

The Influence of Indian Philosophy on Emerson's Writings

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Abstract

This article is a critical analysis on the influence that Indian literature had on Emerson. Emerson was well-acquainted with Indian literature from an early age. He read many articles about Indian mythology from *Edinburgh Review*. Indian ideology and religious beliefs and principles had a tremendous effect on Emerson's various works. Unlike most of his precursors and his fellowmen he was empathetic about other spiritual traditions and heritage. In the present world, his knowledge and perspective on Indian literature is of great interest to researchers especially of comparative literature.

Keywords: Brahma, Karma, Hinduism, Veda, Atman.

Introduction

Transcendentalism as a philosophical movement began in the late 1820s and 1830s as a quarrel with the orthodox Unitarian Church. It questioned the established cultural norms, urged the spirit of self-reliance and tried to bring about social reform. The chief trait of transcendentalism is that it believed in the moral nature of people. Its followers believed that the forces of society and various organizations have tainted the goodness of man, and they believed that people are at their finest when self-reliant and independent.

The Transcendentalists are strong believers in the ability of man. It focuses essentially on personal liberty. Transcendentalism focused on the spiritual capability of an individual by stressing on non-conformity, so that, through individuality and self-reliance, man might be free from various pressures and control to instinctively experience God's all-permeating oneness. Transcendentalism laid emphasis on the individual rather than the group, instinct rather than rationality, and on nature rather than the strength of man. Such notion was radical in 19th century and hence the movement was met by lot of resistance at the time. Such straightforward disclaim of established rules gave the authors the liberty to study the religious practices, literature, philosophy, art and culture of other distant countries. As a result of this, at a very early age, Emerson started reading the ancient books of Hinduism.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to bring forth the writings of Emerson that were inspired by Indian writings. Emerson's writings were highly influenced by Indian philosophy and had a huge influence on Americans in his times and in present era. Harold Bloom, described Emerson as "the mind of America." Philip Goldberg wrote: Emerson's "prodigious intellect was augmented by a deep intuition that yielded insights similar to those of the Vedic rishis. He was, in short, a mystic." (34) Emerson's remarkable fusion of Indian tradition and Western idealism, atman and individual self, mysticism and Neo-Platonism with his transcendental principles attracted many Americans.

Arguably, Emerson was the first American to be inspired by the religion and philosophy of Asia. Emerson conceived India as "the land of mysticism and the cradle of civilization" (Mudge 377). But at the same time he criticised the "immense godderly" (377) of Hinduism. In his poem "Indian Superstition" that he wrote in 1921 in his senior class for Harvard College Exhibition reflected the prejudices of Hinduism. In the poem he stated that India was a great civilization once but now she has fallen to sheer superstition and delusion of casteism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was influenced by Hindu philosophy and mysticism at an early age. He read many articles about Indian mythology



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that appeared in *Edinburgh Review* from 1820-25. The first Indian translation that Emerson read was an Indian verse titled "To Narayana" when he was only nineteen years of age. Soon after reading it, in a letter to his aunt, he expressed his desire to read more Hindu mythologies as for Emerson, India was the ultimate East. Even Persia with its abundance of poetry held a secondary place for him. Emerson was profoundly influenced by Indian Vedas and Upanishads and it played a vital role on the thought of Emerson. In this connection, F.I. Carpenter in his *Emerson and Asia* points out:

His reading of Indian literature forms one of the most important chapters in the story of his literary development; for not only did he owe his poems "Brahma" and "Hamatreya" entirely to Hindu works, but large parts of his essays on "Plato", "Fate", "Illusions", and "Immortality" are based on Hindu thought, and his famous "Sphinx" probably shares in it. (104)

Between 1836 and 1845, Emerson read segments from the *Vedas and Buddha* translated by Sir William Jones, the *Bhagavad Gita* translated by Charles Wilkins and the *Visnu Purana*. He found many concepts and ideas arising from the East, primarily from Hinduism or more precisely from *Advaita Vedanta*. Many of his public writings and personal journals show the extent to which the *Vedas* had influenced his thought:

In 1862, Emerson received by bequest from Thoreau's library about twenty volumes of Indian literature among which are: *RigVeda Samhita*, *Sankhya Karika*, *Le Bhagavata Purana*, *Institutes of Manu*, *Upanishad* (vol. XV of the *Bibliotheca Indica*, trsns. E. Roer), *Aphorisms of the Nyaya*, *Aphorisms of Mimamsa*, and *Lecture of Vedanta*. (Thottackara 5)

Many themes of Emerson is drawn from Indian philosophy and in 1836, the year of the publication of *Nature*, Emerson had read the Indian translated book "Code of Manu". The theme of individualism and self-reliance is stated in the book: "single is each man born, single he dies, single he receives the reward of his good and single the punishment" (Harris 175). According to Emerson, Raja Rammohan Roy was "world's greatest and most self-reliant individual" (Mudge 379). His continuing interest in Indian philosophy is revealed by his publications of passages from *Laws of Manu*, *The Visnu Sarma* and *The Vedas in The Dial* during 1840s. In 1845, a passage from *Vishnu Purana* inspired his poem "Hamatreya". "Hamatreya" is an adaptation of Maitreya which is a character in *Vishnu Purana*. Maitreya, in the original passage, is in conversation with Vishnu where he asks questions about human ambition, greed, materialism and man's ego. In the poem, Emerson opposes greed and material and emphasizes on spiritualism. Throughout the poem, the speaker puts forward the point that we spend our life chasing after earthly gains while ignoring the fact that material things fade away at death.

Emerson's poem "Brahma" probably expresses the central idea of Hindu philosophy more clearly and concisely than any other writings in the English language- perhaps better than any writing in Hindu literature itself... Brahma is not only one of the finest expressions of the Hindu idea of absolute unity, it is one of Emerson's own best poems, and represents on Emerson's part a deep and subtle reworking of the Hindu idea. (Carpenter 110-11)

The poem "Brahma" composed in 1856 was not the product of one day but it took shape over a period of time of Emerson's association with Hindu scriptures. The title of the poem is a reference to the Hindu God of Creation. The poem is composed from the viewpoint of Brahma. The poem explores the all-embracing quality of the spirit of Brahma. Brahma is "the impersonal creative force of the world". (113). The idea of Brahma came to him after his extensive reading of the Hindu *Vedas*. He wrote in his Journal: "Then I discovered the Secret of the World: that all things subsist, and do not die, but only retire a little from sight and afterwards return again" (*The Journals* VII 127). The "Secret of the World", as Carpenter believes "is merely the vague, unformulated idea of "Brahma" (114). Emerson jotted down in his Journal in 1845, the following lines that he read in the *Vishnu Purana*: "What living creature slays or is slain? What living creature preserves or is preserved? Each is his own destroyer, as he follows evil or good" (*The Vishnu Purana* 135). And years later he composed the poem "Brahma":

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again. (*Poems* 195)

Brahma is the supreme force of the world- the source of all energy. It is vain on part of man if he thinks that he has killed anyone or he himself is dead. Man doesn't know how Brahma works. He also stresses on his place of importance among the worshippers and if one doesn't worship him, then he will regret in due course of time. "Brahma" touches on the themes of transcendence and spirituality and this transcendental experience can be attained if we inspect and examine the purpose and essence of our existence.

In "Plato; or, the Philosopher", written in 1850, Emerson also writes about Brahma as the "fundamental unity":

In all nations there are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity. The raptures of prayer and ecstasy of devotion lose all being in one Being. This tendency finds its highest expression in the religious writings of the East, and chiefly in the Indian Scriptures, in the Vedas, the Bhagavat Geeta, and the Vishnu Purana. (*Emerson for the Twenty-first Century* 155)

The idea of Brahma was present in Emerson's mind since a long time. He incorporated the idea first in his essay "Plato", then years later he composed "Brahma" and again for a third time in his

later essay on "Immortality" he wrote about Brahma: "Brahma the supreme, whoever knows him obtains whatever he wishes. The soul is not born; it does not die; it was not produced from any one. Nor was any produced from it. Unborn, eternal, it is not slain, though the body is slain; subtler than what is subtle, greater than what is great . . ." (*Works* 505).

The idea of Brahma was clearly a favourite of Emerson. Human beings can find peace and happiness only when they realise Brahma. Brahma alone is real and this world is false or an illusion. Man and Brahma are not separate entities. As man is proud and ignorant, he think himself to be separate from Brahma but when the right knowledge dawns upon him, he realises his true self. When one realises his true identity, he is released from maya. He has expressed this idea in his essay "The Over-Soul":

It calls the light its own, and feels that the grass grows and the stone falls by a law inferior to, and dependent on, its nature. Behold, it saith, I am born into the great, the universal mind. I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect. I am somehow receptive of the great soul, and thereby I do overlook the sun and the stars, and feel them to be the fair accidents and effects which change and pass. More and more the surges of everlasting nature enter into me, and I become public and human in my regards and actions. So come I to live in thoughts, and act with energies, which are immortal." (*Select Writings* 85)

When Emerson writes that the sun and stars are "fair accidents" and that he is "born into the universal mind", he reiterates the Vedanta concept that the world is phenomenal and that man and Brahma are not different. For Emerson, freedom from illusion comes by understanding that the world is not real and that man is part of an endless nature.

"Compensation" was Emerson's understanding of the law of Karma or cause and effect in the Hindu scriptures. Every man is compensated according to his deeds. The Law of Compensation is another way of saying: "as you sow, so shall you reap". One will always be compensated for his own efforts and action. He writes: "Crime and punishment grow out of one stem. . . Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end pre exists in the means, the fruit in the seed" (*Select Writings* 101). "Always pay!" he wrote, indicating to the laws of karma and dharma. "First or last you must pay your entire debt. Persons and events may stand for a time between you and justice, but it is only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt" (106). His action solely is responsible for the good and bad in his life and man must pay his debt.

The Indian influence on Emerson is also evident in his essay "Fate" where he illustrates a Hindu fable: "Vishnu follows Maya through all her ascending changes, from insect and crawfish up to elephant; whatever form she took, he took the male form of that kind, until she became at last woman and goddess, and he a man and a god. The limitations

refine as the soul purifies, but the ring of necessity is always perched at the top" (*Conduct of life* 25). The spiritual Vishnu follows the worldly Maya in the different forms that she takes. They are fated to be present with each other in the natural changes of things. Emerson also states that, "Fate is nothing but the deeds committed in a prior state of existence" (11). The deeds of man in his previous birth also affects in the present birth that he has taken.

Emerson was always captivated by the subject of Maya. He wrote a short poem "Maia":

Illusion works impenetrable,
Weaving webs innumerable,
Her gay pictures never fail,
Crowds each on other, veil on veil,
Charmer who will be believed

By Man who thirsts to be deceived.
(*Collected Poems* 432)

The poem deals with the power of Maya and how it deludes all. Along with this poem, he writes about Maya many times in his journals. For example, he acknowledges the concept of Maya in the following entry:

The illusion that strikes me [most] as the masterpiece of Maya, is, the timidity with which we assert our moral sentiment. We are made of it, the world is built by it, Things endure as they share it, all beauty, all health, all intelligence exist by it; yet 'tis the last thing we dare utter, we shrink to speak it, or to range ourselves on its side (*Journals* XV 243).

He completely agrees with the notion of Maya and believes that the whole world consists of Maya. He quotes from the *Veda*, that "the world is born of Maya" (*Journals* XVI 33). His essay "Illusion" is based on the concept of Maya. Illusion is presented as goddess Maia who is the creator of the soul of man. Maia is the "magical illusion of reality" and the Hindus believed that salvation can be achieved if a man works his way through the "magical illusion". In "Illusions," Emerson writes that all men live in a world of illusions. With a comparison of sick men in hospital, Emerson explains the situation of human life: "We change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways, wailing, stupid, comatose creatures, lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death" (*Journals* XVI 384)

Emerson was highly influenced by the English translation of Charles Wilkins *Bhagavad Gita*. Reading the *Bhagavad Gita*, Emerson acknowledged Hindu religious teachings and its philosophy. He wrote: "I owed, - my friend and I, - owed a magnificent day to the Bhagavad Geeta. It was the first of books, it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercises us" (qtd.in Mudge 386). Even Swami Vivekananda, a towering figure in the Hindu reform movement in India, in 1900 pointed out to his audience in Shakespeare Society in Pasadena , California the importance of *Bhagavad Gita* to

Emerson. He said: "I would advise those of you who have not read that book to read it. If you only knew how much it has influenced your country even! If you want to know the sources of Emerson's inspiration, it is this book, the Gita . . . and that little book for the Concord Movement". (Vivekananda 91)

Just as Emerson appreciated enthusiastically Indian philosophy, similarly Emerson found favour among the Asian citizens. "Emerson's discovery of the East, the East's discovery of Emerson was largely contingent upon larger movements of world history, in particular nineteenth and early twentieth century politics, and the opening up of various Asian cultures to the political, commercial, and cultural interests of the West" (Mudge 389) As a result of this, Emerson's writings were disseminated to the Eastern lands which was a source of inspiration and encouragement for the people. In 1855, a missionary from Boston, Charles H. A. Dall came to Bengal for theological work. He circulated the writings of William Ellery Channing, Emerson, and Theodore Parker among the Brahmo Samaj disciples who eagerly read and were captivated with Emerson's essays.

rotap Chandra Majumdar, a prominent leader in the Brahmo Samaj was so spellbound by Emerson's essays that he travelled to Concord to pay his adoration but by that time Emerson had passed. Majumdar wrote "Emerson as Seen From India" that was read in 1884 in the Concord School of Philosophy. Majumdar eulogised Emerson as someone who could understand and appreciate "the wisdom and spirituality of the Brahmins" (qtd. In Mudge 390). Emerson was also captivated by the Nobel laureate poet, Rabindranath Tagore. He remarked: "I love your Emerson. In his work one finds much that is of India. In truth he made the teachings of our spiritual leaders and philosophers a part of his life". (45) Even Mahatma Gandhi in his letter to his son on 25 March 1907 suggested his nephew to read Emerson. He wrote:

Please tell Maganlalbai [Gandhi's nephew] that I would advise him to read Emerson's essays. They can be had for nine pence in Durban. There is a cheap reprint out. Those essays are worth studying. He should read them, mark the important passages and then finally copy them out in a notebook. The essays to my mind contain the teaching of Indian wisdom in a Western garb. (qtd. in Mudge 373)

Over the course of several years, when India underwent social and political change, Gandhi continually asserted the significance of Emerson's ideas. He was particularly charmed by Emerson's words: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesman and philosophers and divines"(qtd. in Mudge 394).

Conclusion

Emerson's writings laid much emphasis on the four concept of Hinduism, namely, Brahma, Maya, Karma and Atman. In "The Over-Soul" and "Brahma"

Emerson deliberates on the concept of form and formless Brahma. In "Divinity School Address" he deals with the theory of atman and in his poem like "Maia," essays like "Illusions" and "Experience," and his personal journal entries, Emerson contemplates on the concept of Maya. His reading of *Bhagavad Gita*, added to his knowledge of Indian philosophy which he has praised throughout his Journal. He has presented the concept of karma in his essays "The Conduct of Life" and "Self-Reliance". He writes that people should be responsible for their own actions and his action will determine his fate. Indian philosophy and religious beliefs and ideas had a substantial influence on Emerson's literary works. Emerson showed the way to his succeeding generation to continue reading the Hindu ancient texts like Upanisads and the Gita.

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