

THE CONCEPT OF SUFFERING IN CLASSICAL SAMKHYA

While the concept of suffering is undoubtedly central to Classical *Sāmkhya* serious questions remain regarding its nature and function.¹ One reason is the surprising lack of textual references. For example, the *Sāmkhyakārika* contains only two references to *duḥkha*, the basic term for “suffering” in the *Sāmkhya* tradition. The first reference (*Kārika* 1) refers to the torment (*abhighāta*) of a three-fold suffering (*duḥkha*) which is said to cause the desire for release, while the second reference (*Kārika* 55) claims that *puruṣa* somehow attains (*prāpnoti*) phenomenal suffering. Such references, however, raise more questions than they solve. What is the torment (*abhighāta*) of suffering referred to in *Kārika* 1? What is the three-fold suffering and what is its relationship to *abhighāta*? Finally, how can *puruṣa* be affected by phenomenal suffering when it is never bound and never released (*Kārika* 62)? I shall first offer a general over-view of *Sāmkhya* metaphysics with particular attention to the concept of suffering as “ignorance” (*avidya*). I shall then propose the following in response to the above questions: (1) suffering (*duḥkha*) in the *Sāmkhyakārika* is no ordinary suffering but rather a special suffering which results from a unique experience (*abhighāta*), namely, the individual’s awareness or consciousness of the limitation, inadequacy and emptiness of his human condition; (2) this experience is all-inclusive, the product of a profound disillusionment on every level of phenomenal reality: individual, social and cosmic; and (3) this experience motivates the individual to practise *Sāmkhya* yoga which, in turn, culminates in the permanent enstasis of *puruṣa* understood as a state of consciousness in which the individual no longer experiences the bondage of finitude.

1. The term “Classical *Sāmkhya*” is used in Larson’s sense of “that formulation of *Sāmkhya* found in *Iśvarakṛṣṇa*’s *Sāmkhyakārika*” (Gerald Larson, *Classical Sāmkhya*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969, P. 4).

Suffering as Ignorance

Classical *Sāmkhya* is a dialectical dualism of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. *Prakṛti*, according to *Kārika II*, is undiscriminated (*aviveki*), objective (*vishaya*), general (*sāmānyam*), non-conscious (*acetanam*) and productive (*prasavadharmi*) as well as characterized by the three *gunas* or "qualities" (*sattva, rajas, tamas*). By contrast, *puruṣa*, according to *Kārikas 3, 11 and 19*, is opposite of *prakṛti* and her evolutes, indifferent (*mādhyasthyam*), inactive (*akartrobhāva*), possessed of freedom (*kaivalyam*) and merely the witness (*sākṣitvam*) and spectator (*draṣṭṛtvam*).

Man is a combination of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. *Puruṣas* are plural in the sense that each individual embodies a single *puruṣa*. But *puruṣa*, though individual, is not personal. The personal ego as well as the entire psychophysical apparatus of body, emotions, intellection, etc. are evolutes of *prakṛti*. *Puruṣa* is simply the fact of consciousness. While *puruṣa* is necessary for self-consciousness and intellection it is not identified with these. *Puruṣa* whose nature is unfailing light (*sadāprakāśasvarupa*) is the enjoyer (*bhoktā*) never the doer or agent (*kartā*).

Since *puruṣa* is inactive and neither manifest nor non-manifest (neither *vyakta* nor *avyakta*) its existence must be inferred from the nature of *prakṛti*. *Sāmkhya's* reasons for postulating the existence of *puruṣa* may be reduced to the following: (1) since all structure presupposes "existence-for-another"; and since *prakṛti*, composed of the three *gunas*, is structured, then *prakṛti* exists for another and that "other" is *puruṣa*; (2) there must exist a "subject" capable of release from the suffering of the human condition. But since *prakṛti* and its evolutes are composed of the three *gunas* their very constitution is pain, pleasure and delusion. Hence there must exist a subject of final release other than *prakṛti* and its evolutes. This subject is *puruṣa*.

Gerald Larson summarizes the fundamental tenets of classical *Sāmkhya* yoga in four propositions: (1) human existence means suffering; (2) *Sāmkhya* offers a way of salvation from suffering; (3) the way of salvation is through a discriminative knowing (*viveka*); and, (4) the content of saving knowledge is the discrimination of the difference between phenomenality (*prakṛti*) and pure consciousness (*puruṣa*).²

Firstly, human existence means suffering understood as ignorance (*avidya* or *aviveka*). *Avidya* is the individual's inability to distinguish between his *prakṛti* self, that is, his psycho-physical apparatus characterized by limitation, change and impermanence, on the one hand, and his *puruṣa* Self which is ever free, on the other. In other words, the non-discriminating individual, unaware of his authentic transcendence (*puruṣa*) identifies himself with process and finitude (*prakṛti*). The result is suffering (*duḥkha*).

Secondly, *Sāmkhya* offers a way of salvation from suffering (*duḥkha*). *Sāmkhya*, according to Larson, is a religious system since "it is an attempt to find a way or mode of existence which transcends the ordinary structures of human experience."

Thirdly, *Sāmkhya's* way of salvation is a *jnāna yoga*, that is an epistemological soteriology in that the means of salvation is a conceptual investigation of phenomenality (*prakṛti*) which issues in a "knowledge" (*viveka*). Hence salvation is epistemological or better, psychological, since the ontological status of the individual remains unchanged. Because *puruṣa* is ever free and never in reality affected by suffering, both bondage as well as release are, from an ontological viewpoint, illusory.

Finally, the content of salvation knowledge is the discernment on the part of the individual of the proper relationship between *prakṛti* (his psycho-physical apparatus) and *puruṣa* (his authentic Selfhood). Classical *Sāmkhya* views this relationship of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* in terms of proximity or compresence (*sannidhi*). There is an absolute separation between the two and the only contact possible is mutual presence. Hence *puruṣa* is never in fact bound by *prakṛti*. It only appears to be bound due to the lack of discrimination. At the beginning of any given world cycle, *puruṣa* draws close to *prakṛti*. The presence of *puruṣa* causes *prakṛti* to "awake" from its dormant, unmanifest condition and undergo a transformation which issues in the phenomenal world. *Puruṣa*, in its turn, begins to witness *prakṛti's* transformation. In this dialectic between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* each begins to assume the characteristics of the other (*Kārika 20*). *Puruṣa* appears to be an active agent while *prakṛti* appears to be conscious. Both *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* co-operate, like the blind man and the lame man, for but one purpose: to effect the salvation or release of *puruṣa* (*Kārika 21*). Such release is effected once *puruṣa* attains the knowledge of itself which arises in its opposite. Thus the entire manifest and unmanifest world functions for the sake of *puruṣa* (*puruṣārtha*) and can be understood only in terms of consciousness (*puruṣārthatā*).

2. Larson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Suffering as the experience of limitation

The key reference to suffering in the *Sāmkhyakārika* is contained in *Kārika* 1 which reads: "Because of the torment (*abhi-ghāta*) of the three-fold suffering, (there arises) the desire to know the means of removing it."³ But what precisely is this torment (*abhi-ghāta*)?⁴ I suggest that *abhi-ghāta* refers to a unique experience, namely, the conflict (and subsequent torment) which results from the consciousness of the limitation and inadequacy of one's world, on the one hand, and the sense of oneself as somehow transcendent, on the other. Hence this initial insight is characterized by disillusionment with phenomenality as well as self-alienation. It is the awareness that "I" in my authentic selfhood am alien to and different from phenomenality and yet bound by the limitations of phenomenality. In *Sāmkhyān* terms, it is the awareness of the fundamental opposition or conflict between *purusha* and *prakṛti* which results in the torment (*abhi-ghāta*) of consciousness.

The *abhi-ghāta* experience is wholly unique. It cannot be identified with the ordinary physical pain or mental anguish of the human condition which may or may not be conducive to final liberation. Rather, *abhi-ghāta* is that unique crisis-situation in consciousness resulting from the experience of a radical conflict within the self which can only be resolved by a fundamental reorientation of one's life. The conflict involves "torment" for two reasons. Firstly, there is no solution which does not necessitate the sacrifice of some portion of one's being. The choice is between *prakṛti*, the familiar, psycho-physical self bound by finitude, on the one hand, and *purusha*, the unfamiliar invitation to transcendence and freedom, on the other. Secondly, *abhi-ghāta* presumes that the individual's situation is critical: a decision must be made. And the sheer necessity of such a decision involves "torment".

The Extension of Suffering

Kārika 1 of the *Sāmkhyakārika* refers to a "three-fold suffering" without further explanation. But Gaudapada's *bhāṣya* identifies

3. Larson. *op. cit.* p. 257. For earlier translations of this *kārika* see John Davies. *The Sāmkhya Kārika of Iśvara Kṛṣṇa* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta 1957).
4. Monier-Williams renders *abhi-ghāta* (root 'han') as "striking; attack; infliction of injury, damage."

this three-fold suffering as *ādhyātmika* and *ādhidāivika* which A.B. Keith translates as "the sorrows brought on by ourselves, those brought on by others, and those inflicted by fate respectively."⁵ This schema, which exhausts the possible sources of human suffering suggests that the *abhi-ghāta* experience is critical because it is the focal point of disillusionment with every level of phenomenality.

Ādhyātmika comprises all forms of personal limitation: physical, mental, psychic, emotional. It also includes genetic as well as evolutionary limitations. An individual's awareness of his own fragility and the utter finiteness of his psycho-physical apparatus is in itself a major insight which implies a high degree of mental health, intellectual honesty, emotional stability and self-knowledge. The individual who experiences *ādhyātmika* torment is not only aware of his weakness at every point, but, more importantly, acknowledges it. Hence he experiences the pain and torment of limitation and bondage in his own person.

Ādhibhautika, the second form of suffering, comprises the limitations imposed on the individual by his society and culture. Two examples must suffice. Every individual is subject to the limitations of the socio-cultural conditioning process by means of which every society programmes its young to think and act in prescribed ways. Upon maturity, one individual may continue to regard the norms of his childhood as absolute and unchanging without further reflection. However, another, confronted with the reality of societies and cultures other than his own and professing quite different values and attitudes, may experience the relativity, the finiteness, of all socio-cultural norms. It is the latter individual who experiences *ādhibhautika* suffering in terms of the limitations of socio-cultural values, norms and institutions. *Ādhibhautika* suffering may also stem from an awareness of the fragility of social relationships. Consciousness of the masks we wear and the games we play with those closest to us, point up the limitations of our inter-personal relationships. To realize that, no matter how well-intentioned, one can never fully communicate his thoughts

5. A.B. Keith. *The Sāmkhya System*. (Calcutta: Y.M.C.A. Publishing House, 1949), p. 86. A slightly different interpretation of these three sufferings is found in the *Vishnu Purana* where *ādhyātmika* refers to physical and mental pain, *ādhibhautika* to every kind of evil which is inflicted (from without) upon men by beasts, birds, men, goblins, snakes, friends or reptiles and *ādhidāivika* which is "the work of cold, heat, wind, rain, lightning, etc." (H.H. Wilson, *The Vishnu Purana*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961, p. 499).

and feelings to another is to experience alienation, frustration, limitation and the "torment" of *ādhībhautika* suffering.

A third form of suffering, *ādhīdāivika* refers to the limitations imposed by the natural environment on human existence. This includes not only traditional "acts of the gods" such as earthquake, tornado, flood and other natural disasters over which man has no control but also environmental disasters created by man himself as a result of modern technology. One example is the increasing demands of technology for natural resources coupled with dwindling supplies. A second example is the "pre-elite" demands of the poor for increased production and wealth versus the "post-elite" ecological concerns for clean air and water. Modern man, faced with the realities of "space-ship earth" is increasingly aware of his symbiotic relationship with the earth and his dependence upon natural materials and forces which continue to elude absolute control and manipulation. To be conscious of environmental limitation is to experience *ādhīdāivika* suffering in terms of finitude.

In sum, *abhihāta* suggests a personal experience of limitation on every level of phenomenal existence: personal, social, and cosmic characterized by dissatisfaction and frustration with the limitations of the human condition.

The Abhihāta Experience as Yogic Stimulus

The causal connection between the *abhihāta* experience and the desire for release in *Kārika* I is obvious: once the individual experiences the "torment" of the three-fold suffering he desires to know the means of removing it. The experience of personal social and cosmic finality issues in the effective desire to transcend it. To be effective, this desire must motivate the individual to perform *Sāmkhya* yoga, that is, to investigate the nature and function of phenomenality (*prakṛti*). Such an investigation culminates in an intuitive realization (*jñāna*) the effect of which is to expel everything from consciousness itself (*Kārika* 37). The final experience is "isolation": (*kaivalya*) understood as both freedom from the limitations of *prakṛti* as well as the permanent enstasis of *puruṣa*. With reference to this final experience two points must be kept in mind: firstly, while *kaivalya* means escape from the torment of the three-fold suffering, such freedom does not necessarily imply escape from existence itself. Secondly, the ontological status of *puruṣa* as ever free must never be lost sight of. The

torment of the three-fold suffering including the experiences of decay and death which *puruṣa* is said to attain (*Kārika* 55) is ignorance (*avidyā*), that is *puruṣa's* false identification of itself with *prakṛti*.

To conclude: *Sāmkhya* recognizes two kinds of suffering. On the one hand, there are the natural limitations of the human condition, the personal, social and cosmic limitations with their consequent sufferings, which are the manifestations of *prakṛti* and, as such ontologically real. On the other hand, there is the suffering caused by *avidyā* (or *aviveka*) which, as the false identification of one's true nature (*puruṣa*) with *prakṛti* and its consequents, is basically illusory and, as such, enjoys only epistemological reality. The *abhihāta* experience, as the initial awareness of discrimination between one's limitations (*prakṛti*) and one's transcendence (*puruṣa*), is the awakening of faith which motivates the *Sāmkhya* yoga investigation of categories (*tattva*) and culminates in a transcendent consciousness free from the tyranny of phenomenal finitude.