



Māyā: An Interpretation from Vivekananda's end

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Abstract

Māyā, the cosmological principle is known as the principle of projection and concealment. Conceptually, Vivekananda has not make any difference in explaining māyā from that of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. But it seems that the status of māyā has been given more importance in the philosophy of Vivekananda. So, in this paper enquiry will be on how Vivekananda has visualised māyā and tries to make people understand it so that māyā is not to be misunderstood as an illusory principle of empirical level. However, māyā being only the empirical reality, how Vivekananda has shown the importance of it, is a matter of enquiry. Further, the paper will try to find out how Vivekananda has shown the deification of the world in the world of māyā itself and it will also try to enquire whether is this because of the status of māyā that the Vedānta of Vivekananda has landed into Practical Vedānta.

Key Words: Māyā, Illusion, World, Ramakrishna, Practical

The word māyā has been used in Vedas, in the sense of illusion and many writers and translators also used the term in this Vedic sense. But Vivekananda considers such explanation of māyā as incorrect and holds that māyā is to be understood in its correct sense as it is one of the pillars upon which the philosophy of Vedānta depends. It may be said that the intervention of māyā in the philosophy of Vivekananda seems to be same as Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, which is for the explanation of the multiplicity of the world. But here, in this paper it is tried to be highlighted, how Vivekananda has visualised māyā to show its importance and how he has tried to make people understand it so that māyā is not to be misunderstood as an illusory principle of empirical level. Thus a proper understanding of the concept of māyā is needed for understanding its importance in Vivekananda's philosophy. Tapash Sanker Dutta remarks that "...though Vivekananda has expounded and exemplified the Māyā-Vada of Śaṅkara, he has not subscribed to the Advaita view of Māyā

without any modification. He opines that a lack of proper understanding of the deeper meaning of Māyā as also an indiscriminate use of the doctrine has done a lot of harm.”¹

Now, the question arises in what sense Vivekananda uses the word māyā? Vivekananda denies to use the word māyā in terms of illusion or delusion or in a sense of magic. In fact he wishes to say that it is erroneously interpreted as illusion.² However, Vivekananda is not even in support of the Buddhist view of māyā which is a kind of idealism. Rather for Vivekananda māyā “...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.”³ Māyā, for Vivekananda, is neither real like Brahman because it is dependent upon Brahman, nor unreal like skyflower because it exists and because of which the reality appears in a different way. That is why may be Vivekananda conceived māyā as neither idealism nor realism. Moreover, he consider it as “...paradox – real, yet not real, an illusion, yet not an illusion.”⁴ Vivekananda in fact admits that “He who knows the Real sees in Maya not illusion, but reality. He who knows not the Real sees in Maya illusion and thinks it real.”⁵

The concept of māyā, in Vivekananda, can be understood in relation to the world as he maintains that “Maya is a statement of the fact of this universe, of how it is going on.”⁶ Māyā is the very fact of life, for Vivekananda, as it prevails everywhere. Man’s clinging to life knowing it well that death is inevitable is māyā; mother’s love which cannot be shaken off for her brute son, is also māyā. Furthermore, for Vivekananda, it is because of māyā that “Animals are living upon plants, men upon animals and, worst of all, upon one another, the strong upon the weak. This is going on everywhere.”⁷ Thus māyā is considered as the cosmological principle in the philosophy of Vivekananda.

But question may arise that how māyā acts as a cosmological principle? It is observed that for Vivekananda, māyā acts in two ways, as science and as nescience. Nescience is the negative aspect of māyā which conceals the reality and science is the positive aspect which reveals or projects the relative reality.⁸ As science, māyā projects the relative reality which is the reality of this phenomenal world and as nescience, it conceals the real nature of things, i.e., māyā acts as a veil which hides the real nature of man and the world which is nothing but Brahman. Moreover, Ātman or the Self is identical with Brahman and it is because of this māyā that the Self is identified with the limiting adjuncts of the body, mind, and sense organs, which are seen to be distinct from the Self because of māyā. Thus, Vivekananda holds, “Tree-nature is Maya, it is really God-nature which we see under the veil of Maya.”⁹ That means the tree which we see because of māyā, is in reality, non-different from Brahman.

Here, question may come to our mind that Vivekananda’s imposing of partial or the relative reality to māyā does make any influence upon the status of the world? It seems that the status of māyā as relative or partial reality entails that the world also is not unreal rather relatively real. Vivekananda shows that māyā or what it is called in Europe as space, time, and causation is like a glass through which when it is seen at the lower side it appears as the world. The world cannot be come into existence without māyā because māyā is the mediator between Brahman and the world. Māyā provides name and form with which Brahman creates the world. Thus it may be said that for Vivekananda, it is due to māyā that the relation between the manifold and the unity can be explained.

In fact, the status of the world is deified saying that the world is also Brahman. In this regard, Dr. R.C. Majumdar holds, “Echoing his master’s voice Vivekananda also explained that “...the world of objects is not totally negated in Brahman. It is not, as in Shankara’s Advaita it is, that Brahman alone is real and the world is false or illusory (*Brahma satyam, jagat mithya*), but that in a sense the world also is real.”¹⁰ Dr. Satischandra Chatterjee also remarks, “According to Swami Vivekananda, the Vedanta does not in reality denounce the world. What it seeks to teach is the deification of the world and not its annihilation.”¹¹ Romain Rolland also holds that for Vivekananda “Nothing in the world is to be denied, for Maya, illusion, has its own reality.”¹² In the words of Vivekananda, “Real existence, real knowledge, and real love are eternally connected with one another, the three in one, where one of them is, the others also must be; they are the three aspects of the One without a second – the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss. When that existence becomes relative, we see it as the world; that knowledge becomes in its turn modified into the knowledge of the things of the world; and that bliss forms the foundation of all true love known to the heart of man.”¹³

This status of *māyā*, as not to be considered as illusory in Vivekananda’s philosophy may be because of the influence of his Guru Ramakrishna as “To him *māyā* itself was God, for everything was God. It was one of the faces of Brahman. What he had realized on the heights of the transcendental plane, he also found here below, everywhere about him, under the mysterious garb of names and forms.”¹⁴ Ramakrishna experienced that in the transcendental level *māyā* gets transformed but it does not vanish in fact *māyā* itself becomes Brahman and the world becomes the manifestation of the Divine Mother.¹⁵

The above discussion may arise a question whether the position of *māyā* in his philosophy mark him as a practical philosopher. It seems that *māyā* has been given an important position in his philosophy by showing that within *māyā* there is no falsity but relative reality and in connection with this, it also gives light on the fact that Vivekananda has advocated such a philosophy where the oneness of Brahman is shown on the basis of deifying the universe. Thus it may be said that Vivekananda’s approach is positive towards establishing his advaitic position as he deifies the world. Unlike the traditional Advaita, instead of giving importance only to the transcendental reality, he descends down the transcendental reality to the very empirical world and it seems that it is through *māyā*, he shows that the divinity is expressed or the manifestations of Brahman appear in the empirical level. The transcendental Brahman can be known through the *jīvas* because for him, *jīvas* are potentially divine and thus for knowing Brahman Vivekananda does not insist us to go beyond *māyā* but emphasizes that there is no harm to be here in *māyā* because *māyā* is nothing different from Brahman in fact *māyā* is the link between Brahman which is in the transcendental level and the manifestations of Brahman i.e., *jīvas* which is in the empirical level. It is in this *māyā* only, *jīva* can realize his self or actualize his potentiality. In this sense it may be said that the world of *māyā* is the plane where the reality of oneness can also be realized. That is why *māyā* is also explained by Vivekananda, as the link between the metaphysical and the moral aspect of Advaita philosophy. *Māyā* is not interpreted in Vivekananda’s philosophy as something which is to be given up, in fact the world of *māyā* is the only *karmabhumi* for man to realize their true Self. Thus he prescribes ‘*jīva is Śiva*’ and ‘*Śiva jñāne jīva seva*’. This uniqueness of his concept of *māyā* is also observed by Tapash Sanker Dutta, as he affirms that “To a *Māyā-vadi Sannyasi* we need not expect any feeling for the human race who are subjected to pains and

sufferings. But in Swamiji's philosophy we find that the bright sun of intellectuality of Śaṅkara has combined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful, infinite heart of love and mercy."¹⁶ Commenting on Vivekananda, G. Ranjit Sharma also remarks, "...he subscribed to the *mayavada* (doctrine of ignorance or nescience), giving no doubt an interpretation of it in his own way. But this did not land him in negativism. He insisted on action – action in the living present, the performance of duty in a spirit of detachment. Idealism and realism were wonderfully blended together in his ideology."¹⁷

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