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BRAHMAN IN THE ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy is an attempt at comprehending the problems of the universe. As philosophy aims at knowledge of truth it has been termed in Indian literature darśana or the vision of truth. The word darśana in that case would be distinguishing feature of Indian philosophy in mere intellectual conviction but aim at transforming such conviction into direct experience. Indian Philosophy denotes the philosophical speculations of the Indians. Philosophy is mainly divided into two broad classes āstika (orthodox) and nāstika (heterodox) systems, because they believe in the authority of Vedas. The Vedānta emphasized the speculative aspects of the Vedas and elaborate philosophy to justify those speculations. Among the other Vedantins, Saṁkara, the founder of the Advaita Vedānta, established the Brahma as the root cause of the world. He says, “Brahma Satya Jaganmithyā.” He also established Brahma as saguṇa and nirguṇa, and the concept of Māyā with the help of which Brahma creates the whole universe. In this paper, I tried to establish the concept of Brahma from the view point of Saṁkaracharya.

Keywords: Brahma, Māyā, Āstika, Nāstika, Saguṇa, Nirguṇa.

Introduction

Vedānta literally means “the end of the Vedas” or the doctrines set forth in the closing chapter of the Vedas, which are the Upaniṣadas. Subsequently, however, Vedānta came to mean all the thoughts that developed out of the Upaniṣads. Saṁkarāchārya was the founder of its Non dualism Vedānta System. It is one of the most essential system of Indian Philosophy. Even before Saṁkara and also after him many philosophical systems were developed in India which proved to be unique in different spheres, but from the integral spiritual standpoint the Advaita philosophy holds a position which is unrivalled by anyone else. Saṁkara’s interpretation of the philosophy of upaniṣads may not satisfy those who follow the path of devotion, but from the standpoint of philosophical discussion it is certainly the best and the most original. Thus, whether we may agree or disagree with the Advaita philosophy it most impress so far as its subtle insight and perfect logic is concerned.

The whole of the Vedānta philosophy can be summarized in a line thus “Brahma is true, the world is false and the Jiva and Brahma are not different” (brahma satyam jaganmithyā jibo brahmaiba nāpara). According to Saṁkara, Brahman is the highest transcendental truth. It is perfect and the only truth. The ultimate truth is non contradictory. It is existent beginningless and unchanging, absolute, extremely pure, transcendental, self-existing, external, Indivisbleness, not essentially different from the individual Jiva.

According to Advaita-Vedānta Brahma is niguṇa (qualityless) and nirviśeṣa (adjectiveless). It is beyond the comprehension of our mind and speech (avāṇ mānasagocara). He is not bound by human conception even the Sruti declares its existence only through the doctrine of negation by saying “Neti, Neti” meaning “not this”, Now is Brahma described positively, as It is this. If is this.

Two types of definitions of Brahma are offered by Advaita Vedāntins i.e., Svarūpa lakṣṇa or the essential definition and Tatasthalakṣṇa or the accidental definition.¹

The Svarūpalakṣṇa or essential definition of a thing consists of the essential nature of the thing. Sat (existence). Cit (consciousness). Ananta (infinity. Ananda (bliss) are the essential characteristics of Brahman and as such they constitute the essential definition of Brahman.² The Sruti refers to this essential definition of Brahman when it describes Brahman as “Satyam Jñānam, anantaṁ, brahma, (Brahma is existence, consciousness and infinity. Vijñānam, ānamdaṁ brahma. Brahma is knowledge and bliss, anando brahmeti vyājānat (He Brahma as bliss).³ But according to some other Vedāntins there are some other essential definitions of Brahma is also other than sat, cit, ānanda these are nitya, sudha, Buddha, mukta, satya etc.

The accidental definition or tatasthalakṣṇa is that which does not co-exist with the thing for all time and yet which can distinguish it from other things.⁴ Example of tatathalakṣṇa is “Kākavat devadatta graham” The crow cannot be the Viśeṣaṇa of the house of Devadatta, as it doesnot remain on the house for all time, nor does it constitute the essence of the house yet the crow differentiates the house from other houses. Hence this is tatasthalakṣṇa of Brahma is clearly stated in the aphorism. “Janmādyasya yataḥ.⁵ Brahma is the cause of the origination, sustenance and destruction of the world. This is also supported by the Sruti.



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“Yatovāimāni bhūtāni Jāyante, Yene jātāni jivanti. yatprayantyabhisamvisanti.”⁶ From where this world is originated, by which it is sustained and in which it returns in dissolution that is Brahman.

Brahma as Saguṇa or Nirguṇa

There is a controversy between the Vaishnava Vedāntins and the Advaita Vedāntins about the real nature of Brahma. According to Vaishnava Vedāntins Brahma is necessarily endowed with qualities, action etc. But according to Advaita Vedāntins Brahma is essentially nirguṇa and niskriya.⁷ It appears to be Saguṇa and sakriya only when it is endowed with Māyā.⁸ The Svarūpa lakṣhṇa discussed above, speaks of the absolute nature of Brahma as nirguṇa and niskriya. While the tatashtalakṣhṇa deals with its saguṇa aspect. Brahma denoted by the Svarupalakṣhṇa is nirguṇa and niskriya because it is akhanda or indivisible and is not at all concerned with the world process, and Brahma denoted by the tatashtalakṣhṇa is saguṇa and sakriya, because it is endowed with qualities like omniscience, omnipotence etc. and is concerned with the world process. These saguṇa and nirguṇa Brahma are not two different entities. It appears different because of the different view point. From the transcendental point of view Brahma is nirguṇa and niskriya while from the empirical view point it is Saguṇa Brahma or Īśvara, i.e., Brahma endowed with Māyā and also with the acts of creation, sustenance etc. of the world.⁹ Thus the difference between the saguṇa and nirguṇa Brahma is only a difference of viewpoints. There is no actual difference between them.

Brahma is existence as well as consciousness. According to Saṁkara, the existence is also consciousness and whatever is conscious its alone exists. The knowledge is the knowledge of existence and existence is itself of the form of knowledge. Thus, Saṁkara does not make distinction between metaphysical and the epistemological reality. Brahmanhood is said to be the liberation. Saṁkara has described Brahman liberation and soul is the same terms. As a matter of fact, all these three are one and the same. This metaphysical, epistemological and axiological synthesis of the Advaita Vedānta is unrivalled in the history of philosophy. There are no distinctions in Brahman. There is no distinction of the knower, knowledge and known in it, nor any distinction of the waking, dreaming and sleeping, consciousness and unconsciousness and sub-consciousness etc.

Brahman is pure identity. It is absolutely undifferentiated, Brahman is devoid of differences, homogeneous, heterogeneous and internal. Homogeneous difference is difference between two homogeneous things e.g., between one tree and another. Heterogeneous difference is the difference between two different things e.g., a tree and a stone. Internal difference is the difference between the parts of a whole e.g., between the leaves, flowers and fruits in a tree. Brahman is devoid of all these differences. It is devoid of homogeneous differences as it is one and without second. It is devoid of heterogeneous difference as there is no other reality dissimilar to it. Brahman has no internal variety like the tree which has the internal variety of leaves, flowers, fruits etc. Brahman is of the nature of consciousness which does not admit of parts. All the objects of the world are made up of parts and admit of differences. So, the pure identity of Brahman cannot be explained in terms of empirical descriptions. Brahman is beyond the world of name and form. In it there is no appearance and disappearance. In spite of thus admitting Brahman to be beyond all distinctions. Saṁkara has not taken it to be negation or nihil. Brahman is also of the nature of bliss. But this bliss is merely an object of experience. Hence by calling him bliss. Brahman does not become attributes.

In Saṁkara's philosophy the main proof for the existence of Brahman is the spiritual experience. Brahman can be realized by immediate intuitive knowledge. But as a philosopher, Saṁkara has tried to give systematic testimony to prove the existence of Brahman of these the main are as follows. Scriptures or the Sruti is the greatest proof to admit Brahman as the ultimate truth, on the basis of numerous great sentences of the Upanishads lie “I am Brahman” “all are Brahman”¹⁰ etc. he tried to prove the concept of Brahman is Advaita philosophy. The scripture is the proof of the existence of Brahman, and Brahman is the eternal source of the scriptures.

The concept of Brahman is also proved by the etymological meaning of the word. The word Brahman is derived from the root bri with the suffix man. The suffix man denotes unlimitedness. Hence the word Brahman denoted unlimited greatness. The very root brih means greatness hence literally speaking Brahman means all transcending existence.

Radhakrishnan rightly observes: “If Saṁkara's Advaita seems to us to be abstract, it is because we are content to dwell on a level lower than the highest that is possible for us.”¹¹



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