

# Is Darkness Matter, or Does That Matter?

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Whether darkness (*tamas*) is a substance or a lack of light was a popular topic in Indian philosophy, discussed by many. In the essay “Shadows: The ontology of Contoured Darkness,” Arindam Chakrabarti illuminates the philosophical significance of the ontology of shadow (or darkness). Chakrabarti is evidently very familiar with most of the discourse surrounding the shadow/darkness in Indian philosophy, but he does not present the original sources much. This paper rather focuses on the history of the discussion; the weight is put on the context how it came to be discussed and why someone chose one side or the other. Additionally, a different picture from that of Chakrabarti with regard to the early Advaita view on the topic is presented.

The Vaiśeṣikas were probably the first to be interested in the issue of the darkness’ position in their categories. Their sūtra (5.2.21) explicitly excludes darkness from being a substance (*dravyas*). However, they—along with the Naiyāyikas (first in Nyāyabhāṣya 1.2.8)—became aware of the discrepancy that shadow (interchangeable with darkness), while fulfilling the condition to be a substance, was not counted as one of the *dravyas*. Subsequently, it became the matter of the validity of *sāmānyatodṛṣṭānumāna* (in the Nyāyavārttika, Nyāyakandalī, Vyomavatī, etc.). At this point, the Mīmāṃsakas enter the fray. Not surprisingly, the Prābhākaras (evidenced in the Prakaraṇapañcikā) and the Bhāṭṭas (Kumārila in his Bṛhaṭṭikā) took opposing sides. There, whether non-existence (*abhāva*) should be accepted as one of the valid means of knowledge also became an important factor.

An excursion is made to understand the term *bhūcchāya/prthivīcchāyā* (the shadow of earth) since it plays a significant role in the writings of Maṇḍana Mīśra and Śaṅkara. The term refers to the lunar eclipse (the Āryabhaṭṭiya/Bṛhatsaṃhitā): literally the shadow of earth, which lunar eclipse really is. But eclipses also had the name Rāhu (and Ketu) and associated mythology. The Bṛhatsaṃhitā even claims the superiority of science in this contradiction between science and mythology.

Two prominent early Advaita authors, Maṇḍana Mīśra and Śaṅkara, too, touched upon the issue. Maṇḍana kept coming back to the issue in three of his works (the Vidhiviveka, the Brahmasiddhi and the Vibhramaviveka). It is always in relation to the validity of non-existence (*abhāva*) as the object of valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). (This was already the point of departure between the Bhāṭṭas and the Prābhākaras.) For Maṇḍana, darkness can be a substance as well as the lack of light. It did not matter for him since non-

existence was a valid object to be cognized. Śaṅkara mentions the issue of shadow in relation to the nature of reflection (*pratibhā*) in his *Upadeśasāhasrī*. There he does not deal with the nature of shadow as darkness but as reflection (the possibility Chakrabarti explicitly leaves out of consideration). He, with some ambiguity, chooses the position that shadow (reflection) is simply unreal (*asat*)—neither a real substance nor an absence. These two authors, possibly real rivals, chose opposing sides in a different level from most other authors were in.