



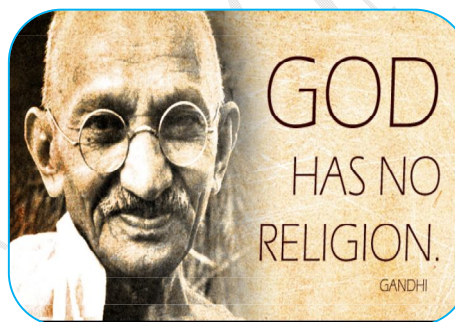
CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF GOD AND ŚANKARA BRAHMA

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ABSTRACT:

As we know Gandhi was not an abstract theorist, he was a man of action. It is necessary to see that his conceptual formulations were limited by the fact that as a political moralist he wrote from the standpoint of an individual rather than concerning himself with ethical and practical problems facing men in authority. However, they tried to apply their basic concepts of ahimsā and Vedānta to different practical matters such as the relation of labour and capital, the promotions of collective human welfare, village self-government, attitude toward work, problems of educational and social reconstruction, social inequalities and the decentralization of political and economic power. Like Śankara Gandhi also believes on many names of God. But difference is only Śankara believe on saguṇa and nirguṇa Brahman. Gandhi believes that God have thousand names, or rather, He is Nameless. We may worship or pray by whichever name that please us. Some call Him Rama, some Krishna, and other call Him Rahim, and yet other call Him God. All worship the same spirit, but as all foods don't agree with all, all names do not appeal to all. Each chooses the name according to his associations and He, being the In-Dweller, All Powerful and Omniscient knows our innermost feelings and responds to us according to our deserts.



KEYWORDS: Saguna Brahma, Nirguna Brahma, abstract theorist, political moralist, Vedānta.

INTRODUCTION

The nature and status of man have been interpreted in various ways in history of philosophy. Some philosophers describe man on the basis of psychological ground. Psychologists, like Freud interpret man as a concrete being along with unconscious urges and impulses. Some thinkers try to describe man on the basis of metaphysical insight. Metaphysicians, like Aristotle explain the nature of man by

discovering the common and essential characteristic of man. But existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre and humanists who appear to be convinced that the description of man in terms of his class-characters can't be an exact description of man for the simple reason that in the case of man his peculiarities are by far more important than the common characters. All these merely represent the physical aspects of man. But man is not only physical entity. He has something higher than gross body.

Gandhi asserts man is not all body but he is something infinitely higher. These infinite higher qualities are not ascribable to other beings. Man has consciousness, reason, conscience, will, emotion and similar other qualities and powers which are the expression of the spirit or soul present in him. Gandhi accepts man's animal ancestry and says, we have become man by a slow process of evolution from the brute. What distinguishes man from the brute is his ceaseless striving to rise above the brute on

the moral plane.

The body of man dies or decays whereas the soul is immortal. The body of man is limited in time and space. But soul is eternal. When the body is taken away, his soul finds another. Gandhi thinks that body of man is endowed by God with abilities to perform divine service in this world body is like a machine requiring to be well kept for full service. Man may use the body for the purpose of self realization

But for Gandhi body and soul are not two ultimate and independent realities. For him God is the only ultimate reality. God is manifested differently as body and soul. Gandhi no doubt is a follower of Advaita, which emphasize that Brahman is the ultimate reality; the body and soul are the finite appearances of the Brahman. The furniture of man is due to his ignorance of his real nature, when man removes his ignorance he realizes his complete identity. But he can't be strictly regarded as following the Advaita of Sankara for he does regard the body and soul as a mere appearance. Like Ramanuja, Gandhi thinks that man's body and soul are not merely appearances of Brahman. But they are partial entities of one ultimate reality. The self and the body of man are all real though finite.

Gandhi's conception of god is derived from the doctrine of Vaishnava theism. According to Vaishnava theism God is a concrete person possessed of all auspicious qualities and perfections like omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence and all mercifulness. Liberation could be obtained by the mercy of God propitiated by devotion and self surrender. Like Vaishnava theism Gandhi also conceived God as omniscient and omnipotent being. God is concrete person, who perceives every act of human being. God is the inner voice in all of us. He is the creator of the world. Gandhi believes God is all pervasive reality.

In Vedanta philosophy, the *Ahimsā* is conceived in the sense of love or compassion. According to Advaita Vedanta of Samkara, Brhma is the only ultimate truth, the universe is false. The Jiva is the Brahman. There is no difference between Jiva and Brahman. Jiva remains in bondage due to avidya. Its true nature is pure consciousness as Brahman. The realisation of ultimate truth, the Nirguna *Nirākāra* is the supreme end of living being or Jiva. The knowledge or *vidyā* is the realization of ultimate truth.

I

GOD AND BRAHMAN

There is no difference between God and Brahman for Gandhi, while *Śankara's* talks about *Pārā* and *Apārā* Brahman. *Pārā* Brahman means God in its absolute aspect is beyond the cognition of the human mind. Like an ant cannot understand an elephant however much it may try, man too cannot grasp *Pārā* Brahman. The three closest pointers to it are the human mind are *Sat* (Existence), *Chit* (Consciousness) and *Ananda* (Bliss). Even these are only indicative and do not define *Pārā* Brahman. Shri Krishna declares in *Gītā* "na me viduḥ sura-gaṇāḥ prabhavamī na maharṣayāḥ" that is to mean that non can grasp Him. This is the *Pārā* Brahman. While *Pārā Brahman* is for man to effectively worship God, a mental limitation needs to be created as the Human mind needs a name and form to effectively meditate, worship and benefit. God is thus conceived with attributes and is termed as *Apārā* Brahman. Gandhi claims that God is lawgiver and law. God himself is both the law and the Law giver.¹ The question of anyone creating Him therefore doesn't arise, least of all by an insignificant creature such as man. Man can build a dam, but it is beyond him to make the wood. He can, however picture of God in his mind in many ways. But how can man who is unable to create even a river or wood create God? That God has created man therefore, God is pure truth. The contrary is an illusion. However, anyone may, if he is likes, say that god is neither the doer nor the cause. For him it is predictable.²

Gandhi never regards God as a person. For him truth is God. God and law is not different things or facts, in the sense that an earthly king and his law are different. The Almighty is not like us. He is greatest living force or law in the world. Accordingly, he does not act by caprice, nor does that law

¹(Horizon, 14-4-1946, p80

² Ibid p 81

admit of any amendment or improvement his will is fixed and changeless, everything else changes every second.³

Like Advaita *Vedānta Śānkara*, Gandhi also believes powers of God. Gandhi argued 'Everything that has a beginning must end. The sun, the moon and the earth must all perish one day, even though it might be after an incalculable number of years. God alone is immortal, imperishable. How can anyone find words to describe Him?⁴ Gandhi believes that God alone knows absolute truth. Therefore, Gandhi had often said, truth is God. It follows man a finite being cannot know absolute truth.⁵ Therefore Gandhi said that God is all powerful. He can change the hearts of man and bring real peace among them.⁶

Gandhi argues that Rama, Rahman, Ahuramazda, God or Krishna are all attempts on the part of man to name that invisible force which is the greatest of all forces. It is inherent in man, imperfect though he be, ceaselessly to strive after perfection. In the attempt he falls into reverie. And just as a child tries to stand, falls down again and again and ultimately learn how to walk., even so man with all his intelligence, is a mere infant as compared to the infinite and ageless God. This may appear to be an exaggeration but is not. Man can only describe God in his own Poor languages.⁷

Śānkara interpretation on Brahman is non-dualistic or monism. For him Brahman is the only reality, and the world is unreal (*Brahma satyām, jagan mithyā, Jivo Brahmaivo napara*). This is the central theme of *Śānkara's* Advaitism. How the existent world is deemed to be unreal, *Śānkara* prove it with the theory of *Māyāvada*. *Śānkara* recognizes three strata of reality: transcendental reality, phenomenal reality and apparent reality. Brahman is the transcendental reality, the world is empirical reality and illusion is the apparent reality. What is truly real is the transcendental reality. But we cannot know this reality until we are gifted with *advaitajñāna* i.e. intuition. Now we have simply empirical knowledge as characterized by sensuous perception and intellectual knowledge. So we have only empirical reality. The world we have in our sensuous and intellectual/ logical experiences is only empirically real. Sometimes we confronted with illusory knowledge as in a rope snake illusion. This is illusory or apparent reality. According to *Śānkara* what is the position of the world from the Brahman standpoint is the illusory snake in the empirically real rope. The world is unreal from the standpoint of Brahman, as snake is unreal from the view of the rope. Both the illusions take place due to human folly in the matter of knowledge.

Brahma Sūtra is the root text of *Śānkara's* concept of Brahman. He has written massive commentary on it. *Śānkara* conceives the Ultimate Reality as something transcendent, totally independent of the universal process, eternal in its nature and not having any kind of touch of temporality in it, because creation implies time process and also space.⁸ For *Śānkara* God and Brahman is different from each other. Whereas he urged on *pārā* and *apārā* Brahman, Sakara Brahman is trikalavad *satyā*.

Śānkara's conception of Brahman in its twofold aspect and all ideas connected there with are, therefore, found to be logically deducible also from a critical view of ordinary experience. The first aspect is the conception of *Īśvara* or *Saguṇa*-brahman. Brahman endowed with the attributes of omnipotence (the power of causing all things) and omniscience (consciousness revealing all forms of existence). Again, as all objects perish only to merge in existence of some other form, objects can be conceived as being withdrawn into their ground, which is existence. God can thus be described as also the Destroyer or that into which the world's objects lose their particular forms.⁹

³(H, 28-7-1946, p233)

⁴(Harizon, 16-6-1946, p183)

⁵ Ibid.,p 183.

⁶From the book "Mind of Mahatma Gandhi

⁷(H, 18-8-1946, p267)

⁸The Brahma Sutras as a Moksha Shastra by Swami Krishnananda

⁹Raghudev., Essay on the Rational Basis of Śānkara's Theory of God.2001

The another aspect of Brahman is *Nirguṇa* Brahman, Brahman does not endowed any kind of attribute which emerges the idea of God in His transcendent and truly real aspect of *Pārā* Brahman, the Supreme Reality, above all multiplicity and devoid of all really ascribable attributes, the *Nirguṇa* Brahman or Indeterminate Absolute. According to Śānkara to attribute saguṇa Brahman there is no quality, attributeless, indefinable, nameless. We can only know Him by negation and negation in other words, neither this nor that, In Śānkara words *neti neti*. Śānkara believes only in Brahman. For him Brahman is the only Reality.

II

Śānkara's notions of Reality and Illusion (*Satyām* and *Mithyā*)

Śānkara's monism is the doctrine that declares that there is but one reality, that the individual Self and the Brahman are one. Whereas Śānkara defines the fundamental tenet of Advaita *Vedānta* thus: *brahma satyām jagan mithyā jivo brahmaiva napara*¹⁰.

This sloka refers that Brahman is the Reality, the universe is an illusion, The living being is Brahman alone, none else. This statement, though it presents the core teaching in all the Upanishads, has evoked much criticism. Most people are naturally unable to accept as illusion the world in which they live and the things they directly perceive and experience throughout their lives. So also are those with a predominantly materialistic culture. Doubts from other quarters are probably caused by a superficial or incomplete understanding of the significance of the words, "Reality" and "illusion," used in this statement. What follows is an attempt to clarify the meaning intended by the revered *Acharyā*.

a) Brahma satyām ("Brahman is the Reality"): In *Vedānta*, the word "*Satyām*" (Reality) is very clearly defined and it has a specific significance. It means that which exists in all the three periods of time (past, present and future) without undergoing any change; and also in all the three states of consciousness (waking state, dream state and deep-sleep state). This is therefore the absolute Reality — birthless, deathless and changeless — referred to in the Upanishads as "Brahman."

b) Jagan mithyā ("the world is an illusion"): The world appears "real" only in the "waking state;" but it is negated (it disappears) in the dream and deep-sleep states. Hence, it is not real, according to the definition above. Therefore, the world is said to be *mithyā* by the *Acharyā*.

However, many people seems sensitive to the word, "*mithyā*," when it is used to refer to the perceptible world. For this reason, perhaps, the *Acharyā*, in his later works, like *Brahmasūtra Bhashyā*, calls it "*vyāvaharika satta*" (relative reality) or "*pratibhasika satta*" (apparent reality), as if to accommodate them.

c) Jīva brahmaiva napara ("the *Jīva* is Brahman alone, none else"): "*Jīva*" refers to the sentient principle in all living beings, including human beings. In the deep-sleep state, the body, senses, mind and intellect are all negated (rendered totally ineffective or insentient). Hence, the *Jīva* is one with the sentient, inner life-principle, which revives the body, senses, mind and intellect after sleep. This life-principle is the pure consciousness that is the same in all beings. The all-pervading Brahman of the Upanishads is that pure consciousness present in all *Jīvas* as their *antaryāmi* (inner spirit).

III

Illusion (*Māyāvada*)

The idea of *Māyāvada* has always been present since the decline of the Vedic age. The concept of *Māyāvada* has been since Vedic period, but it became famous and renowned only due to his preaching. Śānkara *caryā* is in fact a manifestation of Siva, who descended to this world to spread the false philosophy of *Māyāvada*. Siva spoke to Parvati as follows:

Māyāvadam asac-chastram pracchannah baudham ucyāte Māyāiva kalpitam devi kalau brahmana-rupina (Padma Purana)

¹⁰ Ibid., 2001

The meaning of this sloka is 'O Goddess, in the age of Kali I shall descend in the form of a brahmana to spread this *Māyāvada* philosophy which is actually covered Buddhism.'¹¹

Śankara explains the world by the concept of *Māyā*. *Śankara* borrows the word *Māyā* from the Upanishads and with the concept of *Māyā* he explains the world.¹² The Upanishads say, 'Indra' (God) by his magical power (*Māyā*) assume various forms.¹³ The *Svetasvatara* clearly states the origin of the world lies in magical power of God¹⁴. *Māyā* is magical power of god because it is indistinguishable from Him, as the burning power of fire is indistinguishable from fire itself.

The illusion of the world in place of Brahman is due to ignorance. For *Śankara* the world is illusion like that of snake in a rope. The ignorance (*avidyā*) creating the illusion not only conceals from our view the real nature of ground or substratum, the rope, but positively distorts it, makes it appear as something else the snake. But, according to *Śankara's* Brahman, *Māyā* is the power to create appearances. This power does neither affect Brahman nor deceive Him.

Brahman, the unchanging reality, cannot, of course, be said to be undergoing evolution. All change and therefore, evolution belong to the sphere of *Māyā*. It is *Māyā*, the creative power which at first remains un-manifested, then becomes differentiated into subtle objects, and then into the gross ones. Brahman conceived as the possessor of the undifferentiated *Māyā* is named *Īśvara*, and described as omniscient and omnipotent. It is the conception of God existing prior to actual creation, but possessed of the power of creation.

It should be remembered that whereas ordinarily *Īśvara* implies the entire immanent aspect of God, that is Brahman associated with *Māyā* in all stages, the word is used in the present context in a narrower sense, and confined only to the first stage. Counting these three immanent aspects of God in relation to creation along with the transcendent aspect beyond all such relation, we have the four possible aspects of Brahman, namely, Pure Consciousness-Existence (*Pārābrahman*), *Īśvara*, *Hiranyagarbha* and Vaisvanara though these are generally taken as the successive stages of manifestation.

In this particular section, question might be arise, what is the link between *Śankara's* *Māyāvada* with Gandhi's concept of truth. Like *Śankara* *Māyāvada*, Gandhi's truth is not essay as to understand, actual meaning. To practicing truth for all people is not possible, like as to understand *Māyā* of all people. For Gandhi truth is divine power, a few people can practice it. *Śankara* Brahman is the only supreme reality others are illusion. Like *Śankara* Brahman, Gandhi also says "there is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses. But it is possible to reason out the existence of God to a limited extent."¹⁵

Śankara clearly mention that *avidyā* or ignorance is the root cause of *Māyā*. Therefore, to understand brahman's *Māyā* we have need proper knowledge of Brahman. While Gandhi also says that truth is knowledge. For Gandhi realize God, we have need proper path or way which is truth. Gandhi states that if here is Truth, there is also is knowledge which is true. And where is no truth, there can be no true knowledge. That is why the word Chit or knowledge is associated with the name of God. And where there is true knowledge, there is always bliss (Ananda). There sorrow has no place. And even as Truth is eternal, so is the bliss derived from it. Hence we know God as Sat-Chit-ananda, one who combines in Himself Truth, Knowledge and Bliss.

¹¹Gaura Gopala Dasa.,The self-Defeating Philosophy of Mayavada,SEP 18 2007 - KRISHNA TALK 70

¹²Jagdiswar Sanyal, indian Philosophy, Sribhumi, Calcutta, 1968.

¹³Indro Māyāhib puru rupa, Svetasvatara Upanishads

¹⁴Ibid..

¹⁵Young India, 11-10-19

Devotion to this Truth is the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centered in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life.¹⁶



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¹⁶Comprehensive Website by Gandhian Institutions - Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal & Gandhi Research Foundation