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Advaita Vedanta Tatwa and Adi Sankaracharya

Ranjan Kumar Mishra

Abstract

'Advaita Vedanta' is an orthodox Indian religious culture which was initially consolidated and propagated by the Adi Sankaracharya. In this research article the concept and dimensions of 'Advaita Vedanta' elaborated by Adi Sankaracharya is attempted to present in nutshell. He focuses his thinking through 'Brahma Sutras, Bhagavad Gita' and 'The Upanishads'. The dimensions of 'Advaita Vedanta' are discussed under different four heads for a better conclusion.

Advaita Vedanta says the one unchanging Reality (*Brahman*) alone exists and that changing entities do not have Absolute existence, much as the ocean's waves have no existence in separation from the ocean. The waves rise within the ocean and there would be no waves without the ocean. In the same manner, the transient world rises within Reality and owes its existence to Reality. The world has no independent existence from Reality and that is why it is said to be unreal. *Advaita Vedanta*, the doctrine of non-dualism is one without a parallel. Propagated in the history of mankind by Adi Shankaracharya, *Advaita Vedanta* implies one and only one. The philosophy of *Advaita Vedanta*, the non-dual characteristic of the supreme Lord, the Almighty God *Parmatman* in *hinduism* confirms that the Creator God does not have a dualistic nature.

What is changing must always be unreal. This phenomenal world of names and forms is ever changing. Names and forms are subject to decay and death. Hence they are unreal or impermanent. What is constant or permanent must always be 'Real'. The *Atman* or the Eternal, all-pervading 'Self' ever exists. It pervades all objects like ether. Even if the pot is broken, the ether that is within and without it cannot be destroyed. Similarly, if the bodies and all other objects perish, the Eternal Self that pervades them cannot be destroyed; it is the living Truth and only Reality. Just as a swan lives in water but its feathers are never soiled by water, similarly an Advait in lives in the world but is untouched by its illusion.

Adi Shankaracharya

Shankara was born in a Brahmin family circa 788 AD in a village named *Kaladi* on the banks of the river *Purna* (now *Periyar*) in the Southern Indian coastal state Kerala. His parents, *Sivaguru* and *Aryamba*, had been childless for a long time and the birth of Shankara was a joyous and blessed occasion for the couple. Legend has it that *Aryamba* had a vision of Lord Shiva and promised her that he would incarnate in the form of her first-born child.

Shankara mastered all the *Vedas* and the six *Vedangas* from the local *gurukul* and recited extensively from the epics and *Puranas*. Shankara also studied the philosophies of diverse sects and was a storehouse of philosophical knowledge.

Shankara wrote the *Brahmasutra Bhasya* on *Upanishads* and *Gita*. The first integrator of Hindu India, he established four *mathas* (mutts) in four directions of the country— *Jyotirmath* in North, *Govardhan Math* at Puri in east, *Shringeri Matha* in Karnataka in south and *Dwarika math* in Gujarat in west. Shankara lived for only 32 years and died at Kedarnath.

Adi Shankaracharya set out its basic elements. Part of his philosophy is also concerned with the actual details of spiritual practice and guidance through the guru-student relationship. Consequently, spiritual instruction and the interpretation of authentic teachings (such as the *Upanishads*) have been core activities for every Advaitic philosopher and teacher since Shankara.

Concept of Advaita Vedanta by Shankaracharya

Adi Shankara consolidated the *Advaita Vedanta*, a re-interpretation of the Vedic scriptures, which was accepted by *Gaudapada* and *Govinda Bhagavatpada* themselves and adhered to their *siddhanta* (system). Following the footsteps of some of the *Upanishadic* teachers, and also that of *Gaudapada*, Adi Shankara expounded the doctrine of Advaita; a non-dualistic reality.

Adi Shankara's contributions to Advaita are crucial to mankind. His main works are the commentaries on the *Prasthanatrayi* (*Brahma Sutras*, *Bhagavad Gita* and *the Upanishads*) and the *Gaudapadiya Karikas*. He also wrote a major independent treatise, called *Upadesha Sahasri*, expounding his philosophy. All these revolve around the principle of *Advaita Vedanta*.

The Dimensions of Advaita Vedanta

***Brahman* (The One without a Second)**

According to Adi Shankara, *Brahman*, the Supreme Cosmic Spirit, is alone true. Other than *Brahman*, everything else, including the universe, material objects and individuals, is false. *Brahman*, described as the One who is Omnipresent, Omnipotent and Omniscient, is the divine ground of all Being. *Brahman* is also described as *neti neti*, meaning "not this, not this", as it is *Adrishya* (beyond the reach of the materialistic eyes). It is the basis of the material world, which in turn is its illusionary transformation (*Maya*). *Brahman* is not the effect of the world whereas, this world is nothing but the work of *Brahman*. *Brahman* is said to be the source infinite knowledge in its purest form.

Brahman is not an object; *Brahman* is not another. It is all-full, infinite, changeless, self-existent, self-delight, self-knowledge and self-bliss. It is *Svarupa* (essence), *Nirikara* (formless). It is the essence of the knower. It is the Seer (*Drashta*), Transcendent (*Turiya*) and Silent Witness (*Saakshi*).

Even though *Brahman* is self-proved, Adi Shankara came up with some logical proofs for *Brahman*:

1. The *Upanishads* and the *Brahma Sutras* describe *Brahman* in an almost exact manner as how Adi Shankara has described. This is the testimonial proof of *Brahman*.
2. Every person experiences his soul, or *Atman*. According to Adi Shankara and his teachings as well, *Atman* and *Brahman* are no different. This argument also proves the omniscience of the *Brahman*.
3. The world appears to go in an orderly fashion and all things seem to fall into place. The reason for this is not an unconscious principle; it is but *Brahman*. And hence, *Brahman* is the basis of this world.

Maya (Illusion)

Maya is the complex illusionary power of *Brahman* which causes the *Brahman* to be seen as the material world of separate forms: *Nirguna Brahman* and *Saguna Brahman*. As Shankara has explained, *Nirguna Brahman* is impersonal. It becomes a personal God (*Saguna Brahman*) only through its association with *Maya*.

Saguna Brahman and *Nirguna Brahman* are not two different *Brahmans*. *Nirguna Brahman* is not the contrast or opposite of *Saguna Brahman*, and neither the vice-versa; if at all they were, it would be completely contradictory to the *Advaita Vedanta*. The same *Nirguna Brahman* appears as *Saguna Brahman* for the pious worship of devotees. It is the same Truth from two different points of view. *Nirguna Brahman* is the higher *Brahman*, the *Brahman* from the transcendental viewpoint (*Paramarthika*); *Saguna Brahman* is the so-called lower *Brahman*, the *Brahman* from the relative viewpoint (*Vyavaharika*).

Maya has two main functions, one is to 'hide' the *Brahman* from ordinary human perception, and the other is to present the material world in its place. *Maya* is also said to be indescribable, since the fundamental reality underlying sensory perception is completely hidden, even though all sense data entering ones awareness through the five senses are *Maya*. Another reason why it said to be inexplicable is that it is neither completely real not completely unreal.

Maya's shelter is *Brahman*, but *Brahman* itself is unharmed by the illusion of *Maya*; just like the Swan and the Lotus (unaffected by its surroundings), which is a depiction of the *Advaita Vedanta*.

The *Upanishads* proclaim, "*Brahman* alone is real", but we see this material world to be real. How so? Adi Shankara explained this anomaly by the concept of *Maya*.

Ishwara (The Supreme Lord)

According to *Advaita Vedanta*, as explained by Adi Shankara, when man tries to know or understand the formless, the indescribable *Brahman*, with his mind and under the influence of *Maya*, the *Brahman* that he sees, is *Ishwara*. *Ishwara* is the effect of the integration of *Maya* with *Brahman*.

Adi Shankara uses a metaphor wherein he says that when the reflection of the Cosmic Being is viewed through the mirror of *Maya*, the Supreme Being (*Ishwara*) manifests.

Ishwara is *Saguna Brahman* or *Brahman* using *Maya* as his tool or instrument. He can be realised or seen by the spiritually enlightened. He may be even regarded to have a personality. He is the subject of worship. He is the basis of morality and giver of the fruits of one's *Karma*. However, He himself is beyond sin and merit. His association with *Maya* does not affect the perfection of *Ishwara*. *Ishwara* always knows the unity of the *Brahman* substance, and the *Mayic* nature of the world.

The Supreme Lord is true only in the pragmatic level—His actual form in the transcendental level is the Cosmic Spirit.

Now the question arises as to why the Supreme Lord created the world. If one assumes that *Ishwara* creates the world for any incentive, this slanders the wholeness and perfection of *Ishwara*, and once again it goes against the *Advaita Vedantic* Principles.

For example, if one assumes that *Ishwara* creates the world for gaining something, it would be against His perfection. If we assume that He creates for compassion, it would be illogical, as there

would be nothing to be compassionate for in the beginning (when only *Ishwara* existed). Hence, the only logical conclusion that Adi Shankara could come up with was that the Creation by Him is just a sport.

Mohsha (Liberation)

Advaitins also believe in the theory of reincarnation of souls (*Atman*) into plants, animals and humans according to their *karma*. They believe that suffering is due to *Maya*, and only knowledge (called *Jnana*) of *Brahman* can destroy *Maya*. Only when *Maya* is removed, there exists absolutely no difference between the *Jiva* and the *Brahman*. Such a state of bliss when achieved while living is called *Jivan mukti*. While one is in the pragmatic level, one can worship God in any way and in any form. But Adi Shankara believes that while *Vedic* sacrifices, *puja* and devotional worship can lead one in the direction of *Jnana*, true knowledge, they cannot lead one directly to *Moksha*. One has to suffer the consequences of his past actions. No matter how many good deeds a person does to cover-up his wrong doings, he still has to face them one day or another, probably not in this lifetime.

The Impact of Advaita Vedanta

Advaita rejuvenated much of Hindu thought and philosophy and also instigated debate with the two main theistic schools of Vedanta philosophy that were formalized later viz. *Vishishtadvaita* (qualified non-dualism), and *Dvaita* (dualism). *Advaita Vedanta* further aided the merge of the old Vedic religion with popular south-Asian cults/deities, hence forming a link between higher types of practice (such as *Jnana yoga*, *Kriya yoga* etc.) and devotional religion of simpletons. The above mentioned are a few basic but important aspects involved in the Non-Dualistic Philosophy. This miniscule knowledge of the oceanic philosophy would suffice just as much as to explain the two questions posted.

Who is a Saint?

The answer to this is simple; anyone who preaches (after practising) about the basic human qualities and its benefits and also spreading knowledge and awareness about the purpose of life.

If this is the definition of a saint, then Lord Rama, Sri Krishna, and all the other Gods would fall into this category. This truth, people in general are not willing to accept. They say Krishna is a God and not a saint; Adi Shankara is a saint and not God. Adi Shankara is actually an incarnation of Lord Shiva.

The definition of a saint that I could come up with is as follows:

A Saint is a form of *Ishwara*, who has understood his/her purpose in life and has the ability to explain the as well as the philosophy itself.

Finally, Adi Shankara's *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy can be summarised to just this one verse:

“Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya, Jeevo Brahmaiva Na Aparaha”

- a) **Brahman** (the Absolute) is alone real. This world is unreal and the *Jiva* or the individual soul is non-different from *Brahman*. This is the quintessence of his philosophy. *Brahma Satyam* ("Brahman is the Reality"): In *Vedanta*, the word '**Satyam**' (Reality) is very clearly defined and it has a specific significance. It means that, "which exists in all the three periods of time (past, present and future) without undergoing any change; and also in all the three states of consciousness (waking state, dream state and deep-sleep state)". This is therefore the absolute Reality — birthless, deathless and changeless — referred to in the *Upanishads* as '*Brahman*'.

- b) **Jagan Mithya** (the world is an illusion): The world appears “real” only in the “waking state”; but it is negated (it disappears) in the dream and deep-sleep states. Hence, it is not real, according to the definition above. Therefore, the world is said to be *mithya* by the Acharya. However, many people seem allergic to the word, “*mithya*”, when it is used to refer to the perceptible world. For this reason, perhaps, the Acharya, in his later works, like *Brahmasutra Bhashya*, calls it “*vyavaharika satta*” (relative reality) or “*pratibhasika satta*” (apparent reality), as if to accommodate them.
- c) **Jiva Brahmaiva Na para** (the *jiva* is *Brahman* alone, none else): “*Jiva*” refers to the sentient principle in all living beings, including human beings. In the deep-sleep state, the body, senses, mind and intellect are all negated (rendered totally ineffective or insentient). Hence, the *jiva* is one with the sentient, inner life-principle, which revives the body, senses, mind and intellect after sleep. This life-principle is the pure consciousness that is the same in all beings. The all-pervading *Brahman* of the *Upanishads* is that pure consciousness present in all *jivas* as their *antaryami* (inner spirit).

Conclusion

No one has any hesitation, obviously, in taking the dream world as an illusion; for, when they wake up to this familiar world, the dream world disappears. But all of us find it hard to believe that this familiar world, which we all actually perceive and experience, is an illusion. If I jump down from an upper floor, I will certainly be fatally injured. This difficulty is because we are all part of this world and are attached to it in some way.

But a spiritual aspirant may ask, "Is there a higher state to which I can wake up, so that this waking world will disappear, just like the dream world?"

The answer is a resounding "yes." What that higher state is no one can precisely describe. But Sri Shankaracharya was an intellectual and spiritual prodigy. He could experience that sublime, transcendental state (*turiya*, wherein the *jiva* is in a state of complete identification with *Brahman*), just like the *Upanishadic* seers. Thus, the great Acharya could confirm and authoritatively summarise the vision of the ancient seers of *Sanatana Dharma* — the truth of Advaita. Before he left his mortal coil, he firmly established this philosophy by his masterly commentaries on the *prasthanatraya* (the three basic texts on *Vedanta*, viz., *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Brahma Sutras*).

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