



THE CONCEPT OF MĀYĀ:AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The concept of *Māyā* i.e. illusion is a fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy, notable in the *Advaita* (Nondualist school of Vedānta). *Māyā* forms one of the pillars of the *Vedānta* Philosophy, generally is interpreted as to mean illusion. It has multiple meanings in Indian Philosophies depending on the context. *Māyā* originally denoted the magic power with which a God can make human beings believe in worldly existence to be an illusion. *Māyā* is the manifestation of the world. The description is enormous in Vedanta philosophy. But a small attempt is done here to analyse the concept in a nutshell.

Keywords : *Om, Vyāna, Meditation, Upāsanā, Māyā, Vidyā, Avidyā, Ātman, Bhraman, Vidyā, Udgītha, Prāṇa.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Upaniṣads* are the rich source of knowledge. The word *Upaniṣad* is derived from the root √ *sad* – to sit, with two prepositions “*upa*” and “*nī*” which means sitting close. That means the Pupil sitting near the teacher for the purpose of a secret communication there for synonym of *Upaniṣad* also called *Rahasyam* or *rahasyavidya*. The *Upaniṣad* is also called the *BrahmaVidyā* or science of *Brahman* which narrates the ultimate reality of life. The *Upaniṣads* play a vital role to teach the secrets of the Vedic wisdom and popularised as *Brahmavidya* among all the *Upaniṣads*. These *Upaniṣads* are the treasure house of knowledge and eradicates the darkness of ignorance. The major part of the *Upaniṣads* described about *Brahma Upāsanā* and directed the pupils to realise it. The concept of *Māyā* is again very strange to understand as it is described in many ways. *Māyā* pre-exists and co-exists with *Brahman*-the ultimate principles of consciousness. *Māyā* is perceived reality, one that does not reveal the hidden principles, the true reality.

II. VEDIC IDEA OF MĀYĀ

In the *Rgveda* the chief meanings assigned to the word ‘*Māyā*’ are power (*prajñā*, (knowledge) and deception (*kapaṭa*). The power as it is mentioned here it does not mean any physical power but a mysterious power of the will. In the other way we can say it as *sankalpa śakti* or *icchā śakti*. The word *Māyā* is derived from ‘*mā*’ to measure or by which is measured, meaning there by, that illusive projection of the world by which the immeasurable *Brahman* appears as if measured. The same root gives further the sense of ‘to build’ leading to the idea of appearance or illusion. Therefore the word *Māyā* meant in the *RgVeda* supernatural power, mysterious will-power, wonderful skill and that the idea of the underlying mystery, illusion or magic being more and more emphasized later on till in the time of *śaṅkara* when it was firmly established. In other word we can say ‘*mā*’ not and ‘*yā*’ this i.e not what is seen, an expression implying illusion that which gives the impression of being something it is not.

RgVeda does not connote the word *Māyā* as always good or always bad. It is simply a form of technique, mental power and means. *RgVeda* uses the word in two contexts, implying that there are two kinds of *Māyā*, divine *Māyā* and undivided *Māyā* the former being the foundation of truth, the latter of falsehood.

In Vedic mythology, *Māyā* is used in the sense to conquer. *Vritravarṇna*’s supernatural power is called *Māyā*, In such example it connotes powerful, magic, which both *devas* (Gods) and *Asuras* (demons) used against each other. In the *Yajurveda*, *Māyā* is unfathomable plan. In the *Aitreya Brāhmaṇa*, *Māyā* is also referred to as *Dirghajivi* hostile to gods and sacrifices. The *Atharvaveda* described the primordial woman *Virā*¹ (chief queen) and how she willingly gave the knowledge of food, plants, agriculture husbandry, water, prayer, knowledge, strength, inspiration, concealment, charm, virtue, vice to gods, demons, men and living creatures, despite all of them making her life miserable. *Viraj* is used by *Asuras* (demons) who called her as *Māyā* as follows -:

She rose. The *Asuras* saw her. They called her cry was ‘come to *Māyā*’ ‘come thou hither’

Her Cow was Virochan Prahardi. Her milking vessel was a pan of iron.

Dvimurdha Artavya milked this *Māyā*.

The *Asuras* depend for life on *Māyā* for their sustenance.

One Who knows this, becomes a fit supporter (of gods)²

The contextual meaning of *Māyā* in *Atharvaveda* is ‘power of creation’. Not illusion. Gonda suggests the central meaning of *Māyā* in Vedic literature is, ‘Wisdom and power enabling its possessor, or being able itself, to create, devise, contrive, effect, or do something. *Māyā* stands for anything that has real, material form human or non-human, but that does not reveal the hidden principles and implicit knowledge that creates it. In *R̥gveda* it is given an illustrative example³ which is also mentioned in *AtharvaVeda* where Indra is invoked against the *Māyā* of sorceres appearing in the illusory form like a *pseudo type* of animals to trick a person⁴.

III. MĀYĀ IN UPANIṢADS

The *Upaniṣads* describe the universe and the human experience, as an interplay of *Puruṣa* (the eternal, unchanging principle, consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (the temporary, changing material world, nature). The former manifests itself as *Ātman* (Soul, Self), and the latter as *Māyā*. The *Upaniṣads* refer to the knowledge of *Ātman* as ‘true knowledge’ (*Vidyā*) and the knowledge of *Māyā* as ‘not true knowledge’ (*Avidyā*, Nascence, lack of awareness, lack of true knowledge). The *Māyā* is ‘the tendency to imagine something where it does not exist for example, *Ātman* with the body. To the *Upaniṣad*, knowledge include empirical knowledge and spiritual knowledge, complete knowing necessarily includes understanding the hidden principle that works, the realization of the soul of things.

The term *Māyā* has been translated as ‘illusion’ but then it does not concern normal illusion. Here ‘illusion’ does not mean that the world is not real and simply a fragment of the human imagination. *Māyā* means that the world is not as it seems; the world that one experiences is misleading as far as its true nature is concerned.

It is also explained as ‘the world is both real and unreal because it exists but is ‘not what it appears to be. So universe is an illusion is not to say that is unreal. *Māyā* not only deceives people about the things they think they know; more basically it limits their knowledge. There are some cases in the *Upaniṣad* which, judged by all external and internal criteria claim a higher antiquity than other; as for example the chapter of the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, where Yājñavalkya’s views of the universe are developed⁵.

We saw how as early as the later hymns of the *R̥gVeda* the thought was introduced, which here as always marks the first step in philosophy, the thought of the unity of existence.⁶ It involves, if only in germ and half unconsciously, the knowledge that all plurality consequently all proximity in space, all succession in time, all interdependence of cause and effect, all contrast of subject and object has no reality in the highest sense. When it is said in *R̥gveda ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*, ‘the poets give many names to that which is only one⁷’. It is implied there in that plurality depends solely upon words (‘a mere matter of words’, as it is said later,⁸ and that unity alone is real. In the attempt also to define more closely this unity, as we have traced it through the period of the hymns and the *Brāhmaṇas*, the thought more or less clearly finds expression that it is not plurality that is real, but only unity; - ‘the one who besides which there was no other⁹’, the one, inserted into the everlasting nave, in which all living beings are fixed¹⁰. When also it is said - ‘this entire universe, in all past and future¹¹’ it is implied that in the entire universe, in all past and future, the one and only *Puruṣa* is the sole real. The common people however do not know this; they regard as the real not the stem, but ‘that which he is not, the branches that conceal him¹²’ for that ‘in which gods and men are fixed like spokes in the nave,’ the ‘flower of the water’ (i.e. *Brahman* as *Hiranyagarbha*), ‘is concealed by illusion’¹³.

However as the conception of the *ātman* of the universe, the ‘great omnipresent *ātman*,¹⁴ which is ‘greater than heaven space and earth,¹⁵’ was attained, that which as not-self was excluded from the *ātman* was by that very fact excluded from the sum of being, and therefore from reality. This cosmic *ātman* moreover, which admits no reality outside of itself, was at the same time present, small as a grain of rice, whole and undivided in a man’s own self; and this identity of the cosmically and the psychical principle was always visibly preserved by the word *ātman*: -the self in us is the path finder of the great omnipresent *ātman*¹⁶. Therefore the trace of the universe, which is the *ātman* here (in us), for in it man recognises the entire universe. Hence is this dearer than a son, dearer than a kingdom, dearer than all else; for it is closer than all.

Yājñavalkya is found in the discourses with his wife Maitreyī, the high antiquity of which is testified both on internal grounds and by the double recessions of it, in two collections which antedated our *Upaniṣad*, and were first united with it at a later period. Yājñavalkya begins his instruction with the sentences: - ‘In truth not for the husband’s sake is the husband dear, but for the self’s sake is the husband dear ‘the same is then asserted, with constant repetition of this formula, of wife, sons, kingdom, *Brāhmaṇa* and warrior castes, world regions, Gods, living creatures, and the universe; they are all dear, not on their own account, but for the sake of the self. So the consciousness, and the knowing subject are within us and the thought is that all objects and relation of the universe exist for us, and are known and loved by us only in so far as they enter into our consciousness, which comprehends in itself all the objects of the universe, and has nothing outside of itself.

Therefore it is said further: - “the self in truth we should comprehend, should reflect upon. He who has seen, heard, comprehended and known the self, by him this entire universe is known.” As the notes of a drum, a conch shell or a lute have no existence in themselves, and can only be received when the instrument that produces them is struck, so all objects and relations of the universe are known by him who knows the *ātman*. In the *ātman* as the knowing subject space with all its contents is inter-woven; all the heavenly regions are its organs; the universe of names forms and works,” although it is threefold is one, that is the *ātman*”; he is the immortal, which is concealed by the (empirical) reality, he is the reality of reality; from him spring forth, as sparks from the fire, all the vital spirits, all world, all gods, all living creatures; in him they all are fixed, like spokes in the nave of a wheel;” he oversteps in sleep this universe, and the forms of death” only “as it were” he plans and moves; only “as it were” is there a duality; he stands as spectator alone and without a second. ¹⁷

In *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* it is narrated that unheard becomes heard, the uncomprehended becomes comprehended and the unknown becomes known. The *ātman* as holding apart the phenomenal forms of the universe, as it was condensed in the description of the *ātman* as “the bridge that holds apart from one another. The concept of *Māyā* appears in numerous *Upaniṣad*. The *Brahman* (supreme soul is the hidden reality, nature is magic, *Brahman* is the magician, human being are infatuated with the magic and thus they create bondage to illusions, and for freedom and liberation one must seek true insights and correct knowledge of the principles behind the hidden magic

IV. MĀYĀ AS EMPIRICAL FORMS

The *ātman* is the knowing subject in us. So it follows immediately: -(i) that the *ātman*, as the knowing subject, is itself always unknowable; (ii) that there is not and never can be for us reality outside of the *ātman*. Both consequences are recognised and clearly mentioned. They mark the climax of the philosophical conceptions of the *Upaniṣad*, the first for the theology, the second for cosmology and together they seem to bar any further progress in philosophical thought. The inquiring mind of man could not however rest here; in spite of the non-knowledge of the *ātman*, it proceeded to treat the *ātman* (i.e. God) as an object of knowledge; and in spite of unreality of the universe outside of the *ātman* it proceeded to concern itself with the universe as though it were real. This gave rise in theology to numerous methods of representing the *ātman* by the help of metaphor, and these, though they are based upon an inadmissible drawing of the *ātman* down into the sphere of human knowledge, and are resolved again into it. The fundamental doctrine is thus clothed in the empirical forms of knowledge which are innate within us and assert their right; while the metaphysical dogma is gradually more and more superseded by empirical intellectual methods. In this way is originated a series of conceptions which are the original idealism into the theories of pantheism, cosmogonism, theism and atheism.

- (1) **Idealism.**-The *ātman* is the sole reality; with the knowledge of it all is known; there is no plurality and no change. Nature which presents the appearance of plurality and change is a mere illusion [*Māyā*].- the change is in the worldly existence.
- (2) **Pantheism.**-The universe is real, and yet the *ātman* is the sole reality, for the *ātman* is the entire universe. The pantheism of the later philosophy has been developed as an inevitable consequence from the theism of the Middle Ages; the pantheism of the *Upaniṣads* is founded on the attempt to assert the doctrine of the sole reality of the *ātman* over against the obtrusive reality of the manifold universe.
- (3) **Cosmogonism.**- The identity of the *ātman* and the universe could never be more than a mere assertion. In order to make it intelligible, a further step was necessary which transformed empirical methods of regarding things into metaphysical by substituting for an identity, perpetually asserted but never comprehensible, the relation of causality that experience had made familiar, and by conceiving that *ātman* as cause, which produced the universe form itself as effect. After creating the universe the *ātman* enters into as soul. The self, the soul in us, is identical with the doctrine of a creation of the universe out of the *ātman*.
- (4) **Theism.**-When a distinction is drawn between the *Ātman* as creator of the universe and the *ātman* entering into the creation, i.e. between the Supreme and the individual soul. They are opposed, at first insensibly, as light and shadow then with ever – increasing clearness, until the complete theism.
- (5) **Atheism.**-The sole function remains for God was to fashion forth material nature as the arena of recompense for the actions committed by the independent souls. It was only necessary to transfer the powers needful for this purpose to matter itself, and God as creator of the universe would be superfluous. When from considerations of practical convenience there is attached to the atheistic *Sāṃkhya* teaching, in a purely external manner and without affecting, the essential principles of the system. Finally, when we consider that we have the conceptions of a veil, of blind-foldness, of a knot, of ignorance, of not-being, of darkness, of death, of unreality and uncertainty, of untruth, of crookedness, and falsehood and illusion, of the power of God, of this power as identical with nature. The creation and multiplicity are due to the power of *Māyā*. Through its influence various names and forms are falsely superimposed upon *Brahman*. As long as one sees the duality, one is dwelling in the realm of ignorance or *avidyā* or *Māyā*.

The *māyā* is like a moss which is grown in clean water. Its main action is to bind the person (*ātman*) in the world through the course of action¹⁸ in the *Adhyātmopaniṣad*(*AdhyāUpa*). Hence the importance of *māyā* is established in a brief manner in this present paper. It has a bigger application in Vedānta philosophy also.

CONCLUSION

This body is mortal, always gripped by death, but within it dwells the immortal self. This self, when associated in consciousness with the body, is subject to pleasure and pain; and so long as this association continues, freedom from pleasure and pain can no man find. But as this association ceases, there cease also the pleasure and the pain. Raising above physical consciousness knowing the self to be distinct from the senses and the mind-knowing it in its true light-one rejoices and is free. The gods the luminous one, meditate on the self, and by so doing obtain all the worlds and all desires. In like manner, whosoever among mortals knows the self, meditates upon it, and realizes it- he too obtains all the worlds and all desires.

Māyā is a fact in that it is the appearance of phenomena. Since *Brahman* is the sole metaphysical truth, *Māyā* is true in epistemological and empirical sense; however *Māyā* is not the metaphysical and spiritual truth. The goal of spiritual enlightenment, state Advaitins, is to realise *Brahman*, realise the fearless, resplendent Oneness. The *Upaniṣads* rendered it in various ways but it also has a connotation in the latter minor *Upaniṣads* strictly following the Vedantic principle, the *māyā* is dominating principle of world. It is ignorance, lack of understanding, less intelligence & less knowledge. But through it, one gets the awareness of *Brahman* after one knows it clearly.

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4. *Śatap. Brāh* 10. 6. 3.
5. *Ibid*. 10. 6. 3.
6. *Taitt Brāh* 3. 12. 9. 7.
7. *Ṛgveda* 1. 164. 46.
8. *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 6. 1. 3
9. *Ṛgveda*. 10. 120. 2.
10. *Ibid*.10. 90. 2.
11. *Bṛih.upa*. 2. 4 and 4. 5
12. *Ibid*. 2. 4. 14.
13. *Ibid*. 3. 8. 11.& 4. 17.
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16. *Ibid*. 2. 4. 7-9.
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