

Śaṅkar's Concept About The "Nature of Self"

Sandhya Nandy

ABSTRACT

According to Śaṅkara the concept of self is equivalent to Brāhmaṇ. This unchanging self lies in the background and illumines transient, everyday perceptions, it is the "unknown knower", the self luminous witness of own delusively conceived individuation. When the self takes itself to be an embodied and conditioned agent, it is called the Jiva when embodied, a special sense organ, often called the aṅtaḥkarana is super imposed on the saksin; the antahkanana functions as an awareness or attention "mechanism" while special and subtle, the aṅtaḥkarana still lies in the sense and object realm the world of relation and discrimination.

It acts through and correlates other sense but ultimately it too is an inconstant and delusive adjunct of the self. Acharya Śaṅkara has logically proved that advaitavada is the central teaching of the upanisads and the self is nothing but Brāhmaṇ. His advaitavada which means spiritual non-dualism or absolutism has been the most logical and the most celebrated tradition in Indian philosophy.

Keywords: Self, Brāhmaṇ

Śaṅkara believes in unqualified monism. Śaṅkara's conception of the self is absolutely identical with Brāhmaṇ. The concept of self is nothing but Brāhmaṇ itself.

Indian system of Advaita Vedanta understands that Jiva or individual self is finite but has the potential to realize the whole. It is also the basic concept of advaita Vedanta that jivatma is Nitya Śuddha Buddha, Mukta in nature

Man is apparently composed of the body and the soul. But the body which we perceive is, like every other material objects merely an illusory appearance. For instance the case of the relation

of the knower and the known. They are opposed to each other like light and darkness. One is intelligence as such, the other is the intelligible. Hence there cannot be any identity between these two principles. Their attributes also cannot be imported into each other. Therefore, the superimposition of the object and its attributes on the subject and vice versa ought to be regarded as a logical impossibility. Yet it is nature on the part of man to identify the two and to superimpose the attributes of the one on the other. In asserting that the body is mine or the mind is mine, the self identifies itself with the body or the mind. Again in

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Raja N.L. Khan Women's College, Midnapore, West Bengal, India.

declaring that I am lame or I am blind, the self fails to distinguish itself from the senses. But neither the body, nor the mind, nor even the senses can really be the self. Seers and sages are pure in mind and their intelligence is free from turbidity. The eternal varieties appear before their settled vision in unsettled form. And they have declared that the soul is pure intelligence and bliss.

Various systems of Indian philosophy have their own observations regarding self through all the systems of Indian philosophy recognized self as the ultimate real. But there is a difference of opinion regarding the nature of self. Their views are as follows

The cārvāka atheist maintains that the self is no other than the body and it is the body that thinks, feels and wills. The body formed by the material atoms is to be regarded as conscious. And this conscious body is the self-consciousness as a quality of the body arises out of the four kinds of atoms (Earth, water, air, fire) in the same way as intoxicating properties are generated by the mixture of ingredients which by themselves, are not inebriating. Consciousness is destroyed with the dissolution of the body. The body is thus an inalienable factor for consciousness which is not possible in disembodied state. So, the existence of the self as a spiritual entity and as distinct from the body cannot be admitted. There is another proof in favour of the causal relation between matter and consciousness. In medical literature it is described that the properties of particular preparations of food and drink e.g. Brahmighrta result in the development of the intellectual powers.

In criticism of the cārvāka materialist vātsyāyana observes that if the body be regarded

as conscious then the different parts of the body such as hands, legs, feet, etc. or its constituent atoms must be admitted to possess consciousness.

Vācaspati writes in his Bhamati that no action can be performed by a body which has different knowers because the knowers have often different motives. It can not be said that they must always have a unity of purpose. Further the body as a whole will be in danger of losing its solidarity, if the different parts or knowers move in opposite directions.

Udayana points out in his kusumāñjali (1/15) that if the body be the substratum of consciousness, then the phenomenon of memory will remain inexplicable. Because the body of a child is totally different from the body of a youth, as the growth of the body unmistakably shows. So it is to be admitted that the combination of further atoms is responsible for the development of the body. Where the body is identical with the self the present body of a young person would not remember the events cognized in childhood; since the present body being absent in childhood, so, the present body, though different from the past one, can remember the objects apprehended by the past body. But this is wholly untenable. For the impressions, being devoid of motion, cannot be transferred from one body to another. Therefore it cannot be said by the cārvāka that memory is an attribute of the body and the body is that which remembers the past.

The cārvāka, however rejoins that it is not the body as a whole it is consciousness. So there is no difficulty in the remembrance of past events. In reply to the cārvāka vardhamāna in his commentary on the identical passage of the kusumāñjali points

out that the atoms being devoid of gross magnitude or perceptible dimensions are super sensible. For this reason the attributes pertaining to the atoms cannot be perceived. Hence if consciousness be admitted to be an attribute of the atoms, it cannot be directly known. But there is internal consciousness of conscious itself. The assertions in the form of 'I know', 'I am happy' etc. clearly show that there is direct consciousness of consciousness.

Other think that the self or the knower is nothing but the organs of sense, during sleep and in the presence of or activity of the senses, the work of consciousness goes on; it is therefore inferred that the senses are the self on the psychological reality. But this also is absurd.

The fact that an object is perceived by the different senses probes that the self is not the sense. For example 'I am blind', 'I am deaf' and to be regarded as erroneous. So the self is not the senses. Some think that the vital impulse as the organic sensibility (prāna) is the self. But prāna is not the self.

Someone thinks that the mind (or the mānās) as the self or the knower. But the mind is an organ of internal perception of pleasure and pain and so it can not be taken as the knower.

The jainas hold that the self is of intermediate dimension i.e. neither infinitesimal nor infinite. The dimension of the self is invariably associated with the eternity or no eternity of the self. If the self be of madhyama-parimana, it is bound to be non-eternal. According to them consciousness is a quality of the self. The jaina assumption that the self is madhyama-parimana is thus untenable.

The Jainas believe in the transmigration of

souls. But does not the soul, owing to Karma, take different bodies and suffers.

The Buddhist conception of the self as a series of sensations and feelings (Vijñāna & Antama) tenable because it cannot account for the consciousness of the self as a permanent entity.

According to Nyāya the pure self is a simple, permanent ubiquitous, spiritual substance. The self is not an attribute. It is a substance that exists by itself.

According to Kumāṛila, the soul is an active, permanent, omnipresent being which is the substratum of consciousness. It is distinct from cognition, the body and the senses. The activity of the soul is proved by the fact that it is the doer of sacrifices unlike the Vaiśeṣika, the Mimamsaka does not think that activity always consists in motion. Motion is impossible in an Omnipresent being. The soul's activity rather consists in directing the body for the performance of acts. Without its inciting activity bodily motion will not be possible at all.

The soul is the abode of consciousness. Consciousness cannot be a special attribute of the body; since the special attributes of the body are co-present with it. They vanish only with the destruction of the body. But consciousness is not co-existent with the body. So the soul is distinct from the physical body.

Kumāṛila holds that the self is ubiquitous. It can not be atomic. It does not stand to reason that after death when the soul assumes a new body, it will contract or expand accordingly. Moreover, if it possesses dimensions of the body, it will consist of parts; and consequently it will be transitory. Therefore the soul is not of limited magnitude but

all pervading. An all pervading substance is necessarily without parts and an indivisible entity cannot but be eternal.

According to Kumārila the self can be known by the mind as an object in the form of 'I'. It is an introspected datum of experience. But it may be objected that the self or the knower cannot be the known too. For the agent and the object of an act cannot be the same entity. The subject of knowledge cannot turn round and catch itself. The self being the seat of knowledge cannot also be the object meant by it.

Prabhākara's views with regard to the self are different from those of Kumārila. He denies that the self can be known as an object of cognition. The expression 'I know myself' is used only in a figurative sense. The soul is naturally unconscious but it becomes the substrate of consciousness. It is present as a necessary factor in every state of consciousness which is self-luminous. So the self cannot be cognized as the substrate of cognition. Rather it is known as an object of introspection.

According to the Sāṅkhya-Yoga, puruṣa or the self is different from body and the senses, the mind and the intellect. It is not anything of the world of objects and is above the whole material world. It is neither the body nor the brain, nor the aggregate of conscious states. The self is the conscious subject of experience and can never become an object of knowledge. It is not a substance with the attribute of consciousness, but it is pure consciousness itself.

According to Rāmānuja, the self of man is limited and finite like his body. The body is made of matter which is a part of God. The soul is, of

course, not made; it is eternally existing. But being a part of God, it cannot be infinite. Nor can it be said to have a medium dimension which things composed of parts (such as tables and chairs) have, for then it would be liable to destruction. Therefore, the soul is infinitely small (anu) and not infinite or all-pervasive. But being very subtle (Śukṣma) it can penetrate into every material substance and in this sense is described by the Upanisads as all-pervasive.

Consciousness is not the essence of the self as held in the Advaita Vedānta. It is an essential and, therefore, eternal quality of the soul and it remains under all conditions. In dreamless sleep and even in the state of liberation, when the soul is altogether disembodied, the soul remains conscious of itself as 'I am'. The self is, therefore, identified by Rāmānuja with what we call the 'I' (aham), or the ego.

As for the relation between God and the self of man, Rāmānuja thinks that there is identity of essence and difference in form between them. The soul is finite and imperfect. As such, it cannot be identical with God in every respect. At the same time, man is not different from God in the sense that God pervades and controls man as well as every other thing of the universe. Just as the existence of a part is inseparable from the whole, that of a mode or quality from its substance, so the existence of man is inseparable from God. In this sense there is identity between the soul and God. It is true that identity cannot be asserted between two altogether different terms; but it is also meaningless to assert any identity between exactly identical terms; because it would be a needless tautology. Identity can

be asserted' between two forms of the same substance. In the Upanisadic text 'That thou art' (Tat tvam asi), the identity that is asserted is, therefore, between God with certain qualification (i.e. as man) and God with certain other qualification (i.e. as Brāhmaṇ); it is the identity of the same substance-existing in two different forms.

The soul is not identical with the body, but is really a part of God who controls it from within. But when under the influence of its karma or ignorance, the soul identifies itself with the body and regards it as itself, it becomes subject to the limitations of the body and is in bondage.

He who realises God is liberated from all bondage to the body for ever. But liberation is not the soul's becoming identical with God. The liberated soul having pure consciousness become similar to God (Brahmaprakāra). Free from ignorānce and bondage of every kind, the liberated soul enjoys infinite joy born of complete communion with God.

According to Śaṅkara When this is realized, the reality that remains in the soul which is nothing other than Brāhmaṇ. The meaning of "That thou art!" It is the supreme Brāhmaṇ the self luminous infinite, consciousness. The soul appears as the limited, finite self because of its association with the body which is a product of ignorānce.

Due to ignorance the soul erroneously associates itself with the body gross subtle. This is called bondage. In this, it forgets that it is really Brāhmaṇ. It behaves like a finite, limited, miserable being which runs after transitory worldly objects and is pleased to get them, sorry to miss them. It identifies itself with a finite body and mind

(aṅtahrana) and thinks 'I am lame,' I am ignorant. Thus arises the conception of the self as the 'Ego' or 'I' so the ego is not, the real self but is only an apparent limitation of it.

'Āsmarathya' regards the empirical self as partly different and partly non different from Brāhmaṇ, even as the sparks are partly different and partly non different from a fire. As the sparks issuing from a fire are not absolutely different from it because they both are of the nature of fire and on the other hand, are not absolutely non-different from it, because in that case they could be distinguished neither from it nor from one another. So the empirical selves also are neither absolutely different from Brāhmaṇ. Because they both are of the nature of consciousness, non-absolutely non-different from Brāhmaṇ. The consciousness of the self in bondage is limited.

Audulomi regards the individual self as different from Brāhmaṇ, when it becomes impure in contact with the adjuncts of body sense-organs, mānās and buddhi. But he regards it as non-different from Brāhmaṇ when it is divested of the limiting adjuncts by right knowledge and meditation. The bound self is different from Brāhmaṇ, while the liberated self is non-different from Brāhmaṇ. The self loses its individuality and realizes its identity with Brāhmaṇ in the state of liberation.

When a man is awake, he thinks himself identifies with the gross body, as well as with the internal and external organs. When he falls asleep and dreams, he is still conscious of objects that arise from memory impressions and therefore, the feeling of his limitation as a subject or knower opposed to objects still persists there. When he

has deep dreamless sleep, he ceases to have any ideas of objects. In the absence of objects he ceases to be a knower as well. The polarity of subject and object, the opposition between the knower and the known, vanishes altogether. He no longer feels that he is confined to and limited by the body. But yet consciousness does not cease in dreamless sleep; for otherwise how could we remember at all on awaking from sleep that we had such a state? How could we report? I had peaceful sleep had no dreams, if we were unconscious then?

The study of dreamless sleep gives us a glimpse of what the self really is when dissociated from its feeling identity with the body. The soul in its intrinsic state is not a finite, miserable being. It does not separate itself from the rest of existence and does not limit itself by a feeling of the 'I' (aham) opposed to a 'thou' or 'this' or 'that'. It is also free from all worries that arise from hankering after objects. The self really then is unlimited consciousness and bliss.

Kāśakṛtna regards the empirical self as identical with Brāhmaṇ. The empirical self is not different from immutable God or Brāhmaṇ, they related to each other as effect and cause since the former depends upon the latter.

Audulomi looks upon difference and non-difference of the empirical self from Brāhmaṇ as due to different conditions. It is different from Brāhmaṇ in the state of bondage, and non-different from Brāhmaṇ in the state of liberation.

Kāśakṛtna's view accords with the Sruti which says 'That-thou-art'. The empirical self is identical with Brāhmaṇ. If it is not a modification, since if it were so, it would be merged in prakṛti or maya in dissolution, and would not be immortal. So the

names and forms which subsist in the adjuncts, are attributed to the empirical self. Its origin from Brāhmaṇ like that of the sparks issuing from fire is really the origin of its limiting adjuncts.

Śāṅkara adopts Kaśakṛtna's view. There is no ontological difference between the individual self and Brāhmaṇ. Their difference is empirical due to the limiting adjuncts of body, sense, manas and buddhi produced by nescience. The purity of indeterminate Brāhmaṇ is the real nature of the empirical self whose enjoyments sufferings and the like are its accidental nature due to its limiting adjuncts.

Śāṅkara does never think that the existence of the self (ātman) needs to be proved by any argument. The self is self-manifest in everyone. Everyone believes that He exists, and never thinks I am not. But there are so many different kinds of meaning, attached to 'I' or 'self' that it requires a good deal of analysis and reasoning to find out what the self really is.'

The empirical self is not a part of Brāhmaṇ, since Brāhmaṇ is devoid of parts. It is not a modification of Brāhmaṇ, since Brāhmaṇ is unchangeable. Brāhmaṇ, the eternal, transcendental consciousness, is the substratum of the empirical selves and the entire empirical universe, which cannot exist apart from it.

Analysis of the meaning of 'I' shows pure consciousness to be the essence of the self. The word 'I' seems sometimes to imply the body e.g. I am fat, sometimes a sense e.g. I am blind, sometimes a motor organ e.g. I am lame, sometimes a mental faculty e.g. 'I am foolish', sometimes consciousness e.g. I know. Which of these should be taken to be the real essence of the self?

To determine this we have to remember the true criterion of reality. The reality or the essence of a thing is, as I saw previously, that which persists through all its states. The essence or the reality behind the world of objects was found, in this way, to be pure existence because while other things about the world change and persists this always reveals itself in every state. The different particular and changing forms of consciousness can be shown, from their contradictory natures to be mere appearances in this same was as the different forms of existence were shown to be so before.

This conclusion is further supported by the linguistic expressions 'my body', 'my sense' my intellect etc. which show that the self can alienate it self from these (body, sense etc.) and treat them as external objects distinct from itself. So I can say my consciousness does not really imply distinction between self and consciousness.

Comparison of the three states namely walking, dreaming and dreamless sleep again shows pure consciousness to be the essence of the self. This shows again that the essence of self is pure consciousness without necessary relation to object. So there is no reason to think that consciousness is produced by the relation of the self to objects through some proper medium. The self is in intrinsic nature isolated from all objects, as it is dreamless sleep, is found to have blissful or peaceful existence. Consciousness in that state is bliss.

Brāhmaṇ the infinite existences-consciousness is the only reality that constitutes the self and the external world. Brāhmaṇ is also found to be bliss or joy, since, the state of dreamless sleep exhibits the intrinsic nature of the self, pure objectless

consciousness, to be identical with bliss so we can say Brāhmaṇ is pure consciousness the ground of both the self and the external world.

Maya or Avidya the principal of limitation and multiplication of the one Brāhmaṇ into many selves. The individual selves (jiva) can then be imagined metaphorically as but the reflection (Pratibimba) of the infinite consciousness on the finite mirror of ignorance (Avidya) and compared to one of the many reflections of the moon cast on different receptacles of water. Just as there the reflection varies with the nature of the reflecting water, appearing clear or dirty, moving or motionless, according as the water is of one nature or another similarly does the human self the reflection of the infinite, vary with the nature of the avidya. I saw previously that the human body gross and subtle is the product of ignorance and the mind (the antahkaraṇa) is one of the elements composing the subtle body. The mind is thus a product of avidya.

The attempt to understand the appearance of individual souls on the analogy of images is called the theory reflection (pratibimba vada). There is no distinction between objects and objects, souls and souls, since all are of bottom the same pure existence. What is illusory here is only the limitation, the finitude imposed on reality by ignorance. Every soul, even when supposed to be limit, is really nothing other than Brāhmaṇ. Liberation consists only in breaking the illusory barriers. This alternative explanation is known as the theory of limitation (Avacchedaka - Vāda).

We thus see that the self is regarded in vedanta as well as the views of sankaara that the eternal infinite, indivisible, self –luminous,

undifferentiated being-conscious-bliss. Being – conscious- bliss are not the determinations of the self. The self cannot be concerned as a substance possessed of attributes.

Therefore the self must be all pervading. And useless to posit many all-pervading selves, when are self can easily explain. The distinct feeling of pleasure and pain in so-called different selves by resorting to the different adjuncts (aṅtahrakana) of the all pervading self.

References:

- Ray Chaudhuri, Anil Kumar, 1955, *Self and Falisity (1st ed.) India*: Progressive publishers (Chapter 1,11,111 of Part -I), Calcutta.
- O. Fort, Andrew, 1990, *The Self and its states (1st ed.)*. India, Motilal Barnarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi.
- Mudgal, S.G, 1975, *Advaita of Sāṅkara A Reappraisal (1st ed.)*, India. Motilal Bararsidass, Varanasi.
- Grimes, John, 1990, *The seven Grant Untenables (1st ed.)*. India. Motilal Barnarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Bangalore.
- Tiwari, N, Kapl. 1977, *Dimensions of Renunciation in Advaita Vedanta, (1st ed.)*. Indian: Motilal Barnarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Patna.
- Sharma, Chandradhar, 1983, 1996, Revised, 2007, *The Advaita Tradition in Indian Philosophy (1st ed.)*, (Revised ed.). India :Motilal Barnarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi.
- Kumar Lal, Basant.,1978, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy (2nd ed.)*, Motilal Barnarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Varanasi.