

## Concept of MAYA in Indian Philosophy and Sikh Religion

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### Abstract

*In World Philosophy, Indian philosophy has an edge over Western philosophy. The concepts of Brahma and Maya occur only as concepts of Indian philosophy. Concept of Maya is a pillar of Advaita Vedanta which is an important component of Hindu philosophy. The historical development of this concept from Vedic period to Adi Shankracharya era has been discussed. Maya appears in all religious traditions of India. It has different connotations in Buddhism and Sikh religion. In Advaita Vedanta, Maya is a representation of Brahman (God) in this world which makes its Reality appear as illusion. Guru Nanak transforms the Vedantic concept of Reality in Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) and proclaims that this World phenomena is also real, not an illusion. A detailed study of Maya concept in Sikh religion is presented based on the writings of Sikh Gurus in the SGGS and its implications for the Indian society.*

**Keywords:** Indian philosophy, Maya, Advaita philosophy, Buddhism, Sikhism, Reality.

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### INTRODUCTION

In World Philosophy, Indian philosophy has an edge over Western philosophy. The concepts of Brahma and Maya occur only in Indian philosophy. Their origin is as ancient as Hindu Dharma. Concept of Maya is a pillar of Advaita Vedanta which is an important component of Hindu philosophy. The concept of Maya has been undergoing transformation from Vedic era to modern times. In Rig Veda, the word Maya connotes the supernatural powers of deities, for example, Varuna, Mitra, and Indra. The historical development of this concept from Vedic period to Adi Shankracharya era has been discussed.

Maya appears in all religious traditions of India. It has different connotations in Buddhism and Sikh religion. In Advaita Vedanta, Maya is a representation of Brahman (God) in this world which makes its Reality appear as illusion. Guru Nanak transforms the Vedantic concept of Reality in Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) and proclaims that this World phenomena is also real, not an illusion. A detailed study of Maya concept in Sikh religion is presented based on the writings of Sikh Gurus in the SGGS and its implications for the Indian society.

Maya is a most complicated concept of Indian philosophy [1]. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan [2], the great Indian philosopher defines Maya as that term which had its origin in Sanskrit from the root 'ma' which means to measure. Maya has a number of different meanings in Vedic literature, some of which are: Prakrti-nature, sakti, avidya, veiling the reality of a thing for another, etc.. Maya is not real, or unreal, or real and unreal. It is indefinable. Our purpose is to elaborate this concept and find its implications for Sikh religion.

Maya is one of the pillars upon which the Vedanta rests [3]. Maya is one of the basic doctrines of the Advaita Vedanta, according to which, Brahman is the only reality. Brahman appears to us as the Universe of multifarious names and forms due to Maya. Vedanta says that everything that exists in the world, including science, is the manifestation of Brahman, the supreme consciousness. We are all influenced by Maya in one way or the other. It is due to power of Maya that makes us think that all our activities of life and religion belong to the domain of Maya.

Maya is not real; it is only an illusion power of the Supreme consciousness. The concept of

Maya is beautifully explained by the metaphor of 'rope appearing as a snake' in dim light. Our ignorance of reality creates the confusion in our mind and we perceive the appearance of rope for snake in dim light. In the bright light, the confusion of our mind disappears and fear is gone with true knowledge of rope. It shows that *Maya* flourishes in ignorance and with true knowledge, its magic disappears.

Adi Shankarara's magnum opus of Advaita Vedanta, called *Vivekachudamani* (verse 108) [4] describes *Maya* in the following way: "It is undifferentiated and undivided. Nobody can define what it is, but it has the power of God. It is also called ignorance, it has three qualities; *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. It cannot be understood except by its actions, and that, only by the illumined ones. It has created all this universe – produced it all. It is *Maya*". *Maya is unreal because it changes, and it is not unreal because it exists.*

### CONCEPT OF MAYA IN HINDU PHILOSOPHY [5]

Hindu Philosophy is derived from six Schools of thought, known as *Darshanas*. The Vedanta and Yoga schools explained that complete realization of knowledge requires both the understanding of ignorance, doubts and errors, as well as the understanding of invisible principles, incorporeal and the eternal truths. The text *Yoga Vasistha* explains the need to understand *Maya* as follows [6]: "*Just as when the dirt is removed, the real substance is made manifest; just as when the darkness of the night is dispelled, the objects that were shrouded by the darkness are clearly seen, when ignorance [Maya] is dispelled, truth is realized.*"

The early works of Samkhya, the rationalist school of Hinduism, do not identify or directly mention the *Maya* doctrine [7]. Samkhya school steadfastly retained its duality concept of *Prakrti* and *Purusha*, both real and distinct, with some texts equating *Prakrti* to be *Maya* that is "not illusion, but real", with three *Gunas* in different proportions whose changing state of equilibrium defines the perceived reality [8].

In the Bhagavata philosophy, *Maya* has been described as 'that which appears even when there is no object like silver in a shell and which does not appear in the *atman*'; with *Maya* described as the power that creates, maintains and destroys the universe [9].

The realism-driven Nyaya school of Hinduism [10] denied that either the world (*Prakrti*) or the soul (*Purusa*) are an illusion. Naiyayikas developed theories of illusion, typically using the term *Mithya*, and stated that illusion is simply flawed cognition, incomplete cognition or the absence of cognition. There is no deception in the reality of *Prakrti* or *Pradhana* (creative principle of matter/nature) or *Purusa*, only confusion or lack of comprehension or lack of cognitive effort, according to Nyaya scholars. To them, illusion has a cause, that rules of reason and proper *Pramanas* (epistemology) can uncover.

*Maya* is a prominent and commonly referred to concept in Vedanta philosophies [11, 12]. *Maya* is often translated as "illusion", in the sense of "appearance" [13]. Vedantins assert the "perceived world including people are not what they appear to be" [14]. *Māyā* is that which manifests, perpetuates a sense of false duality [15]. This manifestation is real, but it obfuscates and eludes the hidden principles and true nature of reality. The difference within various sub-schools of Vedanta is the relationship between individual soul and cosmic soul (*Brahman*).

Advaita Hindu philosopher, Adi Shankaracharya, has been considered to be the best exponent of theory of *Māyā* during the ninth-century. In Advaita Vedanta philosophy, there are two realities: *Vyavaharika* (empirical reality) and *Paramarthika* (absolute, spiritual reality) [16]. *Māyā* is the empirical reality that entangles consciousness. *Māyā* has the power to create a bondage to the empirical world, preventing the unveiling of the true, unitary Self—the Cosmic Spirit also known as *Brahman*. Shankar's theory was modified by a later Advaita scholar Prakasatman, who explained, "*Maya* and *Brahman* together constitute the entire universe, just like two kinds of interwoven threads create a fabric.

Maya is the manifestation of the world, whereas *Brahman*, which supports Maya, is the cause of the world" [17].

The appearance of phenomena is Maya, hence it is a fact of life on this earth. Since *Brahman* is the sole metaphysical truth, so *Māyā* can not belong to the realm of metaphysical and spiritual truth, but it is true in epistemological and empirical sense. The spiritual truth is the truth forever, while empirical truth is transitory in nature and true for now. Since *Māyā* is the perceived material world, it is true in perception context, but is "untrue" in spiritual context of *Brahman*. *Māyā* is not false, it only clouds the inner Self and principles that are real. True Reality includes both *Vyavaharika* (empirical) and *Paramarthika* (spiritual), the *Māyā* and the *Brahman*. According to Advaitins, the goal of spiritual enlightenment is to realize *Brahman*, realize the fearless, resplendent Oneness [16, 18].

### CONCEPT OF MAYA IN BUDDHISM

In *Mahayana sutras*, illusion is an important theme of the *Prajñāpāramitā sutras*. In this text, the magician's illusion is used as an example to show how people misunderstand and misperceive reality, which cannot be grasped as it has no essence. The *Mahayana* uses similar metaphors for illusion: "magic, a dream, a bubble, a rainbow, lightning, the moon reflected in water, a mirage, and a city of celestial musicians" [19]. One must understand that what we experience is less substantial and is not enough to serve the purpose of liberation from ignorance, fear, and clinging and the attainment of enlightenment as a Buddha completely dedicated to the welfare of all beings. The *Prajñāparamita* texts also state that all *dharma*s (phenomena) are like an illusion, including all beings, *Bodhisattvas* and even *Nirvana* [20].

Nāgārjuna of the *Mahāyāna Mādhyamika* (i.e., "Middle Way") school, discusses *nirmita*, or illusion closely related to *Māyā*. For Nagarjuna, the self is not the organizing command centre of experience, it is just one element combined with other factors and strung together in a sequence of causally

connected moments in time. As a consequence, the self is not substantially real, but neither can it be shown to be unreal. The continuum of moments, which we mistakenly understand to be a solid, unchanging self, still performs actions and undergoes their results. "As a magician creates a magical illusion by the force of magic, and the illusion produces another illusion, in the same way the agent is a magical illusion and the action done is the illusion created by another illusion" [21]. What we experience may be an illusion, but we are living inside the illusion and bear the fruits of our actions there. We undergo the experiences of the illusion. What we do affects what we experience, so it matters [22]. In this example, Nagarjuna uses the magician's illusion to show that the self is not as real as it thinks. For the *Mahayana Buddhist*, the self is *Māyā* like a magic show and so are objects in the world. In *Theravada Buddhism* 'Māyā' is the name of the mother of the Buddha as well as a metaphor for the consciousness aggregate (*viññāna*).

### CONCEPT OF MAYA IN SIKH RELIGION

Sikhism is classified as an Indian religion along with Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was the founder of the Sikh religion. According to Guru Nanak [23], the supreme purpose of human life is to reconnect with *Akal* (The Timeless One), however, egotism is the biggest barrier in doing this. *Māyā*, defined as a temporary illusion or "unreality", is one of the core deviations from the pursuit of God and salvation (*mukti*). The worldly attractions, which give only illusory temporary satisfaction and pain, distract the human from the devotion to God. However, Guru Nanak emphasised *Māyā* is not the cause of the unreality of the world, but of its values. Since the world is led astray by the love of attachment to Maya, the Sikhs believe it is currently in a state of *kali yuga* ('age of darkness') [24].

The term Maya occurs 827 times in SGGS under various connotations, for example, illusion, ignorance, female-serpent, magic, falsehood and delusion. For sake of illustration, we may give quotes from the

SGGS in support of our Sikh concept of Maya as follows:

Maya as an illusion [25]:

*O Baba, Maya deceives with its illusion.*

Maya as delusion [26]: *O my mother, Maya is so misleading and deceptive. Without meditating on the Lord of the Universe, it is like straw on fire, or the shadow of a cloud, or the running of the flood-waters.*

Maya as female-serpent (nagin) [27]:

*Maya is a serpent, clinging to the world. Whoever serves her, she ultimately devours.*

Maya as ignorance leads to spiritual darkness [28]:

*Emotional attachment to Maya is spiritual darkness; it is very difficult and such a heavy load.*

In SGGS, concept of Maya has been used in two different contexts: temporal and spiritual. Maya is a necessary ingredient for leading a worldly life. It denotes wealth and other worldly possessions of man. The economic structure of the society is based upon Maya (wealth). It plays a significant role in all spheres of human activity, including religion and politics. For leading a trouble-free life, Maya is a necessary evil. Guru Arjun Dev in a hymn of SGGS beautifully describes the human predicament as both the excess and lack of Maya are dangerous [29]:

*The household which is filled with abundance - that household suffers anxiety.*

*One whose household has little, wanders around searching for more.*

*He alone is happy and at peace, who is liberated from both conditions.*

Guru Nanak has emphatically stated that Maya cannot be amassed without using sinful means and exploitation of society but it never goes with the man after his death [30]:

*For the sake of this wealth, so many were ruined; and so many have been disgraced. It was not gathered without sin, and it does not go along with the dead.*

In Sikh religion, Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus laid the foundation of Sikh society on three pillars:

1. *Kirat Karni*: earning an honest living to support the family;
2. *Vand Chhakna*: sharing one's earnings with others who need and giving to charity.
3. *Naam Japna*: keeping God in mind at all times; meditation on qualities of God.

So generation of wealth is not forbidden in Sikh religion but it has to be earned by honest means and needs to be shared with those who are deprived of wealth and prosperity.

It is a big paradox that Maya which is the cause of separation of man from its divine source, is created by God Himself [31]:  
*He created the world, with its various colours, species of beings, and the variety of Maya.*

Creation of Universe by God is a phenomenon based in Maya [32]:

*The Formless Lord created the universe of form.*

*By the Hukam of His Command, He created attachment to Maya.*

Sikhism believes that people are trapped in the world because of five vices: lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego. Maya enables these five vices to trap the human being and makes a person think the physical world is "real," whereas, the goal of Sikhism is to rid the self of these vices. Guru Amardas defines functions of Maya and how it traps the human in egotism [33]:

*What is called Maya? What does Maya do? These beings are bound by pleasure and pain; they do their deeds in egotism.*

Guru Arjun Dev describes another strange characteristic of Maya. Those who love it are left in the lurch but those who abandon it and do not bother about Maya, it falls at their feet [34]:

*No matter how hard you try to grab it, it does not come into your hands.*

*No matter how much you may love it, it does not go along with you.*

*Says Nanak, when you abandon it, then it  
comes and falls at your feet.*

Philosophically thinking, there sees some correspondence between Hindu concept of Maya and its counterpart in Sikh religion. However, on the basis of empirical considerations, there are basic differences among the two. Sikh religion does not consider abnegation of Maya as a human virtue. Salvation can be achieved by living a fruitful life amidst Maya [35]:

*This is Maya, by which God is forgotten;  
emotional attachment and love of duality  
well up.*

*Says Nanak, by Guru's Grace, those who  
enshrine love for the Lord find Him, in the  
midst of Maya.*

A person entrenched in Maya and its influence is known as *Mayadhari* in Sikh parlance. Such persons are called blind and deaf in SGGS [36]:

*One who is attached to Maya is totally blind  
and deaf. He does not listen to the Word of the  
Shabad; he makes a great uproar and tumult.*

SGGS indicates the methodology to get out of maya-meshes of worldly life created by Maya. One has to focus his mind on the Shabad of SGGS to get rid of ill effects of Maya. Meditation on the Name of God and living the life of a Gurmukh helps the Sikh to win over the ill-effects of Maya [37, 38]:

*Through the Word of the Guru's Shabad, the  
Lord is seen within one's own heart. Through  
the Shabad, I have burned my emotional  
attachment to Maya.*

*When the Immaculate Naam comes to dwell in  
the mind, the mind and body become  
Immaculate, and emotional attachment to  
Maya departs.*

What is unique contribution of Sikh religion to concept of Maya in the Indian philosophy? In Hindu philosophy, development of concept of Maya and its interpretation gets transformed from Vedic period to Advaita Vedanta, which considers *Brahman* (God) as the only Reality and all His creation as illusion or Maya. Guru Nanak did not subscribe to any view of the

world, which denigrated its reality or made the world illusory. He was, therefore, firm on the principle that the creation is as real as the creator — it includes, besides material existence, the culture of man, his thoughts and his values. Guru Nanak rejects the *Vedantic* conception of Reality in *Asa-di-Var*, and proclaims that this universe is real, not an illusion [39]:

*Real are Thy continents; Real is the universe;  
Real are these forms and material objects;  
Thy doings are Real, O Lord.*

Guru Nanak calls this world as real because this vast universe is abode of the True Lord [40]:

*This moving universe is the divine mansion of  
the true Lord;  
And the true one lives therein.*

In Sikh religion, the world is regarded as both transitory and relatively real. God is viewed as the only reality, but within God exist both conscious souls and non-conscious objects; these created objects are also real [41]. Natural phenomena are real but the effects they generate are unreal. *Māyā* exists, as the events are real; yet *Māyā* is not a reality, as the effects are unreal.

However, in SGGS, *Māyā* is subjected to criticism as the "grand illusion" of materialism. *Māyā* gives birth to all other evils in the world, but by understanding the nature of *Māyā*, a person begins to approach spirituality. Materialism prevails upon the worldly life of most people due to the false consciousness of materialism, which leads to worldly entanglements as described in the following hymns of SGGS [42, 43]:

*O Baba, the splendour of Maya is deceptive.  
The blind man has forgotten the Name; he is in  
limbo, neither here nor there. ||1||  
Without the Lord, nothing else shall be of use  
to you; false is emotional attachment, and  
useless are worldly entanglements. ||1||*

*Māyā* in modern Punjabi refers to money or wealth. In some mythologies the symbol of the snake was associated with money. In SGGS, Bhagat Ravidas uses the *Vedantic* metaphor of

'the rope mistaken for a snake', to understand the mystery of this universe [44]:

*Like the story of the rope mistaken for a snake, the mystery has now been explained to me.*

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