

NATURE OF BRAHMAN IN ADVAITA VEDĀNTA : AN EVALUATION

Sibsankar Tunga

Brahman is the main concern of Advaita Vedānta . In this paper an attempt has been made to explicate and evaluate the nature of Brahman in the light of Advaita Vedānta .Normally the principal teachings of S'ankara's Advaita are expressed as (1) Brahman is ultimately real, (2) the world is a false appearance on Brahman, and (3) the jīva is essentially identical with Brahman. "*brahma satya jagan mithyā jīva brahmaiva nāparah*". Sankara's Absolutism is known as *Kevalādvaitavāda* on its positive side and as *Māyāvāda* on its negative side. On the S'astric side it declares to be based on three different sets of Upanisadic texts, viz. (a) texts teaching non-dualism such as *Ekamevādviṭīyam* (one only without a second), (b) texts teaching the non-existence of manyness such as *neha nānāstikiñcana* and (c) texts teaching the non-dual reality to be the staff of the universe: *yatovāimāni bhūtāni jāyante* (from which all the elements, etc. have sprung forth). In Advaita philosophy the world is the self-alienation of Brahman, an eternally negated objectification of the unobjective reality. The world is an apparent manifestation (*vivarta*) of Brahman and a substantial transformation (*parināma*) of nescience inherent in Brahman.

The scripture declares that Brahman is existence (*satya*), consciousness (*jñāna*) and endless (*ananta*)¹ it is birthless (*ajam*),² deathless (*amaram*)³ and eternal (*nityam*)⁴; It is 'one without a second'- *ekamevādviṭīyam* and indescribable in words and unknowable to the mind- *avāṅmanasagocaram* .

S'ankara , in his commentary on the *Vedānta sūtra* , describes the nature of Brahman as follows: Brahman is that whose nature is permanent purity, intelligence, and freedom (*nitya S'uddhabuddhamuktasvabhāvam brahmeti*); it transcends speech and mind, does not fall within the category of 'object', and constitutes the inward self of all. Of this Brahman our text denies all plurality of forms; the Brahman itself is leaved untouched the cause, 'Not so, not so', negatives not absolutely everything, but everything but Brahman.⁵

In *his commentary* S'ankara distinguishes Brahman as a higher and a lower one.

Brahman viewed from the aspect of knowledge or *vidyā* is free from all adjuncts, all name and form and it is called the higher Brahman. It is *nirguṇa* Brahman and it is knowledge of this Brahman through which liberation can be attained. Brahman viewed from the aspect of ignorance or *avidyā* is lower Brahman which is *saguṇa* Brahman or God. One cannot properly speak positively about the higher Brahman. Many of the adjectives used in our texts are negative : Brahman is without quality (*nirvis'eṣa*), without form (*arūpa*), without change, without parts, without end (*advitīya or advaita*).⁶ It is devoid of all distinctions-homogenous(*svajātīya*), heterogenous(*vi-jātīya*) and internal (*svagata*). A tree is different from a stone (*vi-jātīya -bheda*). The oak is different from the poplar (*svajātīya-bheda*). In the same tree, the blossom is different (*svajātīya -bheda*) from the leaf. All these differences disappear in Brahman, which is homogeneous consciousness without a break.

There are descriptions in the *Brahma-sūtra* of the ultimate reality as both *nirguṇa* (devoid of qualities) and *saguṇa* (possessing qualities). S'ankara reconciles them by means of the distinction between higher knowledge (*parāvidyā*) and lower knowledge (*aparāvidyā*). From the standpoint of the liberated soul Brahman is unconditioned; from that of one in bondage Brahman appears to be the cause of the universe and endowed with different qualities like omniscience etc.⁷. Thus *saguṇa* Brahman or *Īs'vara* is the self-same Brahman at the relational level of experience which at the supra-relational level of experience is the *nirguṇa* Brahman. The Higher knowledge brings about immediate Liberation, resulting in the utter cessation of all suffering and the attainment of supreme bliss. The lower knowledge leads to the realization of the *Brahman* and thus paves the way for ultimate Liberation. It offers the highest happiness in the material world. But still it is Immortality. The attainment of the Higher knowledge, or *Parā Vidyā*, is the goal of the spiritual life.

The scriptures describe Brahman as being both qualified and unqualified, differentiated and non-differentiated (*saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*). So both must be true according as It is or is not connected with *Upādhis* (adjuncts). Sankara refutes this and says that such contradictory descriptions of one and the same entity cannot be true, nor can Its nature be changed by connection with another; for such a change would mean its destruction. Brahman is without attributes, for the scriptures throughout describe It as such, to the exclusion of Its other aspects.⁸ They do not inculcate the connection of Brahman with forms, for wherever they

describe a form of Brahman, the scriptures explain at every instance that the form is not true and that behind the *Upādhīs* there is one formless principle.⁹ Brahman is only formless; forms are due to *Upādhīs* and are meant for *Upāsana* (meditation), and are not intended to establish It.¹⁰ Brahman is pure intelligence, homogeneous, and formless; the various forms are like reflections of the one sun in water, and as such are not real.¹¹

The Vedānta philosophy often describes Brahman by the term *saccidānanda*, a compound consisting of three words: *Sat* (Existence, reality, or Being), *Cit* (Consciousness, or Knowledge) and *Ānandam* (Bliss). *Sat, Cit and Ānandam* Existence, Consciousness and Bliss are not attributes of Brahman, but Its very essence. Brahman is not endowed with them: Brahman is Existence itself, Consciousness itself and Bliss itself. In the Absolute there is no distinction between substance and attributes. *Sat, Cit and Ānandam* denote the same entity; when one of them is present, the other two are also present. Absolute Being is Absolute Consciousness and Absolute Bliss. These three words, Existence, etc. though they have different meanings in ordinary parlance, yet refer to one indivisible Brahman, even as the words, father, son, husband, etc. refer to one and the same person according to his relationship with different individuals.

The truth, knowledge and infinitude are the essential characteristic of Brahman which will find support in the s'ruti texts "*satyam jñānamantam Brahma*".¹² The secondary characteristic feature of Brahman exists in its being the cause of the creation etc. of the universe (*jagat*)¹³. Here the term '*jagat*' denotes all kinds of effects and the term 'creation' etc (*janmādi*) means the creation, maintenance and dissolution, "Being the cause (*Kāraṇatva*) means 'being an agent' (*Kartr̥tva*)".

In the first *Brahmasūtra*. '*Athāto Brahmajijñāsā*' Brahman is recognized as *nirguṇa Brahman*. But in the second *Brahmasūtra* '*janmādyasya yataḥ*', Brahman is explained as *sagūṇa Brahman* and He is that from which all this has arisen, by which it is maintained in existence and into which it will ultimately disappear. Brahman is the all knowing and all powerful cause of this world. Here a question may be raised: What is the real nature of the definition of the second *Brahmasūtra janmādyasya yataḥ*, whether *svarūpa Lakṣaṇa* or *Tatastha Lakṣaṇa*?

The *Advaitins* examine this *sūtra* and shows that though this aphorism provides us

directly with *Tatastha Lakṣaṇa* , it indicates *Svarūpa Lakṣaṇa of nirguṇa* Brahman also. The significance of this *sutra* is dependent on the *s'ruti* : “*yato vai Imāni bhūtāni jāyante , yena jātāni jīvanti , yat prayanti abhisamvisanti tat vijijñāsasva , tat Brahma*”¹⁴. This *s'ruti* is included in the *prakarana* passage (sentence) of *Taittīriya saṁhitā* and the *s'ruti ānandāt hi eva khalu Imāni bhūtāni jāyante* , occurs at the end of the above passage. This *s'ruti* constitutes the essential definition of Brahman. From *Ānanda* says the *Upanisad*, ‘all existents are born, by *Ānanda* they remain in being and increase to *Ānanda* they depart. *Ānanda* or bliss is the essence of *nirguṇa Brahman*. Here *dharma* and *dharmī* are identical. Therefore, according to the follower of Sankara, the aphorism. “ *janmādyasya yataḥ* ” implies both the accidental definition (*Tatastha Lakṣaṇa*) and essential definition (*Svarūpa Lakṣaṇa*) of Brahman . These two definitions are also found in the significance of the introductory (*Maṅgalācarana*) stanza of the *Vedānta - paribhāṣā* of *Dharmarājādharīndra* :

“*Yadavidyāvilāsenabhūtabhautikasṛṣṭayah* ,

Tam naumi paramātmanam saccidānandavigraham 1 ” (To that supreme self, the embodiment of Existence, Knowledge and Bliss (Absolute), by the manifestation of the nescience (*avidyā*) relating to which the projection of the (simple) elements and in fact, the whole universe of name and form.) And in that of the *Vedāntasāra of Sadānanda Yogīndra* .

“ *Akhandamsaccidānandamavānmanasa gocaram I*

Ātmānamakhilādhāramās'rayeabhiṣṭasiddhaye . II ” (I take refuge in the self, the indivisible, the Existence-Consciousness-Bliss absolute, beyond the reach of words and thought, and the substratum of all, for the attainment of my cherished desired).

Now I shall attempt to evaluate the Advaita theory of *tatastha lakṣaṇa* of Brahman. The role of *tatastha lakṣaṇa* is very important in the *Advaita Vedānta* . This definition may also be described as adhoc definition of Brahman, which has no permanent status. Brahman as qualified by the power of creation etc. of the universe is *sopādhika* Brahman or *saguṇa* Brahman, which is described as God in *Advaita Vedānta* . To know this infinite, unlimited and attributeless Brahman, the secondary characteristic of Brahman is essential initially and hence it has got some value for the beginners. As soon as the real Brahman is realized, the *saguṇa* Brahman known through this secondary definition becomes illusory and that is why,

it is called *taṭastha* or secondary. Here a question may be raised : Can any definition describe Brahman? The term 'characteristic' whether essential or secondary is not applicable to Brahman. Because, Brahman is indescribable in character which is supported in the *S'ruti – 'Yadvācānabhyuditam'*.¹⁵

One who realizes Brahman cannot communicate to others. To describe Brahman as truth etc. it again becomes *taṭastha* because through this we do not get the indescribable Brahman. That is why, the realization of Brahman is secret (*guhya*) and non-communicable to others. As the realiser of Brahman cannot communicate his experience to others due to the absence of duality at this stage, Brahman is indefinable, but realizable. In one sense the so-called *svārūpa lakṣaṇa* of Brahman may be considered as *taṭastha* on account of the fact that characteristics of Brahman (Truth etc.) are essential for giving a real picture of Brahman to an individual who is desirous to know Brahman (*Brahmanjijñāsu*). When Brahman is realized, there is no necessity of this definition due to the non-duality between definition (*lakṣaṇa*) and the defined object (*lakṣaṇa*) at this stage. Though Brahman exists, the definition is not there, which violates the basic characteristic of *svārūpa lakṣaṇa*. Hence, such *lakṣaṇa* also is not permanent, but temporary.

The real nature of Brahman can be realized only by the concerned individual who has become the seer. What he knows can never be described because there is 'none' to whom it will be described due to the cessation of duality. If the *svārūpa lakṣaṇa* is taken to be a definition revealing the true picture of Brahman, how can it be proved or verified as true? If it is argued that the *vedic* seers have realized this and described as such, the problem remains unsolved. If the *vedic* seers have really seen Brahman they would have been essentially identified with Brahman having no duality, which stands on the way of any kind of description- *taṭastha* or *svārūpa*. Hence, there is no certainty as to the fact that *svārūpa lakṣaṇa* gives the essential characteristics of Brahman. Like *taṭastha lakṣaṇa* the *svārūpa lakṣaṇa* is based on presumption and here an effort has been made to give an idea of the essence of Brahman, which may not be true. Hence, this definition though refined to some extent, may be taken as *taṭastha* again, but not *svārūpa*. Moreover, *svārūpa* and *lakṣaṇa* are contradictory terms. If *svārūpa* is known, the *lakṣaṇa* of it is not possible due to the absence of duality.

We can argue that the vedic seers and embodied liberated persons have realized the essential features through some transcendental means and afterwards they have explained the nature to others coming in the phenomenal world. This view is not satisfactory. If Brahman is realized it is forever. If the above mentioned view is accepted, it will lead to accept the transitoriness of the state of liberation arising out of the realization of Brahman. If a seer comes back to the phenomenal world with the sense of duality, it will entail that he has retained to the world of ignorance or the world of bondage, which indicates his absence of liberation. If liberation is also transitory like other objects of this world, nobody will yearn for it.

When Brahman is realized, all these definitions become superimposed (*adhyasta*). The true character of Brahman is non-communicable, secret (*guhya*) and non-describable. Though the essential nature of Brahman is purely subjective and non-communicable to others, one can take refuge to the characteristic features (*tatastha* and *svarūpa*) to have a rough idea about Brahman. It is true that conceptual designations are denied of Supreme Reality. Still they are necessary means and aids to the human intellect and help in preparing the ground for self-realization. Though these *lakṣaṇa* cannot give us full picture of Reality, the 'hazy picture' got through them is highly essential as it is an index and pointer to the truth. Herein lies the importance of conceptualization and philosophical discourse.¹⁶

There are various descriptions concerning the nature of ultimate reality, i.e., Brahman, according to the different Vedānta Systems like *Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda*, Nimbārka's *Dvaitādvaitavāda*, Madhva's *Dvaitavāda*, Vallabhācārya's *Viśuddhādvaitavāda* and Ś'ri Caitanya's *Acintyābhedaḥedavāda*. All Vedānta systems attempt to discover the unity of all existence in the non-dual *Sat –cid- ānanda*. The schools of Vedānta differ only in their conception of the nature of that unity in its relationship with diversity.

When one tries to describe this Absolute, to express It in terms of thought and speech, It ceases to be the Absolute and becomes phenomenal. As such the descriptions given by different persons are likely to differ according to the standpoint or plane of consciousness from which they describe the Reality. All these descriptions are real so far as they go, for they are descriptions of the one Reality though they may differ among themselves even as the photographs of the sun taken from different distances by one who approaches it are real, being photographs of the same sun and yet they would vary from one another. The aspirants

are taken step by step to the ultimate truth, from dualism to qualified monism and finally to monism 'That thou art' is the last word of the upanisads in religion.

Knowledge of Brahman preaches the doctrine of non-duality and non-difference. Oneness of life and all existence is the message. Its assurance of joy, strength, faith and vision of life, its call for devotion, fellow-feeling and dedication are of momentous importance today. Discrimination between person and persons originates from our 'die-hard ignorance' our spiritual maturity makes us friends of humanity. It is our very spiritual impulse, if properly nurtured that helps us to abide by ethical principles. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'. -Said Jesus Christ. It is very practical as its central focus is on man who is the epitome of the universe. Man in Vedānta is divine. Self, *ātman* of Vedānta, is self-luminous, eternally pure and blissful.

The fruits of *brahmajñāna* are to attain *mokṣa* – spiritual freedom the masterword in Indian Philosophy. This spiritual attitude moulded by Vedānta has saved people from destruction. Vedānta which is possessed of this knowledge is essentially a value-oriented way of life and the view of life. Therefore knowledge of Brahman gives us a blue print of healthy values of living. Only the direct, immediate and intuitive experience of *Ātman* can make us perfectly happy. This experience is necessarily the greatest value in life. This concept of *Ātman*, the self of man, the immortality of soul is one of the greatest contributions of Vedānta to humanity.

From the above discussion we find the ultimate nature of Brahman. Advaitins preach us ultimate oneness of reality which is consciousness free from all determination. This consciousness is also the essence of this individual soul and so the greatness of an individual is emphasized in Advaita Vedānta. It gives us an accommodating doctrine about ultimate reality. Swami Vivekananda, a modern Advaitin, observes: 'There have been various interpretations of the Vedānta Philosophy and to my mind they have been progressive, beginning with the dualistic or Dvaita and ending with the non-dualistic or Advaita.'

Notes And References

1. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.1.1
2. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.2.18

3. *Bhagavadgītā* , II, 19-21
4. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* , Verse No. 134
5. *Brahma-sūtra bhāṣya* . 3.2.22: *tasmāt brahmanvssano'yam pratisedho* (i.e. *neti, neti*)
na abhavavasanaity adhyavasyamah.
6. *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1, P.22.
7. S'ankara's Commentary on *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* , 7.1.5 and also
Bṛahdāraṇyaka Upaniṣad , 4.5.18.
8. *S'rī - Bhāṣya* (Commentary on *Brahmasūtra*) of *S'rī Rāmānuja* , III.ii.11. Edited by
Swāmi Vireswarananda and Swami Adidebananda (Part-I&II), Advaita Ashrama.
Kolkata-700014.
9. *Bṛahdāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* , II.V.1.
10. *S'rī - Bhāṣya* (Commentary on *Brahmasūtra*) of *S'rī Rāmānuja* , III.ii.12-14, Edited
by Swami Vireswarananda and Swami Adidebananda (Part-I&II), Advaita Ashrama.
Kolkata-700014.
11. Ibid, III.ii.11-18.
12. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* , 2.1.
13. “*Yathā gandhavattvaṃ prthivilakṣaṇaṃ Mahā - pralaye paramāṇuṣūtpattikāle .*
diṣuca gandhābhāvāt
Prakṛte ca jagadjanmā ”. *Vedānta – Paribhāṣā* , Pancanan Bhattacarya (Trans. and
Interpreted), Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, Kolkata – 6., P.259.
14. *Tai. Upa.*, 3.1
15. *Kenopaniṣad* .
16. Raghunath Ghosh, ‘Does *svarūpalakṣaṇa* really reveal the essential characteristic of
Brahman’, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol., XXIV, No. 2, April 1997, P. 253-258.