UNIT 10: RADHAKRISHNAN'S ABSOLUTE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- explain the term Absolute
- describe Radhakrishnan's concept of the Absolute
- evaluate Radhakrishnan's Absolute with that of Hegel, Bradley, Bosanquet and Royce.
- examine Radhakrishnan's Absolute with that of Samkara and Ramanuja.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) was an Indian philosopher and statesman who was the first Vice-President (1952-1962) and the second President of India from 13 May 1962 to 13 May 1967. Among the contemporary thinkers of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan is

well known both in his homeland and in the West. He is a philosopher – statesman who has effectively combined the task of a thinker with the responsibility of a statesman. Radhakrishnan has brought to his work a depth of thought, breadth of vision and mature understanding of human problems. The metaphysics of Radhakrishnan is a real fusion of the East and the West, particularly because he has attempted to answer responsibly the problem which has haunted philosophers and theologians of all times, namely the relation between the Absolute of Philosophy and the God of religious experience. Generally, the Absolute of Philosophy is conceived of as an Impersonal being passionless, emotionless and aloof. On the other hand, God of religion is conceived of as a personal being with whom man can enter into warm personal communion. Philosophy subject accepts the Absolute but cannot give equal status to God. It is mainly Radhakrishnan who has been credited for being the great reconciler of the two characters of Absolute and God. Therefore, Radhakrishnan is not merely the distinguished exponent of a lofty spiritual philosophy, but the initiator of a new synthesis.

10.3 MEANING OF THE TERM ABSOLUTE

The dictionary meaning of the concept 'Absolute' denotes the eternal, infinite, unconditional, perfect and unchanging subject that has no dependence on anything else, contains within itself everything that exists and creates it. In Philosophy, the term 'Absolute' was used by post-Kantian idealist metaphysicians to cover the totality of what really exists, a totality thought of as a unitary system somehow generating all apparent diversity.

10.4 RADHAKRISHNAN'S CONCEPT OF THE ABSOLUTE

According to Radhakrishnan, the Absolute is a pure and passionless being, which transcends the restless turmoil of the cosmic life. Creation neither adds to, nor takes away from the reality of the

Absolute. Evolution may be a part of our cosmic process, but the Absolute is not subject to it. The Absolute is incapable of increase.

While the Absolute is pure consciousness and pure freedom and infinite possibility, it appears to be God from the point of view of the one specific possibility which has become actualized. The Absolute is the foundation and prius of all actuality and possibility. This Universe is for the Absolute only one possibility. The character of a finite universe is not incompatible with the Infinite Absolute. It is of the very nature of the Absolute to overflow and realize possibilities. The great symbol of the sun which is used in the Hindu thought signifies the generous self-giving and ecstasy of the Absolute, which overflows, and gives itself freely and generously to all.

God, who is the creator, sustainer and judge of this world is not totally unrelated to the Absolute. God is the Absolute from human end. When we limit down the Absolute to its relation with the actual possibility, the Absolute appears as Supreme Wisdom, Love and Goodness. We call the Supreme as the Absolute, when we view it apart from the cosmos, God in relation to the cosmos. The Absolute is the pre-cosmic nature of God, and God is the Absolute from the cosmic point of view.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: FILL IN THE BLANKS

(a) According to Radhakrishnan the Absolute is a pure and _____ being.

(b) The term Absolute was used by _____ idealist metaphysicians.

Q 2: What problem has haunted philosophers and theologians of all times?

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Q 3: What is the foundation and prius of all actuality and possibility?

.....

Q 4: Is God the Absolute according to Radhakrishnan?

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10.5 HEGEL AND RADHAKRISHNAN

George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a German Philosopher. Hegel's achievement is his development of a distinctive articulation of idealism sometimes termed as absolute idealism. Of special importance is his concept of Spirit. A closer examination of Hegel and Radhakrishnan brings out a number of affinities as well as a number of differences. Hegel and Radhakrishnan both agree that Ultimate Reality is 'Spirit' which is One. This Reality is not an abstract unity but a concrete whole related to many. To Hegel, the Absolute is not a bare one, but one in many, an organic whole, a perfect and harmonious system of an infinite number of finite selves. Hegel calls the Ultimate Reality as the Absolute Spirit. His Absolute Spirit is a concrete universal which is neither differenceless nor relationless. There is the relation of mutual dependence between the Absolute and the world.

Radhakrishnan also firmly asserts that the Absolute is not an abstract unity, but a concrete whole binding together the differences which are subordinate to it. The whole has existence through its parts, and the parts are intelligible only through the whole. Thus the ultimate reality is not a pulseless identity excluding all differences nor is it a chaotic disconnectedness with no order in it. The Absolute is, "an organized whole with interrelated parts ". The dead mechanism of stones, the unconscious life of plants, the conscious life of animals and the self-conscious life of man are all part of the Absolute at different stages. On the line of Hegel's doctrine of unity-in-difference, Radhakrishnan remarks, "The same Absolute reveals itself in all these but differently in each. The Ultimate Reality sleeps in the stone, breathes in the plants, feels in the animals and awakes to self-consciousness in man."

Radhakrishnan, on the one hand, says that the Absolute which is the non-relational aspect, of the Supreme transcends all temporal relations and then says that the Absolute "embraces time, its events and processes. The finite universe is rooted in the Absolute" He thus seems

to be presenting a contradictory picture of the Absolute as both non-relational and as the foundation of all relation. We understand the Absolute as non-relational is an abstract unity. How can then it be related to many?

In order to concretise the Absolute, Radhakrishnan, posits God as the creative principle. . God is the Absolute in action. God and Absolute are not to be regarded as exclusive of each other. He brings the concept of Supreme. "The Supreme in its non-relational aspect is the Absolute, in its active aspect it is God." While God is organically bound up with the universe, the Absolute is not". Radhakrishnan's Absolute is in no way dependent on the world. Creation of the world makes no difference to it. It cannot add to or take away anything from the Absolute.

Here one question arises. In what relation does God stand to the philosophical Absolute. According to Hegel, God is the Absolute. They are only two alternative words used for the same Ultimate Reality. So here there is no doubt that Hegel identifies God of Religion with the Absolute of Philosophy. For Radhakrishnan, God and Absolute are poises of the same Reality. The Absolute is a living reality with a creative urge – when this aspect is stressed, the Absolute becomes a personal God. According to Radhakrishnan, God and Absolute are not two different concepts but two distinct 'aspects' of the same Reality.

10.6 BRADLEY AND RADHAKRISHNAN

Francis Herbert Bradley (1846-1924) was an English philosopher who developed theories of metaphysical basis of absolute idealism. Bradley is essentially Hegelian in approach. Radhakrishnan, who made valuable contribution to the construction of a metaphysical edifice on Hegelian line, has similarity with Bradley also, though in some vital points Radhakrishnan differs from Bradley. Following the Hegelian terminology, Bradley calls the Ultimate Reality as 'Spirit'. Bradley's Spirit is an organic whole, where the whole is immanent in each of its parts. Though Bradley's Absolute Spirit embraces all differences in an inclusive

harmony, it is not conceived in a relational form. Bradley's whole contains diversity, but not partitioned by relations. It is "a whole in which distinctions can be made, but divisions do not exist." His Absolute is above relational form and it has absorbed the bewildering mass of phenomenal diversity in a higher unity.

Bradley's 'Absolute Spirit' as a non-relational unity of many in one is however self-contradictory. We may ask Bradley: what rational justification is there for accepting such a non-relational unity of many in one? Bradley appeals to immediate experience. He says that the whole reality as unity is felt in immediate experience.

'Reality' for Bradley is supra-relational. Thoughts relational form can never express the Reality which is a perfectly individual system. Bradley considers all finite objects as appearances of Reality and maintains that all appearances are not equally imperfect. Out of two given appearances, the one more harmonious is more real. However Bradley says that the Absolute considered as such, has no degrees for it is perfect and there can be no more or less imperfection. If Bradley's Absolute is the only Reality and all are appearances, where then does God stand?

Bradley does not identify God with the Absolute for he says, "If you identify the Absolute with God, that is not the God of Religion. If again you separate them, God becomes a finite factor in the whole". For Bradley, 'God is a finite object standing above and apart from man". Bradley refuses to admit God as the all-inclusive Reality but makes him as an aspect of that Reality. A slightly similar view of God we find in Radhakrishnan who says that God is an aspect of the Supreme Reality. But by saying it as an aspect Radhakrishnan means that God is the very Absolute in the world context and not the mere appearance of the Absolute. God is reconciled with the Absolute Reality without being treated as a separate entity. According to Radhakrishnan, God and Absolute are united by the very relation (being aspects) which makes them constitutive of the Supreme Reality.

10.7 BOSANQUET AND RADHAKRISHNAN

Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923) was an English Philosopher in late 19th and early 20th Century Britain. In his metaphysics he is regarded as a key representative (with F.H. Bradley) of Absolute Idealism, although it is a term that he abandoned in favor of 'speculative philosophy'. Bosanquet like Bradley insists that there can be only one true or complete individual viz. the Absolute. This Absolute is not an abstract universal – i.e. not a pure identity without any difference, but is a concrete universal – an all- inclusive harmonious whole which contains and unifies the many into one. As Bosanquet puts it, "a diversity recognized as a unity, a macrocosm constituted by microcosms, is the type of the concrete universal."

Similarly, Radhakrishnan's Absolute is not an abstract unity but a concrete whole binding together the differences. Radhakrishnan writes the Absolute is "the whole, the only individual, and the sum of all perfection. The differences are reconciled in it, and not obliterated."

Bosanquet's Absolute is a 'harmonious whole', 'a unity within multiplicity'. It is the concrete all inclusive synthesis of every conceivable thing and thought. According to Bosanquet, the harmonious synthesis or unity can be maintained only by the "transmutation and rearrangement" of particular experiences, and also of the contents of particular finite minds, by inclusion in the completer whole of experience." But transmutation of every conceivable thing and thought and its inclusion in the complete whole implies its absorption in an undifferentiated totality. But such an undifferentiated totality which is not differentiated into a plurality of finite centers of experience is an abstraction.

Radhakrishnan's concept of Absolute, however is not a disconnected whole, but an "Organized whole with interrelated parts". His Absolute includes all differences. So its unity, is maintained not by 'excluding', but by 'reconciling' the differences. Radhakrishnan writes, "The whole has existence through the parts, and the parts are intelligible

only through the whole." Radhakrishnan's Absolute is not an abstract identity. It is a concrete whole which includes differences.

According to Bosanquet, God is not the ultimate reality itself, but the appearance of that reality and this appearance is in relationship with the finite spirit. Unlike Bosanquet's, Radhakrishnan's God is not only the mere appearance of the Absolute but the very Absolute in the world context, "God is the Absolute from the human end." The same Supreme Reality is called differently from two different points of view. Radhakrishnan writes "We call the Supreme the Absolute, when we view it apart from the cosmos, God in relation to the cosmos. The Absolute is the pre-cosmic nature of God, and God is the Absolute from the cosmic point of view." So it is seen that it is only a matter of viewpoint.

10.8 ROYCE AND RADHAKRISHNAN

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) was an American Idealist philosopher. He developed philosophy of Idealism, emphasizing individuality and Will rather than intellect. Royce, following Hegel's concept of concrete universal, holds that the Absolute is a concrete whole. But unlike Hegel, Royce's Absolute is a whole which is rich in attributes. Absolute is a Self and possesses self-consciousness as essential character. The multitudes constituting the concrete individuality of the real world is an expression of that Self. Reality is a unity of One and many. Royce sums up his views on the Absolute in the following way "There is, for us as we are, experiences. Our thought undertakes the interpretation of this experience. Every intelligent interpretation of an experience involves, however, the appeal from this experienced fragments to some more organized whole of experience, in whose unity this fragment is conceived as finding its organic place. To talk of any reality which this fragmentary experience indicates, is to conceive this reality as the content of the more organized experience. To assert that there is any absolutely real fact indicated by our experience, is to regard this reality as presented to an absolutely organized experience, in which every fragment finds its place.

"Thus Royce's Absolute is not an undifferentiated Unity. It is an all-inclusive organized system of all finite ideas.

Similarly, Radhakrishnan also says that his Absolute is an organized whole with interrelated parts in it. It is a concrete whole binding together the differences which are subordinate to it. But unlike Royce's Absolute, Radhakrishnan's Absolute is devoid of attributes. Royce did not make any distinction between Absolute and God. For him, Absolute and God are different terminology used for the same Reality. The attributes that are ascribed to God are same as those which are ascribed to the Absolute as well .

Radhakrishnan's Absolute is depicted as devoid of attributes and God as full of metaphysical and moral attributes. The relation between God and Absolute is indicated in Radhakrishnan's philosophy in the following: "The difference between the Supreme as absolute Spirit and the Supreme as personal God is one of standpoint and not of essence." So from two different standpoints Absolute and God appear as distinct two, one devoid of attributes and the other full of attributes. Radhakrishnan writes, "While the Absolute is the total reality, God is the Absolute from the cosmic end, the consciousness that informs and sustains the world." So God is the very Absolute in the world context. The distinction between the two is simply the matter of emphasis.

10.9 SAMKARA AND RADHAKRISHNAN

Samkara (788-820) was a philosopher and theologian from India who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta. Samkara's Absolute is an undifferentiated unity. It is not an organized whole and therefore excludes all internal relations. Unlike Samkara's , Radhakrishnan's Absolute is a whole where differences are reconciled and not obliterated Radhakrishnan's Absolute is a pure and passionless being which transcends the restless turmoil of cosmic life. However, Radhakrishnan says that from the point of view of one specific possibility of the Absolute which has become actualized, the Absolute appears as God. The

Absolute as God is organically related to the world. For Radhakrishnan, God, who is the creator , sustainer and judge of the world is not totally unrelated to the Absolute.

Samkara neither identifies God with the Absolute nor says that it is different. He says that the Absolute is God, associated as it were with Maya. (Power of God which is indistinguishable from Him). So long one is under the influence of Maya, God appears to be real but ultimately God disappears along with Maya. But according to Radhakrishnan "Both the Absolute and personal God are real, only the former is the logical prius of the latter". In fact, God is the Absolute from the cosmic end. At the end of the cosmic process God does not simply disappear. "He recedes into the background of the Absolute".

Samkara and Radhakrishnan both make a distinction between Absolute and God. Samkara puts so much emphasis on Absolute or Brahman that God merely appears and disappears in his philosophy God ceases to exist with the cessation of Maya. Unlike Samkara, Radhakrishnan gives equal emphasis to both. He writes: "While the Absolute is the transcendental divine, God is the cosmic divine". Radhakrishnan's God is preserved till the very end of the cosmic process. Ultimately God does not disappear but unites with the Absolute.

The Absolute of either Samkara or Radhakrishnan cannot kindle passionate love and adoration in the Soul. Radhakrishnan writes, "We cannot worship the Absolute whom no one hath seen or can see, who dwelleth in the light that no man can approach unto. The formless (nirakaram) Absolute is conceived as formed (akaravat) for the purposes of worship." God is the form in which alone the Absolute can be pictured by the finite mind. For Radhakrishnan, the Absolute assumes the form of God. God is not the figment of our minds. Radhakrishnan says, "God Himself is the highest Reality as well as Supreme Value."

The formless and passionless Absolute as such, has no meaning for a religious man. The Absolute acquires meaning only when it assumes the form of God. Radhakrishnan's Absolute and God are like two sides of the same coin. Absolute and God refer to the same truth, that is , the Supreme.

10.10 RAMANUJA AND RADHAKRISHNAN

Ramanuja (1027-1137) was a Hindu theologian, philosopher and one of the most important exponents of the Sri Vaisnavism tradition within Hinduism. Ramanuja is famous as the chief proponent of Vishistadvaita School of Vedanta. Ramanuja conceives 'Brahman' as the Absolute. Brahman is the whole of Reality and the abode of eternal attributes. According to Ramanuja, the word 'Brahman' denotes "the highest person (Purushottama) who is essentially free from all imperfections and possesses numberless classes of auspicious qualities of unsurpassable excellence". Thus the attributes that we generally ascribe to the God of Religion has been ascribed to the Absolute of Ramanuja.

Ramanuja discards the distinction that is usually drawn between the Absolute of Philosophy and God of Religion, as he regards both of them as identical. Ramanuja uses the words Brahman and Isvara or God interchangeably. Radhakrishnan like Ramanuja, also speaks of Reality as one whole. But Radhakrishnan does not identify Absolute with God. He says "When we emphasize the ineffable character of the Reality, its transcendence of subject-object relation, we call it the Absolute. When we look at it, as the creative principle of all existence, we conceive it as God. The Absolute and God are two statuses of the same Reality."

Though like Ramanuja, Radhakrishnan's Absolute is all perfect "the world of change does not disturb the perfection of the Absolute." Radhakrishnan does not say in clear terms like Ramanuja that the auspicious qualities belong to Brahman or the Absolute. Radhakrishnan only says that "when we limit down the Absolute to its relation with the actual possibility the Absolute appears as Supreme Wisdom, Love and Goodness." That is to say, the Absolute as God is the creator, sustainer and judge of the world. Like Ramanuja, Radhakrishnan did not use the words Absolute and God interchangeably. Radhakrishnan says, "The Supreme in its absolute self-existence is Brahman, the Absolute and as the Lord and Creator containing and controlling all, is Isvara the God." Thus both Ramanuja and Radhakrishnan expresses the same truth but

with slight variation. While Ramanuja does not give separate emphasis to the two words viz, Absolute and God or Brahman and Isvara, Radhakrishnan gives due emphasis to the two words used to express the same truth.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is Absolute Spirit according to Hegel?

Q 6: How does Bradley conceive the Spirit?

Q 7: How does Bosanquet describe the Absolute?



10.11 LET US SUM UP

- Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was an Indian Philosopher and Statesman. Radhakrishnan has been credited for being the great reconciler of two characters of Absolute and God.
- According to Radhakrishnan, the Absolute is a pure and passionless being, which transcends the restless turmoil of cosmic life. The Absolute is the foundation and prius of all actuality and possibility.
- Hegel and Radhakrishnan both agree that the Ultimate Reality is 'Spirit', which is One. To Hegel, the Absolute is not a bare One, but One in many. His Absolute Spirit is a concrete Universal which is neither differenceless nor relationless. Radhakrishnan also firmly asserts that the Absolute is not an Abstract unity, but a concrete whole binding together the differences which are subordinate to it.
- Bradley calls the Ultimate Reality as 'Spirit' .This Spirit is an organic whole, where the whole is immanent in each of its parts. Bradley refuses to admit God as the all-inclusive Reality but makes Him as an aspect of that Reality. Radhakrishnan like Bradley says that God is an aspect of the Supreme Reality. By saying it is an aspect, Radhakrishnan means that God is the very

Absolute in the world context and not mere appearance of that Absolute.

- Bosanquet's Absolute is not an abstract universal but a concrete universal – an all inclusive harmonious whole which contains and unifies the many into one. Similarly, Radhakrishnan's Absolute is not an abstract unity but a concrete whole binding together the differences. His Absolute includes all differences. According to Bosanquet, God is not the Ultimate reality itself, but the appearance of that reality. Radhakrishnan's God is not only the mere appearance of the Absolute but the very Absolute in the world context.
- Royce's Absolute is a whole which is rich in attributes. Absolute is a Self and possesses self-consciousness as essential character. Reality is a Unity of one and many. The Absolute is not an undifferentiated unity. It is an all-inclusive organized system of all finite ideas. Similarly, Radhakrishnan's Absolute is an organized whole with interrelated parts in it. But unlike Royce's Absolute, Radhakrishnan's Absolute is devoid of attributes.
- Samkara's Absolute is an undifferentiated Unity. It is not an organized whole and therefore excludes all internal relations. Radhakrishnan's Absolute is a whole where differences are reconciled not obliterated . For Samkara the Absolute is God associated as it were with maya. God appears to be real but ultimately disappears. According to Radhakrishnan both the Absolute and God are real, only the former is the logical prius of the latter.
- Ramanuja conceives Brahman as the Absolute. Brahman is the whole of Reality and the abode of eternal attributes. Ramanuja uses the words Brahman and Isvara of God interchangeably . Radhakrishnan also speaks of Reality as one whole. But Radhakrishnan does not identify Absolute with God.



10.12 FURTHER READING

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5. Bosanquet, B. (1927).*The Principle of Individuality and Value*. Macmillan and Co. Ltd.., London
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10.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans. to Q No 1: (a) Passionless

(b) Post-Kantian

Ans. to Q No 2: The problem of the relation between the Absolute of Philosophy and God of Religion.

Ans. to Q No 3: The Absolute is the foundation and prius of all actuality and possibility.

Ans. to Q No 4: According to Radhakrishnan God is the Absolute from human end.

Ans. to Q No 5: According to Hegel Absolute Spirit is a concrete Universal, which is neither differenceless nor relationless.

Ans. to Q No 6: Bradley's Spirit is an organic whole, where the whole is immanent in each of its parts. But it is not conceived in a relational form.

Ans. to Q No 7 : Bosanquet's Absolute is a concrete Universal - an all inclusive harmonious whole which contains an unifies the many into one – a unity within multiplicity.



10.14 MODEL QUESTIONS

A Very Short Question

Q 1: Who is Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan?

Q 2: How did Radhakrishnan describe the Absolute?

Q 3: Who is George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel?

Q 4: What does Bradley calls the Ulitmate Reality?

Q 5: Is there any similarity between Bosanquet's and Radhakrishnan's Absolute?

Q 6: Name the American Idealist Philosopher according to whom the Absolute is rich in attributes.

Q 7: Who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta?

Q 8: Does Samkara identifies God with the Absolute?

Q 9: What is Maya?

Q 10: Who is the Chief proponent of Vishistadvaita school of Vedanta?

Q 11: What does the word 'Brahman' denotes according to Ramanuja?

B Short Question (Answer in about100- 150 words)

Q 1: Discuss the points of affinities and differences between Hegel and Radhakrishnan's Absolute.

Q 2: Does Bradley identifies God with the Absolute? Discuss.

Q 3: Compare Bosanquet and Radhakrishnan's Absolute.

Q 4: How does Ramanuja and Radhakrishnan explain the concept of God and the Absolute?

C Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: Examine critically Radhakrishnan's Absolute.

Q 2: Explain and examine the Absolute of Royce and Radhakrishnan.

Q 3: Discuss how Samkara and Radhakrishnan explain the relation of Absolute and God.

Q 4: Critically examine the Absolute of Bradley.

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