



UNDERSTANDING MĀYĀ BEYOND ILLUSION A CRITICAL STUDY OF VEDĀNTA AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This study of Māyā is a key element in Vedānta philosophy and has been long understood to be the principle of the phenomenal world. Its significance is not merely the sense of illusion, however, but has broader metaphysical, epistemological and spiritual aspects. The concept of Māyā in classical Vedānta, especially in Advaita Vedānta, is critically examined and its interpretation in other Vedānta schools and relevance to current philosophical, psychological, cognitive, and scientific viewpoints are explored. The study is of qualitative nature with regard to secondary sources that consist of scholarly books, journal articles, and the philosophical literature. It explores the conceptual underpinnings of Māyā, analyses the classical and modern understandings of it, and assesses whether there are similarities and differences, and what its relevance is in the context of today. It is found that while classical Vedānta sees Māyā as the cosmic power which obscures the ultimate reality of Brahman and sustains ignorance, contemporary interpretations see it as a process of perception, consciousness, cognition and reality construction. Although there is methodological and accentual variation, both views recognize the poverty of human knowledge and the existence of a difference between the phenomenal and the ontic. The final conclusion of this study is that Māyā is a living and vibrant philosophical notion which does not only help to enrich the understanding of Vedāntic thought but also adds value to the current cross-disciplinary debates in consciousness studies, the nature of reality, and human existence.

Keywords: Māyā, Vedānta, Advaita Vedānta, Brahman, Avidyā, Consciousness, Reality, Modern Perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study allows an investigation of one of the most important and controversial ideas in Indian philosophy. Māyā is usually translated "illusion," which is only part of the message of its philosophy.

In Vedānta, especially Advaita Vedānta, Māyā is considered to be the principle of appearance by which the nature of reality is concealed and the appearance of multiplicity in the phenomenal world is created. Māyā is not deception or falsity but an elucidation of the experience of the finite world, in the context of the ultimate unity of Brahman. To understand Māyā, it is thus necessary to look at its metaphysical, epistemological and spiritual aspects in addition to its popular understanding as illusion.

The word Māyā has been interpreted in various ways in the different schools of Indian philosophy. Māyā is seen as the power of ignorance (Avidyā) that is the reason why Brahman is not realised as per Advaita Vedānta as propounded by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya and other views like Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita Vedānta speak of the reality of the world but differ in the understanding of the relationship between God, the individual soul and the universe. That these philosophical differences illustrate that Māyā is not a single concept, but rather a dynamic idea which is interpreted within varying metaphysical frameworks. A careful analysis of these approaches will help to deepen one's understanding of the richness and complexity of Vedāntic thought.

Māyā is now a subject of renewed interest in philosophical, psychological and scientific debates today. Māyā is found to have a connection with the nature of human perception, human cognitive biases, subjective reality, and the constructed nature of human experience, in the eyes of contemporary thinkers. Though these modern formulations do not necessarily agree with the classical Vedāntic ones, they do show interesting parallels in the way in which individuals see and judge reality. This demonstrates that interpersonal interaction expands the value and use of Māyā beyond the scope of traditional religious and philosophical fields.

It is an attempt to critically view Māyā from a philosophical perspective, not just as an illusion. The study proposes to investigate the continuity and changes, the transformation and contemporary relevance of the concept by interpreting it in the light of classical Vedāntic interpretations and modern interpretations. The study not only enriches the comprehension of Indian philosophical legacy but also encourages a discussion between traditional knowledge and contemporary intellectual pursuits. Overall, it suggests that the concept of Māyā is an important one to understand reality, consciousness, and human existence both in the classical and modern period.

1.1. Research Objectives

The research objectives of the study are:

- To study the philosophical significance and the conception of Māyā in the Vedānta philosophy, in a way transcending its usual understanding of illusion.

- To critically study the contemporary views about Māyā and to contrast these views with the Vedāntic understanding of Māyā.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Medhananda, Swami (2021) examined Sri Aurobindo's experiential and philosophical criticism of Advaita Vedānta, focusing on the idea of Māyā and the nature of reality. The work examined the way in which Sri Aurobindo challenged the traditional Advaitic view of the phenomenal world as merely illusory and suggested a more dynamic view of the world. It concluded that the philosophy of Aurobindo offered an alternate metaphysical framework, which was a synthesis of the spiritual experience with the world around them, and expanded the philosophical conversations about Māyā.

Raveh (2021) examined the continuity and transformation of contemporary Indian philosophy by analyzing how classical Indian philosophies and modern intellectual advancements compare. The research examined the reinterpretation of the traditional Vedāntic concepts such as Māyā in the contemporary debates continuing to be based on the same foundations. It discovered that Indian philosophy has adapted to contemporary situations, it has taken on new points of view, but not losing the basic philosophical foundations..

Silberstein (2017) investigated the philosophical connection between panentheism, neutral monism, and Advaita Vedānta, in order to gain insight into the nature of reality and consciousness. The study has investigated the similarities and differences of the concepts of Advaitic non-dualism and philosophical theories of the present day. It argued that Advaita Vedānta provided useful insights for the understanding of consciousness and ultimate reality and hence its relevance in the modern philosophical discourse.

Thompson (2015) explored the classical Indian philosophical discussions of dreamless sleep and consciousness in light of modern cognitive sciences. The research examined Vedāntic ideas of consciousness, the embodied mind, and their relationship with modern scientific ideas. It found that classical Indian philosophy provided useful conceptual schemas for consciousness that went beyond the traditional cognitive schemas and thus aided interdisciplinary research.

Upadhyay (2021) examined Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* in the light of Vedānta Philosophy. Two themes were identified and interpreted: dreams, reality, and self-awareness, using the Vedāntic concepts of Māyā and consciousness. It concluded that the movie did a great job in depicting philosophical issues related to the nature of reality and perception, and that the Vedāntic thought is relevant even in the present cultural and cinematographic context.

Verrier (2021) investigated the idea of the transpersonal Self as the basis of psychological and spiritual healing. The philosophical and spiritual traditions, such as those that are compatible with Vedāntic thought, were explored to gain insight into the relationship between consciousness, self-realization and well-being. It found that awareness of the higher Self enabled healing in a holistic manner and facilitated the incorporation of spiritual philosophy with modern psychological tools.

3. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MĀYĀ

Conceptual foundations of Māyā give the philosophical bases for the understanding of one of the central ideas of Vedānta. Māyā is not just about illusion, but rather how the phenomenal world seems to exist, but is in fact ultimately grounded in Brahman, the absolute reality. This involves the nature of reality, its role, and the difference between the apparent and ultimate reality, and the role of ignorance (Avidyā). This section discusses the meaning, the nature, and the philosophical implications of Māyā in order to lay out a framework to understand its significance in the classical Vedāntic philosophy and the modern philosophical discourse in explaining the existence, consciousness, perception, and the journey to self-realization.

3.1. Meaning and Nature of Māyā

Māyā is also an important term in Indian philosophy, especially in Vedānta. Mā is the root of the Sanskrit word Māyā, which means "to measure," "to form" or "to create. In philosophical terms, Māyā is usually interpreted as the power by which the phenomenal universe seem to exist. It is usually rendered as 'illusion' but this is not quite complete since Māyā does not mean that the world is absolutely unreal. Rather, it is a description of the perceived reality that humans have, based on their lack of knowledge and perception. It is the principle which is responsible for the perception of diversity, change, and individuality and yet it also hides the ultimate unity of Brahman.

Māyā is considered to be beginningless (anādi) but not eternal; it dissolves with the recognition of Brahman. It operates in two ways: the power of concealment (Āvaraṇa Śakti) by which the true nature of reality is concealed, and the power of projection (Vikṣepa Śakti) by which the phenomenal world is projected on top of the substratum of Brahman. So, it is Māyā who is responsible for the wrong identification of self with body, mind and material existence. It is neither absolutely real nor absolutely unreal, but has a dependent and empirical reality (Vyāvahārika Satya) which lasts until the attainment of true knowledge (Jñāna). Hence, it is important to understand the significance and nature of Māyā to grasp the Vedāntic explanation of the nature of existence, consciousness and liberation.

3.2. Māyā as a Philosophical Principle

Māyā is not just interpreted as illusion but also a great philosophical principle that explains the relation between the absolute and the empirical worlds. It is the philosophical structure which Vedānta uses to explain the universe without violating the principle of non-duality of Brahman. Māyā is the power through which names, forms, space, time, and causation become manifested, leading to the appearance of diversity and dynamism in the world, which then appears to have some kind of independent existence, though it is ultimately subject to the Absolute. In this context, Māyā is not an illusion, but the Cosmic principle of the appearing and experiencing of the phenomenal universe.

The philosophical principle of Māyā is also relevant to epistemological issues relating to knowledge and perception. Human beings know reality through the senses and through the intellect, both of which are affected by ignorance (Avidyā). Thus, people confuse the temporary with the permanent, the finite with the infinite. According to Vedānta, liberation (Mokṣa) is achieved by the removal of this ignorance through self-realization, and the direct knowledge of Brahman. Thus, the concept of Māyā serves not only as an account of the way the universe is – as a way of explaining how things are – but as a guide to spiritual inquiry, with the highest wisdom being that which enables us to distinguish between apparent reality and ultimate reality. The philosophical implications of Māyā remain a subject of interest in various fields today, including metaphysics, consciousness studies, psychology, and comparative philosophy, reflecting the continued relevance of the concept beyond its religious context.

Table 1: Conceptual Overview of Māyā

Concept	Key Idea
Meaning	Cosmic power responsible for the appearance of the phenomenal world.
Nature	Neither absolutely real nor unreal; empirically experienced.
Two Powers	Āvaraṇa (concealment) and Vikṣepa (projection).
Cause	Operates through Avidyā (ignorance).
Goal	Self-realization and Mokṣa through Jñāna (true knowledge).

4. MĀYĀ IN VEDĀNTA PHILOSOPHY

Māyā is a key term in the philosophy of Vedānta, but different schools of Vedānta interpret its meaning differently, using it to discuss the nature of reality, the nature of the universe, and the nature of the relation between individual self and Brahman. Vedānta philosophies other than Advaita Vedānta,

including Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita, consider the phenomenal world to be a real manifestation or creation of God, due to ignorance. All these reflections on the philosophical dimension of Vedānta illustrate the variety of ways in which Māyā can be interpreted from different metaphysical angles and the importance it plays in the quest for spiritual knowledge and liberation.

4.1. Advaita Vedānta Perspective

The most influential interpretation of Māyā in Indian philosophy is in the Advaita Vedānta system, which was systematically developed by Ādi Śaṅkarācārya. This school teaches that Brahman is the ultimate and absolute reality (Paramārthika Satya) and the phenomenal world is an experience under the influence of Māyā. Māyā is neither real nor unreal: it has only the empirical reality (Vyāvahārika Satya), while ignorance (Avidyā) is there it subsists, and when ignorance is eliminated, it is not there. It hides the true nature of Brahman by means of Āvaraṇa Śakti (the power of concealment) and makes the world of multiplicity appear by means of Vikṣepa Śakti (the power of projection). Hence, incorrectly they take the body, mind and ego to be themselves and miss their true nature as the non-dual Self (Ātman) that is one with Brahman.

According to the Advaita, liberation (Mokṣa) is achieved by Jñāna (true knowledge), which dispels ignorance and eradicates the effect of Māyā. After self-realization, the apparent differences between the individual, the world, and Brahman vanish and the oneness of the world becomes evident. So, Māyā is the philosophical justification for appearance of diversity and the oneness of ultimate reality.

4.2. Interpretations in Other Vedānta Schools

In spite of the fact that Māyā is the focus of the Advaita Vedānta's metaphysical system, there are different understandings of this concept in other schools of Vedānta. Rāmānuja refutes this notion of the world as an appearance of Māyā in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta. Rather it asserts that the universe is real and that it is the body of Brahman. In this perspective, Māyā is the divine creative power of God by which the universe is manifested; and the world is no longer illusory.

The philosophy of Dvaita Vedānta, founded by Madhvācārya, is totally against the non-dual concept of Māyā. It claims that God, individual souls and material world are eternally different and yet real. Within this line of thought, the universe is not an illusion, but a real creation of God subject to God's will. All schools of Vedānta accept ignorance and spiritual realization, but in accounting for the nature

of reality and the role of Māyā, all schools disagree with each other, and some even have contradictory ideas. This shows the diversity of these interpretations and gives a wider sense of the meaning of Māyā than is found in the context of Advaita.

5. MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON MĀYĀ

Contemporary views of Māyā redefine this classical Vedāntic concept in the context of modern psychology, cognitive science, philosophy, and scientific research. Today, scholars do not only interpret Māyā as a philosophical concept, but also connect it to human perception, consciousness, cognitive limitations and the nature of reality. Thus, these interdisciplinary approaches show that the concept of Māyā is still relevant in the way people construct and experience reality, and thus a meaningful link can be made between the ancient Vedāntic wisdom and modern intellectual thought.

5.1. Psychological and Cognitive Interpretations

Psychology and cognitive science have given a new way to understand the concept of Māyā and link it to human perception, cognition and mental processes. Thus, Māyā is sometimes interpreted as the human mind's own habit of forming subjective interpretations of reality, from sensory experience, belief, emotion and even cognitive biases. Theories in the field of psychology imply that people tend to see things as they wish which may result in distortions of reality. These limitations are similar to the Vedāntic concept of Avidyā (ignorance) which is the inability to perceive the ultimate reality. In this way, Māyā can be seen as an altered or clouded state of mind in which appearances are accepted as reality, causing attachment, suffering and delusion.

In contemporary cognitive science, the role of perception has also been highlighted as an active construction of the brain and not a direct reflection of reality. Perception, attention, and consciousness studies point to the fact that the mind is constantly processing the sensory data, sometimes constructing experiences that are not actual. This scientific understanding is in sync with the Vedāntic understanding that reality is perceived only through an ignorance and limited cognition. Therefore psychological and cognitive explanations offer a valuable perspective on the universal human experience of Māyā, and not just a religious or metaphysical one.

5.2. Scientific and Philosophical Perspectives

Modern scientific and philosophical writings have broadened the scope of Māyā and explored reality in physics, neuroscience, and contemporary metaphysics. Advances in quantum physics have thrown out the old ideas of objective reality and have indicated that observation, probability, and interrelatedness have a profound effect on the behavior of the physical world. In relation to the

difference between appearance and the ultimate reality, there are philosophical comparisons that are encouraged by scientific theories, though the latter are not validating the Vedāntic philosophy per se.

Philosophically, Māyā has been understood as a concept that brings fundamental questions in regard to existence, knowledge, and consciousness. Contemporary philosophers have discussed parallels between Vedāntic non-dualism and phenomenological, idealistic or constructivist philosophies dealing with the ways in which reality is experienced and known. These views stress that what people know is frequently a "construction of their own perception and interpretation" rather than a direct experience of "truth. In this way, the idea of Māyā remains significant in both traditional Indian philosophy and in contemporary interdisciplinary discourse, enhancing explorations of consciousness, reality, and the boundaries of human knowledge.

Table 2: Modern Perspectives on Māyā

Perspective	Focus	Relation to Māyā
Psychology	Perception, emotions, cognitive biases	Māyā as distorted perception of reality
Cognitive Science	Brain and consciousness	Reality is mentally constructed
Science	Physics and neuroscience	Explores the nature of reality and observation
Philosophy	Knowledge and consciousness	Examines appearance versus ultimate reality

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CLASSICAL AND MODERN VIEWS

Comparative analysis of classical and modern understanding of Māyā shows the continuity and change in the understanding of this philosophical concept across different intellectual traditions. Classical Vedānta has generally tried to explain Māyā as the power of the cosmos which produces the phenomenal world, but modern interpretation has tried to explain it in the light of psychology, cognitive science, philosophy and scientific enquiry. The juxtaposition of these perspectives offers more insight into the timeless significance of Māyā and how its philosophical teachings still resonate in today's discussions of reality, consciousness, and human perception.

6.1. Similarities and Differences

In both classical Vedānta and modern perspectives, an interest is being aware of what is real and what is merely apparent to the human eye. In both methods, people are aware that others can have incomplete or distorted perceptions of reality. In Vedānta, it is a feature of Avidyā (ignorance), while in modern psychology and cognitive science, it is due to a range of cognitive biases, perceptual restrictions and mental conditioning. In both, what is perceived is not what is actual or real.

These similarities notwithstanding, there are important differences between the two perspectives. The interpretations of classical Vedānta view Māyā as a metaphysical principle related to Brahman and spiritual liberation, whereas the modern approaches interpret it as a principle within psychological, philosophical, or scientific contexts, without any attribution of a transcendental reality. So, while the classical perspective values the idea of self-realisation and liberation, the modern ones try to elucidate the perception, cognition and human consciousness through empirical and rational investigation.

6.2. Critical Evaluation

A critical evaluation of the classical Vedāntic interpretation of Māyā reveals that it provides a complete account of reality in its metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and spirituality. It offers a unified philosophy that interprets the individual self, the universe and ultimate reality and highlights the role of knowledge in the battle against ignorance and the goal of liberation.

However, modern interpretations extend the implications of Māyā and make it relevant to modern fields like psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind. These methods do not completely embrace the metaphysical presuppositions of Vedānta, but they consolidate the practical and interdisciplinary importance of the concept. In conclusion, the combination of classical and modern viewpoints highlights the enduring relevance of Māyā as a means of comprehending perception, consciousness, and the intricacies of human experience.

Table 3: Comparison of Classical and Modern Views of Māyā

Aspect	Classical Vedānta	Modern Perspectives
Meaning of Māyā	Cosmic power causing apparent reality	Constructed or perceived reality

Primary Focus	Brahman, Avidyā, and Mokṣa	Perception, cognition, and consciousness
Approach	Metaphysical and spiritual	Psychological, scientific, and philosophical
Goal	Self-realization and liberation	Understanding human perception and reality

7. CONCLUSION

The study finds that the concept of Māyā is not only deep and multifaceted, but also far more than what people generally believe it to be: an illusion. In the classical Vedānta, especially in Advaita Vedānta, Māyā is a cosmic principle which explains the phenomenal world and the mechanism of ignorance to mask the realization of Brahman, and in other schools of Vedānta, another interpretation is made of Māyā which, in different ways, brings out the reality of the world. The study of Māyā is further enriched by modern psychological, cognitive, scientific, and philosophical views which connect it to the perception, consciousness, and construction of reality. The methods and goals of classical and modern approaches differ, but both classical and modern approaches focus on the limitations of human perception and the difference between the apparent and the ultimate reality. Altogether, the study shows that the concept of Māyā is a timeless and relevant philosophical idea, one that both ancient Indian thinkers and modern philosophers and philosophers of science have found significant value in, and can learn from, which continues to be of great importance for the discussion of metaphysics, consciousness, human experience, and the search for truth.

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