CHAPTER VIII

GURU NANAK AND SHANKARA (ADVISTA-VEDANTA SYSTEM) THEORY OF VIVARTA-VADA
Shankara is the expounder of Advaita-vedanta. It is the system which adheres to the theory of Vivarta-Vada. This system maintains that Brahman is the Only Ultimate Reality. The world is merely an illusory appearance. The individual soul is no different from Brahman. Brahman and Atman are synonymous. Isvara is the personal aspect of the impersonal Brahman. The individual soul or the self due to Avidya (ignorance) thinks himself to be different from Brahman. Brahman reflected in Maya is Isvara and reflected in Avidya is Jiva. This system advocates the unique veiling and creating power of Maya. The qualified Isvara through Maya is Immanent in the whole universe. He conceives that the whole world is nothing else but a phenomenal appearance of Brahman. Hence he believes in the theory of Brahma-vivarta-Vada.

Before proceeding further it would be desirable to elaborate the theory of Vivarta-Vada. In the preceding chapter we have studied Satkarya-Vada. Satkarya-Vada further has two categories: Parinama-Vada and Vivarta-Vada. Both these doctrines maintain that the effect is the explicit state of what was implicitly contained in its material cause. But the difference occurs in these two doctrines when these discriminate the nature of the effect
of their material cause. In order to distinguish them we may frame one question: Is the effect a real modification or an unreal appearance of its cause? Those who believe that the effect is a real transformation of its cause are called the followers of Parinama-Vada. Those who hold that the effect is an unreal appearance are the advocates of Vivarta-Vada. Kapila and Ramanuja believe in Parinama-Vada, while the exponents of Shunya-Vada, Vijana-Vada and Advaita-Vedanta believe in Vivarta-Vada.

In brief, the theory of Vivarta-Vada believes that the whole external world of forms and features is the effect of the play of thought, and it is not the real modification of its material cause.

As we have already seen in the preceding chapter, Guru Nanak believes in the theory of brahman-parinama-Vada. Guru Nanak conceives that the whole creation is the manifestation of what was unmanifested in its cause — the Brahman. Guru Nanak does not accept the idea of phenomenal appearance of the world as laid down by Shankara. In the following few pages we shall see how two great thinkers are supporting their view-points and are advocating their conceptual interpretations in regard to the Ultimate Reality, Brahman, Isvara, Jiva, Maya and lastly the Creation.
Higher-Brahman

So far as the Higher-Brahman is concerned both thinkers agree with each other. According to them Higher-Brahman is the background of the whole Universe. They agree that Higher-Brahman is absolutely Indeterminate, Indescribable and Non-dual. He is beyond speech and thought, beyond time and space, but still He is not 'an abyss of non-entity'. He is Pure-consciousness, Self-luminous, Self-contained and Self-proved.

Isvara or the Lower-Brahman

Shankara makes a clear-cut distinction between Absolute Brahman and Personal Isvara. The former is Higher-Brahman and the latter is Lower-Brahman. Higher-Brahman is Super-Cosmic-Unmanifested Reality while Lower-Brahman is the Cosmic Lord. According to Shankara, Brahman associated with its potency Maya appears as the qualified Isvara. In short, Isvara is the personal aspect of the impersonal Brahman. Isvara is the Lord of Maya. He is perfect personality. He is Immanent in the whole creation. He is Soul of souls. It is this Isvara who is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of this world which is His appearance.¹

Shankara further explains that Brahman reflected in or conditioned by Maya is called Isvara. Thus, Isvara, according to Shankara is the Conditioned Consciousness and is no other than the play of the thought of mind.¹

Guru Nanak also believes that Isvara is Lower-Brahman. But he does not accept that Lower-Brahman or Isvara is the reflection of Higher-Brahman in Maya or He is merely the play of thought. He also does not agree with the phenomenal Nature of Isvara. Guru Nanak, on the contrary, maintains that Isvara is the manifested State of Unmanifested Brahman.²

Guru Nanak, thus, conceives that Transcendent God or Higher-Brahman is Shunya Rupa Aghur Brahman and Isvara is Sabada Sarupa Saphur Brahman.³ Guru Nanak plainly says:

He Himself creates His Self, He Himself assumes His Name. The Second thing He creates Quadrat (Nature), then He observes His Play with delight.⁴

Clear it is that Guru Nanak's Isvara is real manifestation or modification of Higher-Brahman.

¹Ibid., p. 280.
²A.G., p. 940.
³Cf. Chapter IV.
⁴A.G., p. 463.
In *Brahadaranyakopanisad* these two forms are accepted:

There are two states of Brahman, formful and formless.\(^1\)

No doubt, Guru Nanak firmly believes in the Higher-Brahman who is without form and feature, without colour and kind but he also depicts Isvara in a beautiful manner. Guru Nanak says:

Thine eyes are radiant and teeth are exquisite, Thy nose is beautiful and hair are long, and Thine body is golden.\(^2\)

This manifested Isvara is the Creator, preserver and destroyer of the whole Universe. Guru says:

Everything is born from Him and is finally absorbed in Him.

In brief, Isvara, according to Shankara is the reflection of Brahman in Maya and is not the real transformation of Brahman whereas Guru Nanak enunciates that Isvara is the real modification or the real manifestation of Higher-Brahman.

Secondly, Shankara holds that Isvara is conditioned by Maya whereas Guru Nanak conceives that Isvara is the real modification of Brahman.

\(^1\) Quoted by Dr. S.S. Kohli, *Outlines of Sikh Thought*, New Delhi, Punjabi Parkashak, 1966, p. 19. 
master of Maya. Maya is His Potency, His Nature, His Creation, His Play or Sport. Thus, Guru Nanak’s Isvara is Karta, Kartar, Qadir, Karana-Karan, Karnhara, Sirianhara etc. while Shankara’s Isvara is relatively Creator and not Real Creator because He is merely a play of thought.

Jiva

Shankara holds that individual soul or Jiva is no different from Atman or Brahman.  Atman is universal space and the Jiva is the same but enclosed in a jar; just as foam, bubbles, ripples and waves exist separately from water though they are not actually separate. The difference is only in form, name and capacity but not in essence. The relation between Atman and Jiva is identical but the difference is phenomenal.

Shankara further maintains that Brahman reflected in Maya is Isvara and reflected in Avidya is Jiva. Jiva, on account of Avidya (ignorance) creates in him the false sense of individuation; just as the moon appears many on account of the reflection in the different vessels of water, similarly the same self appears as many phenomenal selves on account of Nescience.

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1Sharirka-Bhashya, I, 1, 5; I, 2, 6.
2Ibid., I, 3, 19.
Shankara further explains that Jiva is subject-object complex. Its subject element is the pure-consciousness and is called Saksin. Its object element is the internal organ called Antahkarna. This internal organ is Bhautika as it is composed of all five elements with the predominance of tejas which makes it always active except in deep sleep or in the state like swoon or trance.¹

Guru Nanak conceives that Jiva or the embodied soul contains the essence of Brahman. He is rather a sort of miniature of Brahman. But Brahman is infinite while Jiva is finite. Jiva is imperfect while Brahman is Perfect.² Guru Nanak conceives that Jiva is not Brahman though his origin is Brahman. He is, however, the essence of Brahman.

Jiva is, however, immortal. It is only the physical body which perishes. Jiva carries over the merits and demerits of his deeds from one life to another.

The body is the temple or the residence of Jiva, or soul, but soul remains unaffected of the actions of the body. Soul who resides in the body simply witnesses the activities of the body. It is entirely free from

²A.S., p. 597.
birth and death, growth and decay, Passions and propensities, teenage and old age. Guru Nanak says:

Neither Jiva dies nor sinks and swims.¹

Again,

It is the notion of self-assertion and ego which have died.
He who is the seer or the witness does not die.²

Thus we may safely infer that Jiva or the embodied soul is phenomenally different from Brahman, but identical in essence.

On the materialistic and physical plane, Jiva, according to Guru Nanak, possesses the wrong notion of self-assertion and ego which retain his entity and individuality. The finite self begins to think himself separate from the whole cosmic system. The ego, Guru Nanak thinks, is the seed of individuality and diversity. Actions performed under the misconception of ego becomes the cause of birth and death, and cycle of transmigration starts.

Above, we have noticed that both Shankara and Guru Nanak agree upon the concept of Jiva, but the difference lies in the manner in which the Jiva is created. Shankara conceives that Brahman reflected in Avidya is Jiva. Guru Nanak does not accept this thought. Guru Nanak maintains

¹Ibid., p. 151.
²Ibid., p. 152.
that Jiva is created under Divine Law according to the Divine Will. Guru Nanak clearly says:

**Jivas** come into existence through Divine Will.¹

In brief, **Jiva**, according to Guru Nanak is the part and parcel of **Brahman**, while according to Shankara is the reflection in **Avidya** of **Brahman**. Secondly, Shankara says that **Jiva** is no other than **Brahman** Himself while Guru Nanak thinks that **Jiva**, no doubt, contains the essence of **Brahman** but is not actual **Brahman**. **Jiva** is finite and imperfect while **Brahman** is Infinite and Perfect.

**Maya**

Shankara has introduced a very unique interpretation of **Maya**. **Maya**² is also called **Avidya** and **Ainana**. It is indefinable and mysterious stuff which has, however, both psychological and ontological existence. The term **Maya** in the system implies different meaning in the different situations. Sometimes it is used for showing the relation between **Brahman** and the world. Sometimes it is used for showing the phenomenal characteristics of the world. Sometimes to show the material cause of the world, while on other time it is used to comprehend relative

¹Ibid., p. 2.

²It should be born in mind that the words like **Maya**, **Avidya**, **Ainana**, **Adhyasa**, **Vivarta**, **Ayyakta**, **Mula-Prakriti**, **Bilashakti** are used in Vedanta invariably as synonyms.
existence of the world, sometimes it is interpreted as
the great potency of Brahman, sometimes it is used in the
sense of illusion and as the cause of creating duality.
Thus the term Maya is used in a very wider sense in the
whole system.

Maya is inherent potency of Brahman, yet its
characteristic is phenomenal and relative. It is neither
existent, nor non-existent, nor both. It is beginningless.

Maya is not only absence of knowledge but also is
positive wrong knowledge. It is not only non-apprehension
but also misapprehension.

It is called super-imposition. It is the sole
cause upon which superimposition of the world is based,
just as a shell is mistaken as silver. Here the shell
is the ground upon which the silver is superimposed. Maya
is the means through which the diversity of the whole
universe appears to be true. Lastly, Maya is beginningless
and endless.¹

In a nutshell, Shankara holds that Brahman, with
the inherent potency of Maya is the substratum on which
the phenomenal world is super-imposed.

In the process of creation this Maya or Avidya
plays two parts. On one hand, on the subjective plane,

¹Cf. Chapter I.
it forms mind and the senses and on the other hand, on the objective plane, it creates the whole of the objective universe. This Maya has two powers: (1) The power of veiling or covering. (2) The power of creation. The power of veiling means that self which is the part and parcel of Brahman tends to feel a separate entity and ceases to see an Infinite, Eternal and Pure-consciousness in itself. Thus the sense of individuation is generated in the 'Self'.

The creative powers (Vikshepa-Shakti) ainana are characterised as being three-folds, that is Rajasic, Sattvic and Tamasic. With the pure consciousness as the basis and with the associated creative power of Ainana predominating in tamas, space (akash) is first produced. And then the rest of the elements are created.

Guru Nanak has also introduced the word 'Maya' in his text. This word has been used in various senses. It is the 'potency' and the 'might' of the Almighty. It is 'illusion', 'bewitching serpent', 'reflection', 'mother', 'nescience', 'nature' and 'subtle object'. Maya is the cause of creating duality. It contains three gunas. It is the creative power of Brahman. So the scope of the word 'Maya' in the composition of Guru Nanak is also very wide.

Guru Nanak conceives that Maya is the creation created by Brahman. Guru says:
Know Him Who has created bewitching Maya. He who knows realises the Unity in nectar and poison.  

He adds:

He Himself is Maya and He Himself is Vishnu. He Himself enjoys after creating sabada.

Again,

He created three worlds and bewitching Maya. He Himself creates and destroys.

Guru Amar Das further illustrates this point. He says:

All the Formation of Maya is evolved out of Him.

No doubt, Maya is the creation of Brahman, but it creates duality in the individual self and it misleads him to do selfish deeds. Guru Nanak conceives that the entire world is in the grip of bewitching Maya, only those who are meditating on Name are saved from the poison of attractive Maya. In the following couplet Guru Nanak beautifully portrays the function of Maya:

The mortals abide by the poisonous serpent-Maya. This duality has ruined many homes.

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1 A.G., p. 937.  
2 Ibid., p. 1190.  
3 Ibid., p. 1037.  
4 Ibid., p. 997.  
5 Ibid., p. 1029.
Again,

Seeing the extension of Maya hither and thither, man has fallen in love with Maya. He commits sins, makes ostentation on large scale and without Name has fallen into errors.¹

He further adds:

Nanak, Maya is the tree of action which bears ambrosia and poisonous fruits. Every creation is created by the Creator, He gives the fruit accordingly.²

He continues:

This Maya is enticing the world, O brother, All deeds done in its wake are sinful. The action from which happiness springs. O brother, is the meditation on Name.³

Guru Nanak thus, realises that the whole world is under the influence of Maya. Only those persons are free from it who introspect real soul within. In the words of Guru Nanak:

I have observed that the entire world is enveloped by Maya. Nanak, by Guru’s instructions, (Some) meditates on Name.⁴

He adds:

O my friends, Maya leads astray through illusion. The person in the grip of illusion is like an abandoned wife who is not liked by her husband.⁵

¹Ibid., p. 906.
²Ibid., p. 1290.
³Ibid., p. 635.
⁴Ibid., p. 354.
⁵Ibid., p. 60.
By now we have understood the concept of Maya as laid down by Guru Nanak. We may safely conclude that some of the functions and characteristics of Maya are similar to some extent to those which are enunciated by Shankara. But the striking difference is that Shankar conceives Maya as beginningless and endless, whereas Guru Nanak does not accept this idea. According to Guru Nanak this Maya is the creation of Brahman. It is created through the Will of God. Maya or nescience lasts so long as the real knowledge does not dawn upon by the Grace of the True Guru.

So far we have studied the concept of Brahman, Higher-Brahman, Lower-Brahman, Isvara, Jiva and Maya as laid down by two great thinkers and knew the similarities and dissimilarities. If we conclude the whole difference in brief, we may say that Shankara believes in an illusory appearance in regard to the whole creation. According to him only Brahman is real and the whole creation is Unreal and Jiva is no other than Brahman Himself.¹

On the other hand, Guru Nanak holds that Transcendent God or Higher Brahman becomes Immanent God who is all-pervasive in the whole creation. Thus the whole creation

²Brahma Satyam Jagan Mithya JIvo Brahmaiya Napatrah.
is the real manifestation of the Unmanifested God. Jivas and Maya are also created by God through the Divine Will. They have their no independent entity. According to Guru Nanak, the whole creation is real and is not the mere reflection. It is true for all practical purposes. We can touch and perceive it. He says:

Real are thy continents, real are thy solar systems.
Real are thy worlds, real are thine creation.
Real are thine doings, and all the deliberations.
Real is Thine Order, real are Thine courts, 1
Real is Thine Will, real is Thine utterance. 1

Thus we may conclude that Guru Nanak believes in Brahman-parinama-vada, whereas Shankara believes in Brahman-Vivarta-Vada.

1 A.G., p. 463.