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PRAKRTI IN THE UPANISADS : A STUDY

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Prakrti is an important topic found in different system of Indian thought and also in other branches of Sanskrit literature. The word Prakrti has different meaning. According to Puranic Encyclopaedia : (1) Pra means 'Principal' and 'krti' means creation. Therefore the word is meant to convey the meaning 'one that is principal factor for creation'. (2) 'Pra' means 'sattvic', 'kr' means 'rajasic' and 'ti' means tamasic and the word Prakrti conveys the power of the three gunas. (3) 'Pra' means 'before' and 'krti' means creation and so Prakrti means that which existed before creation.

Before creation Prakrti lay merged with the spirit without separate existence. But when the desire for creation was aroused this Supreme Spirit divided itself into Prakrti and Purusa.¹

According to *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, "In the course of creation Nature is said to have assumed five forms, viz, Durga, Radha, Lakshmi, Sarasvati and Sabitri. There 'Pra' means competent, and 'krti' means creation. She is expert in creation and is therefore styled Nature. According to Sruti, 'Pra' means the property of virtue, 'kri' means the principle of activity and 'ti' is the principle of ignorance. She, therefore, who is all powerful, vested with the above three attribute and pre-eminently gifted with the faculty of creation, is styled Prakrti or Nature. 'Pra' means first, and 'krti' means creation. The primordial cause of creation is therefore called Prakrti or Nature."²

According to Theor Bernard - Prakrti is a Sanskrit word composed of the prefix pra, 'before or first' and the root kr, 'to make or produce'. Here the term means that which existed before anything was produced, the primary source of all things, the original substance out of which all things have come and into which all things eventually return. It is also called Pradhana "Primary matter", and avyakta, "non-manifest matter".³

Prakrti is treated as the ultimate cause of this universe in Samkhya system. It is the fundamental substratum out of which the world evolves. Prakrti is the equilibrium state of the three Gunas.⁴ Prakrti has no cause, but it is the cause of all effects from which it is inferred.⁵ It is the root cause of this manifested world. In Samkhya system, Prakrti and Avyakta are said to be identical. Sometimes Prakrti is called Pradhana⁶ or Mula Prakrti. Lokacarya writes that it is called Prakrti, it is the source of all change, avidya, since it is opposed to all knowledge; maya, since it is the cause of varied creation.⁷



Reference of Prakrti is found in the *Bhagavadgita* also. In *Bhagavadgita*, Prakrti is called Mahad-Brahma⁸. It is said that Prakrti is described as being like the female part which God charges with His energy for the creation of the Universe. Whenever any living being may be born, the Prakrti is to be considered as the female part and God as the father and fertiliser.⁹

Prakrti is found to have been treated in most of the Puranas. The *Bhagavat Purana*, *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, *Visnu Purana*, *Markandeya Purana*, *Matsya Purana* may be specially mentioned.

In *Bhagavat Purana*, we can see an elaborate description of Prakrti. Here, Prakrti is also called Pradhana, and it is unmanifest, homogenous and eternal. It believes Prakrti to be the cause of this Universe, and this creative principle is moved into action through the influence of time by the will and thought of transcendental Purusa.¹⁰

Besides this, we find a description of Prakrti in the *Visnu Purana*.¹¹

*Brahmavaivarta Purana*¹² presents a vivid picture of Prakrti with different meanings.¹²

Moreover references of Prakrti are found in the *Matsya Purana*¹³, *Brahma Purana*,¹⁴ and *Markandeya Purana*.¹⁵

In *Mahabharata* too, Prakrti is mentioned. Again *Ahimbudhnya Samhita*, *Carak Samhita* etc. contain description of Prakrti.

The reference of Prakrti is abundantly found in the Upanisads.

The Prakrti which is Avyakta is the cause that evolves the world in a series of categories like Buddhi, Ahankara, Manas etc. The cause is endowed with the three Gunas, which stand for three elements of Nature.¹⁶

The idea of the gradual development of the world from the womb of some unconscious, unmanifest principle is also present in the philosophy of the Upanisads.¹⁷

Words like Pradhana, Prakrti, Avyakta are used directly or indirectly in the later Upanisad.¹⁸ In this Upanisad we have a reference of the one unborn red, white and black from which the Universe proceed.¹⁹

The word 'Aja' in the fifth verse of the fourth chapter of *Svetasvatara Upanisad* implies the origin of the conception of Prakrti which is constituted with the three gunas of Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. The meaning of the verse²⁰ is : There is one unborn red, white, and black who gives birth to many creatures like herself. An unborn (male) becomes attached to her and enjoys her, while another unborn (male) leaves her after his enjoyment is completed.

The conception of the Prakrti is contained in the verse ajamekam. The female referred to in the verse may be ascertained as Prakrti for Nature and the three colours may be considered as representing three Gunas or constituents of Prakrti, known as sattva, rajas and tamas. Speaking in a wide sense, it implies one she-goat with three colours - red, white and black and bringing forth many offspring of its own form. There is one he-goat who enjoys her in love and the other he-goat abandons her after his enjoyment. The underlying meaning of the verse is : the one she-goat is nothing but the Prakrti, Samkhya also holds that Prakrti is one and unborn. The Upanisad also mentions the term 'aja' elsewhere where too it is clear from the context that it stands for the Prakrti for otherwise she-goat does not form the subject matter of discussion.

Again, Prakrti as is well-known is constituted by the three Gunas which are represented in the said verse by the three colours - red, white and black. According to Samkhya, Prakrti with its three Gunas goes on changing in every moment resulting in innumerable modifications. These result in the manifestation of the particular formations of the Gunas of the Prakrti and which are in fact not different from them. Thus the unborn Prakrti also is said to be producing many offspring of its own form.

The said verse of the Upanisad is very much appreciated by the Samkhya philosophers. According to them, there are ultimate principles viz., Purusa and Prakrti. The proximity of the Purusa which is pure consciousness activates Prakrti. Prakrti consists of the three Gunas.

There are on the other hand innumerable consciousness or conscious entities. A Purusa comes under the spell of Prakrti for the real nature and become attached to the world of matter. After repeated experience of material pleasures he at last become satiated with them and relinquishes the world. But Prakrti casts her spell over other Purusa, thus the cosmic process continues. It should be stated that Prakrti serves as deluder and liberator.

In the first chapter of this Upanisad, we get the word "devatmasaktim"²¹ which means the power that is identical with the deity. The word 'devatmasaktism' shows that Brahman itself can neither be the cause or non-cause of the universe. It is his power called Maya, which the sages saw as the cause of the world. This power (maya) is not independent as the Samkhya Philosophy holds, but depends upon the Supreme soul, as the expression "atmasaktim" clearly shows, which means (God's) 'own power'. So, according to Vedanta philosophy Maya, under the guidance of the Supreme Being creates the universe. When Brahman is spoken of as a creator, He is not then the real Brahman, but phenomenal Brahman, which consists of real Brahman being apparently limited by the destruction (Upadhi) of maya. So, it is the phenomenal Brahman (also called Isvara) which governs the various causes of the world.²²

According to Sankrabhasya of *Svetasvatara Upanisad*, Brahman and Maya have co-existed from everlasting and



their association and union is eternal. Apart from Maya, Brahman is purely characterless and indeterminate, and is not to be regarded as the principle from which things emanate. When the world is said to emanate from Brahman, we are always to understand that it proceeds not from Brahman, but from Brahman reflected upon Maya.²³

In the fourth chapter of the Svetasvatropanisad "mayam tu prakrtim" describing God as the Lord of Maya. This indicates that the Prakrti is an entity dependent upon the Supreme Being. Prakrti is the material cause or source of the Universe. The material cause technically known as maya.²⁴ Avyaktam is also maya, the original germinal condition of the Universe when it is neither manifested in name nor in form.²⁵ Pradhanam means Maya or Prakrti the cause on which are placed, as it were, various illusory form ether etc.²⁶

In the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad we get the idea of the food and the eater of the food and further it is the Purusa who is mentioned there as the eater of the food. According to Samkhya, Prakrti is the enjoyable and the Purusa is the enjoyer and this idea has a similarity with the idea of the food and the eater of the food as mentioned above.²⁷

Some critics are of the opinion that certain other passages in the Upanisads are the origin of the conception of Avyakta in the Samkhya Philosophy. "Annam which is described as of all empirical things and beings in Mundakopanisad appears as Prakrti in the philosophy of the Samkhya system, and this doctrine of the reality of the world is further supported by the aphorism collected from the Chandogya, the Svetasvatara, the Brhadaranyaka and the Maitrayani Upanisad.²⁸

The Mundakopanisad states that Brahman, the source of creation, when desirous of creating this world, increases in size. From that Brahman, this unmanifested enjoyable vast Prakrti or food comes out. From that unmanifested food was born Prana or Hiranyagarbha, who is common to all the beings in the universe. He is also called Sutratma.²⁹

The references of food philosophy are also found in the Taittiriyaopanisad We are told : "All beings that dwell on the earth are verily born from food. Moreover by food alone they live. And then also into it they pass at the end."³⁰

In Maitrayani Upanisad also Prakrti is described as the food and the inner self as the eater.³¹ Again in this Upanisad we get some idea of Prakrti in the following passages:

"In the beginning there had been only tamas, it rested on the supreme (Purusa) and being moved by Him - it becomes uneven and thus it becomes rajas; rajas also being moved becomes uneven and thus it becomes Sattva. This Sattva being moved, the essence was generated. It is the part which is consciousness. It is the knower of the

body (ksetrajna) abiding in every Purusa and is attested with determination, willing and egoism."³² This tamas is treated as Prakrti by some commentators.

Kathopanisad is one of the oldest Upanisad. In this Upanisad the word Avyakta is used in three verses.³³ Though Avyakta and Prakrti are one and the same in classical Samkhya, in the Upanisads their meanings differ. It is not clear whether the author of the Kathopanisad meant that this category was constituted by the three Gunas - Sattva, Rajas and Tamas.

The Samkhya scholars hold that the unmanifested principle (Avyakta) of this Upanisad means Prakrti or Pradhana, the independent principle. Sankaracarya discussed this view in the Vedanta Sutra,³⁴ and attempted to prove from the context that the unmanifested principle is not the Pradhana of Samkhya but the world fiction Maya, which is the body of Isvara, the body out of which all things emanate

The three Gunas were first of all mentioned in the Chandogyaopanisad as the three elements of fire, water and earth which exists in all things.³⁵ "yadagne rohitam tadrupam" etc. is only an earlier form of the Sattva, Rajas and Tamas of the Samkhya philosophy. The redness of fire indicates Rajas, just as red colour colours cloth etc., so Rajas colours citta, because of its property of activity, the whiteness of water indicates Sattva, because white water has the property of purifying things, Sattva also purifies the mind with knowledge. The dark colour of earth indicates Tamas. The dark colour covers everything. Even so, the insentient Tamas covers the knowledge born of Sattva. This very thing is propounded in the Mantra (ajamekam). The trivrtkarna Sruti found in the Chandogyaopanisad also corroborates this opinion. We also see that this word "Trivrt" has been used in the sense of three attributes in Svetasvatropanisad.

In Chandogyaopanisad, we read "It thought May I be many may grow forth. It sent forth fire, that fire thought, May I be many, may I grow forth. It sent forth water. That water thought, may I be many may I grow forth. It sent forth food....." This tripartite creation is then related in puzzling manner to three colours in the Chandogyaopanisad. Whatever form fire has it is the form of heat, whatever is white, it is the form of water, whatever is dark, it is the form of earth. Here again, of course, one thinks of the process of emergence of Prakrti.³⁶

Besides these, there are some minor Upanisads which contain the references of Prakrti. Among these, Paingalopanisad defines Prakrti as indefinable, consisting of three Gunas.³⁷ Sarvasaropanisad calls it maya, as beginningless, neither real nor unreal.³⁸ Again Niralamopanisad calls that Prakrti is the power of Brahman.³⁹ Mahanarayano-opanisad defines Prakrti as unborn, and also consisting of three Gunas.⁴⁰

In the Upanisads, we can see Brahman or God as the basic principle, Prakrti or Maya is a mode of God. It is the



power of God that is identical with Him. As the Prakrti is the power of Brahman and the Brahman being eternal, the Prakrti is also eternal. Prakrti thus occupies an important place in the Upanisads.

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