

The theory of Abhasa: A different way of interpretation of Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract: There are three ways of interpretation of Advaita Vedanta, namely the theory of reflection (*pratibimbavada*), the theory of appearance (*abhasavada*) and the theory of limitation (*avacchedavada*). Badarayana, in the *Brahmasutra* and Samkara, in his *Brahmasutra-bhasya* adumbrate these three theories in germinal forms which receive their full-bodied forms in the writings of the followers of Samkara. The developed forms of *abhasavada* and *pratibimbavada* are almost simultaneous. Suresvara, a disciple and staunch follower of Samkara, is the chief exponent of the theory of appearance (*abhasa*). He enunciates and develops the theory of appearance (*abhasa*) in his *Varttika-s* and *Naiskarmyasiddhi*. The theory of *abhasa* is regarded as the original contribution of Suresvara. He develops the theory in order to defend the thought of Samkara in the face of criticism made by the opponents. This paper demonstrates the standpoint of Suresvara which highlights a new approach to reveal the concept of the ultimate reality.

Key words: Abhasa , Advaita Vedanta, Brahmasutra, Suresvara, Pratibimba.

1. INTRODUCTION:

There are three ways of interpretation of Advaita Vedanta, namely the theory of reflection (*pratibimbavada*), the theory of appearance (*abhasavada*) and the theory of limitation (*avacchedavada*). Badarayana, in the *Brahmasutra*¹ and Samkara, in his *Brahmasutra-bhasya* adumbrate these three theories in germinal forms which receive their full-bodied forms in the writings of the followers of Samkara. The developed forms of *abhasavada* and *pratibimbavada* are almost simultaneous. Suresvara, a disciple and staunch follower of Samkara, is the chief exponent of the *abhasa* theory in his *Varttika-s* and *Naiskarmyasiddhi*. The theory of *abhasa* is regarded as the original contribution of Suresvara. He develops the theory in order to defend the thought of Samkara in the face of criticism made by the opponents².

Suresvara in the *Brahadaranyakopanisadbhasyavarttika* spends much intellectual energy in formulating the theory of *abhasa*. According to him, Brahman or Consciousness is the only Absolute Reality that does not admit of any differentiation or gradation, while the universe is an appearance (*abhasa*) in *avidya*³. The universe with all its phenomenal things is as much appearances as illusions⁴. The only difference lies in the fact that the phenomenal realities of the universe are primary appearances that seem to be real to the erring person until realization of Brahman dawns in his mind, and the dream objects and illusory objects are the secondary appearances. The former is the original appearance in *avidya* and is considered to be a primordial one and the latter is the secondary appearance, a further appearance of the original appearance. The former arises from Pure Consciousness through *avidya* first and then, the latter arises from the same Pure Consciousness through any of the modifications of *avidya*, through the process of non-realization and false realization. In Suresvara's philosophy these two appearances are known as *karanabhasa* or *cetanabhasa* and *karyabhasa* or *acetanabhasa* respectively⁵. Suresvara maintains that the appearance of Consciousness or Reality expands in larger and larger circles and develops in innumerable diverse outer forms that constitute the universe.

Abhasa is the central doctrine of Suresvara's philosophy. He makes a distinction between *pratibimba* and *abhasa*. *Pratibimba* or image, as the teachers of Vivaran School hold, is identical with *bimba* or the prototype and hence as much real as the original⁶. But *abhasa* is neither identical with the reality nor is itself real in any sense⁷. Suresvar considers *abhasa* to be something in and through *avidya* and its multiple modifications causes the diverse phenomenal things of the world, and the same Reality by virtue of so many appearances make all of the objects appear to be real for all practical purposes to the erring person. Although both the phenomenal things and illusory objects are apparent entities, the former is primary appearance and the latter, secondary appearance. As the two types of appearance are the basis of gradation, the world seems to be a higher type of the so-called reality than that of illusions. But it would be wrong to say that Suresvara also admits of the threefold grade of reality, inasmuch as, according to Suresvara, all phenomena are only outward appearances of one and the same Reality, Brahman⁴⁴. Actually, Suresvara advocates the theory of *sattaikya*.

It is to be noted here that the three schools of interpretation admit of non-dualism, but they arrive at the same conclusion in different ways. The teachers belonging to the *Pratibimba* School arrive at non-dualism through the method of identity proper. They are of the view that as *pratibimba* is essentially identical with *bimab*, the phenomenal things of the world being the reflection of Brahman have no separate existence apart from Brahman or Absolute

Reality. But Suresvara also comes to the same conclusion through the method of cancellation. According to him, the empirical entities are neither real nor unreal nor both. They are instantly removed on the realization of Brahman, and what is ultimately left as the Residue is Brahman⁴⁵.

Suresvara in his *Varttika* quite frequently refers to *abhasa* or appearance as *cidabhasa*, *caitanyaabhasa* and *atmabhasa*. Naturally, a question may arise here: how is *abhasa* related to cit or Consciousness? As Consciousness is *kutastha* or the immutable witness and out of all relations, It can never be related to an appearance or *abhasa* in any way. So in the plane of the Absolute their relation is impossible. But in the realm of ordinary dealings, the relation between cit and *abhasa* cannot be denied. Both Brahman and the world, Suresvara holds stand in the relation of cause and effect (*janyajanaka*). The former appears to be the cause in Its immanent aspect. The relation of *janyajanaka* here signifies difference, not identity.

A fresh question may be raised here. Appearance and *avidya* are mutually related. The former depends on the latter as its receptacle or adjunct and again the latter also being appearance depends on the former. So it is vitiated by the defect of see-saw. In reply to this objection Suresvara says that as both are beginningless the problem of series of dependence should be judged in accordance with the dictum of seed and sprout. He further proposes that appearance and *avidya* stand in the mutual relation of the cause and effect (*janyajanaka*). *Avidya* being the container of *abhasa* is regarded as the cause (*janaka*) of the latter; and again in the perspective of existence and manifestation *abhasa* is considered to be the cause (*janaka*) of *avidya*. *Abhasa* is the material cause (*upadana karana*) of *avidya*, whereas *avidya* is the efficient cause (*nimittakarna*) of *abhasa*⁴⁶.

The question, that inevitably arises, is: How does *avidya* itself arise initially? Suresvara says that *avidya* is one kind of appearance, but it does not require any receptacle for itself. It has no time at which it begins. It is assumed under the logical necessity of explaining the appearance of the Universe. It is not only a suppressive factor, but also a creative principle. *Avidya* being a creative principle is *bhavarupa* and *avicarita-samsiddha*. The term *avicarita-samsiddha* and a variation of it such as *avicaritaprasiddha* or *avicaritasamsiddhi* are characteristic expressions of Suresvara that occur regularly in the *Naiskarmyasiddhi* signifies that *avidya* seems to be a fact beyond dispute so long as Brahman or the Absolute Reality is realized⁴⁷. The objects which one experiences in one's daily life exist apparently and conditionally. *Avidya* is *avicarita-samsiddha* also in the sense that it does not admit of proof or epistemological process. It does not depend on any causal factor since causal factor is itself the issue of *avidya*. The start of *avidya* is unquestionable but not its end. The end of *avidya* needs the realization of Brahman. Suresvara speaks of two logical alternatives namely Reality and non-realization of Reality. *Avidya*, its modifications and appearances are non-realization of Reality, not a separate reality.

It is to be noted here that some critics ignore the distinction between *abhasavada* and *pratibimbavada*. But on close scrutiny it reveals that there is a fine distinction between the theory of *abhasa* and the theory of *pratibimba*. The former doctrine considers *abhasa* or appearance to be false, whereas the latter regards *pratibimba* as real. Madhusudan Saravati in his *Siddhantabindu* draws such a line of demarcation⁴⁸. But a question arises whether *abhasa* is false or its adjunct i.e. *avidya* or both. Vasudeva Sastri in the introduction to his edition of the *Siddhantabindu* points out that according to the author of the *Varttika-s* and his followers, both *abhasa* or appearance and *avidya* i.e. adjunct are false⁴⁹. Samkara also in his commentary on the *Brahmasutra uttaraccedavirbhutasvarupastu* holds that both are illusory⁵⁰. In this context, another question arises whether Vidyanaya, known as Bharatitirtha, advocates the theory of *pratibimba* or the theory of *abhasa*. It has already been discussed that Vidyanaya in his *Vavaranaprameyasamgraha* adheres to the theory of reflection. Interestingly, in his *Pancadasi* he supports the theory of *abhasa*. At places, he uses the term *pratibimba* in the sense of *abhasa*⁵¹. Sometimes on the authority of the scriptural texts he asserts that both *jiva* and *isvara* are illusory⁵². He cites the example of *japa* flower at many places. The *Pancadasi*, *Anubhutiprakasa* and *Bhradaranyakavarttikasara* bear the testimony of the fact that Vidyanaya, the writer of these works, is an upholder of Suresvara's *abhasavada*. So T.M.P. Mahadevan rightly observes, "While the Vivaran view regards the reflection as real and identical with the prototype, according to the theory propounded in the *Pancadasi*, the *abhasa* is wholly illusory"⁵³. Notably, the flowers and successors of Suresvara slightly differ from the latter in interpreting the non-dualism.

2. CONCLUSION:

It will not be out of place to mention that the theory of *abhasa* should be distinguished from the theory of *drstisrsti*. Surprisingly, some critics fail to discover the subtle distinction between these doctrines, and wrongly take one for another. *Drstisrsti* is a purely conceptual construct. There are two kinds of *drstisrsti*. According to one variety, creation is contemporaneous with perception. The world is a series of interrupted and occasional manifestation associated with different empirical bodies. It is co-terminus with its occasional cognition⁵⁴. But it endures till the Absolute Reality is realized. One may argue that who is he that posits it? The unconditioned self cannot posit it, inasmuch as, even in release there exists the person who without any assistance of instrumentality posits the world. As a matter of fact the state *moska* would be undistinguished from the state of migration⁵⁵. Similarly, the opponent claims

that the self that is conditioned by nescience (*avidya*) cannot posit the world, since *avidya* has to be posited and the conditioned person is to be admitted even prior to the assumption of *avidya*⁵⁶. To ward off the difficulties Appyaya Diksita in his *Siddhantalesasamgraha* says that a person who is conditioned by the earlier posited nescience (*ajnana*) posits the subsequent nesciences⁵⁷. Prakasananda, the author of the *Vedantasiddhantamuktavali*, refers to another type of *drstisrsti*. Accordingly to this theory, *satta (esse)* and *idristi (percipi)* are identical, because their difference cannot be proved⁵⁸. Perception is itself the creation of the universe, since there is no difference of the seen from the seeing⁵⁹. But Suresvara's *abhasa* is not a conceptual construct. The continuation of *abhasa* is an established fact until the Absolute is realized. The Abhasavadins say that Reality is one that exists timelessly, unconditionally and independently. Whatever is changing at any time and under any condition cannot be Reality. What changes is only appearance, but behind it there is an essence which is reality and which does not change⁶⁰. So Abhasavadins recognized an underlying eternal reality as the ground of all appearances, whereas the *Drstisrstivadins* do not acknowledge any such real ground.

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