

# Themes of Yoga Philosophy

## 2. *Prakriti* and its sequel

Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar

### The three elements

We have seen how their theory of causation led Saankhyas to conceive of *prakriti*, the ultimate imperceptible source of the material world, as constituted of three elements (*guna*-s, strands) – *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*, which account for the threefold response every object in the world is capable of evoking. This threefold constitution of *prakriti* which prompted an Upanishadic thinker to conceive of a perfectly poetic image in which *prakriti* is presented as a female goat of triple colour – red (*rajas*), white (*sattva*) and black (*tamas*) – engaged in producing progeny of her kind. Of the two male goats nearby, one indulges in union with her while the other, having passed through that stage, quits her (Shvetaashvatara IV.5). In further elaboration of the characteristics of the three elements, Saankhyas state:

- (1) *Sattva* has pleasure as its nature and, consequently, covers trends (contentment etc.) that result in pleasure, has enlightenment as its purpose/effect, and is light;
- (2) *Rajas* has pain as its nature and, consequently, covers trends (hatred etc.) that result in pain, has activation as its purpose/effect, and is active;
- (3) *Tamas* has delusion as its nature and, consequently, covers trends (fear etc.) that result in delusion, concealment/stagnation as its purpose/effect, and is heavy.

These elements operate variously in defiance, with mutual support and stimulation, and as complementary to each other in much the same way as the factors (oil, wick, heat) which combine to produce a flame, or as the roles the electron, neutron and proton particles play in the organisation and function of an atom.

### Process of evolution

As long as the elements of *prakriti* are in equilibrium, in which state it is termed *pradhana*, the principal, or *a-vyakta*, the imperceptible, there is no sign of the gross world as we see it, although the Saankhya philosophy presumes its existence in its cause as we have seen earlier. As *prakriti* is about to evolve into the world, it gives rise to the principle of intellect termed *mahat*, the great. Thence comes ego, without which no creative activity is possible. From the ego are produced sixteen principles: 11 organs (5 sense organs, 5 organs of action, 1 mind which is the seat of both, sense and action), and 5 subtle elements (which exist in the form of the essential properties of the elements); from the subtle elements arise the gross ones (space, wind, fire, water, earth). This group of 16 (G-16?), along with *mahat* and *ahankaara*,

constitutes the subtle body of the soul in which it is trapped and travels through the chain of lives and deaths until its liberation from the chain which can be achieved only through discriminative knowledge.

### **Mind as matter is different from *purusha***

It is interesting to note that this scheme presents mental faculties (intellect, ego, mind) as part of matter distinct from the conscious principle, the *purusha*. Psychology, too, regards the mind and its faculties as part of matter, inasmuch as it does not feel the need to recognise the soul as distinct from the mind. That the mind is part and parcel of matter can be verified from the mechanical character of the working of a computer which is considered an instrument of 'artificial intelligence'. It does all it is taught to do unless and until the programmer instructs it to change its course for better results. The role the soul plays in philosophical thinking is comparable to that of the programmer whose distinct identity from the instrument and the programme is unquestionable. The soul too has a distinct identity inasmuch as it can 'change the mind' Thus, the identity of the soul is proved not so much in the continuation of mental function as in its change.

### **Functions of *prakriti* are a matter of nature**

Saankhyas maintain that bondage and liberation of the soul are the purpose for which *prakriti* operates; for the *purusha*, who is, in reality, inactive and indifferent by nature is neither bound nor freed. A question is then raised as to what is it that makes the insentient *prakriti* do what it does, – first involving the *purusha* in worldly suffering and then getting it released from it. Saankhyas meet this question by saying that, insentient though it is, *prakriti* by its nature acts for this twofold purpose, in the same way as milk, though insentient, forms and exudes from the cow's udders for the nourishment of the calf. This reply implicitly admits of limitations of reasoning in defining reality and has given rise to counter arguments from Vedantins, the chief opponents of the Saankhyas (see Brahma-sutra-bhaashya of Shankara, II.1.5).

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