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Concept of Self in Vedanta Philosophy

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Abstract

The concept of self or ātman, in the realm of Indian philosophy, occupies a very coveted position in the domain of philosophical discussions. The self, viz., soul, jīva, ātman with different terminology is but the same which signifies the ignition of human life and existence. Since the days of the Upanisads, the self has been the subject of enquiry of all philosophical brooding. When the soul is studied from the subjective standpoint, it is called ātman and when it is analyzed from the objective standpoint, it is known as Brahman, the ultimate reality. All the system of Indian philosophy maintains that the self is pure and unsullied in its nature and all impurities of action or passion do not form a real part of it. The ultimate end of human life is obtained when all impurities are removed and the pure nature of the self is clearly apprehended and all other extraneous connections with it are absolutely dissociated. Hence, it is most important to know the real nature of the self. All the systems of Indian philosophy advocate their own theories on the concept of self in/to support their views. The Vedānta philosophers also widely discuss about the real nature of the self. Here an attempt has been made to highlight the different views of the Vedānta philosophers on the concept of self.

Keywords: *ātman, brahman, jīva, dvaita, advaita etc.*

Introduction: The concept of self or soul is an important topic of discussion in Indian philosophy. Almost all the systems of Indian philosophy admit the existence of a permanent entity, which is variously called *ātman* or *jīva*. The concept of self has been the subject of many different theories. Some philosophers believe it to be static, others dynamic, some consider it to be universal in character, others more personal or specific. There are great controversies among the philosophers regarding the real nature of the self. Among the *nāstika* schools, the Cārvāka rejects the reality of the self and identifies it with the body endowed with consciousness. The Buddhist denies the reality of the permanent self and regards it as a series of momentary ideas. However, the Jaina admits the reality of the permanent self as a knowing, feeling and active agent. All the *āstika* schools of Indian philosophy admit the reality of the self or *ātman* as a permanent spiritual substance. The Sāṃkhya-Yoga regards the self or *puruṣa* as an eternal spirit whose essence is pure

consciousness. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika regards the self as an eternal substance endowed with cognition, pleasure, pain, desire, aversion, volition, impression, merit and demerit. It acquires consciousness in conjunction with the body and the internal organ. The Mīmāṃsā also holds the similar view. Kumārila regards knowledge as a mode or activity of the self while Prabhākara regards it as a quality of the self. In dreamless sleep and at the state of release the self is devoid of consciousness.

The System of Vedānta: The Vedānta is one of the most significant systems of Indian philosophy. The term *vedānta* literally means the end of the Veda or the doctrines set forth in the closing chapter of the Vedas, which are the Upaniṣads. Thus the system of philosophy based on the Upaniṣads is called the Vedānta philosophy. Traditionally the literature forming the foundation of Vedānta is divided into three *prasthānas* or the triple canon of Vedānta, viz., *Śruti-prasthāna*, *Smṛti-prasthāna* and *Nyāya-prasthāna*. The *Śruti-prasthāna* consists of the Upaniṣads and some parts of the Saṁhitā; the *Smṛti-prasthāna* comprises the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Nyāya-prasthāna* means the *Vedāntasūtra* or *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyana. Many commentators wrote the commentaries on it. Śaṅkarācārya, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Nimbārka, Vallabha and Bhāskara are the chief commentators of the *Vedāntasūtra*. However, the commentators have commented by holding different views and thus there come into existence many schools of Vedānta, viz., Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism) of Śaṅkarācārya, Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism) of Rāmānuja, Dvaita-Vedānta (dualism) of Madhva, Śuddhādvaita (pure non-dualism) of Vallabha, Svābhāvika-bhedābhedavāda (natural difference cum non-difference) of Nimbārka, Aupādhika-bhedābhedavāda (conditional difference cum non-difference) of Bhāskarācārya.

The most common question, on which the schools of Vedānta are divided, is the nature of the relation between the self and Brahman. According to Śaṅkarācārya, Brahman and the self are absolutely identical and hence his view is called Advaitavāda (non-dualism). Madhva holds that the self and Brahman are totally different entities and thus his view is known as Dvaitavāda (dualism). According to Rāmānuja, Brahman and the self are identical only in some special sense and hence his view is known as Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda (qualified non-dualism). Vallabha, the profounder of Śuddhādvaitavāda, maintains that the self is non-different from Brahman, because the effect is non-different from its cause. According to Nimbārka, Brahman is both identical and different from the self for all time and hence his view is known as Svābhāvika-bhedābhedavāda. Bhāskara holds that Brahman is both absolute and relatives; and its relation to the self is one of the both difference and non-difference. Of these two, again non-difference is essential, while difference is created by *upādhis*, i.e. limited adjuncts. Thus, this view is called Aupādhika-bhedābhedavāda.

The Self in Vedānta Philosophy: The Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara regards Brahman as the Ultimate Reality. According to him, there is no distinction between the self and Brahman. The Advaita Vedāntins hold that though the difference-less Brahman is the only reality, it appears as the empirical selves and the manifold world because of *māyā*, also called *ajñāna* or *avidyā*. Hence Maxmullar, the great western philosopher has rightly said that the entire

Vedānta philosophy may be summarized in a line: Brahman is true, the world is false and the *jīva* and Brahman are not different.ⁱ

According to the Vedānta philosophy, the self or *ātman* is identical with Brahman. It is the highest transcendental reality. It is Brahman itself.ⁱⁱ The *ātman* is of the nature of pure consciousness. Pure consciousness is identical with the existence and bliss. The conception of existence involves the idea of truth, externality, immutability and completeness. Thus, the real self is unconditionally true, eternal, unchangeable and self-complete. It is not subjected to bondage and suffering, because it is of the nature of the pure knowledge and bliss.ⁱⁱⁱ It is omnipresent, universal and infinite, because consciousness is without any limitation. The *ātman* is all pervasive and not conditioned by time and space. It is neither atomic nor intermediary in size. The self or *ātman* is one and the same self exists in all beings. The *ātman* is throughout nothing but intelligence; intelligence is its exclusive nature as the salt taste is of the lump of salt.^{iv} It is ever shining. As the sun shines when there is nothing to shine, so the *ātman* has consciousness even when there is no object.^v The *ātman* is without any quality; the qualities that seem to pertain to the self are not only apparent. The *ātman* is devoid of action, because action involves an idea of change in the subject, while the *ātman* is changeless.^{vi}

According to the Advaita Vedānta, the *ātman* conditioned either by *avidyā* or by the *antahkaraṇa*, i.e. the internal organ is revealed as the *jīva* or the empirical self. In other word, the *ātman* or the transcendental, metaphysical self is appeared as the *jīva* or the empirical, phenomenal self-due to *avidyā*. It is this empirical self that performs actions, enjoys their fruits and undergoes birth and rebirth.

The *jīva* is said to be in essence one with Brahman.^{vii} Though the self is pure, it seems to be subject to the worldly defects because of *avidyā*. Śaṅkara distinguishes carefully the self that is implied in all experience from the self which is an observed fact of introspection, the metaphysical subject or 'I' and the psychological subject or 'me'. The object of self consciousness is not the pure self, the *sākṣin*, but the active and enjoying individual (*kartr̥*) endowed with objective qualities.^{viii}

The *jīva* is the knower, doer and enjoyer.^{ix} It acquires merits and demerits according to its good and bad deeds and experiences their fruits. It is subject to transmigration and bondage. Though the *jīva* is non-different from Brahman and immortal in its essential nature, morality is attributed to it owing to its actions. It has already been mentioned that the *jīva* is one without a second and is identical with Brahman, but it is regarded as many or different in different individuals due to the limiting adjuncts.^x The origin of the limiting adjunct of the mind-body complex is said to be the origin of the empirical self or *jīva*.

The *jīva* is said to have three *śarīra* or bodies, viz., the *kāraṇa-śarīra* or the causal body, the *sūkṣma-śarīra* or the subtle body and the *sthūla-śarīra* or the gross body. *Ajñāna* is its *kāraṇa-śarīra*; the five sense organs, the five motor organs, the five vital airs, the mind and the intellect form the *sūkṣma-śarīra*; and the five material elements constitute its *sthūla-śarīra*. In the waking state, the *jīva* is endowed with the gross and the subtle bodies, which

is known as *viśeṣa*; in the dream state, it is endowed with the subtle body, which is called *taijasa* and in the state of deep sleep, it is endowed with the causal body and is called *prajñā*.^{xi}

There are differences of opinion among the Advaita Vedāntins regarding the number of the self. Most of them hold that the *jīva* is many, because the adjunct of the *jīva* is different in different individuals. They also say that the multiplicity of the selves must be maintained in order to distinguish between the bound and the released selves.^{xii} On the other hand, some Advaita Vedāntins, like according to the upholders of *Drṣṭi-srṣṭi-vāda*, maintain that the *jīva* is not many but one; other *jīvas* as well as their bondage and liberation.^{xiii}

The later Vedāntins accept an intermediate stage called *sākṣin* or witness-self in between the *jīva* and the *ātman*. This *sākṣin* is different from both of them. According to Vidyāraṇyamuni, the *sākṣin* is of the nature of unchanging and immutable consciousness and is the substratum of the subtle and the gross bodies. It is the substratum of the illusion of the *jīva* in its false identification with the ego.^{xiv} According to the author of *Vedānta-Paribhāṣā*, the *sākṣin* is the eternal consciousness conditioned by the internal organ. A *jīva* is the eternal consciousness confined by the internal organ. The internal organ is here a qualification which enters into the being of eternal consciousness.^{xv} However, Śāṅkara does not make any distinction between the *ātman* and the *sākṣin*. He regards the universal self immanent in the *jīva* as the witness-self.

According to Rāmānuja, categories are the three kinds: Brahman or Īśvara, *cit* or the self and *acit* or the matter. Brahman is the ultimate principle of this universe. Though non dual, Brahman admits of internal difference, because the whole universe of matter and the selves move within its being. The selves and matter are related to Brahman as bodies or as modes or attributes. These elements have got distinct characteristics of their own, since they have no separate existence apart from Brahman.^{xvi} Hence, Rāmānuja's theory is an Advaita or non dualism, though with a qualification (*viśeṣa*), viz., that it admits plurality, since the supreme spirit subsists in a plurality forms as souls and matter. It is therefore called Viśiṣṭādvaita or qualified non-dualism.^{xvii}

In the view of Rāmānuja, the self and Brahman cannot be identical, because they differ in their essential characteristics. The self is finite, atomic and imperfect, while Brahman is infinite, all pervasive and perfect. The self is regarded by Rāmānuja as a part of Brahman. Though Brahman and the self are different in their essential nature, they are inseparable or non-different from each other just as a substance and its attributes are different in their essential nature though they are inseparably related as whole-and-part.^{xviii} Just an attribute has no existence apart from the substance, so the self has no existence apart from Brahman. In the *kāraṇāvasthā* or the causal state, the self merges into Brahman in its subtle and unmanifest form and in the *kāryavasthā* or the effect state, it becomes manifest. In both the states, the self and Brahman are inseparable from its other, the former forming the body or qualification of the latter.^{xix}

According to Madhva, the self and Brahman are not identical with each other and not related to as a part or attribute. They are quite distinct from one another. Hence, his view is known as Dvaitavāda or dualism. According to Vallabha, Brahman transforms itself into the self though it remains ever-perfect and ever-pure in its real nature. The self is non-different from Brahman, because the effect is non-different from its cause. In the view of Nimbārka, Brahman is both identical and different from the self for all time. The self is regarded by Nimbārka as a *śakti*, i.e. potency or attribute of Brahman. The self is not wholly identical with Brahman during the state of liberation, but is both identical with and different from it.

According to Bhāskara, the self is a part of Brahman, since it is nothing but the unlimited Brahman limited by *upādhis* or conditions. Just as sparks are part of fire or the *ākāśa* confined by a jar or by a house is a part of the unlimited *ākāśa*; so the self is a part of Brahman. Brahman is both absolute and relative, and its relation to the self is one of the both difference and non-difference. Here non-difference is essential, while difference is created by *upādhis*, i.e. limiting adjuncts.^{xx} Both Bhāskara and Rāmānuja agree that the self is a part of Brahman, but they differ in certain points. Rāmānuja holds that the self is related to Brahman as its part in both the effect-state and the causal-state. On the other hand, Bhāskara says that only in the effect-state the self is different from Brahman, but in the state of liberation it becomes identical with Brahman.

Conclusion: From the above discussion, it is clear that the concept of self-occupies an eminent position among all the system of Indian philosophy. The Advaita Vedānta of Śāṅkara admits the reality of single self or *ātman* or Brahman, which is pure being, pure consciousness and pure bliss. According to him, though the real self or *ātman* is identical with Brahman, the individual selves are mere appearances. It is *māyā* or *avidyā*, which is responsible for the appearance of the material world and the individual selves. Thus the followers of Advaita Vedānta deny the ontological reality of the individual self. However, there are some differences of opinion among the Vedānta philosophers also regarding the nature of the self. Śāṅkara does not recognize the absolute reality of the individual self. But Rāmānuja maintains that the individual self is as real as Brahman, since it is an integral part of Brahman. The individual self is the subtle body of Brahman and the material world his gross body. So Brahman and the individual self are non-different as well as different from each other. Thus, according to Śāṅkara, liberation means the realization of the identity of the individual self with Brahman. But to Rāmānuja, the liberated self becomes similar to Brahman, and retains its distinct existence within Brahman.

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ⁱ brahma satyaṃ jaganmithā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ.... Sodha-sudha, p.176

ⁱⁱ ātmā ca brahma..... *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, I.1.1

ⁱⁱⁱ puruṣa hi vināśahetvabhāvāt vikriyāhetvabhāvācca kūṣṭha nityaḥ, ata eva nitya-śuddha-buddha-muktasvabhāvaḥ... Ibid, I.1.4

^{iv} Ibid, III.2.16

^v Ibid, II.3.18

- ^{vi} Ibid, I.3.24; asaṅgo hyayaṃ puruṣaḥ.... *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad*, IV.3.15
- ^{vii} tattvamasi.... *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, VI.8.7
- ^{viii} cf. Indian Philosophy, Vol. II, p.595
- ^{ix} *Brahmasūtra Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, I.3.40
- ^x bhedastu upādhinimitto mithyājñānakalpito na pāramārthikaḥ... Ibid, I.4.10
- ^{xi} *Vedāntasāra*, 43,79 & 90.
- ^{xii} jīvabhedas tāvat āvaśyikaḥ, baddha-mukta-pratibhāsāt.... *Bālabodhini* on Ibid, 36
- ^{xiii} ekasya eva jīvatvāt itareṣāṃ tadrṣṭivijrmbhitatvena tataḥ anatikrāt.... *Vidvān-mañjari* on Ibid.
- ^{xiv} kūṣṭha-caitanyaṃ.....sākṣād īkṣāṇān nirvikāratvācca sākṣītyucyate, *Siddhāntaleśasamgraha*, p.234
- ^{xv} jīvo nāmā'ntaḥkaraṇāvachinnaṃ caitanyam,
tatsākṣi tu antaḥkaraṇopahitaṃ caitanyam... *Vedāntaparibhāṣā*, p.85
- ^{xvi} jīvavat pṛthaksiddhyanarthaviśeṣanatvena acidvastuno brahmāṃ satvam..
Brahmasūtra Rāmānujabhāṣya, III.2.28
- ^{xvii} cf. Indian Philosophy, Vol.II, p.661
- ^{xviii} prabhā tadāśrayayor api tādātmyam, *Brahmasūtra Rāmānujabhāṣya*, III.2.27 ;
jīva parayor viśeṣanaviśeṣyatvakṛtaṃ svabhāvavailakṣyaṃ āśritya bheda nirdeśāḥ pravartante,
abhedanirdeśastu pṛthak-siddhy-anarthaviśeṣanānām..... Ibid, II.3.45
- ^{xix} sūkṣma daśāpanacidacid vastuśarīraṃ tat kāraṇāvasthām, brahma sthūlacidacid vastuśarīraṃ tat
kāryavasthām Ibid, II.1.15
- ^{xx} c.f. The Self in Indian Philosophy, p.80

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