

# The Rational Schools: Saankhya, Vaisheshika

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## The Saankhya dichotomy

The beginnings of the Saankhya school can be found in the Shvetaashvatara Upanishad which is considered later than the ten principal Upanishads. The name Saankhya is derived from *sankhya* meaning number or intellect, and is explained as (1) those who are adept in enumerating principles, ultimate and in the process of evolution, or (2) those who are intellectuals. The theory they offer to explain the nature of the world and life justifies these etymologies. History credits Kapila with the formulation of Saankhya tenets, but the earliest extant work on the system is Saankhya-kaarika by Ishvara-krishna (c. 1st c. AD) which, however, makes clear references to earlier authors and works.

## Prakriti and Purusha

Saankhyas are dualists. They consider matter and spirit as dichotomous. The ultimate forms of the two principles are Prakriti or the insentient stock, and Purusha or the conscious principle. They arrive at the principle of Prakriti by a logical process based on the observation that gross objects evolve out of subtle causes, and multiplicity of properties evolves out of a few fundamental constituents. This leads them to conceive of Prakriti as constituted of three *gunas* or 'qualities' – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The basis for this inference is the broadly threefold response every object in the world evokes in Purusha: pleasure, pain and indifference; or enlightenment, activity and lethargy. Purusha by nature is devoid of 'qualities' but gets entangled with them, considers himself as an actor and comes to grief because of his mistaken identity with the intellect, a product of Prakriti, and gets trapped into transmigratory existence full of pleasure and pain. When he realises that he is distinct from intellect, he is isolated from Prakriti and simultaneously released from worldly miseries. Saankhyas regard Purushas to be several, and justify this view on the ground of the common sense logic that every Purusha has experiences of pleasure and pain distinct from another's.

## The process of evolution

The machinery that involves Purusha in worldly miseries evolves from Prakriti through the stages of (1) Mahat (cosmic intellect), (2) Ahankaara (cosmic ego), (3) the group of sixteen, consisting of five subtle elements (earth, water, fire, air and space in the form of their specific qualities, viz. smell, taste, colour, touch and sound), and eleven organs (five sense organs, five organs of action, and the sense-cum-action organ called mind). These make the subtle body of Purusha which accompanies him throughout his transmigratory existence. From the subtle

elements evolve the gross ones, which in their turn produce the gross body that changes with every birth.

### **Theory of causation**

The foundation of this theory of evolution is the Saankhya stand about the cause-and-effect relation known as '*sat-kaarya-vaada*' which claims that every effect exists in its cause even before its production, for nothing comes out of nothing. We get oil from sesame seeds because the oil exists in them. What is then production? – Just a modification, rearrangement of the cause. This stand, shared also by Vedaantins, is disputed by the Nyaaya-Vaisheshika systems. The cause-and-effect relation is a basic problem that poses difficulties for all philosophical systems.

### **The purpose of evolution**

The question is what it is that drives Prakriti to evolve into the series of effects as stated earlier. For those who make room in their scheme for God as the creator and controller of the world it is easy to answer this question. Saankhyas, who do not recognise God, meet this question on the basis of the presumption that all objects by nature need the subject, one who experiences them; and this leads Purusha to bondage without which he cannot achieve his purpose, isolation or liberation. This explains the natural inter-dependence of the object and the subject serving each other's purpose in much the same way as the co-operation of a lame man with a blind: the lame sitting on the blind man's shoulders directs the latter to the destination of both. According to the Saankhyas, even the presence of Purusha is enough to make Prakriti act in the same way as the presence of magnet is enough to make iron filings move.

### **Vaisheshikas: the ancient physicists**

Kanaada (c. 1<sup>st</sup> c. AD) who wrote suutras (aphorisms) in ten chapters is the earliest author of this system. We find in his work an odd combination of conflicting approaches, religious and scientific. He opens his work with the statement that he is going to expound religion or spiritual conduct, proceeds to define it in the next suutra as the means to both worldly achievement and liberation, and finally introduces his exposition as an outcome of outstanding religious conduct. Later in the work, he introduces orthodox religious codes in the context of the category of 'action'. All this talk of religion appears to be artificially related to the main subject of his work and makes the reader feel that it is prompted by the pragmatic view to make the work acceptable to the established intellectual tradition. His main thrust is undoubtedly a scientific analysis of the world, material, spiritual and conceptual.

## **Vaisheshika analysis of the world**

Kanaada divides the world into six categories: *dravya* (substance), *guna* (quality), *karman* (action), *saamaanya* (genus), *vishesha* (specificity), *samavaaya* (inherent relation). Of these the first category includes the soul, which, unlike in other systems, receives no preferential treatment from him. He places the soul at the same level as the earth, water etc. reflecting the logical/scientific attitude of a scientist. It is the concept of vishesha that gives this system its name, meaning the system that specialises in vishesha. Visheshas are special characteristics of the atoms which distinguish them.

## **The atomic theory**

According to Vaisheshikas, atoms are the ultimate constituents of the material world; they are defined as the smallest entities beyond which there is no further division. In other words, atoms are partless. The world assumes its gross form out of a combination of atoms leading progressively to larger and larger bodies until the final products take their shape. This chain of atomic structure up to the final stage is punctuated by progressive technical entities named *dvy-anuka* (dyad), *try-anuka* (triad) and so on. This is the process of evolution. As the world dissolves, there is separation between atoms which ultimately results in the disintegration of gross products reducing all material world to atoms which are eternal. What causes the world to evolve and dissolve? – The actions of souls, says the system. The modern scientist owns his inability to answer this question. The Vaisheshika system is thus an unusual combination of physical and spiritual sciences; this justifies opening references of the system to religion.

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