



E-ISSN: 2706-8927  
P-ISSN: 2706-8919  
[www.allstudyjournal.com](http://www.allstudyjournal.com)  
IJAAS 2024; 6(6): 39-42  
Received: 01-04-2024  
Accepted: 04-05-2024

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## Theory of Abhāsa-Vāda in Trika Shaivism: Understanding Śiva's Cosmic play

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2024.v6.i6a.1192>

### **Abstract**

The Abhāsa-Vada (Theory of Reflection) within Trika Shaivism provides a profound explanation of how the unchanging Absolute, Śiva, manifests as the dazzling array of phenomena that constitute the world. This manifestation occurs in such a way that Śiva maintains His pristine and transcendent nature while simultaneously becoming, in a literal and true sense, everyone and everything within the universe. This dual aspect of retaining transcendence while engaging in immanence is central to the understanding of Abhāsa-Vada.

The central aim of the Trika Theory of Appearance (Abhāsa-Vada) is to present a logical framework that elucidates how the manifest universe, before its actual manifestation, exists as an undifferentiated mass within the Absolute. This theory posits that the entirety of existence, including the subject, the means of knowledge, and the objects of perception, should be viewed as expressions or appearances (Abhasas) of cosmic consciousness. This perspective ensures that the transition from the unmanifest to the manifest state is seamless and maintains the intrinsic nature of the Absolute.

Abhāsa-Vada, also known as the Pratyabhijñā's theory of manifestation, was propounded by the philosopher Utpalācārya and significantly influenced by Abhinavagupta, a prominent figure in Trika Shaivism. This theory explains monism by asserting that all objects in the world are manifestations or Abhasas of the Absolute. According to this view, it is the inherent nature of Śiva, the Supreme Cause (Parama Śiva), to manifest Himself in the diverse forms of the universe. Consequently, the entire universe is considered an Abhasa of Śiva.

This theoretical framework acknowledges that appearances, or the processes of the world, are real and not merely superimpositions on Śiva. Instead, these appearances are manifestations of Śiva's active involvement in the free and spontaneous Kriya (creative activity) of creation. In this context, Prakṛti (nature) is perceived as a projection of Śiva's free will, further emphasizing the integral role of Śiva in the manifestation of the universe.

By articulating this perspective, Trika Shaivism offers a cohesive understanding of the relationship between the Absolute and the manifest world, effectively bridging the gap between transcendence and immanence. This theoretical approach not only preserves the transcendental purity of the Absolute but also affirms its real and literal manifestation as the diverse phenomena of the universe. Thus, the Abhāsa-Vada provides a comprehensive framework that harmonizes the seemingly paradoxical coexistence of the unchanging Absolute and the dynamic, ever-changing world of appearances.

**Keywords:** Abhāsa-Vada, the theory of reflection, Trika Shaivism, Abhinavagupta, manifestation

### **1. Introductions**

Trika Shaivism, a distinguished school within Kashmir Shaivism, offers a unique and profound perspective on the nature of the universe and its relationship with the Absolute, Śiva. Central to this philosophical system is the Abhāsa-Vada, or the Theory of Reflection, which provides an intricate explanation of how the unchanging Absolute manifests the diverse phenomena of the world.

According to Trika Shaivism, the universe does not come into existence through a process of self-transformation of Śiva or His Śakti (divine energy). This rejection of transformation (Pariṇāma) theories is significant because it preserves the essential nature of the Absolute, maintaining its purity and indivisibility<sup>[1]</sup>. Instead, Trika Shaivism proposes that the universe emerges through a process analogous to reflection. This analogy is crucial for understanding how the Absolute can remain unchanged while giving rise to the multiplicity of the manifest world. This paper aims to elucidate the intricate and profound theory of Abhāsa-Vada within Trika Shaivism, offering insights into its philosophical foundations and implications for understanding the nature of the universe and the Absolute.

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## 2. The Abhāsa-Vada: Shiva's luminous consciousness

The Abhāsa-Vada posits that the nature of the Absolute is inherently luminous and possesses cognitive awareness <sup>[2]</sup>. This luminosity enables the Absolute to project the universe within its own essence, much like an object reflected in a mirror. In this process, the Absolute, or Śiva, retains its transcendental purity and undivided nature, even as it manifests the universe. The reflection of the universe is not a diminution or alteration of Śiva's nature; rather, it is a testament to His infinite and unbounded consciousness.

In this reflective process, the universe appears as an expression of Śiva's luminous consciousness. This projection, often described using the metaphor of a mirror, implies that the entire manifest order is a direct reflection of the Absolute's inherent nature. The luminous light of consciousness causes all manifest categories to shine, revealing their existence in the manifest state. Prior to this manifestation, these categories exist potentially within the Absolute, representing their transcendental state (paramārtha-sattā) <sup>[3, 4]</sup>.

This framework addresses the paradox of how the unchanging Absolute can be the source of the dynamic and ever-changing universe. By viewing the universe as a reflection, Trika Shaivism maintains that the Absolute does not undergo any intrinsic change. Instead, it is the reflective capacity of Śiva's consciousness that makes the universe appear. This perspective preserves the integrity of Śiva's transcendent nature while acknowledging the reality of the manifest world.

The Abhāsa-Vada also asserts the reality of appearances. Unlike certain philosophical systems that consider the world of appearances as illusory or mere superimpositions, Trika Shaivism holds that these appearances are real <sup>[5]</sup>. They are manifestations of Śiva's free and spontaneous Kriya (creative activity), arising from His divine will. As such, the phenomena of the world are causally efficient and serve as objects of knowledge and action, reinforcing their reality <sup>[6]</sup>. By articulating this theory, Trika Shaivism offers a cohesive understanding of the relationship between the Absolute and the manifest world. It bridges the gap between transcendence and immanence, showing that the universe is a real and integral expression of the Absolute <sup>[7]</sup>. This doctrine not only preserves the transcendental purity of the Absolute but also affirms its real and literal manifestation as the diverse phenomena of the universe.

### 2.1 Doctrine of Reflection (Pratibimbavada)

Trika Shaivism elucidates the intricate process of cosmic manifestation through the profound doctrine of reflection, known as Pratibimbavada. This theory posits that the emergence of the universe is not due to any transformation or alteration of Śiva, the supreme reality, or his Śakti, the dynamic energy. Rather, it is inherent in the very nature of the Absolute, which is characterized by inherent luminosity (Prakāśa) and cognitive awareness (Vimarśa), to reflect the universe within its own essence <sup>[8]</sup>.

This reflection is analogous to the manner in which an image appears in a mirror. In this analogy, the mirror remains unchanged and unaffected by the image it reflects. The image, while visible within the mirror, does not alter the mirror's inherent properties. Similarly, the Absolute, which in Trika Shaivism is the ultimate reality encompassing both Śiva and Śakti, retains its indivisibility, immutability, and transcendent nature despite the

manifestation of the universe within it. The universe, therefore, is not a separate entity but rather a reflection or projection within the pure, undifferentiated consciousness of the Absolute.

The doctrine of Pratibimbavada underscores a fundamental principle in Trika Shaivism: the Absolute does not undergo any modification, transformation, or division during the process of manifestation. The universe is conceived as a reflection that exists within the unchanging, indivisible essence of the Absolute. This ensures that the non-dualistic nature of reality is maintained. The inherent luminosity and cognitive awareness of the Absolute facilitate this reflection, enabling the universe to appear manifest while the core nature of the Absolute remains unaltered and whole <sup>[9]</sup>.

This doctrine also illustrates the dynamic interplay between the Absolute's immanent and transcendent aspects. The Absolute's immanence is evident in the fact that the universe is reflected within it, while its transcendence is preserved by the unaltered and indivisible nature of the Absolute itself. Thus, the doctrine of Pratibimbavada provides a profound explanation for cosmic manifestation, emphasizing that the universe is a mere reflection within the divine consciousness.

In essence, Pratibimbavada offers a deep and nuanced understanding of how the universe can exist within the divine consciousness without compromising the Absolute's non-dual nature. This perspective affirms the transcendence and immanence of the Absolute, illustrating the seamless integration of the manifest and unmanifest, and highlighting the unchanging, luminous, and cognitively aware essence of the ultimate reality in Trika Shaivism.

### 3. Nature of the Absolute and Manifestation

In Trika Shaivism, the Absolute, Śiva, is characterized by fundamental luminosity and cognitive awareness. This luminosity is not merely a passive attribute but an active principle that enables the projection of the universe as a reflection. Śiva's inherent luminosity and cognitive awareness are crucial for understanding the process of cosmic manifestation. Unlike other philosophical traditions that may suggest a transformation or modification of the divine to explain the creation of the universe, Trika Shaivism posits that the universe's emergence does not involve any change or division within the Absolute <sup>[10]</sup>.

In Trika Shaivism, the universe's manifestation is a process of reflection within the Absolute's consciousness. Prior to manifestation, all categories exist potentially within the Absolute, representing their transcendental state (paramārtha-sattā).

When these categories manifest, they shine due to the luminosity of Śiva's consciousness, experiencing both rise and fall within the pure I-consciousness during their manifestation and dissolution. As appearances of the Absolute, these entities are considered part of the realm of Abhāsa, indicating that they are of the nature of psychic light (Abhāsa) and shine with the luster of luminosity. The manifest state of phenomena is thus referred to as appearance or Abhāsa.

### 4. Transcendental State and Manifestation

Prior to manifestation, all categories exist potentially within the Absolute, representing their transcendental state (paramārtha-sattā). In Trika Shaivism, this state signifies the inherent potentiality of all phenomena to manifest within the

Absolute's consciousness. These categories, ranging from the most abstract principles to the most concrete objects, exist in a state of unity and potentiality within the Absolute [11].

When these categories manifest, they are illuminated by the luminosity of consciousness inherent in the Absolute. This luminous light of consciousness causes all manifest categories to shine, making their manifest condition apparent. During manifestation, these categories experience both rise and fall within the pure I-consciousness. This implies that they emerge into existence from the transcendental state, undergo various states of manifestation, and eventually dissolve back into the pure consciousness from which they arose.

As manifestations of the Absolute, these entities fall within the realm of Abhāsa, signifying that they are of the nature of psychic light (Abhāsa) and shine with the luster of luminosity. This metaphorical understanding suggests that the manifest state of phenomena is illuminated by the luminous consciousness of the Absolute, and their appearance is a direct result of Śiva's inherent qualities.

The concept of transcendental state and manifestation elucidates how the unchanging Absolute can give rise to the dynamic and diverse universe without undergoing any intrinsic change. It emphasizes the inherent potentiality of all phenomena within the Absolute and the role of consciousness in their manifestation. This understanding bridges the gap between the unmanifest and manifest states, highlighting the continuous interplay between transcendence and immanence within Trika Shaivism's philosophical framework.

### 5. The Reality of Appearances

Trika Shaivism asserts that the phenomena, as manifestations of the Absolute, are real and not mere illusions. The manifest entities are real because they are not only causally efficient but also serve as objects of knowledge and action. The theory of appearance maintains that the entire range of categories, from Sadāśiva to Earth, is real. These categories have always existed within the Absolute and shine identically with pure I-consciousness [12]. A significant aspect of the Pratibimbavada doctrine is its assertion of the reality of appearances. Unlike some philosophical traditions that view the world of appearances as illusory or mere superimpositions, Trika Shaivism holds that these appearances are real. They are manifestations of Śiva's active involvement in the free and spontaneous Kriya (creative activity) of creation. As such, the phenomena of the world are causally efficient and serve as objects of knowledge and action, reinforcing their reality [13, 14]. Furthermore, Trika Shaivism emphasizes the intrinsic connection between the appearances of the world and the pure consciousness (I-consciousness) that underlies them [15]. According to this perspective, all manifestations shine with the radiance of pure consciousness, which is none other than the Absolute itself. In other words, the diverse phenomena of the universe are not separate from the ultimate reality but are expressions of its luminous nature.

### 6. Conclusion

The doctrine of reflection, or Pratibimbavada, within Trika Shaivism offers a profound and intricate understanding of the relationship between the Absolute and the manifest universe. Through vivid metaphors and philosophical

insights, this doctrine elucidates how the unchanging nature of the Absolute, characterized by luminosity and cognitive awareness, gives rise to the dynamic and diverse phenomena of the world.

The reflection of the universe within the Absolute's consciousness ensures that Śiva's pure nature remains intact and undisturbed. The process of manifestation, described as a natural emanation or reflection, highlights the inherent potentiality of all phenomena within the Absolute. Prior to manifestation, all categories exist potentially within the transcendental state, representing a state of unity and potentiality within the Absolute.

During manifestation, these categories are illuminated by the luminosity of consciousness, experiencing both rise and fall within the pure I-consciousness. This manifestation process, described metaphorically as a reflection in a mirror, emphasizes the real and literal nature of the manifest world while preserving the transcendental purity of the Absolute.

Furthermore, the doctrine of reflection asserts the reality of appearances, affirming that the diverse phenomena of the world are not illusory but are genuine expressions of Śiva's inherent qualities. As manifestations of the Absolute, these entities fall within the realm of Abhāsa, shining with the luster of luminosity.

In conclusion, the doctrine of reflection provides a cohesive framework that bridges the gap between transcendence and immanence within Trika Shaivism. By presenting the universe as a reflection of Śiva's luminous consciousness, this doctrine offers valuable insights into the intricate nature of cosmic manifestation. It ensures that the Absolute remains unchanging and pure while simultaneously allowing for the dynamic and real manifestation of the world. Through this profound understanding, Trika Shaivism offers a holistic perspective on the relationship between the Absolute and the manifest universe, enriching our comprehension of the nature of reality.

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