

A view on Radhakrishnan's ideas on World

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In the modern times, Indian Philosophy has been interpreted by several Contemporary thinkers in the tradition of the ancient Philosophy. Most of the Contemporary thinkers of India belong to the Vedantic tradition. Due to the awareness of the needs of the present century and the influence of the western Philosophical ideas, most of the contemporary thinkers were led to interpret or take a view slightly different from the traditional explanation. Especially, Sarvepallai Radhakrishnan is influenced by the western thoughts and tries to interpret the world of the traditional Vedanta to make it acceptable to the modern period. He himself made it know in 'the fragment of a confession' that "my approach to the problem of philosophy from the angle of religion as distinct from that of science or of history was determined by my early training."¹ Radhakrishnan is a devout but not a rigid follower of Sankara's Vedanta. To meet the needs and demands of the modern world he has re formulated the Vedanta of Sankara in accordance with the changed context. He believes that only the new approach fulfills the new requirements of the modern world.

Man can not live or think without making assumptions about himself and about the world in which he lives. In fact, according to Radhakrishnan, 'Philosophy is an attempt to explain the world to which we belong'.² Radhakrishnan, like Sankara, believes that the absolute is the only ultimate reality. True to the spirit of the changing trends in contemporary Indian Philosophy, Radhakrishnan conceives the empirical world as real and spiritual. He takes an idealistic view when he tackles the problem of world. His way of presentation of his interpretation makes an advancement from the traditional view. The job of Philosophy is not to deal with facts which is the work of science, but to give us a vision of meaning and purpose of life, of existence and of the universe. As Radhakrishnan asserts, 'throughout the history of Indian thought the ideal of a world behind the ordinary world of human strivings, more real and more intangible, which is the true home of the human spirit has been haunting the Indian race'.³

¹ Radhakrishnan.S, (1952)The Religion of the sprit and the world's need:Fragments of a confession,, (Ed.) Paul Arthur Schilpp, The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Tudor Publishing Company, New York pp. 6-7

² Ibid, p.26

³ Ibid, p.137

Indian thought employs the words, Samsara or jakat to indicate the dynamic character of the universe. Continuity and change are the two characteristic features of the material or physical world. Discarding the ancient conception of matter as atomic, inert and indivisible substance, Radhakrishnan incorporates the scientific view of matter and draws our attention to two significant contributions in it. First matter is a system of energy; it is dynamic, changeable and not an inert reality. Secondly the nature as constituted of cosmic waves of energy is an interconnected system. Thus Radhakrishnan develops the dynamic and energetic view of the universe.

Radhakrishnan normally identifies the distinction between the universe as apprehended by the scientist and as apprehended by the mystic. Radhakrishnan holds fast to the view that, 'the truth of the universe is not a mathematical equation or a kinematical system or a biological adjustment or an ethical individualism but a spiritual organism'.⁴ 'In truth the pulse of the spirit throbs through nature'.⁵ The materiality or actuality of the universe does not contradict its spirituality, on the other hand the latter comprehends the former. In other words, spirit is not opposed to matter for it includes matter but the universe as apprehended by the mystic brings us closest to Reality. As such seeing the universe as spirit is seeing it whole while seeing it as matter is seeing it partially. 'The universe seems to be alive with spirit, aglow with fire, burning with light'.⁶ As the Chandogya Upanishad declares, we will see spirit, 'above, behind, before, to the right and to the left'.⁷ Integral experience will show that the universe is spirit. 'Spirit is the reality of the cosmic process'.⁸ It is the transcendent absolute that manifests itself as the creative power of the universe. To him matter is creative energy which renders possible the creation of forms and types. He rightly observes, space, time and material are abstractions from the concrete fact which is a set of events. They exist together in concrete reality.⁹

Radhakrishnan feels much at home with the view that nature conceals and symbolizes a deeper order. He is keenly alive to the primacy of spirit over matter. But this does not mean that all things are of such stuff as ideals are made. The basic claim is merely that the universe is not a blind process but a teleological one. Bernard Phillips aptly remarks, 'that the realm of the physical is not self sustaining and that is the creation or manifestation

⁴ Radhakrishnan.S, (1947)An Idealist View of Life, George Allen & Unwin, p.311.

⁵ Loc.cit.

⁶ Ibid, p.109

⁷ Ibid, p.110

⁸ Ibid, p.334

⁹ Ibid, p.229

of a spiritual order is the central tenet of his metaphysics.¹⁰ Radhakrishnan clearly steers between these two extremes. He recognizes the indissoluble links that bind spirit with nature without disputing the superiority of the former. He does not accept spirit and nature as two ultimate principles. They are opposite yet are complementary poles of all existence. The dualism between the two can not be abolished by making nature a form of spirit as in Hegel or spirit a form of nature as in Marx. The right attitude to nature is repeatedly expressed by him in such utterances, ‘Man is bound up with nature; the human spirit is wedded to the material organism. Contact with the body, instead of being a tainting of the purity of the soul, is just the condition necessary for fulfilling its nature.’¹¹ How are we to account for the world? The most articulate expression of his viewpoint, we find in his address at the sixth International congress of Philosophy (1926) ‘we are not so much in need of a keen analysis of particular problems as those of essence and existence, sense and perspectives or a pragmatic insistence on methodology and on the futility of metaphysics, interesting as they all are, but philosophy in the large sense of the term, a spiritual view of the universe, board based on the results of sciences and aspirations of humanity.

Radhakrishnan declares his faith in the hidden harmonies of the universe because they are to it matters of logical demonstration. He asserts that the world exists by the sustaining presence and activity of God. Without this presence and activity it would collapse in to a nothingness. He believes that the world has no intrinsic value and no independent reality of the kind that materialists or naturalists want to attribute. but at the same time Radhakrishnan strongly denies that maya implies that world is illusion or unreal and is mere shadow. He holds Deussen responsible for the spread of erroneous view which creates a complete misrepresentation of the Indian thought. This view, he claims, is foreign to the Upanishads as well. Radhakrishnan’s statement in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita also exposes that maya does not imply that world is an illusion or is non- existent absolutely. It is a delimitation distinct from the unmeasured and the immeasurable. Therefore, maya is a feature of the central reality, neither identical with nor different from it.¹²

The physical world is there bound in space, time and cause. The negative attitude towards the world is discarded. The positive approach to the world reaches to its zenith in the philosophy of the modern thinkers who develop the philosophy of humanism. Radhakrishnan finds the principal categories of the world of experience as self contradictory.

¹⁰ Bernard Phillips: Radhakrishnan’s Critique of Naturalism, Philosophy of S. Radhakrishnan. Op.cit.p.138

¹¹ Radhakrishnan.S,(1918) The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, Macmillan,London,p.313

¹² Radhakrishnan.S,(1958)Indian Philosophy, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, Vol.II, p.570.

‘They have no real existence yet they are not non-existent. The world is there and we work in it and through it. We do not and can not know the why of this World. It is this fact of its inexplicable existence that is signified by the word maya. The doctrine of maya as propounded by Sankara is supposed to repudiate the reality of the world and thus make all ethical relations meaningless. Dasgupta hints at the same difficulty when he observes, ‘How the ‘many’ of the world can arise out of ‘one’- the self- and in what sense the reality of the world can be regarded as spiritually grounded, remains a question which has never been explained in the Upanisads’.¹³

Radhakrishnan and Sankara utilized the doctrine of maya in different ways relating to the status of the world. Radhakrishnan attempts to give a rational and acceptable explanation to the concept of the absolute, world and soul. In doing so, he uses the concept of maya. Maya does not imply illusion.¹⁴ In the lucid words of Radhakrishnan, ‘the word, maya is not a deceptive façade of something underlying it, since the supreme is the basis of the world, the world cannot be unreal. Maya has a standing in the world of reality.’¹⁵ Maya as well as the world are real, according to him. At the same time he holds that Sankara is not an illusionist. Sankara, is rightly credited with the systematic formulation of the doctrine of maya, tells us that the highest reality is unchangeable. He warns us, however, against the temptation to regard what is not completely real as utterly illusory. The world has empirical being which is quite different from illusory experience.¹⁶

Radhakrishnan never fails to point out that maya should not be taken as a value judgment, but only as a logical concept of inexplicability. Further more, he says that the world is not illusion but appearance only. This preserves the conception of God as a true creator and at the same time does not rob action of its spiritual significance.¹⁷ Radhakrishnan puts up a spirited defense even to Sankara’s version of the doctrine of maya. In a fitting reply to the charge that the doctrine of maya repudiates the reality of the world, that the world of nature becomes unreal and human history illusory,¹⁸ he pleads that the spirit in which Sankara treats maya does not entail the illusory character of the empirical world,

¹³ Marlow.A.N, *Spiritual religion and the Philosophy of Radhakrishnan*, Philosophy of S.Radhakrishnan, Op.cit. p.349.

¹⁴ Radhakrishnan.S, (1976) *The Bhagavad Gita*, Blakie & Son Ltd., Bombay,p.38

¹⁵ Mcdermott,A.Robert,(1975) *Basic Writings of S.Radhakrishnan*, Jaico Publishing House, Bombay,p.224.

¹⁶ Radhakrishnan.S,(1940)*Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, Oxford university Press, p.86.

¹⁷ Lawrence Hyde, *Radhakrishnan’s Contribution to Universal Religion*, Philosophy of S.Radhakrishnan, Op.cit.p.378.

¹⁸ Radhakrishnan.S, (1947)*An Idealist View of Life*, op.cit. p. 61

human history and human endeavour, thus the manifold universe is not an illusion. Radhakrishnan himself makes the distinction between illusion and unreality when he declares that “unreal the world is; illusory it is not”.¹⁹

Radhakrishnan is keenly aware of the difficulty involved in explaining the concept of maya, yet he does not evade the issue and is in no mood to tread the beaten path and rightly expounds his viewpoint thus, ‘It is for Sankara a mixture of truth and illusion. It partakes of the characteristics of both being and non-being while Sankara refuses to acquiesce in the seeming reality of the actual he does not dismiss it as unreal phantasmagoria. It is not determinable either as real or as unreal.’²⁰ But Radhakrishnan tries to transform what is neither being nor non-being into what is both being and non-being. To him the world is a derived being. To mark the distinction between Absolute being and dependent being, we call the latter, maya, when the Absolute is taken as pure being, its relation to the world is inexplicable, anirvacaniya. Without the background of being, there can be no world. The relation between the two can not be logically explicated. This inexplicability of the logical relationship does not repudiate the existence of world. The similes of the appearance of snake in the rope and of silver in the shell, that we often come across bear witness to the fact of one-sided dependence of the world on the Absolute. ‘The purpose of these analogies is not the relationship is such that world exists without any change in the being of the Absolute.’²¹ Radhakrishnan clearly subscribes to the realistic view of the world, he makes a realistic approach and successfully counteracts the charge leveled by certain critics that it is illusory in character. He performs the difficult feat of converting maya into the creative principle accounting for history of the universe and individual souls etc. Prof.Sundaram points out that Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of Sankara has gained the reputation of ‘somehow accommodating’ the world in reality of Brahman.²² In the collection *The Philosophy of S.Radhakrishnan*, while replying to his critics, he states that ‘In my writings I have interpreted the doctrine of maya so as to save the world and give it a real meaning’.²³ Hence he boldly reinterprets Sankara himself. He shows ingenuity and displays ample imaginative freedom with the result that the Vedanta doctrine of maya is given a transformation which is partly Hegelian and partly Bergsonian and in an even more pronounced way Whiteheadian.

¹⁹ Radhakrishnan.S,(1958)*Indian Philosophy*, op.cit. p.553

²⁰ Ibid, p.185

²¹ Radhakrishnan.S, Reply to Critics, , *Philosophy of S. Radhakrishnan*. Op.cit.p.800.

²² Sundaram,P.K,(1978)*Radhakrishnan and the Concept of Maya in the Indian Philosophical Annual*, Vol.XII, Madras University, p. 260.

²³ Radhakrishnan.S, Reply to Critics, *Philosophy of S. Radhakrishnan*. Op.cit.p.800.

According to Radhakrishnan, maya should be taken only as a logical concept of inexplicability, whereas Sankara uses maya to save the reality of Brahman. Therefore, he uses the concept of maya to save the reality of the world from the concept of illusion. The doctrine of maya, according to Radhakrishnan, is not an educative principle, but a means of covering improvable faith in pseudo-academic manner.²⁴

According to Radhakrishnan, the world is not an illusion. It is not nothingness for to is willed by God. The reality of the world is not in itself, but it is in the thought and being of the creator. The world is derived being. The world and its objects do not present any problem to him for he succeeds in maintaining that all objects of this world are to be regarded as appearances in reality, though not of it. Metaphysically it can be said that the universe is the outcome of the evolutionary process of the spirit. Else where he mentions that maya is the name of the negative principle which lets loose the universal becoming, thereby creating endless agitation and perpetual disquiet.²⁵ The world-process is not so much a translation of immutable being as its inversion. Radhakrishnan repeatedly denies that the doctrine of maya is a doctrine of the unreality of the world or that it makes all moral relations meaningless.

Radhakrishnan holds a realistic view of the world. He uses the concept of maya as an explanation of the relation of the apparent to the real. Like Sankara, he postulates the entire world in Brahman. At the same time, maya, in his interpretation, is a statement of fact. Without maya our empirical life in the world is not possible. All objects of this world are said to be appearance in reality. Radhakrishnan clearly states that ignorance, avidya or maya produces the world appearance. It cannot be said to be existent or non-existent; sad-asad-anirvachaniya and it ceases when Brahman is know. It is true that in our ordinary experience are perceive multiplicity and the Vedic injunctions imply the existence of plurality. The scriptural texts which speak of Brahman as the one and only reality have greater validity than those which imply the existence of plurality. Even according to Sankara the world is not non-existence; it is not absolutely real. Brahman with maya or sakthi as power is the cause of the world. The world has a relative empirical existence²⁶. He repeatedly states that this world is

²⁴ Gnanakumaran,N.(1986)Maya: Fact or Fiction, unpublished thesis, Rani Durgavathi University, India,p.150.

²⁵ Radhakrishnan.S, (1940)Indian Philosophy, Vol. I, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, p.34.

²⁶ Radhakrishnan.S, (1960)The Brahma Sutra The Philosophy of Spiritual life, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, pp. 35-36

not an illusion, it is not nothingness for it is willed by God and therefore is real. In her 'Concept of maya', Ruth Rayna also puts forward the view that maya is the anti-thesis of vidya and the maya is not translated as illusion.²⁷ Without contradicting the basic principles of Sankara Radhakrishnan has given the concept of maya a new significance by putting together the various aspects of the concept. He explains the need for a new interpretation for "our times are different, our habits of thought, the mental background, to which we relate our experience, are not quite the same as those of the classical commentators. The chief problem facing us today is the reconciliation of mankind."²⁸ Due to this attitude, Lawrence Hyde, in his article in the book 'The Philosophy of S.Radhakrishnan' maintains that Radhakrishnan's standpoint regarding the concept of maya is much nearer our own than that of Sankara... The world is not an illusion, but an appearance.²⁹ He adopts a liberal and positive attitude in explaining the doctrine of maya. . No one treats life as an illusion or to be indifferent to the world's welfare. He maintains that the Brahman, when viewed not merely as Absolute being but as Eternal creativity, the creative power is called maya. We know that without the background of 'being' there cannot be any world appearance. The relation between Brahman and the unreal world cannot be logically, explicated. This inexplicability of the logical relationship does not repudiate the existence of the world. It does not imply that the world is not, but it appears to be. At the same time Radhakrishnan clearly states that all logical explanations of the relation between the world and Brahman are unsatisfactory because it is ultimately a riddle and is indefinable.³⁰

Radhakrishnan espouses the belief that the empirical world is between being and non-being, that it is not ultimate but neither it is nothing or illusion. Maya is taken to be the concept which was devised to express the ultimate mystery in the relationship between the Absolute and the empirical world and the reason for the existence of the empirical world and its creation by the Absolute. Radhakrishnan is never tired of repeating that we can not answer the question 'Why?' and that the concept of maya expresses this ultimate mystery. 'An idealist view finds that the universe has meaning, has value. Ideal values are the dynamic forces, the driving power of the universe. The world is intelligible only as a system of ends.'³¹ To Radhakrishnan the 'why' and 'how' of the existence of the empirical world and

²⁷ Reyna,Ruth.,(1962)The Concept of Maya, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, p 4

²⁸ Radhakrishnan.S, Bahagavad Gita, Op.cit. pp.5-6

²⁹ Lawrence Hyde, Radhakrishnan's Contribution to Universal Religion, Philosophy of S.Radhakrishnan, Op.cit.p.378.

³⁰ Radhakrishnan.S, Indian Philosophy, Vol- II. Op.cit. p.566.

³¹ Radhakrishnan.S, (1947)An Idealist View of Life,op.cit.p.15.

individuals are a mystery expressed in terms of the doctrine of maya, a doctrine which does not entail the illusory character of the world, although it does entail the non-ultimate and dependent status of the empirical.

Radhakrishnan gives a spiritual interpretation to the modern theory of evolution. He holds that spirit is the goal of evolution. He examines the various explanations of the cosmic process put forth by Naturalism, Holism, Emergent Evolution and Ingressive Evolution. All these theories, according to Radhakrishnan, are vulnerable to certain defects and as such does not approve of them. Though he is aware of the truth involved in them yet he is much more favourably inclined towards the last explanation- that of Whitehead. Radhakrishnan remarks, 'Every occurrence is a mystery... physical science fails if it attempts to transform a miracle in to an equation'.³² In the cosmic evolution the different stages are not apposed as good and evil. It is an evolution from one stage to another within a unity. He emphasizes that, 'the world process is not an incessant fluctuation comparable to a surging sea. It is a movement with a direction and a goal'.³³

Radhakrishnan tries to assimilate the theory of scientific evolution with his Advaita philosophy. He makes a distinction between God and the Absolute. Process belongs to God but the Absolute is above process. But then God and Absolute are identical. Repeatedly he affirms that the Absolute is the pre cosmic nature of God and God is the Absolute from the cosmic point of view.³⁴ The universe is actually the overflowing and one mode of the self-realization of the Absolute.³⁵ Thus whitehead's 'ingressive evolution', with which Radhakrishnan agrees to a great extent, paves the way for a satisfactory explanation in revealing or claiming that 'God is the ground and the goal of the whole evolutionary scheme'.³⁶ But we must not lose sight of the fact that god is not entirely free from the process for 'God in whitehead's scheme is affected by the process of reality. His nature finds completion only in terms of the world process'.³⁷ Radhakrishnan accords a spiritualistic interpretation to the modern theory of evolution. He affirms that spirit is the goal of evolution. We should not overlook this important truth and get involved in mechanical explanations which prove of no avail. Hence he puts his view succinctly thus, 'Evolution is

³² Ibid,p.191.

³³ Radhakrishnan.S, (1952)The Religion of the sprit and the world's need: Fragments of a confession,,op.cit.p27

³⁴ Radhakrishnan.S, (1947)An Idealist View of Life,op.cit.p.345.

³⁵ Ibid, p.344

³⁶ Ibid.p.331

³⁷ loc.cit

no explanation. It does not say why the process should have ever occurred, why life should occur at all?’³⁸

Radhakrishnan declares frankly that these various interpretations of the cosmic process, dominated by the scientific spirit, are agreed in thinking that the temporal process gives meaning to our existence. They are also aware of the truth that strictly scientific principles can not account for or explain the complex world of perpetual change. He urges that, ‘our search for the reality of the world, for the structure of the cosmos, reveals the presence of something invisible and eternal which is working within the visible and the temporal world. Science cannot deal with the why of the temporal process as a whole. The meaning of the mystery, the origin and the end of the world can not be scientifically apprehended. It is a fact that they require to be investigated metaphysically only. Thus invariably we are led to the conclusion that the historical world of becoming is incapable of explanation from within itself. Radhakrishnan rightly undertakes the task of showing that an idealist is not obliged either to ignore or to make light of physical facts in order to maintain the theory of the Absolute. In his interpretation of the world, we hear the echo of the same truth over and over again to which he is never tired of reiterating ‘Nature will reply to the insistent call of spirit’.

³⁸ Ibid, p.257