CHAPTER—III

ŚAṆKARA ON MOKṢA
SANKARA ON MOKSA

In the previous chapter we have discussed the multiple dimension of the concept of mokṣa. In the present chapter I propose to discuss the basic tenets of Śaṅkarā's theory of Mokṣa. Śaṅkarācārya is the first philosopher to offer a systematic explication of the scattered philosophical gems contained in the Upaniṣads. His commentary on Bādarāyaṇa's Brahma Sūtra is a classic example of rigorous logical analysis and high level dialectics. It is well-known that there are different interpretations of upaniṣads, as well as Brahma Sūtra but Śaṅkara very convincingly shows that non-dualism or the Advaita pervades the Upaniṣadic corpus, in other words the basic thrust of the upaniṣads is the teaching of a non-dual reality, i.e. Brahman. His advaitic standpoint largely determines his metaphysics, epistemology as well as his theory of mokṣa.


Śaṅkara very articulately sums up the nature of bondage in the following way: "Due to ignorance man identifies the self with not-self. This is the bondage
of man and brings in its wake, the miseries of birth and death. Through this, he considers his perishable body as real. He identifies himself with it with the help of sense-objects. Thereby he becomes bound like silk-worm in its cocoon woven by its threads.¹

From the above explanation, it is clear that for Śaṅkara bondage implies ignorance and confusion, which ultimately leads to suffering. This state of bondage is identified by him as sāṁsāra. Obviously the question arises that why this ignorance? Śaṅkara answers that ignorance is due to mistaking a thing for what it is not (atasmin tat buddhi) i.e. "in this the ideas of that". Elaborating it further Śaṅkara says, "In the absence of discrimination, the snake is mistaken for a rope, and great danger be-falls him who seizes it though this false notion"². In the introductory passage of Brahma Sutra Bhāṣya, Śaṅkara

2. Vivekābhāṣhavai sphurati rajjudhisanā tateh' nरthा vrāteh nipatati samādhaturdhika, Ibid.
makes this point more precise. According to him in any instance of knowledge two basic elements are involved, that is viṣaya (sense object) and viṣayin (the subject of sense object). These two elements are referred to by Śaṅkara as yusmat and asmat, respectively. These two elements are opposed to each other in every respect. But there is a tendency in man to wrongly identify the viṣaya with viṣayin or the attributes, which results in such forms of judgements as "I am this, this is mine, etc.". This sort of mixing up of the two opposite elements is identified by Śaṅkara as adhyāsa or superimposition.

It follows from the above explanations that unless we understand the basic concepts like saṁsāra, avidyā/ajñāna and adhyāsa. We can-not understand the true nature of mokṣa.

II. The Nature of the World (Saṁsāra)

We take it for granted that the world is real and perfect in every respect. Yet when we look around we
are puzzled by the vast variety and multiplicity of the world. There are numerous animate and inanimate objects having within them, numbers of classes and sub-classes. So plurality is a peculiar feature of the world. But besides plurality what strikes us as most peculiar is the element of change in this world. Everything is momentary and changeable. Naturally, philosopher's obsession since time immemorial is the understanding and providing an explanation for these two puzzling concepts i.e. plurality and change. This obsession has led the philosophers to pinpoint certain basic principles through which plurality and change could be explained. Anything that is changeable is taken to be unreal, hence the philosopher tries to find out an ultimate principle which can explain the plurality and change in terms of unity and unchangeability. Of course there are philosophers like Heraclitus and Dignāga who have accepted the moments and the flux as real. But the majority of philosophers has not been satisfied with this acceptance. For them, it is as good as stopping half-way. Flux needs to be
explained in terms of permanence, the plurality of moments must lead to unity and oneness. For them this alone is the Being and the Reality. Plato had pointed such a Reality in Idea, Aristotle in God, Sāṃkhya in Prakṛti and Puruṣa. So the quest for the principle of unity and un-changeability is one of the major thrusts of philosophical inquiry. It is no wonder, that for Śaṅkara the world cannot be taken as the Real, as it is characterised by plurality and change. But Śaṅkara does not dismiss the world as an illusion. It is unfortunate, that some people believe so. Śaṅkara only emphasises the phenomenal nature of the world. To understand his conception of the world we must examine Śaṅkara's way of tackling the problem of plurality and change. Let us first, concentrate on the issue of plurality.

From Śaṅkara's viewpoint the pluralistic concept of the world is due to the very structure of our thought and knowledge. We normally believe that the world can be known by our sense organs, mind and
intelligence. The process starts with a distinction between the subject and the object of knowledge. We usually believe that the 'I' or the 'self' is the subject of knowledge, and the materials received from the sense objects must constitute the object of knowledge. But the knowledge of the objects is largely determined by name and form (nāma, rupa). No object can be known without the ascription of some names and attributes to an object. Our linguistic structure is such that to express a judgement we need to use a subject and a predicate. In other words a That and a What. That stands for the subject to which the What or the attribute is attached. For example, 'the man is tall' - in this judgement the man is the subject or the That to which the tallness is ascribed. In this way, all our empirical knowledge is a matter of connecting two concepts from the standpoint of what we want to linguistically express about the world. The same subject can be attached to many predicates. Thus the multiplicity is expressed through the structure of thought and language. The language creates an illusion
that attributes are different from objects, as we have shown in the above example 'tallness' is something different from the 'man'. So the multiplicity of the world is more due to our structure of thought and language, than due to the nature of objects. Śaṅkara very aptly shows the peculiarity of the pluralistic conception of the world through the example of one moon appearing as many through the reflection on water in many water vessels.

The world as such cannot be known completely. So at best we can say that conceptually it appears to be totality of things seen and unseen (druṣṭā-druṣṭā viṣaya samudāya). According to vedānta the world consists of name (nāma) form (rupa) and action (karma). The names and forms are the results of our conceptual categorization. This categorization is common to all. But action depends upon one's station in life and other social factors. It varies from individual to individual. Man's belief in systems, values, needs and aspiration, determines his course of
action. So at the level of action difference is taken for granted. But at the level of name and form, which is accepted as common for all, the idea of difference is also the key factor. All our methods of knowledge excepting Śruti, prerequisite 'difference' as the functional means for their operation. Every knowledge has an object of reference (sannimittam) or an object (vīṣaya). There is no knowledge which is without an object. Even actions, either good or bad cannot be conceived in the absence of difference. So duality or difference is the condition of our empirical level of activities. In this context Śaṅkara's distinction between vyāvahārika (empirical) and pāramārthika (transempirical) existence is of crucial importance. For him, the world has existence at the empirical level. Thus he does not discard the world as unreal or illusory. It is real as long as a man operates with his rational, perceptual and intellectual categories. In this sense, it is real and existent, it has

Vyāvahārika Sattā. But it is not real in the ultimate sense (Pāramārtthika Sattā) as it is vitiated by plurality and change. So Śaṅkara makes a distinction among three levels of existence — that is — Pāramārtthika Sattā, Vyāvahārika Sattā and Prātibhaṣika Sattā (illusory level of existence like dream etc.).

Now the question arises about the cause of the world. If the world does not have a cause it may turn into a mere hallucination? As in the case of hallucination, one sees the non existent object as the real object, similarly is the world a figment of imagination? Śaṅkara’s answer will be that the world is not a hallucination because it has a cause. Brahmān is the cause of the world. To explain the point he gives the example of rope and snake. Unless a snake-like object is there we cannot ascribe the attribute of snake to the rope, similarly unless the cause is accepted the world cannot be seen as an effect. Śaṅkara looks at the problem of change and causality in a very original way. Some of his arguments for the
causal foundation of the world resemble the Śāṅkhya theory of satkāryavāda, according to which the effect pre-exists in the cause. Śaṅkara argues that if the effect is not pre-existent in the cause then anything may arise out of anything. But this is not the case. So for him the world is not a manifestation out of a non-existent material. While explaining the Vedic passage, "in the beginning the universe was non-existent (asat)" - Śaṅkara clarifies that here the asat refers the effect before it is manifested. But he parts company with Śāṅkhya while dismissing the reality and the independent existence of effect. He argues that the effect is not at all an independent substance, as it is non-different (tadatmya) from the cause. He explains this point by some commonplace examples. When one says "the milk changes into curd", it signifies "this substance which had the qualities of milk has now the qualities of curd, viz sourness etc." So this substance remains the same though the qualities may change. The constituent and the constituted are substantially identical and non-
different (ekam advaya). The curd is not absolutely non-existent before it was produced. So the sentence "curd originates", has significance whereas the sentence "the son of the barren mother is the king" is meaningless. What Śaṅkara implies is that the world is not a meaningless illusion but a significant expression of reality. The Brahmān is the material cause which remains unchanged but it assumes the attribute of change as seen from the standpoint of the empirical world. Change is only phenomenal in character and there can be no change — in the noumenal realm of Ātman — Brahmān (Kutasthānitya). The concept of change has significance only at the empirical level. Thereby he proves that the non-qualified, non-dual, divisionless, relation-less, substance (Brahmān) alone is real. It is the material cause as well as the efficient cause of the world. Brahmān as the manifestation through names and formes is the material cause and as pure consciousness it is the efficient

4. *Tatbhāvānurktrām hi buddhim kāryakāranayo, ranonvate hetumvayam vādāmahah Brahmāṇḍuṭra Bhāṣya, 2.1.15.*
cause of the world.

(a) *Adhyāśa* :-

Śaṅkara's conception of *Saṁsāra* and his analysis of the issues of the plurality and change ultimately justifies his hypothesis that the world is an appearance, and *Brahman* alone is the ultimate reality. But the gap between the reality and appearance needs to be bridged to make his theory logically consistent. In *Adhyāśabhaṅga*, Śaṅkara clearly outlines his philosophical programme regarding the issue of Reality and appearance. According to Śaṅkara the one unique, unchangeable *Brahman* appears as having plurality of names and forms and constant change of attributes, because of the human tendency of superimposing the characteristics of one on the other. Unfortunately the idea of *Adhyāśa* has been dealt with by the traditional philosophers in a dogmatic and mystical manner. The term has often been interpreted as an internal process of psychological illusion. As a
man in the process of illusion sees a second moon which does not exist, similarly man sees the empirical world which does not exist. As we have noted earlier, Śaṅkara does not interpret the world as a case of illusion. His approach to the problem of adhyāśa is logico-linguistic. The structure of our language and thought necessarily implies a differentiation between the subject and the object. So the form of language is inadequate to represent the unity signified by the reality. Language according to him is evolved and structured by intellect, and intellect is determined by the practical conduct of life. Its function is to guide and conduct the life at practical level. So the peculiarities of language and thought shows that we are bound by the tendency of superimposition. Furthermore, he argues all our statements about the world are sublatable. There is always a possibility of correcting a judgement "this is a snake" can be corrected by the judgement "this
is a rope". But there is no guarantee that this sentence is not further open to correction. So *adhyāsa* implies a consistent process of superimposition. One can talk of *adhyāsa* in two senses: (1) with respect to particular experiences in the world of appearances, for example, post appearing as ghost or rope appearing as snake; (2) with respect to the world in general. Here *adhyāsa* is superimposition of names and forms on the undifferentiated unitary Reality. In both the cases *adhyāsa* is due to the peculiar tendency of the intellect to look at things by conceptual and categorical standards.

(b) *Avidyā and Māyā* :-

*Māyā* and *avidyā* are regarded as the chief sources of human bondage and the *samsāra*. Śaṅkara says "man's bondage was sprung forth from two 'powers'. Deluded by them he mistakes his body for the self and
wanders from life to life*.5 Elaborating it further Śaṅkara says "just as on a cloudy day, when the sun is swallowed up by dense cloud, cold, shivering blast, persecute man, so too, when the Ātman is screened of by utter ignorance, the dreadful projecting power (Vikṣepa Śakti) persecutes the foolish man with aimless sorrows".6

The two powers Śaṅkara talks of are māyā and avidyā. Though, sometimes he uses these terms interchangeably, there is a slight difference in implication of these two terms. The term māyā is often translated as illusion. But as we have noted earlier, the use of the term illusion gives a wrong interpretation of Śaṅkara's theory of Saṁsāra so the term is extremely misleading. The concept of māyā can be

5. Vivekaçudāmani, 144.
6. Ibid., 143.
better understood by understanding its psychological, epistemological and ontological dimensions. Here I take help of R.K.Puligandla’s interpretations of three dimensions of \( māyā \). Psychologically speaking, "\( māyā \) is our persistent tendency to regard appearance as reality and vice-versa". "From an epistemological point of view, \( māyā \) is our ignorance (\( avidyā \)) as to the difference between appearance and reality". In other words ignorance, regarding the nature of reality is the foundation of \( māyā \). According to Śaṅkara \( māyā \) is beginningless and endless, unthinkable and in expressible. \( Māyā \) is unthinkable because our thought structure and conceptual categorization have their origin in it. It is inexpressible because language has its basis in it. Brahm which is the internal subject \( pratyagātman \) is represented by \( māyā \) in terms of the
distinction between the knower known and the act of knowledge. "From an ontological point of view māyā is the creative power of Brahmān by virtue of which the world of variety and multiplicity comes into existence".

The phenomenal world has its foundation in the creative power of māyā that is why it is called vikṣepa śakti or the power of projection. As Śaṅkara says "by that element of plurality which is the fiction of Nescience (māyā as ignorance) which is characterized by name and form, which is evolved as well as non-evolved, which is not to be defined either as the existing or the non-existing, Brahmān becomes the basis of this entire apparent world with its changes, and so on, while in

its true and real nature, it, at the same time, remains unchanged, lifted above the phenomenal universe. Śaṅkara's conception of māyā clearly indicates that the world is not an absolute non-reality. Due to the instrumentality of māyā, Brahman appears as something different from its own nature.

Avidyā ordinarily means ignorance but in the context of Śaṅkara's philosophy it means not knowing the real as it is. There is a close connection between a māyā and a avidyā. If māyā is responsible for false projection (vikṣepa), then ignorance is the principle of veiling or screening of the real nature of Brahman (āvāraṇa). But both māyā and avidyā are common in nature, both are beginningless and endless. Yet māyā cannot operate without the prior acceptance of avidyā. This also means that māyā

8. BrahmaSūtra Bhāṣya, 2.1.27.
vanishes as soon as the ignorance is overcome by the real knowledge (vidyā).⁹

These principles of avidyā and māyā become operative through the concept of adhyāsa.

Nature of Mokṣa

The empirical self which is otherwise known as the jīva, represents the spiritual element in the universe. But jīva's spirituality is not in its full manifestation, because of avidyā the man associates himself with the physical adjuncts (upādhi), such as antahkaraṇa (the ego), the body and the senses. These limiting adjuncts are the very basis of individuality. Because of this each man considers himself different from other. So avidyā is responsible for man's egoity and this alone robs him of the realisation of his true nature. Śaṅkara illustrates this peculiar situation with the example of a prince, brought up as a hunter from infancy all along believing that he is really a part of the hunter family, but discovers.

⁹. Ibid., 2.1.22.
afterwards that he is of royal blood. Similarly, the \( jīva \) is nothing but same as the cosmic consciousness (\( ātman \)) which is non-different from \( Brahmān \), but he falsely identifies himself with the body and ego.

Thus according to Śaṅkara \( mokṣa \) is not a new state to be achieved. It is only the realisation of one's own true nature. So the mahāvākyā that thou art does not mean "that thou becomest". It is simply the realisation that the \( jīva \) is nothing but the \( ātman \) and the \( Brahmān \). That is why \( mokṣa \) is said to be a state of realisation. It is a case of the removal of deceptive idea about oneself, body and ego. The change that occurs due to realisation is only epistemic not ontological.

Śaṅkara develops his conception of \( mokṣa \) while commenting on 1.1.4. of \( Brahmāsūtra \). He says: "this, however, is absolute, immutably eternal, all pervasive like the ether, devoid of all modifications, eternally contented, without parts, self luminous by nature, to which

10. Śaṅkara's \( dhāśya \) on \( Bhādāranyaka Upaniṣad \), 2.1.20.
merit and demerit together with their fruits cannot approach in all three times". This description is almost similar to Śankara's conception of Brahmān, so it follows that for Śaṅkara mokṣa is not a new state but a state of non-difference between Brahmān, ātman and jīva. It is beyond all descriptions and the categories of thought such as space time and causality. So it becomes evident that knowledge of the true nature of the self is equivalent to mokṣa. But it should be noted that by knowledge he does not mean the factual or rational knowledge. For him jñāna means parāvidyā which is distinct from aparāvidyā. According to Munḍaka Upaniṣad all the truth proclaimed by rational enquiries including sciences and even the vedas are of the nature of secondary knowledge (aparāvidyā). They are categorial in nature. In contrast, the knowledge which leads to self realisation is direct (aparokṣa) and

11. Idam tu pārmarthikam kutasthanityam, vyomavatsavaryāpi, sarvavikriyārahitam nityatṛptam, niravayavam svayamjwotih svabhāvam Yatradharmādharho saha kāryena kālatrahayam ca nāpāvartete.

12. Nacadeśakāla nimittādyapeksatvam vyavasthitātmavastuvīsāyatvādātma jñānasya Śaṅkara's commentary on Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, 4.5.15.
intuitive in nature. This is often known as *Brahmanubhava*. This knowledge does not presuppose the triplicate distinction of the knower, known and the knowledge. According to R.K.Puligandla, "lower knowledge and truth lack the power to radically transform the human being ... , people quite accomplished in some branch or other lower knowledge suffering from anger, jealousy, depression, angst, fear of death and capable of cruelty and violence towards others and even themselves. In contrast, the higher knowledge and truth are soteriological, in that they have the power to radically transform the human being from one of ignorance and disease to one of knowledge, peace, fearlessness, freedom and wisdom*. 13 This is what one should understand by the state of *mokṣa*. It does not stand for a life in heaven or a state of religious ecstasy. This helps us to understand Śaṅkara’s conception of *mokṣa* as beyond the merits and demerits of moral life. Moral life implies some sort of strife and the conflict between ‘is’

and 'ought'. But mokṣa being beyond the limits of all categorial dualities, the liberated ones, become the master of moral law. The struggle for doing good which is at the very root of moral activities, is destroyed. This is replaced by a spontaneous activity for the welfare of humanity. It would be absurd to think that moral activity itself is destroyed, it is just transcended. According to Sureśvarāchārya, one of the great Advaitins, all moral virtues become a part of the very nature of liberated.¹⁴
What Śaṅkara highlights is, that moral discipline is not enough for mokṣa. The activities of the liberated one are the manifestations of morality. To transcend the moral obligation is to become supra-moral. To act morally in a spontaneous manner without being entrapped in moral conflict is not a matter to be ashamed for the liberated one it is rather an ornament to him.¹⁵

It is evident from the above discussion that for Śaṅkara mokṣa does not mean annihilation or disembodiment,

¹⁴. See S. Radhakrisnan: Indian Philosophy, Vol. 1.

¹⁵. Alankāro hyayamsmākam yad brahmātmāvagatau satyāṃ sarvakarteytāhahihīkṛtakṛtyatāceti | Śaṅkara Bhāṣya, 1.1.4.
necessarily. So he makes a distinction between two states of mokṣa - jīvan mukti (embodied state of liberation) and videha mukti (disembodied state of liberation, when a man dies and casts off his physical form). The conception of jīvan mukti is an unique contribution of Śaṅkara in the field of soteriology. This conception remains a controversial point in vedānta philosophy. Other vedāntin especially those who are influenced by vaiṣṇava view, vehemently oppose the concept of jīvan mukti. According to them this is a self contradictory idea, since the bondage is caused by human action (karma) which implies embodiment logically lead to the annihilation of the body. So liberation means videh mukti not jīvan mukti. But in Śaṅkara’s scheme of mokṣa the idea of jīvan mukti is not self contradictory. According to Śaṅkara the bondage is not due to embodiment or karma, rather it is due to ignorance. So once the ignorance is removed the mokṣa in the form of true knowledge dawns. It is the realisation that the jīva is non-different from Brahma. So embodiment is not an obstacle here.
From Śaṅkara's conception of the nature of the samsāra, jīva, adhyāsa and avidyā it follows that it is knowledge and knowledge alone is the means of mokṣa. He does not accept the primacy of karma or action as a means of mokṣa. According to him the fruits of good or bad action brings happiness and misery respectively. Action may be useful indirectly in preparing one self mentally to start on the path of knowledge. Besides action implies production, modification or obtaining something which is not yet achieved. But mokṣa is neither a production nor a modification; nor is it an attainment of something new. It is just the realisation that originally we are free and one with Brahman. The ignorance blocks this knowledge. Therefore the removal of the blockade does not mean attaining something, not yet attained. The path of action (karma) and devotion (bhakti) are not totally discarded but taken as a preparatory ground for knowledge (jñāna). They do not directly lead to mokṣa.

According to Śaṅkara the process of attaining the highest knowledge requires a life of discipline (sādhanā)
so that one can attain the Brahmajñana. The seeker of knowledge are exhorted to practice four kinds of disciplines, which is otherwise known as sadhnācatuśṭaya. They are as follows:

(1) *Viveka* - (discrimination between the Real and the unreal). This is an unshakable knowledge.

(2) *Vairāgya* (renunciation) : Disinclination to worldly things in this life and the heavenly life after death.

(3) *Śatsampatti* (six treasures) : These form the ethical foundation of spiritual life. They are (a) *śama* (calmness), (b) *dāma* (self-restraint), (c) *uparati* (self-settledness), (d) *titikṣā* (forbearance), (e) *samādhāna* (complete concentration), (f) *śraddhā* (firm belief).

(4) *Mumukṣatvam* (Longing for liberation) : This is the intense longing for overcoming the ignorance and the knowledge of the highest truth.
These four stages are preparatory ground for Brahmajñāna. The second stage consists of (1) Sravana i.e., the study and discussion of Upaniṣads and understanding the true purport of these scriptures. (2) manana, this is arguing within oneself and in the process getting convinced about the truths contained in the Upaniṣads. In other words, it is intended to make a rational analysis of the validity of the scriptural truths. (3) nidhidhyāsana, it means meditation, which aims at overcoming the obstacles in the path of right knowledge and concentrating one’s thought upon the identity between the individual self and Brahmān. This should be continued till the direct and immediate knowledge (aparokṣānubhuti) of such identity is realised.

There is a logical compulsion for Śaṅkara to put the entire emphasis on jñāna mārga (the path of knowledge and undermine the role of karma (action)). But he includes karma at the initial stage of the progress towards self-

16. “Action can not destroy ignorance, for it is not in conflict with ignorance. Knowledge alone destroys ignorance, as light destroys darkness”, Śaṅkara’s Atmabodha, 3.
realisation. Before one sets on the path of knowledge one must perform the nitya karma (obligatory duties), and must have avoided all actions leading to the fulfilment of selfish desires (kāmyā karma) and prohibited actions (nisiddha karma). These are needed for the purification of the mind. Śaṅkara also makes room for bhakti, which later on gained prominence in the philosophical theories of Rāmānuja and others. His conception of Īśvara as the saguṇa Brahmān (the qualified Reality) is very significant in this respect. Brahmān is conceived as Īśvara being limited by the adjuncts of māyā. When the ignorance is removed the distinction between Īśvara and Brahmān evaporates. But from Śaṅkara’s non-philosophical writings it becomes obvious that Śaṅkara was a devotee par excellence. It seems that Śaṅkara in his capacity as a philosopher gives primacy to knowledge, but in his capacity as a spiritual leader he emphasizes on the path of devotion. He defines bhakti as the search of one’s own real nature.

17. Samprāpte sannihite kāle nahi nahi raksati dukr karaṇe bhaja govindam mudhamate etc.

contradiction between bhakti (devotion) and jñāna (knowledge). When bhakti to Īśvara ripens, it leads to Brahmānubhava (that I am non-different from Brahmā). May be Śaṅkara introduced bhakti to make the common-man aware of his spiritual potentialities, because the path of knowledge is a difficult path.

Thus far we have discussed Śaṅkara's conception of mokṣa. It is obvious that for Śaṅkara mokṣa is a focal concept, because without mokṣa Brahmā would have turned into an empty concept.