

## Nature as perceived in the Sankhya Philosophy

Dr. Manisha Phanasalkar, India

The broader framework that this paper is discussing is Dharma which means philosophy here. The broader outlook of the environmental concepts within the Sankhya Philosophy is anthropocentric to a large extent but it also has traces of ecocentricism and cosmocentricism. The Sankhya Philosophy is the oldest system of Indian philosophy. Its seeds are found in the Upanishads. The earliest reference to it is found in Caraka's work (78 A.D.).<sup>1</sup> The founder of this system is believed to be Kapila, of an uncertain date. The most important work of the system<sup>2</sup> was composed by Ishvarakrushna who flourished from the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Cent. A. D. It is important to note the time of the tradition as we have to take into account the cultural and the religious conditions at the time.

The Sankhya philosophy starts with the basic assumption that in this universe there are two realities viz., Consciousness (Purusha) and Matter (Prakriti). Consciousness is manifold, pure, intelligent and changeless. The individual Consciousness is responsible for the process of evolution. It does not control the process by any actual contact, the bare presence of it being sufficient to disturb the equilibrium of the constituents of the Matter causing change and evolution. It is non-active and a mere witness. It is neutral and not elated or depressed. It is not an agent. Matter is primarily one but it is mutable and non-intelligent. It evolves the material world out of itself and reabsorbs it at the time of dissolution. There are two forms of matter, namely, the evolved (vyakta) and the unevolved (avyakta). The evolved is caused, non-eternal, non-pervasive, mobile, manifold, dependent, mergent, has parts and is heteronomous. The unevolved is the reverse of all these.<sup>3</sup> Matter, both, evolved and unevolved is composed of the three subtle entities (Gunas), viz. Sattva (pleasant), Rajas (stimulating) and Tamas (enveloping). Sattva is pleasant and illuminating. Rajas is obscuring, stimulating and mobile. Tamas is heavy, dark and

---

<sup>1</sup> Caraka-samhita; Sariria.

<sup>2</sup> The Sankhyakarika of Isvara Krsna, Edited and translated by S. S. Suryanarayana Sastri, University of Madras, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Karika (verse) 11.

enveloping. Sattva serves to illumine, Rajas to actuate and Tamas to restrain. Each of these functions through suppression, co-operation, transformation and intimate relation with the rest.<sup>4</sup> They function for the ultimate good (liberation) of the Consciousness. Their functioning for the Consciousness is like a lamp. The wick, the oil and the flame co-operate in the lamp for giving out light even though they are of different nature. In the same way the three entities co-operate.

The association of consciousness and matter is like that of a lame man and a blind man.<sup>5</sup> This analogy is one of the most famous ones in the Sankhya literature. The lame man is the consciousness as it can see but cannot act itself. Intelligence is the characteristic of the Consciousness. The blind man is the matter which can act but being non-intelligent cannot see. The Matter is non-rational at all stages. This association of these two is the cause of the evolution (utpatti). To bring the world into existence, the equilibrium of the three ultimate subtle entities is disturbed. When the Sattva (goodness) is predominant, the Intellect (Buddhi) which is also called the Great One (Mahat) evolves from the matter. The intellect is determinative. In its Sattvika form (i. e., when the subtle entity sattva is predominant) Intellect is characterized by virtue, wisdom, non-attachment and lordly powers. In its Tamasa form (i. e., when the subtle entity Tamas is predominant) Intellect is characterized by the reverse of the four dispositions i. e. Vice, ignorance, attachment and absence of lordly powers. From the intellect evolves individuation (Ahamkara). Individuation is conceit in the ego. The evolution proceeds from Individuation in two ways that are determined by the preponderance of one of the three entities. When the Sattva, goodness is preponderant it produces the eleven organs. These are 5 organs of cognition, namely, eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin, 5 organs of action, namely, voice, hands, feet, organs of excretion and organs of reproduction and mind. When the Tamas, darkness is preponderant, the individuation produces the 5 subtle elements, the Tanmatras. The subtle essences of sound, touch, colour, taste and smell are the 5 subtle elements. Of these, the element of sound is generated from the individuation with darkness preponderance. The subtle element of sound in conjunction with the subtle element of touch produces sky. The subtle elements of sound and touch in conjunction with the element of

---

<sup>4</sup> Karika (verse) 12.

<sup>5</sup> Karika (verse) 21.

colour produce fire; these three elements with the element of taste produce water and the four elements with the element of smell produce the earth. Each succeeding gross element has more properties than the preceding one because a larger number of subtle elements generate it. The state of individuation where Rajas, stimulant, is preponderant helps the other two states in bringing out their evolutes.

All these entities are divided into four classes: 1. Those entities which bring others into existence though they are themselves not produced, i.e. the evolvents. 2. Those which are produced and produce something different from themselves, i.e. the evolutes and the evolvents. 3. Those which are products alone and cannot produce anything different from themselves, i.e. the evolutes. 4. Those which neither produce nor are produced and are different from the other three. Matter is not produced and hence is the evolvent and is not an evolute. It is the seed from which the creation springs. As the Intellect (Mahat), the Individuation (Ahamkara) and the Subtle Entities (Tanmatras) are produced and in turn produce other things, they are both evolvents and evolutes. The eleven organs (five of cognition and five of action plus mind) and the five great elements are only evolutes as they are produced and do not produce anything in turn. The Consciousness is neither an evolvent nor an evolute as it is changeless.<sup>6</sup>

The Sankhya philosophy has an interesting account of the gross elements. The earth helps the other four by being their support. Water helps the other four by moistening. Fire helps the others by ripening. Wind helps the others by drying and the sky helps others by giving space. Earth is possessed of 5 qualities, sound, touch, colour, taste and smell. Water is possessed of four, sound, touch, colour and taste. Fire is possessed of three, sound, touch and colour. Wind is possessed of two, viz., sound and touch. The sky has one quality of sound.

The evolution proceeds in two ways: organic and inorganic. The organic division of the evolution consists of three kinds of beings, namely, the gods, the human beings and animals. The gods are of eight kinds, the animals are of five kinds but the human beings are of one kind only. The five kinds of animals are domestic animals, birds, wild animals, reptiles and immovable things or plants.

---

<sup>6</sup> Karika (verse) 3.

A list of animals and of things of each class is provided. Domestic animals are from cows to mice, birds from an Eagle to gnats, wild animals from lions to jackals, reptiles from serpents to worms and immovable things from the Parijat tree to grass.<sup>7</sup> In the division of animals the list of domestic animals begins with cows and ends with mice, the list of birds begins with an eagle and ends in gnats and so on. This order indicates that each list begins with the most revered animal and ends in the least revered one. Cows, eagles, lions and serpents were the most revered ones of their kind in those days while the Parijat tree was believed to be divine, being in the heaven. This implies that the Sankhya philosophy had the same kind of reverence towards certain plants and animals though it does not mention it clearly. There may be more such instances in other texts of the philosophy. These are the traces of ecocentricism. More work is needed of this philosophy as there are many texts on this philosophy which have not been studied till date.

The process of dissolution (Pralaya) goes exactly in the reverse order of the evolution (Utpatti). At the time of dissolution the five gross elements merge into the five subtle elements in the order of their evolution. The five subtle elements and the eleven organs merge into Individuation (Ahamkara). Individuation merges into Intellect (Mahat/Buddhi). Intellect merges into the Matter (Prakruti). This process of evolution and dissolution is compared to the movement of a tortoise, the limbs of which are protruded at one time and retracted within the shell at another. The three subtle entities (Gunas) attain a state of equilibrium at the time of dissolution and remain in the same state till the next evolution. The period between the evolution and the dissolution is known as existence or sustenance (Sthiti). In the dissolution all the individual consciousnesses are released. According to the Sankhya philosophy, all objects in the universe serve some purpose and the purpose is assisting in the release of the individual consciousnesses. These are some traces of cosmocentricism. A further study of more texts of the Sankhya philosophy can throw more light on this.

The human-environmental relationships are apocalyptic as the Sankhya Philosophy accepts the Karma theory. But universal brotherhood and non-violence are fundamental features of this philosophy. The Sankhya philosophy

---

<sup>7</sup> Karika (verse) 53.

holds that the world, both animate and inanimate, is just an evolution of the Matter (Prakruti). Therefore gods, human beings and animals are mere representatives of different planes of the same evolution. They all stand in blood relation to each other. Therefore the individuals have to respect each other as members of the same family. It is a position which will lead to great social harmony and peace even today.

According to the Sankhya Philosophy, all human beings form one class without any distinction of caste, creed and sex.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it boldly accepts the equality of human beings. The rights and duties are not assigned to people on the basis of their caste. Though the people differ in their temperament, ability etc. on the basis of a preponderance of one of the three subtle entities (gunas), the duties are not assigned on the basis of these either. It is left to the individual to realize and discharge his duties according to his ability and strength. There is no mention of human rights, participation and precautionary principle. All living beings are said to be vulnerable to misery and destruction. The correct knowledge of the true nature of things can bring release from the bondage of life. There is no clear mention of sustainability but the time between evolution and dissolution is called sustenance.

Though the process of evolution terminates at the human body and mind, they are not the ultimate perfection of divine creation, nor independent and sudden emergence upon the earth, nor a gradual evolution through species. They are one of their kind, unique but the same with respect to their species. According to the Sankhya, Human beings are the only species with a conscience. The basis of human relation to the environment is of a symbiotic dependence. Human beings are dependent on the environment, other living beings and vice versa. The interaction of humans with the environment is that of respect and love.

As human beings are the only species with conscience, the earth is an inert entity without an ability to protect itself against human led destruction. The dissolution is the only way of destruction of all life in the universe but it is only going back to the Matter. There is no mention of earth punishing humans or even the rationalist argument about scarcity etc. There are no practical rituals or forms of worship of the environment, animals or trees. But there is criticism of killing of animals in sacrifices. It is mentioned that the scriptural means of

---

<sup>8</sup> Karika (verse) 53.

terminating misery are impure and destructive.<sup>9</sup> The reference is to the killing of animals in the sacrifices. As mentioned above, the end of the world is in the form of merging into the Matter. But because the whole universe merges in to the Matter there is no possibility of life form somewhere else in the cosmos getting reborn on the earth. The Sankhya Philosophy is in conformity with the social and moral responsibilities laid down by the books on human conduct (The Smritis) but it rejects the basis of caste for the responsibilities. For the philosophy all humans are equal and have the same responsibilities regardless of caste or sex. This is a valuable contribution of the philosophy to mankind. It is more significant in a country like India where caste system is still in practise widely and where women are still provided a lower status than men. Environment becomes the prime concern of a particular caste. If more people are inspired to take up the principles of this tradition, they can become more responsible towards the environment. There is great significance of reasoning and insight in this tradition. Through reasoning the humans can achieve release from bondage and misery.

## **Conclusion**

1. Though this tradition is not a living set of concepts but a set of values can be developed from it after further study of the tradition.
2. A lot of work is needed of this tradition which has been widely neglected by the scholars even from India. The chief reason behind this negligence may be its boldness in rejecting the caste system and assigning equal status to women. This system has a lot to offer to the modern world view if properly studied and interpreted. There are still a number of texts on this tradition which have not been studied. A thorough study of these texts may lead to more relevant doctrines.
3. The text which was used for this paper is an abridged book on this philosophy. There are other works which have parables to illustrate the doctrines of this philosophy. These parables can provide more information about the issues on which nothing is mentioned in the text that was used for this paper. Moreover, these parables can provide valuable information about the social, cultural and political conditions of

---

<sup>9</sup> Karika (verse) 2.

those times and about the views this tradition had of those conditions. Everything points to one and the same issue that this philosophy has been widely neglected and a lot of study is required to get a better understanding of it.

## **Bibliography**

1. The Sankhyakarika of Isvarakrsna, Ed. and Tr. by S. S. Suryanarayana Sastri, University of Madras, 1973.
2. The six Systems of Indian Philosophy, Prof. Max Muller, /the Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1971.
3. A History of Indian Philosophy, Surendranath Dasgupta, Volume I, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1975.
4. A Panorama of Indian Philophy, R. C. Pandeya, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1966.
5. The Sankhya Philosophy; A Critical Evaluation of its Origins and Development, S. G. M. Weerasinghe, Sri satguru Publications, Delhi, 1993.