

Greek and Indian thoughts some Interpretations: Gnosticism and Smkhya

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Abstract

Here in this paper the argument and discussion about similarities and resemblances about the thought and system of two great philosophies namely Gnosticism of Greece and Samkhya of India in ancient times. It is very surprising to find many resemblances between the two. Like if we find the aim and purpose of the soul to come on earth is very same in these systems, we can trace various aspects like this which have the same ideology about the life and its process on earth. In fact it is very interesting to find out these similarities in so far land on earth.

Keywords: Asceticism, Gnosticism, Smkhya, Pneuma, Psyche, Upanisad, Purush, Prakriti.

Introduction

One Indian thought system does analyze the nature of the human being in a way reminiscent of the Gnostic contrast between psyche and pneuma. This is Samkhya one of the six major Indian philosophical systems, which also serve as the theological underpinning for the practical discipline of Yoga. The earliest systematic formulation of Samkhya as now known occurs in the Samkhya Karika, a work dating from perhaps the 5th century A.D. But elements of the system can already be found in a few passages from the middle and later Upanisads and in the Bhagavad Gita and Moksadharmas. 1

According to Samkhya, this world is composed of a multiplicity of souls (Purus) bound to matter (prakriti). Prakriti contains in itself not only inanimate matter, but also mental and emotional life. On the other hand, Purusha is pure consciousness, it does not participate in life, but is only a spectator of it. Though associated with prakriti, it is essentially isolated and uncontaminated by it. Samkhya recognizes no supreme being. It knows no all-encompassing single Purusha or otherworldly One to serve as transcendental component of the individual soul. Salvation in the Samkhya system occurs when a person, by means of intelligence (buddhi), comprehends that his true nature is consciousness (i.e. purusha), which is essentially independent of prakriti.

Purusha is not identical in nature with the Upanisadic atman, though both words may be translated as "soul" or "self". Although some passages of the Upanisads treat atman as the pure, abstract subject of consciousness, atman is also the life-giving power, the essence of the total person. In the case of purusha, its most essential feature is alienation from life- i.e., isolation and non-involvement. In this it closely resembles the Gnostic pneuma. Both pneuma and purusha are associated (in Gnostic terminology: "entrapped") with bodies which by nature are their complete antitheses. Gnosticism explained this alienation as the result of a complete cosmic pre-history: the mythological drama which brought the world into being. Samkhya's creation-story is less elaborate. The original proximity of prakriti and purusha brought about an imbalance among the three gunas (i.e. the components of matter), thus producing the manifold earthly phenomena. The process is a kind of mechanical interaction, which is in no way the consequence of (a deity's) conscious decision. According to Sedlar, the purpose of creation was to provide the purushas, which are subjects of consciousness, with objects to perceive, i.e. with "enjoyments" and secondly to make possible the purushas' liberation from their bondage to matter. 2

Aim of the Study

This study is about spirituality and inner voice of soul. Here we are talking about the civilizations which are so far in geographical manners but very close to spiritual manners. Greece and India both are very ancient



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Civilizations and most of the countries of Europe claims that they belong to the great civilization of ancient Greece. This is the time to consider world as a whole and all the forms of religion are connected or taken or given something to each other. In the light of the present scenario we have to find traces of interexchange of ideas from one place to other only than we can understand our world as a whole .Hope that study will bring some more light to the spiritual and philosophical study of present scholars.

Some times it is very much important to find about some new things in some type of different places. In this phase of study while all world is considered as a one single unit we have to put our study in the light of the above said thought . Lets have some more argument on this topic of interest of two far places India and Greece

Like Gnosticism, Samkhya is a system of individual salvation. Moreover, it provides theoretical justification for Yoga, the characteristically Indian method of physical and mental discipline by which the practitioner may eventually attain the ultimate mystic state. Indeed, Indian texts often refer to Samkhya and Yoga as the two halves of one single system. By contrast, Gnosticism never became associated with a sophisticated ascetic discipline.

But Samkhya and Gnosticism resemble each other in that both emphasize "knowledge" as the true path to salvation. Gnostics spoke of the "awakening" of the pneuma, while Samkhya regards knowledge as arising in the material half of existence, the buddhi (intelligence) which is the first and highest evolute of prakriti. Classical Samkhya moreover gave a partially rationalist interpretation to "knowledge": it analyzed the three forms of knowledge as perception, inference and authority.³ Even so, the ultimate knowledge-knowledge of the purity of purusha and the falsity of its association with prakriti-could hardly have been originally a logical determination. More probably, the categories enumerated by the Samkhya-Karika are the rationalist explanations of what was originally a mystic intuition, an "awakening" similar in nature to Gnosis.

The point of departure for classical Samkhya, as for Buddhism and less explicitly for Gnosticism, is the interpretation of earthly life as an inevitable condition of suffering and torment. ⁴Thus, the object of religion is to procure release from suffering, which in turn requires spiritual alienation from the affairs of this world. Suffering is the direct result of involvement in worldly concerns-an involvement metaphysically explained in Samkhya as the association of purusha and prakriti, in Gnosticism as the "drunkenness" or "numbness" produced in the pneuma through its contacts with material life. Salvation is defined in negative term as "isolation" (Kaivalya) or release from bondage. Samkhya differs fundamentally from Gnosticism in that it lacks the figure of a divine redeemer who transmits to humankind the knowledge of the path to salvation. Furthermore, the multiple purushas of Samkhya possess no transcendental counterpart, because the system recognizes no supreme being. However, on this point its difference from Gnosticism is essentially

one of degree. The Gnostic high God is so vastly removed from all relation to the world that he is, ineffect, absent. The resultant human feeling of world-alienation, so pronounced in Gnosticism, is if anything even more extreme in Samkhya. Not only is each purusha unrelated to any other, it is also without relation to God. It has no heavenly "home" to which it may ultimately hope to return.

But in the final analysis-despite the differing traditions from which they arose-Samkhya and Gnosticism present remarkably similar responses to the human condition. In both systems the innermost nature of the human being is considered totally alien to every ordinary aspect of life. The soul is a foreigner on this earth, ill-at ease in the universe it inhabits. The highest object of human ambition consists in discovering "true" being - a being as far removed as it is possible to be from all human affairs. ⁵

In the beginning the scholars were inclined to find out the similarities between the Greek philosophy and the Samkhya system found were listed previously. Sir Willaim Jones ⁶ has represented the statements made by the earlier scholars. According to him Kapila corresponds with Pythagoras and Patanjali with Zeno. Many other contemporary writers have also made the similar statements regarding the importance of Oriental influence specially of Samkhya on Greek philosophy but such statement had not been supported by any comparative study. ⁷

Garbe endeavored to make the analysis about the exact nature of the views expressed by the philosophers in Greece and there effects in India. He has also tried to determine the specific Samkhya views as different from those principles which are the common features of different schools of Indian philosophy. Grabe was the first philosopher who has stretched the need for finding out the probability of influence from India reaching Greek philosophers. He also kept in mind the consideration at the time of studying a question of the exchange of ideas between the distant countries. ⁸

Grabe's opinions about the correlation between Samkhya and Greek philosophy led to a lively discussion between him ⁹. Keith ¹⁰ and Oldenberg.

Keith in his history of Samkhya philosophy admits the probability of Samkhya elements in Gnosticism but does not determine such parallels to be of definite help in finding the date of a real Samkhya.

J.W. Sedlar ¹¹ has made the use of earlier studies to make reasonable prepositions about the relation between Samkhya and Greek philosophy. According to him there is a close relation in the doctrine of metempsychosis in Greek philosophy with the common philosophical heritage of India of which Upanisads, Buddhism and Samkhya alike partake. He analyses with keen understanding the relevant features of Gnosticism¹². According to him, there is a great likelihood for Gnostic system to have been influenced by Samkhya, he adds that no single Indian system can be considered as its complete counterpart; rather it has analogies with many,

namely, Upanisads, Bhagavad-Gita, Samkhya and Buddhism.

The only author to add new information about the Brahmanas is St. Hippolytos, bishop of Rome, who belonged to the first half of the third century. He possibly received it from south India, which was open through sea-route, though the overland route was violently snapped on account of political disturbances. His logos is Light, God or Brahman and tallies with atman in the Upanisads. His account resembles the teaching in the Maitry Upanisad. He speaks of Kenodoxia (vain opinion of abhimana), which may be identified with ahankara in Samkhya 13.

We may say, in the case of Gnosticism it has been admitted that, before its appearance as a coherent system in the second century A.D., its direct antecedents cannot be identified, though we may find isolated motifs and the use of the term gnosis in a wider sense. There being no clear indication of the existence of Gnosticism in the first century A.D., the probability of Indian example causing the efflorescence of Gnosticism is strengthened¹⁴. The case of Egypt or any country other than Indian providing the stimulus for these features has not been seriously advocated¹⁵. It is admitted on all hands that the ideas under study are characteristic mostly of Indian systems, situations and thinking pattern.

The earliest available Samkhya text is the Samkhya-Karika of Isvarakrsna. Even the earliest date suggested for this text would create a chronological impasse for the Samkhya influence to permeate to Greek philosophy. The latest in the group of Greek tradition to show Samkhya influence are the Gnostics and the Neo-Platonists. Gnosticism, as a full blown system, belongs to the second century A.D., but is not seen before the beginning of the Christian era¹⁶. As against this, Isvarakrsna is generally placed in the early fourth century A.D.¹⁷ though some people suggest as early a date as the first century¹⁸. Thus, the Samkhya elements in Greek thought could not have been derived from the Samkhya-Karika.

The Samkhya philosophy is correctly reputed to be the oldest in India. Though the claims for tracing its elements in the early Vedic literature may be disputed, it is admitted that it has a long career before Isvarakrsna standardized it. Likewise, Samkhya influence on origins of Buddhism may be debated, but its contemporaneity with early Buddhism is admitted. Efforts have been made to demonstrate that, notwithstanding some retouching and interpolations, the Samkhya-Pravacana-sutra or Samkhya-sadadyay and Tattvasamasasutra are among the earliest Samkhya text which possibly was written by Kapila himself or by Pancasikha¹⁹. Early versions of Samkhya philosophy are known to occur in the middle Upanisads, Mahabharata, Gita, Asvaghosa's Buddhacarita and Carakasamhita²⁰. The treatment of the history of Samkhya requires considerable reformulation on account of the clear proof that the Devaladharmasutra contained a detailed and authentic account of Samkhya principles. Quotations from Pancasikha are also known to occur in later works.

That these accounts of Samkhya preceded the Samkhya-Karika by many centuries is too well known to require arguing.

Many ideas and expressions occurring in Gnostic writings are known to be the characteristic features of Samkhya. Such parallelisms are not confined to the text of Samkhya-Karika. Even in the case of Samkhyakarika the possibility cannot be ruled out that the parallels were preserved traditionally and were adapted by Isvarakrsna from earlier sources. A closer scrutiny of the Samkhya system found in texts which can be dated before the Samkhyakarika shows a closer similarity in a still larger number of cases. The Gnostic tenet of personal existence of intellect, will etc. is to be connected with the Samkhya doctrine of independent existence of Buddhi, Manas, and Citta³³. Of these we may make a special mention of the Devaladharmasutra, the Upanisadic texts, the Moksadharmaparva section in the Shantiparva of the Mahabharata and the Gita. The dates of these texts are not settled. It is generally agreed that they are based on much old material which may be placed in the fifth fourth centuries, though their present and final form was fixed as late as the second-third centuries of the Christian eras. Hence, we will not be far from realities of the case, if we take these texts generally to belong to the period roughly from the second century B.C. to the first century of the Christian era. Chronologically this suits the suggestion that the novel features in the Gnostic philosophy were the results of Samkhya influence.

The view of Gnosticism about coming of the soul on this earth has been defined in the Purusha and "Prakriti" of Samkhya. Here purusha is pure consciousness and after assimilating with "prakriti" and matter has forgotten its divine origin. "Purusha" is tied in fatters of earthly allurements from where it can be free through yoga, meditation and intelligence of knowledge.

Conclusion

In the light of the above study we see that there were vivid similarities in the philosophy involved between the ancient India and Greece. There were great similarities between Samkhya one of the six orthodox philosophies of India and the Gnosticism of Greece. "Purusha" in Samkhya in India and Pnuma in Gnosticism of Greece are the similar terms. Both are of the opinion that the soul comes to the earth from almighty and getting influenced by the worldly allurements it forgets that it is the part of the divine and at the end it becomes one with Him. The soul can go back to the divine through the medium of intelligence and knowledge after being detached from this world and yoga is the other medium of it.

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