THE CONCEPT OF MĀYĀ

The present paper intends to do an analysis of the concept of māyā in order to understand its precise meaning and the specific role the Advaita Vedānta thinkers wanted it to play, so that it can be evaluated how far it has been able to fulfill or is even capable fulfilling the function(s) for which it was resorted to.

Cosmological connotation of māyā :

In the history of philosophical thought of Indian origin this term has been used in two distinct senses and therefore before we evaluate the role it is required to play in the Advaita Vedānta it is necessary to determine in which sense or senses it has been employed in it. The term māyā occurs right in the Ṛgveda (x. 54.2) where it stands for wondrous (perhaps magical also) power to assume diverse forms. In a similar, though not the same, sense it has been used in the Śvetāśvatara upaniṣad (iv.10) and the Gītā where the application of this wondrous power is extended from individual appearances to the cosmic appearance, adding the idea of creativity to it. This can be named as the cosmological connotation of the concept of māyā.

Another use of the word ' māyā ' :

The word ' Māyā ' is also used in another sense and in this use the sense of ignorance is attached to this concept. In this sense it means an antithesis or obscuration of knowledge (vidyā). In the upaniṣads the term avidyā was used to express this meaning and the term māyā had only a cosmological connotation, but in Śankara, perhaps under the influence of Buddhism and Gauḍapāda who explained the cosmic multiplicity in terms of illusion and mental deceit, the meanings of these two terms got fused and they were used almost interchangeably. The basis for this identification seems to be an intermingling of two distinct but vague upaniṣadic notions that the multiplicity of the world is a consequence of avidyā and that world is a product of māyā (creative power of the Lord).

It must, however, be made clear that in Vedāntic thought there are two distinct traditions which can be named as absolutistic and realistic. The realistic tradition centres round statements like, ' Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma ' and the absolutistic round, ' Neha nānāsti Kiñcana '. In the realistic tradition the term māyā was used only in its consmological connotation and it did not in any way imply the non-reality or falsity of the world. And when this term acquired an illusionistic meaning in the rival tradition the culmination of which was reached in the Ajātivāda of Gauḍapāda, it was soon replaced here by the term ' lila '.

Key role of māyā :

Having decided upon the meaning of the term māyā as used in Advaita Vedānta, we may now investigate what precisely was the role assigned to it which was responsible for the continuous adherence to it inspite of heavy odds by all the advaitic thinkers without exception, since it alone was thought to be capable of playing that role. The concept of māyā has been employed only by the system of Advaita Vedānta as an ontological device to explain the multiplicity and mutations of the world of experience. Since this school started with the presupposition that the Real is the Changeless One (Brahman), it had to face the problem of explaining the experienced changing manifold (Jagat). It could not afford to keep its eyes closed to the verdict of experience also supported by the scriptures, nor did it want to give up its presupposition, because it was regarded as based on the scriptures. In order to resolve this conflict, the concept of māyā was brought in as a link to relate the changeless one to the changing manifold. The other systems did not face this problem because for them reality was amenable to change and multiplicity. From this it clearly follows that the chief role to be played by māyā was to relate the changeless one to the changing manifold.

Postulation of māyā :

It is interesting to see how the concept of māyā has been introduced in this system through the process of Postulation (arthāpatti). Arthāpatti, or polstulation, is that mode of cognition in which a phenomenon (artha) is assumed or postulated

(āpatti) to explain another phenomenon which is otherwise unexplainable. It is a sort of necessary hypothesis. That is to say, when a known phenomenon cannot be accounted for without another phenomenon, we have to assume or postulate the latter. So it is that process in which knowledge of the phenomenon to be explained leads to the knowledge of the phenomenon that explains it.

In the present case, we experience a world of change and multiplicity which demands to be accounted for. As the Real (Brahman) being changeless and non-dual cannot account for it, it has to be accounted for by some term ' other than ' (vyatirikta or vilaksana) Brahman and that is presumed to be māyā. Since according to the basic position of this system, one immutable (Brahman) is the sole existence, māyā cannot be regarded as another existence, second to Brahman. That is why it has been described as an explanation of the cosmic appearance, which has only an epistemic and no ontological status. It is therefore said to have bhāva and no sattā. Rāmadāsa, a Marathi philosopher-saint, has very aptly put this point in Dasabodha (7.3.4.). I shall paraphrase what Ramadasa has said in modern idiom :

He writes that we are given an equation containing a term X and are asked to determine the value of x. We do so by adding 1 to both sides of the equation. Since 1 is an extraneous element conjectured just to solve the problem, it was superimposed in the beginning and eliminated at the end. In the same way, māyā is an imagined phenomenon brought in to resolve the paradox and the moment it has served its purpose it has to be discarded. The definition of māyā unanimously accepted by all the Advaitic thinkers, viz., Anādi bhāvarūpe sati jñānena nivartavyam, clearly brings out these two features of māyā that it is bhāvarūpa (positive) and nivartanīya (removable).

Does māyā fit in to the Advaitic Conceptual framework ?

In order to evaluate the adequacy of māyā in performing the role assigned to it, it should be seen how it fits in to the advaitic conceptual framework in so far as the properties of bhāvarūpatva and nivartaniyatva, (through which alone it performs its task), can be assigned to it under advaitic logic.

The Advaitic logic starts with two basic values, viz., Sat and Asat. Sat is defined as that which is never sublated (abādhita). Asat is defined as that which is never in existence (atyantābhāvarūpa). Māyā, which has the properties of bhāvarūptva and nivartaniyatva, has to be accounted for in terms of Sat or Asat or their derivations. It cannot be regarded as either Sat or Asat as in that case it cannot have the required properties. Nor can it be regarded as Sat and Asat (Sadasat) simultaneously since where they are treated as contraries or contradictories they cannot co-exist. So they introduce a third value sadasat vilakṣana and regard māyā as neither Sat nor Asat (Sadasadvilakṣana).

Sadasadvilakṣana is a conjunction of Sadvilakṣana and Asadvilakṣana. Since Sadvilakṣana and Asadvilakṣana are derived from Sat and Asat, the properties of the former are to be traced to the later. The relation between Sat and Sadvilakṣana, or Asat and Asadvilakṣana can be either contrary or contradictory. If they are treated as contradictories then the properties of Sadvilakṣana and Asadvilakṣana can be negatively deduced from the properties of Sat and Asat, but if they are treated as contraries then it cannot be done so because in such a case it can only be said what they *are not* but what they *are* cannot be asserted.

If Sat and Sadvilkṣana or Asat and Asadvilkṣana are treated as contradictories, then Sadasadvilakṣana will be the contradictory of both Sat and Asat. If māyā is defined as Sadasadvilakṣana then the required properties of māyā, viz., bhāvarupatva and nivartaniyatva, have to be present in Sadasādvilakṣanatva, which in other words, means in either of its constituents. So far as the property of nivartaniyatva is concerned, it can be derived from Sat. Since Sat has the property of abādhitatva, its contradictory will have bādhitatva or nivartaniyatva. But the difficulty comes in deriving the property of bhāvarupatva. The constituent Sadvilakṣana cannot imply it as it is the opposite of Sat, the only principle of bhāvarupatva. Asadvilakṣana can, of course, do so because Asat being abhāvarupa its contradictory will be bhāvarupa but since it is in conjunction with Sadvilakṣana which negates bhāvarupatva, its conjunct Asadvilakṣana cannot do so. In fact, all bhāvarupatva has to be decduced from Sat only, Asat being abhāvarupa. That would mean Sadasadvilakṣana has to be

positively related to Sat but it cannot be done so as one of its constituent, viz., Sadvilakṣana is the contraditory of Sat.

In other words, māyā has been introduced in this system to account for the existence of multiplicity and mutability in this world. In order that māyā can do so, it itself should have an existence of some sort, otherwise a non-existent entity would not be able to explain an existent entity. To bestow upon it this capacity would mean to relate it to Brahman but the crux of the whole problem is how to relate it to Brahman without vitiating the nature of the latter. Therefore, the attempt to bring in māyā to explain multiplicity and mutability of empirical existences does not appear to be satisfactory.

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