



Prakṛti And Puruṣa In Sāṃkhya Philosophy: A Survey

Raspoti Mandal

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Bangabasi College, Kolkata, India

ABSTRACT:

According to Sāṃkhya Philosophy prakṛti and puruṣa are two ultimate realities. They have their own independent existence. This is the reason why this philosophy is known as dualistic realism. Prakṛti stands for matter and puruṣa stands for self. Sāṃkhya is pluralistic because of its teaching that puruṣa is not one but many. The Sāṃkhya distinction between puruṣa and prakṛti is fundamentally that between the subject and the object. The subject can never be the object, and the object can never be the subject. The self and the non-self are radically different from each other. Thus, the dualistic metaphysics of Sāṃkhya is founded on the undeniably bipolar character of our everyday experience as made up of the experience and the experienced.

The Sāṃkhya recognizes twenty-five principles of reality. Of these an individual soul is neither a cause nor an effect. Causation is transformation of the gunas sattva, rajas, and tamas. The soul is not composed of them, and is therefore neither a cause nor an effect.

Prakṛti is the First Cause of the aggregate of all effects in the world. It is their ultimate cause, which is not the effect of any other cause. If it had any other cause, it would lead to infinite regress. Prakṛti is a cause but not an effect. It is not a modification of any other ultimate cause.

Keyword: Prakṛti, Three Gunas of prakṛti, The relationship between Prakṛti and the Gunas, Existence of prakṛti, Puruṣa, Existence of puruṣa. The Relation between puruṣa and prakṛti.

Introduction: Sāṃkhya is one of the six classical schools of Indian philosophy and is considered one of the oldest and most influential systems in Indian philosophical thought. It is traditionally attributed to the sage Kapila and is known for its dualistic approach, dividing reality into two fundamental principles: Puruṣa (consciousness or soul) and Prakṛiti (material cause). Puruṣa is the pure, passive consciousness or observer, unchanging and eternal. It represents the self or the spirit, which is beyond physical existence. Prakṛiti is the dynamic, unconscious material principle. It is the source of all physical existence and is responsible for the creation of the physical and mental world.

Prakṛti: The Nature and Characteristics of Prakṛiti in Sāṃkhyakārikā is described with various intrinsic characteristics. Prakṛiti is said to be

“हेतुमदनित्यमव्यापि सक्रियमनेकमाश्रितं लिङ्गम्।

सावयवं परतन्त्रं व्यक्तं विपरीतमव्यक्तम्॥”¹

‘Ahētusmat’ (unborn), ‘Nitya’ (eternal), ‘Avyakta’ (unmanifested), ‘Alinga’ (unmarked), ‘Vyapaka’ (all-pervasive), ‘Anāshṛita’ (unsupported), ‘Anavayava’ (without parts), ‘Svatantra’ (independent), ‘Triguṇa’ (composed of three qualities), ‘Avirodhi’ (non-oppositional), ‘Viṣaya’ (object), ‘Sāmānya’ (common), ‘Acetana’ (unconscious), and ‘Prasavadharmi’ (productive).

Key Characteristics:

1. Ahētumat (Unborn): All manifest entities have a material cause, but the ultimate unmanifested Prakṛiti has no such material cause. This implies that Prakṛiti is without origin, and because it has no cause, it cannot be destroyed by any cause, making it eternal.
2. Nitya (Eternal): As Prakṛiti has no origin or cause, it is eternal, existing perpetually without beginning or end.
3. Vyapaka (All-pervasive): Prakṛiti is the material cause of all effects. As the cause cannot be excluded from the effect, Prakṛiti is pervasive.
4. Anāshṛita (Unsupported): Prakṛiti does not depend on anything else for its existence, highlighting its autonomous nature.
5. Anavayava (Without Parts): Being all-pervasive and subtle, Prakṛiti has no physical parts or form.
6. Svatantra (Independent): Prakṛiti does not derive energy from anything else, indicating its independence.
7. Triguṇa (Composed of Three Gunas): Prakṛiti comprises three qualities—Sattva (goodness), Rajas (activity), and Tamas (inertia). These three qualities are inseparable from Prakṛiti, making it an integrated whole.
8. Avirodhi (Non-oppositional): The three Gunas are never separate from each other, hence Prakṛiti is free from internal contradictions.
9. Viṣaya (Object): Prakṛiti is the source of bondage for Puruṣa (the soul), making it the object of experience.
10. Sāmānya (Common): Prakṛiti serves as the object of experience for all Puruṣas (souls), making it a common entity.
11. Acetana (Unconscious): Prakṛiti, being material, is devoid of consciousness.
12. Prasava-dharmi (Productive): Prakṛiti is inherently active and perpetually produces changes. It cannot remain static for even a moment.
13. Avyakta (Unmanifested) and Alinga (Unmarked): Prakṛiti, in its ultimate state, is subtle and beyond direct perception, making it unmanifest and unmarked.

1. Shastri, Dr. Rakesh. *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Delhi: Sanskrit Granthagar, 1998, p-32.

These characteristics collectively define the complex and profound nature of Prakṛti in Sāṃkhya philosophy, which is the fundamental substance underlying all material existence.

We experience the world as constituted of multiple objects. The Sāṃkhya asks: what is the cause of these objects? A follower of Sāṃkhya answers by saying that prakṛti is the ultimate cause of all objects, including our body, senses, mind and intellect. We observe that every object is caused by other objects. Thus, curd is produced by milk, and cloth is produced from thread. However, according to the Sāṃkhya, milk and thread are only proximate, but not ultimate causes of curd and cloth. Sāṃkhya wants to know how milk and thread themselves come to be. More generally, the question is: what is the ultimate stuff of which the various objects of the world are made? Sāṃkhya answers that there must be some finest and subtlest stuff or principle underlying all physical existence. Prakṛti is that principle: it is the first and ultimate cause of all objects, which are gross and subtle. It is both the material and the efficient cause of the physical world. Being the ultimate cause. Prakṛti itself is uncaused, eternal, and all-pervading: and being the subtlest and finest, prakṛti cannot be perceived, but can only be inferred from its effects.

The Sāṃkhya argument for the existence of prakṛti is as follows: Every object of our experience is dependent upon and caused by other objects. Nothing arises out of nothing. In this manner, the whole physical world is a series of causes and effects. But, the Sāṃkhya continues, the series of causes and effects can only account for the arising of one object from another and cannot explain the fact of there being any objects at all. The existence of the physical world, then, must either remain an unfathomable mystery or be traced to a primordial cause. The first alternative is certainly unsatisfactory, since mystery cannot be a substitute for knowledge and the understanding of reality. Only the second alternative is in accordance with reason and experience. Thus, the Sāṃkhya infers prakṛti as the primal cause of all physical existence.

Three Gunas of prakṛti (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas): Prakṛti is the non-self and is devoid of consciousness and hence, of the puruṣa, the self. According to the Sāṃkhya, prakṛti is constituted of three 'gunas', namely, sattva, rajas, and tamas. The term guna ordinarily means quality or nature. But in the context of prakṛti, guna is to be understood in the sense of its constituent. Sattva is the component whose essence is purity, fineness, subtlety, lightness, brightness, and pleasure. It is sattva which is most closely associated with ego, consciousness, mind, and intelligence. It should be emphasized, however, that sattva is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for consciousness. This is because consciousness is exclusively the puruṣa. Rajas represents the principle of activity and motion. In material objects, rajas is responsible for motion and action of objects. In man, rajas is the cause of activity, restlessness and pain. Tamas is the constituent that manifests itself in material objects such as heaviness as well as opposition and resistance to motion and activity. In man, it is the cause of ignorance, coarseness, stupidity, laziness, lack of sensitivity and indifference.

It is important to note that the gunas constitute prakṛti as a dynamic complex and not a static entity. Prakṛti is thus not a mechanical aggregate of the three constituents, but an organic unity in which the three gunas not only oppose but are also dependent upon each other. On account of the homogeneous, non-mechanical,

organic unity of prakṛti, the gunas cannot be separated. This is another way of saying that prakṛti cannot be decomposed into the individual gunas, for otherwise gunas and not prakṛti would be the ultimate cause of all physical existence.

The relationship between Prakṛti and the Gunas: It is said in Sāṃkhya Pravacanasūtra with the statement —

“सत्त्वरजस्तमसां साम्यावस्था प्रकृतिः प्रकृतेर्महान् महतोऽहङ्कारोऽहङ्कारात् पञ्चतन्मात्राण्युभयमिन्द्रियं तन्मात्रेभ्यः स्थूलभूतानि पुरुष इति पञ्चविंशतिगण.”²

In other words, prakṛti is the balanced state of the three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas. These three Gunas constitute the essence or components of prakṛti. Beyond this equilibrium of the three Gunas, there is nothing else that can be called prakṛti. When no single Guna dominates the others, and they exist in equal measure, this state is known as prakṛti.

The Gunas are inherently dynamic and cannot remain unchanged even for a moment. Though they coexist, there is a constant struggle among them for dominance, leading to their transformation or evolution. This perpetual change in the Gunas is the cause of the evolution of prakṛti. During dissolution (Pralaya), each Guna undergoes change within itself without influencing the other Gunas. At that time, Sattva Guna transforms within itself, Rajas within itself, and Tamas within itself. No new phenomena arise in this state. Even though the Gunas continue to undergo changes, no movement or development is observed. This state is considered the inherent evolution of prakṛti.

However, when one Guna exerts influence over the others, the resulting transformations in the Gunas are referred to as the "adverse evolution" of prakṛti. This type of change leads to the predominance of one Guna over the others. For instance, when Sattva Guna overpowers Rajas and Tamas, it generates joy and lightness. Conversely, when Tamas Guna dominates Sattva and Rajas, it results in sorrow and inertia. It is due to this imbalance among the three Gunas that the world manifests and functions through the process of Mahat and the subsequent stages.

The discussion of the relationship between qualities (gunas) and prakṛti reveals that the equilibrium of the three gunas represents prakṛti. Although the three gunas are mutually opposed, they work together to achieve the same purpose, which is the bondage and liberation of the Purusha (spirit). Just as a lamp's oil and wick, though in opposition to fire, combine with it to produce light, similarly, the three gunas cooperate to manifest this world. However, a concern arises: if the equilibrium of the gunas is disturbed during creation, how can prakṛti be eternal? How can eternal prakṛti be subject to destruction? To address this concern, the scholar says that the equilibrium of sattva, rajas, and tamas gunas is what truly constitutes prakṛti “अकार्यावस्थोपलक्षितं गुणसामान्यं प्रकृतिरित्यर्थः।”³ Therefore, sattva, rajas, and tamas gunas are fundamentally prakṛti itself.

2. Bhattacharya, Dr. Shree Ramshankar. *Sāṃkhyasutram*. Baranasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 2022, p- 44.

3. Bhattacharya, Dr. Shree Ramshankar. *Sāṃkhyasutram*. Baranasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 2022, p- 44.

Existence of Prakṛti: The Sāṃkhya infers the existence of prakṛti from the complex and manifold products in the universe. Īśvarakṛṣṇa argues for the existence of prakṛti on the following grounds.

“भेदानां परिमाणात्, समन्वयत्वात् शक्तितः प्रवृत्तेश्च ।
कारणकार्यविभागादविभागाद् वैश्वरूप्यस्य ॥”⁴

1. Individual things manifest to our experience are caused, and depend upon other causes which contain them in a latent condition. The cause must contain at least as much reality as the effect contains. Every effect has a cause. Therefore, the ultimate cause of the whole universe must be uncaused. Prakṛti is the uncaused cause of the whole world of effects which are its modifications.
2. Individual things are transient and dissolved into their material causes. Therefore, the ultimate material cause of the whole universe is eternal. Prakṛti is the ultimate material cause into which the whole world is dissolved, which is never dissolved into a more primal cause. While individual things are transient, prakṛti, the ultimate cause, is eternal.
3. Individual things are non-pervasive or limited in magnitude. An effect is pervaded by its cause, but a cause is not pervaded by its effect. A cause must contain more reality than its effect; or, at least, it must contain as much reality as its effect does. Therefore, the ultimate cause of the whole universe must be all-pervasive. Prakṛti is the ubiquitous cause of the finite effects.
4. Individual things are active, mobile, and subject to change and mutation. Therefore, the ultimate cause of the universe is inactive and immobile. Prakṛti is subject to transformation, but devoid of motion.
5. Individual things are manifold, conditioned, determined, composed of parts, subordinate, and manifest. Therefore, the ultimate cause of the universe is one, unconditioned, indeterminate, devoid of parts, independent, and unmanifest.

Individual effects are manifold, while prakṛti is one. They subsist in their causes, while prakṛti does not subsist in any other cause. They are determinate, while prakṛti is indeterminate. They are composed of parts, while prakṛti is partless. They are differentiated and heterogeneous, while prakṛti is undifferentiated and homogeneous. They are subordinate to prakṛti, while prakṛti is self-subsistent and independent. prakṛti is the matrix of the whole psycho-physical universe-the first cause of matter, life, mind (manas), intellect (buddhi) and egoism (ahaṃkāra). The unintelligent world cannot be a transformation of an intelligent principle, since spirit cannot be transformed into matter.

Puruṣa: Iswarkrishna's 'Samkhyakarika' is said to be-

त्रिगुणमविवेकि विषयः सामान्यमचेतनं प्रसवधर्मि ।
व्यक्तं तथा प्रधानं, तद्विपरीतस्तथा च पुमान् ॥”⁵

4. Shastri, Dr. Rakesh. *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Delhi: Sanskrit Granthagar, 1998, p-51.

5. Shastri, Dr. Rakesh. *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Delhi: Sanskrit Granthagar, 1998, p-38.

The manifest principle is characterized by sattva, rajas, and tamas, making it inseparable from the three gunas. It is capable of being perceived by many, meaning it is an object of enjoyment or a subject, insentient, and subject to change. The unmanifest or Prakṛiti is similar in nature. However, despite being of a similar nature, Puruṣa or consciousness is the opposite of both the manifest and unmanifest principles.

Sāṃkhya says that like prakṛti, puruṣa cannot be perceived. Consequently, the existence of the latter, like that of the former, is inferred. First and foremost, one's own existence is the most indubitable and incontrovertible an experience that one cannot deny without self-contradiction. It would be absurd to be able to doubt one's own existence, for the very act of doubting presupposes the doubter. Thus, the Sāṃkhya concludes, the existence of the self is remarkably similar to the Cartesian dictum 'I think therefore I am.' There is however a difference between the two. Whereas for Descartes, thinking is the attribute of the self, for the Sāṃkhya, the self is not something which has attributes, but is pure consciousness itself. According to the Sāṃkhya, thinking belongs to the internal organ but not to the self. It would seem, then, that what Descartes calls the self or I is not the self of Sāṃkhya but the ego. The second argument of the Sāṃkhya for the existence of self is based on linguistic consideration. When someone says, 'I am fat', he is not saying that his self is fat but that his body is. In this manner, our feeling of the distinction between the self and the body is reflected in our language. The third argument is expressly teleological. This says that the evolution of prakṛti into the various objects, subtle and gross, would be pointless if it did not serve any purpose. Each object of the physical world serves as a means to the realization of someone or other. In short, the evolution of prakṛti is for the sake of puruṣa. The Sāṃkhya further supports this observation by saying that the very fact that the first products of evolution, namely, mahat, ahamkara, and manas, are aids to conscious life requires us to infer that there must be conscious subjects whose ends govern the order of the evolution of prakṛti. The fourth argument for the existence of self consists in drawing our attention to the fact that men, notwithstanding their ignorance and capacity for evil, feel the urge for self-perfection, and saying that such a spiritual urge and impulse would be inexplicable if there did not exist a subject seeking perfection. Therefore, the Sāṃkhya argues, there must exist a conscious subject striving for perfection.

Sāṃkhya believes in the plurality of puruṣas, selves. For this reason, Sāṃkhya is pluralistic. Sāṃkhya defends the plurality of selves from the fact of the existence of men as distinct and unique individuals. The distinctness and uniqueness of them from each other is in turn supported by the undeniable fact of mental and moral differences between them. In short, the two men are not mentally and morally identical. Therefore, the Sāṃkhya concludes, there must be distinct selves.

We may note that the Sāṃkhya argument for the plurality of selves is open to the following objections: if selves are not perceivable but are transcendent subjects, how is the Sāṃkhya entitled to claim the plurality of selves from the fact of the plurality of empirical individuals? Another serious objection against the Sāṃkhya theory of the self-concerns its pervasiveness. If selves are many, what does it mean to say that each of them is all-pervading? If all-pervading is taken to mean being simultaneously present everywhere, then it is hard to see how a self that at a certain time is associated with a certain body can also be associated at the same time with

other bodies. In other words, the Sāṁkhya assumption that the self is all pervading is incompatible with its claim of the plurality of the selves.

Existence of puruṣa: Argument of Sāṁkhyakāra in proving the existence of puruṣa —

“संघातपरार्थत्वात् त्रिगुणादिविपर्ययादधिष्ठानात्।
पुरुषोऽस्ति भोक्तृभावात् कैवल्यार्थं प्रवृत्तेश्च॥”⁶

1. Sāṅghāta-parārthatvāt (Purpose of Composite Objects): Everything in prakṛti is a combination or composite of the three qualities (guṇas). Anything composite exists to serve the purpose of something else. Hence, prakṛti must exist to serve a separate, non-composite entity, which is the puruṣa. This puruṣa is a pure, conscious entity, and its purpose is fulfilled by prakṛti.
2. Tri-guṇādi-viparyayāt (Discrimination of the Three Guṇas): The existence of the puruṣa is inferred because, without a pure, non-mixed, indivisible, and formless entity, the existence of a mixed, three-guṇa entity (prakṛti) cannot be understood. When there is an object (dṛśya), there must be an observer (draṣṭā), and only a conscious entity can be an observer. Hence, there must be a pure conscious observer, which is the puruṣa.
3. Adhiṣṭhānāt (Basis for Prakṛti’s Activity): Just as an unconscious chariot cannot move without a conscious charioteer, similarly, prakṛti cannot function in an orderly manner without a conscious puruṣa. The purposeful transformation and regulation of prakṛti indicate the presence of a conscious puruṣa guiding these processes.
4. Bhokṣṭṛ-bhāvāt (Experience of Joy and Sorrow): We experience joy, sorrow, and other emotions. These experiences imply the existence of an experiencer or enjoyer. Since prakṛti and its derivatives (like intellect and ego) are all inert and unconscious, they cannot experience anything. Therefore, a conscious puruṣa must exist as the experiencer.
5. Kaivalyārtham Pravṛtṭeḥ (Striving for Liberation): The effort to attain liberation from the bondage of prakṛti would be meaningless if there were no conscious entity separate from prakṛti. Since unconscious matter cannot strive for anything, the striving for liberation implies the existence of a conscious puruṣa that seeks freedom from the bondage of prakṛti.

The Relation between puruṣa and prakṛti: According to the Sāṁkhya, prakṛti is unconscious; and prior to evolution, it is in a state of dynamic equilibrium in which the three guṇas exist in perfect balance. Further, prakṛti cannot itself initiate evolution, but requires contact with puruṣa. Only by coming into relation with puruṣa that prakṛti can begin to evolve. If, as the Sāṁkhya teaches, prakṛti and puruṣa are absolutely different, how can they interact? If puruṣa is wholly inactive and unchanging, how can it initiate the evolution of prakṛti? The Sāṁkhya’s answer to this question is very unsatisfactory; for all that the Sāṁkhya has to say in reply to this objection is that prakṛti and puruṣa are like a lame man and a blind man who can harmoniously cooperate

6. Shastri, Dr. Rakesh. *Sāṁkhyakārikā*. Delhi: Sanskrit Granthagar, 1998, p-56.

to find their way out of a jungle. But this is not an argument but merely an analogy. In the absence of any other reply to this objection, the relation between prakṛti and puruṣa shown by Sāṃkhya remains a total mystery.

Conclusion: Prakṛti is constituted by the three guṇas of sattva, rajas and tamas. It is said to be the unity of guṇas held in a state of equilibrium. The second type of ultimate reality admitted by the Sāṃkhya is the self. The existence of the self must be admitted by all. Everybody feels and asserts that he or she exists, and has this or that thing belonging to him or her. The feeling of one's own existence is the most natural and indubitable experience that we all have. In fact, no one can consistently deny the existence of his self, for the act of denial presupposes the reality of the denying self. So, it has been said by the Sāṃkhyas that the self exists, because it is self-manifest and its non-existence cannot be proved in any way. According to Radhakrishnan 'It is through the light emanating from puruṣa that we see that there is such a thing as prakṛiti. Consciousness of puruṣa thus, though physically mediated, is not physically explained by the Sāṃkhya as it is with the Nyāya'.

Western science has tried to prove that the conscious mind is the result of the actions of the unconscious mind, but Western science cannot explain how the mind is like consciousness, Sāṃkhya has explained it. This happens when prakṛiti is reflected in puruṣa, the consciousness of the soul superimposed on the material prakṛiti. Thus, the witness- puruṣa forgets himself. prakṛiti's thoughts, actions are mistaken as its own. Getting rid of this illusion is the liberation of the puruṣa.

Bibliography:

1. Bhattacharya, Dr. Shree Ramshankar. *Sāṃkhyasutram*. Baranasi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 2022.
2. Bhikshu, Shri Vijnana. *Samkhya Darshan with Commentary of Vijnana Bhikshu*. Varanasi: Chaukhamba Prakashan, 2008.
3. Banerji, Sh Chandra. *Sankhya Philosophy*. Culcutta: R. Dutt, 1898.
4. Chatterjee, Satischandra & Datta, Dhirendramohan. *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*. Kolkata: University of Culcutta, 2011.
5. Keith, Berrierdale. *The History of Samkhya Philosophy*. Scotland: Nag Publication, 1987.
6. Raghuramaraju, A. *Philosophy and India*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.
7. Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy (Vol-2)*. UK: Oxford University Press, 2012.
8. Shastri, Dr. Rakesh. *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Delhi: Sanskrit Granthagar, 1998.
9. Sinha, Jadunath. *Indian Philosophy (Vol-1)*. London: NCBA, 2012.
10. Tripathi, Ramasankara. *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Baranasi: Balakrishna Tripathi, 1970.
11. Hiriyanna, M. *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993.