



Research Paper

The liberation of the self: An introduction to sāṅkhya philosophy

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ABSTRACT: Indian philosophy has a wide outreach with several doctrines and theories that attempt to define ultimate reality. One of the six systems of Indian philosophy (the ṣaḍdarśanas) is the sāṅkhya darśana. This darśana is explained in terms of 25 padarthas or numbers. Empirical in its approach, it describes two independent realities - prakṛti and puruṣa. Prakṛti is material reality or Pradhāna kāraṇa that is composed of three guṇas – sātva, rajas and tamas. Puruṣa is opposite of prakṛti. Puruṣa is inactive, bodyless but it co-exists with prakṛti. Puruṣa is the spiritual principle. Sāṅkhyas believe in satkārya-vāda – for every effect, there is a particular reason. Sāṅkhya also attempt to explain the process of evolution. Sātva, rajas and tamas are in a state of equilibrium in the beginning. With the coming together of prakṛti and puruṣa, rajas gets activated and further activates the other guṇas. This theory of guṇas also explain the individuality of different people who are believed to be dominated by a particular guṇa or a combination of guṇas. As an individual who is the part of evolution, we have in ourselves mahat in the form of buddhi that is the first product of the evolution of prakṛti. Buddhi gives rise to Ahaṅ. Ahaṅ, in turn, gives rise to Manas (Mind), five sense organs, five motor organs and tanmātras. Tanmātras gives rise to Mahābhūtas. Mahat (buddhi) and Manas (mind) are fundamental to human life. Pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow really belong to buddhi or the intellect and the mind. But on account of ignorance, men tend to identify himself with the body and mind. According to sāṅkhya philosophy, we are the victims of three kinds of pain. All men earnestly desire to avoid every kind of pain. Sāṅkhya philosophy not only tries to explain the above-mentioned theories but also tries to give a particular approach of its doctrine. It maintains that liberation must be achieved through right knowledge of reality. It can be achieved through yoga and therefore it is closely allied to yoga darśana. One can get liberation when one can distinguish between prakṛti and puruṣa and this realization can be brought about by yoga. This article attempts to illuminate the basic tenets of sāṅkhya darśana and present a practical system of self-culture for the attainment of liberation.

KEYWORDS: Prakṛti, Puruṣa, Sātva, Rajas, Tamas, Evolution, Liberation

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I. INTRODUCTION

Indian philosophy is very wide and expensive. It consists of various doctrines and theories that teaches us about reality– the ultimate reality. It also gives us a better understanding of the difference between ultimate reality and the reality that is perceived by us.

Sāṅkhya philosophy is closely associated with the yoga philosophy. Hence they are also called sāṅkhya - yoga darśana. What is mean by sāṅkhya? The term 'sāṅkhya' means sankhya that is number. The founding principle of sāṅkhya philosophy is that the whole reality is constituted of 25 principles or 25 numbers. Here reality means the reality of you and me and the reality of everything. Another meaning of sāṅkhya is that it is knowledge – which is not the empirical knowledge but the knowledge of the ultimate.

It is much different compared to other Indian philosophies. It is important to understand that Indian philosophy is mostly spiritual in approach– for example, śhaṅkarācārya's advaita vedānta is spiritualistic in nature, that believes that the ultimate reality is spiritual something – that everything is Brahman. But sāṅkhyas differ from this view. They believe even if ultimate reality is spiritual but right from the beginning we have to perceive this from empirical experiences. The empirical experience of all our senses is very important. The dualistic nature of the sāṅkhya school of philosophy makes it very different in its approach than others. It

maintains that there are two separate independent realities – one reality is called prakṛti and the other is called Puruṣa.

Prakṛti, in other words, can be called material reality. Everything that is real in this universe, including you and me, the entire nature – everything within it, every modification every manifestation is the result of prakṛti. Though prakṛti cannot be perceived, it is the principle, it is the fundamental something. And yet it is imperceptible. It is avakta, but since it gives rise to everything. Prakṛti is also described as Pradhāna kāraṇa. Prakṛti is the cause of all the world. The birds, the clouds, the seas and rivers, everything including all humans – is a modification of prakṛti. This brings us to the question that what are the constituents of prakṛti. Prakṛti is composed of three qualities or guṇas. The three guṇas that make prakṛti are – sāttva, rajas and tamas. And how are all these known? All this is known by inference. All the objects in this universe are material object and all our experiences are related to this material objects. So what we eat, smell, touch etc are also material. Therefore, we can infer that if everything is matter, then the cause of everything, every experience is also material. Thus, we can state that this view of sāṅkhya is based on causal theory. Sāṅkhya believes in the theory of satkārya-vāda that is the effect exists in the material cause even before it is produced. Let's take an example, can anyone turn blue into red and salt into sugar? So nothing can be produced which does not have any pre-existence. Also, a certain effects can be produced from a certain cause. Curd can be produced only from milk. This shows that effect somehow exists in the cause.

According to sāṅkhya everything is the resultant of something. On the basis of this theory, they propound that the theory of prakṛti is the basic to everything. There is another kind of reality which is called Puruṣa. The word 'puruṣa' in this context does not mean 'male' as opposed to 'female'. Here puruṣa means the spirit or the self. The existence of the self must be admitted by all. No one can consistently deny the existence of his self, for the act of denial presupposes the reality of the denying self.[S.Chatterjee & D.Dutta,page-247]

The material principle that is known as prakṛti is co-existent with the spiritual principle known as puruṣa. They are co-eternal and exist side by side. However, they are totally separate entities and opposite to each other. It is already mentioned that prakṛti constitutes of three guṇas –sāttva, rajas, tamas. All these guṇas of prakṛti (sāttva, rajas, tamas) exist in each of us. Every human being has sāttva, rajas and tamas in them. Not only humans, but it is also the case with every existence– everything contains these guṇas in them.

When a man experiences pleasure or pain or even dullness there must be some kind of cause behind these experiences. Sometimes a man looks happy, sometimes sad, or sorrowful. What makes these differences? The existence of the three guṇas are responsible for all our experiences – our pleasure, pain, or even inactivity. These three guṇas together form the prakṛti. In the beginning, all these three guṇas were in the state of equilibrium – they were static, none of them more powerful than the other. They were equally silent. But suddenly this equilibrium was stirred into motion and the rajas became active and vibrated. With this vibration, the rajas activated sāttva and tamas. This change from the state of equilibrium to sudden activity of the guṇas marks the beginning of the process of evolution.

When comes into relation with the puruṣa, prakṛti evolves the world of objects. The contact between prakṛti and puruṣa is a sort of effective relation through which prakṛti is influenced by the presence of puruṣa in the same way in which our body is sometimes moved by the presence of a thought. There can be no evolution until the two are related to each other. The activity of prakṛti must be guided by the intelligence of puruṣa for evolution to occur. Sāṅkhya gives the example of a blind man and a lame man can get out of a forest only with the help of each other – not individually. Just as non-intelligent prakṛti and the inactive puruṣa combine and cooperate to serve their respective interests. [S.Chatterjee & D.Dutta,page-250]

According to sāṅkhya, evolution means production or development. Sāṅkhya thinks puruṣa is responsible for bringing about evolution into prakṛti. Puruṣa is very different in nature than prakṛti. Puruṣa is inactive and simply co-exists with prakṛti. It is very close to prakṛti and therefore it influences and the vibrations in rajas take place. This vibration creates a number of things. This happens because rajas is the principle of activity. We speak, listen and do other activities because of the presence of rajas in us. When we paint, play, sing or dance it is because of rajas in us. It is the rajas that is responsible for the growth of seeds, its development into a tree and the shapes of leaves and flowers. However, tamas is completely opposite to rajas and when rajas is moving, tamas checks its activity. Tamas is like ignorance, it is obstructing. When a man keeps working or doing some activity, tamas resists it. It asks him to stop, makes him dull and unintelligent. So Tamas and rajas are contradictory to each other. Sāttva gives us pleasure and joy. There are different kinds of people in the world. Some are dominated by rajas or tamas or even both and this varies with every person. Sāṅkhya tries to explain the individuality of people through this theory.

Puruṣa, as one of the basic principle is inactive. It is not affected by the three qualities. The three guṇas do not belong to Puruṣa because puruṣa is bodyless. It is only knowledge – a form of knowledge. It is free from everything. Sāṅkhya describes a man or individual in details. Sāṅkhya says that in prakṛti there is the reflection of puruṣa. This reflection is very subtle and it is called mahat. Mahat is within all of us. Mahat lives in us in the form of intelligence or buddhi that gives rise to ahaṅkāra or ego. Ego then gives rise to Manas or mind, five sense organs, five motor organs and five tanmātras. The five tanmātras are the potential element or generic essence of sound, touch, colour, taste and smell. These are very subtle and cannot be ordinarily perceived.

Tanmātras gives rise to five mahābhūtas. Human body is described as having five sense organs, five motor organs and various other parts of body which are composed of matter. Mahat, manas, ego – these are fundamental to human life. Man first identifies himself with the body and the ego. Pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow really belong to Buddhi or the intellect and the mind. The puruṣa or self is by its nature free from them all. But on account of ignorance, it fails to distinguish itself from the mind and the intellect; and owns them as parts of itself so much so that it identifies itself with the body, the senses, the mind and the intellect. We suffer pain and enjoy pleasure because the experiencing subject in us wrongly identifies itself with the experienced objects including pleasure and pain.

In this world, we have so many different kinds of sufferings. Generally, there are three different kinds of pain or suffering – the ādhyātmika, ādhibhautika and ādgudauvuja. The ādhyātmika suffering is due to intraorganic causes like bodily disorders and mental affections. It includes both bodily and mental sufferings such as fever and headache, the pangs of fear, anger greed etc. The ādhibhautika suffering is produced by extra-organic natural causes like men, beasts, thorns etc. Instances of this kind are found in cases of murder, snake bite, prick of thorns. The ādgudauvuja is caused by extra-organic supernatural causes like sufferings inflicted by ghosts, demons etc. [S.Chatterjee and D.Datta, Page-263]

The practical purpose of the sāṅkhya school is to end all pain and suffering. The real pleasure is in the identification of puruṣa. It is from ignorance that we think of ourselves as a body, our mind, our intelligence. Sāṅkhya tells people to dissolve themselves or liberate themselves from the chains of body, mind, intelligence and ego. And how do we attain this liberation? It is with the right knowledge of reality. We must understand that the self is quite distinct from the mind-body complex and is beyond all affections and afflictions of physical life. It is the mind, not the self, that feels the pleasure or pain. Freedom from suffering must come from the knowledge of the distinction between the self and the not-self. Liberation can be achieved through yoga which means unification. Yoga is a practical philosophy, a kind of a solution prescribed by yoga philosophy. It is a philosophy that brings sāṅkhya's view into practice and realization. In this way, one can realize the highest good of his life and it reveals the reality of man and the world.

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