



FROM ABSOLUTE UNITY TO QUALIFIED UNITY: PHILOSOPHICAL DIVERGENCES BETWEEN ŚANKARA'S ADVAITA AND RĀMĀNUJA'S VIŚIṢṬĀDVAITA

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Abstract

This article explores the philosophical divergences between Śaṅkara's *Advaita Vedānta* and Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, two of the most influential schools of Indian philosophy rooted in the *Prasthānatraya*—the *Upaniṣads*, *Brahmasūtra*, and *Bhagavadgītā*. Śaṅkara's *Advaita* upholds an uncompromising non-dualism in which *Brahman* alone is real, formless, and without attributes, while the phenomenal world is a superimposition caused by *Māyā*. Liberation (*Mokṣa*) is achieved through *jñāna*—the realization of the identity between the individual self (*Ātman*) and *Brahman*. In contrast, Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita* advances a qualified non-dualism wherein *Brahman* (identified with Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa) possesses infinite auspicious attributes and includes the souls (*cit*) and matter (*acit*) as inseparable modes of its reality. Liberation, for Rāmānuja, is not identity with God but eternal communion with Him through *bhakti* (devotion) and *prapatti* (surrender). Thus, the transition from Śaṅkara's absolute unity to Rāmānuja's qualified unity reflects a philosophical movement from abstract monism toward theistic realism, emphasizing personal devotion over metaphysical abstraction.

Keywords:

Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Brahman, Māyā, Jīva, Mokṣa, Bhakti, Prasthānatraya, Non-dualism, Theism, Indian philosophy.

Introduction

There are a number of Vedantic schools based on the *Prasthānatraya*. The important are five, viz., the Monism or Advaita of Śrī Sankara, Qualified monism or Viśiṣṭādvaita of Sri Rāmānuja, Dualism or Dvaita of Sri Madhva, Dualistic monism or Dvaitādvaita of Sri Nimbārka, and Pure nondualism or Śuddhādvaita of Śrī Vallabha. Among these five schools, the first three are the major schools. Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva established their own philosophies by interpreting the Triple basic texts of Vedānta viz, *Upaniṣads*, *Brahmasūtra* and *Bhagavadgītā* composed separate. Among these the monistic approach of Śrī Śaṅkara possesses both logical and chronological priority.

Advaita of Śrī Śankara

Śrī Śankara elaborated and expounded the monistic principles of the Upaniṣads in a logical framework. In interpreting the vedantic texts as a consistent system of spiritual non-dualism capable of facing logical objections, Śankara was led to recognize two directions within the Vedantic texts. One, clearly and directly affirmed the central truth of Vedānta, the other spoke of a lower and relative truth relevant to those still engaged in religious worship, meditation or action. Śankara's restoration of ancient Vedānta was not, as a matter of fact, a mere revival or going back. It was a profoundly original reinterpretation. Śankara seized upon one aspect of the Upaniṣads' many-sided and varied teachings, and developed it uncompromisingly in the light of the logical implications of Advaita and the spiritual ethos of 'Nivṛttidharma'¹. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes, "It is impossible to read Śankara's writings, packed as they are with serious and subtle thinking, without being conscious that one is in contact with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality. His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither before nor an after, whether we agree or not, the penetrating light of his mind never leaves us where we were."²

His great achievement in the field of speculation is the Advaita system which he developed by means of commentaries on the ancient texts. He found it the best way to reconcile contemporary standards of knowledge and belief with the ancient texts and tradition. He felt impelled to attempt the spiritual direction of his age by formulating a philosophy and religion which could satisfy the ethical and spiritual needs of the people.

The theists were veiling the truth in a mist of sentiment. They were indifferent to the practical concerns of life. The Mīmāṃsaka emphasis on karma developed ritualism devoid of spirit. For Śankara, the Advaita philosophy alone could do justice to the truth of the conflicting creeds. He wrote all his works with the one purpose of helping the individual to the realization of the identity of his soul with Brahman. In his wanderings throughout India, he came across many faces of worship and accepted all those which had in them the power to elevate man and refine his life. He composed hymns of unmistakable grandeur addressed to the different Gods of popular Hinduism. While reviving the popular religion he also purified it.

According to Advaita, the final goal of human life is Mokṣa or liberation. It is called *paramapuruṣārtha*, the highest of the ends designed by human beings. The mortal who attains to that state becomes immortal. The aspirant of liberation should clean his mind through the study of the scriptures and through the practice of instructed lessons. The spiritual practice in Advaita is called *Sādhana*. It consists of *Viveka* (discrimination), *Vairagya* (renunciation), *Śamādiśadkasampatti* (group of six virtues), and *Mumukṣutva* (desire for liberation). *Viveka* is the knowledge that Brahman alone is real and the infinite, and this world is transient. This knowledge naturally produces *Vairagya* towards the world. The six virtues are *Śama* (peace of mind), *Dama* (Control of senses), *Uparati* (withdrawal of the mind from sense objects), *Titikṣa* (forbearance), *Śraddha* (faith) and *Samādhāna* (concentration of mind). Practice of these six virtues produces *Mumukṣutvam*, the desire for liberation. Then the aspirant earns the authority to know Brahman.

According to the Upaniṣads, Brahman alone existed before creation. It is the absolute reality. The Chāndogya Upaniṣad says, "In the beginning, My dear, this was being alone, one only without a second."³ "All this indeed is Brahman."⁴ "There is no plurality whatever here. He goes from death to death, who sees in it, as it were, diversity."⁵

¹ Pande GC, Life and thought of Sankaracharya, Motilal Banarsidas Publ., Delhi, 1994, P-174

² Radhakrishnan S.Dr., Indian Philosophy, Vol-2, Oxford University press, Delhi, 1998, PP-446-47

³ "Sadeva soumyedamagrasit ekamevadvitiyam Chandogyopanishad, 6-2-1.

⁴ Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma" Ibid, 3-14-1

⁵ "Neha Nanasti Kincana", Brhadaranyaka upanishad, 4-4 19

In Advaita Vedanta Brahman is conceived as absolutely real. It defines Brahman in terms of *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* or essential nature and *Taṭasthalakṣaṇa* or qualification per accidents. The *Svarūpalakṣaṇa* is “*Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma*”⁶, which means Brahman is existence, consciousness and bliss. The *Taṭasthalakṣaṇa* is “From where all the creation happens, by whom all the created are sustaining, in which all these are dissolving. that is Brahman.”⁷ Brahman, the reality, is pure non-dual self, devoid of all internal differentiations and distinctions of whatever sort. It is devoid of all external relations.

The Advaita school of philosophy explains how this world of duality has evolved out of the non-dual reality. The world of duality is generally divided to two, viz, the Seer and the Seen. Both these again are divided into countless objects of creation and the innumerable living beings. It is avidya that causes the one Brahman to appear as many Jivās, and it is Māya that causes the world of phenomena. Māya is avidya at the cosmic level. It is the power of Brahman itself. This *avidya* or *ajñāna* is neither real nor unreal nor even real-unreal; it is beyond any definition. Hence, it is termed *anirvacanīya* or indefinable. This ignorance comprises three qualities called Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. The ignorance is known as opposed to knowledge and positive (*Jñānavirodhi Bhāvarūpa*)

The ignorance has two powers. They are *Āvaraṇa* (concealment) and *Vikṣepa* (projection). The concealing power conceals the real nature of Brahman. Its projection power projects the world appearance in the same. Dr. M. Hiriyanna observes, “That is to say, if Māya explains the world, we have to seek for the explanation of Maya itself beyond it. It may be unique in that it is neither real nor unreal, *sadasadvilakṣaṇa*, but it is not ultimate, and that entity which explains spirit”⁸

Brahman the pure consciousness, associated with Māya, is called Īśvara. Īśvara is the unmanifested cause of the world or *Avyaktakāraṇa* and inter-controller of it *Antaryāmin*. He is *Sarvajña* or all knowing, all powerful or *Sarveśvara*, and all-controller or *Sarvaniyanta*. According to Dr. M. Hiriyanna, “The qualified Brahman, if personified, becomes the God or Īśvara of Advaita. Like it, God also may be represented as the cosmic parallel to the finite individual self, the distinction between them being entirely one of adjuncts. The consequence of this distinction is that God remains untouched by any of the evil consequences of association with a finite adjunct, such as narrow love and hate. It is attachment which implies preferences and exclusions but God being equally attached to all, is really detached.”⁹

All the living beings in the state of bondage and undergoing transmigration are called Jīvas. According to Vedanta, the Jiva is a reflection of the pure consciousness in the internal organ or *Antahkaraṇa* or the intellect, the *Buddhi*. Jiva has three aspects. They are *viśva*, *taijasa*, and *prājña*. The jīva has five sheaths and three states of consciousness. The sheaths are, *Annamaya kośa*, *Prāṇamayakośa*, *Manomaya kośa*, *Vijñānamaya kośa* and *Ānandamaya kośa*. The states of consciousness are *Jāgrat*, *Svapna*, and *Suṣupti*. The bondage of jīva is caused by ignorance. Jīva can get liberation through *Jñāna* - the real knowledge.

According to Vedanta the Jagat or world is a superimposition or *adhyāsa* on Brahman. *Adhyāsa* is also called *Adhyāropa*. According to Śankara, the *adhyāsa* is, the superimposition of the nature of recollection of the appearance of which have seen before.”¹⁰ There are fourteen worlds beginning with Bhu. The bodies of the beings inhabit them. The five basic elements, viz, *Akāśa* (ether), *Vāyu* (air), *Agni* (fire), *Ap* (water), *Ṗṛthvi* (earth) are their causes. Śankara refers to three orders of being. They are *Prātibhāsika* (illusory), *Vyāvahārika* (empirical) and *Pāramarthika* (transcendental). Śankara's contention is that the everyday experience of the world is *Vyāvahārika*. Through right means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), logic (*yukti*) and experience (*anubhava*) the world which is being perceived in Brahman through ignorance is sublated and its substratum or *adhiṣṭāna*, Brahman, is seen as it is. This method is called de-superimposition or *apavāda*. According to

⁶ .Taitireeya upanisad, 2-1-1.

⁷ "Yato va imani bhootani Jayante yena jatani jivanthi yat prayantyaabhisamvisanti Tat Vijijnasasva tat Brahmeti", Ibid. 3-1-1

⁸ Hiriyanna M. Dr., Essentials of Indian Philosophy, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1983.

⁹ Ibid, P-164

¹⁰ "Smṛti rupa paratra Purvadrstavaabhasah adhyasah", Sankaracarya. Brahmasutra Bhasya, Introduction

Siddhināthānanda, "The world seems real to the unthinking mind. It becomes inexplicable when subjected to searching analysis, It disappears when reality is experienced."¹¹

The state of freedom or liberation from all bonds created by ignorance or illusory power is called *Mokṣa*. It is characterized by bliss and cessation of rebirth. *Mukti*, *Kaivalya*, and *Nirvāṇa* are the alternative words to describe the state of liberation. According to Advaita, when man realizes the highest truth of the universal oneness, then he is in a state of liberation. Liberation is the negation of the limitedness determined by ego. It is unconditional and absolute. The Upaniṣad says, "Hear, oh, sons of immortal bliss, this is the divine beyond the phenomenal world."¹² "I know I am Brahman; I am the resplendent light beyond darkness. Knowing him one can cross the realm of death. There is no other way to become perfect."¹³

Viśiṣṭādvaita of Ramanuja

Like Sankara, Ramanuja was a great exponent of Vedānta. He was born in, Sri Perumbudur in the year CE 1027 Ramanuja wrote *Vedāntasāra*, *Vedārthasamgraha*, and *Vedāntadīpa* and composed commentaries on the Brahmasūtra and the Bhagavat Gīta. The learned among the Vaiṣṇavas gave their approval to Ramanuja's exposition of the Brahmasūtra. The commentary of Ramanuja is called the ŚrīBhāṣya. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes, "Their minds were driven to the same points and problems. Their methods were based on the same assumptions and yet their results show striking differences. Ramanuja trusts firmly to the religious instinct and sets forth a deeply religious view which reveals God to man through creation, through the theophanies, through the prophets, through the incarnations"¹⁴

The whole system of Ramanuja is based on the relation between God and the world of matter and souls. He recognizes three ultimate realities viz; God, soul, and matter. The last two are absolutely dependent on the first. Their relation is like the relation of the body to the soul. They are organically connected with God and are inseparable from Him, as inseparable as the attribute from the substance, technically. *Viśeṣana* from *Viśeṣya*. The three form one organism. They are a complex whole, an organic unity. Hence, Ramanuja's philosophy is called Viśiṣṭādvaita.

Viśiṣṭādvaita is a system of theism. Bhakti holds a higher place in it than Jñāna, which is dominant in Advaita. According to Ramanuja, Jñānayoga is only meditation on the nature of the soul, for the purpose of realizing that it is different from its physical sheath. But, Bhaktiyoga is a higher stage of meditation accompanied by love, on the nature of God, for the purpose of realizing the soul's relation to them. In Advaita one can attain liberation while in living. He who liberated while living called Jīvanmukta. But in Viśiṣṭādvaita Mokṣa comes only after death to one who has performed his Bhakti. It is the enjoyment of bliss with a superior body in the presence of God in Vaikuṇṭha.

Viśiṣṭādvaita has its philosophical origin from the Upaniṣads, Brahmasūtra, and Bhagavat Gīta. Ramanuja's work, *Vedāntasamgraha*, explains his philosophical positions, pointing out the basis for it in the Upaniṣads. Dr. M. Hiriyanna observes, "Thus the final Upaniṣadic teaching, according to Ramanuja is that, while Brahman, the soul and the physical world are all different and equally eternal, they are quite the same time inseparable. The point to be emphasized here, because it is often missed owing to the description of the doctrine as Viśiṣṭādvaita (commonly but erroneously rendered as qualified monism) is that the three entities are different, although they stand in a peculiarly close relation to one another."¹⁵

¹¹ Siddhi nadhananda Swami, Satyam Sivam Sundram, Sri Ramakṛṣṇa Advaitasram, Madras, 2000, P-158

¹² Smvantu visve amṛtasya putrah, Divyani dhamani paramastu", Svetasvataropamiśad, 2-5.

¹³ "Vedahametam puruṣam mahantam, Adityavarṇam tamasaḥparastat Tameva Veditvatimṛtyumeti nanya pantha vidyate ayanaya", Ibid, 3-8

¹⁴ Radhakrishnan S. Dr., Indian Philosophy, Vol 2 P-464

¹⁵ Hiriyanna M. Dr. EIP, P-178

According to Ramanuja, God or Brahman, is qualified and his theory is called qualified monism. Ramanuja formulates the relation so important in his system of inseparability or *aprthaksiddhi*, which obtains between substance and attribute. Sri Nirod Baran Chakrabarthi remarks, “The *aprthaksiddhi* is parallel but not identical with Nyāya – Vaiśeṣika *Samavāya*. The two agree in so far as the 'relation' they bring together is regarded as quite distinct and real, but while *Samavāya* is an external relation, inseparability is an inner relation. Ramanuja discards the relation of *Samavāya* as superfluous and views inseparability itself as the Svarupa of the two related things as inseparability theory.”¹⁶

Ramanuja's Brahman admits of internal difference between *cit* and *acit*, and is a knower. Ramanuja does not admit the possibility of the Advaitic Brahman being consciousness, non-subjective, un objective, without any distinction and attribute. According to Ramanuja such a Brahman or consciousness does not express the purport of the Sruti texts. It is not in conformity with our experience. In his ŚrīBhāṣya, Ramanuja rejects Sankara's maya or ajñāna for seven reasons, called *saptānupapathi*.¹⁷ He never does deny the ultimate reality of the world. To him the unity of the absolute does not exclude the world and its plurality from itself. The world is dependent on God as gold ornaments are on gold. Dependence and falsity are not identical. Ramanuja does not admit non-difference between Brahman and Jiva, as the infinite and the finite never can be identical to Ramanuja, Jiva is a part of Brahman. In liberation Jiva remains a part and does not become identical with Brahman. Ramanuja is an advocate of *Jnana – Karma Samuchayavāda* the theory of the combination of knowledge and action. He accepts *Karmajijñāsa*, or an enquiry into action as a pre-step for *Brahmajijñāsa*, an enquiry into Brahman.

In Viśiṣṭādvaita, liberating knowledge is of the form of prayer or *upāsanātmaka*. Dhyāna also is dedication and devotion. Ramanuja was a Bhaktivadin- an advocate of Bhakti as the most important means for liberation. An aspirant has to surrender himself completely to God who alone can grant ultimate release from sufferings. Ramanuja does not admit Jīvanmukti.

Conclusion

The divergence between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja marks a profound philosophical shift from absolute unity (Advaita) to qualified unity (Viśiṣṭādvaita). Śaṅkara's Brahman is pure, attribute less consciousness, beyond all plurality and relation. Rāmānuja's Brahman, by contrast, is a personal God possessing infinite auspicious qualities and inseparably related to the souls and the world. Whereas *Advaita* seeks liberation through the realization of the self's identity with Brahman, *Viśiṣṭādvaita* envisions liberation as eternal participation in the divine presence through love and surrender. In essence, Śaṅkara's philosophy culminates in the silence of absolute being, while Rāmānuja's culminates in the harmony of divine relationship.

¹⁶ Vedanta-Concepts and Application(ed),The Ramakrishna mission Institute of Culture,Kolkatta,2000,P-177

¹⁷ Ramanujacharya, Sri Bhasya,Choukhamba Publicatios,Delhi,PP-166