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Roots of Indian Materialism in Tantra and Pre-Classical Sāṃkhya

Sonali Bhatt Marwaha

Materialism is considered to be an anathema to Indian philosophy. Despite this, Indian tradition boasts of a strong materialist trend predating the Vedas. This paper traces the proto-materialist ideas as found in the ancient Tantra and pre-classical or original Sāṃkhya. Representing the naturalistic trend in Indian philosophy, ancient Tantra identified the brain as the seat of human consciousness. The pre-classical Sāṃkhya considered matter as the primal non-intelligent or non-sentient first cause from which the universe was to evolve. It considers the material cause to be self-sufficient for the purpose of producing the world; the principle of consciousness is potentially contained in the primeval matter. This paper aims to provide an overview of the Indian materialist viewpoint for multidisciplinary scholars.

Materialism was not a perversion of the innate spirituality of man. It was a natural development of the spirit of man, freed from primitive ignorance, and unencumbered by the artificial impediments of the doctrines and dogmas of metaphysics. (Roy, 1940/1982, p. 14)

The East is identified as being primarily ‘spiritual’ in its essence, implying ontological and epistemological dualism and idealism. Indian philosophies are entrenched in the spiritualist world view, which many Indians accept as the ‘Absolute Truth’. Idealism and dualism are considered to be synonyms for Indian philosophy. A novice philosopher or a stray visitor to Indian philosophy would see the spiritualist tradition as the only tradition in Indian thought. Modern scholars exclude non-Vedic as well as the materialist tradition within classical Indian thought, thereby eclipsing the full richness present in the Indian traditions. This we may assume is also true for the layperson, religious in their beliefs, but unlettered in the great philosophical traditions and systems that form the basis of their beliefs. This lack of exposure is evident even among those who are adequately exposed to Indian philosophy and its offshoot, Indian psychology.

The materialist world view is found in the works of Cārvāka muni, Payasi, Kanada (about 600 BCE), Ajita Kesakambali (6th c. BCE) and Bhatta (6th c. CE). Contemporary scholars are few, notably Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, M. N. Roy,
J. Bandopadhyaya, S. Joshi, K. K. Mital, S. N. Prasad, Ramakrishna Bhattacharya and P. P. Gokhale. These scholars have concentrated purely on the textual and philosophical aspects of the Lokāyata/Cārvāka school. In addition, Chattopadhyaya has emphasized on the role of sociopolitical factors in the decline of the materialist world view in India. Unlike their work, this paper highlights the antiquity and core concepts of the Indian materialist tradition with the aim of bringing it to the forefront.

The term ‘proto-materialism’ refers to the rudimentary idea that everything is based on matter. The most conspicuous aspect of this primitive world view is that the human body (deha) is a microcosm of the universe, along with a cosmogony attributing the origin of the universe to the union of the male and female (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. xvii). Chattopadhyaya describes this ‘pre-spiritualistic’ phase of human awareness as ‘primitive proto-materialism’. Thus, in this form, we will not find the expression of the materialistic thought as defined in present times. Further, in his analysis, during this period of deep interdependency with the bounty of the earth, the discovery of agriculture and the numerous fertility rituals that linked the agricultural process and human fertility, the existence of a spiritualistic or idealistic world view of the Vedānta was not as yet developed.

Materialism in Early Tantra

The proto-materialistic world view may be found in the ancient belief systems of Tantra. Tantra predates the Vedas and is of non-Vedic origin. It places supreme emphasis on the female principle prakṛti (primordial or subtle matter), whilst Vedic thought lays great emphasis on the masculine principle puruṣa (non-material consciousness, Supreme Being or soul).

As Tantra is older than the written form, it is difficult to trace its origins. Concrete material relics are found in the Indus ruins, placing its origins or existence to at least 5000 BCE (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, pp. 320–323). Although Tantra may find its roots in the hoary past of Indian culture, its existence still forms an intrinsic part of the contemporary Indian culture, not only in the practices of the tribal population but also in the religious rituals that are followed. To put things in perspective, the time line of human cultural evolution places the domestication of cattle at about 8500–6300 BCE, beginning of agriculture at about 5000 BCE, pyramid texts at about 3100 BCE in Near East (Hare, 2001).

Early Tantra represents a period of human thought that was not as yet acquainted with spiritualism. According to Chattopadhyaya (1973, p. 53), it was much later when Tantra’s ideas were put to the written form that the treatises were put down along theistic lines and spiritualistic ideas were superimposed on them. This led to the development of the various schools of Tantrism, such as Buddhist Tantra and Hindu Tantra, which was later sub-divided into Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva-Śakta Tantra. Many scholars have attested to the Tantra being much older than the written texts which are as early as 600–700 CE and as late as 1700s CE. Tantric usages and popular formulas were current and practiced in a much earlier age: they belong to a type of thought
that is primitive and among primitive people varies little in the course of centuries. According to S. B. Das Gupta (1946, p. 27), ‘Tantrism is neither Buddhist or Hindu in origin: it seems to be a religious undercurrent, originally independent of any abstruse metaphysical speculation, flowing on from an obscure point of time in the religious history of India.’ Considering the antiquity of this system, it also implies that it was a system that predates the development of the Vedic caste system.

Procreation—human and agricultural—was of vital importance to the survival of the species. As its inner working was outside the grasp of human understanding of the time, it was shrouded in magical practices and worship. These practices are still common as seen in the variety of ‘coming-of-age’ rituals and the ‘pre-sowing’ rituals and festivals that are celebrated in most ancient cultures. The common understanding of Tantra is that of a philosophy of mystical metaphysics. However, the archaic system of Tantra had its origin in the belief that the productive activity of nature was related to, and even vitally dependent on, the reproductive function of the woman.

Chattopadhyaya (1973, p. 333) considers this agriculture-human fertility concept as a form of ‘magical thinking’ from the perspective of the ancients, as they functioned with a limited awareness of the workings of nature. Thus, there is no reference to soul, god, liberation, heaven, prayer or sacrifice in their belief system. Rather, it is a system that perceived the human body and nature as two aspects of the same fundamental reality, and this was in the form of matter. The forces lying dormant in nature and within the human body are astonishing. This brings the human body into the forefront, making it a proto-materialistic world view.

The cosmogony of the Tantra is a reflection of their basic world view. As Chattopadhyaya notes (1973, p. 336), ‘According to Tantra, the universe is created by sexual urge (kama); it was born of the female (vamodbhava) and as the result of her union with the male.’ This type of cosmogony is known as ‘genealogical’ and is commonly found among primitive cultures. For instance, similar cosmogonies have been found in ancient China, Mesopotamia and Polynesian islanders.

In his work Racanavali (Bengali/Hindi), Bandopadhyaya identifies the proto-materialistic world view of ancient Tantrism. This archaic view equates the body with the universe, as they are perceived to be made of the same material, acted upon by the same forces and thus function in the same way. This premise serves as the guiding principle behind the Tantra-sādhanā or Tantra-practices—intimately knowing one’s body is akin to intimately knowing the universe. The Purāṇa and other Śāstra accept this conclusion of all Tantras (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, pp. 333–334).

As Chattopadhyaya (1973, p. 335) analyzes, 'the search for the inner truth within the body led the Tantrikas not to any subtle non-physical spiritual principle but rather to the human nervous system in its essentially physical aspect'. With this, the early Tantrikas began to explore the human body, leading them to the discovery of the human nervous system, which led to the identification of the brain as the seat of human consciousness, rather than a non-physical spiritualistic conception. This perspective opened the doors of scientific methodology in ancient Indian history.
and led to the development of alchemy and chemistry. As Seal (1915, p. 218) stated: 'In Caraka and Susruta (as in Aristotle) the heart is the central organ and seat of consciousness; but in the Tantrika writings (as in Galen) the seat of consciousness is transferred to the brain or rather the cerebro-spinal system.'

Caraka (300–400 BCE) had a clear conception of the sensory and motor nerves. Whilst Caraka and Suśruta regarded the heart as the seat of consciousness, Tantra writers considered the brain as the seat of consciousness. The Tantric writers referred to the different kinds of consciousness. They had a fairly accurate analysis of neuroanatomy, despite its primitive conceptualization as compared to that of today. According to it, there are two nerve-cords (nāḍī or nerves) running parallel to the central cord, called the suṣumna, which stretches from near the pelvic curve to the brain. Within the suṣumna is another nerve cord, called the vajrakhya, within which is conceived another nerve cord called the citrine, which is the innermost core of the central cord, the suṣumna. They distinguished between the motor nerves (ājñāvahā nāḍī) and sensory nerves (manovahā nāḍī), further identifying the different sensory nerves: the olfactory nerves (gandhavahā nāḍī), the optic nerves (rūpavahā nāḍī), the auditory nerves (śabdavahā nāḍī), the gustatory nerves (rasavahā nāḍī) and the tactile nerves (sparśavahā nāḍī) (Sinha, 1986, vol. 1, p. 1).

Their practices centring around the dead body (śava sādhanā), which was considered to be impure, may have led the Tāntrikas to gain a deeper understanding of the human body (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 336). Although the Vedic and post-Vedic philosophers also had views on nature, origin and functions of the sense organs, their views were based on their philosophies with primarily metaphysical speculation. Nevertheless, they did provide phenomenological support for their views. As the Brahmanical orthodoxy had taboos against having anything to do with the dead body, they were prevented from exploring and contributing to the understanding of the human body; this may have led them to focus on discovering the true nature of the self or soul in the spiritual domain. Human fertility and its associated rituals, early ideas of conception occurring in the breasts and then descending down to the abdomen, importance of blood—particularly menstrual blood—in both agricultural and human rituals (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, pp. 303–305) is an indication of the deep significance attributed to the human body. While the rituals are still performed, although in a symbolic manner, the sanctity of the human body, as being of vital importance for human and agricultural fertility, was seen as a perversion of a true metaphysical reality under the influence of the dualistic and idealistic philosophies. With the rise of the influence of these views and the caste system, with its accompanying disdain for manual labour, a hands-on analysis of the physical processes of the body, agriculture and the tools of the tradesman diminished, curbing the development of science. A greater emphasis on the metaphysical realms was a severe blow to the development of a materialistic and scientific viewpoint.

In Chattopadhyaya’s (1973, pp. 280–285) analysis, the modern writers on Tantra, accustomed to the essentially spiritualistic conceptualization of Indian thought, are keen on discovering some hidden spiritual implications in it. The yogasādhanā of Tantra is usually called the sat-cakra-bheda and has its origins in the anatomical
view. This practice is a method suggested for the purpose of propiating the ultimate female principle residing within the body. For this, seven lotuses (padmā-s) are conceived as situated on the central cord, the suśumna, and are considered as the seven cords of feminity. The highest lotus on the suśumna is called the lotus with the thousand petals (sahasra-dala-padma), which according to Seal (1915, p. 221) is ‘thousand-lobed, the upper cerebrum with its lobes and convolutions’. According to the Tāṇṭrikas, this is the highest seat of consciousness. Viewed in another way, this is also an early understanding of the nervous system. This proto-materialism was the basis of the development of a proto-science.

In later Tantra (Hindu and Buddhist), there is a distinct emphasis on experimental observation. It is to the field of chemistry that the Tāṇṭrikas made their greatest contribution. P. C. Ray in his History of Hindu Chemistry stated that ‘Indian alchemy very largely derives its colour and flavour for [Tantrism]’. The Tāṇṭrikas invented and used a variety of laboratory equipments (yantram) for their chemical experiments (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 356). As Chattopadhyaya (1973, p. 358) surmises:

... unlike the followers of the idealistic systems of Indian philosophy, who belittle the importance of the body and dreamt of the liberation of the soul, the Tāṇṭrikas, with their supreme emphasis on the material human body (dehavada), conceived liberation only in terms of the development and culture of the body (kaya sadhāna). It is no wonder, therefore, that they should have been so much concerned with concrete material measures that could ensure the development and the preservation of the body itself. This explains their contributions to alchemy and medicine. In short, the proto-materialism of the Tāṇṭrikas was the clue to their proto-scientific tendencies.

The original Tantra thus represents the naturalistic trend in Indian philosophy.

**Materialism in Pre-Classical Sāṃkhya**

The origin of the Sāṃkhya rests in the ancient past. Much controversy surrounds its origins and development. Much of early Sāṃkhya literature is lost, and there is no continuity in the tradition from the ancient times up to the age of the commentators. Sāṃkhya is based on speculative insight and not the religious experience of the Vedānta or analytical and critical method of the Nyāya (Bhattacharya, 1959, p. 127).

In the absence of a core corpus of literature, interpretations are based on subsequent compendiums of the core ideas as are passed down. This is akin to the vast difference in ideas that we see between early Tantra and the modern day interpretations and practice of Tantra. In cases such as the Sāṃkhya, it may involve providing the missing links by foraging through other traditions or texts of the period. In addition, there are persistent attempts to fit them into the Vedāntic mould. Thus, to understand the Sāṃkhya tradition is a difficult task for any scholar to accomplish. For the present work too, we find that at times we are faced with contradictory viewpoints influenced by the world view of the commentators on the system, based on their understanding or the sociopolitical exigencies of the time they lived in.
In his work Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning, Gerald Larson (1969/1979, p. 75) has summarized the works of earlier scholars and organized the texts relating to the Sāṃkhya into four basic periods: (1) ancient speculations including the speculative Vedic hymns and the oldest prose Upaniṣads, extending from the eighth or ninth century BCE through the period of Jainism and the rise of early Buddhism; (2) proto-Sāṃkhya speculations, including the ‘middle’ Upaniṣads. Such texts as the Carakasamhitā and the Buddhacarita, the Bhagavadgītā and the speculative passages from the Mokṣadharma portion of the Mahābhārata, extending from fourth century BCE through first century CE; (3) classical Sāṃkhya speculation, including the Sāṃkhya Kārikā, the Yogasūtras and related commentaries extending from first century CE to eleventh century CE; (4) later Sāṃkhya speculation, including the Sāṃkhyaapravacanasūtra and the commentaries of Aniruddha, Mahādeva and Viṣṇunabhikṣu, together with the Tattvasamāsasūtra, from about fifteenth century CE to the seventeenth century.

Bhattacharya and Larson (1987, p. 40) identify the various periods of Sāṃkhya as (1) Proto-Sāṃkhya (800 BCE to 100 CE), (2) Pre-Kārikā Sāṃkhya (100–500 CE), (3) Kārikā-Sāṃkhya (300–850 CE), (4) Patañjala-Sāṃkhya (400–850 CE), (5) Kārikā-Kaumudi-Sāṃkhya (850 or 975 CE to present), (6) Samāsa-Sāṃkhya (1300 to present) and (7) Śūtra-Sāṃkhya (1400 to present).

According to Bhattacharya and Larson (1987, pp. 40–41): ‘The original philosophical formulation occurs with the emergence of Pre-Kārikā Sāṃkhya, and the normative formulations in summary form appear in Kārikā-Sāṃkhya and Patañjala-Sāṃkhya. Somewhere in these ancient traditions there appears to have been a clear break with the original genius and vitality of the system, and the later traditions of Kārikā-Kaumudi-Sāṃkhya, Samāsa-Sāṃkhya, and Śūtra-Sāṃkhya present the system through a Vedānta prism.’

The Sāṃkhya system of Indian philosophy is considered to be one of the orthodox schools, dualistic in nature. However, an analysis of the Sāṃkhya system in terms of what scholars refer to as ‘original Sāṃkhya’ emphasizes its pre-Vedic origins, and a ‘dualism’ that gives primacy to matter as the fundamental principle in nature. In Chattopadhyaya’s analysis, it is a monistic materialism, an antithesis to Śankara’s monistic idealism (Larson, 1969/1979, p. 66). However, Mittal (1974, p. 207) interprets the dualism of Sāṃkhya as that of ‘jīva (spirit—the consciousness, Puruṣa that transcends both thought and extension) and the Jīva (matter—the unconscious, Prakṛti which holds mind also in its fold). He adds that ‘the Sāṃkhya itself interprets the mental phenomena materialistically’ (p. 212).

The Origins of Sāṃkhya

In his analysis of Indian materialism (Lokāyata), Chattopadhyaya (1973, pp. 359–448) hypothesizes that the early Sāṃkhya system may be a more explicit philosophical re-statement of the theoretical position implicit in Tantrism. (The details of this hypothesis are beyond the scope of this work.) References supporting this hypothesis are found in the Kapilasya Tantra, the Saśītantra, also in the Sāṃkhya Kārikā, the Patañjala Tantra and the Atreyā Tantra. He further adds that if the term Lokāyata
originally stood for the beliefs and practices broadly referred to as Tantrism, the original Sāṃkhya may be viewed as the most important development of the Lokāyata tradition in Indian philosophy. This implies that original Sāṃkhya was a form of uncompromising atheism and materialism (pp. 362–363).

The original Sāṃkhya was called the godless doctrine of primordial matter, which was fundamentally opposed to the early Vedic orthodoxy that culminated in the idealistic outlook of the Upaniṣads. The essentially spiritualistic outlook of the Upaniṣads probably finds its roots in the ancient myths of spirits. Primitive views on death included the belief that the spirits of the dead pass into other forms. Viewed in this way, it may not be difficult to see the origins of some of the Upaniṣadic ideas, which through time and imaginative sophistication, developed into the form of the Great Spirit to which all eventually return.

This original potentially materialistic outlook of the Sāṃkhya provided the fundamental ideas of science in their theory of matter, theory of causality, theory of knowledge and a theory of evolutionary process. As Seal (1915, p. 251) observed: ‘The Sāṃkhya system possesses a unique interest in the history of thought as embodying the earliest clear and comprehensive account of the process of cosmic evolution, viewed not as a mere metaphysical speculation but as a positive principle based on the conservation, the transformation, and the dissipation of energy.’

The works of Kapila, Asuri and Pañcaśīka are considered to represent the original Sāṃkhya. The Śaṣṭītantra (ca. 100–200 BCE), which represents either the earliest of the Sāṃkhya texts or systematic formats for discussing the Sāṃkhya, forms the bridge between the older and the classical Sāṃkhya of Iśvara Kṛṣṇa which appeared a few centuries later (Bhattacharya & Larson, 1987, p. 128). Although these are lost to us, they are referred to at the end of Iśvara Kṛṣṇa’s Sāṃkhya Kārikā (ca. 200 CE). (According to Dasgupta (1922/1955, vol. 1, p. 245), ‘the fact that Caraka (78 AD) does not refer to the Sāṃkhya as described by Iśvara Kṛṣṇa and referred to in other parts of Mahabharatī is a definite proof that Iśvara Kṛṣṇa’s Sāṃkhya is a later modification, which was either non-existent in Caraka’s time or was not regarded as an authoritative old Sāṃkhya view.’ Garbe, however, places it much earlier in about the fifth century CE.) The later Sāṃkhya Sūtra is considered to be a bit spurious and is dated at about 1400 CE. Guṇaratna (Taraka Rahasya Dipika, p. 99) mentions two other authoritative works on the Sāṃkhya, the Mathra Bhasya and the Atreya Tantra. Further, he spoke of two distinct schools of the Sāṃkhya, the Maulikya (original) Sāṃkhya and the Uttara (later) Sāṃkhya. This view is supported by Dasgupta (1922, p. 217).

The Sāṃkhya system has had an all pervading influence on Indian thought, influencing its philosophy in medicine, law, statecraft, mythology, cosmology, theology and devotional literature. Eminent scholars such as Jacobi, Dahlman and Garbe support the view that the original Sāṃkhya was vastly different from the later Sāṃkhya as found in the Bhagavad Gītā. According to Jacobi, the pre-classical or original Sāṃkhya had a practical purpose rather than an exclusively metaphysical purpose. It was addressed to the masses rather than the trained dialecticians. In Garbe’s analysis, the old Sāṃkhya was the singular work of Kapila or Pañcaśīka; it
was not a blurred set of intuitions that finally got its house in order through the genius of Vijñanabhikṣu, as stated by Dasgupta. The later Sāmkhya or the classical Sāmkhya of Iśvara Kṛṣṇa’s Sāmkhya Kārikā was greatly influenced by Vedāntic thought, to the extent of changing its earlier materialistic basis to a spiritualistic one (Bhattacharyya & Larson, 1987, p. 43; Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 431; Larson, 1969/1979, p. 27).

In Oldenberg’s analysis, the pre-classical Sāmkhya can be traced in the works of the middle and younger Upaniṣads, such as the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad, Maitrāyaniya Upaniṣad and the philosophical portions of the Mahābhārata, i.e. in the Bhagavad Gītā. While the discourse in the earliest Upaniṣads, such as the Chāndogya Upaniṣad and Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad, centred around the notion of unity and the ātman, the intellectual concerns slowly shifted from the self to the world or nature, and the stirrings of it could be found in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad and the early Sāmkhya (Bhattacharyya & Larson, 1987; Chattopadhyaya, 1973; Larson, 1969/1979).

Chattopadhyaya disagrees with this view. In his analysis, modern scholars have tried to find germs of original Sāmkhya thought in the Upaniṣads by quoting some of the passages from them for Sāmkhya terminologies. However, in his analysis, the real purpose of the mention in the Upaniṣads has been to reject them or proclaim its superiority over the Sāmkhya. For instance, the author of the Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad does not deny the importance of the pradhāna (primal nature) doctrine of the Sāmkhya, but he considers it subservient to God, who rules over it and produces it with his own magical powers (Chattopadhyaya, 1976, pp. 253–254).

An astute observation made by Chattopadhyaya (1973, p. 442) was on the misperception of later writers on the ‘sophistication’ of early non-Aryans or pre-Aryans. His contention is that any ideas of the pre-Aryan/non-Aryan groups that were deviant from their more ‘advanced’ ideas need not necessarily be due to their absorption from underdeveloped cultures; even they had a primitive past beyond them, having evolved just like the rest of humanity. Thus, finding ideas contrary to those that we now identify as the crux of the modern Sāmkhya need not be a surprise to us. This is supported by scholars such as Dandekar, H. P. Sastri, Garbe and Zimmer, who consider the origin of the original Sāmkhya to the ‘pre-Vedic non-Aryan thought complex’ (Dandekar, 1968, p. 444).

Garbe (1892) and H. P. Sastri (Boudha Dharma) support the anti-Vedic character of the Sāmkhya, and place its rise in the North-Eastern regions, which is also the home of the Tantra system. Garbe (1892, pp. xx–xxi) definitively states that:

The origin of the Sāṃkhya system appears in the proper light only when we understand that in those regions of India which were little influenced by Brahmanism the first attempt had been made to explain the riddles of the world and of our existence merely by means of reason. For the Sāṃkhya philosophy is, in essence, not only atheistic but also inimical to Veda. All appeal to śrutī in the Sāṃkhya texts lying before us are subsequent additions. We may altogether remove the Vedic elements, grafted upon the system, and it will not in the least be affected thereby. The Sāṃkhya philosophy had been originally, and has remained up to the
Support for materialism in the original Śāṁkhya comes from an unlikely source—the early proponents of the idealist Vedānta system. Śaṅkara (Vedanta Sūtra, ii.1.2; Thibaut, trans. 1890) and Rāmānuja (Max Müller, 1879, xivii, 411) vehemently opposed the original materialist Śāṁkhya. According to them, the original Śāṁkhya was opposed to the Vedic tradition of Brahma vāda. In his Brahma Sūtra (also known as the Vedānta Sūtra and Uttara Mīmāṁsā Sūtra), Bādarāyaṇa refers to the Śāṁkhya as pradhāna vāda or pradhāna kāraṇa vāda, i.e. the doctrine of pradhāna (matter) being the first cause, the ultimate reality.

**Basic Principles of Pre-Classical Śāṁkhya**

According to the Śāṁkhya, everything exists in the present moment. The qualities of things are mass, energy and essence. Before examining the basic principles of the original Śāṁkhya, a brief look at the principles enumerated in the classical Śāṁkhya Kārikā are listed. The Kārikā identifies three sets of principles:

First are a set of 25 basic principles, comprising the five basic principles, five sense capacities, five action capacities, five subtle elements and five gross elements. Of these, the Śāṁkhya Kārikā recognizes the puruṣa as pure consciousness, holding a primary position, and prakṛti as primordial matter, and they simply exist alongside each other. Pure consciousness is inherently inactive, and primordial matter is inherently generative. However, the original Śāṁkhya considers the prakṛti as primary and the puruṣa as an evolute of prakṛti, i.e. an emergent property of matter.

Second are the fundamental predispositions (bhāva) or instinctual tendencies that guide the human being. These include meritorious behaviour (dharma), knowledge (jñāna), non-attachment (vairāgya), power (aśvarya), demeritorious behaviour (adharma), ignorance (ajñāna), attachment (avairāgya) and impotence (anāśvarya).

Third relate to the phenomenal, empirical world of ordinary life, which are formed by the interaction of the 25 basic principles and the eight predispositions. These generate 50 categories of ‘phenomenal creation’. These are (1) five fundamental misconceptions and include ignorance, confusion or preoccupation with one’s own identity, extreme confusion or passionate attachment; (2) twenty-eight categories of perceptual, motor and mental dysfunctions; (3) nine categories for a reasonably balanced and conventional mendicant life and (4) eight categories representing authentic attainments (Bhattacharya & Larson, 1987, pp. 48–56).

Keith (1918, p. 10) traces the development of these categories to the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad where the individual self is compared to a wheel with three tyres, sixteen ends, fifty spokes, twenty counter-spokes and six sets of eight. These are interpreted as the three Gunas, the set of sixteen consisting of the ten organs, mind and the five elements, the fifty psychic states of the classical Samkhya, the ten senses and their objects, and the six sets of the five elements, mind, individuation and intellect; the eight
elements of the body, the eight perfections, the eight psychic states which form in
the Śāṃkhyā.

As he further states, ‘The worth of such identifications must be regarded as uncertain,
and no conclusive evidence is afforded by them, as plays on numbers are much
affected by the Brahmanical schools’ (p. 10).

Matter (Pradhāna/Prakṛti) in Pre-Classical Śāṃkhyā

Pradhāna, also known as prakṛti (primordial or primeval matter), is the original state
from which the universe or the world was to evolve. Matter, then, is the ultimate or
principle reality. The Śāṃkhyā also recognized the principle of puruṣa, which literally
means male. Pradhāna meant only the primeval matter, the non-intelligent or
non-sentient first cause. This was in contrast to the Vedānta philosophy of Brahma
vāda or Brahma kāraṇa vāda, wherein Brahman was the first cause, the ultimate
reality and the principle cause of consciousness. As Chattopadhyaya notes (1973,
pp. 372–375), Bādarāyaṇa devotes a considerable portion of the Brahma Sūtra on
the refutation of the materialist position of early Śāṃkhyā. Of the 555 sūtras of the text,
at least 60 were designed to refute the doctrine of the pradhāna, while only 43 were
devoted to the refutation of other rival schools such as the Jaina and Buddhist
views. Further, of the 60 aphorisms refuting the doctrine of pradhāna, 37 were
designed to prove its non-Vedic and anti-Vedic character. After a further analysis,
Chattopadhyaya concludes that if Śāṃkhyā was not understood as a materialistic
tradition, there would have been no need for the substantial opposition that it faced
from the idealistic schools, which held that the first cause was a spiritual principle.
However, the later Śāṃkhyā Kārikā and the Śāṃkhyā Sūtra compromised on the
original position and conceded to the orthodox Vedāntic viewpoint.

In the original Śāṃkhyā, the basic reality was the pradhāna; the puruṣa was not
related to the formation of the universe. In the Vedānta Sūtra, Śaṅkara empha-
sized that Kapila’s acknowledgement of the plurality of the self and rejection of the
Vedānta position of the singularity of the puruṣa as the ultimate reality were
strong grounds to consider the Śāṃkhyā as non-Vedic. This was based on the
fundamental assumption that the experienced world is real and that the puruṣa
had no role to play in its causation, further, that consciousness had no role to play
in its causation. This was in stark opposition to the Vedāntic view, which held that
the puruṣa was the supreme reality, and it had no role to play in the causation and
continuance of the world, which in itself were ultimately unreal. Śaṅkara’s anti-
pathy to the Śāṃkhyā rested not only on its material first principle but also on
its anti-scriptural position—it’s clear opposition to both the Vedas and the
Manu Smṛti.

Garbe (cf. Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 450) summarizes the Śāṃkhyā view on the
material first cause:

The material universe is traced back by a correct philosophical method to a first
cause. The Sāṅkhyā doctrine proceeds on the principle that the product is none
other than the ‘material cause’ in a definite stage of evolution, and that the
preceding stages are to be inferred from that which lies open before us. By this means a first principle was finally reached, which is of the nature of cause only, and not also of product. This is the prakṛti, primitive matter, from which the universe is evolved in regular course. It further teaches the existence in the entire material universe of three substances (guna-s), united in dissimilar and unstable proportions, of which the first (sattva) exhibits the qualities of lightness, illumination, and joy; the second (rajas), of movement, excitation, and pain; the third (tamas), of heaviness, obstruction, and sloth. Hence the conclusion necessarily follows that primitive matter also was composed of these three constituents. Undeveloped primitive matter is the ‘state of equilibrium of the guna-s’. As a result of a disturbance, which is not more definitely described, the material universe is evolved...
earth—which ‘are produced from the absolute and which are present in all that exists’. He further adds that though they originally referred to material products, the tendency would be to see in them psychic states, as was apparent in the classical Sāṃkhya where the development of the individual self to the absolute in the three guṇa-s was conceived. Keith considered it probable that these ideas were ‘original’ and shorn off the influence of the Vedānta school. At one level, guṇa-s is secondary or subordinate to the primeval matter or pradhāna and is the inner essence or underlying reality of primordial matter. On another level, it implies moral distinctions in the activity of prakṛti on the basis of satisfaction/moral excellence (sattva), frustration/moral decadence (rajas) and confusion/amoral indifference (tamas). On yet another level, it refers to the aesthetic and intellectual matters that pervade subjective and objective experience. The three guṇa-s are not conceptualized as individual elements; rather they are perceived, like a thread, as a contiguous and inextricably related process. From the objective perspective, the guṇa-s represent the spontaneous and continual flow of primeval matter as energy/activity (rajas), its rational ordering (sattva) and its determinate formulation or objectivation (tamas). From the subjective perspective, the guṇa-s represent the continuous flow of experience capable of pre-reflective spontaneous longing (rajas), its pre-reflexive discernment or discrimination (sattva) and the continuous flow of awareness of an opaque, envelope world (tamas). This continuous flow of experience gives rise to the daily rhythm of doubt, confusion and contentment. Further, there is no experiential distinction between the subjective and objective, i.e. mind and matter or thought and extension. Thus, in this continuous flow of primal material energy, the dualities of subjective/objective, mind/body, thought/extension does not apply. When the guṇa-s are in a state of equilibrium, no creation or modification occurs; it is when they are in a state of disequilibrium or state of flux that creation or modification occurs. Disequilibrium then becomes an essential part of existence, which is in contrast to the Vedāntic view, which declares a state of equipoise or equilibrium as the ultimate reality. Thus, that which is created or modified emerges from the primordial material when it is in a state of flux or disequilibrium (Bhattacharya & Larson, 1987, pp. 66–71). If we consider that in the Tantra view the human body was a replication of the cosmos—everything that constituted it, made it functional and happened to it was the same for the universe—then attributing subjective and objective processes to the guṇa-s become quite obvious. The human body and its psychological processes—including morals and personality—begin to have the same properties of fire, water and earth.

Sāṃkhya Theory of Evolution

The pre-existence of the effect in the cause is the preliminary doctrine of causality in the Sāṃkhya. For example, the tree is contained within the seed; nevertheless, the tree is not the seed nor is the seed the tree. The tree is potentially existent in the seed. Thus, the tree emerges from the seed when certain conditions are consistently met. In the same way, as mentioned earlier, the visible world is the product or effect of
prakṛti; as the visible world is material, it can be inferred that prakṛti is material. However, this does not imply that prakṛti is to be equated with the visible world. In other words, prakṛti and the visible world are not synonymous. The common interpretation of prakṛti as nature is erroneous, as nature is the totality of the phenomena of the visible world and is potentially contained in the prakṛti. To distinguish between the two, the Sāṃkhya philosophers employed the terms vyaktā (manifest) and avyaktā (unmanifest). Thus, the constituents of matter are different from the concrete cognition of the visible world. As the Vedāntists do not accept prakṛti as the primal cause, they are faced with the problem of accounting for the real world. They do this by denying the existence of the real world and considering it as an illusion (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, pp. 453–455). As Stcherbatsky (1962, p. i.18) notes,

This Matter is supposed to begin by an undifferentiated condition (avyakta) of equipoise and rest. Then an evolutionary process is started. Matter is then never at rest, always changing, changing every minute (pratiksana-parinama), but finally it again reverts to a condition of rest and equipoise. This Matter embraces not only the human body, but all our mental states as well, they are given a materialistic origin and essence.

Commentators on the Caraka Saṃhitā older than Cakrapani, view the process of creation and dissolution as just birth and death, indicating that the Sāṃkhya philosophy had its basic roots in human analogy. The human analogy, as stated earlier, is seen in Tantra cosmogony. In its primitive pre-evolved state, prakṛti was in perfect equilibrium with its three constituent guṇa-s. According to the Sāṃkhya Kārikā, these guṇa-s are in a state of constant flux, uniting and separating. Thus, a disturbance in the initial equilibrium of the guṇa-s in prakṛti marked the beginning of the evolution of the universe. While the view of the original Sāṃkhya philosophers on the cause of this early disequilibrium is unknown to us, the later Sāṃkhya philosophers have attributed this to the passive influence of puruṣa on prakṛti (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 454). Thus, the primeval matter with the attributes of volition/intelligence, energy/motion and inertia are the fundamental blocks of all that is existent in the universe. Sattva is considered to be the essential attribute of the puruṣa, which is non-material and primarily spiritualistic and abstract in its conceptualization. However, it would be appropriate to invoke here the concepts of the ‘genetic self’ (Dawkins, 1989) and Francisco Varela’s (1997) concept of ‘the body’s self’ as examples that indicate the essential ‘intelligence’ within matter. Intelligence, not in the sense of higher cognitive abilities that we are accustomed to associating with the term but rather an inherent or built in mechanism that enables it to carry out its growth, development and function.

Causality in Original Sāṃkhya

According to the Sāṃkhya, the existence of the pradhāna was based on the doctrine of causality: the nature of the cause is to be inferred from the nature of the effect, i.e. on the basis of observation, even though the effect may not be absolutely new and the material cause is self-sufficient for the purpose of producing the world. Since this
world is essentially material, its first cause is also necessarily material (Chattopadhyaya, 1976, p. 92). This principle of material first was a precursor to scientific thought. In the Sāṃkhya view, where there is both change (parināma, e.g. milk changes to curd) and transformation (vivarta, e.g. silver is transformed to a ring) in the formation of the world, there was no spiritual principle that participated in these changes; rather natural laws (svabhāvenaeva) governed the transformation of primeval matter. This doctrine is similar to that of svabhāva vāda, the doctrine of natural laws, which is attributed to the Lokāyatas (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 394).

Puruṣa in Original Sāṃkhya

The Sāṃkhya also recognized the principle of the puruṣa (literally, male) which in later Sāṃkhya meant the Self or pure consciousness, as meant in the Vedāntic interpretation. However, Chattopadhyaya (1973, p. 383) raises the question of whether this was indeed the original meaning within the early Sāṃkhya world view, devoid of the Vedānta influence.

To begin with, both Ranade and Belvalkar, citing references from texts such as the Satpatā Brāhmaṇa, Aitareya Upaṇiṣad and Taittirīya Sāmhitā, state that the puruṣa originally denoted the human being with his peculiar bodily structure and not any inner or spiritual entity indwelling therein (Dasgupta, 1932/1952, vol. II, pp. 427–428). This, in the context of the pastoral society that it arose in, meant specifically the male (Chattopadhyaya, 1973, p. 402). In the original Sāṃkhya, the puruṣa held a secondary position to prakṛti, and was a-pradhāna or udāsīna (indifferent), and had no role to play in the evolution of the material world. This takes us back to the Tantra recognition of the role of the female (prakṛti) in procreation and the male (puruṣa) as just the provider of seed. In contrast, in the Vedānta view, the puruṣa was of prime importance and was the ultimate reality, with the real world being a mere illusion arising out of ignorance (avidyā). Thus, everything was nothing and nothing was everything. As mentioned earlier, the original Sāṃkhya believed in the doctrine of the multiple selves. In retaining its fidelity to the original Sāṃkhya, the Sāṃkhya Kārikā emphasized on the grounds for the existence of the main selves as (1) differences among individuals on their birth, death and the motor and sensory endowments; (2) difference among individuals in their activities and (3) differences in the guṇa-s among individuals, the three constituents of prakṛti.

According to Sāṃkhya, it is not necessary to postulate any spiritual principle, intelligence or consciousness for explaining movement or change. However, to establish the primacy of the spirit over matter, Śaṅkara considered that change and movement can be only due to an Intelligent First Cause. To do so, however, he first needed to deny their reality. This led to the conceptualization of all reality as an illusion stemming from ignorance of the true nature of Brahman.

Dasgupta (1940/1952, vol. III, p. 527) cites the Jaina scholar Silamka in his commentary on the Sāṃkhya perception of puruṣa. According to Silamka, the Sāṃkhya admit the existence of the souls; however, these are absolutely incapable of doing any work, which is done entirely by prakṛti. Thus, the puruṣa, in the Sāṃkhya world view,
occupies a nominal position, unlike in the Vedānta. In Garbe’s analysis, the place of the puruṣa in the Sāmkhya philosophy is thus anomalous; it cannot meet any genuine theoretical needs of the philosophy. Based on this analysis, Chattopadhyaya concludes that ‘the Sāmkhya would have been a far more consistent philosophy without the totally functionless puruṣa’ (1976, p. 415). Nevertheless, Garbe still tries to find a justification for the existence of the puruṣa based on its later idealistic influence.

If the tradition of the original Sāmkhya is traced back to early Tantra view (with its primacy to the procreation process), the literal meaning of the term puruṣa as male and prakṛti as female referring to the original meaning of puruṣa may be more appropriate. Chattopadhyaya cites the Sāmkhya Kārikā to clarify the meaning of puruṣa, where words such as pumān and pumsah (meaning, the male) (Sāmkhya Kārikā, 11, 60) are used as substitutes for puruṣa. The puruṣa of Sāmkhya is not to be seen in the Vedāntic sense; rather, it is conceived as the solitary, bystander, spectator and passive witness of procreation. It was the passive spectator of an essentially real world process. Chattopadhyaya reminds us of the Tantra view of the human body as a replication of the larger universe. Thus, ‘just as a child in the [early] matriarchal society has no real kinship with the father, so the universe, in spite of being real, has no real relationship with the purusa. Hence, the anomalous status of the purusa in a system, known to the early orthodox idealists as essentially the doctrine of the pradhana’ (1973, pp. 407–408). However, the Sāmkhya Kārikā aligns itself, at the cost of internal consistency with its other principles, with the Vedānta and considers the puruṣa as a detached consciousness.

In Dasgupta’s view, Caraka’s (78 CE) version of the Sāmkhya, which represents a more materialistic view, predates the Sāmkhya Kārikā. The puruṣa in the Sāmkhya Kārikā is the Self or Pure Consciousness. However, in Caraka’s older version, ‘there are six elements (dhātus), viz. the five elements such as ākāśa, vāyu etc. [jala, agni, prithvi] and cetanā, called also puruṣa. From other points of view, the categories may be said to be twenty-four only, viz. the ten senses (five cognitive and five conative), manas, the five objects of senses and the eightfold prakṛti (prakṛti, mahat, ahamkāra and the five elements)’ (Dasgupta, 1922, p. 217).

According to Dasgupta (1922, p. 214), Caraka identifies the avyaktā [the unmanifested] part of prakṛti with puruṣa as forming one category. The vikāra or evolutionary products of prakṛti are called kṣetra, whereas the avyaktā part of prakṛti is regarded as the kṣetrajña. . . This avyaktā and cetanā are one and the same entity. From this unmanifested prakṛti or cetanā is derived the buddhi [intellect], and from the buddhi is derived the ego (ahamkāra) and from the ahamkāra the five elements and the senses are produced, and when this production is complete, we say that creation has taken place. At the time of pralaya (periodical cosmic dissolution) all the evolutes return back to prakṛti, and thus become unmanifest with it, whereas at the time of a new creation from the puruṣa the unmanifest (avyaktā), all the manifested forms—the evolutes of buddhi, ahamkāra, etc.—appear.

From this, according to Chattopadhyaya (1973, pp. 398–399), there are two alternative ways of looking at the Sāmkhya: (1) the puruṣa (consciousness or cetanā) is on
par with the five material elements and is itself a form of material element (\textit{dhātu}) and (2) as everything else on this list of 24 categories, including the 10 organs, and the mind are essentially material and there is no place for any spiritual principle in all of them—the concept of the \textit{puruṣa} is absent in them. The Śāṃkhya principle of \textit{puruṣa} becomes a part of \textit{prakṛti}, i.e. the principle of consciousness as potentially contained in the primeval matter.

\textit{Consciousness in Original Śāṃkhya}

With the Śāṃkhya finding its roots in a materialistic tradition, it would seem appropriate that the question of consciousness, self, intelligence and mind would also be attributed to within the material world. It would be erroneous on our part to expect in their work an understanding of materialism and the human body as we understand them now. Nevertheless, the seeds of it are present in their understanding of matter as the primeval cause and principle foundation of all that exists in the universe. Furthermore, the Tantra system which predates it had, as mentioned earlier, explored the nervous system and had a rudimentary idea of the brain as an essential organ. Thus, for the Śāṃkhya, adhering to their basic principles, consciousness too would find its roots in the physical body.

Subsequently, the first references to the brain as an organ does not appear until the 2nd century BCE in the \textit{Atharva Veda}, which though belonging to the Vedic corpus represents an independent parallel tradition. The early Śāṃkhya predates the \textit{Atharva Veda}, finding its roots in the ancient past. According to the \textit{Atharva Veda}, the \textit{prānas} (the vital currents) and the senses depend on the head (\textit{śīrṣa}), which was different than the brain (\textit{mastiśka}) (\textit{Atharva Veda}, x.2.6). The brain matter (\textit{mastulunga}) is referred to in the \textit{Caraka Saṃhitā} (about 100–200 CE) (9.101), and the head is considered to be the centre of the senses and all sense currents and life currents. Bhela, a contemporary of Caraka, considers the brain to be the centre of the mind. According to Cakrapani, though the currents of sensation and life pass through other parts of the body as well, yet, they are particularly connected to the head because, when there is an injury to the head, they are also injured (Dasgupta, 1932/1952, p. 340).

As Dasgupta argues, the \textit{Caraka Saṃhitā} admits no \textit{puruṣa} except in the sense of this unmanifest stage of primeval matter, and the \textit{Caraka Saṃhitā} is yet to accept any pure spirit apart from matter. ‘The self is in itself without consciousness. Consciousness can only come to it through its connection with the sense organs and \textit{manas}. By ignorance, will, antipathy, and work, this conglomeration of \textit{puruṣa} and the other elements takes place. Knowledge, feeling, or action, cannot be produced without this combination. All positive effects are due to conglomerations of causes and not by a single cause, but all destruction comes naturally and without cause’ (Dasgupta, 1940/1952, pp. 213–214).

With the Śāṃkhya concept of matter (\textit{pradhāna}), causality, the \textit{guna}-\textit{s} and reductive materialism, it would be expected that the school develops a definitive materialist position. As Bhattacharya and Larson (1987, p. 75) state,
This did not happen, however. Instead, the Śāmkhya teachers worked out an eccentric form of dualism with primordial materiality or the tripartite constituent process (encompassing twenty-four fundamental principles) as one kind of ‘existent’, and pure consciousness (puruṣa, a twenty-fifth tattva) as a second kind of ‘existent’. Eccentric, as it does not follow the usual or conventional notions of dualism, which profess two different kinds of reality—the physical and the mental.

Summary

Although dualism and idealism are the most propagated philosophies in India, the materialist viewpoint is an intrinsic part of the Indian thought system. Predating the Vedas is the proto-materialistic world view found in ancient Tantra and pre-Vedic or original Śāmkhya, which may be the most important development of the Lokāyata system.

Tantra places supreme emphasis on the female principle prakṛti (primordial or subtle matter). This archaic view equates the body with the universe, as they are perceived to be made of the same material, i.e. earth, wind and fire, and are acted upon by the same forces and thus function in the same way. The early Tantrikas explored the human body, leading them to discover the human nervous system. The search for the inner truth within the body led them to the identification of the brain as the seat of human consciousness. They had a fairly accurate analysis of neuroanatomy, despite its primitive conceptualization as compared to that of today. With their supreme emphasis on the material human body, they conceived of liberation only in terms of the development and culture of the body. The original Tantra thus represents the naturalistic trend in Indian philosophy.

An analysis of the original Śāmkhya emphasizes its pre-Vedic origins. It may be a more explicit philosophical re-statement of the theoretical position implicit in Tantrism. The original Śāmkhya was called the godless doctrine of primordial matter, which was fundamentally opposed to the early Vedic orthodoxy that culminated in the idealistic outlook of the Upaniṣads.

According to the Śāmkhya, everything exists in the present. The qualities of things are mass, energy and essence. Pradhāna, also known as prakṛti (primordial or primeval matter), is the original state from which the universe or the world was to evolve. It is the non-intelligent or non-sentient first cause. Matter, then, is the ultimate or principle reality with its proof resting on the reality of the empirical world. However, this does not imply that prakṛti is to be equated with the visible world. In other words, prakṛti and the visible world are not synonymous.

The Śāmkhya also recognized the principle of puruṣa, which literally means male. It originally denoted the human being with his peculiar bodily structure and not any inner or spiritual entity indwelling therein. The puruṣa held a secondary position to prakṛti and had no role to play in the evolution of the material world. The principle of puruṣa is a part of prakṛti, i.e. the principle of consciousness as potentially contained in the primeval matter.
Sāṃkhya developed the notion of ‘guṇa-s’, referring to material products, the tendency would be to see in them psychic states, as was apparent in the classical Sāṃkhya where the development of the individual self to the absolute in the three guṇa-s was conceived. When the guṇa-s are in a state of equilibrium, no creation or modification occurs; it is when they are in a state of disequilibrium or state of flux that creation or modification occurs. Disequilibrium then becomes an essential part of existence. Thus, that which is created or modified emerges from the primordial material when it is in a state of flux or disequilibrium.

The pre-existence of the effect in the cause is the preliminary doctrine of causality in the Sāṃkhya. The nature of the cause is to be inferred from the nature of the effect, i.e. on the basis of observation, even though the effect may not be absolutely new; the material cause is self-sufficient for the purpose of producing the world.

The Lokāyata system grew on the edifice laid by the Tantra and original Sāṃkhya. Briefly, as the body was composed of a combination of material elements, and consciousness emerged in it due to the nature of its components, they did not accept the existence of the soul. As a result, rituals, reincarnation and liberation did not find a place in their belief system. They considered perception as the only source of valid knowledge, thus eliminating the need for a higher state of consciousness to access an ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Reality is that which can be observed. The technological advances in modern science have opened our horizon to perceive realities that cannot be observed by the naked eye. Tantra to modern science is the on-going journey in our quest to understand the world as it is.

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