

The Status of Maya in Shankara Vedanta

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[Abstract: *The term ‘Maya’ first appears in several hymns of the Rigveda to describe mainly the ‘magic force’ or the heroic powers of Varuna (god of the sky and the ocean) and Indra (god of thunder). The Rishis of the Upanishads also similarly mention Maya but they evolve its meaning into ‘cosmic force’ associated with Brahman that brings forth the world of plurality. Gaudapada, the first exponent of the Advaita Vedanta and the Parma-Guru of Shankara, in his Mandukya Karika, explains this term to mean the mysterious power of Brahman. Later, Shankara brings it to the explicit. To him, every perceivable thing is Maya or the cosmic illusion. This Maya is the very basis in the philosophy of his Advaita Vedanta. In his interpretation of ‘Maya’, he uses almost the same sense as it is meant in the Upanishads. He explains the nature of the phenomenal world through his concept of Maya, which appears as objects in manifold forms. In this article, an attempt is made to explore the nature of Maya and its relation with the world, the relation between individuals and Brahman and finally the role of Maya in attaining liberation in Shankara Vedanta.]*

Introduction: The word ‘Maya’ has a number of different meanings in Indian Philosophy. The term ‘Maya’ is derived from Sanskrit root ‘mā’ (not) with ‘yā’ (this) to mean ‘not this what is seen’. So, etymologically Maya infers whatsoever that does not exist but appears as existing. From this viewpoint, Maya is an expression of illusion. However, Maya is studied from different senses as it is used in different Indian scriptures like ‘Kapata’ (deception), ‘Mula-Prakriti’ (womb of nature), ‘Adhyasa’ (superimposition), ‘Shiva-Shakti’ (Mother Goddess), ‘Mahashakti’ (divine power), ‘Upadhi’ (limiting adjunct), ‘Avidya’ (nescience), ‘Ajnana’ (ignorance), etc. In Veda, Maya stands for the mysterious magical powers of the gods (Griffith 604; 1.11.7). Again, in the Upanishads, it is used as the power that brings about lots of exteriors out of Brahman. God appears manifold through His Maya; He takes on these various forms for the sake of revealing Himself (Madhavananda, *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad* 385; 2.5.19). Like the meaning of Upanishads, the Maya of Shankara is such an illusionary power, which causes the Brahman to be projected as the Universe. To him, the phenomenal representation of this material world, in which we live, is nothing but Maya or illusion. So, the world of cosmic manifestation (Vyavaharika Loka) with numerous names and forms (Nama-rupa) is the product of Maya. It acts as a screen or costume over the Brahman on which the exterior world is created. In his Commentary on the Brahmasutras, Shankara says, as is bloomed in the sub-commentary of Viresharananda, “In Vedānta, though Brahman is indifferent, yet through Mâyâ, It is endowed with attributes and activity; so It becomes the Creator” (Vireswarananda 198; 2.2.7). So, all the dualities generated from the Brahman is recognized as Maya in Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta.

Maya and Shankara Vedanta: Maya occupies a crucial perspective in Shankara’s Advaita Vedanta. Shankara in his various monistic texts did not recognize the existence of this world, but

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expressed the view that it is a manifestation of Brahman itself. He called Maya as an indescribable power of Brahman under the influence of which He is manifested in the form of the world. Shankara believes that Brahman alone is the only eternal and genuine reality identical to our soul. He is the ever-brilliant source of all illumination and consciousness, the absolute, expressing Himself through the world, the gods, creations and all that exists. But to Shankara, the personified beings (creatures or Jivatmans) and the material world (Prapancha) as we experience have no reality. He clarifies that the peculiar diversity created, revealed and illumined in this universe are nothing but the jugglery of Maya generated from Brahman. Hence, every provisional phenomenon except the crystal-clear luminous Brahman is Maya. Behind all these phenomena, the invisible Nirguna Brahman is the only ultimate subjectivity. This idea of causation non-differentiating between the Brahman and the cosmic manifestation is known as Mayavada or Vivartha-vada (Doctrine of transfiguration) in Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. According to Natalia Isayeva, “--- all the multiplicity of the phenomenal world is unfolded through maya by its own creative power. Maya is a kind of screen or magic illusion but, at the same time, it is the reverse side of Brahman itself” (Isaeva 3). Thus Shankara, through the idea of Maya, facilitates the relation between diverse unconscious phenomena of this empirical world and the one Reality of Brahman. Through Maya, he attempts to offer us the idea of Brahman (Paramatman) and Jivatman, the nature of transient world and the methods for acquiring the ever-imperceptible wisdom on this earth that Brahman is non-dual, that there is no distinction between Atman and the ultimate divine reality, that Brahman and the eternal essence of all living beings (Atmans) are a unique unity, and that the illusory appearance of plurality in the prodigious world is nothing but Maya, the delusive reality.

Maya is indescribable: While determining the nature of Maya, Shankar explains that Maya is such a magic that creates division among creatures concealing the truth of One Reality. Shankara says that It limits the indivisible nature of Brahman and makes Him appear as the world and the personified being (Nikhilananda 50). It is both real and unreal at the same time from two different standpoints. First, it is noticed that It is existent (Sat) and eternal as Brahman, since it is grounded in Brahman. In the beginning, the world remains confined as one in its cause i.e. Brahman in an undifferentiated condition before it develops various names and forms. Secondly, it is also noticed that Maya is non-existent (Asat) because apart from Brahman it has no existence. Everything fades with the dawn of knowledge and cannot restrain the Brahman as darkness is not seen where there is a light. If Maya is taken as existent, then a question arises whether how extensive it is real or unreal. It is easily understood that if Maya is viewed from the relative state, it is real; since it is existent when we observe it in our state of ignorance. Again, in other sense i.e. if the same Maya is viewed from an absolute state of consciousness, it is transient, since it vanishes when Brahman is truly known by us with the dawn of cognizance. So, it can be said that, Maya is neither real (Sat) nor unreal (Asat), nor a fusion of partly real and partly unreal (Sat-asat) - a contradictory something that cannot be clarified. Since Maya is neither real as Brahman nor unreal as the sky-flower, nor 'real and unreal both' (Sadasat), as that would involve a contradiction, it is said to be indeterminate. Since Maya precedes all including speeches and thoughts, it is magnificent, indescribable and unthinkable (mahādbhutānirvacanīyārūpā). Thus, it is impossible for a Jiva to know Maya because his very guts are soaked in Maya. Shankara precisely describes these features of Maya in Vivek-chudamoni, as is translated by Swami Madhavananda,

The Status of Maya in Shankara Vedanta

It is neither existent nor non-existent nor partaking of both characters; neither same nor different nor both; neither composed of parts nor an indivisible whole nor both. It is most wonderful and cannot be described in words (Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani* 46;109).

Maya and Nirguna Brahman: Shankara does not accept two Realities. To him, Brahman is the only One Reality - the Absolute Universal Consciousness. To mean Brahman, Shankara indicates that impersonal (Nirguna) one. He is free from illusion and any material attributes or qualities. That is why the Jivas can neither see Him with their eyes nor can perceive Him with other sense organs. The Upanishad states: “The speech together with the mind turn away without reaching the ultimate Brahman” (Chinmayananda 147; 2.4.1). The Jivas can only see or perceive his manifestations i.e. the cosmos and its objects. Shankara says the visible cosmos is just the manifestation or the effect of the Māyic power of Brahman. Maya, the Magical power of Brahman, hides the actual shape of the Brahman from us. Instead, it manifests the incorrect view of Brahman. He opines that Brahman and the Maya-bred universe with its varied beings and things are not different from Brahman. They unitedly mean one single indivisible eternal and all-pervading ultimate reality that exists invisibly behind all abolishing objects, all transient existences and in all beings of diverse names and forms in the cosmos. Shankara opines that the Brahman is ‘ekam-eva-advitīyam’ i.e. one and second to none. Quoting Shankara, Vireswarananda writes,

The world is a Vivarta or apparent transformation through Maya of the Nirguna Brahman but not in reality. The Jiva, in reality, is all-pervading and identical with Brahman, though as individualized by its Upadhi (adjunct), the internal organ, it regards itself as atomic, as an agent, and as a part of the Lord (Vireswarananda xiv).

Every object in this entire space is filled in and out with that blissful Brahman. Both Brahman and discrete Atman are not different realities. They are meant separately for practical purposes only. These two different names are identical and are meant for one common reality. Thus, the world full of animals and objects is established on the Brahman, which is nothing, but Brahman. From That the universe comes forth, the universe exists in That and again, dissolves in That.

Maya and Saguna Brahman: Shankara opines that Brahman together with Maya is Ishwara or Saguna Brahman. He accepts Saguna Brahman full of divine qualities as Ishwara for his association with the Gunas of Maya. He appears as Personal God who assumes various names and forms with the power of Maya. The attributeless Nirguna Brahman is neither gross nor subtle. When he manifests with infinite divine attributes such as form and power in connection with Maya, he becomes Ishwara or Saguna Brahman. V. M. Apte translates the commentary of Shankara on Brahma-Sutra as,

A Crystal which in itself is white, is not rendered as being coloured, by its being affected by a limiting adjunct such as red lac or resin (Ālak-taka), because the notion about its being coloured is only illusory. Besides limiting adjuncts are brought about by Nescience. Hence, when only one indicative mark alone out of the two has to be accepted, Brahma should be understood to be devoid of any specific attributes.... (Apte 583; III. ii.11).

He is the same omniscient and omnipotent Supreme Nirguna Brahman looked at from the view of Maya possessing the sattva guna. When he appears in this world, he is never affected by the avarna sakti (veiling power) of Maya. The devotees of all schools of Vaishnavism accept Ishwara

as the Absolute Brahman without being affected by Maya and thus worship Him as God to attain liberation by His grace.

Unlike Dvaita, Shankara does not accept Saguna Brahman as the ultimate goal of humanity. He states the Saguna Brahman as the lower order of Reality (Pure Consciousness) who creates, sustains and annihilates this universe. He is the highest intellectual Form of Brahman to whom a human brain can perceive. Shankara concedes that there is, in fact, no creation at all and the existence of the world as we see is simply an illusionary manifestation of Maya. The commentary of Shankara on Gita as translated by Mahadeva Sastri states,

Just as food which is mixed with poison is itself called poison, so the Avyakta, the First Cause, conjoined with the vasana, or latent unconscious impression, of Ahamkara, is itself called here Ahamkara since Egoism is the impelling cause of all (Sastri, *Bhagavad-Gita* 189-190; 7.4).

The gross creation of the world as the five perceivable great elements (pancha bhootaas) happens in Hiranyagarbha from which all things of the world appear. Thus, Ishwara endowed with Maya is the efficient cause of the universe where the Maya itself is its material cause.

Maya as Superimposition: Maya is a puzzling superimposition (Adhyasa) or limiting adjunct (Upadhi) of the individual seekers on Brahman. An Upadhi seems to alter or limit the true nature of an object. It is so congenital with an individual that he is not conscious of it at all. It diverts his attention to worldly matters. When he is in its grip, Brahman is seen to him as the world, just as a rope is seen as a snake. The erroneous advent of the snake can never be proved as a real snake. Similarly, one can never prove Brahman to be the world. In discussing the philosophy of Shankara, Surendranath Bhattacharya writes,

You take a rope to be a snake, this is *adhyāsa*. You take Brahman to be the world, this too is *adhyāsa*. In reality, there is no snake, no world, and there should not be any superimposition, the one cannot be the other. Yet it is the inherent nature of man to identify truth with falsehood. This principle of *adhyāsa* therefore is such as has no reason to exist, and yet is most indispensable for all human affairs. It is the law that regulates all our actions and all our movements, nay, it is the law that makes the world what it is. Although it is indefinable, yet it is no abstraction and has a most concrete existence so far as the phenomenal world is concerned (Bhattacharya 241).

In reality, each soul is identical to Brahman who is real on the transcendental level. But at the pragmatic level, the soul considers himself to be a personified Jiva owing to his identification with the adjuncts (Upadhi). He looks the empirical universe very real and forgets that it is only a superimposition on Brahman. Although he is infinite, he appears to be subject to different little Upadhis of ones' body, sense-organs, prana, mind, ego and so forth. Due to its effect, very often, a man thinks of himself as a child, monarch, god, animal or any other creature in his dream. In the same way, the crystal-clear Brahman also, forgetting His real nature and keeping Himself hidden under Maya's Upadhi, identifies Himself with names and forms like man, woman, animal, seed, etc. under the influence of the cosmic Maya. An inestimable number of Upadhis of Maya is responsible for representing endless names and forms produced from a single absolute attributeless Brahman. Shankara clearly states in his commentary of Brahmasutra,

In this way there goes on this natural beginning and endless superimposition, which appears in the form of wrong conception, is the cause of individual souls appearing as agents and enjoyers (of the results of their actions), and is observed by every one (Thibaut p. 9; 1.1.1).

The Status of Maya in Shankara Vedanta

Equally, as soon as the discriminative knowledge dawns in an aspirant, he cognizes the eternal svarupa (Sat-cit-ananda) of the Brahman.

Maya as Tri-gunatmika: Shakara's Maya holds three inter-reliant and interchangeable Gunas or attributes. It is called Tri-gunatmika as it is characterised by Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas - the three essential aspects (Gunas or qualities) of the cosmic power. Everything in the world exists with the combination of these three Gunas and evolves from the innumerable combination of these three Gunas. In the Bhashya on Gita, as translated by C. V. Ramachandra Aiyar, Shankara says,

.....My Prakrti - Māyā belonging to Myself as Visnu, comprised of the three Gunas, to whose power the entire universe is subject, and deluded by whom one does not realise his own Self which is the same as Vāsudeva, - come into being, I become as if possessed of a body and as if I am born, by My own Māyā and not in fact as is the case with the world (creatures) (Aiyar 492; 4.6.).

Both Maya and Brahman are Anadi (without beginning). Out of them, Maya is almost an inert and material principle. On the contrary, Brahman is the non-material (conscious) principle beyond all Gunas. All three Gunas are the tools of Maya and are the bases of all creatures. They bind all embodied beings resolutely into the webs of the temporal illusion. Of these, Sattva represents our tranquility, illuminating aptitude or intellectual efficiency. When the pure Sattva (Maya) reflects on the Brahman, it is the all-knowing Creator (Ishwara). The Sattva is free from all evils and the actions performed by an embodied soul under the domination of this Guna are good ones. It can veil one's consciousness in the split-up nature of Illusion and binds him by the form of attachment to happiness and knowledge. It is the best of all Gunas because of its purity, veracity, peace, and lucidity. Raja is the principle of longing, desire, despair, energy, action, and motion. It binds the embodied creatures with passions and actions. A Raja-dominant person naturally tries to fulfill his desires by the sense-objects. Tama is the power of rigidity and inertia that fetters all embodied beings down through heedlessness, negligence, ignorance, indolence, negativity, and sleep. The actions performed by an individual under the domination of Tamas are almost irreligious ones as it obscures the true nature of their true reality and causes repeated transmigrations in this world. Shankara continues,

Even wise and learned men and men who are clever and adepts in the vision of the exceedingly subtle Atman, are overpowered by Tamas and do not understand the Atman even though clearly explained in various ways. What is simply superimposed by delusion, they consider as true, and attach themselves to its effects. Alas! How powerful is the great Avriti Shakti of dreadful Tamas (Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamani* 48; 114)!

Thus, the three essential Gunas of Maya operate in all objects and all beings of the entire phenomenal world. All embodied beings in this world hold a combination of these Gunas in varying degrees and all his behaviors in this world are just performed as plays of his intrinsic Gunas. All beings have to face the diverse series of births and deaths so long as they remain associated with the Gunas.

Maya's part as Avidya: Maya is of the nature of Avidya (nescience or ignorance). Avidya covers our true nature and offers false knowledge in exchange. It is the basic ignorance (Mula Avidya), which mesmerizes the Jivas and generates duality among them by its magical power. Maya that quite often stands for Avidya, entangles man in worldliness identifying pure Brahman as transient body or ego. When the reflection of Brhman falls on Maya, He becomes Ishwara who creates the all-inclusive world of time, space and causation. When the same falls on Avidya

(ignorance), He becomes endless individual living beings with bodies, senses, mind, and ego. On the distinction between Maya and Avidya, Mahadevan writes,

In empirical usage, however, there is a distinction made between Māyā and nescience. But that is intelligible even in respect of one and the same thing as conditioned by different adjuncts. When prakriti generates projection or when it conforms to the desire of the agent, it is called 'Māyā' in empirical usage. When it obscures or when it is independent of the agent's will, it is known as nescience (Mahadevan 231).

So, both are the root cause of the 'duality' holding the reality of one Brahman. Due to it, the Same Oneness (Brahman) is perceived in many forms. In his bhashya, on the Mundaka Upanishad, Shankara explains how the veiling power of ignorance covers Atman as,

Where is It perceived? Guhayam, in the cavity (of the heart) called the intellect; for by the enlightened It is perceived as hidden there; and yet, though existing there, It is not perceived by the ignorant because of Its being covered by ignorance (Gambhirananda 155; 3.1.7).

Shankara speaks of two functions of Avidya associated with Maya - Avarana and Vikshepa. Avarana shakti covers the Reality - the true nature of Brahman. As a trivial patch of cloud, appearing from the sun covers the Sun from the sight of the seer, similarly, the limited and inert Avarana Shakti covers the infinite Atman by covering the intellect of the seer and prevents us from the experience of the Atman. By its influence, we experience pain and pleasure in contact with the objects in this world. Vikshepa shakti conceals Brahman and projects a false Universe (Jagat) over the Atman. The appearance of the variegated universe is due to the Vikshepa shakti of Maya. In the example of the rope and snake, it covers the real existence of the rope and superimposes a snake in the rope in slight light. This power covers the Reality of Brahman and superimposes the empirical universe over the seer. This force makes him take the empirical objects of the world as real.

Association of Maya with Jiva and Brahman: Shankara believes that there is no categorical difference between Jiva and Brahman. The Reality of both Jiva and Brahman is one and the same who appears distinctly through Maya. A Maya associated man who sees himself as separate from Brahman is Jiva. To Shankara, Maya limits the indivisible entity of Brahman and makes Him appear as embodied jiva. The erroneous presentation of Brahman, the Buddhi (egocentric mind) that performs various activities and thereby enjoys their results is called Jiva (Nikhilananda 49). When Maya is removed, the duality attitude from our mind is annihilated and the notions of 'I' and 'Mine' is also completely vanished. Ultimately, there exists only the Self or Brahman meaning no difference between the Jivatman and the Brahman. A Jivatman is ever divine and ever pure. When it is deluded with Maya, it is the I-sense who feels himself to be an individual Jiva separate from Brahman. Deluded by Maya, he becomes full of pride for his temporary affluence and physical strength and does all sorts of things according to his wishes. Even though he forgets to recognize himself to be Brahman, he is, all along with nothing but Brahman.

Hence, the Self of each Jiva is identical with the infinite Brahman. An individual Jiva is none but the focus of Brahman, all other things than Him are Maya. To make it clear, we need to understand the two levels of reality: vyavaharic - the relative one when a Jiva sees and experiences objects in this world in ignorance and paramarthic - the astute one when a wise realizes the Brahman, his true nature of Atman, in his liberated state. Both are non-different but only relatively different because of the names and forms created by Maya. So long a Jiva, controlled by Maya, thinks that he is the doer of his actions and the enjoyer of the fruits of action,

The Status of Maya in Shankara Vedanta

he has to suffer the consequences of his past actions irrespective of good or bad nature. When an individual Jiva can be able to remove Maya, it becomes clear to him that there ultimately exists a single Atman non-different from Brahman. It becomes clear in the commentary of Shankara on Gita as translated by C. V. Ramachandra Aiyar,

To perceive the self limited by adjuncts in its true form as (identical with) the Supreme Brahman devoid of adjuncts is the sacrifice (offering the self) in the fire (of Brahman); and this (sacrifice) is performed by samnyāsins (Aiyar 166; 4.25).

Maya as a hurdle to liberation: In this temporary, ever-changing and illusive world, birth, death, and rebirth with pain and pleasure are the common happenings for all beings. Shankara maintains that these pains and sufferings faced by Jiva are due to Maya. For Shankara, an individual Self is always devoid of desire, scums, aversion, and fear since he is devoid of impurities such as the connection with material objects, body, senses and intellect generated by Maya. He declares in Upadeshasahasri, “As I am changeless the series producing pain viz., the body, the intellect and the senses are not Myself nor Mine. Moreover, they are unreal like dream-objects, there being a reason for inference that they are so” (Jagadananda 112; 10.5). In this process, he is caught up in the cycle of births and deaths and has to enjoy the result of his previous good and bad deeds in the form of enjoyment and suffering. Shankara advises us to be conscious about the bondage of Maya and not to try to attain fleeting gratification through the varied objects which ultimately results in suffering. The only way to get rid of these miseries is to know the Absolute Brahman. When Maya is extinct through the eye of Knowledge, a personified Self realizes that he is not a body-mind complex of sufferings but is identical with the infinite Brahman. Quoting Kathopanishad, Shankara states in his ‘Sata Sloki’,

There are two paths open to man in this world, the path that leads to fulfillment of worldly desires and the path to liberation. The first, fulfillment of desires, is the sole source of all sorrow and becomes insipid in no time. Only people lacking in discrimination take to this path. The other path leads to the attainment of Brahman, the imperishable source of infinite bliss. Wise men of discrimination resort to this path (Sastri, *Sata Sloki* 15).

True knowledge of Brahman can lead the individual soul directly to Moksha. One must realize the indispensable identity between oneself with that of Brahman and remain established in the direct experience of Brahman. However, one cannot easily achieve this state as long as Maya acts in him. If someone, after effortless practices, experiences the Brahman on reaching the state of higher consciousness, this Maya generated multifarious phenomenon vanishes from his conception and the true nature of Brahman is revealed to him when he perceives the same universe identical to Brahman. As the rays of sun passing through a magnifying glass burn the combustible substance, similarly the knowledge of Brahman passing through the mind of a Jiva burns his Maya. He then discovers the true nature of Maya. In Shankara, Maya and all its objects that exist around us are all Brahman. The man who realizes Him while living in this world, become liberated forever (Jivanmukta) from this samsara full of suffering. Then, getting liberated, he finds himself as nothing but Brahman and enjoys the Blissful freedom of eternal Brahman.

Conclusion: Shankara employs the term Maya largely to explain the multiplicity created from the non-dual Brahman. The illusory Maya is responsible for our practical experience of other things in the universe. It develops false notions of our imperishable self. It, on one side, misleads us toward the phenomenal world from our Absolute reality and on the other side; it develops a link between the changing world and the changeless Brahman. Shankara says that one is not the real

owner of one's peripheral elements like the physical body, senses, mind, thoughts, cravings, objects and so forth. He questions to an enlightened one such as, "When the whole universe, movable and immovable, is known to be Atman, and thus the existence of everything else is negated, where is then any room to say that the body is Atman" (Vimuktananda 112)? Because any materialistic thing meant by 'I', 'me' or 'mine' is nothing but a psychological illusion - a universe of illusory appearances created by Maya. The essence of 'I' is such a radical reality, which is essentially identical with Brahman. Swami Vivekananda emphasizes this point when he says,

Thinkers in ancient India gradually came to understand that the idea of separateness was erroneous, that there was a connection among all those distinct objects - there was a unity which pervaded the whole universe - trees, shrubs, animals, men, Devas, even God Himself; the Advaitin reaching the climax in this line of thought declared all to be but the manifestations of the One. In reality, the metaphysical and the physical universe are one, and the name of this One is Brahman; and the perception of separateness is an error - they called it Māyā, Avidya or nescience. This is the end of knowledge (Vivekananda 519-520).

In fact, everybody is identical with Brahman, but the ignorant one is unconscious of his identity and very familiar in viewing diverse objects through the strange lenses of Maya - this is the truth flourished throughout Shankara's text. Through frequent practice and repeated contemplating on the transitory nature of the world with our conscious mind, as advised in Shankara's texts, we can again become free from the bondage of vast multiplicity of Maya and explore our own self-luminous Reality.

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