as well. It is on record that the translations of Raja Ram Mohan Roy were available in America. Emerson might have read these translations, especially the translations of the Hatopanishad on the advice of his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson. The translations, which made deepest in roots into American consciousness, were those which Emerson mentioned in a passage of his essay "Books". He refers to The Vedas and Laws of Manu, The Upanishads, The Vishnu Puran and The Bhagwad Gita of Hindus.

Emerson, also praised Milman's translation of Nal Damyanti. These books, along with a large body of essays and studies, which appeared in Europe and America on Indian themes, tremendously augmented the waters of mysticism which were flowing

current originating from the native mentality and the religious and philosophical sources, which themselves had sprung from the Indian sources, directly or indirectly.

Evidently, the influence of Indian religion and philosophy was pervasive. The religious element that Emerson's mind absorbed from Indian sources became the basis of his religious and philosophical concepts, especially The Over-Soul, Self, Nature, Illusion and Moral Principles. In the words of Anupam Ratan S. Nagar :

In Indian thought Vedanta is referred to as the science of emancipation (Mukti). This was one of the several foreign philosophies that reached American in the early decades of the nineteenth century and greatly influenced, among several others, the transcendental thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. Ralph Waldo Emerson believed as a Vedantist that the worth of any individual man was derived from the Universe, which contained all human life and was, therefore, mysterious. He regarded every man as the entrance to the universal mind. In his chief writing as 'Nature', 'The American Scholar', 'Spiritual Laws' and 'The Over-Soul' he illustrates the interconnectedness of all life in an almost pantheistic view of God-in-matter. (Nagar 22)

In so far as Emerson's concept of The Over-Soul is concerned it is wholly Indian. Emerson's poem "Brahma" is called the poem "Song of the Soul" which later on he changed to "Brahma". Emerson regarded this poem as central to his thought. Analysis of sources reveals moralistic tone of the poem "Brahma" has been received from Vishnu Puran Emerson received the immediate inspiration and phraseology from the Katha Upanishad and the Gita. The source of Emerson's interest can be traced from his acquaintance with the work of Sir William Jones, father of the Royal Asiatic Society. Emerson read Jones, "Narayana" which embodies some important ideas about the Indian Deity and Maya or Deception. The first stanza of the Hymn describes the sublime attributes of the supreme being and the three forms in which the being appears to us—powers, wisdom and goodness :

Spirit of spirits! Who, though every part
Of space expanded and of endless time,
Beyond the stretch of lab, ring thought sublime,
Badst uproar into beauteous order start, . . .
What line first impell'd three to exert they might?

Goodness unlimited. (Jones 580)

Emerson conceives of Over-Soul in terms of energy rather impersonal energy which undergoes constant change. When the body apparently dies, the energy it contains merely changes its form. We find this idea in "The Over-Soul" as well when Emerson advances the view that "there is no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases and God, the cause beings". (Emerson 2003:208). Emerson evinces keen interest in the realization of God. He believes that God can not be realized through knowledge alone. For the attainment of God one has to develop unified sensibility, in which subject and object merge to form single unity. For Emerson, God is the real source of unity.

Emerson's conception of union is similar to that of Upanishads. When the mind turns within, it attains unity. Likewise Emerson writes :

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God, yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unreachable. (Emerson 1965:8-9)

The person who is united with God realizes the friendliness and sacredness of all things. For him, everything weathers an object or a man becomes divine. Emerson gives this idea in his essay "History" in the following words :

To the poet, the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine . . . Every chemical substance, every plant, every animal in its growth teaches the unity of cause, the variety of experience. (Emerson 2003:155).

It is probable that Emerson might have received his idea from the VI Chapter of Bhagavad Gita : "He who sees Me everywhere sees all in Me; I am not lost to him nor is he lost to me." (Permandnd 54-55).

For Emerson, man is no longer an eating and drinking animal or a planter. He is but a soul that manifests itself through the process of action, a soul in action, that takes many forms. In turn it is genius, virtue, love etc. To quote him :

A man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call, the eating, drinking, counting, planting man does not, as we know him, represent himself but misrepresents himself . . . All reforms aim in some one particular to let the soul have its way through us; in other words to engage us to obey. (Emerson 2003:208)

Emerson's portrait of the soul echoes the description of the soul in the Kane-Upanishad, as cited by Swami Permanand, in which soul has been defined as the essence of all the faculties and the power that moves all the senses. It is :

The ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of the speech, the life of the life, the eye of the eye; that which can not be thought by mind but by which mind is able to think, that which is not seen by the eye, but by which the eye is able to see; that which can not be heard by the ear, but by which the ear is able to hear. (Permanand 50-51).

Another idea peculiar to Emerson conception of self is that of 'Sakshi (observer). According to this idea, there are two selves, one the participant or the Jivatma and other, the observer or the Sakshi. While the former participants in the action that the body performs, the other simply witness the operations that go on in the body or outside it. Emerson interprets this idea in his own way. In the Journal-entry of the 1837, he writes :

. . . keep the habit of the observer, and, as fast as you can, break off your association with your personality and identify yourself with the Universe. Be a football to time and chance, the more kicks, the better, so that you inspect the whole game and know its uttermost law. (Chari 28).

Most probably Emerson received this idea from the Bhagvad Gita, which conceives of self as witness.

Besides the idea of self, Emerson's idea of mind or soul (the Budhi of Indian philosophy) is also derived from Hindu scriptures. Emerson recognizes two parts of mind - intellect and intuition. Intellect gives knowledge of variety or the knowledge of surface or the knowledge of differences and intuition gives us the knowledge of unity, harmony or super-rational knowledge.

Emerson developed this idea of intuition in his essay "Self-Reliance", while inquiring into the reason of self trust :

We denote this primary wisdom as intuition, whilst all later teachings are intuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis can not go, all things find their common origin. For the sense of being which in calm hours arises, we know not how the soul is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time from man, but one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source where their life and being also proceed. (Emerson 2003:187).

Besides the ideas of double consciousness, witness-self, and intuition, there is yet another idea peculiar to Emerson - the idea of equal mindedness, which the soul attains after overcoming opposition and achieving harmony. In the state of equal - mindedness the soul sees everybody with equal eyes. Interestingly, this idea of Sihitapragna forms the basis of Emerson's philosophy of individualism as propounded in his essay "Self-Reliance". It is indwelling God residing in the heart of man, it controls, determines, and guides all human activities of the inner world whether sensuous, intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual.

Originally, Emerson thought of the Soul as within self and nature, in a transcendental sense, man's creation. Nature, for Emerson, represents a ceaseless flow of life. On the whole Emerson's nature is similar to Indian Maya which is double instrument of concealment and creation. As an instrument of concealment it creates illusion. Emerson accepts doctrine of illusion as the theory of life which educates man that illusion is God's instrument. Emerson notes that Yoganidra, being the illusory power of Vishnu, deceives the whole world. He writes :

In fact we may come to accept it as a fixed rule and theory of our state of education, that God is substance, and his method is illusion. The Eastern sages owned the goodness Yoganidra, the great illusory energy of Vishnu, by whom, as utter ignorance, the whole world is be-guided. (Emerson 1983:173).

According to Christy, Emerson's cosmology is neither Hebraic nor Aristotelian, it is rather Vedantic based on the fusion of the principles of transcendence and Immanence. One of the finest expressions of this doctrine surfaces in "Woodnotes" were Emerson writes :

Ever fresh and broad creation,
A divine improvisation,
From the bean of God proceeds,
A single will a million deeds. (Goren 42)

Emerson believes that the world of nature is embodied in Universal mind. Nature undergoes perpetual transformation. Thus Emerson gave revolutionary concept of Nature to Western World. He conceived of nature not only as matrix on which man and God meet but also as one which creates humanity. Furthermore, for Emerson Nature also appears

as Maya or illusion. It is power of Brahma playing the deceptive role of hiding reality. As the power of creation, Nature or Maya is responsible for the variety of this world.

Thus, the Indian philosophical and religious concepts and teachings had a great influence on Emerson's intellectual works. By exploring and utilizing Indian spiritual beliefs and philosophical traditions, Emerson paved the way for his successors who continued to dig into the richness of ancient texts such as the Upanishads and the Gita. Therefore, with regard to Emerson's contribution to American Scholar's growing interest in Indian thought, Dale Riepe is convincingly right when he says that, "there has been a continuous concern for Indian thought in the United States since Emerson's early years". (Riepe 125).

References

1. Chari, V.K. Whitman in the light of Vedantic Mysticism : An Interpretation. Landmark :University of Nebrasks Press, 1976.
2. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Nature and Selected Essays. (ed.) Larzer Ziff. New York : Penguin Books, 2003.
3. Selected Prose and Poetry. (ed.) Reginald L. Cook, New York, 1965.
4. Essays and Lectures. (ed.) Joel Porte. New York : Library of America, 1983.
5. Goren, Leyla. The Elements of Brahmanism in the Transcendentalism of Emerson (ed.) Kenneth Walter Cameron. Hartford : Transcendental Books, 1977.
6. Jones, Very. Selected Poems (ed.) Nathan Lyons. New Brunswick : Rutgers, 1966.
7. Nagar, Anupam Ratan S. American Transcendentalism and Indian Thought : A Comparative Study. Delhi : Indian Institute of Language Studies, 2003.
8. Permanand, Swami. Emerson and Vedanta. Boston : The Vedanta Centre, 1918.
9. Riepe, Dale. The Indian Influence in American Philosophy : Emerson to Moore. University of Missouri Press, 1995.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

© 2015 by the Authors. Licensed by HCTL Open, India.