

## **Bhagavad Gita a Substantial provenance of understanding and motivation for Ralph Waldo Emerson**

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### **Abstract**

*Hinduism precisely came into American society when Swami Vivekananda in 1893 spoke these words and addressed the people, "sisters and brothers of America", these words attained big round of applause in Chicago where World Parliament of Religions was being held. But one cannot deny that Indo- American spiritual relation was already into existence in the works of American thinkers and writers. The deep and wide thoughts of the Vedic concepts, knowlwdge of Upanishads, stories from Purans, Vedantas and teachings of the Bhagavad Gita were fully grown in the mind and thoughts of well known writers and poets from America. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, William James, Henry David Thoreau and several other writers and poets came under this category and expressed their Indo- American spiritual views in their writings. People like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman were remarked as 'Brahmins of America or American Yogi's' because of their outlook and views regarding Indo- American Spiritualism which was developed by the true love for the philosophy of the Upanishads.*

*In the Renaissance of American history key figures of writers were Emerson and Thoreau, they American by birth yet they were Indians by heart, thoughts and philosophy to express their vision.<sup>[1]</sup> Literature is far beyond the national or racial boundaries its major task is to bring people closer and establish harmony. Everything is easily available on the internet these days; things are just one touch away from human being. Indian literature has widely attained attention in the in international market because now it is also available in English as well as other languages. "A new and readable translation of the Bhagvad Gita, available for a few cents, has sold a million copies in America and has become a household book of guidance for numberless American natives and Indians"<sup>[2]</sup>.*

**Keywords:** *Hinduism, Religion, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishad, Indian, Philosophy American Renaissance*

### **Introduction:**

In my research paper on 'Bhagavad Gita a Substantial Source of understanding and motivation for Emerson' I have brought forth that Ralph Waldo Emerson was very much affected by The Bhagavad Gita. The other group of people in Western civilization are moving on the path designed by the Great philosopher Emerson. So, it becomes very essential not only for western world but for the entire world to know his thoughts for achieving higher goals. Its passionate attendant Emerson said, "I owed

a magnificent day to the Bhagavad 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 in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us. <sup>[3]</sup> If truth be told Ralph Waldo Emerson has put together Bhagavad Gita and Vedic as an essential and vital part of Western world and knowledge.

Entire world knows Ralph Waldo Emerson as an American poet-prophet. He is recalled time and again for his efforts to uplift the spiritual mindset of American people. Ralph Waldo Emerson was in Boston (1803), USA. His father died when Emerson was just eight years old and later he was nurtured under the care his mother. Ralph Waldo Emerson spent his entire life in Massachusetts and later became the prime member of Transcendentalists group. Waldo's idea's and philosophy may be put in nut shell by one of his own remarks: "Can anyone doubt that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, and noblest Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest and wisest Christian, Manu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet and converse together, they would find themselves of one religion? <sup>[4]</sup>" Before taking a step ahead and discussing how Indian philosophy impacted Emerson's views and concepts, it is essential that I succinctly discuss and through some light on the Transcendentalism as a movement.

### **Transcendentalism and its meaning:**

"Transcendentalism, or American Transcendentalism" <sup>[5]</sup>, was a many- sided movement. This generated religion as freethinking, individualism in the field of literature, philosophy of intuitive idealism, new optimism among peoples' mind and new upstart in social reforms. This movement prospered in between 1830 and 1860. Initial mark of this movement at the fall of 1836 a meeting of transcendentalist held at George Ripley's home. It began as a movement of intellect, romanticism and post- Kantian idealism gave push to Transcendentalism, and its paramount supporters were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott. In the first instance, it began its expedition as a movement of religion, but soon it touched various other and key issues the current age.

One can clearly see the Impact of Transcendentalism in many movements of America—be it philosophical, Economical, literary, political, or religious. From religious point of view, it started new ways to practice religion which included freethinking and reasoning. As a matter of fact, was for the very first mutiny against historical Christianity as it denied religious forms, creeds, rituals, and the literal explanations of scriptures which were earlier taken very seriously. On the other hand, it motivated to achieve for a genuine and true religious experience. Building up an authentic relationship among the God and the universe was the essential purpose of the movement. Denying religious customs, Emerson in his "Divinity School Address" proclaimed that "Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us....It seemed strange that the people should come to church <sup>[5]</sup>". Hence, Transcendentalism favours religious experience based on second sight and a primary relationship with the universe and its Creator.

### **Review of Literature:**

The Books of Hinduism are considered to be read by Emerson for the very first time in American history; so, his writings have clear cut picture of Hinduism in his works. Emerson's poems and essays are great example of his attachment towards Hinduism. Emerson spread the ideas of Hindu holy book

Bhagavad Gita that in England they started accepting laws and materialist fact, the attractive, the tactful, the fearless, the beneficial unfortunately, they were not successful in creating book like Bhagavad Gita <sup>[6]</sup>.

Concept of Maya is beautifully presented in the works of Emerson. He was firm believer that people are living in the world of illusion. Emerson talks about life and tells about human beings that human changes only bed or he shifts from one to another. Emerson pointed towards nothingness in life with the concept of nothingness in the death. In his well known essay “Experience” he claims human beings keep on peeping through the glass (illusion) still they are in fix about the reality as they are not sure at all. According to Emerson it is really difficult to pass through the path of this illusion as Lord Krishna describes in the Upanishads. ‘It is really very difficult to penetrate through this ‘Maya of mine’, which is made up of the three Gunas. Only those pass through this illusion those take refuge in me alone.’ According to Emerson he finally summed up that there is no end to this illusion. From Maya Emerson took the concept of illusion which he presented in his work. The concept Maya is taken from Hinduism which literally means dishonesty, fraud or treachery <sup>[6]</sup>. Different types of illusions which can form dilemma and take the senses of common human being to wrong way. In the common concept of Indian Philosophy which exclaims uselessness, apart from the concept of realism covered by the god or the Brahman itself. God is the pure consciousness and away from all the worldly and material aspects. In other course of dimension Maya is reflected in the Hindu mythologies and scriptures as the play (lila) or drama of God. Emerson in his third poem came up with a Hindu philosophical title other than "Brahma" and "Hamatreya", this small poem, is given the title of "Maya". This poem gives reference to the Hindu mythological goddess which keeps the humankind under the magical chasm of illusion. Emerson took life as a puzzle; he praised the Hindus because they have found the apt response against the concept of Maya. When he attained the age of fifty three he wrote a new work in his journal for which he took motivation from The Katha Upanishad. <sup>[7]</sup>.

Emerson was also influenced by the idea of Karma, another Hindu Philosophical concept which motivated him more towards Indian Philosophy. Karma in literal words means work or action. The pain which is caused in future is the ultimate result of the disobedience of the Karma. Multiple Hindu books (Bahagavad Gita, Upanishads and Vedas) clearly present the picture where the disobeying person faces serious punishment. Karma philosophy can be clearly compared with “Self Reliance.” Karma is elaborately discussed in the works of Emerson. This concept is also taken from Hindu religion <sup>[6]</sup>. The deeds and actions of a man are said to be Karma. In religious dimension Karma means intentional action or dealing which affects one’s kismet (Destiny) at present and future lifes to come. Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism have common stand on the concept of Karma, but it is explained in different manner.

‘Anwaruddin’ presents that regardless of few disagreements, the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson is coordinated with Indian mythology, religious and philosophical concept. Emerson’s writings have very vast influence of these concepts. Indian philosophical and spiritual concepts are greatly explored by Emerson. Emerson paved the pathway for the people who were interested in the same field, and wanted to study Hinduism like Bhagavad gita and Upanishads. People who are interested in the works of Hindu Philosophies Emerson designed path for those people. <sup>[6]</sup> Emerson has written about hindu concepts in his works because he was highly influenced by them.

‘Singh’ also reflects the similar idea that Emerson was deeply and profoundly attached towards Indian Philosophy and Hindu ideas. The way was designed for the people who wanted to study Indian philosophical and spiritual concepts through the study of ancient texts like Gita and Upanishads <sup>[8]</sup>.

Eastern Scriptures, Hindu Mysticism and mythology to Chinese philosophy and concept, Persian poetry and literature to Hafiz ideology to Buddhist principles have influenced the ideas and thought process of Emerson greatly. “Pickford”, one the most famous mystical poems which is greatly indebted to the Persian poets such as “The Sphinx” it clearly shows that Ralph Waldo Emerson’s mystifying and visionary tone in his concepts and ideas, “Hamatreya” gives clear reflection to Hindu outlook (wisdom) towards the England and English people, “Bacchus” reflects the joy of poetic motivation which is rare, “Days” represents the mixture of (Christian) Puritan principles and vision which is unique and exemplary and “Brahma” reflects a mixture of Hindu core concepts and ideas which directly connects to the idea of Niravana with selflessness<sup>[9]</sup>.

In the work of ‘Kumar’ we get the similar idea that “Emerson searched the value of acquisitive world and unending power”<sup>[10]</sup>. This is the only reason why he studied Hindu scriptures such as, Bhagavad Gita, Vedas, the Upanishads and German idealism and few other books. In the list of great writers Emerson occupies special place<sup>[8]</sup>.one can easily see the vividness of ideas and scripture notions. In the list of writers who ever read Hindu scriptures and had tilt towards Hinduism Emerson stands first. Hindu affect can be clearly seen in the works of Emerson. Vishnu Purana is the main source from where he took most of the titles and themes for his works. Various thinkers have remarked about “orient of Islam and original corpus of Emerson, centring on the fundamentals of Sufi Mysticism, Hindu Spiritualism and literary principles of Asian culture in his works”<sup>[10]</sup>. From a very tender age Emerson started reading Hindu Manuscripts like ‘Purana, Bhagavad Gita, Katha Upanishad and Manusmriti’. One can easily see the references of these sacred books in the works of Emerson.

Philosophy of Emerson for “The Over Soul” is completely attached with the Indian philosophy. The keen perspective of the idea and concept of “Brahma” is also very much related to the Indian concept and idea. Vishnu Purana is regarded as the main source of motivation for Emerson if one studies it deeply. For his better understanding and knowledge he got wider perspectives from Katha Upanishad as well as Bhagavad Gita, these two guided him and motivated him to the vary extend. Hinduism gave him the deep insight to look into the concepts like sin, evil of karma and action, freedom and liberation, suffering and repenting and destiny. Hinduism also gifted Ralph Waldo Emerson with the concept of moral and ethical laws. These ideas penetrate in God, Over Soul or Highest Mind of the human which broaden his mindset. Through Hinduism Emerson also came to know about the idea of soul or mind (Budhi of Indian concept)<sup>[8]</sup>. Intellect and intuition are two sorts of mind as he identifies. Knowledge of variation and superficial knowledge is provided by the Intellect whereas, rationality, unity and harmony is provided by intuition. The concept of intuition was developed by Emerson in one of the profound essay “Self Reliance” while he was in quest for reason if self trust<sup>[8]</sup>.

Indian philosophical literature was completely and intensely studied by Emerson, he is credited to be the first American writer who did this task wholeheartedly. The picture of this can be seen his works. Emerson wrote a letter to Max Muller where he tells: "All my interest is in Marsh's Manu, then Wilkins' Bhagavat Geeta, Burnouf's Bhagavat Purana and Wilson's 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 Arjuna and I still prize the first chapters of the Bhagavat as wonderful". Indian influence was progressively in thoughts and ideas of Emerson, as by 1856 “Katha Upanishad” was read by him<sup>[11]</sup>. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s poem, such as “Hamatreya” (poem written in 1845) clearly reflects that he has completely digested Indian Philosophical reading to the core. Vishnu Puran is the main source which motivated Emerson to write “Hamatreya”. The concept of Maya and Illusion fascinated the mind of Emerson. Hinduism, literary, philosophical as well as religious is deeply dug by Emerson to get best out of it. Intrusive mind of Emerson was motivated by

the sacred books of Hinduism. Spiritually he was impacted very much by the ideas of Indian religious philosophy. In his two famous poems “Hamatreya” and “Brahma” he represented the concepts of Hindu Philosophy. Hindu Philosophy is very close to the heart and mind of Emerson and his keen interest brought him even nearer <sup>[12]</sup>. The works of Emerson represent the impact of Manu, this is a mythology of India. Emerson was surely motivated by the Indian concepts is the view point of ‘Rao’. In the works of Emerson people could easily see the reflection of Manu, Hinduism and Bahagavad Gita which he has presented very skilfully and efficiently <sup>[12]</sup>.

### Research Issues

- i. Hinduism as an essential part of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writings?
- ii. Reason behind the proximity of Emerson and Hindu religion?
- iii. What was the reason for his tilt towards Hinduism?
- iv. Cause for mentioning Hindu mythological and religious Books in most of his works?
- v. How was Emerson so well acquainted with concepts and ideas of Hinduism?

Emerson’s thoughts and philosophy has not only impacted his contemporaries but generations to come. For him Hinduism is the most essential and vital source of understanding in his works. Many people opine that Emerson has done deep study of Hindu scriptures and Sanskrit language and literature while he was living in Germany. A section of thinkers also ponder that Emerson’s aunt Mary Moody Emerson has gifted to him various Indian Religious Manuscripts like The Bhagavad Gita, The Upanishads and the Vedanta. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, in his book “New Age Religion and Western Culture” deals fruitfully with Emerson’s stance on Oriental religion, mythology and philosophy. He writes:

“Buddhism remained alien to him, as too many of his contemporaries, and the same goes for Taoism. Confucianism, by contrast, was admired by Emerson for its ethical concern and common sense. But his deepest appreciation was for Hinduism, which he perceived (partly under the influence of the reform-Hinduism of Rammohun Roy’s Brahma Samaj, which had fascinated European and American Unitarians since the early 19th century) largely in terms of Advaita Vedanta” <sup>[13]</sup>.

Emerson had his mind fixed on divinity; the religion offered universally, he neglected any observance and ritual of Hinduism. Loyalty of Emerson towards Indian religion and philosophy is visible in many of his works and in particular poems like “Brahma”, “Hematreya” and “Maya”. “Brahma” (1857) is a poem in which he clearly supplicates the Hindu highest ranking Lord Brahma, the God of formation along with the other two attached terms Brahman (“the essence”, or "soul," of the universe) and Brahmin (the Hindu priests or clergy). The poem is a mixture of philosophies and ideas from “Katha-Upanishads”, “Maitri Upanishads” and the spiritual/ religious knowledge of the Bhagavad Gita, in accordance to which, human dies but soul exists even after the death of material body. There is a great connect between the creator (who Created) and the creation (the world), which could be clearly seen in the verses of this poem. One can clearly predict the mind set of Emerson which depicts that the greatest path to make the human immortal soul is by the understanding of real sense of Brahma. Ralph Waldo Emerson captures the content and context of “Hematreya” (1846) from “Vishnu Purana”, which is an old and sacred Vedantic mythological scripture. In “Hematreya”, Emerson skilfully represents the comparison amongst the human mortality and the earth which is immortal. “Hematreya” is in fact presenting ‘Maitreya’, a chief character from “Vishnu Purana” which is busy talking with God Vishnu about the sturdy King who has pride of the Earth and their incomprehension about their death. The same theme has been taken in Emerson’s poem where Earth proves her dominance upon the ignorant mankind.

“Where are these men? Asleep beneath their grounds:  
And strangers, fond as they, their furrows plough.  
Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys  
Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;  
who steer the plough, but cannot steer their feet  
Clear of the grave. [Hamatreya: Lines 11-16]”<sup>[14]</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson has not skilfully used Indian themes only in his poems but his essays are also full of richness with Indian flavours. In his most well recognized essay “The Over-Soul” (1941), Ralph Waldo Emerson talks about the godly human soul which is immortal, an unshakable spirit that can be only recognized by practicing virtuous actions and spiritual exercises. Ralph Waldo Emerson after referring and going through Bhagavad Gita and Indian philosophy was highly influenced by the idea of eternal soul. Emerson’s poem “Unity” was brought as the epigraph of the essay. Many of the thinkers believe that Ralph Waldo Emerson began losing faith in his own religious beliefs after the death of his own near and dear ones: at the age of nineteen his first wife died which was shock for him, when he attained the age of twenty nine his death of his brother due to scarlet fever. Emerson belonged to highly religious family and background but his interest and attachment towards his own religion began to lose after facing so many tragedies in his own family. Circumstances were such that he became restless and started reading Indian religious books and took keen interest in the Indian philosophy as well Hindu religion for peace of mind.

Emerson began his bookish association with the wisdom of Asia during college days. Though his acquaintance with the writing of the East did not develop into intimacy until after Melville had inhaled the strong breezes of Sumatra Emerson was almost the high priest of Orientalism in America by the time he published “Brahma” in the Atlantic Monthly in 1857. It will not be out of place here to cite the poem ‘Brahma’ verbatim here:

#### **“BRAHMA**

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

Far or forget to me is near;  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanished gods to me appear:  
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out:  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sing.

The strong god pine for my abode,  
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;  
But thou, meek lover of the god!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven” <sup>[15]</sup>.

The ideas of this poem are weaved around a Shaloka in the Bhagwad- Gita and mantra in Katha Upanishad. Both these Shaloka and the mantra means: “If the slayer thinks I slay, If the slain things I am slain, than both of them do not know well, the soul does not slay, nor is it slain.” The ending of the poem speaks of immortality interests of Indian philosophy. Several more examples can be cited from this poetry and prose as a proof of this soul having been merged with the Oriental Thought.

### **Conclusion:**

people living in the west especially thinkers, poets and writers have realized that the western philosophy have intoxicated with the negative thoughts which are fixed towards personal gain and profits. Finally, the philosophers and poets showed the certain tilt towards the orient world and pushed the contemporaries towards spiritualism, which are most common practices of Indian society. So, it can be definitely said that the influence of Indian philosophy is not only limited in the horizons of spiritualism in the American society; the shift covers other dimensions too. For several decades Indian community is living in the American continent for their livelihoods. Therefore, the diversified country India one of its own kinds is delivering a huge amount in the native traditions and lifestyle of the American community. Indian practices like “Yoga”, which is not only physical workout but also mental workout has gained wide popularity in the American mainstream. It’s common and can be easily seen that Indian spiritual and yog guru’s organizing yogic camps in whole over the world these days. People throughout the world have acknowledged the importance of yoga in day to day life and have started practicing yoga for better mental and physical conditions. In accordance to “Yoga in American Studies <sup>[15]</sup>”, performed by “Yoga Journal and Yoga Alliance”, at present 36.7 million United States yoga performers and practitioners are there. (“In 2012 there were 20.4 millions”). It is acclaimed in the same report that in the next 12 months 34 percent Americans will start yoga practice. Thusly, one of the greatest world powers in every sphere is following the footsteps of the Indian society through its own native poets. American society is taking shelter under the poet for the spiritual quest. Regardless, it can be clearly seen that Indian philosophy, with clear points of Hinduism and Buddhism, are not just playing vital part in the creation and ideologies of the nineteenth century and twentieth century American writers and poets but also providing American society with eternal belief system. “Turtle Island’ owed credit to the Indian philosophy, religious practices, mythologies, heroes, epics(meta-narrative) and spiritual hymns from its initial stages till date. Finally, it reached on the top in late nineteenth century with the works of Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the start to the tradition, Walt Whitman nurtured the tradition and ultimately, it was T.S Eliot who changed the tradition into being universal.

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