CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying the fact that the problem of consciousness is one of the most fundamental problems of philosophy. The problem has two core phases. Firstly, it is concerned with the very being or existence of consciousness, which has been affirmed as well as denied by many Indian and Western philosophers. And secondly, it tends to explore the nature or essence of consciousness, which indeed, is even more important and controversial. The present study has been proposed to address the second aspect of the problem which concedes the existence of consciousness as a fundamental prerequisite. In other words, the study does not want to examine how we can prove that there is consciousness nor does it seek to justify that consciousness has real existence. Rather very specifically it addresses the question 'What is the nature of consciousness?'

The credit of any philosophical research lies in its ability to instigate a genuine problem that transcends ordinary perception. A problem is claimed to be philosophically impressive if it is usually less explicit to consider. Interestingly, the problem of consciousness being intangible in nature seems to justify this criterion. The paradox is that consciousness is believed to be the innermost subjective experience, yet the most incomprehensive phenomenon. It is the one that permeates all our thoughts and acts yet it exceeds the grab of any thought. Not only philosophers even psychologists, scientists, mystics of different ages have spent lives in this inquiry, still the mystery of consciousness is found to be impenetrable. Dennett writes, 'Human consciousness is just about the last surviving mystery' (D. Dennett, 1991: 21)¹. Similar mystical attitude is seen in the Upanişad when it states,

Na tatra caksurgacchati na vāggacchati no manah;

Na vidmo na vijānīmo yathaitadanuśiṣyāt²

It is surprising that high-tech machineries of modern science are quite effective to record the operations of the different neurons in brain but even today struggle to explain the cause of consciousness in physical apparatus. Thus says David Chalmers, the hard problem is, 'how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience' (D. Chalmers, 1995: 63). It appears that any debate on the problem of consciousness stumbles on some kinds of dualism. Dualism, as said Susan Blackmore, is a necessary outcome of any discourse on consciousness. However, dualism in any form either it is spirit and matter, or subjective and objective, or mind and body is always weak and incomprehensible in enhancing our understanding of consciousness, yet it is unavoidable. Though, materialists and epiphenomenalists have reasons to differ and object, yet they finally fall into some sorts of reductionism by denying real and autonomous existence of consciousness. According to John Searl, reductionists' attempt is equally hopeless, in fact even worse than the dualists since they renounce the very being of consciousness, which they are supposed to explain. Condemning reductionism Searl writes,

"In a way they are worse, because they deny the real existence of the conscious states they were supposed to explain. They end up by denying the obvious fact that we all have inner, qualitative, subjective states such as our pains and joys, memories and perceptions, thoughts and feelings, moods, regrets, and hungers."

However, among several issues pertaining to the problem of consciousness one very perplexing question that is fascinating the attention of philosophers over the centuries is the very nature or the essence of consciousness. The question is not about any proof for the existence of consciousness since the problem stirs up only by conceding the self-evident being of consciousness. It is therefore, focused on the structure or feature of

consciousness. Broadly, we can categorize the issue into two. On the one hand, there is one prominent view that marks consciousness essentially with intentionality while the other takes it to be solely self-luminous or reflexive. Succinctly, the present study has been taken up to ponder over the questions of whether consciousness is attributed with intentionality or reflexivity. Or, is it both intentional and reflexive in nature? An outline of the problem is presented below.

1.1 The Problematic

The dilemma that has been pointed out by M.K. Bhadra in his article, On Mohanty's Conception of Intentionality, regarding Mohanty's attempt to derive reflexivity of consciousness from intentionality, is one of the most provocative issues that may compel anyone to indulge into consciousness studies. The necessity to carry out the present inquiry has emerged significantly from the same source. Over the times, both Husserlian phenomenology⁵ and Advaita Vedānta have ventured exceedingly to work out the nature and fundamental features of consciousness. However, the debate among them became vibrant due to the intervention of contemporary scholars, noticeably the renowned phenomenologist J.N. Mohanty, who in the true sense has made the problem to reinforce. The age-old questions that continue to poke the Indian scholars especially the Advaitins and the phenomenologists of different times can be stated as - what is the nature of consciousness? Is consciousness by nature intentional or self-luminous (reflexive)? The modified version of this problem is: whether reflexivity is fundamental to consciousness or depends on intentionality to persist. Briefly, the purpose of this study is to evaluate these two well-known theories, namely, 'the theory of reflexivity or sva-prakāśa of consciousness' as espoused by Śankara and 'the theory of intentionality' as propounded

by Husserlian phenomenology in a new light. In addition, the present study aims to know whether or not it is possible to derive reflexivity from intentionality. Does intentionality occur prior to make consciousness self-aware? Lastly, does the nature of consciousness permit any real reconciliation between these two theories?

The difficulty basically occurs due to the rigorous conviction of Śańkara about the absolute self-luminous nature of consciousness which does not consider intentionality or object directedness as an essential nature of consciousness. Intentionality cannot be the essence of consciousness which is pure and eternal. Any attempt to compromise with this principle is to mistake the most fundamental thesis upon which the entire philosophy of Advaita is centred. On the contrary, for Husserl and other phenomenologists, it is the intentionality that constitutes the very being of consciousness, since the first person experience of consciousness is always found to be directed towards something beyond. Unlike object, consciousness is an 'act of reference' as it is always about something that it intends. It is worthy to note here three very controversial questions raised by J.N. Mohanty,

- a) Is there any incompatibility between intentionality and reflexivity?
- b) Is intentionality primary than reflexivity or vice-versa?
- c) Does one of them depend on the other?

The irony here is that while Advaitic position seems to exclude intentionality thoroughly from the domain of transcendental consciousness, phenomenologists are firm to maintain intentionality along with reflexivity. Though, in terms of occurrence, the phenomenologists grant more priority to intentionality and thus, subsequently reflexivity

becomes secondary to them. Since consciousness in order to be conscious must be conscious of its object. In other words, consciousness is reflexive as long as it is intentional in nature. However, in this context, Mohanty made a ground-breaking effort to reconcile these two features of consciousness. As for Mohanty, in the strict sense, the phenomenologists do not notice any such incompatibility between intentional and reflexive nature of consciousness but for Advaita there is an alleged opposition between the two.

In fact, for Advaita, there is nothing wrong to designate consciousness at empirical level with intentional act but there is no ground to put intentionality along with self-luminosity in its ultimate being. Any attempt to approve this co-existence is to distort the very universal essence of consciousness, which is *nirviṣaya*, *nirākāra* and *nirāśraya*; i.e., contentless, formless and placeless. It is the pure consciousness, away from any superficial attribute that limits its eternal nature. It is at best stated as *Sat-Cīt-Ānanda* – Existence, Consciousness and Bliss. In his commentary on *Brahma-sūtra*, Śańkara compares the nature of consciousness with the formlessness of light that cannot be objectified. In a very metaphoric way, Śańkara thus describes the reflexivity of consciousness as a light that does not need any second light apart from its own being. Since, "it is against experience and a contradiction in terms to say that the luminaries like the sun etc. shine variously with the help of another light, for one light dims out the other".

There is a strong argument based on which Advaita argues for reflexivity of consciousness denying the intentional nature. The object directedness or intentionality is considered by Śańkara as a mental modification (*ċitta-vṛtti*) and is not attached to

consciousness. Along with Patanjali's Yoga philosophy, Advaita holds that due to the reflection of pure consciousness on internal organ (*antaḥkarṇa*) or mind, it appears to be conscious, in fact, it is made up of subtlest particles of matter. It is thereby, materialistic in nature as distinct from the sacred. In Advaita Vedānta, mind goes out as it were and takes the shape of the object, thereby we cognize the object. Indeed, for Advaita, not only the intentional act but also the acts of recognition, objectivation, constitution of objectivity, belong to the ego-consciousness and not to the transcendental consciousness⁷. As expressed in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 'Desire, resolve, doubt, faith, want of faith, steadiness, unsteadiness, shame, intelligence, fear -- all these are but the mind."

In contrast, for Mohanty consciousness is both intentional and reflexive. There is no opposition between consciousness and object as conceived by Śańkara nor is there any conflict between intentionality and reflexivity. As consciousness is not only flowing towards its object, it also reveals itself and the object. To clarify his view, Mohanty writes, "if S is the consciousness of an object O, S is also aware that it is conscious" Since, every act of consciousness is both object directed as well as directed to its own being. In fact, going a step further, along with Husserl, Mohanty too has tried to derive reflexivity from intentionality of consciousness. As for him, intentionality is much broader concept than reflexivity, constituting the very being of consciousness. There are in fact mental states that are intentional but not transparent. In the words of Mohanty, "Intentionality is a more inclusive concept. Its extension is larger than that of transparency. All transparent states are intentional, no non-intentional state is transparent." Every act of experience is intentional and that presupposes consciousness. Therefore, consciousness is always and everywhere intentional. This view of Mohanty,

however, is subject to severe criticism. Since, for many modern phenomenologists intentionality also belongs to unconscious states and body and therefore, all cases of intentionality may not give rise of reflexivity¹¹.

Furthermore, Mohanty's inclination to make a fair reconciliation between reflexivity and intentionality by going beyond the traditional extremists' positions has drawn the attention of many contemporary critics, namely, M. K. Bhadra. Notably, Bhadra in his essay *On Mohanty's Concept of Intentionality* has made a critique of three important views made by J.N. Mohanty. First, Bhadra opposes Mohanty's critique of Śańkara on subject-object dualism. Secondly, he takes up Mohanty's thesis of 'degree of intentionality' and 'degree of reflexivity'. And lastly, he has considered Mohanty's attempt to derive reflexivity from intentionality.

At the very outset, Bhadra proves that Mohanty's claim that the logical contradiction between the nature of consciousness and the nature of object is due to our initial definition about them, is unacceptable. Emphasizing the arguments put forwarded by Śańkara in *Brahma-sūtra*, Bhadra clearly maintains that logical contradiction between them is not because of our initial definition regarding them rather it is due to the opposing nature of consciousness and object. In fact, it is phenomenologically evident that the object has the essential features of identity, permanence, solidity etc. On the other hand, consciousness is of the nature of becoming, changing, self-existent and self-revealing. Hence, Mohanty's criticism does not prove sound.

Bhadra further objects Mohanty's attempt to derive reflexivity of consciousness from intentionality. He goes on to argue that intentionality and reflexivity are two inter-related

functions of consciousness and thus, one cannot operate without the other. Though, on the question of priority of performance, the self-awareness takes place only after the revelation of object. But neither of them can be reduced to other nor can one be drawn from the other.

In this context it is worth to mention that Rāmānuja, the great advocate of Viśiṣṭādvaita, impresses Mohanty by his radical approach more than Śańkara. By developing a thorough critique of the Advaitic notion of pure and absolute consciousness, Rāmānuja makes consciousness dependent on the existence of object. Reflexivity is not an autonomous presence of consciousness rather occurs only when consciousness reveals its own object. To be precise, for Rāmānuja, reflexivity of consciousness is determined by intentionality. Consequently, there is no such incompatibility between these two. This intention becomes more apparent by his remark in Śri Bhāṣya, where Rāmānuja writes, "Consciousness is not self-luminous always and to everybody, but it is self-luminous only when it reveals objects." 12

It follows that even though the notion of 'consciousness' is central in the entire discussion of Vedānta, in Rāmānuja's philosophy consciousness enjoys a slightly different status, as for him consciousness is distinct from both the self and the Brahman. Consciousness like any other object is qualified and relative. However, this view of Rāmānuja does not only bring him close to Mohanty and phenomenologists but turns him into an ardent revolutionist in the domain of Vedānta philosophy.

However, the above discourse hints at the prolonged history of debate between these two theories that not only involves these two great traditions but is an overriding concern of the philosophers engaged in consciousness studies. As a result, several attempts have been made to map the problem from different perspectives. Being a phenomenologist, Mohanty lines up with the compatibility view to circumvent the problem. But this sort of measure is unlikely to be approved by an Advaitin who is committed to the thesis of reflexivity. Moreover, that undermines the depth of Advaitic insight in many ways. Even Bhadra's remarks express his discomfort and opposition to accept Mohanty's claim, yet he too clearly admits the reconciliation between reflexivity and intentionality. In fact, what seems more surprising is that even after refusing any such derivation that Mohanty has proposed, Bhadra admits the priority of intentionality over reflexivity. This discussion raises further questions: Do we need to adhere to the compatibility view to settle down the issue? Does the nature of reflexivity or intentionality really leave a room for such uniformity? Does the essence of consciousness justify the priority of intentionality? The present study is an attempt to address these questions.

There is no doubt that both these traditions always have something more intrinsic and substantial to reveal when the questions on self-luminosity and intentionality come into view. But any such approach as has been taken up by Mohanty following other phenomenologists seems to overrule the view of their counterpart and thus, the intricacy of the problem has remained unaddressed in its entirety. It is this complexity of the problem that demands a complete reappraisal of the theories of reflexivity and intentionality in the context of Advaita and Husserlian phenomenology. In short, the present work seeks to explore the inherent nature of consciousness to unroll the relation, if any, between these two features.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

Precisely, the present study contains the following objectives

- To explore the intentional and reflexive nature of consciousness.
- To evaluate the theories of intentionality and the reflexivity from classical and contemporary perspectives. (Indian and Continental)
- To study thoroughly the objections against these theories and to measure the available solutions.

1.3 Methodology

Present work is out and out a conceptual analysis in the fields of Vedānta and Husserlian phenomenology. Besides this research work involves two important methodologies of east and west. Following the Nyāya method of philosophical inquiry, the study establishes its *siddhānta* (conclusion) by a detailed investigation and refutation of the *pūrvapakṣa* or *dṛṣṭanta* set forth in the above. Further, the study is an extensive application of the phenomenological method to describe minutely the nature of consciousness.

According to R. Balasubramanian, the similarity in the method between Advaita and phenomenology consists in the fact that both try to study the world of objects presented to consciousness both inwardly and outwardly. For Advaita, the inner world is transcendent to consciousness as much as the outer world is. Both the systems aim at arriving at the essence of consciousness bereft of phenomenal objects of inner and outer space.

However, it is not possible to overlook the methodological differences between the phenomenologists and the Vedāntins. Vedānta while analysing and understanding the nature of consciousness has always used both *yukti* or logic and *shastra* as *pramāṇa*. In the matters of understanding the nature and structure of pure consciousness Vedānta relies heavily on *śabda* as a *pramāṇa*. Phenomenology as a method depends on the first account of describing subjective experiences. By the method of suspension, the world of objects is bracketed and effort is to arrive at the essence of consciousness. The present research keeps in mind the methodological differences between these two schools of thought.

1.4 Brief Outline of the Chapters

Keeping in view the above objectives, the thesis has been classified into four major chapters apart from introduction and conclusion. A brief account of each chapter is presented below.

The beginning chapter immediately after introduction titled *Nature of consciousness in Vedānta: Classical and Contemporary* is twofold. The first half of the chapter has commenced by taking into consideration the standpoints of two classical Vedāntic thinkers, particularly, Rāmānuja and Madhva, who reflect passionately on the core questions of reflexivity and intentionality of consciousness. Rāmānuja does not only mark out consciousness with object directedness rather his realistic conviction impels him to challenge the unique nature of consciousness as he has reduced its being to the level of objectivity. Even though, both of them are firm in their position to maintain reflexivity as an essential aspect of consciousness, yet there is an explicit attempt in their

part to objectify consciousness along with other phenomenal entity, which on the one hand, proves the conceptual gap with Advaitic understanding, on the other hand, opens a scope for reconciliation between reflexivity and intentionality. Precisely, to them, the revelation of consciousness is destined in its correlation with object and not in its autonomy. According to their views, the absurdity that Advaitins are facing is that either they have to abide by the immediacy of consciousness which invalidates the non-cognizable essence of consciousness or they have to adhere with non-cognizable nature of consciousness which fades away the possibility of its immediacy. Moreover, being an advocate of substantialist notion of self, Rāmānuja denies any independent existence of consciousness by characterizing it a mere quality of the self that provides its access to the world. Going a step further than phenomenologists, Rāmānuja rather attributed consciousness with double intentionality that correlates it at the same time both with the self and the object. Thus, by objectifying consciousness they ignore the foundational role of consciousness.

In contrast, the second half of the chapter highlights K.C. Bhattacharyya's attempt to establish the autonomous being of consciousness. By a careful phenomenological study of different modes of subjective expressions, it has been shown that it is the essence of consciousness to be free at each level of its relatedness to the objects. It is this freedom that constitutes the essence of subjectivity and not its relatedness, which indeed disappears in course of its self-realization. Bhattacharyya methodologically establishes that consciousness is not only free from the corresponding object and the perceived body rather there are successive stages of dissociation that certifies its absolute freedom. In

doing so he indeed, has pointed the possibility of conscious subject to transcend its relational nature which confirms the real essence of reflexivity.

In brief, while the first half of the chapter is framed to enhance the position of phenomenologists by a critique of pure, non-cognizable and eternal notion of consciousness; the second half of the chapter is an attempt to reinforce the notion of self-luminosity as upheld by Advaitins by pointing towards the possibility of transcendental, autonomous and non-intentional nature of consciousness.

The third chapter titled Reflexivity of consciousness in the Philosophy of Śankara and His Followers provides a theoretical framework to establish the notion of self-luminosity or reflexivity by overthrowing the ordinary narrow sense of the term. The essence of reflexivity being embedded in its non-cognizability does not allow any scope to objectify consciousness. Since, the transcendental nature of consciousness excludes any internal or external dichotomy that cognitive process includes. The nature of consciousness therefore, needs to be realised by transcending the so-called subject-object distinction, which is the basic constituent of empirical cognition. According to Advaitins, reflexivity is an immediate realization of consciousness, which is analogous to the being of consciousness. Reflexivity, to be precise, is a case of kevala-vyatireki anumāna that only consciousness is reflexive and immediately known and thus, there is no other instance of the same. Hence, 'luminosity' is not the cognition of a previous act. Since, consciousness is assumed to be something that does not remain unmanifest, yet is revealed in the most direct manner, although it is not revealed through any sensory representation¹³. Reflexivity, says Citsukha, in his famous treatise *Tattvapradipika*, is 'the capacity of being called immediately known in empirical usage while not being an object of cognition.¹⁴ Again, explaining the non-objectivity of consciousness, T.R.V. Murti writes

"...any usage of words would mean objectifying the thing. The Vedāntist, however, makes a distinction. He accepts *svayamprakāśa* in a symbolic way, but it is not confronted as an object. That which is not known as an object is still something that can be referred to in significant discourse and can be said to be validly known." ¹⁵

Establishing the distinction between transcendental and phenomenal experiences, Advaitins thus finally argue that irrespective of the conditional nature of empirical consciousness one must presuppose a foundational conscious experience behind all cognitive states that transcends the limitations of subject and object. It is an all-pervading existence and thus the character of agency that confines empirical experience in intentional relation cannot be ascribed to it. In other words, understanding of the notion of reflexivity in Advaita demands an end of the epistemic trinity or else it would lead us towards an infinite regress.

The fourth chapter named *Contemporary perspectives on Intentionality of Consciousness* focuses exclusively on the theory of intentionality as has been developed in the Continental philosophy. There is widespread agreement among phenomenologists regarding the intentional nature of consciousness. Intentionality is not simply one property that consciousness carries like continuity, subjectivity etc.; it is in fact, the very essence of consciousness in the sense that consciousness can never reveal itself without being intentional. It is the 'meaning-giving' and 'world-constituting' mechanism of consciousness as the world itself along with all objects including both real and unreal derives its meaning from intentionality of consciousness. In other words, consciousness

does not simply receive the empirical data through bare mechanism but also conceptualizes them by granting sense and meaning to them. Consciousness therefore, is not something like contentless torchlight illuminating all that comes in front of it as assumed by Advaita rather possesses a content that directs it towards the intentional object. Thus, hold the phenomenologists, consciousness is always conscious of something as something.

The chapter here highlights the transition of the notion of intentionality in the hands of phenomenologists which has proved conducive to ascertain Advaitic view of intentional mental states. Since, to the subsequent phenomenologists, particularly for Merleau-Ponty and Mohanty, intentionality is not just exclusive to consciousness rather it is more essential to the body-subject. However, here the peculiarity is phenomenologists' attempt to reconcile these two aspects of consciousness; as for Mohanty, every act of consciousness is both directed towards the object as well as aware of its own awareness, which is not another act or second order intentionality as have been considered by many. Moreover, Mohanty along with Advaitins defines reflexivity as an immediate self-awareness of consciousness 'without being an object of any cognition' 16.

However, the study latter points out that Mohanty was not strict to his initial remark about reduction as like Rāmānuja, Mohanty too has made reflexivity contingent on the object-directedness of consciousness. Consciousness is defined to be reflexive or self-luminous only when it is intentional or directed towards the object. In fact, the higher the degree of intentionality is, the more it is claimed to be reflexive. Though, it does not imply that all states of intentionality are equally reflexive or self-luminous since there are unconscious states which are intentional, yet not reflexive.

The fifth chapter titled, *Critique of Intentionality and Reflexivity of Consciousness* is the final and crucial edifice of the study from which the conclusion follows. Fostering a rigorous critique of these two theories the chapter aims to penetrate more deeply into the standpoints of antagonists. It begins with a critique of the notion of 'intentionality' from an Advaitic perspective by means of thorough phenomenological investigation into the three states of experience in empirical level. In short, the chapter thoroughly explores the possibility of refuting intentionality from the domain of consciousness by an examination of waking, dream and deep sleep states. The chapter also has countered the charges leveled by Rāmānuja against Advaitic theory of reflexivity.

This is a brief account of the chapters developed in response to the problematic. The last chapter of the thesis summarizes the concluding remarks by addressing the questions put forth in the above.

Notes and References

¹ Blackmore, Susan, (2004), *Consciousness: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University press, p. 8

- ³ Blackmore, Susan, (2004), *Consciousness: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University press, p. 20. Originally from Chalmers, D. (2010) *The Character of consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University press, p.5
- ⁴ Searl, John, (1997), *The Mystery of Consciousness*, Canada: The New York Review of Books, p. xiii
- ⁵ As per the tradition of writers of Vedānta, capital letter 'V' and 'A' are used for the words Vedānta and Advaita and following J.N. Mohanty, small letter 'p' is used for the word phenomenology.
- ⁶ Śaṅkara, (2011), *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, (Translated by Swami Gambhirananda), Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, I. iii. 22
- ⁷ Chattopadhyaya, D.P., Embree, L. and Mohanty, J. N. (Ed.), (1992), *Phenomenology* and *Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research in association with Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Ltd., p. 83
- Madhavananda Swami (trans.), (2011), The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, Kolkata:
 Advaita Ashram, 1.5.3

² "The eye does not reach there, nor does speech, nor the mind. We do not know how a teacher can possibly explain it to a disciple. We do not know." Lokeswarananda, Swami (tr.), (2013), *Kena Upaniṣad*, (With the commentary of Śaṅkara), Kolkata: Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, p. 1.2

⁹ Ibid.,p.32

¹⁰ Krishna, Daya and Sharma, K.L. (Ed.), (1991), *The Philosophy of J.N.Mohanty*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research in association with Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. p.208

- Saha, Sukharanjan (2004), Studies in Advaita Vedānta, Kolkata: Jadavpur University,p. 59
- ¹⁴ Citsuhkha, (1931), *Tattva-Pradipika*, (Ed. by Pt. R.K. Sastri), Bombay: Nirnayasagar Press, p.9.
- ¹⁵ Murti, T.R.V. (1983), *Studies in Indian Thought*, (Ed. by Harold G. Coward), Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, p.108

¹¹ Ibid., p.7

¹²Rāmānuja,(2012), *Brahman-Sūtras: Śrī-Bhāṣya*,(Translated by Swami Viresswarananda and Swami Adidevananda), Kolkata: Advaita Ashram, p.27

¹⁶ Gupta, Bina, (2003), 'Cit' Consciousness, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 157.