

EPISTEMOLOGY IN ADVAITA-VEDANTA AND ISLAM: A COMPARISON

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Introduction

Ask science, man has always been inquisitive and the inbuilt tendency 'to know more' has landed him up being, more innovative, more path-breaking in whatever he approaches. The ever burning embers of innovativeness in him have deciphered the space, the earth and the ocean and he is going to unravel the mysteries in the times to come. Everyone, worth the name, is crying from the hill-top that an overall reform in the educational set-up is a dire need of the hour. Innovations without any philosophical foundation will remain sheer wishful hope of the planners and it will amount to thinking of a healthy tree without fruits. Various epistemological theories and principles have been evolved to probe into the genesis of the existence and nature of the knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

The study entitled 'Epistemology in Advaita-Vedanta and Islam: A Comparison' is conducted with special reference to the aims, curricula, discipline and methodology of education.

Exposition of the Concepts Used in the Study

The epistemology of Advaita-Vedanta is investigated according to Shankara Bhashya 'Brahmasutra' while in the case of Islamic epistemology, it is discussed in the light of the 'iQura'n and Sunnah' of the prophet Mohammad.

The term 'epistemology' refers to the theory of knowledge with regard to method and validation. In other words, epistemology is a branch of philosophy that studies various aspects of knowledge. It attempts to answer the prominent and fundamental question pertaining to the true-adequate knowledge and false-inadequate knowledge.

The philosophy of Advaita-Vedanta as a stream, is the non-dualistic interpretation of Vedanta, which attempts to guide the individual to enlightenment. According to the philosophy of Advaita, 'jiva' (*Updesh Shahastri*, 8/2, 11/7, 13/8) in his basic nature, which is Brahman, is the self-illuminated non-dual reality, but it is due to avidya (absence of perfect or objective knowledge) that he is not able to realize his own original state, the Brahmanhood. Shankara laments that all differences and plurality of the world are illusory. So, this is the essence of Advaitic epistemology that at the level of permanent reality, there is nothing else except Brahman, the absolute.

Islam comes from an Arabic root word meaning "peace" and "submission" that teaches 'one can find peace in one's life only by submitting to Allah in heart, soul and deed'. The iQura'n is the word of Lord revealed to the last prophet Mohammad through the angel Gabriel in Arabic language during the last twenty-three years of the prophet's life. It contains the final edition of instructions and guidelines for the eternal benefit of mankind. Sunnah is the Muslim code of practice; a body of traditional law based on the sayings, actions, and guidance of the last prophet, as detailed in the Hadeeth and the Sirah (a biography of the prophet's life). It is a source of legislation for the ummah in the form of his utterance, action or approval of an act witnessed by him or reported to him.

Justification

The study is on a subject of vital topical interest and epistemological relevance. In order to promote the cultural ethos, national integration and most importantly a common concern regarding our existing system of education the academic enquiry is carried out. It is designed to eradicate the misconceptions and misgivings prevailing in the misguided fringe-elements of the followers of Advaita-Vedanta and Islam. All these justify selection of the present topic as a problem for academic investigation.

Objectives of the Study

- *To find out the epistemology of Advaita-Vedanta and Islam,
- *To study comparatively the epistemology of Advaita-Vedanta and Islam and its impact on education, and
- *To assess the utility of theories, principles and practices of Advaita-Vedantic and Islamic epistemological systems in the present educational context.

Assumptions of the Study

*Both the systems of epistemology complement each other on the focal point that knowledge should aim at the pursuit and realization of truth and goodness and help to

attain the divine approbation,

*These two epistemological systems are more relevant and they fulfill the integrated approach of education, and

*Both the epistemological systems are value and goal-oriented and can be applied to re-construct and re-pattern a viable and verifiable system of education which fulfills the aspiration of the learner.

Review of the Related Literature

The investigator has gone through the major research theses, literature, abstracts and reviews to investigate the related issues. *Divekar's, (1960)* study entitled 'A Critical Study of the Educational Philosophy of Upanishads' brings forth the educational philosophy of the Upanishads with a view to search for solution of the radically wrong in the fundamentals of existing education in India. *Alam's (1992)* study entitled 'A study of the Islamic Concept of Education in the light of the Concept of Man and Society' has attempted to analyze and evaluate the Islamic concept of education. *Mishra's (2002)* study entitled 'A Critical Study of the Educational Philosophy of Adi Shankara' has focused on the certain philosophical aspects of Shankara's Advaita theory. *Masoodi's (2004)* recent study entitled 'Al-Gazzali and Iqbal: Their Perspective on Education' has focused on the relevance of Islamic philosophy of education in the light of two illustrious thinkers of Muslim Ummah Imam Gazzali and Allama Iqbal. The investigator found no clear-cut trace of any academic enquiry at doctoral level pertaining to epistemological study of Advaita-Vedanta and Islam and their impact on the educational theories and practices which ensured those theories.

Research Strategy

The methodology adopted in philosophical study is qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources which followed comparative method based on library research and authentic sources. The analysis and synthesis was done on the basis of collected data in a scientific manner and important citations were inserted in the body of research. The facts are analyzed and written in a lucid and scientific language and lastly conclusions are drawn with all objectivity and emotional detachment.

Epistemology

Aims, curricula, discipline and methodology of education can not be conceived of unless these are hued in the concept of epistemology. Epistemology offers the source to the knowledge of metaphysics and tries to affirm that knowledge of reality is possible. As the science of knowledge, it is the way to knowing reality, to analyzing metaphysics which forms the content of epistemology and it is considered as the backbone of any philosophical thinking. Advaita-Vedanta establishes that real knowledge of the object depends upon the object itself and not on the human mind. Since any objectively existing reality can be known by appropriate means of valid knowledge, Brahman can also be known by appropriate means of valid knowledge. Advaita holds that the knowledge of the ultimate reality is a unique cognition that is not subjected to elimination (*Godavarisha Mishra 2003*). Since it is enduring and unalterable, its contents must be true. Shankara investigates pramana, that forms one part of a triputi, namely; i) pramatra, the subject; the knower of the knowledge, ii) pramana, the source of knowledge, and iii) prameya, the object of knowledge. The Advaitins hold that due to the improper knowledge man does not recognize the true Brahman, all powerful and the great commander and he is unable to find the infinite knowledge, divinity and vision already in him. A passage from Shankara's commentary on the Brahma-sutras supports the view that the self is the locus of nescience. Shankara says that Brahman is the asraya of avidya and the jives that having lost their identity reside therein (*Brahmasutra Bhashya I, iv, 3*). Man suffers due to the darkness of ignorance and so this is the root cause of all human sufferings. Advaitic epistemology admits that knowledge is meaningful only in involving a knowable and a knower. While Islamic philosophy as a system of thought and practice establishes that the source and end of all knowledge is God, who is all-knowing (*al-Aleem*). The iQura'n stresses on the study of the nature, the moon, the tide, the night, the stars, the day, the plants and animals. Revelation is considered the most reliable source of knowledge. The other sources of knowledge such as sensation, perception and reason are also attributed valid sources of knowledge. It is because of the paramount importance of knowledge in Islamic philosophy that acquisition and dissemination of knowledge has been made a sacred duty of its believers. In fact, epistemology in the Islamic perspective mingles knowledge, insight, and social action as its ingredients. Similarly, reason is recognized as a potent medium of knowledge in Advaitic philosophy which follows a scientific course leading

from one step to another. Both the epistemological systems give importance to theology, as well as empirical sciences. Knowledge refers to the acquisition of knowledge of Islam, is one of the most essential requirement of human race. It raises the individual to the heights of goodness and gives a noble position and real happiness in the two worlds, and above all it helps to attain the divine approbation.

Concept of Education

Shankara believes that education paves the path of salvation (*sa vidya ya vimuktaye*, Brahman, 3/28). With the help of education man should learn to maintain a balance between spiritual and material values of life. To achieve this, he emphasizes on vocational subjects, science education and research along with the spiritual perspective. A person should have a high moral character which makes him efficient and also adds to the understanding of the cultural heritage in the light of contemporary educational concerns. However, in Islam education is a continuous effort to disseminate the knowledge and skills that lead to the internalization of the teachings based on the iQura'n and Sunnah of the last prophet. It develops among its believers the attitudes, skills, character and a vision of life that enable them to see themselves as servants of God. It aims at moulding the individual to become a knowledgeable, pious and devoted follower so that he may be a faithful and responsible vicegerent of God. Islamic epistemology brings out the blossoming of a culture of free inquiry and rational scientific thinking that could encompass the spheres of both theory and practice. Treating knowledge and education as sacred duty; both regard it as the best kind of charity. The education which fails to lead the individual from ignorance to knowledge is hardly acceptable according to these philosophies. Both the systems fuel the seeker to come out from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality. Therefore stress has been laid down on both the acquisition as well as diffusion of knowledge.

Aims and Objectives of Education

The aims and objectives of Advaitic philosophy are seeking the pleasure, attainment of collective human life and salvation. It lays stress on the development of ideal values- truth, beauty and goodness. It includes love, compassion, kind-heartedness, sympathy, service to humanity etc. It further stresses that all these ideal values should be translated into action. It also emphasizes on the liberation of self from physical bondage. Contrarily, Islamic philosophy aims at the pursuit of truth and happiness here and hereafter. The approach towards educational aims and objectives was responsible for bringing about a revolutionary change in the society. It set in motion a movement for literacy, learning and knowledge. The ultimate aim of education is *amra bil maaroof wa nahiya anil munkar* (enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong) and also to seek the pleasure of God. Education aims at inculcating Islamic values for creating in the learners a pattern of behaviours to reflect Godly virtues. Moreover, *sabra* (patience), *taqwa* (fear of God), *adl* (justice), *ihsan* (generosity), *shukra* (thankfulness) are the aims and objectives regarded essential to be inculcated in the learners.

Curriculum

The Advaitic curriculum aspires for the physical, intellectual and moral growth of individual. Along with the spiritual knowledge, behavioural and materialistic subjects are also studied. Contrary to this, main emphasis in the Islamic curriculum is laid on the iQur'an and Sunnah followed by other subjects relevant to the requirements of the community. Of course there was no bar on seeking knowledge about other sciences but it was optional and not compulsory (*Mishkat-al-Mashabih*, p.56-57). The Islamic curriculum is not confined only to religious knowledge rather its entire contents are designed within the spirit of Islam. Both the epistemological systems maintain a balance between the requirements of material as well as spiritual life. That way, curriculum is a frame in which scientific facts are arranged in Advaitic and Islamic perspective. In the early days of Islam mosques were not only the centres of theological studies but there were arrangements of instructions of the subjects that today count as secular sciences. Sources suggest that modern sciences along with the theological subjects were instructed in the vicinity of mosque.

Methods of Teaching

Advaitic philosophy offers worship, meditation, memory, imitation, lecture, questioning, discussion, self-study, traveling, exercise and practice, reason and review as methods of education. It also emphasizes on *sutra*- method which is helpful in the practice of concentration and meditation. It emphasizes on hearing the Vedantic texts

(*saravana*), reflection on their import (*manana*) and meditating on what has been ascertained as true self (*nididhyasana*). It is well known as *sravana- manana- nididhyasana vidhi*. Shankara says that in reasoning both inductive and deductive approaches are applied. He also suggests preferring *Vyakhya Vidhi*. This method is also known as *Bhashya or Tika* or commentary. While Islamic philosophy of education offers the teacher flexibility in terms of adopting a variety of methods at different stages as the lesson proceeds. It offers sermon, lecture, experience, memory, discussion, debate, example, monitoring and travelling as method of teaching. *Abu Dard*, a teacher in early Islamic period used to sit back in the mosque after *fajr* prayers for delivering the content to the prospective learners. They were divided into groups, each group having a mentor from among the senior learners (*Shibli, Al-Farooque*, Volume II, p.119). Methodology of education is mostly oral-verbal and based on repetition technique with a view to cram the facts and figures in the minds of the learners. Enhancing interest and aspiration in the learners, offering motivation, drawing learners' attention towards the lesson, and presenting the course-content in a suitable manner were meticulously dealt with.

Teacher - Student Relationship

Both the teacher and learner work on the basis of active co-operation and collaboration. Advaita-Vedanta claims that if the teacher embodies and reflects the values he is teaching then the impression he leaves on his learners is relatively profound and lasting. A teacher must be conscious and careful in his behaviour, attitude and professional ethics. Both the teacher and learner are travellers on the path of self-realization but the teacher is relatively advanced and superior in age, experience and dignity. He is well-read in terms of knowledge and wisdom through meditation and great penance. By virtue of these he becomes the guru and the other the shishyas. In Islamic philosophy the actions and deeds of the teacher are taken as models for his learners. On the one hand Islam raises the teacher's status, on the other, it demands him to be conscious of his responsibilities. Though the last prophet of Islam, Mohammad was an ummi (unlettered), but he taught his followers the importance of literacy, learning and knowledge. He is reported to have said that he was sent only as a teacher (*Mishkat-al-Mashabih*, Volume I, p.59). The teachers on their part treated the learners with love and affection and went out of their way to help and encourage them. They considered a kind of bounded duty to communicate knowledge and learning to others (*Sayeed Akhter*, 1976, p. 19).

School System

The establishment of *mathas* by Shankara aims at transmitting knowledge to the ignorant and providing adequate guidance to those deviated from the right path. Therefore, such type of *mathas* are in natural and peaceful environment; away from the crowd and disturbances and contaminated areas for concentration of mind. Sources suggest that the learner has to go to the residence of guru for seeking knowledge. Islamic institutions of learning such as *maktab, kuttab, darul-arqam, al-suffah, dar-al-qurra, madarsa, and jamia* etc. are evident. Many companions of the last prophet embraced Islam in *Darul arqam* and received their first instruction here. It would appear that there used to be two categories of *kuttab*, firstly the *kuttab* for teaching the Qur'an and elementary religious knowledge, and secondly, the *kuttab* for teaching reading and writing (*Shalaby*, p. 17). *Masjid-al- Nabawi* emerged as a place of worship as well as a centre of education. As it was not possible for the women to attend these sessions, one day in every week was exclusively reserved for their instruction (*Zafar Alam*, 1997, p. 41). Due attention was paid to the women's education, though co-education was not there.

Discipline

Self-control and self-discipline are regarded as fruitful discipline in Advaitic philosophy. Yoga, meditation and exercise may be examples of repressive theories of discipline. It advocates impressionistic approach while maintaining discipline. Similarly, Islamic philosophy does not advocate disciplinary punishment but in very exceptional cases. If it is thought essential the learners are assured that the punishment is on the account of their undesirable conduct. The enforcement of discipline is done meticulously throughout the educative process for attaining better outcomes from the educational endeavour. None of these philosophies of education speaks in favour of the corporal punishment.

Findings

The findings of the study may be summarized as:

*The epistemology of Advaita-Vedanta and Islam give a new perspective by which one can find pointers to develop an integrated personality as they are inclined towards creating an atmosphere of love, compassion, kindness, harmony, sympathy, service to humanity through an appropriate system of education.

*These two philosophies complement each other on the focal point that the true education paves the path of salvation and aims at the pursuit and realization of truth and goodness, and above all it helps to attain the divine approbation.

*The educational thoughts of the two philosophies of education are equally important for the development of intellectual emotional, humanistic, physical, moral, aesthetic, artistic and spiritual qualities.

*The Advaita-Vedanta speaks of cultivation and consolidation of various traits like truth, beauty, goodness, ahimsa, brahmacharya, purity and forgiveness etc. based upon its insightful philosophy. Similarly, Islamic philosophy lays great emphasis on diffusion of knowledge in the backdrop of creating an integrated ideal atmosphere entrenched in universal values i.e., *sabra* (patience) *taqwa* (fear of God) *adl* (justice) *ihسان* (generosity) *shukra* (thankfulness) etc.

*Both the philosophies of education offer a substantive and composite curriculum which carries subjects of spiritual and temporal faculties of learning. Further, human life and education are related in curriculum. Hence, the philosophies of education are inclined towards developing national integration and international understanding.

*In Advaitic methodology of teaching teacher should be a role model for learners while Islamic methodology of teaching has declared the teacher as a spiritual mentor of learners. Further, method of teaching is not confined to self-education only but covers gradation and continuity in teaching, explanation, drawing conclusion and home assignment. Hence, both the philosophies share a common ground with reference to methodology of teaching.

*Both the philosophies pass the sacred string of their consent through the intricacies as well as the lucidity of the educational process.

*It is well explicated by Advaita-Vedanta and Islamic philosophy that serenity and sylvan glades should reign the school atmosphere.

*Both the philosophies of education criticize in unequivocal terms the corporal punishment given to the learners as it is believed that the learner regulates himself and edges towards perfection which every soul craves for.

Educational Implications

There are many more similarities between the two systems, which can be worked out. But, unfortunately, the misgivings prevailing in the misguided fringe-elements of the followers of the two religions often erupt in communal violence and tension, posing threat to national unity and progress. By discovering common ground between the two epistemological systems of Advaita-Vedanta and Islam, some ground has been created for the Hindus and Muslims coming closer. This may be implied for promotion of communal harmony, national unity and solidarity and international understanding. Both these epistemological systems imply the promotion and integration of cultural ethos and value system. Common concern regarding our existing system of education can be promoted by integrated approach.

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