

## The Saturated Self – The Vedantic Dilemma of Identity in Contemporary Life

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**Abstract :** The Vedantic systems of Advaita (Śaṅkara), Viśiṣṭādvaita (Rāmānuja), Dvaita (Madhva), Śuddha - Advaita (Vallabha) etc are the living systems of philosophy and religion in India. They have a large following. Their main advocacy is SELF or SELVES. What is this self? What is its true nature? What are its functions? – these are the questions that naturally arise in the thinking beings. All the philosophical systems, excepting the Cārvāka agree that self or soul is something which is non-physical or spiritual.

What is this self? It is, as already said, spiritual or non - physical. It is, as Bhagavad-Gītā says, is undivided and indivisible, hence indestructible; it cannot be burnt by fire; it cannot be made wet by water, because it is non-physical; it has no size or shape; hence it cannot be seen by the naked eye or even by a microscope, or any scientific instruments however sophisticated they may be. It is *sat* (existence), *cit* (consciousness) and *Ānanda* (bliss); that is *saccidānanda*. It exists in all the divisions of time – present, past and future; at no time it is not. It is conscious by itself and knows itself and everything by its conscious activity. In essence, it is without even a tinge of misery or sorrow or pain.

The self in itself is highly abstract; it expresses itself through the body, which in turn consists of mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), I-notion, (*ahamkāra*), vital air (*prāṇa*), five organs of knowledge (*jñānendriyas*), five organs of action (*karmendriyas*), five great elements (*mahābhūtas*) and five subtle elements (*tanmātras*). In short, twenty four principles go to constitute the human body; *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* being its three characteristics (*guṇas*). The whole body is otherwise called prakṛti. The self is called puruṣa which is independent of prakṛti or body. This is Sāṅkhya theory of self and not-self.

The present paper is an attempt at exploring *The Vedantic Dilemma of Identity in Contemporary Life*.

**Keywords:** vedāntic dilemma, identity, sāṅkhya theory, self, viśiṣṭādvaita, non-physical, *ānanda*

The Vedantic systems of Advaita (Śaṅkara), Viśiṣṭādvaita (Rāmānuja), Dvaita (Madhva), Śuddha-Advaita (Vallabha) etc are the living systems of philosophy and religion in India. They have a large following. Their main advocacy is SELF or SELVES. What is this self? What is its true nature? What are its functions? —these are the questions that naturally arise in the thinking beings. All the philosophical systems, excepting the Cārvāka agree that self or soul is something which is non-physical or spiritual.

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Śaṅkara equated the self (*Ātman*) with Brahman. Rāmānuja propounded that the self is different from Brahman but invariably inseparable from Brahman. Madhva advocates that the self is ontologically different from Brahman but entirely dependent on the latter; self is not one but many. For Vallabha, the self is a part of Brahman; as part, it is identical with Brahman; but appears as different owing to the limited manifestation of some aspects of Brahman.

Herein comes the question of identity and dilemmas of identity. This short paper enquires into Professor R. Balasubrahmanian's exposition of the nature and functions of multiple identities; the apparent plurality and diversity in society and so on.

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The self in itself is blissful; but in empirical life, it is associated with the body; the body provides worldly enjoyment (*bhoga*) to the self. Thus, the body is not the self but what provides enjoyment to the self; the self encased in the living body is called *jīvātman* (individual self), which is accepted by all the systems of Vedānta. The *jīvātman* thus appears to be bound and undergoes all trials and tribulations of empirical life. In short, it appears to be the knower (*jñātā*), the doer (*kartā*) and the enjoyer (*bhoktā*). It undergoes not only happiness (*Sukha*) but also sorrow, pain and suffering (*Duḥkha*). When compared to the amount of happiness in life, the amount of sorrow is immeasurable! The happiness of the birth of the body is invariably associated largely with the sorrowful death of the body. This cycle of birth and death goes on

and on with the consequent suffering. This, the Vedānta calls *Samsāra*. Is there no end to this *Samsāra*? Certainly there is, propound Vedāntic systems. It is called *Mokṣa* or *Mukti* (liberation or release). What is the means to *Mokṣa*? It is the knowledge of the Ultimate Reality (*jñāna*), in the form of analysis and constant meditation according to Śaṅkara; devotion (*bhakti*), *niṣkāma karma* (*disinterested action or work*) according to Rāmānuja, Madhva and Vallabha. Thus *Mokṣa* or liberation from the fetters of empirical life, is the be-all and end-all of *jīvātman*, according to all the systems of Vedānta. With these preliminary remarks, we may now enter into the domain of dilemmas of identity.

## 6

According to Advaita Vedanta, the individual self (*jīvātman*), in essence, to repeat, is identical with Brahman (*paramātman*)<sup>1</sup>. Though the self is one, it appears as many *jīvātman*s due to *ajñāna* or *avidyā* or *Māyā* (nescience or ignorance)<sup>2</sup>. Herein comes the question of identity. One self appears as many *jīvātman*s like J1, J2, J3, J4 etc. The self that is in J1, according to Advaita, is the same self that is in J2, J3 J4 etc. Hence J 1 is identical with J 2; and J 2 with J 3 and J 3 J4 and so on. The self exists as an unchanging element in every person or individual self (*jīvātman*). But how about the differentiating factor from the others?; In society we differentiate and recognise one from the other. How to solve this Gordian knot that has been bewildering and bewitching the society?

Differentiating by the name the parents have given to each *jīvātman*: Sita, Gita Mohan Ram, Shyam and the like. A particular name denotes a particular *jīvātman* alone and no one else! Though the self that is present in the bodies of all the *jīvātman*s is the same<sup>3</sup> the bodies are different in the sense of biological heredity and environment. From birth to adolence the body changes; there is physiological as well as psychological growth. Hence the differentiation and recognition of individual selves (*jīvātman*). Thus according to Advaita Vedanta, empirically speaking the world is full of multiple identities. Only transcendently there is ONE self!

## 7

According to Rāmānuja, the individual selves are many; they are not the same as Brahman<sup>4</sup>. They differ from each other in terms of degree of consciousness (*dharmabhūtajñāna*) and activities; they actually are different, diverse and atomic multiple identities taking active part in society, of course under the control of Brahman.<sup>5</sup>

According to Madhva also, individual selves are many; each is unique, distinct and particular; each is a focal point of existence (*sattā*), activity (*pravṛtti*) and knowledge (*pramiti*).<sup>6</sup> Each differs from the other in terms of eligibility (*yogyatā*) and takes part actively in the world as a multiple identity ordained and controlled by Brahman. No two individual selves are exactly alike and each is not the same as Brahman but ontologically different<sup>7</sup>. The world is flooded with celebrating multiple identities. This stand of Madhva reminds us of Leibnitz's theory of

monads.

Thus in Rāmānuja and Madhva the problem of dilemmas of identity of the *individual* selves gets dissolved as the latter are not ontologically one with Brahman in view of the fact that they are atomic in nature.

For Vallabha also the problem of the dilemmas of identity of individual selves gets solved in view of the fact that the individual selves are parts of Brahman<sup>8</sup> which pleased by Brahman become eligible to destroy sins by the grace of God or Brahman; it is the individual selves that seek and attain *Mokṣa*, the *summum bonum*.

It should be said that the Advaita Vedanta dilemma of identity gets further fixed by raising the problem of the locus of *avidyā* by Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta systems. However Professor R. Balasubrahmanian's able answers to the above mentioned objections by quoting later Advaitic views are worth considering.

### Notes and References

1. R. Balasubrahmanian: *Advaita Vedanta*, Madras University Publication, Second Chapter.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Sri Rāmānuja: *Vedārtha-Saṅgraha*, Eng. Trans, S. S. Raghavachar, Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, Bangalore
5. Ibid
6. Sri Madhva : *Srimad Vishnu Tattva Vinirnaya*, Eng. Trans., S.S. Raghavachar, Ramakrishna Ashram, Mangalore, 1971, pp. 71-72.
7. Ibid, p. 71.
8. C D Sarma. : *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*. Chapter on Vallabha Vedānta.