

Relations in Advaita Vedanta

1) Overview

a) Introduction

- i) The study of relations is central to understanding the philosophical discourse of Advaita Vedanta. Relations (sambandha) function as explanatory tools for clarifying how entities, attributes, and experiences are meaningfully connected in cognition. While everyday reasoning presupposes relations such as contact (Samyoga) or inherence (samavaya), Advaita Vedanta re-examines these from the standpoint of non-duality. The tradition acknowledges Nyaya and Mimamsa classifications but redefines identity (tadatmya) as a unique relation that is neither pure difference nor pure non-difference. This makes Advaita's framework distinctive, especially in its approach to consciousness (cit), mind (antahkarana), and self-knowledge (atma-jnana).
- ii) This document explores different types of relations as they are understood in classical Indian philosophy and highlights Advaita Vedanta's nuanced approach. By comparing Nyaya, Mimamsa, and Vedanta perspectives, we uncover how the concept of relation contributes to a deeper understanding of self, world, and ultimate reality (Brahman).

b) Why is it important?

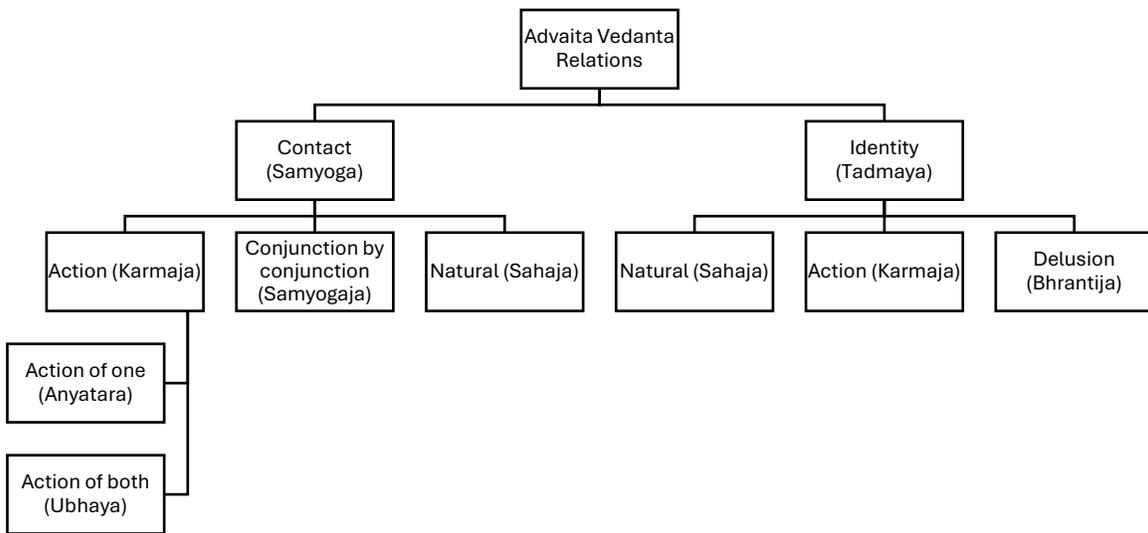
- i) The importance of studying relations in Advaita Vedanta lies in their explanatory and liberative role:
 - (1) Clarifying Ontological Dependence – Relations help explain how consciousness appears connected with the mind, body, and world. Without such analysis, the doctrine of non-duality risks being misunderstood as either crude identity or absolute separation.
 - (2) Resolving Contradictions – By formulating an identity relation 'different from difference and non-difference,' Advaita reconciles apparent contradictions. For instance, the self is distinct from the body-mind complex, yet empirical life proceeds as if they were identical. The doctrine of indescribable identity preserves this tension without falling into logical inconsistency.
 - (3) Supporting Soteriology (Liberation) – Understanding relations between consciousness, mind, and illusion (avidya) is not merely theoretical. It clarifies how ignorance superimposes false identities ('I am the body,' 'I am a doer') and how knowledge (jnana) dissolves them. Thus, relations provide the conceptual framework for explaining bondage and liberation.
 - (4) Philosophical Dialogue with Other Systems – Nyaya emphasizes real distinctions, while Mimamsa leans on non-difference. Advaita synthesizes and transcends these by proposing an identity relation unique to its epistemological and metaphysical commitments. Studying relations illuminates how Advaita negotiates with competing schools of Indian thought.

(5) Practical Relevance – The analysis of relations underlies practical teachings of Vedanta, such as meditation on 'I am Brahman' (aham brahmasmi). The identity between the witness consciousness and the empirical self must be properly understood as natural, action-produced, or illusory to avoid confusion in practice.

c) References

- i) VicarSagar of Niscaldas – translation by S. Bhuvneshwari [topic 429]
- ii) VicarSagar of Niscaldas – commentary by Swami Paramarthananda.

2) Types of relations



3) Definition and Example

- a) Contact (Samyoga) – The association of two substances is called conjunction. It is of three kinds.
 - i) Karmaja – conjunction produced by action. The action referred here is the instrument cause (asamavaya) cause (efficient cause), used for the production of conjunctions. It (Karmaja) is of two types:
 - (1) Anyatara – The conjunction that is produced by the action of one entity (substance) – produced by the action of one.
 - (a) Example – The association of tree with flying bird.
 - (2) Ubhaya – The conjunction that is produced by the action of both entities – produced by the action of both.

- (a) Example – The association between goats as a result of contact between two goats.
 - ii) Samyogaja – conjunction produced by conjunction. The contact caused by the instrumental cause is called ‘conjunction produced by conjunction’.
 - (1) Example – Due to contact of the hand with the tree, there is the contact of the body with the tree. This is called the conjunction produced by conjunction.
 - iii) Sahaja – natural conjunction. The association established at the time of birth is called natural conjunction.
 - (1) Example – the presence of relation between the earthly part and effulgence part in the gold is a natural conjunction.
- b) Identity (Tadmaya)
- i) Background
 - (1) In Nyaya. natural relation (Sahaja) alone is called identity relation (Tadmaya)
 - (2) In Mimamsa (Bhatta), non-difference is the identity relation.
 - (3) In Vedanta, relation that is different from difference and non-difference is called identity relation. It is also called the indescribable identity relation.
 - (a) If it is said to be other than difference, then the actual non-difference gets established.
 - (b) If it is said to be other than non-difference, then imagined difference gets established.
 - (c) Therefore, in Siddhanta – that which is endowed with *imagined* difference and is *actually* non-difference is called as identity relation.
 - (d) In Nyaya, there is a type of relation called Inherence (Samyoga):
 - (i) Samyoga has the following sub-types:
 1. Attribute – Substance (Gauna – Guni)
 2. Universal – Particular (Jati – Vyakti)
 3. Action -Possessor of action (Kriya – Kriyavat)
 4. Cause – Effect (part – whole) (Avayava – Avayavi)
 5. Eternal substance – Particularity ((Nitya) Dravya – Visesa)
 - (ii) Samyoga is considered as Identity relation by Bhattas and Vedantin
 - (e) In Vedanta, identity relation is threefold:
 1. Natural identity (Sahaja)
 2. Identity produced by action (Karmaja)
 3. Identity caused by delusion (Bhrantija)
 - ii) Definition and example
 - (1) Natural identity (Sahaja)
 - (a) Consciousness reflects in the mind. Both the reflected consciousness and the mind combined together as the hot iron piece, becomes one and shines like Consciousness.

- (b) The mind endowed with the reflected consciousness alone is called as the natural identity.
 - (c) In the state of origination itself both arise, combined together, thus the identity between Consciousness and the mind is that of natural identity.
- (2) Identity produced by action (Karmaja)
- (a) The mind shining like the Consciousness because of its association with the reflected consciousness has the relation with the gross body and that is called as the identity produced by action.
 - (b) On the origination of the actions that are the giver of experiences in the waking state, there is the origination of the identity produced by action.
 - (c) In the absence of action, the identity produced by action also gets destroyed. This is seen in the deep sleep state.
- (3) Identity caused by delusion (Bhramantija)
- (a) Example: I am brahmana', I am Ksatriya', I am Brahmachari' etcetera
 - (b) The identity of the mind with such thought-modes along with the witness principle (content of the word 'I') is called as the identity born of illusion.