

Significance of Māyā in Narayana Guru's Philosophy

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Abstract

The principle of māyā has an epistemological and methodological foundation of its own, proper to the type of absolutism found in the Advaita Philosophy of Sankara and Narayana Guru. Māyā is the mysterious power inherent within Ātman, to make the unreal world appear to exist and to veil from view what really exists. Ātman manifests itself as the world because of the mysterious urge inherent in it. This inherent mysterious element is called māyā. According to Sankara māyā has two powers, āvarana and vikshepa. This differentiation is not made by Sree Narayana Guru. He conceives the entire power of māyā as āvarana. The overall purpose of the study is to describe māyā in such a way, the same māyā could be negated in order to realize what really exists.

Keywords: Māyā, Ātman, mysterious urge, manifestation, āvarana.

1. Introduction

Narayana Guru (1856 – 1928) is an Advaita Vedāntin. Vedānta literally means the finality (anta) of knowledge (Vedas). Of the many schools of Vedānta based on different commentaries of different ācāryas, the one propounded by Sankara is Advaita Vedānta. Narayana Guru restated it appropriate to the modern age. Advaita philosophy is dominated by one basic notion: the non-dual ultimate Reality called Ātma or Brahman is Consciousness in essence; all the world emerges in that one Reality as do waves in the ocean. And this happens because of the creative urge for self-unfoldment inherent in ātma. This mysterious urge inherent in ātma is called māyā. Ātma cannot remain without manifesting as the world; and this world cannot exist without ātma underlying it as its causal substance.

Māyā being non-existent its effects also to be understood as really non-existent. It is a methodical device to explain the mysteriousness of what is

ultimately Real was formulated by Sankara. Sankara in his *Vevekachudamani* (Crest – Jewel of Discrimination) defines it as follows: Māyā is that power of the supreme God which is named “the indistinct” (*avyakta*), the beginningless nescience (*avidyā*) and the three nature-modalities (*guṇas*) in essence, that which is transcendental (*parā*), the existence of which is inferred by discerning ones from its effects, and that which gives birth to all the worlds.

It is neither existent nor non-existent nor is it bothwise; it is neither different from *Brahman* nor not-different from *Brahman*, nor is it bothwise;

Neither has it parts, nor is partless, not it bothwise; it is a great mystery of indefinable nature.¹

Narayana Guru defines māyā in his *Drśana Mālā* chapter IV.

Māyā Darśanam as “that which does not exist, is māyā.”²

According to Sankara, *māyā* and *avidya* are almost same, the only difference is that *māyā* is related to the total beings and *avidya* to individuated beings. Narayana Guru conceives both *vidya* and *avidya* are dualities that become manifest as effects of māyā.

Knowledge can become right or wrong, *vidya* or *avidya* only when consciousness functionally unfolds itself in the form of knowledge. *Vidya* and *avidya* are only two functional modes of the same Consciousness Reality, are unreal and the effects of māyā. According to Sankara māyā has two powers namely āvarana (putting a veil on what really exists) and vikshepa (projecting something unreal on the real). This differentiation is not made by Narayana Guru. He simply conceives the entire power of *māyā* as *āvarana*. Unveiling the *āvarana* and directly perceiving what is hidden behind, is part and

¹ Swami Madhavananda, *Vivekachudamany of Sankara*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 39, (1970)

² Narayana Guru, *Complete works*, Narayana Gurukula, 173, (2014)

parcel of spiritual discipline a seeker has to undergo.³

The over all purpose of the study is not to help us to have a clear understanding of *māyā*, but rather to describe *māyā* in such a way that the very same *māyā* could be negated by the student in order to realize what really exists.

Narayana Guru directly deals with the topic in all his philosophical works and in his hymns. This study is limited to *Māyā Darśanam* of the Guru's *Darśana Māla*. In this essay an earnest attempt is made to elucidate the significance of *māyā* in Narayana Guru's Philosophy, its nature, functions and the way to overcome it.

2. Māyā Darśanam

Darśana Māla is an exceedingly compact and lucid expression of Narayana Guru's unitive vision. In this work, the Guru presents Vedānta as the Science of Sciences. The absolute Reality – Brahman is visualized from different perspectives, each vision constitutes one chapter. Each chapter depicts how the one reality looks when viewed from the particular point of view it chooses. *Māyā Darśanam* treats the world as an illusion.

Verse 1

What is not known, that is *māyā*;
it alone shines as many forms:
vidyā, *avidyā*, *parā*, *apara*,
tamas, *pradhāna*, and *prakṛiti*.

It is important to note that *māyā* is meant to cover all other negative concepts and its rival in dignity and status is the neutral Absolute itself still to emerge into full view in later chapters. In the very first verse, the Guru has defined *māyā* as “that which does not exist” and introduces us to eight aspects of our personal and empirical consciousness. These are *māyā*, *vidyā*, *avidyā*, *para*, *apara*, *tamas*, *pradhana* and *prakṛiti*. In subsequent verses the Guru defines each of these with appropriate similes.

Verse 2

Like the prior non-existence in the clay alone,
before it is fashioned,
none other than the Absolute is known;
what is that Absolute is indeed
māyā, of indeterminate possibility

In this verse the Guru defines *māyā* logically. *Nyāya*, the Indian school of logic admits *abhāva* (non-existence) as one of the basic philosophical categories. *Abhāva* simply means, “non-existence”. In Indian logic there are four kinds of *abhāvas*.

1. *Prāgābhāva* (anterior non-existence). Before a potter fashions a pot from clay, there is in the clay a prior absence of the pot. The negation in this case is the prior existence of the pot in the clay. It is the anterior cognition of negation.
2. *Pradhvamsvābhāva* (posterior-non existence). If a pot is made, but before firing it is reduced again to an amorphous lump of clay, this is the negation of the pot by its destruction. Here negation stands for the annihilation of identity. It is posterior negation based on the principle of the destruction of identity.
3. *Anyonya – abhāva* (mutual non-existence). When milk turns into curds; that which was milk is now absent; only the curds exist. Before the milk is curded there is the absence of curds. In this case there is a reciprocal complementarily of negativity.
4. *Atyantha-abhāva* (absolute non-existence). In a lump of granite there is no trace of milk. Here we have a negation arising from the total absence of one thing in another.⁴

Verse 3

The non-self is unreal, the Self is real;
thus, the means by which such knowledge
comes,
that is this *vidyā*, like the recognition
of the truth about rope and snake.

How *māyā* manifests as *vidyā* or knowledge is stated in this verse.

The entire world of transaction, along with whatever is of empirical knowledge, comes under the category of the actual world. To apprehend the real, one has to transcend the transactional. At the transcendental level the only reality is the Self, the transactional world is unreal. Therefore “right knowledge mentioned in this verse, as *vidyā* can only be the knowledge of the Self.

Verse 4

The Self is unreal, the non-self is real;
thus, the means by which such knowledge
comes,
that alone is *avidyā*, like the erroneous cognition

³ Narayana Guru, *Complete works*, Narayana Gurukula, 173 (2014)

⁴ Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *The Psychology of Darśana Māla*, Narayana Gurukula, 202, (1987)

about rope and snake.

This verse only states the converse position of the previous verse.

Those who are under the spell of *avidya* usually do not discriminate between the Self and the non-self, the real and the unreal. Treating the Self as unreal and the non-self as real after having known the Self, is not what they do. Those who discriminate between the two never become subject to *avidya*. *Avidya* causes one to simply see whatever is presented to the sense organs as real as such. That mysterious function of the mind or consciousness which, unable to discriminate the real from the unreal, treats whatever is experienced through the senses as real, thinking of nothing beyond it is the *avidya* form of *māyā*. The traditional example of mistaking a piece of rope for a snake to make this point clear.

Verse 5

The senses, mind, intelligence,
five vital tendencies and such - that by which
they are specifically created as the subtle limbs
of the reasoning self is *parā* alone.

In this verse 5, the central notion is *cidatma* having assumed the form of oneself. There is here both the horizontal and the vertical aspects brought into relationship. This aspect of the Self as *cidatma* is subject to alternating pleasures and pain. In this commentary, Narayana Guru relates this with the *jiva* or *vital self*, and *jiva* should be understood as the horizontal correlate of *cidatma*. There is also reference in the commentary to the limbless Absolute with which *cidatma* can also be correlated. Such an Absolute is the verticalised version of the same. Besides definitions contained in the verse, our structural analysis helps to fix these notions more precisely.⁵

Verse 6

Adopting these limbs, the reasoning Self
by its own *māyā* becomes deluded,
as if happy and unhappy;
in truth there is nothing at all.

This verse deals with delusion caused by the *māyā* of *cidatama*. When the structural mechanism of verse five understood a full verticalisation of the tendencies in the *jiva* would be found to abolish the ambivalent alternation of pleasure and pain. At a higher level both get absorbed into the Absolute.

Verse 7

That by which this world, which is indeed
the object of the senses, is specifically created

is *aparā* alone, which in the Self permeates
the eidetic imagery of the gross.

In the two previous verses we have referred to a negative principle of phenomenology which occurs as the counterpart of the Absolute. In the present verse the negative principle given to the content of actuality.

It is one *cit* or *cidatma*, becoming conditioned because of its own *māyā*, that manifests itself as both mind and matter, both as subject and object, one subtly and the other grossly. *Maya* causes the superimposition of certain conditioning factors and as a result, the one Reality appears as two. These conditioning factors taken away, what remains is the *cidatma* alone. An urge for realizing the oneness is there in all these conditioned appearances. The one *māyā* functions as *vidya-avidya*, *para-apara* and many such happens so in *Ātma* because of its own willing or ideations.

The willing that causes the emergence of the gross world is termed here *sthula-sankalpanā* (gross ideation).

The gross ideation that takes place in *ātma* is what appears as the gross world. For this reason, this aspect of *maya* is described by the Guru here as *adhyātma – sthula – sankalpanamayi* (in essence nothing but gross ideation of the individuated self), and it is non other than the *apara-māyā*.⁶

Verse 8

As ignorance of mother-of-pearl
is the basis of silver,
what is imagined in the self -
that is known as *tamas*.

Māyā is treated as having *tamas* or darkness for its essential quality. Darkness is marked by the absence of light and it stands here for *ajñana* or ignorance, the absence of *jñana* or wisdom. Knowing what really exists as it is known as *jñana*. Kowing something as it is not, is called *ajñana* or ignorance.

The delicate interplay of ambiguity between the mother-of-pearl and the silver-appearance rests on an ontological rather than teleological or psychological basis. A fuller knowledge of the mother of pearl abolishes the error of the silver appearance. Negativity when pushed further abolishes duality by diminishing the possibility of error in the opposite pole.

Verse 9

Just as a tree is wonderfully
latent in the seed,

⁵ Nataraja Guru, *An Integrated Science of the Absolute*, D.K. Printworld, 531, (2001).

⁶ Guru Muni Narayana Prasad, *Garland of Visions*, D.K. Print world, 139 (2007)

all are in this; therefore, or by its importance, it is called *pradhānam*.

Pradhana, which is given in the present verse as the primeval cause of manifestation is one of the effects of *māyā*. It is the prime potency, such as of a seed to develop into a tree or a big-bang that can cause and expanding universe. According to the Guru *Pradhana* and *Prakriti* are two different aspects of *māyā*. To the Sankhyans these two are synonym.

Verse 10

As by its very nature it
diversifies the modalities marvellously,
this, of three-fold modality,
is well-known here as *prakriti*.

Prakriti or Nature is that which has the tendency to proliferate, replicate and cause endless varieties of mutations. In Indian Philosophy *prakriti* or nature is a term that has acquired a noticeable place. The Sankhyans considers *prakriti* or nature as one of the two Ultimate Realities (the other is *purusha*). In Sankara's *Advaita Vedānta prakriti* is yet another word for *māyā*. Narayana Guru admits *prakriti* as an aspect of *māyā* and gives a clear definition of it, in its summarised form as "*prakarshena karoti iti prakriti*". Then it would mean "That which performs all actions in its own proper way is called *prakriti*".⁷

Such actions take place no where else than in the one imperishable Reality or *Ātma* as made clear in the *Bhagavad Gita* (VIII.3), where karma is defined as "that creative Reality which urge inherent in the imperishable gives rise to all that comes into being. "Narayana Guru also takes the same stand in respect of karma in the *Darśanamāla*, in the *Karma Darśanam*. In short, the indomitable creative urge abiding in the one *Ātman* – Reality, when functional is called *prakriti*.

It is the same *prakriti* that assumes the subjective and objective worlds, the employer and employed that manifests as extensively existing externally both here and here after, arousing this sense.

3. Conclusion

Ātman is sat-cit-ānanda or *Saccidananda*. These three latent aspects express themselves so that *ātma* could have the enjoyment of self-expression. This is an actualization of *ātma*'s own *ānanda* content and is accomplished by unfolding itself in numerous ways, unique to itself, resulting in the world appearance.

We have seen, that *māyā* is a mysterious factor that has no existence of its own, inherent in *Ātman* that hides the real and appears the unreal.

Narayana Guru in the *Māyā Darśanam* conceives the evil of *māyā* as an overall negative principle of error is reviewed and presented in a methodological order with a clear definition of each factor and describes it in such a way that the very *māyā* could be negated in order to realize what really exists.

The Guru's concept of *māyā* is acceptable to the theistic vedantins - Ramanuja, Mādhva and others and even to the scientists.

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⁷ Guru Muni Narayan Prasad, *Garland of Visions*, D.K. Print world, 146