NATURE OF BRAHMAN IN ADVAITA VEDĀNTA: AN EVALUATION
Sibsankar Tunga

Brahman is the main concern of Advaita Vedānta. In this paper an attempt has been made to explicate and evaluate the nature of Brahman in the light of Advaita Vedānta. Normally the principal teachings of Śaṅkara’s Advaita are expressed as (1) Brahman is ultimately real, (2) the world is a false appearance on Brahman, and (3) the jīva is essentially identical with Brahman. “brahma satya jagan mithyā jīva brahmaiva nāparah”. Śaṅkara’s Absolutism is known as Kevaladvaitavāda on its positive side and as Māyāvāda on its negative side. On the Sāstric side it declares to be based on three different sets of Upanisadic texts, viz. (a) texts teaching non-dualism such as Ekam evadviṣṭam (one only without a second), (b) texts teaching the non-existence of manyness such as neha nānāstikiñcana and (c) texts teaching the non-dual reality to be the staff of the universe: yatovāṁśiṁ bhiṣṭiṁ jāyante (from which all the elements, etc. have sprung forth). In Advaita philosophy the world is the self-alienation of Brahman, an eternally negated objectification of the unobjective reality. The world is an apparent manifestation (vivarta) of Brahman and a substantial transformation (parināma) of nescience inherent in Brahman.

The scripture declares that Brahman is existence (satya), consciousness (jñāna) and endless (ananta) 1 it is birthless (ajam),2 deathless (amaram)3 and eternal (nityam)4; It is ‘one without a second’- ekamevadviṣṭam and indescribable in words and unknowable to the mind- avāṃgmanasagocaram.

Śaṅkara, in his commentary on the Vedānta sūtra, describes the nature of Brahman as follows: Brahman is that whose nature is permanent purity, intelligence, and freedom (nitya S’uddhabuddhamuktasvabhāvam brahmaṇi); it transcends speech and mind, does not fall within the category of ‘object’, and constitutes the inward self of all. Of this Brahman our text denies all plurality of forms; the Brahman itself is leaved untouched the cause, ‘Not so, not so’, negatives not absolutely everything, but everything but Brahman.5

In his commentary Śaṅkara distinguishes Brahman as a higher and a lower one.
Brahman viewed from the aspect of knowledge or *vidyā* is free from all adjuncts, all name and form and it is called the higher Brahman. It is *nirguṇa* Brahman and it is knowledge of this Brahman through which liberation can be attained. Brahman viewed from the aspect of ignorance or *avidyā* is lower Brahman which is *saguṇa* Brahman or God. One cannot properly speak positively about the higher Brahman. Many of the adjectives used in our texts are negative: Brahman is without quality (*nirvisesa*), without form (*arūpa*), without change, without parts, without end (*advitiya* or *advaita*).

It is devoid of all distinctions-homogenous (*svajātiya*), heterogenous (*vijātiya*) and internal (*svagata*). A tree is different from a stone (*vijātiya-bhedā*). The oak is different from the poplar (*svajātiya-bhedā*). In the same tree, the blossom is different (*svajātiya-bhedā*) from the leaf. All these differences disappear in Brahman, which is homogeneous consciousness without a break.

There are descriptions in the *Brahma-sūtra* of the ultimate reality as both *nirguṇa* (devoid of qualities) and *saguṇa* (possessing qualities). Śaṅkara reconciles them by means of the distinction between higher knowledge (*parāvidyā*) and lower knowledge (*aparāvidyā*). From the standpoint of the liberated soul Brahman is unconditioned; from that of one in bondage Brahman appears to be the cause of the universe and endowed with different qualities like omniscience etc.

Thus *saguṇa* Brahman or *Īśvara* is the self-same Brahman at the relational level of experience which at the supra-relational level of experience is the *nirguṇa* Brahman. The Higher knowledge brings about immediate Liberation, resulting in the utter cessation of all suffering and the attainment of supreme bliss. The lower knowledge leads to the realization of the *Brahman* and thus paves the way for ultimate Liberation. It offers the highest happiness in the material world. But still it is Immortality. The attainment of the Higher knowledge, or *ParāVidyā*, is the goal of the spiritual life.

The scriptures describe Brahman as being both qualified and unqualified, differentiated and non-differentiated (*saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*). So both must be true according as It is or is not connected with *Upādhi*śis (adjuncts). Śaṅkara refutes this and says that such contradictory descriptions of one and the same entity cannot be true, nor can Its nature be changed by connection with another; for such a change would mean its destruction. Brahman is without attributes, for the scriptures throughout describe It as such, to the exclusion of Its other aspects. They do not inculcate the connection of Brahman with forms, for wherever they
describe a form of Brahman, the scriptures explain at every instance that the form is not true and that behind the Upādhis there is one formless principle. Brahman is only formless; forms are due to Upādhis and are meant for Upāsanā (meditation), and are not intended to establish It. Brahman is pure intelligence, homogeneous, and formless; the various forms are like reflections of the one sun in water, and as such are not real.

The Vedānta philosophy often describes Brahman by the term saccidānanda, a compound consisting of three words: Sat (Existence, reality, or Being), Cit (Consciousness, or Knowledge) and Ānandam (Bliss). Sat, Cit and Ānandam Existence, Consciousness and Bliss are not attributes of Brahman, but Its very essence. Brahman is not endowed with them: Brahman is Existence itself, Consciousness itself and Bliss itself. In the Absolute there is no distinction between substance and attributes. Sat, Cit and Ānandam denote the same entity; when one of them is present, the other two are also present. Absolute Being is Absolute Consciousness and Absolute Bliss. These three words, Existence, etc. though they have different meanings in ordinary parlance, yet refer to one indivisible Brahman, even as the words, father, son, husband, etc. refer to one and the same person according to his relationship with different individuals.

The truth, knowledge and infinitude are the essential characteristic of Brahman which will find support in the s’ruti texts “satyam jñanam anantam Brahma”. The secondary characteristic feature of Brahman exists in its being the cause of the creation etc. of the universe (jagat). Here the term ‘jagat’ denotes all kinds of effects and the term ‘creation’ etc (jāmnādi) means the creation, maintenance and dissolution, “Being the cause (Kāraṇatva) means ‘being an agent’ (Kartrtva)

In the first Brahmasūtra. ‘Athāto Brahma jijnāsā’ Brahman is recognized as nirguna Brahman. But in the second Brahmasūtra ‘jāmnādyasya yatāḥ’, Brahman is explained as saguna Brahman and He is that from which all this has arisen, by which it is maintained in existence and into which it will ultimately disappear. Brahman is the all knowing and all powerful cause of this world. Here a question may be raised: What is the real nature of the definition of the second Brahmasūtra jāmnādyasya yatāḥ, whether svarūpa Laksana or Taṭastha Laksana?

The Advaitins examine this sūtra and shows that though this aphorism provides us
directly with *Taṭastha Laksana*, it indicates Svarūpa Laksana of nirguna Brahman also. The significance of this sutra is dependent on the s'ruti: "yato vai Imāni bhūtāni jāyante, yena jīvāni jīvanti, yat prayanti abhīsāmvasanti tat vijītvānasva, tat Brahma". This s'ruti is included in the prakaraṇa passage (sentence) of Taittiriya samhitā and the s'ruti ānanda hi eva khalu Imāni bhūtāni jāyante, occurs at the end of the above passage. This s'ruti constitutes the essential definition of Brahman. From Ānanda says the Upanisad, ‘all existents are born, by Ānanda they remain in being and increase to Ānanda they depart. Ānanda or bliss is the essence of nirguna Brahman. Here dharma and dharmī are identical. Therefore, according to the follower of Sankara, the aphorism. “janmādyasya yatāḥ” implies both the accidental definition (*Taṭastha Laksana*) and essential definition (*Svarūpa Laksana*) of Brahman. These two definitions are also found in the significance of the introductory (Maṅgalācarana) stanza of the Vedānta - paribhāṣā of Dharmarājādhvarindra:

"Yadvividāvīlāsenabhūtabhautikasṛṣṭayāḥ, 
Tāṁ naumi paramātmanāṁ saccidānanda-vigrāham I
(To that supreme self, the embodiment of Existence, Knowledge and Bliss (Absolute), by the manifestation of the nescience (*avidyā*) relating to which the projection of the (simple) elements and in fact, the whole universe of name and form.) And in that of the Vedāntasāra of Sadānanda Yogēndra.

“Akhandamsaccidānanda-vākhiladharamārayeabhāvā-yād-śiddhayā. II” (I take refuge in the self, the indivisible, the Existence-Consciousness-Bliss absolute, beyond the reach of words and thought, and the substratum of all, for the attainment of my cherished desired).

Now I shall attempt to evaluate the Advaita theory of *taṭastha laksana* of Brahman. The role of *taṭastha laksana* is very important in the Advaita Vedānta. This definition may also be described as adhoc definition of Brahman, which has no permanent status. Brahman as qualified by the power of creation etc. of the universe is sopādhika Brahman or *sagūna* Brahman, which is described as God in Advaita Vedānta. To know this infinite, unlimited and attributeless Brahman, the secondary characteristic of Brahman is essential initially and hence it has got some value for the beginners. As soon as the real Brahman is realized, the *sagūna* Brahman known through this secondary definition becomes illusory and that is why,
it is called *tatastha* or secondary. Here a question may be raised: Can any definition describe Brahman? The term ‘characteristic’ whether essential or secondary is not applicable to Brahman. Because, Brahman is indescribable in character which is supported in the *Sruti—Yaḍvācānabhyuditam*.  

One who realizes Brahman cannot communicate to others. To describe Brahman as truth etc. it again becomes *tatastha* because through this we do not get the indescribable Brahman. That is why, the realization of Brahman is secret (gūhya) and non-communicable to others. As the realiser of Brahman cannot communicate his experience to others due to the absence of duality at this stage, Brahman is indefinable, but realizable. In one sense the so-called *svarūpa laksāṇa* of Brāhmaṇ may be considered as *tatastha* on account of the fact that characteristics of Brāhmaṇ (Truth etc.) are essential for giving a real picture of Brāhmaṇ to an individual who is desirous to know Brāhmaṇ (Brāhmaṇjijnāsu). When Brāhmaṇ is realized, there is no necessity of this definition due to the non-duality between definition (*laksāṇa*) and the defined object (*laksāṇa*) at this stage. Though Brāhmaṇ exists, the definition is not there, which violates the basic characteristic of *svarūpa laksāṇa*. Hence, such *laksāṇa* also is not permanent, but temporary.  

The real nature of Brāhmaṇ can be realized only by the concerned individual who has become the seer. What he knows can never be described because there is ‘none’ to whom it will be described due to the cessation of duality. If the *svarūpa laksāṇa* is taken to be a definition revealing the true picture of Brāhmaṇ, how can it be proved or verified as true? If it is argued that the *vedic* seers have realized this and described as such, the problem remains unsolved. If the vedic seers have really seen Brāhmaṇ they would have been essentially identified with Brāhmaṇ having no duality, which stands on the way of any kind of description- *tatastha* or *svarūpa*. Hence, there is no certainty as to the fact that *svarūpa laksāṇa* gives the essential characteristics of Brāhmaṇ. Like *tatastha laksāṇa* the *svarūpa laksāṇa* is based on presumption and here an effort has been made to give an idea of the essence of Brāhmaṇ, which may not be true. Hence, this definition though refined to some extent, may be taken as *tatastha* again, but not *svarūpa*. Moreover, *svarūpa* and *laksāṇa* are contradictory terms. If *svarūpa* is known, the *laksāṇa* of it is not possible due to the absence of duality.
We can argue that the vedic seers and embodied liberated persons have realized the essential features through some transcendental means and afterwards they have explained the nature to others coming in the phenomenal world. This view is not satisfactory. If Brahman is realized it is forever. If the above mentioned view is accepted, it will lead to accept the transitoriness of the state of liberation arising out of the realization of Brahman. If a seer comes back to the phenomenal world with the sense of duality, it will entail that he has retained to the world of ignorance or the world of bondage, which indicates his absence of liberation. If liberation is also transitory like other objects of this world, nobody will yearn for it.

When Brahman is realized, all these definitions become superimposed (adhyasta). The true character of Brahman is non-communicable, secret (guhya) and non-describable. Though the essential nature of Brahman is purely subjective and non-communicable to others, one can take refuge to the characteristic features (tatttha and svarupa) to have a rough idea about Brahman. It is true that conceptual designations are denied of Supreme Reality. Still they are necessary means and aids to the human intellect and help in preparing the ground for self-realization. Though these laksana cannot give us full picture of Reality, the ‘hazy picture’ got through them is highly essential as it is an index and pointer to the truth. Herein lies the importance of conceptualization and philosophical discourse. 16

There are various descriptions concerning the nature of ultimate reality i.e., Brahman, according to the different Vedanta Systems like Ramanuja’s Visistadvaitavada, Nimbarka’s Dvaitadvaitavada, Madhva’s Dvaitavada, Vallabha’s Visuddhadvaitavada and Sri Caitanya’s Acintyabhedabhedavada. All Vedanta systems attempt to discover the unity of all existence in the non-dual Sat-cid-ānanda. The schools of Vedanta differ only in their conception of the nature of that unity in its relationship with diversity.

When one tries to describe this Absolute, to express It in terms of thought and speech, It ceases to be the Absolute and becomes phenomenal. As such the descriptions given by different persons are likely to differ according to the standpoint or plane of consciousness from which they describe the Reality. All these descriptions are real so far as they go, for they are descriptions of the one Reality though they may differ among themselves even as the photographs of the sun taken from different distances by one who approaches it are real, being photographs of the same sun and yet they would vary from one another. The aspirants
are taken step by step to the ultimate truth, from dualism to qualified monism and finally to monism ‘That thou art’ is the last word of the upanisads in religion.

Knowledge of Brahman preaches the doctrine of non-duality and non-difference. Oneness of life and all existence is the massage. Its assurance of joy, strength, faith and vision of life, its call for devotion, fellow-feeling and dedication are of momentous important today. Discrimination between person and persons originates from our ‘die-hard ignorance’ our spiritual maturity makes us friends of humanity. It is our very spiritual impulse, if properly nurtured that helps us to abide by ethical principles. ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’. -Said Jesus Christ. It is very practical as its central focus is on man who is the epitome of the universe. Man in Vedānta is divine. Self, Ātman of Vedānta, is self-luminous, eternally pure and blissful.

The fruits of brhamajñāna are to attain mokṣa – spiritual freedom the masterword in Indian Philosophy. This spiritual attitude moulded by Vedānta edanta has saved people from destruction. Vedānta which is possessed of this knowledge is essentially a value- oriented way of life and the view of life. Therefore knowledge of Brahman gives us a blue print of healthy values of living. Only the direct, immediate and intuitive experience of Ātman can make us perfectly happy. This experience is necessarily the greatest value in life. This concept of Ātman, the self of man, the immortally of soul is one of the greatest contributions of Vedānta to humanity.

From the above discussion we find the ultimate nature of Brahman. Advaitins preaches us ultimate oneness of reality which is consciousness free from all determination. This consciousness is also the essence of this individual soul and so the greatness of an individual is emphasized in Advaita Vedanta. It give us an accommodating doctrine about ultimate reality. Swami Vivekananda, a modern Avaitin, observes: ‘There have been various interpretations of the Vedānta Philosophy and to my mind they have been progressive, beginning with the dualistic or Dvaita and ending with the non-dualistic or Advaita.

Notes And References

1. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.1.1

2. *Katha Upaniṣad*, 1.2.18
3. Bhagavadgītā, II, 19-21
4. Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, Verse No. 134
5. Brahma-sūtra bhāṣya. 3.2.22: tasmāt brahmavasanno’yaṃ pratisedho (i.e. neti, neti) na abhayavasanaity adhyavasyamah.
7. S’ankara’s Commentary on Chāṇḍogya Upaniṣad, 7.1.5 and also Brahāranyka Upaniṣad, 4.5.18.
11. Ibid, III.ii.11-18.
12. Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 2.1.
   ādiṣṭha gandhābhāvān

14. Tai.Upa,3.1
15. Kenopanisad.