

MĀYĀ AND BRAHMA : THE ŚĀṆKAR PERSPECTIVE

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Indian philosophy is like a mighty ocean and the different philosophical systems, its tributaries, having separate existence, but finally merging with the mighty dream. The foremost among them is the Advaita discipline of Śāṅkarācārya, a discipline which has to be either absorbed or attacked, if any one wants to take philosophy further.

The basic trend of Indian philosophy is to speculate on the three concepts namely the Individual soul, the World and the Lord. In a way this is also 'trika' except for the difference lying only in, the concept of the world here, instead of 'Pāśa'. On these three principles only Ācārya founded his theory of the Advaita. In other words, according to Ācārya Brahman is eternally present, and except for some difference the individual soul is nothing but Brahman or Śiva, and the world or jagat itself means 'that which goes' (gacchati iti jagat) i.e. the substratum of the transient. Naturally the world is perishable and has only temporal existence. Qualitatively the individual Soul and Brahman are alike. This is the evidence enough for the existence of Brahman i.e. the Advaita or non-duality. While founding his theory of the Advaita, Ācārya modified the theory of the Ajātivāda i.e. non-production, as put forward by Gauḍapādācārya. Gauḍapādācārya denied the existence of the world by declaring that all this duality is due to Māyā only, and Advaita is the ultimate reality.¹ He firmly believed that the individual Soul is neither born nor produced.² Gauḍapādācārya was Śāṅkarācārya's 'Parātpara Guru'. Govindayati was Ācārya's spiritual guide, whose writings are not available today. Gauḍapādācārya's kārikās on the Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad are known as 'Gauḍapādākārikā' a tract on the doctrine of Ajātivāda. According to him whatever is visible is futile and is dismissed as

dream by the rational thinkers.³ This detailed sketch of the background will enable us to understand how and why Ācārya arrived at the theory of Advaita. The contradiction implied in Gauḍapādācārya's theory that the visible world is non-existent is only apparent. Significantly enough Gauḍapādācārya's use of the word 'Paramārthataḥ' nullifies this apparent contradiction.⁴

A glimpse into the life of Śāṅkarācārya reveals to us that he spent all of his life for the well-being of the society. A doctrine such as the Advaita, based on personal experience may be difficult to live, but, it must at least be approved and accepted by the society. It seems that Ācārya has simplified the theory of Gauḍapādācārya for the benefit of common man. (Here the word common is used as the synonym for the Sanskrit word 'bāla' which means ignorant in a particular subject. The well-known critic Mr. Vāsudeośāstri Abhyankar declared in his preface to '*Siddhāntabindu*' that Gauḍapādācārya has established not only Ajātivāda, but that Māyāvāda also originates from him.⁵ It is worth examining how far Ācārya who was a real Brahmanavadin but labelled as Māyāvādin, made use of Māyā. To consider the two concepts pregnant with meaning Brahman and Māyā in one research paper is a challenge. A host of questions arise in our mind. Are Māyā and Brahman related to each-other? If so, what is the nature of their existence? Do they exist only on the ontological level? Can it be understood through rational thinking? One may say that Brahman exists on ontological level and Māyā can be experienced in day-today life. Others believe that Brahman is either with attributes or without attributes and Māyā, which is related to the world, has to have attributes. Śaiva system provides another perspective on the relation between Māyā and Brahman.

According to them Brahman is the possessor of energy and Māyā is the energy itself. Another possibility is that Brahman is the end and Māyā is the means to that end. The last, but not the least important view is that of Śāṅkarācārya to whom Māyā and Brahman are the foundation of threefold existence. Keeping all these things in mind, I believe that the challenge is worth accepting. Ācārya's Bhāṣya texts (commentaries) are the basis for this study, because there are violent disagreements among scholars with regard to the authenticity of the authorship of some *Prakarāṇa* texts and the *stotra* texts. There is no such difference of opinion in case of Ādi Śāṅkarācārya's bhāṣyas. This paper intends to explore concept of Māyā and Brahman as propounded by Ācārya.

Concept of Māyā

Māyā is that by which something is measured is the well-known definition of the term Māyā (*Mīyate anayā iti Māyā*). But words have many meanings and sometimes they are rather more important than the etymological ones. Same is the case with Māyā. The term Māyā has been used in different senses one hundred and fiftyfour times starting from Rgveda upto Āraṇyaks. Ācārya has used the term Māyā fifty times in his bhāṣyas. There is no intention to use this statistical data for drawing any conclusion, However, it is only on five occasions that he has made a serious attempt at defining the term Māyā. We will try to find out the reasons why he has used the same at other places.

The fundamental question is why it is necessary to presume the concept of Māyā. There are many theories regarding the theory of the universe. Physicists advocate the theory of evolution. Religious minded people who live with faith believe that the Lord has created the universe. Whereas a philosopher like Ācārya strongly asserts that the existence of the world itself is an illusion. According to him Brahman is the only reality. In order to reckon with the existence of the visible world Ācārya had to accept the concept of Māyā. Even before Ācārya, the first Vaidika literature has taken cognisance of the concept of Māyā, and later Gauḍapādācārya has also mentioned it. It is crystal clear that the concept of Māyā does not originate from Ācārya, as it is generally believed, but the credit of putting it in the proper perspective, certainly goes to him

The references to Māyā, in Ācārya's bhāṣyas, where he tries to define the same will be taken into consideration first. The emphasis is on thematic connections rather than the chronological order. This obviously calls for a change in order in which Ācārya has commented on the Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā and Brahmasūtras. The first definition of Māyā will be found in Brahmasūtrabhāṣya.⁶ Reflections on the idea that the cause of the world is not Prakṛti as upheld by the Sāṅkhyas, but Brahman and Brahman only, begins in B.S.I.4.1.1. In this connection the wellknown citation from Śvetāśvataropaniṣat 'Māyām tu Prakṛtiṃ Vidyāt'(Śve.IV.10) occurs in the third aphorism. Here Prakṛti means the unmanifested i.e. Avyakta. While explaining the word Māyā Ācārya comments that Māyā is unmanifested in a specific sense i.e. it is neither real nor unreal.⁷ According to Ācārya Prakṛti and Māyā are not synonyms. The word 'tattva' and 'anyattva' which mean 'sat' and 'asat' for Ācārya are used as technical terms

here. Whatever is omnipresent is 'sat' and that which is non-existent is 'asat' e.g. skyflower (kha-puṣpa). It follows that Māyā is neither 'sat' nor 'asat' i.e. 'tattva' and 'anyattva'. Prof. Ramamurti Sarma in his book on Śāṅkarācārya⁸ concurs with many critics who have misread Ācārya in their belief that the words Māyā, Prakṛti, Ajñāna, Pradhāna Avidyā, Ākāśa, Akṣara as synonyms.

Another definition of Māyā can be found in the Bhāṣya of Ācārya on G.K.IV.58. The attributes of Ātman are just like something created by Māyā. They are not there in principle. Ācārya deliberates 'is Māyā vastu? Not at all; Māyā can never be.⁹ The definition somewhat similar to this occurs in Śveta. I.9. Māyā is indescribable, because it is not 'vastu'¹⁰ - The term 'vastu' is very significant. The reason is that one of the successors of Ācārya - Sadānandayātrīndra, who belongs to the fifteenth cen.A.D. has explained the term 'vastu' as 'Eternal, Conscious; of the nature of Bliss, Everlasting and only one Brahman. All other entities are 'avastu'¹¹. Vedāntasāra, the 'Prakaraṇagrantha' of Sadānanda is based on the bhāṣyas of Ācārya. Ācārya's statement about Māyā becomes more clear, if the word 'vastu' is taken in this specific sense. The reference is that Māyā is something which does not exist as 'vastu'. The verb 'vidyate' is significant. It also means to experience. A statement similar in meaning is found in Kenopaniṣat, 'One, who says that he knows, has knowledge only on the theoretical plane, and one, who says that he does not know, is capable of experience.¹² Taking this specific meaning of the root 'vid' into consideration we may infer that perhaps Ācārya wanted to suggest that Māyā cannot be experienced directly.

The third definition of Māyā can be found in the Praśnopaniṣat. Ācārya does not explicitly talk about the twofold power of Māyā viz. covering (āvaraṇa) and disclosing (vikṣepa), but it is implied in this definition. Māyā means that which reveals itself differently and behaves differently, whose conduct is of illusory nature.¹³ The use of the word 'eva' is significant here, which suggests that at any cost Māyā does not reveal its own nature, not only this but, it reveals itself in the reverse form and consequently the individual soul gets involved in duality. The epithet 'mithyācārarūpā' clearly reflects its illusory nature.

In the commentary on G. K. IV. 59 Ācārya further explains the term Māyā. The analogy of the illusory seed and its illusory sprouting used by Ācārya can be accepted for the sake of argument. In the same way the soul is not subject

to the law of birth and decay.¹⁴ The peculiarity of this definition lies in the fact that Ācārya felt the need to use analogy in order to explain the concept of Māyā.

The last definition is found in Sāmbandhabhāṣya of Śvetāsvataraṇiṣat. It is stated that the difference between the entities is due to Māyā in the same way in which the reflection of the sun in the water.¹⁵ It is significant that in both the places Ācārya takes the help of analogy.

Except for these five definitions there is no further attempt of defining Māyā, however, some words used by Ācārya indirectly refer to Māyā. This enables us to draw certain inferences. The first of these references will be found in B. S. I. 3.5.19. The Lord is only one, omniscient and eternal like the anvil, the plurality is only due to Avidyā, in the same way in which magic helps the magician appear in different forms.¹⁶ A similar reference is found in Bhagavad Gītābhāṣya - VI.35, where it is clearly stated that all this duality is superimposed on that One (who is without the second, conscious, Blissful, Supreme Being.¹⁷ While commenting on the fourth śloka of the fifteenth chapter of Bhagavad Gītā, Ācārya has pointed out the peculiar nature of Māyā in two words. 'Who is He? The Lord is like the magician, who, with the help of his magic creates an illusory world, that is Māyā, and Māyā is old (purāṇī) and has been experienced over years (cirantani)'.¹⁸

The word 'cirantani' is popularly mistaken to mean eternal (everlasting), however, the etymological meaning stands in contradiction with the popular meaning. The word does not preclude the possibility of the end, but it implies that the end may come in distant future. Probably Ācārya wanted to suggest that the origin of Māyā cannot be traced, but coming out of Māyā is possible only when one experiences Brahman. While commenting on the sixteenth śloka of the same chapter Ācārya describes the various features of Māyā, Māyā is enigmatic, deceiving, obliquely operating.¹⁹

In the commentary on the wellknown citation from Śvetā 'Māyām tu Prakṛtiṃ vidyāt' (śvetā - IV.10) Ācārya finds out the difference between the apparently synonymous concepts viz. Māyā and Prakṛti. He proclaims there that the superimposition of the snake on the rope is just one of the many superimpositions that pervade the world.

While commenting Ācārya does not forget his role of the commentator. This may be one of the reasons why Ācārya's commentaries are treated as authentic. The third important point with regard to Māyā is the compromise that commentator makes with the text. When the text fails to justify Ācārya's view of Māyā he takes this position. In all there are seven references in Bhagavad Gītā where Ācārya proclaims that Māyā is equal to Prakṛti.²⁰ But in Bhabavad Gītā where the word Prakṛti occurs (B. G. IX.8) Ācārya keeps the word as it is and does not try to equate it with Māyā. At some places he uses the epithets like 'Vaiṣṇavi' or 'Bhagavataḥ' before the word Māyā to show how Māyā is different from what it means to him.

The word Māyā occurs in seventeen different places within quotations. Hence future discussion is not needed.

So Ācārya puts forth his concept of Māyā in four ways. It is interesting that while defining Māyā, Ācārya seems to take a dubious position. So that we are at a loss to make any positive or negative statement about the nature of Māyā, and hence we are also compelled to say that Māyā is indescribable (anirvacanīya). While describing the salient features of Māyā, Ācārya states that the plurality of the world is due to Avidyā, like the jugglery of the jugglar: The explanation in Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya that duality caused by Māyā is itself an illusion can be directly linked up with Gauḍapādācārya's statement that this duality is there because of Māyā and the non-duality is Real.²² The use of the adjectives 'Vaiṣṇavi' and 'Bhagavataḥ' shows how skillfully Ācārya as a commentator has deliberated on the concept of Māyā. After having considered the concept of Māyā let us now examine the concept of Brahman.

Concept of Brahman

Brahman is the ultimate goal of Advaita Vedānta. The term itself implies expansion. Rejaneesha in his book 'Meghvīṇa barase dhāra' opines that Brahman is in neuter gender because it is neither feminine nor masculine.²³ There are about three hundred seventyfour references, to the term Brahman in the commentaries of Ācārya. For him the word Brahman has four different meanings. The first one is spell (mantra). It occurs in B. G. IV.32 - in this way various rituals evolved through the mouth of Brahman i.e. Veda etc.²⁴

The second meaning is Brahmin caste. Br. Up. believes "In the beginning there was Brahman."²⁵ Considering the superior position of Brahmins, Ācārya reflects the word Brahman to Brahmin.²⁶ No further discussion of the two meanings is essential.

The third meaning of the word Brahman is creator (Prajāpati). It is found in B. G. VIII.17. Taking this from the statement in B. G. that one day of Brahman is equal to one thousand yugas.²⁷ Ācārya asserts that Brahman means Prajāpati. All the three meanings given by Ācārya, the commentator, are logically derived.

The most important meaning of the word Brahman is the ultimate aim - Para Brahman. Prior to this Ācārya gives the option of Apra Brahman. With the help of these two concepts of Para and Apra Brahman the nature of Brahman is clearly revealed.

The amazing intelligence of Ācārya is reflected in the systematic reconstruction of his experience of Advaita achieved at the cost of the worldly pleasures. Ācārya acknowledges in his *Adhyāsabhāṣya*, preface to *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, that duality is natural (*saha-ja*). One who thinks carefully can easily understand it. The terms dark, fair in the statement such as, 'I am dark, I am fair', actually denote the complexion of the body and not of the soul. When one speaks in terms of 'I, me and mine', it is clear that he does not mean the body. In expressions like my pen, my book, my body the object is separated from the subject. It is quite obvious that the body is perishable. In practical life when we say that someone is dead we indirectly accept the fact that there is something other than the body and it is that which activates the body. That is Soul, which so naturally united with Brahman, but because of its embodiment appears to be dual in form. In his commentaries Ācārya is very clear about this view.

In B. S. I. 1.6.11 Ācārya Declares that Brahman can be known in two ways. One is endowed with names, forms and is subject to change and plurality, and the other is devoid all these qualities.²⁸ In Br. Up. there is a statement that Brahman is of two forms.²⁹ It is possible to describe Brahman which is omniscient, omnipotent, because of its dual form - visible - invisible, mortal - immortal., it emanates from the five elements and is bound by the law of cause and effect, with the result that it receives various impressions. Brahman becomes liable to all practical affairs due to the law of cause and effect. The same

Brahman when stripped of all these qualities becomes the object of revelation. Such Brahman is unborn, ageless, immortal, fearless, and beyond the capacity of language to understand and analyse it. Because of its non-duality one can only say what it is not. The word 'vāva' signifies that Brahman can exist only in two forms viz. 'Para' and 'apara'³⁰ on the basis of which Ācārya might have presumed two levels of existence - empirical and transcendental. Here one might question the validity of the idea that the world is perishable, if Brahman can be experienced on the empirical level. If it is so, then the world will be imperishable. In that case what will be the basis for Ācārya's absolute monism? I think Ācārya has satisfactory explanation for this dilemma. Ācārya exemplifies this with the help of an analogy. For the carpenter, who works with his tools, the awareness that he is the doer, brings unhappiness, whereas the loss of this awareness brings happiness. Similarly the soul caught in the net of duality becomes unhappy on account of the same awareness in both the states of dream and waking, but when it unites itself with Brahman in the state of deep sleep, it becomes happy.³¹ In other words unhappiness is the consequence of the awareness of the action which in turn is caused by dualism. It follows that Ācārya denies certainty to duality and consequently to the world. What remains is consciousness (Caitanya) only, which is manifested through the embodied soul (jīva). Ācārya proclaims this union of the soul and Brahman in B. S. I. 1.1.1. There he points out that Brahman is ever pure, awakened, liberated, omniscient, omnipotent. The word Brahman by its very root 'bruh' signifies that which is all pervading and hence not subject to the laws of the empirical world. The existence of the soul in every body endorses the existence of Brahman. Everyone can experience the presense of the soul, however, it is impossible to be a non-entity. Therefore, soul is Brahman.

In his commentary on the wellknown śloka of Kenopaniṣad, 'if you say - you know it'³³, Ācārya begins by considering the possibility of various forms of Brahman, since the word 'dabhram' (small) is used here. His speculations lead him to the conclusion that the act of naming inevitably leads to duality. Duality does not exist in Reality. A man cannot live without the act of naming as the world is full of diversity of forms. Diversity gives identity to entities which are otherwise in complete union. Ācārya has put the same systematically in his ideology. According to Ācārya Brahman is beyond the capacity of the five senses viz. the sense of hearing, touch, smell, taste and sight, to experience.

Curiously enough with the help of words only one can negate the diversity of forms made possible by words.³⁴ References like these help to establish Ācārya's concept of Brahman. He takes for granted two forms of Brahman, one of which is in the form of soul (jīva) on the empirical plane and the other on the transcendental level. Ācārya had firm faith in the existence of Brahman, therefore, he explicitly puts forth that Brahman helps every other thing come into being, whereas Brahman is not born of anything else.³⁵ It goes without saying that Brahman is self-sufficient.

Conclusion

The commentaries of Ācārya have no evidence for us to say that Māyā and Brahman are two separate concepts, completely independent of each other. They are certainly related to each other. According to Ācārya, Māyā is neither real nor unreal because it vanishes as soon as one experiences Brahman. Therefore, Māyā is indescribable - (anirvacanīyā). Ācārya was Kevala-Advaitin, still he himself has visualised two forms of Brahman - Supreme Being and lower Brahman. Lower Brahman is the effect (Kārya). The effect is subject to destruction. Accordingly the Kāryabrahman or lower Brahman merges with the Supreme Being. Ācārya has very brilliantly established the temporal existence of Māyā, and everlasting Brahman. It is worth noting that Ācārya probes deep down into the concept of Māyā, whereas he refrains from discussing Brahman in detail. The reason is that Māyā is the means to an end, i.e. Brahman. When the true nature of Māyā dawns on one's mind, the illusory nature of world becomes clear, leaving only Brahman behind. As previously mentioned, these two concepts hold true not only on the ontological level. Unless and until one experiences Brahman it remains a matter of reasoning only. The lower Brahman or Brahman having attributes can be known through symbol worship of Chāndogya Upaniṣad - VII 2.2 To VII 14.2. Ācārya explains it with the help of branch and moon maxim (śākhā-candra nyāya). It is crystal clear for Ācārya that Brahman is superior to Māyā. It seems that he does not accept the energy and possessor of energy relation (Śakti-Śaktimat sambandho) Eventually there is no alternative other than to accept the view that Māyā is the means and Brahman is the end. Though Māyā is the means it has no place in worship or meditation either for Ācārya. His only intention was to understand the nature of

Māyā. The realisation of the futility of Māyā is followed by the realisation of the futility of dualism. This culminates in the experience of Brahman, on the transcendental plane. Ācārya's speculations begin with the assumption that the knowledge of the thing is to know the abstract principle behind it. Chāndogya Upaniṣhad has already endorsed this view in the well-known analogy of the clay and the pottery made of the clay. Pots made of clay may be of different shapes and sizes and may be used for different purposes, but the clay is the common element in all of them³⁶ and this can be experienced.

It can hardly be doubted that Ācārya wants to establish Brahmvāda. His construction of the same is perfectly logical, however, people concentrate on Māyā only. They cannot accept whole-heartedly the existence of the soul, nevertheless, they do hesitate while denying it absolutely. Thus Brahmvāda recedes in the background unfortunately and Ācārya comes to be labelled as Māyāvādin.

NOTES

1. Gauḍapādākārikā - I. 17. *Ten Principal Upanads with Śāṅkarābhāṣya*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1978.
2. *ibid*, III.48 & IV.71.
3. *ibid*, II.1.
4. *ibid*, I.17.
5. *Siddhāntabindu* - Ed. by M. M. Vasudeośāstri Abhyankar. Introduction.
6. *Brahmasūtraśāṅkarābhāṣyam* - I.4.1.3. Ed. by J. L. Śāstri, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1980.
7. *ibid*, I.4.1.3..
8. *Śāṅkārācārya : Unake Māyāvāda tathā anya Siddhāntōṅkā ālocanātmaka adhyayana*, Dr. Sharma Ramamurti, Sahitya Bhandar, Subhash Bajar, Merath, 1964.
9. *G. K.* IV.58 (See Śāṅkara's commentary on it).
10. *Śve. U.* 1.9 (See Śāṅkara's commentary on it).

11. *Vedāntasāra* by Sadānanda, com. by Shriramasharana Tripathi, Chaukhamba Vidyabhavana, Varanasi, 1990, P. 13 - Adhyāropa.
12. *Kena U.* II.3
13. *Praśna U.* I.15 (see Śāṅkara's commentary on it).
14. *G. K.* IV.59 (see Śāṅkara's commentary on it).
15. *Sve. U.* Saṁbandhabhāṣya.
16. *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣyam* I.3.5.19.
17. *Bhagavad Gītā with Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, VI.35, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1981.
18. *ibid* XV.4
19. *ibid* XV.16
20. *ibid* IV.6, VII.14, VII.25, IX.10, XIII.19, XIII.29, and XIV.3
21. *ibid* IV.6, VII.4, VII.14, XIII.24, XIV.5, XV.1 & XV.16.
22. *G. K.* I.17.
23. *Megha Veena Barase Dhara*, Ācārya Rajneesh, Ed. by Sadhu Amruta Bodhisautva, 101, Timber Market, Pune - 2, 1976, p. 6.
24. *B. G.* IV.32 (see Śāṅkara's commentary on it).
25. *Bṛ. U.* I.4.11
26. *ibid* I.4.11 (see Śāṅkara's commentary on it).
27. *B. G.* VII.17
28. *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣyam* I.1.6.11
29. *Bṛ. U.* II.3.1.
30. *Bṛ. U.* II.3.1 (see Śāṅkara's Commentary on it).
31. *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣyam*, II.3.15.40.
32. *ibid* I.1.1.1.
33. *Kena U.* II.1
34. *ibid* II.1 (see Śāṅkara's Commentary on it).
35. *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣyam*, I.3.6.22.
36. *Chā. U.* IV.1-4.

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