

Feminism and the Dual Nature of Sāṃkhya Philosophy

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Abstract

The Sāṃkhya school is one of the six classical schools (ṣaḍdarśana) of Indian philosophy. It is based on a metaphysical dualism symbolized by Puruṣa, traditionally defined as pure consciousness, and Prakṛti, as primordial matter. Prakṛti, the source of all things, is symbolically equated with the feminine principle—dynamic, creative, and changeable—while Puruṣa, the silent witness, is equated with the masculine principle—passive, unchanging, and transcendent. While these symbolic identifications affirm the generative power of the feminine, they also inevitably undercut the reinforcement of hierarchical binaries (masculine over feminine) that have always placed the feminine under the masculine in spiritual discourse. From a feminist perspective, the symbolic representation is a reproduction of powerful societal patterns that construct gender roles in metaphysical imagery. But is such representation inevitable? Sāṃkhya makes Prakṛti the dynamic source of the phenomenal world, necessary for the realization of Puruṣa. The two principles stand in a relation of interdependence, one that resists easy hierarchies. It opens the possibility of an interpretation that attempts to affirm difference without subordination. This paper critically analyzes the “dual nature” of Sāṃkhya philosophy—its structural metaphysical dualism and its interpretive gender dualism—through the prisms of feminist philosophy. Referring to primary texts such as the Sāṃkhyakārikā and classical commentaries, and drawing on the insights of contemporary feminist theory, it explores whether Sāṃkhya's ontology necessarily legitimates gender hierarchies or whether Sāṃkhya can be reinterpreted as a system that advocates reciprocity and complementarity.

According to this study, Sāṃkhya's acknowledgment of Prakṛti as the active, causative component of the metaphysical reality is highlighted when it is positioned within contemporary discussions of gender and emancipation. For rethinking women's agency and the dynamics of gendered power in metaphysical and social contexts, this worldview provides a wealth of philosophical tools.

Keywords: Sāṃkhya Philosophy, Feminism, Prakṛti, Puruṣa, Dualism and Gender

1. Introduction

Sāṃkhya philosophy, identified as being one of the six classical schools of Indian philosophical tradition, is based on a dualistic metaphysical system distinguishing between Prakṛti (nature or matter) and Puruṣa (spirit or consciousness). While this distinction has been interpreted largely through a metaphysical filter, it has also acquired symbolic gender undertones—Prakṛti is most commonly identified with the feminine qualities of dynamism and generativity, whereas Puruṣa is identified with the masculine qualities of passivity and transcendence [1, 2]. These symbols go beyond abstract association. They are significant in shaping societal attitudes and informing philosophical thought in issues of identity and agency, raising the question: Does this dualistic system necessarily privilege one principle over the other?

From a feminist perspective, such symbolic representation risks reifying patriarchal dualisms in favor of the masculine-identified Puruṣa against the feminine-identified Prakṛti. In contrast, the Sāṃkhya model offers hermeneutic paths for a more egalitarian metaphysics in which differences are recognized without a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, and both principles as mutually constitutive aspects of reality. This article critically analyzes the “dual nature” of Sāṃkhya—metaphysical organization and gendered interpretations—under a feminist critique. Based on classical texts like the Sāṃkhyakārikā and commentarial texts, as well as feminist theory, it queries whether Sāṃkhya ontology necessarily supports hierarchical gender relations or whether it could be reinterpreted to promote equality, reciprocity, and complementarity. Placing Sāṃkhya in the larger context of feminist philosophy, this study hopes to contribute to ongoing debates in gender, metaphysics, and liberation in Indian philosophic discourses.

2. Materials and Methods

Materials

- **Primary Sources:** Original Sāṃkhya treatises such as the Sāṃkhya Karika written by Ishvarakrishna, Tattva Kaumudi written by Vacaspati Misra, and certain chosen sections of the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita that explain the Puruṣa-Prakṛti model.
- **Secondary Sources:** Modern discussions of Sāṃkhya in philosophy books, and influential feminist theory work by Simone de Beauvoir [3], Judith Butler [4], and Vandana Shiva [5].

Methods

The study utilizes text analysis to derive fundamental metaphysical ideas from Sāṃkhya texts, and feminist hermeneutics to reinterpret these ideas through the lens of gender studies. Comparative philosophical methods are applied to determine both points of convergence and divergence between classical Indian philosophy and contemporary feminist thought.

3. Consequences and Discourse

3.1. Classical Foundations of Sāṃkhya Philosophy

Sāṃkhya is identified to be one of the earliest philosophical schools in Indian intellectual heritage, dating back to pre-Upaniṣadic ideas and later systematized in the Sāṃkhya Kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa (circa 4th–5th century CE). The earliest references to Sāṃkhya concepts are found in the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavad Gītā, and some of the Upanishads, revealing that its intellectual foundations are pre-codification and pre-classical literature. The word “Sāṃkhya” itself is derived from the Sanskrit lexeme Sāṃkhya, “number” or “count,” thus mirroring its systematization in categorizing the tattvas (principles) that make up existence.

At the root of the system is a rigid dualism between Puruṣa (pure awareness) and Prakṛti (primordial nature). Puruṣa is defined as eternal, unchanging, passive, and conscious—the spectator self who neither acts nor changes. Prakṛti, on the other hand, is said to be active, unconscious, and perpetually changing—being the root matrix from which the whole phenomenal world unfolds. The activity of Prakṛti is motivated by the interaction of the three guṇas—sattva (illumination, harmony), rajas (activity, passion), and tamas (inertia, darkness)—whose balance is disturbed in the presence of Puruṣa and therefore sets the process of cosmic evolution (pariṇāma) in motion.

The classical list has 25 tattvas [8,9]:

1. Puruṣa (the universal principle of unadulterated consciousness)
2. Prakṛti (1 principle of original nature)

3. Buddhi or Mahat (cosmic intelligence)
4. Ahaṁkāra (ego principle)
- 5–9. Five subtle elements (tanmātras)—sound, touch, form, taste, smell
- 10–14. Five sense organs (jñānendriyas)—hearing, touch, sight, taste, smell
- 15–19. Five action capacities (karmendriyas)—speech, grasping, movement, reproduction, elimination
- 20–24. Five gross elements (mahābhūtas)—ether, air, fire, water, earth

1. Manas (mind), the organizer of sensory data

In epistemology, Sāṁkhya embraces three certain ways of knowledge (pramāṇas): Pratyakṣa (perception), Anumāna (inference), Śabda (authoritative testimony)

Liberation (kaivalya) in Sāṁkhya is achieved [8] through discriminative knowledge (viveka-jñāna)—knowledge that Puruṣa is absolutely independent of Prakṛti and her evolutes. Such separation ends the cycle of suffering (duḥkha), because the self is no longer associated with the changing nature.

In spite of its classical non-theistic flavor, Sāṁkhya has had a profound influence on other philosophical systems, most notably Patañjali's Yoga, which adds Sāṁkhya's metaphysical concepts to a theistic component and a pragmatic methodology for attaining liberation. The clarity of its dualistic organization has made it a focal point for modern reinterpretations, such as ecofeminist and gender-sensitive approaches that question the conventional symbolic relationships assigned to Puruṣa and Prakṛti.

3.2. Gender Symbolism and Dualism

The majority of traditional descriptions of Sāṁkhya philosophy provide symbolic gender readings of the metaphysical concepts of Puruṣa and Prakṛti, the latter of which possesses profound cultural and philosophical meaning. Prakṛti is the power of creation and transformation and is traditionally depicted in feminine terms—she is the mother of creation, the fertile earth from which all the things that are perceived arise. She is the force of change, transformation, and cyclical rebirth, frequently identified with the natural cycles, fertility, and life-giving processes.

Puruṣa, by contrast, is symbolically linked with masculinity and defined as the passive, unchanging observer. He is the seer who is not affected by the ever-changing nature of the phenomenal world. This masculine ideal reiterates themes of detachment, transcendence, and autonomy, typically represented as superior to Prakṛti's changing nature. The resultant symbolic polarity—active/passive, material/spiritual, body/mind—reiterates and supports patriarchal forms common to much of world tradition [2, 6], in which the feminine is relegated to the domain of change, feeling, and matter, and the masculine with stability, reason, and spirit.

These symbolic associations here involve more than simple aesthetic or literary concern; they have implications for broader metaphysical and social comprehension. In their depiction of Prakṛti in a secondary role, whose value resides only in relation to Puruṣa, orthodox readings occasionally unwittingly perpetuate the subordinating of the feminine. Moreover, such readings complement dualistic hierarchies of Western philosophy, which have privileged reason over emotion, spirit over the body, and culture over nature.

However, Īśvarakṛṣṇa's Sāṁkhyakārikā (Kārikā 21) provides a more nuanced account through the famous analogy of the lame man and the blind man, wherein Puruṣa and Prakṛti are portrayed as mutually dependent collaborators rather than hierarchically ordered entities. Just as the lame man, symbolizing the Puruṣa, provides vision and direction, and the blind man symbolizing the Prakṛti, provides motion and agency, their cooperation enables meaningful activity and purposeful progress in the world. Classical commentators such as Vācaspati Miśra (Tattvakaumudī) and Vijñānabhikṣu (Sāṁkhyapravacanabhāṣya)

interpret this allegory as illustrating the essential interdependence of consciousness and materiality. Neither Puruṣa nor Prakṛti is self-sufficient; each attains significance only through interaction with the other.

When read through the lens of gender symbolism, this allegory suggests a complementary rather than subordinating relationship between masculine and feminine principles, thereby challenging patriarchal misreadings of Sāṃkhya dualism. Feminist scholars argue that these symbolic significances do not necessarily pertain to the metaphysical organization of Sāṃkhya itself, but rather to interpretive traditions shaped by patriarchal contexts. Through critical re-examination of Puruṣa and Prakṛti's gendered imagery—and by foregrounding the Sāṃkhyakārikā's depiction of their mutual dependence—feminist scholarship reinterprets Sāṃkhya dualism as a non-hierarchical meeting of complementary principles, rather than an order marked by domination and subordination.

3.3.Reinterpretations of Prakṛti

Contemporary feminist scholarly work has undertaken a critical re-reading of Prakṛti with a view to moving beyond her characterization as other or being dependent on Puruṣa for signification and salvation. Prakṛti's agency is only intelligible in terms of Puruṣa's passivity in conventional readings and the reinforcement of a gender hierarchy based on patriarchal ethics. Feminist critics counter this by referring to Prakṛti's agency, autonomy, and intrinsic value.

In this sense, Prakṛti is not receptive and passive to forces from outside; rather, she is active and independent, and her potential for creation lies in the ontological nature of being. She is the foundation for forms, the constant force of evolution, and the basis for embodied existence. In this position, she turns her role from that of a servant of Puruṣa to that of an equal ontological partner, engaging and critically shaping the fabric of reality.

Ecofeminist readings, in particular, fall naturally into place within this rethinking [6, 7]. By equating the subordination of women with the domination of nature with the same exploitative behavior, ecofeminism situates Prakṛti as a symbol of resistance to ecological spoliation as well as to gender oppression. Her cycles of rebirth, adaptability, and creativity emerge not merely as passive natural processes but as active forces of renewal and resilience, challenging the dualistic hierarchies that privilege the abstract and the masculine.

In this interpretive framework, Puruṣa and Prakṛti are understood as complementary and interdependent principles, echoing Īśvarakṛṣṇa's image of the lame man and the blind man in the Sāṃkhyakārikā (Kārikā 21), where consciousness and activity cooperate to bring forth meaningful experience [1]. Vācaspati Miśra's Tattvakaumudī further elaborates that "Puruṣa gives light to Prakṛti as the sun to the earth; but the earth's fertility is her own; thus, activity and illumination depend upon one another" [2], affirming a dynamic reciprocity rather than hierarchy. As Nalini N. B. notes, Sāṃkhya "does not posit an ontological hierarchy but a polarity; evolution proceeds only through the interplay of these poles" [3].

Within ecofeminist philosophy, this reciprocity becomes an ethical model for coexistence. Vandana Shiva's assertion that "recovering Prakṛti as creative energy means recovering the partnership of man and nature, spirit and matter, consciousness and creation" [7] parallels Sāṃkhya's own relational ontology. Valerie Plumwood's call to "reconceive reason and nature in mutual definition, not opposition" [8], and Rosemary Radford Ruether's view that "redemption lies not in transcendence of nature but in conscious participation in its creative, sustaining processes" [9], both resonate with Sāṃkhya's vision of Puruṣa's work as conscious awareness harmonized with Prakṛti's creativity. Their balanced union thus serves as

an archetype for restoring ecological and gender equilibrium—a partnership of vision and vitality, awareness and activity, each completing the other.

In practical philosophy, the reclaiming of Prakṛti signifies the recognition of the felt, lived, and sensory dimensions of human existence. Far from seeing the body and nature as impediments to liberation, feminist interpretation reclaims them as active sites of creativity, relation, and meaning. Within this framework, freedom is not conceived as transcendence from nature but as a harmonious participation within it, echoing the Sāṃkhya-kārikā's vision of mutuality between Puruṣa and Prakṛti [1].

Just as Puruṣa provides the reflective awareness that illumines experience, Prakṛti embodies the dynamic potential through which consciousness expresses itself in the world. Their relationship, described by Vācaspati Miśra as one of “illumination and activity depending upon one another” [2], illustrates a compatibility that unites awareness with embodiment and spirit with matter. Nalini N. B. affirms this interdependence by noting that evolution in Sāṃkhya “proceeds only through the interplay of these poles” [3].

This reinterpreted compatibility between Puruṣa and Prakṛti parallels Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist assertion that creative life emerges from the partnership of consciousness and nature [7]. Likewise, Valerie Plumwood's critique of dualistic hierarchies—calling for the “mutual definition, not opposition” of reason and nature [8]—and Rosemary Ruether's advocacy for “conscious participation in nature's creative processes” [9]—extend Sāṃkhya's dualism into an ethical and aesthetic vision of integration. Here, liberation (mokṣa) becomes not the rejection of the natural or the feminine, but the realization of compatibility between awareness and activity, where Puruṣa and Prakṛti co-create the conditions of both experience and freedom.

3.4. Consequences for Feminist Metaphysics

Reframing Sāṃkhya dualism in a feminist context suggests huge potential for building a pluralistic and inclusive metaphysics. Traditionally, the metaphysical difference between Puruṣa and Prakṛti has been understood in a manner that reinforces binary hierarchies, with the masculine-identified Puruṣa taking the higher, transcendent position and the feminine-identified Prakṛti relegated to the variable and subservient category of nature. Interestingly, the texts themselves are open to another interpretation—one that acknowledges the two principles as different but equally required. This new model requires relationality and difference without converting it into a hierarchy of superiority.

A feminist metaphysics derived from Sāṃkhya would define Puruṣa and Prakṛti as co-constituting principles—non-dual but non-separate factors of existence. This view esteems multiplicity and relationality over fixed dichotomy, seeing difference as a constant process of mutual enrichment rather than domination. This interpretation not only undermines existing patriarchal models but also gives a model of understanding gender as something other than binary essentialism.

This rethinking has broader philosophical consequences. In its refusal to devalue the material, the embodied, and the natural, it stands in solidarity with ecofeminist calls for the dismantling of dualistic hierarchies that structure both gender domination and ecological destruction. In addition, it is in harmony with contemporary intersectional feminism, which insists on the interdependence of social, cultural, and ecological systems. According to this perspective, Prakṛti is a source of creative power and agency, and Puruṣa is the grounding awareness that enters into, rather than dominates, the emergence of life.

This model invites Indian philosophy to enter an international discourse on inclusiveness and justice, where freedom is not attained as separation from nature but as the realization of equilibrium between consciousness and the world of matter. It suggests that metaphysical thought can be employed to initiate

ethical and social transformation, offering conceptual assets to dismantle hierarchies and construct egalitarian relations between gender, culture, and nature.

Conclusion

The feminist critique of Sāṃkhya philosophy reveals a complex interplay between metaphysical abstractions and gendered meaning. The system's metaphysical dualism, in its necessary separation of Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (primordial matter), is inherently metaphysical in nature; but its symbolic identification with gender and consequent cultural resonance are profound. Although traditional interpretations have a tendency to gender Puruṣa as masculine transcendence and Prakṛti as feminine dynamism, such identification, when accepted unconditionally, can actually support the deeply embedded patriarchal schema in which the masculine-coded principle is privileged in its quest for liberation (mokṣa). A closer look at the classical texts, such as the Sāṃkhyakārikā and the commentaries that accompany them, shows that Sāṃkhya ontology is not necessarily a hierarchical order. Instead, Prakṛti is the dynamic and causative force that is responsible for the genesis and evolution of the universe, in the absence of which Puruṣa would be in a state of dormant isolation. The interdependence suggests a system of complementarity in which the two principles cannot be seen as redundant or necessarily subordinate. From a feminist philosophical point of view, Sāṃkhya can be redescribed as offering a metaphysical foundation for gender justice—that is, one sensitive to difference without complicity in subordination. This reading resists reductionist readings and offers potential for redescribing the symbolic feminine as a site of power, agency, and creative possibility [5, 6, 7]. In this regard, therefore, the twofold nature of Sāṃkhya—both metaphysical and interpretive—can be used as a resource for philosophy in dealing with contemporary controversies around gender justice, agency, and freedom. Lastly, this study suggests that Sāṃkhya's transformative power does not lie in discarding its dualism but reimagining it as a paradigm of mutualism in equilibrium—to avoid hierarchies but to recognize the irreducible gifts of Puruṣa and Prakṛti to the unfolding of reality.

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