Introduction

The ancient story of Samudra-manthan of the Hindu tradition has got a deep spiritual meaning for all humanity, especially in this modern age. During the past four hundred years, man has been doing, what the myth refers to us as, samudra-manthan, ‘churning the ocean’, through his scientific discoveries, technological inventions, industrial developments, and socio-economic programmes. Man ‘churns’ the ‘oceans’ of his life and experience, churns the whole nature, to obtain the ‘nectar’ of happy, joyous, and fulfilled life—a churning that has become intensified in the modern period.

The Ancient Myth and the Modern Reality

The vigorous churning of the ocean by the gods and the demons produced both poison and nectar, along with many other good and useful and attractive things in between, says the myth. The modern churning also, similarly, has produced beneficent and harmful things in abundance. When the beneficent things emerge, men rush towards them to possess them and to enjoy them. When harmful things emerge, all run away in fear and consternation. The gods and demons in the myth also behaved similarly. Among the beneficent and attractive things that came out, according to the myth, are Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and welfare, and Dhanvantari, the god of health and longevity, bringing with him the pot of nectar capable of conferring immortality on the churning participants. That led to competition, strife, and bitter war between the two groups, in the struggle to obtain the nectar for oneself and deprive the other group of it. The harmful thing that came out was the terrible poison called halāhala or kālakūṭa.

Everyone was frightened at its emergence; all fled from it, and there was panic all around.

This situation depicted in the myth is the situation created by modern man in real life in the modern world. Modern science, technology, industry, medicine, economics, politics and the arts—all these have churned out for modern man many beautiful, good, and useful products which have enhanced the joys of life. But the churning had produced poisons also—drug and dirty sensuality and crime explosions, nervous and psychic tensions and breakdowns, and above all, nuclear-bombs and the prospect of nuclear war of final doom of all civilization.

The fear, consternation, and panic depicted in the myth, at the emergence of the halāhala poison, is found depicted in real life today. And remedy for the same, depicted in the myth, has great significance and relevance for contemporary man and for his maladies as well. All these point out to the meaning ground of the ancient myth and the modern reality.
Resort to Shiva the Great Yogi

The myth says that, unable to face, much less overcome, the halāhala poison themselves, the gods and demons, accompanied by Brahmā the creator, approached Shiva to seek his help. Shiva is ever immersed in the consciousness of his infinite divine Self, which is the one Self in all. He is also, accordingly, endowed with compassion for all beings. These two qualities have made Him the God of Yoga and of all yogis, ever sought after by them.

Shiva Drinks the Poison and Saves the World

Shiva’s central abode, says the myth, is the high peak of Kailāsa in the Himalayas. There he lives, along with his wife Umā or Sāti, the Divine Mother of all, immersed in the bliss of His infinite Self. All resorted to Kailāsa and presented their sufferings and problems before Shiva. And Shiva was deeply moved by their distress; and he told His wife Umā (Shrimad Bhāgavatam VIII. 7.37–39, as narrated by the sage Shuka):

‘Seeing this suffering of the people, there arose compassion in the heart of Shiva, who is the friend of all beings and who experienced the grief of these people in Himself: And He spoke to his dear wife Sati:’

And so Shiva took the decision (ibid, Verse 41, second half):

‘Therefore I shall drink this poison, by which good may betide my people.’

And Shiva calmly drank that poison. And Shuka, the narrator, comments (ibid, verses 44 and 45):
‘That poison, the evil product of the waters, showed its energy also on Shiva, by leaving a blue mark on His throat: but that, verily, became a vibhūshanam, i.e. adornment, in the case of a sādhu, or good man (like Shiva).’

‘For the hearts of good people burn at the sufferings of the people at large: and that alone is, verily, the (true) worship of the Supreme Divine Person, who is the Self of all.’

Compassion, dedication, and service are the ways to worship God, who is not a far-away extra-cosmic deity, according to Vedānta, but the one Self in all beings. And Shiva demonstrated, by his spontaneous service of the suffering people, this truth about the proper mode of the worship of the Divine.

So Shiva drank the terrible poison and saved the world. But that powerful poison was an insignificant thing compared to Shiva, the God ever aware of His infinite nature and ever immersed in it. So the poison could not do the least harm to Him, except to leave a blue mark on His throat; and from that day, Shiva got a new name, Nilakantha, the blue throated. Such a mark, instead of becoming, as in the case of all ordinary people, a mark of blemish or ugliness, became a mark of vibhūshana, adornment or beauty, in the case of one like Shiva, says the verse. It added, to His already existing adorable qualities and names, another adorable quality and name.

*Shiva of the Myth and Modern Man*

That is the story of the samudra-manthan myth and Shiva’s role in it. But what is that to us, and especially to the people of the modern scientific age? True modern man has his intractable problems, which are like the halāhala poison generated during the samudra-manthan; apart from the fear of an impending nuclear war, there are the endemic fears of psychic and nervous breakdowns and drug and crime and dirty sensual pleasure explosions, within the society. What can Shiva of the myth, living far away in the mount Kailāsa in Tibet, now under Communist China do to alleviate these sufferings of modern man? That is a legitimate question.

The Shiva of the myth is only a symbol of the real Shiva, who is not far away in Tibet, but is close to every one of us, being our Ātman, the One Infinite Self in all. Our body has the energy; to digest the food we take; and that gives us physical energy; when that digestion fails, or becomes weak, that food becomes toxic and generates poison in the body. So we strengthen our body through nourishing food and exercise and apply anti-toxins also to de-toxify the body to regain health. Our mind, similarly, has the energy to digest the knowledge we acquire, and that gives us efficiency in life and work.

But we are not able to digest many of our experiences; they become knots and complexes in the psyche, become toxic to the psychic system, and eventually produce nervous and psychic breakdowns, or loss of control over gushing organic cravings and impulses to drug crime and dirty sensual explosion.
**Vedānta as the Science of Human Energy Resources**

How we are to handle this kind of psychic toxins? The energy of these toxins cannot be neutralized either by our physical energies produced by diet and nutrition or by the mental energies produced by intellectual knowledge. Suppose we could have with us ‘anti-toxins’ to deal with them, and to eliminate them, as and when they arise, as in the case of our physical toxins. What beautiful spiritual health humanity will then have, to match and over-match man’s physical health and well-being! Can we not expect our versatile physical sciences to help us with such spiritual anti-toxins also? The answer, even from many scientists, apart from intelligent laymen, is an emphatic ‘no’. ‘Science can denature plutonium, but it cannot denature evil in the heart of man’, says Einstein emphatically. The only way left is to turn to science of religion, the science of the inner nature of the man, as expounded in Vedānta and Yoga. It is when we ask this question, seriously and earnestly that we become capable to respond to the great truth about Shiva of the symbolic myth. That Truth is that man is essentially that ever free, ever-pure, and ever luminous Shiva:

\[ 	ext{िचदानन्दरूपः िशवोऽहम् ि श व ो ऽ ह म्} \]

‘I am Shiva, of the nature of Pure Consciousness and Bliss,’ as sung by Shankaracharya. Man is essentially divine, says Vivekananda, conveying the modern man the central truth of all Vedānta. This Truth is lying hidden in all men, like butter in milk, says Upanishad and needs churning to bring it out in a manifest form. The Amrta-binding Upanishad majestically declares (verse 20)

\[ \text{घृतिमव पयिस िनगूढं भूते भूते वसित िवज्ञानम्} \]
\[ \text{मनसा मन्थन भूतेन, सनातनं मन्थियत᳞ं मनसा मन्थानभूतेन} \]

‘Like the butter hidden in milk, Pure Consciousness resides in every being. That must be brought out by constant churning by the churning rod of the mind.

If samudra-manthan, or churning of the of the ocean, includes this churning of one’s life and experience also, to realize his truth of the Shiva nature of man, then the churning of external nature through physical science and technology will pose no serious danger to man, even if it produces halāhala and other poisons; for man’s Shiva nature, now awakened, will digest all such poisons.

So the myth points out to man, firstly, the truth of his inalienable Shiva nature, and secondly, his need to awaken himself to this truth, and thirdly, nature has given man the organic capacity to achieve this and be free.