



The Concept of Isolation in Indian Thought

Jibin Paul¹

Abstract:

The isolation becomes one of the most conventional concepts at the present context. The self-isolation from the world as well as sensual pleasures (Vairagya) and the ensconcement in the Supreme Isolation (Kaivalya) is squarely entrenched in Indian thought system. Therefore, Kaivalya is defined as the aloofness from everything else and remaining in the pure existence of the Self. This essay is an attempt to expose the concept of isolation in Indian tradition. The deeper understanding in the essay finds that isolation is not the state of eloping from the social responsibilities. Instead, it is the responsible performance of duties without entangling towards either action or fruits of actions. It is perfected through the practice of detachment and contemplation. The rare but evident combination of the Supreme Isolation and Social Responsibility is presented in the essay as the distinctive and unique feature of Indian tradition. The self-discovery in the quarantine without snubbing the social responsibility is the relevancy of the thought.

¹ godsown143@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION:

At present context of COVID-19, the self-isolation and quarantine becomes the part of the common talk at the nook and corner of the universe. To mitigate and flatten the pandemic, the self-isolation and quarantine functions as one of the proactive exit-strategy. The fear, anger, and anxiety over the grief of the isolation embroil one to distress and depression. But, an Indian mind that deeply rooted in its own rich and prolific tradition can never succumb to it, because the concept of self-isolation and quarantine has positive and liberative motif in Indian tradition. The detachment from the world as well as sensual pleasures (*Vairagya*) and the ensconcement in supreme isolation (*Kaivalya*) is squarely entrenched in Indian thought system without exception and it is not social ostracism or escapism from the responsibilities. Understanding the real sense of isolation incrementally nurtures and rejuvenates the positivity in the present society. This is an attempt to expose the concept of isolation in Indian tradition, which significantly bolsters to face the grief of pandemic with a positive and

creative attitude. The procedure of the paper flows through three steps; it begins with the understanding and interpretation of the concept of isolation in Indian thought system and this interpretive understanding discloses the social and practical implications of the concept of isolation.

THE CONCEPT OF ISOLATION

In the Indian philosophical tradition, the absolute isolation is identified as '*Kaivalya*' or *Kevalajñāna*. *Kevala* in Sanskrit means 'mere'. *Kaivalya* is the noun form of *kevala* and, therefore, 'mereliness' which means homogenous oneness. It is generally translated as 'Supreme Isolation' or 'Supreme Aloneness'. *Kaivalya Upaniṣad* (2.2) defines it as "the experience (*jñānam*) of absolute oneness which destroys the endless experience of change and multiplicity (*saṃsārārṇavanāśanam*). Therefore, having experienced this, one attains the fruit of liberation (*kaivalyaṃ phalamaśunate*); indeed, one attains *Kaivalya*."² *Kevalajñāna* is the composite of *kevala* which means 'single' and *jñāna* which means 'knowledge'. Thus, the etymological meaning of *kevalajñāna* is

² *Kaivalya Upaniṣad* . 2.2.

‘the single knowledge’. The practice of isolation is perfected through the practice of detachment and meditation, according to Indian tradition.

Sāṅkhya-Yoga

The Sāṅkhya system ascribes the term *kevala* to *Puruṣa* wedged out from *Prakṛti* and *Kaivalya* is the state of liberation.³ It is the state of reimbursement of the original status of *guṇas* (*Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) in *Prakṛti* and ensconces *Puruṣa* in its purity which will be resulted in the extinction of the sufferings (*ādhyātmika*, *adhibhautika*, and *adhidaivika*). *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali suggests the methodical effort to attain ‘the discriminative enlightenment (between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti*)’ which leads to *Kaivalya*. According to Yoga, the suffering and ignorance (*kleśa* and *avidya*) is due to modifications of *citta* and therefore, Yoga aims at “the suppression of the modification or fluctuations of *citta*”⁴ by ‘the practice (*Abhyāsa*) and detachment (*Vairāgya*)’.⁵ Therefore, the liberation (*kaivalya*) is always within his/her reach to

transform nature by restricting his/her *citta*. With the self-restriction, dispassion, concentration and contemplation, one can even expunge evils and ills.⁶ According *Yogasūtra*, *Kaivalya* is the state of ‘the Self (*Puruṣa*) in itself.’⁷ It implies that ‘the supreme consciousness is established in its own self and remains all alone because it is dissociated from Buddhi.’ Therefore, Yoga envisages ‘a new normal life’, through the spirit of renunciation and self-imposed containment (Quarantine) and the enquiry into the potencies and actuality of the self (Self-resilience and self-reliance).

Advaita Vedānta

Advaita Vedānta adheres *Kaivalya* as non-dualism or identity with the Absolute Brahman. *Vedāntasāra* says, “The soul absorbed in the Supreme Brhman. The soul is identified with the Absolute Brahman, the Supreme Isolation, and the embodiment of Bliss, in which there is not even the appearance of duality.”⁸ *Tattoabodha* and *Ātmabodha* enumerate the pedagogy for the inheritance of the

³ *Sāṅkhyakārika*: 17.

⁴ *Yogasūtra*: 1.2.

⁵ *Yogasūtra*: 1.12.

⁶ S. Radhakrishnan, (2008), p. 309.

⁷ *Yogasūtra*: 4.26; 34.

⁸ *Vedāntasāra*: 226.

immediate knowledge. It is the process of withdrawal from adjectival identities such as caste, clan, family, individual as well as material possessions, body, and sensual pleasures etc. and is firmly ascertained 'I am not these multiplicities of identities but I am unattached and of the nature of *Saccidānanda* (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss), effulgent (*prakāśasvarūpaḥ*), indweller of all (*sarvāntaryāmī*) and the formless awareness (*cidākāśrūpaḥ*) and I am Brahman alone (*brahmaivāhamasmiti*)'.⁹ Through discriminative self analysis and logical thinking one isolates oneself from all these multiplicities and realises the pure oneness within. *Ātmabodha* briefs out the nature of pedagogy of isolation or negation (*atadvyāvṛttirūpeṇa*) like this; "Realise that to be Brahman which is non-dual (*advayam*), indivisible (*akhaṇḍam*), one (*ekam*), blissful (*ānandam*), and which is indicated in Vedānta as the immutable substratum, realised after negation of all tangible objects (*atadvyāvṛttirūpeṇa*)."¹⁰ According to Advaita Vedāntic tradition, this

realisation is the immediate knowledge (*aparokṣajñānam*) which leads liberation.

Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhist literature annotates *kevala* with two senses: oneness and perfectness.¹¹ *Kevalin* is described as one who is perfect in virtues (*savvaḡuṇa*), fully accomplished (*paripuṇṇa*), all-powerful (*savvayoga*) and free from worldly dispositions (*visamṡyutta*).¹² For Jainas, the cognitive actuality (*kevalajñāna*) is the tantamount to liberation (*mokṣa*). In the Jaina dogmatic and philosophical literature, the term denotes as the 'perfect knowledge that exists alone'. It does not coexist with any other type of knowledge.¹³ When the omniscience occurs in the self, it exists alone, because the omniscience evolves only when all the knowledge covering karma is totally eliminated. There is another explanation for *kevala* in Jainas tradition.¹⁴ The first four types of knowledge are procured by the corresponding karmic suppression as well as the augmentation of

⁹ *Tattvabodha*: pp. 110-111; *Ātmabodha*: 31-38.

¹⁰ *Ātmabodha*: 57.

¹¹ *Samṡuttanikāya*: 153.

¹² Indra Candra Shastri, (1990), p. 365.

¹³ *Tattvārthasūtra*: 1.31.

¹⁴ Indra Candra Shastri, (1990), p. 366.

kevalajñānāvaraṇa. But, the cause of *kevalajñāna* is all alone the self. Hence, 'the Supreme Isolation' has two implications in Jainas philosophical tradition; the sole existence of omniscience in the self at the time of liberation and the sole role of the self in the genesis of the omniscience.

THE EXQUISITE CONVERGENCE OF THE SUPREME ISOLATION AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The rare combination of the complete isolation and the social responsibility seems to be little bit paradoxical in appearance. But, the convergence is well evident and true in Indian tradition. The concept of *Niṣkāmakarma*, *Lokasaṅgraha*, *Boddhisattva*, *Arhat*, *Tīrthaṅkara*, and *Jīvanmukta* etc. are the epitome of such model. It echoes social responsibility of the liberated people. Social distance and self-quarantine doesn't mean egoistic (*asmita*) self-containment and which fleeing away from social responsibility. It never asks to ostracise others (*dveṣa*). According to the approaches of Indian tradition, the

quarantine cannot be considered as the constraint or suspension of activity but stimulation of activity. *Bhagavatgīta* (3.5) teaches that there is no one who can remain without action, even for a moment. Indeed, all beings are compelled to act by their qualities born of material nature (the three *guṇas*).¹⁵ *Gīta* propels, "*niyataṁ kurukarmatoaṁ karmajyāyo hyakarmaṇaḥ*", which means 'perform ones daily duties, for action is better than non action'.¹⁶ But one should always perform duty without the desire of fruits (*Niṣkāmakarma*).¹⁷ Therefore, it is not renunciation of action but renunciation in action. The pure soul (*yoga-yukta viśuddhātmā*) after restricting his mind and senses (*vijitātmā jitendriyaḥ*) work for the universe (*sarva-bhūtātma-bhūtātmā*) without having any entanglement (*na lipyate*).¹⁸ Those actions are determined for the betterment of the universe (*loka-saṅgraham*), leads one to perfect state of life. It set an example for the rest of the universe to follow which creates 'a new normal life'.¹⁹ Thus, those actions of a liberated being are without any subliminal imprints.²⁰ The concepts

¹⁵ *Bhagavatgīta*: 3.5.

¹⁶ *Bhagavatgīta*: 3.8.

¹⁷ *Bhagavatgīta*: 2.47.

¹⁸ *Bhagavatgīta*: 5. 7.

¹⁹ *Bhagavatgīta*: 3.20.

²⁰ *Yogasūtra*: 4.6.

such as *Jivanmukta*, *Sarvamukti*, *Karmayogi*, *Boddhisattva*, *Arhat*, *Tirthankara* and *Sthithaprajña* reckon the social responsibility of a liberated being to help the common people to cover the ocean of sufferings (*samsāra*) and to help for the benefit of humanity. All of the concepts unanimously profess the performance of social responsibility with a spirit of detachment (*vairāgya*) and devoid of delusion (*moha*).

THE TRAJECTORY TOWARDS THE COMPLETE ISOLATION: A PATH OF PRACTICE AND DISCIPLINE

The activity free from sufferings and attachment (*vītarāgaviṣayam*) has its incremental influence on the trajectory towards liberation. *Yogasūtra* proclaims loudly; “the practice (*abhyāsa*) and detachment (*vairāgya*) are necessary tools to arrest the sufferings”.²¹ The aim of the practice is to attain a tranquil state of mind through mental and physical discipline which leads to concentrate ‘the self in itself’. It is perfected through the state of utter desirelessness (*Paravairāgya*).²² *Tattvabodha* rightly observes the nature

of detachment (*vairāgya*) like this, “*ihasvargabhogeṣu icchārāhityam* which means the dispassion is ‘the absence of desire for the enjoyments in this world and in heaven.’²³ The self-regulated withdrawal from the sensual pleasures (*Pratyāhara*) nurtures dispassion in our carvings as well as mastery over the senses and animates the process of self-discovery.²⁴ Buddhism and Jainism also reiterate the pivotal role of seclusion in the practice of *Astāṅgayoga* and *Guṇasthāna* respectively which leads to liberation. Thus, Indian tradition ensures that by the practice of detachment and isolation from sensual desires as well as self-absorption through concentration and contemplation, one becomes no longer a victim of destiny but becomes a maker of destiny.

CONCLUSION

The ‘social distance’ and ‘the self quarantine’ have already dealt in Indian tradition before ages. From the above discussions, it is well evident truth that the isolation has a liberative motive in Indian tradition. At the point

²¹ *Yogasūtra* 1.12.

²² *Yogasūtra*: 1.13-16

²³ *Tattvabodha*: pg. 16.

²⁴ *Yogasūtra*: 2. 48; 55.

of realisation, Individual soul has to realise the Supreme loneliness or Isolation. It is corollary to discriminative enlightenment and liberation. The transcendental experience of Absolute separation has to be practiced in the transactional level through the life of detachment and concentration. The detachment from the sensual and outer world spurs one's trajectory towards *Kaivalya*. The performance of duties that is devoid of desire and unleashed from delusion work in tandem for the betterment of the universe. Therefore, *kevalin* is not the state of eloping from the social responsibilities. Instead, it is the responsible performance of duties without entangling towards either action or fruits of actions and it can be practiced in daily life even by the common people through the disciplined mode of living. To sum up, the concept of isolation in Indian tradition has never entails one to distress and depression because it has soteriological (liberation), practical, ethical and social implications which constantly remind one to lead a meaningful worthy life.

REFERENCES

Bhagavatgita. Translated by Swami B.G Narasingha. (2011). Srinagapatnam: Gosai Publishers.

Kaivalaya Upaniṣad. Translated by Swami Chinmayananda. (2015). Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.

Īśvara Kriṣṇa. *Sāṃkhyakārika*. Translated by Swami Virupakshananda. (2012). Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math.

Śaṅkarācārya. *Ātmabodha*. Translated by Swami Chinmayananda. (2016). Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.

Śaṅkarācārya. *Ātmabodha*. Translated by Swami Tejomayananda. (2016). Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust.

Sadānanda. *Vedānta-sāra*. Translated by Swami Nikhilananda. (2010). Kolkata: Advaita Ashram.

Patañjali. *Yogasūtra*. Translated by Swami Hariharananda Aranya. (2012). Calcutta: University of Calcutta.

Umasvāti. *Tattvārhasūtra*. Translated by Nathmal Tatia. (2007). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

Shastri, Indra Chandra. (1990). *Jaina Epistemology*. Varanasi: P.V Research Institute.

Radhakrishnan, S. (2008). *Indian Philosophy* Vol. 2. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.