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A CONTEXTUALIZED STUDY OF VIVEKANANDA'S *NEO-VEDANTA* (THROUGH KARL MANNHEIM APPROACH OF SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper aims to evaluate a contextualized interpretation of Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta in nineteen century Bengali society by implementing the Karl Mannheim approach of sociology of knowledge. This approach will focus the socio-historical perspectives that facilitate the transformation of Classical Indian Vedanta philosophy to neo-Vedanta. Religious encountering in pluralistic society posed serious threats of assimilations and syncreticism to religious beliefs. This issue is going to be examined in especial context of Hinduism through Karl Mannheim approach's horizontal and vertical mobility. Here horizontal mobility reflects the role and contribution of the Warren Hasting, orientalists and Christian missionaries as a key factor in destabilizing the core beliefs of Hinduism (Idol worship, caste system and Brahmins the soul custodians of religious knowledge). That further makes road for vertical mobility of in four cast strata of Hindu society by questioning the authority and monopoly of Brahmins (priestly class of Hindus). Thus, results in collapsing of intellectual monopoly of Brahmins by creating free intelligentsia who were fully equipped to reinterpret classical Hinduism. Among these the role of Vivekananda's neo-Vedantic predecessors (Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and Ramakrishna) cannot be ignored who contributed the genetic makeup of Vivekananda's neo-Vedanta.

INTRODUCTION

Vivekananda was the first Indian participant of Parliament of Religion (1893) who not only succeeded in establishing *neo-Vedanta*, the central theology of Hinduism but he also perpetuated his views both to India and outside India. He claims that Hinduism (*neo-Vedanta*) is the only true religion that acknowledges the religious diversity by preaching the message of tolerance and religious harmony (King, 1999, pp. 135-136) in the nineteenth century. The contextualized interpretation of the Vivekananda's *neo-Vedanta* is fabricated in historical perspective of the pluralistic society of Bengal. It does not focus on the doctrine and principles of his *neo-Vedanta* rather emphasizes on socio-historical factors of nineteen century Bengal that transformed classical *Advaita Vedanta* into *neo-Vedanta*. This transformation took place in the nineteenth century Bengal while Hindus, Muslims and Christian interaction can be noticed from date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Karl Mannheim Approach of Sociology of Knowledge

For evaluating the role of the nineteenth century Bengali society the frame work of Karl Mannheim approach of sociology of knowledge is going to be implemented. The approach of Karl Mannheim revolves around the central concept that construction or generation of knowledge is correlated to the socio-historical situation of that specific period in which knowledge emerges. Or in other words the comprehension of the knowledge remains ambiguous until one is not aware of the specific allocation of the knowledge in specific time, place and social conditions of that society. Karl Mannheim believes that constructed knowledge has the imprints of the responses or reaction to specific prevailing situation in which knowledge immerges and these imprints remain dubious without evaluating those historical factors that gives birth to knowledge. In framework of sociology of knowledge his *neo-Vedanta* is going to be evaluated as a particular style of knowledge (reform movement) that emerged in response to the western construction of the Hinduism in nineteen century Bengal (Mannheim, 1954, p. 2).

Karl considers the horizontal and vertical mobility of society the key factors of generating knowledge. Social mobility of Karl Manheim could be helpful in clarifying the status of *neo-Vedanta* in the nineteenth century Bengali society as a response to the stimuli that were generated by the orientalists and Christian missionaries. These stimuli vary in nature that generated mobility in horizontal and vertical direction and demands the detailed separate explanations of these two mobilities (Mannheim, 1954, pp. 2-3).

Causes of Horizontal Social Mobility in Nineteen Century Bengal

The reason of this horizontal social mobility could be traced from policy transformation of Warren Hastings from mercantile to empire builder during his second arrival to Bengal in 1772. His administration further facilitated the constructive cultural contacts between Bengalis and Englishman because before this situation the contact between Englishman and Bengalis were limited to economic and financial gains (Kopf, 1969, pp. 14-19). The vision of the Hasting appeared to remain incomplete without the services of William Johnes and other Company officials who translated Indian works to open the doors of Sanskrit literature to Europe (McGetchin, 2009, p. 28).

These orientalists who were patronized by Hastings had specific approach towards Orientals literature, culture and civilization. These orientalists were classists rather than 'progressive' in their historical outlook, cosmopolitan rather than nationalists in their view of other culture, and rationalist rather than romantic in their quest for those 'constant and universal principles' that express the unity of human nature. What made them an especially fertile field for Hasting's experiments in cultural interaction was the idea of tolerance, the mainspring of their historical and cultural relativism (Kopf, 1969, p. 22). The landmark achievement of the patronized orientalists like William Johnes along with Colebrook could be seen in establishing the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1783. The primary task of society was the translation of the Indian classical literature (Gandhi, 1947, p. 19).

In their dealing of the Indian literature one could find the reminiscent of Gibbon and Voltaire (Kopf, 1969, p. 22) because these all focused to trace link between Hinduism and Christianity from Hindu classical text. Voltaire succeeded in establishing base of Christianity from ancient religion of *Brahma* because he opines that first *Brahmins* placed their religion on universal reason. The religion of these *Brahmins* was monotheism or deism that was degenerated to idolatrous religion by replacing reason to superstitious beliefs (Halbfass, 1998, p. 58). Correspondingly, William Johnes appreciated and gave safe side to Hinduism by discovering the common origins of Hinduism and European religions and establishing the link between the Indo-European languages as the offspring of same family in bringing India closer to Europe (Sugirtharajah, 2003, p. 39). Hence in eighteen century the study of oriental languages and literature was done with the intention to fill the gaps of British administration on India by adopting the approach of rediscovering the classical past of Hinduism as golden age of Hindu religion (Sugirtharajah, 2003, p. 39). It was realized that the work of the orientalists was more beneficial to Indian nation in providing evidences to the glories past of Hinduism than to colonial interest. These colonial authorities switched to Charter Act of 1813 by

allowing and patronizing evangelical groups that adopted the approach of anti-thesis of British orientalists (Bhaktivinoda, p. 122). These missionaries considered *Vedanta* the preparatory phase for the acceptability of Christianity but they clearly negated the equality of *Vedanta* and Christianity. They claimed that *Vedanta* cannot be taken as Christianity rather presentiment of Christianity (Halbfass, 1998, p. 51). The selection of the Upanishad and *Vedanta* philosophy by missionaries seems to support their mission in two ways. Firstly, *Vedanta* to missionaries was that path through which they could address Hindu mindset to convert these Hindus to Christianity. Secondly, adoption of the Upanishad would be helpful in providing them indigenous tool of criticizing Hindu polytheism, idol worship and Vedic ritual that appeared in direct clash with Christianity(King, 1999, p. 123). The contribution of the missionaries was not limited to the above written facts rather their role in intellectual awakening of Bengalis by English education should not be ignored (Chaurasia, 2002, p. 309). English education was meant to spread Western ideas that were characterized for the cultivation and promotion of the secular and rational thinking in Bengalis (Samanta, 2008, p. 2). In the nineteenth century the Christian missionaries started many social movements to criticize many social practices of Hinduism. The focus of this criticism could be seen on *sati* prohibition or widow remarriage, child marriage, gender discrimination and caste system(O'Hanlon, 1985, p. 73). These whole polemical attacks of missionaries were designed to achieve their motives of expanding the domain of Christ by converting Hindu to Christianity. They translated Bible and other Christian literature in Bengali language to penetrate in Bengali society (Chaurasia, 2002, p. 309).

Impacts of Horizontal Mobility

Although horizontal social mobility of Bengalis and Christianity resulted in the different religious groups among Bengali that Karl Mannheim had mentioned in his approach of sociology of knowledge. Bengali Hindus could be categorized into three groups; conservative, radical and reformer. Among these the conservative constituted the most abundant group of Bengali Hindus for whom Hinduism had nothing wrong in its religious and social customs. They conscientiously avoid contacts with non-Hindus. Although these conservatives tried to keep their religion intact but it did not mean that these conservatives were not invulnerable to changes that result from their encountering of Islam and Christianity in Bengal (Ahmed, 1965, p. 27).

The second group consisted of radical wing of Hinduism as these radical were educated at Hindu colleges whose rational and secular prompted them to reject Hinduism. The outlook of these radicals were shaped under Hum's empiricism, Bentham's utilitarian, Shelley's and Byron's romanticism (Ahmed, 1965, p. 28). The origin of third Hindu group could be traced from the beginning of reform movements in the early nineteenth century and are called reform Hindu group. The aim of this group appeared to neutralize the challenges of west to Hinduism not by total rejection of Hinduism rather by equipping it with new interpretation of the old tradition (Ahmed, 1965, pp. 27-32). Reformer group considered the conservative practices of Hinduism like widow burning, *kulin* and child marriages the distorted form of the pure ancient Hinduism and described these issues as the deviated symbols that caused the decay of Hinduism (Puniyani, 2006, p. 277).

Therefore it can be said that encountering of Christianity and Hinduism in latter part of eighteen century and during the nineteenth century in Bengal at horizontal level catalyzed the penetration of western secular and rational ideas through western education. Hindus were enthusiastic for western education to avail opportunities from the Government with mindset that their religion would not be affected by these western education and ideas. But later on they realized that this western education was not mere an education but was the tool to program Hindu's minds for free thinking, rationality and secular Ideas. And it was unmanageable for them to keep clear cut boundaries between their religious ideas and these western secular ideas to keep their religion intact. The result of this mismanagement appeared evident from the fact that when horizontal mobility started to move in the realm of vertical mobility.

Vertical Mobility and Destabilization of Hindu Social Hierarchy

Here vertical mobility is going to be taken in term of disturbance of social hierarchy that prevails within Hinduism in the form of caste system. According to Karl this vertical mobility can be evident in those societies where multiple way of thinking patterns prevails and in such multiple ways disagreements become more conspicuous than agreements. Such situation intensified the vertical mobility between the different strata in the form of social ascent and decent and consequently shakes the beliefs and eternal validity of one's own thinking patterns. Karl equated the vertical mobility as the decisive factor in inculcating the uncertainty and skepticism regarding the traditional view one's hold. That further called in question the authority and prestige of the social groups (intelligentsia) that constitute the upper stratum due to their monopoly on ecclesiastical interpretation for that society. Vertical mobility here caused the collapsing of intellectual monopoly of this priestly class by creating free intelligentsia(Mannheim, 1954, pp. 5-9).

When the above mentioned Karl's vertical social mobility is going to be implanted in the nineteenth century static Hindu society. It reveals that in Hindu society the *Brahmins* were single custodians of these sacred books and the availability of these sacred books to other caste was not possible. But orientalist's contribution may not be limited to their providence of the sacred book to other castes of Hindu. Rather they made an overemphasis on the authority of sacred text as the central key to Hindus religious and social practices by putting into practice Christian model of authority of Bible. Beside these, orientalists highlighted that key parts of prevailing Hinduism that in their consent had no foundation in the text like *Brahmanhood*, untouchability (Soherwordi, 2011, p. 207) and idol worshiping.

That consequently gave rise to free intelligentsia by destabilizing the vertically apical and stable *Brahmins* intelligentsia. The situation further aggravated when western educated Hindus started to re-examine their religious tenets and practices. These Bengali Hindus were on one hand influenced by the concept of golden age of Hinduism and on other hand their (Bengalis) inclination towards western concepts and philosophy may not be ignored. In such circumstances Hindu socio-religious reform movements emerged in the nineteenth century Bengal which is termed as Bengal Renaissance (Wendt, 2006, p. 167).

These reforms worked hard to redefined, reinterpret and reconstruct Hinduism on orientalists axiom of Hindu ancient golden age designed Hinduism whose foundation resided in Hindu sacred text. And their main objective and focus during reinterpretation of the Hinduism was in vilification of missionaries and colonial criticism (Sugirtharajah, 2003, p. 138).

Contribution of *neo-Vedantic* Predecessor and Vivekananda's *neo-Vedanta*

Ram Mohan Roy

Ram Mohan Roy is considered the *first neo-Vedantin* because he bore very uncommon reaction to prevailing critical Christian environment. He accepted few Christian moral doctrines of Christianity but rejected much of its doctrine of faith (Robinson, 2004, p. 6) while from Hinduism he rejected the idol worship and social practices (caste system, widow burning, child marriage and gender discrimination) as *Brahminical* innovations in ancient Hinduism(Thomas, 1994, p. 42). Hence *neo-Vedanta* that emerged as an ideological movement with clearly defined principles, under the leadership of Ram Mohan Roy, appeared as a product of Hinduism and Christianity in the context of the nineteenth century Bengal. Ram Mohan dealt traditional Hinduism in the framework that he designed to interrelate indigenous doctrines and practices with the foreign elements to enhance the receptivity of the Hinduism for West.

He formulated his whole ideology of *neo-Vedanta* to revive popular Hinduism to Real Hinduism but during this revival he failed to develop the link with the past due to his strong connection with the western constructed Hinduism. This resulted in the rupture and discontinuity of linkage of *neo-Vedanta* with traditional Hinduism that became evident from the fact that Ram Mohan dismissed many traditional elements of Hinduism by replacing these with Christian beliefs. His main focus did not appear to find traditional Hinduism rather in selection of the western values and orientation to adjust Hindu tradition by reinterpretation. The inspiration of Ram Mohan from the Enlightenment and Unitarian Christianity enabled him to propose rationalized monotheistic philosophy by selecting the sacred text from Upanishad and *Vedanta* (Chaurasia, 2002, pp. 39-46). The *neo-Vedanta* of Ram Mohan accepted the criticism of Christian missionaries on Hindu idolatrous trends and social practices of Hinduism (caste system, widow burning, child marriage and gender discrimination) (Houben, 1996, p. 354). But he was not convinced to reject Hinduism completely rather he aimed to make survival of Hinduism possible among other monotheistic religions(A. Sharma, 1988, p. 2). He wanted to revive Hinduism as a universal and transcendental religion by amalgamating the monotheism of *Vedanta* with Islamic *Sufism* and Christian Unitarianism (Doniger, 2014, p. 17). That enabled Ram Mohan not only categorized the idol worship and other social practices as pretentious religious beliefs and superstitious practices rather he demolished these with the razor of sharp witted rationality (A. Sharma, 1988, p. 16) His rationality assisted him in justify the adoption and incorporation of the ethical and moral code of Christianity in *Vedanta* society (*Brahmo Samaj*). He believed that these moral and ethical codes would not distort the Hindu metaphysics rather these would facilitate the harmonious relationship by regulating the conduct of human race (A. Sharma, 1988, p.

19). Ram Mohan also coinage the idea of superiority of Hinduism over other world religions. He also introduced the notion of Hindu nation to counteract the strong national feelings of Christianity and Islam. His concept of Hindu nation was embedded in assigning Sanskrit the status of the Hindu national language and Sanskrit sources as the national ideology of Hinduism (Houben, 1996, p. 354). After the death of Ram Mohan *neo-Vedanta* remained dormant for a decade till Ranbindra Nath became the leader of *Brahmo Samaj*. At that time Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Tattvabodhi Sabah* was established (1839) that appeared not only as a barrier to missionaries' activities for conversion of Bengalis to domain of Christ (Michelis, 2004, pp. 51-56). But it also mobilized Hindu intelligentsia as an organized resistance by publishing the book of the *Brahmo* Religion in 1848 to increase acceptability of *neo-Vedanta* of *Brahmo Samaj*.

Rabindra Nath

Rabindra Nath inherited three distinct trends from his Bengali society regarding Hinduism. The first trend comprised of *neo-Vedantic* religio-intellectual movement, second trend consisted of the literally movement while third trend was national movement (S. K. Sharma, 1996, p. 201). From the above mentioned three trends the Tagore's development of the strong bond with *neo-Vedantic* movement of Ram Mohan on one hand appeared due to Tagore own inclination towards Upanishad and on other hand shaped by the Angilicist policies of 1828 to 1835. With these two factors the contribution of the Alexander duff in Tagore's *neo-Vedanta* should not be overlooked(Michelis, 2004, p. 56). Rabindra Nath Tagore as a mystical Hindu was not ready to accept western scienticism and rationality the basis of his *neo-Vedanta* ideology rather his focus was to harmonized *neo-Vedanta* (Hinduism) with science. This compelled him to reject Vedas and replaced the authority of Vedas with the personal epistemology of intuition (Michelis, 2004, pp. 58-59). The seat of his intuitive knowledge of was hidden in the heart of all human beings (Rambachan, 1994, p. 22). Hence his intuitive and experiential approaches gave the *neo-Vedanta* new dimension of universalism and interaction with other religions. His universalism was conservative instead of his rejection the idol worship and caste system because he was reluctant to reform Hindu social and religious life radically (Rambachan, 1994, p. 224). On other side his conservative stance regarding ritual of *Brahmin caste* and exclusive leadership of *Brahmo Samaj* by *Brahmins* (Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 59), inter-caste marriages and widow remarriage created conflict and split of *Brahmo Samaj* (Rambachan, 1994, p. 24)

Keshab ChandraSen

This split opened the door for Keshab Chandra as leader of *Brahmo Samaj* who constructed *neo-Vedanta* as the Ideological forerunner of Vivekananda. Sen's *neo-Vedanta* progress as a predecessor of Vivekananda could be evaluated from the impact of American transcendentalism in Bengali society in second half of the nineteenth century. He started emphasizing on the worship of the Deity that was not bound in the historical events rather that Deity which is ever living and ever present. He further rejected the worshiping of this living Deity in the context of his dead letters (revealed books, religious symbols, and lifeless dogmas). He justified his rejection of the traditional standards of religion by emphasizing that direct communication of metaphysical world that would replaced the traditional concept of revelation with

the living revelation within the man. The new concept of transcendental religion of Sen was not only devoid of sectarian dogmatism and prejudice but it would fulfill the eager expectations of humanity for establishing brotherhood through such harmonious religious concepts (Michelis, 2004, pp. 81-82) Sen's amalgamation of Hindu (*Vedanta*) philosophy and western philosophies enabled him to claim that Hinduism was the only way that would lead Christianity towards it universality and perfection. He was the first who introduced the approach of Hindu inclusivism that further shifted the Christianization of India to Hinduization of West (Halbfass, 1998, p. 226). His contribution was not limited to his encountering with west but he had numerous encounters with Ramakrishna.

Ramakrishna

Although Sen and Ramakrishna, both were the flag holders of the religious harmony through *neo-Vedantic* teachings but their harmonious approaches appeared as distance apart from each other. Ramakrishna was the critic of *Brahmo Samaj* because he opined world as *lila* (living play and manifestation) of goddess that did not require any reform; neither religious nor social. He considered these reforms as hindrance in the salvation of man because these reforms depicted the attachment of man for this world. For him *Brahmo Samaj's* reformations were nothing more than an artificial demarcation which was aimed to draw boundaries between one aspect of God and His multiplicity in the world. He also rejected and replaced the western constructed concept of the pristine knowledge with *Sanatna Dharma* (eternal religion) which to him is beyond any corruptions and innovations. He believed that Hinduism encountered Christianity and other world religions without introducing these reforms to Hinduism. As Hinduism appeared potential due to its religious experiences and its vastness due to its diversity that offered enough space to accommodate other religious experiences and practices within it. Here Ramakrishna introduced the concept of that all world religions are the part of his *neo-Vedanta* when he allowed the worship of Jesus Christ in Hinduism on the basis of his experiential approach. That enabled him to conclude that all religions are the different path to same goal to illustrate the unity of God in diverse religious worships and practices (Halbfass, 1998, p. 227).

Among all neo-Vedantist Ramakrishna was unaccompanied in connecting *neo-Vedanta* with Hindu idol worshiping through *Sakti bhagti* approach in framework of *tantric Advaita*. Ramakrishna's *neo-Vedanta* elaborated by Vivekananda appeared to affirm Ramakrishna's *neo-Vedanta* to Shankaracharya's *Adviata Vedanta* that described the *Brahman* as an evolutionary spirit. Thus *Brahman* of Ramakrishna appeared as an active God who is manifested in all things and beings of the universe(Smith, 1976, p. 95). In the end it can be concluded that in Karl Mannheim approach of sociology of religion these above mentioned predecessors of the Vivekananda that contributed the individual genetic makeup of Vivekananda's *neo-Vedanta*. But it is quite obvious that the journey of *neo-Vedanta* began with the orientalists motivating and encouraging findings of the glory of Hinduism in the past. So, it is worth mentioning that in the time of Ram Mohan Roy the position of *neo-Vedanta* was quite different from Vivekananda's *neo-Vedanta*. As, *neo-Vedanta* was coined by Ram Mohan Roy as a theology to replace Idol worship from Hinduism but the doctrines and principles of this

neo-Vedanta lacked organization till Vivekananda. While in Vivekananda's *neo-Vedanta* one finds the accommodation of idol worshiping in his evolutionary categorization of Vedanta which allowed idol worshiping by *bhagta marga*. Therefore *neo-Vedanta* of Vivekananda appears not only the self awareness of Hindus but an encoded *Vedanta* in the practical social life of Hindus in the form of Practical *Vedanta*. Although, Vivekananda's *neo-Vedanta* was not a philosophy rather it comprised of rules that encompasses the relationship of the man to God and man to man within Hinduism and also with other non-Hindu religions. In the nineteenth century Bengal one single event cannot be considered responsible for Vivekananda's practical derivation of the *neo-Vedanta* rather on one hand derivation of practical aspect was embedded in his connection of the metaphysics with ethical code due to his contemporary Christian missionaries' criticizes that highlighted the ethical and social deficiency of the *Vedanta*. And to some extend his stay in West added secularization in his *neo-Vedanta* when he reinterpreted the meaning of *seva* as fulfillment of worldly and social end by separating it from Hindu stereology. Likewise influence of western evolutionary philosophy on Vivekananda appeared in his arrangement of *Vedantic* schools in spiritually evolutionary realms. That enabled him to update neo-*Vedantic* status as universal and missionary religion by merging every world religion in his *neo-Vedanta*.

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