

Abstract

The Sāṃkhya seems to have flourished at the time of the Śaṣṭitantra ascribed to Vārsagaṇya, which was used by Īśvarakṛṣṇa to produce the Sāṃkhya-Kārikā, a compendium of Sāṃkhya thought. The early history of the Sāṃkhya, beginning with the Kāṭha Upaniṣad and ending with the Sāṃkhya-Kārikā, is arguably the most important phase in the entire history of Sāṃkhya thought. As the Śaṣṭitantra is no longer extant, its contents and form must be inferred from other sources which refer to the Sāṃkhya, such as Epic, Caraka-Saṃhitā, Ahirbudhniya-Saṃhitā, Buddhacarita and so on. Although some modern scholars have already attempted to trace the periodic development of the early history of Sāṃkhya thought, a consensus view has yet to emerge.

In this paper, I shall attempt to reconstruct the early history of the Sāṃkhya based mainly on Epic sources, that is, the Mokṣadharmā found in the Śāntiparvan in the Mahābhārata. The Mokṣadharmā contains many references to Sāṃkhya concepts, which Prof. Frauwallner has already analysed in detail. Although my reconsideration uses almost the same material, my analysis takes a slightly different viewpoint. I attempt to trace the process of development under the assumption that each period possesses a main theme or issue in which necessary concepts are employed.

As seen from references to earlier teachers of the Sāṃkhya found in the Yuktidīpikā, a commentary of the Sāṃkhya-Kārikā, various thoughts or views once existed. In earlier times, many varieties of Sāṃkhya thought or schools might have existed simultaneously in any given period, which indicates that the assumption of a single line of development in Sāṃkhya history is somewhat implausible.

If one examines the text of the Mokṣadharmā as a whole, Sāṃkhya thought seems to have undergone at least two stages of development. The earlier stage appears in Chapter 187 et al. The main theme of this stage is the concept of self (ātman), a specific feature of which is the use of the concept of buddhi in the place of ātman.

The later stage is seen in Chapters 292-295, in which the Sāṃkhya is said to consist of twenty five principles (tattva) or twenty six principles (Pañcaviṃśaka or Ṣaḍviṃśaka). In this stage, the number of principles seen in the Sāṃkhya-Kārikā has been almost fixed. The main theme of this stage might be the concept of material principle. The specific feature here is the assumption of mūla prakṛti as the ultimate material principle, which distinguishes the Sāṃkhya from traditional and authoritative Upaniṣadic thought.

However, with the employment of prakṛti, the Sāṃkhya faced some problems which had to be resolved by adjusting it to conform with other principles. The solution of these problems could have made possible the appearance of the Śaṣṭitantra as the highlight of the school.

Despite the possibility of the approach indicated by the previously mentioned assumption, all the items composing the Sāṃkhya-Kārikā, such as pratyaṣṭā-sarga, cannot be satisfactorily explained. Nevertheless, I intend to discuss the development of Sāṃkhya thought as inclusively as possible.