



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

English

BRAHMA REVISITED: A SPIRITUAL ENLIGHTENMENT ON IMMORTALITY AND TRANSMIGRATION OF SOUL

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to revisit Emerson's poem Brahma and to scrutinize it from the Indian perspective. It is the most notable expression of Hindu religious elements showing close filiations with Shreemad Bhagvad Gita and Upanishads. In fact it can be said that Brahma attempts to perpetuate and reestablish the real essence of Gita, incorporated in the theme of immortality of soul. Body is temporal and perishable but the soul which lies within the body is the divine spark and is eternal, everlasting and never ending. It is a part of the Supreme Soul, the Super Power of the Universe

INTRODUCTION-

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a well known poet and philosopher of America. He made a significant contribution in the field of American religious reformation by tirelessly striving to heighten and broaden the spiritual panorama of American psyche. He was born in 1803 in Boston, USA. He lost his father at a very early age and therefore was brought up solely by his mother. His aunt Mary Moody influenced him most deeply by her religious and noble deeds and thus helped him by preparing a background for his spiritual enlightenment. He writes,

“The kind aunt whose instruction effected my youth. She told me about the virtues and values of ancestors. They have the clergy for many generations and the piety of all and the eloquence of many is yet praise in the churches.”

Emerson became a Harvard graduate at the age of eighteen years. His health problems lead him to travel extensively to various places of warm climate like Charleston, South Carolina and then further to St Augustine, he was befriended with Prince Achille, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte who cast a deep influence on him. He helped Emerson by broadening the hemisphere of his intellectual education through varied discussions on religion, philosophy and government.

Oriental Enlightenment of Ralph Waldo -

Ralph Waldo Emerson after graduating from Harvard University in 1821 entered the Unitarian ministry. It was the period of robust ecclesiastical debate. Unfortunately the death of his first wife Ellen left him completely devastated and his strong belief in Christianity and its teachings were severely shattered. These circumstantial developments led him to announce his resignation from his congregation as he found it difficult for himself to preach a religion in which he lost his faith.

His disillusionment and rebellion against Christianity grew stronger day by day as its doctrine failed to satisfy his active and inquiring intelligence. His initial rebellion against Christianity encouraged him to find a first refuge and solace in the idealism and philosophy of Hinduism.

Noted Indian historian Pratap Majumdar commented on Emerson in the following words,

“Amidst this ceaseless, sleepless din and clash of Western materialism, this heat and restless energy, the character of Emerson shines upon India-serene as the evening star. He seems to some of us to have been a geographic mistake, he ought to have been born in India. Perhaps Hindus were closer kinsmen to him than his own nation because every typical Hindu is a child of nature.”

He extensively explored the various Hindu scriptures like

Bhagvad Gita, Upanishads and Vedanta and assimilated the rich ideologies of Hinduism. He opines about Bhagvad Gita, “I owed a magnificent day to the Bhagvad Gita. It was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large serene, consistent the voice of an old intelligence which is another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”

In his journal he expressed his gratitude to Vedic thought, “It is sublime as night and a breathless ocean. It contains every religious sentiment, all the grand ethics which visit in turn each noble poetic mind.... It is of no use to put away the book; if I trust myself in the woods or in a boat upon the pond. Nature makes the Brahmin of me presently; eternal compensation, unfathomable power, unbroken silence.... This is her creed, peace she saith to me, and purity and absolute abandonment-these panaceas expiate all sin and bring you to the beatitude of the Eight Gods”

On August 4, 1873, Emerson wrote a letter to Max Muller in which he showed his debt and praise for various Indian scriptures, “All my interest is in Marsh's Manu, Wilkins Bhagvad Geeta, Burnof's Bhagvad Purana and Wilsons Vishnu Purana, yes and few other translations. I remember I owed my first taste for this fruit to Cousin's Sketch, in his first lecture of the dialogue between Krishna and Arjun and I still prize the first chapters of Bhagavat is wonderful.”

Brahma: The Upanishdic Wisdom Of Emerson:

Upanishads are part of Vedanta, the earliest scriptures of Hinduism created during 1500-1000 BC. They contain the revealed truth (Sruti) about Brahman (God), the Ultimate Reality and the way of salvation (Moksha).

Emerson, feeling disillusioned by the unending materialism of West, turned towards India for finding solace: “The Indian teaching through its clouds of legends, has yet a simple and grand religion, like a queenly countenance seen through a rich veil. It teaches to speak truth, love others, and to dispose the trifles. The East is grand-and makes Europe appear the land of trifles.... all is soul and the soul is Vishnu....”

In the Indian perspective the concept of 'Brahma' is very vast and vivid. The richness of Indian spiritual panorama gives a vivid interpretation of the concept of Brahma. Brahma is the Universal spirit, the Ultimate Reality pure consciousness; the one existence; the Absolute, the unchanging reality, reality amidst and beyond the world which can't be exactly defined.

Chandogya Upanishad defines Brahma as, “All this is Brahman.” (Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma)

Adi Shankaracharya in one of his very famous quotations extracted from 'Vivekachudamani' establishes the oneness Brahma and the individual soul, “Brahma is the only truth, the world is unreal, and there is ultimately no difference between

Brahman and Atman, the individual self. (Brahma satyam jagat mithya, jivo brahmaiva naparah)

According to Kena Upanishad, "Brahma is known when it is realized in every state of mind, for by such knowledge one attains immortality. By Atman one obtains strength, by knowledge, Immortality." (Kena Upanishad 2.4)

Different Mahavakyas of Upanishad also establish a parallel concept about the Supreme Being
"I am Brahma." Sanskrit- 'aham brahmasmi' (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10)

"Brahma is consciousness" Sanskrit- 'Prajnanam Brahma' (Aitareya Upanishad 3.1.3)

"The self (the Soul) is Brahma" Sanskrit- 'ayam atma brahma' (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5)

Thus according to Hindu metaphysics Brahma lays at the foundation of all existence. All the other levels of reality originate from it and will eventually terminate within it. The main purpose of human existence is to realize the identity of one's ontological self (Atman) with Brahma (Paramatman) and thus paves the way for attaining immortality.

Emerson also believed that man can achieve the majesty of God. In the 'Divinity School Address' he says, "The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul of man there is a justice whose retributions are instant and entire. He who does a good deed is instantly enobled himself....If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God and safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice. (131)

R.W Emerson further stresses his belief in the unity of soul (Atman) and over soul (Paramatman) when he says, "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within 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." (Bhagvad Gita 12.2- 4, 13.13, 13.16, 13.17 14.26-27, 15.15)

Emerson's poem 'Brahma' which made its first appearance in 1845 in Emerson's Journals shows how his wisdom of various Hindu scriptures acted as a motivational source in its creation. In this poem Emerson discusses about the immortality of soul. He says,

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain thinks he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

The similar thought is echoed in Katha Upanishad,

If the killer thinks that he is killing (a particular person) and his victim thinks that he is being killed, both of them do not know the real nature of soul. It neither kills nor it is killed. (part 1.chapter-2,19)

Bhagvad Gita also reflects the affluence of similar thoughts to establish the immortality and eternal nature of individual soul.

"He who thinks that his soul kills and he who believes that his soul is being killed both of them do not know the truth that his soul neither kills nor is killed."

Ye enam vetti hantaram
Yas chainam manyate hatam
Ubhau tav Na vijanito
Nayam hanta Na hanyate (Bhagvad Gita: chapter 2 verse 19)

Lord Krishna said in Bhagvad Gita:
"Know that to be imperishable and indestructible, by which all this is pervaded; for none can bring about the destruction

of this indestructible substance, the imperishable soul."

Avinasi tu tad viddhi
Yena sarvam idam tatam
Vinasam avyayaasyasya

Na kaschit kartum arhati (Bhagvad Gita: Chapter2 verse 17)

The line, "I keep, and pass, and turn again" echoes the transmigration of individual soul after the end of this gross and mortal body and finds the similarity of thoughts with Gita. Just as a man puts off his decaying and worn out clothes and wears a new one similarly the embodied individual soul also casts off the old, diseased and worn out body and enters into a completely new one.

Vasansi jirnani yatha vihaya
Navani grihnati naroparani
Ththa sharirani vihaya jirnanya
Nyani sanyati navani dehi. (Bhagvad Gita

shloka22)

Rabindranath Tagore opines similarly in Gitanjali, he says that life death and rebirth are only a means of continuation of this universe and life and death are just the filling and emptying of soul in individual bodies.

"Thou have made me endless; such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel Thou emptiest again and again and fillest it ever with fresh life." (Gitanjali 1-5)

Emerson expresses his enlightened views on the subject of immortality and transmigration of individual soul as, "Nothing is dead. Man feign themselves dead, and endure mock funerals and mournful obituaries and there they stand looking out of the window sound and well, in some strange and new disguise."

Emerson has discussed about the immortality of soul in the light of transmigratory evolution also. It is a process which teaches the spiritual melioration of the individual. He writes in Brahma, "But though meek lover of the good, find me and turn thy back on Heaven."

Here Emerson has very strongly urged that this world with all its beauty seems to be very varied and charming, but in reality it has neither joy nor peace. It is merely an illusion, a deception. The ultimate aim of the individual soul is to merge with the Over soul. The lover of selfless and noble deeds are always praised by the Supreme Being and He rewards them by rendering Salvation or Moksha (finite becoming one with infinite), thus attaining immortality of soul.

CONCLUSION-

Thus it can be safely concluded that ancient Hindu wisdom had a great influence on Emerson's intellectual world. His close filiations with Bhagvad Gita, Upanishads and Vedantic philosophy are very clearly paralleled in his superb creation Brahma. He became the torch bearer to his successive generations because of his great inclinations and investigation of ancient Indian texts, who continued exploring the infinite and varied wisdom, and thus became benefitted by collecting the nectar of knowledge and motivation. Emerson's Brahma and Bhagvad Gita mostly dwell on the themes of oneness, sameness and evenness but apart from these ideas both of them universally convey the message of immortality of individual soul. Both enjoin and profess a selfless and absolute surrender before the Supreme and pure consciousness embodied as Brahma to attain the eternal immortality or Salvation.

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