• CHAPTER V

MĀYĀ
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The doctrine of Māyā plays an important role in Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. Śaṅkara has introduced the doctrine of Māyā in order to interpret the world as appearance. But Śaṅkara is not original propounder of the doctrine of Māyā, he is an interpreter. He is the representative of the advaita view which involves the theory of Māyā. From the Vedas, through Upaniṣads, the Gītā and commentaries of ācāryas we find a great evolution in the concept of Māyā. The Rg Veda says that “Ekaṁ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti”(1-164-460). The Upaniṣads also declare that there is no duality, no multiplicity. There is only one Reality, which is Brahman. But it is true that we get a systematic explanation of Māyā only in Śaṅkara’s Vedānta.

According to Advaita philosophy all are identical with Brahman. Due to Māyā nobody can understand that he himself is Brahman. Māyā is very difficult to define. Māyā is anirvacaniya – indescribable. It cannot be explained. Māyā is not absolute zero. Māyā is not real because when one realizes one’s identity with Brahman, Māyā is cancelled. It is not unreal because the world appears and it is not absurd like a barren woman’s son. It is true that nobody knows why Māyā exists, but this much can be said that it exists.

In the words of A. K. Roychaudhury, “Māyā has been called the ‘pivotal principle’ of the Vedānta philosophy. It is the logical pendent to Śaṅkara’s doctrine of Brahman as the undifferentiated self – shining truth. Like Brahman, it is also beyond any ordinary proof. But it is an intelligible concept,
though accepted as an article of faith. With its help Śaṅkara seeks to establish that Nirguṇa Brahman alone is the reality. It explains the appearance of the manifold. Hence a clear idea of it is necessary for a proper appreciation of the Advaita system of metaphysics.”

According to Śaṅkara, Māyā is neither real nor unreal, neither being nor non-being. It is something inexplicable but it has the power to hide the reality from us, or make it appear different. A human being is meant to go beyond this avidyā and realize the Transcendental Truth, which is again immanent in all beings. Māyā is the inherent power of Brahman. It is absolutely dependent on and inseparable from Brahman. The relation of Māyā and Brahman is unique and is called tādātmya; it is neither identical nor different and nor both.

According to Śaṅkara the empirical world is the world of Māyā. We live and move in that world because of our ignorance. When we free from this avidyā or ignorance, the world of Māyā automatically disappears and we know the supreme Reality.

It is acknowledged by some scholars that Śaṅkara was gained by the doctrine of Māyā advocated by the upanisads, the Bhagavad Gītā and the Buddhism and then developed his own doctrine on the basis of them. In his commentary on Brahmāsūtra Śaṅkara takes the word Māyā in the sense of explicability, superimposition, subjective modification, all designating the

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1 A. K. Roychaudhury, The Doctrine of Maya, 1950, p 76
phenomenal appearance of the world in the background of Brahman.²

It is a fact that the theory of Māyā found in the Upaniṣads and Śaṁkara has elaborated this theory by the natural and legitimate interpretation of the Upaniṣads. R. D. Ranade has rightly pointed out in his ‘A constructive Survey of Upaniṣadic Philosophy’ regarding the origin of this doctrine of Māyā. Following Ranade, a few points may be mentioned here:

1. “Kaṭha says how people live in ignorance and thinking themselves wise, move about wandering, like blind men following the blind (1, 2, 4-5.).”

2. “Chhāndogya tells us that knowledge is power and ignorance (I, 1, 10.).”

3. “Brhadāraṇyaka tells us ‘as if there were a duality’ implying thereby that there is really no duality. Māyā is a semblance, an as-it-were, an appearance (II, 4, 14.).”

4. “Śvetāsvatara describes God as a Māyin who creates this world by His power (IV, 9.).”³

Sadananda in his ‘Vedānta Sāra’ bringing out the following characteristics of Māyā. He says, ‘Sadasadbhyāmanirvachaniyam trigunātmakam, jñānavirodhi bhāvarūpam yatkincititi’. Swami Nikhilananda translates Sadananda’s comments in this manner,

² Tapas Sankar Dutta, A study of The Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, 1982, p 27
³ C. D. Sharma, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, 2003, pp 29-30
“However, ignorance is described as something\(^4\) positive though intangible, which cannot be described either as being or non-being, which is made of three qualities and is antagonistic to knowledge. Its existence is established from such experience as “I am ignorant,” and from such Śruti passages as, “The power belonging to God Himself, hidden in its own qualities” (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.3.).\(^5\)

Positive is given in order to refute the fact that ignorance (bhavarupa) in the definition is mere negation, as it is antagonistic to knowledge. A. K. Roy Chaudhury states that ajñāna is not negation of knowledge but it is something like a positive entity. It is held by some that ajñāna is not positive, but negative. But the three possible ways in which such negative knowledge is conceivable are each untenable. The three ways and their criticism are as follows:

1. “Ajñāna may be understand as sākṣicaitanyā bhāva. In the Upanisads (Śvetāśvatara, VI.11) sākṣicaitanyā has been taken to mean knowledge, so its absence may be regarded as ajñāna. But the defect of this view is that the sākṣī being permanent, cannot be a counter-entity to negation.

2. Ajñāna may be regarded as the negation of antaḥkaraṇavṛtti (vṛtti jñānābhāva). Against this view we say that vṛtti or the mental mode has been called knowledge in a secondary sense only. Therefore its negation cannot be regarded as ajñāna in a primary sense. But it may be rejoined that vṛtti-

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\(^4\) The word ‘Something’ signifies ignorance as the source or cause of illusion.

\(^5\) Swami Nikhilananda, *Vedanta-Sūtra of Sadānanda*, 2006, p. 21
jnāna is knowledge proper in the primary sense of the term as Sāṁkhya holds. Our reply is that according to the Sāṁkhya view, the absence of vṛtti is nothing more than the original state (svaūpāvasthāna) or Buddhi which forms the material of vṛttis. So ever the Sāṁkhya cannot hold that the absence of mental modification is ajñāna.

3. According to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and others, ajñāna is nothing but a negative entity, being just the negation or absence of ajñāna or cognition.

As a matter of fact, it can be concluded that ajñāna is not negative of knowledge but a positive entity. The positivity does not stand for its absolute reality, because it is cancelled afterwords. It is called positive simply because it is not pure non-being like the barren woman’s son.

Sadananda says, “This ignorance is said to be one or many according to the mode of observing it either collectively.”

“As a forest, from the standpoint of the units that compose it, may be designated as a number of trees, and as reservoir from the same point of view may be spoken of as quantities of water, so also ignorance when denoting separate units is spoken of as many; as in such Śruti passages as, “Indra through Māyā appears as of many forms.” (Rg-Veda 6.47.48)

Māyā or avidyā has two aspects. One is the power of concealment (āvarana) and other the power of projection.

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6 A. K. Roychaudhury, *The Doctrine of Maya*, pp 78-79
7 *ibid.*, pp 80-81
8 Swami Nikhilananda, *Vedanta-Sāra of Sadānanda*, p 25
9 *ibid.*, p 29
(vikṣepa). Māyā conceals God which within us. God is always there, but because of the covering of Māyā we do not see Him. The other aspect of Māyā, its projecting power, causes us to see wrongly. Thus it can say that from the negative aspect Māyā conceals the real nature of Brahman and acts as a screen to hide it. In its positive aspect it gives rise to the illusion of name and form.

In this context A. K. Roy Chaudhury comments that "Avaraṇa and vikṣepa, however, are not to be understood as śakti. Vikṣepa being an effect, cannot be a śakti. Some potency is to be admitted in ajñāna so that such an effect can be brought about. Āvaraṇa, again, does not begin in time – it is anādi. So it cannot be regarded as an effect of ajñāna. Some sort of śakti or power is to be admitted in ajñāna for the functioning of this āvaraṇa. Ajñāna is the logical ground (prayojaka) of this beginning less veil. If there be no ajñāna, there will be no veil."\(^{10}\)

Neither the power of veiling the reality, nor that of projecting it upon the unreal can it any way affect the Lord. That is because the Lord is independent of both manifestation and annihilation. The Śruti says the Lord is endowed with Universal knowledge which constitutes the means of action. Veiling and projecting, creation and dissolution, alike rest in Him.\(^{11}\)

"In its vikṣepa phase it projects the aggregate of names and forms constituting the world. The function of āvaraṇa is to obscure the unity of Being; but since that unity is never concealed from Īśvara, Māyā in its āvaraṇa aspect is stated to be powerless

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10 A. K. Roychaudhury, *The Doctrine of Maya*, p 84
over him. Nature does not veil spirit for him. This sets a vast gulf between the Jīva and Isvara. It, in fact, accounts for the bondage of the one and the freedom of the other.”\textsuperscript{12}

Swami Atmapriyananda, a renowned scholar, says, “only the somehow issue has been pushed to Māyā, whose, nature is, well, who knows what, anirvacaniya; beginningless albeit with an end; indeterminable: neither real nor unreal, nor both at the same time, neither partless nor endowed with parts nor both at the same time; something (yatkiṇcit) of the nature of existence (bhāva-rūpaṁ). Māyā is thus described as the great wonder (mahādbhūta).”\textsuperscript{13}

Māyā cannot also be sadasat, because contrary qualities like being and non-being cannot simultaneously belong to the same thing. It should therefore be regarded as anirvacaniya (indeterminate). This does not mean that it is inexplicable in the sense that the human intellect is incompetent to describe it altogether. But it is indeterminate in the sense that it cannot be described either as sat or as asat or even as sadasat, but as something distinct form being and non-being.\textsuperscript{14}

A. K. Roychaudhury very beautifully explains the word Māyā lying the derivative meaning of the word. According to Roychaudhury, “The root of māyā is ‘mā’ meaning ‘to measure’ – the immeasurable Brahman appears as if measured. The root also means ‘to build’ leading to the idea of illusion or appearance (The

\textsuperscript{12} M. Hiriyana, \textit{Outlines of Indian Philosophy}, 1993, p 366
\textsuperscript{13} Swami Atmapriyananda’s article entitled ‘Understanding Vedanta in the light of Completeness vs Consistancy Questions in the Formalism of Mathematical Logic’, published in \textit{Vedantic Concepts and Application}, 2000, p 68
\textsuperscript{14} A. K. Roychaudhury, \textit{The Doctrine of Maya}, p 77
Doctrine of Māyā by P. D. Sastri, p 29. Dr. Sastri gives another fanciful derivation, māyā—mā yā i.e. that which is not—that which truly is not, but appears to be (ibid, p 30). It may also mean that which causes infatuation (moha).

Māśca mohārthavacanah yāśca prāpanavācakah
Tām prāpayati yā nityaṁ sā māyā parikītītā

(27th chap. of the Brahmavaivarta purāṇa, Śrīkṛṣṇa-janma khaṇḍa).”\(^\text{15}\)

T. M. P Mahadevan refers to sarvajñātma who gives a description of avidyā in terms of the various expressions used as its synonyms. It is ignorance or inertia which veils the pure consciousness and is the primordial cause of the universe. It is the indeterminable and envelops the absolute Self like a quantum of ghee in the blazing fire. Avidyā is termed darkness, dense darkness, inertness, blindness, sleep, deep-sleep, unreality, dissolution, and the oneness of the three constituents of prakṛti. Sarvajñātma justifies the characterization of avidyā as a positive entity.\(^\text{16}\)

According to T. M. P Mahadevan “it is the metaphysical superimposition that is called avidyā (nescience) by those who are learned. It is the cause of all evil. It makes the absolute Self as if subject time and other limitations. It renders the supreme bliss which is the self to feel miserable. But the saving truth is that even during the time of the superimposition, the Self is not really affected in the least by the characteristics of superimposed, i.e.,

\(^\text{15}\) ibid., p 84
\(^\text{16}\) T. M. P. Mahadevan, Superimposion in Advaita Vedanta, 1985, p 28
the not-self. It is the direct knowledge of this truth through the study of Vedānta that is called knowledge (vidyā).”

It is the nature of superimposition (adhyāsa). A synonym of the word Adhyāsa has been defined by Śaṅkara. ‘The apparent recognition of something previously observed in some other thing.’ As for instance, we find the appearance of silver in a mother-of-pearl or water in a mirage.

M. N. Roy in his article referred to Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya Book II, for the explanation of the doctrine of Māyā, which is as follows: “Brahman is associated with a certain power called Māyā or Avidyā, to which the appearance of this entire world is due. This power cannot be ‘being’, for being is only Brahman. Nor can it be called ‘non-being’ in the strict sense, for it at any rate produces the appearance of this world. It is in fact a principle of illusion: the undeniable cause, owing to which there seems to exist a material world. Māyā thus constitutes the Upādāna, the material cause of the world. Māyā belongs to Brahman as a Śakti. We may say that the material cause of the world is Brahman in so far as it is associated with Māyā.”

Māyā causes the differentiation. It ends with the cessation of Māyā. When Māyā is realised as unreal, the Aham (the differentiated ego) has been completely shaken off or effaced, so to speak. There is no trace of that Aham left behind. It is perfect Samādhi. It is absurd to say that Jagat (world) is unreal so long as

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17 ibid., p 5
18 Swami Nikhilananda, Vedanta-Sūra of Sadānanda, p 20
19 M. N. Roy’s Article entitled ‘Indian Philosophy and Radhakrishnan’ published in The Philosophy of Sarvapall Radhakrishnan, edited by Paul Arthur, p 553
all remain convinced that they themselves (their Aham) are real. A person who has not realised Brahman, cannot realised that the world is unreal.

It is a separate question that doctrine of Mâyā is acceptable or not, but there is no doubt that the doctrine of Mâyā is the central theme of Vedânta philosophy. “It is the logical pendent to Śaṅkara’s doctrine of Brahman as undifferentiated self-shining truth.”

Ramanuja vehemently criticize the doctrine of Mâyā as advocated by Sri Śaṅkara. According to Ramanuja, Śaṅkaraite doctrine of Mâyā or avidyā is vitiated by the following seven important charges (Saptadha Anupapatti):

1. Āśrayānupatti — What is the Locus or support of Mâyā? It cannot exist in Brahman because then the unqualified monism of Brahman would break down.

2. Tirodhanupatti — According to Śaṅkara Brahman is self-conscious and self-luminous subject. Ramanuja objects if Brahman is of the nature of self proved pure knowledge, ignorance or avidyā cannot conceal Brahman.

3. Svarūpānupapatti — The question may be asked, is Mâyā or avidyā positive or negative or both or neither? To call it as positive is to admit self contradiction. If ignorance is positive how can it be destroyed?

A. K. Roychauhdury, The Doctrine of Maya, p 76
4. **Anirvacanīyatvānupaptti** — It describes avidyā as indescribable is a sheer self contradiction. C. D Sharma has rightly commented, “How can a thing be neither real nor unreal? This is merely verbal juggling, reality and unreality are both exhaustive and exclusive. They are contradictories not contraries. Between themselves they exhaust all possibilities of predication. A thing must be either real or unreal. There is no third alternative.”

5. **Pramaṇānupaptti** — According to Ramanuja avidyā cannot be proved by valid cognitions or pramanas like perception, inference etc.

6. **Nivartakānupaptti** — The advaita supporters believe that knowledge of the unqualified attributeless Brahman sublets Avidyā but this is not possible. Both discrimination and determination are required for knowledge.

7. **Nivrtyānupaptti** — The Advaita Vedāntins say that Avibya is positive (Bhavarupa). Naturally the question arises, how can a positive thing be removed.

The real meaning of the vedāntic doctrine of Māyā is that all perceive the world to be real but actually it is not so. The world is real from the empirical point of view but from the spiritual and transcendental point of view it is unreal. Brahman alone is real. The manifestation of the cosmos is apparent and not real because the reality is one. So it is the objective of Vedānta to tear the veil of Māyā and let man see himself in reality.

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21 C. D. Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, p 359
Thus when insight into reality is gained, the veil of Māyā which is deceptive in character and also called avidyā or false knowledge vanishes. “Māyā has produced this universe with its multifarious names and forms and has drawn a veil, as it were, over the Reality behind the phenomenal world. When we are able to tear of this veil of Māyā, the real man will manifest himself and then we shall realize our true nature namely Brahman”.22

Brahman is the highest ideal of the Vedānta. Thibaut has rightly said, “.............the ultimate and absolute truth is the self which is one though appearing as many in different individuals. The world also as apart from us, the individuals has no reality and has no other truth to show than this self. All other events mental or physical, are but passing appearances, while the only absolute and unchanging truth underlying them all is the Self.”23

VIVEKANANDA’S INTERPRETATION OF MĀYA

It is acknowledged by the scholars that Vivekananda has borrowed the doctrine of Māyā from Advaita Vedānta but his interpretation of Māyā is not identical with the concept of Śaṅkara. Vivekananda has presented his own views on Māyā in a slightly modified form. He has delivered four Lectures on Māyā in London in 1896: (1) Māyā and Illusion (2) Māyā and the Evolution of the conception of God. (3)Māyā and Freedom (4) The Absolute and Manifestation.

22 Tapas Sankar Datta, A Study of the Philosophy of Vivekananda, 1982, p 30
23 Thibaut, Introduction to the Vedanta-Sūtra, p XIV
Like Advaita Vedānta Vivekananda did not say that the world is anirvacaniya, it is neither real nor unreal. He said that Māyā is a positive fact of experience. It means relativity. It means that the totality of our experience is a mixture of being and becoming, of existence and non-existence.

According to Advaita Vedānta, Māyā is the power which creates illusion, it is that Divine śakti which has the capacity to delude man into believing that the world is real. But Vivekananda did not accept the traditional meaning of the concept of Māyā, because down-trodden people did not understand this theory of Māyā. Then he interprets ‘Māyā’ as power of Brahman. it is a mixture of being and becoming.

According to Vivekananda, Māyā does not necessarily mean being illusory or unreal. In Vivekananda’s philosophy Māyā, is conceived just as a fact about the nature of the world, it seeks to express the essential characters of the world as it exists.24

In his first lecture, he mentioned the oldest idea of Māyā in Vedic literature where it is implied a kind of magic, illusion covering the Reality with a mist. Swami Vivekananda writes, “We read in the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, ‘Know nature to be Māyā and the Ruler of this Māyā is the Lord Himself.’ ....... The theory of Māyā was manipulated a little by the Buddhists too, but in the hand of the Buddhists it became very much like what is called idealism, and that is the meaning that is now generally given to the word Māyā. When the Hindu says the world is Māyā, at once people get the idea that the world is an illusion ......... But the

24 Basant Kumar Lal, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, 1978, p 17
Māyā of the Vedānta, in its last develop form, is neither Idealism nor Realism, nor is it a theory. It is a simple statement of facts-what we are and what we see around us.”

Vivekananda beautifully explains the entire picture of Māyā in the following lines: “Māyā is not a theory for the explanation of the world, it is simply a statement of facts as they exists, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that everywhere we have to move through this tremendous contradiction, that whenever there is good, there must also be evil, and whenever there is evil, there must be some good, wherever there is life, that must follow as its shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice versa.”

Thus it can be said that contradictions are not true, it only seems, harmony and oneness are true. If contradictions were true then there could not have been any harmony between to opposites.

Romain Rolland, the great French Savant comments, “Vedāntic Advaitism (that is to say, impersonal and absolute Monism), of which he is the greatest modern representative, declares that Māyā cannot be defined as non-existence any more than it can be defined as existence. It is an intermediate form between the equally absolute Being and non-Being. Hence it is the relative. It is not existence, for, says the Hindu Vedāntist, it is the sport of the Absolute. It is not non-Existence, because this sport exists, and we cannot deny it.”

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25 C.W., II, pp 88-89
26 ibid., p 97
27 Roman Rolland, The Life of Vivekananda: And The Universal Gospel, 2001, p 150
The brilliant expositions on the doctrine of Māyā is delivered by Swami Vivekananda in the course of his famous Jñānayoga lectures. He perceives the whole life is a contradiction, a mixture of being and becoming. These tremendous contradictions in our intellect, in our knowledge, yea, in all facts of our life face us on all sides. And this is Māyā. We are unable to find a solution of this problem, because the question cannot be logically formulated. There is neither how nor why in fact; we only know that it is and that we cannot help it. Even to grasp it, to draw an exact image of it in our own mind, is beyond our power. How can we solve it then? Māyā is a statement of the fact of this universe, of how it is going on.28

Māyā is a necessary principle of explanation of the problems as to how the ‘one’ appears as ‘many’. It is only influence for influence of Māyā. When we see the rope as snake, then we think that rope is the only truth. In this context Vivekananda says, “We see that when the snake exists in the mind the rope has vanished and when the rope exists, the snake has gone. When we see phenomenon, and phenomenon only, around us, noumenon has vanished, but when we see the noumenon, the unchangeable, it naturally follows that the phenomenon has vanished.”29

So long as all people are subject to ajñāna, they see Reality as it appears to them through Māyā. Meditation on Īśvara can make all free from ajñāna and remove the veil of Māyā.

28 C.W., II, pp 93-94
29 ibid., pp 332-333
Swamiji ultimately shows us the rays of hope for vanishing the veil of Māyā by the following words, “Māyā, instead of being a horrible, hopeless dream, as it is now, will become beautiful, and this earth, instead of being a prison-house, will become our play-ground; and even dangers and difficulties, even all sufferings, will become deified and show us their real nature, will show us that behind every-thing, as the substance of everything, He is standing, and that He is the one Real Self.”

Good and tendencies in us are both His Māyā. Ramakrishna spoke of vidyāmāyā and avidyāmāyā – the Māyā of knowledge and the Māyā of ignorance. “Avidyā deludes...vidyā begets devotion, kindness, wisdom, and love, which lead one to God.”

But a man can realize God if he takes shelter under His vidyāmāyā and follows the path of righteousness. He who knows God and realizes Him is able to go beyond māyā.

The noted scholar T. M. P Mahadevan referred to a citation from Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya (II,i,4) where it said that the knowledge of Brahma culminating in self realization has the tangible result in the form of removing nescience and leading of realize.

Suresvara refers to a verse which is replete with insightful devotion.

Vedāntodaravarti bhāsvadamalam dhvāntacchidasmaddhiyo
dīvyam jñānamatindriye 'pi visaye vyāhanyate na kvacit,

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32 ibid., p 893
33 T. M. P Mahadevan, Superimposition in Advaita Vedanta, 1985, p 74.
"Obseiance to the venerable Preeceptors who removed by the rod of logic our ignorance (darkness) which is the seed of the entire transmigration, who revealed to us the divine knowledge which resides in the heart of Vedānta, which is luminous and defectless, which annihilates the darkness of our intellect in regard to the supersensible Reality, and is in no way sublated."34

According to Vivekananda’s Vedānta the world of Māyā is to become the world of God’s līlā where the distinction between the finite and the infinite is removed. The four lectures of Vivekananda on Māyā are very essential – on the Vedāntic idea of Brahma satya jaganmithyā. Vivekananda says that Vedānta does not say that the world is false; it says that it is what it is, what all find it to be and all have there both misery and joy, sometimes more than joy. All have to live bravely, heroically and prepare themselves for a higher, spiritual life. Vedānta urges all to feel that we are not bound by Māyā, that it is not a shackle.35 Māyā cannot be ignored. If Māyā did not set us free, we cannot attain self-knowledge.

34 Naiśkarmya Siddhi IV, 77