

PRAKRTI AND THE THREE GUNAS OF SANKHYA PHILOSOPHY: A BRIEF ACCOUNT

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The Samkhya Philosophy is one of the oldest systems of Indian Philosophy. Kapila, the sage of ancient India is regarded as the founder of Sankhya philosophy. This philosophy admits of two ultimate realities, namely, *Purusa* (Spirit) and *Prakrti* (Matter). They are independent of each other in respect of their existence. They exist as logical principles and serve as the source out of which all things evolve.

The term Prakrti is employed by the Sâmkhya Philosophers to mean primal matter. The Sâmkhya system is a dualistic system as it admitted two ultimate realities.

The Sâmkhya Philosophers employ various terms to mean Prakrti and these various terms bring out the characteristics features of Prakrti. The uncaused root cause of the universe is *Prakrti*. Prakrti is regarded to be the first principle of the universe. It is regarded to be the first cause of the Universe and hence is called *Pradhana*. Prakrti as the unmanifested state of all effects is known as *Avyakta*. Prakrti is also referred to as *Anumana* in the sense that it is extremely subtle and imperceptible thing which is only inferred from its products. Prakrti is *Jada* as the unintelligent and unconscious principle, and *Shakti* as the ever-active unlimited power. Therefore we find that Prakrti is regarded as uncaused, absolute, independent and eternal. In Sankhya, the concept of Prakrti, as the root-cause of the world of objects is known through the theory that causation means a real transformation of the material cause into the world..

Prakrti is imperceptible and subtle. It is known through *Evolution*, which is the explicit manifestation of this world of objects. Unlike Vedanta and Mahayana consciousness cannot be regarded as the source of the inanimate world. Nor, as wrongly held by Carvaka, Nyaya and Vaisesika, Jainism and Hinayana Buddhism, and Mimamsa, the material atoms of the physical elements explain the subtle products of matter like intellect, mind and ego. The subtle products of matter regarded as internal organs, are different from pure consciousness, which belong to Purusa alone. The unity of the universe suggests a single cause which the atoms are not, they being many and scattered. Prakrti, which is unintelligent, unmanifest, uncaused, ever-

active, imperceptible, eternal and one; this cause is implicitly and potentially contained in the bosom of Prakrti, and this alone is the final source of the world of objects.

Prakrti is the unity of the three Gunas; The Gunas are postulated to account for the diversified objects of experience. The word 'guna' is derived from the Indo-European noun 'twirl, wind'. Here, the term is used to mean that three strands are twirled to form the cord of Prakriti (Cosmic substance) which binds the Purusas. The Gunas which are three in number, are as essential to Prakrti as heat is to fire, for one cannot exist without the other. The three constituents or gunas of Prakrti are:-

- i) Sattva Guna
- ii) Rajas Guna
- iii) Tamas Guna

Each of the three has its characteristic function. They are as follows:-

- i. **Sattva Guna** : Sattva Guna is derived from 'Sat', meaning 'that which is real or existent'. Here it is used to connote that power of nature that illuminates and reveals all manifestations. It is responsible for the lightness of things, the upward movement of fire and the blowing across of wind. It is devoid of excitement and is the cause of equilibrium. It is buoyant (laghu). It is illuminating (prakasaka). It has no motion of its own; therefore, it is incapable of action or reaction. It manifests itself as light. Its colour is white. Sattva guna is revealed in pleasure, contentment, happiness, and bliss, power of reflection, luminosity of light and power of reflection.
- ii. **Rajas Guna** : Rajas Guna is according to one source, derived from 'ranj', meaning to be coloured, affected or moved. It is used to connote that power of nature which affects and moves the other two constituents. It is the activating and exciting potency without which the other constituents could not manifest their inherent qualities. Its function is to move things, overcome resistance, do work. It is responsible for all motion and change that goes on throughout nature. It gives matter its force and impetus and imparts motion to air and fire. It manifests itself as the force of the winds. Rajas guna is present in restless activity, feverish effort, and wild stimulation. Its colour is white.
- iii. **Tamas Guna** : Tamas Guna signifies 'darkness'. Here, it is used to connote the power of nature that restrains, obstructs and envelops the other two constituents by counter-acting the tendency of Rajas to do work, and Sattva to reveal. It is

the restraining and binding potency of nature. Its function is to resist motion. It is responsible for the attraction and downward pull of the earth and the tendency of water to descend. It is the cause of mass, weighted inertia. It makes possible for us to feel the invisible air. Tamas guna is present in apathy, indifference, ignorance, sloth, confusion, bewilderment, and all types of passivity and negativity. It is heavy (guru) and enveloping (varanaka) and therefore opposed to Sattva. Its colour is dark.

These constituents are the sum and substance of Prakriti. They are the root of all change, the foundation of reality, the essence of all things. These gunas are ever present in Prakriti, are never separate. They may be in conflict but they also cooperate with one another and therefore are always intermingled.

According to the Sâmkhya system, Prakriti is always dynamic. The three gunas of Prakriti, as said, always undergo changes. These changes are of two types. They are:-

- (a) Homogeneous change
- (b) Heterogeneous change.

- (a) Homogeneous change (Svarupa Parināma): When the Sattva element evolves to Sattva, Tamas evolves to Tamas and Rajas evolves to Rajas, then we have Svarupa Parinama or Homogeneous change. This change is found in the state of dissolution (pralaya) or returning of the world to Prakriti.
- b) Heterogeneous change (Virupa Parināma): When the Gunas affect one another then there is heterogeneous change. In homogeneous change there is the equilibrium of the Gunas. But when there is heterogeneous change then this equilibrium of the Gunas is disturbed. The process of the evolution then begins. In this type of change, one guna tries to predominate the others. It results in creating a tremendous commotion in the bosom of Prakriti. □

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