Advaita Vedānta - its unique place in Indian philosophy

Vedānta literally means 'the concluding portions of the Vedas' which comprise the Upaniṣads. Subsequently however Vedānta meant all the thoughts that developed out of the Upaniṣads. The greatest and the best known system of Vedānta is Advaita. The Advaitism is mainly spoken of in connection with Śaṅkara's philosophy. Although Śaṅkara was the consolidator of Advaita, he was not the first to advocate Advaita. Among the seers of the Upaniṣads there are sages like Yajñavalkya and Uddalaka who held firmly to the doctrine of monism. In fact, they were the pioneers who did the spade-work and framed the structure of Advaita philosophy which later writers made use of, for streamlining their individual thinking on this basic Advaita philosophy. Gaṇḍapāda is the first systematic exponent of the Advaita Vedānta. He is reputed to be teacher of Śaṅkara's Teacher Gobindo and Śaṅkara has honoured him as his paramāgī. His (Gaṇḍapāda's) work the Māndūkyakarika may be considered to be the first available synthetic manual
of Advaita. Though the Vedas and the Upaniṣads are the foundations of Advaitism, yet they were hardly framed into a concrete philosophic thought before Śaṅkara took it upon himself the task of giving it a concrete shape and form and establishing a new philosophy out of it. He is the most conspicuous and eminent thinker of all the Indian thinkers. The pre-eminence of Śaṅkara will be brought to bold relief through a study of the social and spiritual conditions prevailing before pre-Śaṅkara era and also through a survey of the contemporary situation of Śaṅkara. The sixth and the seventh centuries saw the emergence of Hindu revival. In the south Buddhism was on the decline and Jainism was at the Zenith. As a reaction against the ascetic tendencies of Buddhism, the Mīmāṃsakās were exaggerating at the importance of Vedic rites. Kumarila and Maṇḍana Misra denounced the value of ṛṣāna and sannyāsa and insisted on the value of Karma and the stage of the householder. In other words, at that time, there were various conflicting systems of thought in India, and the condition that prevailed can be best characterised as nebulous. Politically as well as socially, philosophically as well as religiously, there was no central rallying point from which men could view the entire panorama of Indian thought and say, "Here is the unity of India ............... It was at such a time that the master mind of Śaṅkara set to work to produce unity in
the field of religion, culture and philosophy, leaving the political aspect of it to be worked out by future generations. But even what he had undertaken was a gigantic task for a single individual.

We find clearly from a study of Śaṅkara's career that his purpose was to reduce to unity and harmony, under the hegemony of Vedānta, the multiplicity of conflicting thought systems, without destroying the integrity of the prevailing faiths. Śaṅkara appeared as a champion of the orthodox faith. His whole endeavour was directed towards the perennial truth inherent in the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads, the Bhagavadgītā and the Brahmasūtra are the triple basis of Advaita philosophy. The Upaniṣads contain the wisdom of Vedānta, the Gītā supplies its cream and the Sūtras expand its philosophical basis. Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara may be said to be an attempt of a harmonious interpretation of the Upaniṣadic texts. All works of Śaṅkara were directed towards one purpose of helping the individual to realise the identity of his soul with Brahman, which is the means of liberation from human bondage. In his book Glimpses of World History (Letter 44) Jawaharlal Nehru records, his deep appreciation of Śaṅkara's works. Śaṅkaracārya's record is

a remarkable one .......... The whole country is stirred up intellectually by Śaṅkara's books and commentaries and arguments. Not only does he become the great leader of the Brahmin class, but he seems to catch the imagination of the masses. It is an unusual thing for a man to become a great leader chiefly because of his powerful intellect and for such a person to impress himself on millions of people and on history. Great soldiers and conquerors seem to stand out in history. They become popular or are hated, and sometimes they moulded history. Great religious leaders have moved millions and fired them with enthusiasm, but always this has been on the basis of faith. The emotions have been appealed to and have been touched.

It is difficult for an appeal to the mind and to the intellect to go far. Most people unfortunately do not think; they feel and act according to their feelings. Śaṅkara's appeal was to the mind and intellect and to reason. It was not just the repetition of a dogma contained in an old book. Whether his argument was right or wrong is immaterial for the moment. What is interesting is his intellectual approach to religious problems, and even more so the success he gained in spite of this method of approach...........

And the great success which met his campaign all over the country in a very short time also shows how intellectual
and cultural currents travelled rapidly from one end of the country to another².

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes in this context, "It is impossible to read Śaṅkara's writings, packed as they are without serious and subtle thinking, without being conscious that one is in content with a mind of a very fine penetration and profound spirituality. With his acute feeling of the immeasurable world, his stirring gaze into the abysmal mysteries of spirit, his unswerving resolve to say neither more nor less than what could be proved, Śaṅkara stands out as a heroic figure of the first rank in the somewhat motley crowd of religious thinkers of the medieval India. His philosophy stands forth complete, needing neither a before nor an after"³.

The most famous and important commentary of all the commentaries of Śaṅkara is the Vedānta Sūtrā or the commentary on the Brahma Sūtra where he was out to reject not only the theory of modification or transformation of Prakṛti advocated by the Sāṅkhya but also the theory of transformation of Brahman advocated by Bhartrprapanca. Instead he established his doctrine of vivarta-vada according to which Brahman does not become really transformed into the world but remains identically the

2 Jawaharlal Nehru : Glimpses of World History Letter 44.
3 Dr. S. Radhakrishnan : Indian Philosophy, Vol.2, p.446.
ame while we may wrongly think that he undergoes change and becomes the world. To him, the world is neither the transformation of the Prakṛti nor of Brahman. It is only the appearance of Brahman.

The central doctrine of Advaita is that Brahman is the only Reality, all else being an illusory appearance thereof. 

Saṅkara himself expresses the quintessence of his philosophy in a half verse: -

Brahman satyam Jaganmithya Jiva brahmaiva na parah.

Brahman is the only ultimate Reality, the world of multiplicity and plurality is false and ultimately, the Ātman and the Brahman are not different.

The non-duality of Brahman, the non-reality of the world and the non-difference of the soul from Brahman - these three constitute the essential teaching of Advaita.

In his book 'Vedānta for Modern Man' Christopher Isherwood writes, "Vedānta (so called because it was first expounded in the Vedas, the earliest Indian scriptures) is a non-dualistic philosophy. He teaches that Brahman (the ultimate Reality behind the phenomenal universe), is one without a second - Brahman is beyond all attributes. BRAHMAN IS NOT CONSCIOUS; BRAHMAN IS CONSCIOUSNESS. BRAHMAN DOES NOT EXIST. BRAHMAN IS EXISTENCE. BRAHMAN IS THE ĀTMAN (ETERNAL NATURE)
Emphasizing the monistic tendency in the Upaniṣads Śaṅkara develops it into a systematic Advaita Vedānta. William James has rightly remarked that Śaṅkara's system is the paragon of all monistic systems. As a monist Śaṅkara posits the reality of one category and he termed that entity as Brahman. "Reality is Brahman", it alone was in the beginning" remarks the Upaniṣads. Brahman is not related to anything for there is nothing to relate it with. It is devoid of difference both internal and external. In many passages of the Upaniṣads, it is said that it is impossible to give any positive determinations of the supreme Brahman. The famous passage neti neti (not this, not this), tells us that Brahman is absolutely non-empirical. It is beyond the reach of empirical thought. It is inapprehensible by logical knowledge. It is pure inwardness of which no conceptual interpretation is possible. It is indivisible, inalienable. It is neither external nor conditioned by external causation. To define it is to transmute it into object. We cannot even say that it is one. It is non-dual. For the category of number is not, applicable to Brahman. That is why, Śaṅkara calls his philosophy non-dualism.

4 Christopher Iserwood : Vedanta for Modern Man p.IX.
5 Dr. S. Radhakrishnan : History of Philosophy: Eastern and Western, p.275.
In some texts of Upaniṣads, Brahman has been defined as sat, cit and anandā - existence, consciousness and bliss. But even the description of Brahman as sat, cit and anandā though more accurate than accidental descriptions cannot directly convey the reality of Brahman. Such descriptions serve only to direct the mind towards Brahman by denying It of unreality, unconsciousness and blisslessness. Hence truly speaking an accurate description of Brahman must be negative, that is, by way of saying that 'It is not this' 'not this', or of dissociating it from all qualities and characters. Brahman is really Nirguna.

Śaṅkara however points out that we may describe Brahman as the cause, the creator, the sustainer, the destroyer of the world and therefore also as an omnipotent and omniscient, Being from the lower standpoint of our practical life. From that standpoint He appears to possess all these qualities. Brahman in this respect is called Saguna Brahman or Īśwara in his philosophy who is also the object of worship.

Saguna Brahman's value, as is restricted to the empirical sphere - a view which is entirely in consonance with the general Advaitic position that practical utility need not rest on metaphysical validity. It is this distinction that has given rise to what are familiarly known as the 'two grades'
of teaching in the Advaita - the higher one of the nirguna Brahman and the lower one of the Saguna. Sánkara accepts the theory of māyā for the explanation of the world. The doctrine of māyā is very old. It has been used in various senses in Rg Veda. Sometimes it is used in the sense of magic, at other times it is praised as a world-sustaining power, and it is also used in a supernatural sense. It is stated that Varuṇa and Indra assumed various forms through this Māyā. We also find the presence of the theory of māyā in the Upaniṣads.

1. "Īśā tells us that the veil that covers the truth is golden, so rich, gaudy and dazzling that it takes away the mind of the observer from the inner contents (Īśā, 15).

2. Kaṭho says how people live in ignorance and thinking themselves wise, move about wondering, like blind men following the blind (1,2, 4-5).

3. Mūndaka compares ignorance to a knot which a man has got in his heart before he gets possession of the self in the recess of his own heart (11,1,10).

4. Chāndogya tells us that knowledge is power and ignorance is impotence (1,1,10).

6 M. Hiriyanna: Outlines of Indian philosophy, p.377.
5. Brhadāranyaka compares Unreality to Not-being, to Darkness and the Death (1,3,28).

6. Prashna tells us that we cannot teach the world of Brahman unless we have shaken off the crookedness in us, the falsehood, the illusion (1,16).

7. Brhadāranyaka tells us 'as if there were a duality' implying thereby that there is really no duality. Māyā is a semblance, as an as-it-were, an appearance (11,4,14).

8. Chāndogya tells us that Ātman is the only Reality, everything else is merely a word, a mode and a name (VI, 1,4).

9. Śāvetāśvatara describes God as a Mayin who creates this world by this power (IV,9).

In Buddha Mahayana we find the reference of the doctrine of Māyā. Hence critics of Śaṅkara opine that as Buddha along with earlier schools of Buddhism is prior to Śaṅkara, Śaṅkara must have been influenced by the doctrine of māyā advocated by some schools of Buddhism. They consider him to be a Buddhist in disguise and his māyāvada is but crypto-Buddhism. Though the phenomenalism of the Buddhists

---

is akin to the doctrine of māyā, there is a divergence. To Śaṅkara the world of experience neither is nor is not. It has an intermediate existence which both is and is not. While repudiating the two extremes Buddha holds that there exists only becoming. Early Buddhists even went to the length of declaring that there was nothing behind the appearances. So virtually Buddha's māyāvada is reduced to mere nothingness. Śaṅkara recognises the real spirit beyond the unsatisfactoriness of the phenomena. The appearances are the appearances of the Self or Brahman who is pure Being. Thus we find that the doctrine of māyā has come to be associated with the name of Śaṅkara though it is as old as the Vedas. The view that the doctrine of māyā is either borrowed by Śaṅkara from Buddhism or it is a fabrication of the fertile brain of Śaṅkara is not tenable. Śaṅkara gained by the theory of māyā advocated in the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā and the Buddhism and developed a full-fledged doctrine out of them. He was fully aware of the difficulties standing in the way of reconciling the various statements of the Upaniṣads. He overcomes the difficulties by his clarification of knowledge as of two kind, higher and lower. In his commentary on Brahma Sūtra Śaṅkara takes the word Māyā in the sense of inexplicability, superimposition, subjective modification, all designating the phenomenal appearance of the world in the background of
Brahman. In his book "The Bhagavad-gītā" Dr. S. Radhakrishnan describes the relation of Brahman and Māyā in the following manner - "While the world is dependent on Brahman, the latter is not dependent on the world. This one-sided dependence and the logical inconceivability of the relation between the ultimate Reality and the world are brought out by the word, "Māyā". The world is not essential being like Brahman; nor is it mere non-being. It can be defined as either being or not-being."

Sāṅkara has explained creation by reference to snake-rope illusion. In our ordinary experience we mistake a snake for a rope. The illusion of snake in a rope is not without any foundation. It is because of the presence of really existent rope before me, that it appears to me to be a snake. So the illusion of snake has a real foundation in the sense that it resides in a rope. This objective foundation of illusion is called adhisthāna. Due to ignorance we project the attributes of snake in a rope (which is the ground of adhisthāna) and in consequence have the illusion of a snake which is really non-existent there. The imaginary attribution of something to where it does not exist is called adhyāsa. The two objects -

---

8 Dr. S. Radhakrishnan : The Bhagavad-gītā, p.13.
the rope and the snake are two different things. But when this difference is lost sight of, and the two are taken to be identical, we have adhyāsa. When we search for a cause of adhyāsa we find that it is due to ignorance of the substratum or foundation. If rope could be known as rope there would have been no illusion about it. The illusion-producing ignorance has two functions of concealment of reality and distortion of something else in our mind. It not only conceals the reality of rope but makes us appear to us as a snake. Just as rope appears to be the illusory snake, so also Brahman appears to be the world. Brahman is the only Reality. But due to ignorance we project the unreal world on the real Brahman and have the illusion of a world. Ignorance residing in individual selves not only conceals from us the real nature of Brahman who is the ground of the world but makes them appear as something else, namely, the world. From our standpoint ignorance is the cause of the world.

What we call avidyā from the subjective standpoint, is called Māyā from the objective standpoint. Virtually it comes to this that Māyā is the cause of world-appearance. Māyā is a power of Brahman to create the appearance and is indistinguishable from Brahman. Sri Ramakrishna, says that as the water of the ocean is now calm and next agitated into waves,
so are Brahman and Māyā. The ocean in the tranquil state is Brahman, and in the turbulent state is Māyā. It has no entity apart from Brahman who is the only Reality. Wise persons who are not deceived by the world-show will perceive nothing but Brahman. To them there is no illusion nor any illusion-producing māyā. Consequently Brahman to them is not the wielder of māyā. Thus we find that Śaṅkara has introduced the doctrine of māyā for the explanation of the world-appearance. Śaṅkara has not denied the world. A person having the illusion of a snake in a rope takes the snake to be real, since he reacts with fear to the illusory snake. This illusion is corrected as soon as his ignorance about nature of the substratum is dispelled, and he sees the rope as the rope. Similarly, as long as we are deceived by the world-show, the world is real for us. It is only to those wise few, who have attained the intuitive knowledge of Brahman, that the world is unreal or false. They perceive nothing but Brahman in the world. The illusion of snake in a rope is temporary but the illusion of the world is relatively permanent and is not easily removed. It is dispelled only by the attainment of the intuitive knowledge of Brahman.

Māyā occupies a very important place in the philosophy of Śaṅkara. To him, Māyā is the cause of illusion-producing ignorance.
Śaṅkara further holds that the Ātman is absolutely non-different from the Brahman. The relation between the Ātman and the Brahman is often called the relation of pure-identity. We should bear in mind that the identity implies the 'two' which are identical but there is no place for 'two' in the philosophy of Śaṅkara. So the relation between the Ātman and the Brahman can be adequately stated only in the negative terms as non-dual, non-different etc. Śaṅkara is out to explain the relation on the analogy of the space outside a jar and the space inside a jar. The space outside the jar and the space inside the jar are the same. But it is only due to the adjunct of the jar that it appears to be different. In like manner, Ātman and the Brahman are same, but due to limiting adjuncts of body, mind etc. that it appears to be different from Brahman. The individual soul is not a microcosm in a macrocosm; it is the macrocosm itself. It is not merely a true index to the Reality, but Reality itself. This soul per se is the Brahman Itself. For Advaita, the world is a product of Māyā, an illusory creation of God's magical power. The individual self as a limited person is also unreal. But the real self of man, the Ātman in him, is ever pure, free, infinite and immortal; it is the same sat-cit-ānanda, that Brahman is, and as such it is Brahman itself. Its false association with the body through ignorance is the cause of
its bondage. Therefore, liberation is to be attained only through knowledge of the self as identical with Brahman, and not through religious work nor through devotion to God. Describing the standpoint of Śaṅkara Swami Visuddhananda says that so long as we are under the chains of Māyā the universe appears real to us. Māyā has produced this universe with its multifarious names and forms and has drawn a veil, as it were, over the Reality behind the phenomenal world. When we are able to tear off this veil of Māyā, the real man will manifest himself and then we shall realise our true nature, namely, Brahman. When we see the world through the senses, it appears to us as the world of names and forms, and the same world is transformed into the world of ideas when we see it through the mind. And when we see it as Brahman, then we become conscious of a real being. Hence the Vedānta urges us to discover the 'Tat' - the Ideal in us and identify ourselves with It. To become Brahman is the highest ideal of the Vedānta.\footnote{Dr. S.N. Das Gupta; A History of Indian philosophy, Vol. I, p.439.}
us the individuals has no reality and has no other truth to show than this self. All other events, mental or physical, are but passing appearances, while the only absolute and unchanging truth underlying them all is the Self" 10.

Swami Vivekananda opines, that in the Upaniṣads the arguments are often very obscure. By Buddha the moral side of philosophy was laid stress upon, and by Ģaṅkarachārya, the intellectual side. He worked out, rationalised, and placed before men the wonderful coherent system of Advaita.

Thibaut who cannot be charged with any partiality for Śaṅkara speaks of his philosophy in these words: "The doctrine advocated by Śaṅkara is, from a purely philosophical point of view, and apart from all theological considerations, the most important and interesting one which has arisen on Indian soil; neither those forms of the Vedānta which diverge from the view represented by Śaṅkara, nor any of the non-Vedāntic systems can be compared with the so-called orthodox Vedānta in boldness, depths and subtlety of speculation" 11. A commentator writes that the system of Śaṅkara in consistency, thoroughness and profundity, holds the first place in Indian

10 Thibaut : Introduction to the Vedanta-Sūtra, p.XIV
philosophy. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan rightly remarks, "The problem which Śaṅkara set to himself, though it arises from the limited context of the religions experience as recorded in the Upaniṣads, has a universal interest, and the solution at which he has arrived seems a satisfying one, if all the elements are to preserve their equipoise. It is essentially a philosophical solution, since Śaṅkara lifts us through the power of thought which alone can reconcile and enable the different sides of life, into the ideal of joy and peace. It is true that he admits that thought cannot solve all the problems, but stands in need of an intuitive grasp of reality."  

Swami Vivekananda took up the thread of Śaṅkara's philosophy at this stage. He found enough convincing thought in Advaita Vedānta. But he also felt that there was scope for intuitive awareness of many aspects of life not encompassed by Advaita Vedānta. Deeply impressed by the great universal heart of Buddha, Vivekananda found enough ground and thoughts to make up for the apparent irreconcilables in Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. As an outcome of his comprehensive study of the heart of Buddha and Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara he could offer us a more comprehensive view of life jettisoning all ambiguities, obscurities and obscurities. He laid down a clear view of

12. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan: Indian Philosophy Vol 2 P656
life which if we comprehend shall lead us to a far deeper understanding and awareness. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, in Buddha we had the great, universal heart and infinite patience, making religion practical and bringing it to everybody's door. In Śaṅkarachārya we saw tremendous intellectual power, throwing the searching light of reason upon everything. We want today that bright sun of intellectuality joined with the heart of Buddha, the wonderful infinite heart of love and mercy. This union will give us the highest philosophy. Science and religion will meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends. This will be the religion of the future, and if we can work it out, we may be sure that it will be for all times and peoples. Though Swamiji got inspiration from Buddha's deep universal love for all living beings, he could not endorse all his philosophy. For the theoretical justification of Buddha's ethical teaching he has to fall back upon the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara which in Swamiji's hand takes the form of living Vedānta entering in our ordinary life and conduct. The core of Vivekananda's role lies in his bold attempt of bringing down the sky-high elevated thoughts of Buddha and Śaṅkara down to the level of practical life and application. His philosophic thoughts drawn from different studies of Indian philosophy particularly Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta has this uniqueness about it that there is nothing visionary or vain speculation of an idler in it, but it inspires and
stimulates further thoughts which can be translated, applied, and implemented into the framework of human society even in this age of science and rationalism, an age infested with complexity and multiplicity of problems.
Reference

1. Śaṅkara : Brahma Sutra Vasya
2. G. Thibaut ; The Vedāntic Sutras with the commentaries of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.
4. S.K. Das : A Study of the Vedānta
5. Kokilesvar Sastri : Introduction to Advaita Vedānta
7. W.S. Urquhart : The Vedānta and Modern thought.
8. R. Das : The Essential of Advaitism.
12. N.M. Mukherjee Sastri : A Study of Śaṅkara.
20. Rene Guenon : Man and His becoming according to Vedānta.
22. Nicol Macnicol : Indian Theism
24. Dr. Date : Vedānta Explained.
29. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan : Indian philosophy, Vol.2,
32. M. Hiriyanna : Outlines of Indian philosophy.
34. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan : The Bhagavadgītā.
35. Dr. S.N. Das Gupta : A History of Indian philosophy.
36. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol.2,
37. Swami Gambhirananda : Brahma Sūtra - Bhashya of Sri Śāṅkara
38. Sitanath Dutta : Śāṅkara
41. Paul Deussen: The philosophy of the Upaniṣads.

Journals

1. Prabuddha Bharata
2. Vedanta Kesari.