



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VII, Issue-II, October 2018, Page No. 200-205

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Atomism in Vaiśeṣika Philosophy: A Critical Analysis

Iti Chattopadhyay

Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Raiganj University, West Bengal, India

Abstract

In Indian Philosophy, the theory of atomism is found mainly in three schools namely Bauddha, Jaina and Vaiśeṣika. This paper attempts to analyse atomism in Vaiśeṣika Philosophy critically. One of the oldest philosophical schools of India is Vaiśeṣika and Maharsī Kaṇād is believed to be the founder of this school. Vaiśeṣika Philosophy deals with Metaphysics and focuses chiefly on seven categories (Padārtha). It believes that the world consists of these seven categories namely substance, quality, action, particular, universal, inherence and non-being. Amongst these seven entities, substance is the material cause of the composite object. Substances are of nine kinds such as earth, water, air, fire, ether, space, time, soul and mind. Thus, Vaiśeṣika system admits both material and spiritual substances. The first four substances and mind are atomic. In Vaiśeṣika Philosophy, atom is the smallest, indivisible and eternal part of the composite thing.

Keywords: Vaiśeṣika Philosophy, Categories, Substance, Atom.

I. Introduction: Philosophy is called mother of all subjects. At the outset both science and philosophy were integrated. Both want to know the reality. In fact, we find that the root of science is in Greek philosophy. Their separation is a recent phenomenon.

The general meaning of the word ‘philosophy’ is love of knowledge. But in India, philosophy or rather ‘Darśana’ is a practical experience and the living of that experience that is coupled with love for it. The classical Indian philosophy has two broad categories—theist (Āstika) and atheist (Nāstika). The first group believes in the infallibility of the Vedas, an oldest text of Hinduism. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mimāṃsā and Vedānta constitute this group. To the contrary, the atheist group does not believe in the authority of the Vedas. Cārvāka, Jaina and Bauddha Philosophies belong to this group.

In Indian classical philosophy, there are two theories regarding the natural world. One holds that the world originates out of the combinations of atoms. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Jaina and Bauddha advocate this theory. The other view suggests that the world is an evolution of dynamic nature. Sāṃkhya and some branches of Vedānta hold this view.

The word ‘Vaiśeṣika’ comes from the word ‘Viśeṣa’, means distinction. Maharsī Kaṇāda developed this philosophy in his famous treatise ‘Vaiśeṣika’ Sūtra, which has much

in common with modern physics. The etymological meaning of the word 'Kaṇād' is atomeater which characterized this system because one of the central theories of the Vaiśeṣika philosophy is the theory of atom. There are ten chapters and three hundred and sixty eight aphorisms in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra.¹ Book I deals with five categories namely substance (Dravya), quality (Guṇa), action (Karma), universal (Sāmānya) and ultimate differentiator (Viśeṣa). Book II explores various substances. The subject-matters of the book III are the objects of the senses and the nature of inference. Book IV investigates the atomic structure of the universe whereas book V concentrates on the nature of action and its types. Book VI discusses ethical problems. Book VII discusses the questions of quality, self and inherence. The remaining three books highlight on the problems of perception, inference and causality.

II. Substance: As Vaiśeṣika' philosophy considers that diversity is the root of the universe, it is known as pluralistic realism. It deals with the categories at length and unfolds its atomistic pluralism. In Vaiśeṣika' philosophy, category refers to Padārtha. The literal meaning of the word Padārtha is 'the meaning of a word' or 'the object signified by a word'. In this system, Padārtha refers to an object which can be thought (Jñeya) and named (abhidheya). In its view, the entire universe is divided into two main categories- being (bhāva) and non-being (abhāva). Being again is divided into six categories. All knowledge necessarily points to an object beyond and independent of it.² Thus, according to this philosophy, all that is real comes under the object of knowledge and is called padārtha which are seven in number. These seven categories are as follow:

1. Substance (Dravya)
2. Quality (Guṇa)
3. Action (Karma)
4. Universal (Sāmānya)
5. Particular (Viśeṣa)
6. Inherence (Samavāya) and
7. Non-Being. (Abhāva)

Though Kaṇāda does not include Abhāva (non-being) as a real, commentators on Vaiśeṣika' Sūtra' include it. This is an entity like that of vacuum in medial physics. Among these seven categories substance (Dravya), quality (Guṇa) and action (Karma) have a real objective existence³ whereas the universal (Sāmānya), ultimate differentiator (Viśeṣa) and inherence (Samavāya) are products of intellectual discrimination. The proof of their reality is said to be logical⁴ and thus they are not capable of direct apprehension.

As this philosophy suggests that the whole universe consists of these seven and only seven categories and therefore, the system is a system of mainly physics and metaphysics. We find the first six entities form the basis of Physics.

The first real in the Vaiśeṣika system is substance (Dravya). The Vaiśeṣika defines substance as the substratum where actions and qualities inhere and which is the material

cause of all the composite things produced from it⁵ In Vaiśeṣika's views, there are nine substances irrespective of whether they can be perceived through the sense organs or not. These nine substances are earth (pṛthivi), water (ap), fire (tejas), air (vāyu), ether (ākāśa), time (kāla), space (dika), soul (ātmana) and mind (mānas).⁶ According to Kaṇāda, these nine substances are the building blocks of the world. Thus, the Vaiśeṣika philosophy admits both material and spiritual substances.

Amongst these nine substances, earth, water, fire, air and ether are called five physical elements and each of them contains a particular quality different from the rest. These particular qualities of these five substances are smell, taste, colour, touch and sound respectively perceived by five external sense organs namely nose, tongue, eyes, skin and ears. Time, space, soul and mind are the eternal substances (nitya dravya) and cannot be perceived, but can only be conceived by the mind. But, nevertheless they are as much real as the five perceptible substances believes the Vaiśeṣika system.

The first four substances are capable of motion, while time, space and ether (ākāśa) are not.⁷ The material world consists of the first four substances namely earth, water, fire and air. Thus, they are called the building blocks of this world.

III. Atomism: Amongst these nine substances, earth, water, fire, air and mind are atomic and thus eternal. Because according to Kaṇāda, the founder of the Vaiśeṣika philosophy, an atom is eternal as it does not have any cause. It cannot be perceived, but is inferred from its effect.⁸

An atom is an eternal, a dimensionless point particle (kaṇā), and hence has spherical symmetry⁹ but is invisible. The atoms of earth, water, air and fire form the basis of the entire perceptible universe whereas mind does not. As atom is eternal, at the time of dissolution of the world, the matter is not annihilated. At this stage, anu or atom, the fundamental particle of the matter remains motionless and passive. Kaṇād thinks that *atom* can have two states — absolute rest and a state of motion.¹⁰ During creation of the world, motion is arisen in atoms from a 'peculiar dharma'¹¹. Praśastapādachārya said:

*Actions which we find appearing in the rudimentary elements (mahābhūteṣu), and for which we cannot find any cause either by sense-perception or by inference, and which are yet found to be useful or harmful to us, must be regarded as produced by these unseen agencies (Adṛṣṭakāritam).*¹²

Ether, space, time and soul are not atomic, but all pervading and thus eternal. The Vaiśeṣika philosophers believe that the material gross objects of this universe are formed of parts and thus are produced and destroyed. They are divisible and the smallest part which is indivisible and eternal particle of the matter is called atom. Thus, the ultimate cause of this material world which is atom is not the subject to production and destruction. Atoms are independent and have ultimate individuality. All compound objects are produced by the combinations of such atoms. Thus, all gross objects have parts which are related to the

whole by the relation of conjunction, inherence etc. Creation means combination of atoms in different proportion and destruction means the dissolution of this combination. Thus, the Vaiśeṣika thinkers do not believe in complete annihilation of things.

Atomic Combinations: In Kaṇāda's view, though atoms are not subject to production and destruction, they may conjoin or disjoin and this conjunction occurs in three ways:

- a) Contact produced due to motion of one object and not the other.
- b) Both may be in motion.
- c) Contact by actual contact.

To explain the last type of conjunction Praśastapāda, a commentator on the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, gives an example.— a dyad of earth which is in contact with two atoms of water which are themselves in contact and constitute a water dyad. Then the earth dyad's contact with the water dyad is produced by the earth dyad's contacts with the atoms of water. disjunction occurs when the contact between atoms is parted.¹³

Thus, according to Vaiśeṣika system, there are four types of atom namely earth, water, fire and air. They believe that atoms are qualitatively different. Each atom is totally a different from other and exists as a separate entity. Atoms are infinite in number. The finest atoms are the atoms of air that possess the quality of touch. The atoms of fire have the qualities of touch and colour. The atoms of water contain the qualities of touch, colour and taste. The atoms of the earth possess the qualities of touch, colour, taste and smell. Apart from these qualities, all atoms possess velocity, number, distinctness etc. Thus, a composite object contains the qualities of the atoms which constitute it.

Besides, the primary qualities, the atoms have secondary qualities also. They are spherical in shapes, eternal, inactive, imperceptible and motionless in themselves. The atoms combine in geometrical progression and not in arithmetical one. They increase by multiplication when motion is imparted by *adṛiṣṭa* (unseen moral force) on them. At the first stage, they constitute dyad which is imperceptible and formed of two atoms. Three dyads constitute a triad which is great, long and perceptible. And so on by geometrical progression till the gross elements of earth, water, fire and air arise.

Unlike Vaiśeṣika School, Greek atomism of Leucippus and Democritus accepts only quantitative differences in the atoms and maintains their qualitative likeness. Again, according to Greek school, atoms are after all but the smallest possible bits of gross matter. The Vaiśeṣika philosophy, on the other hand, thinks that the atoms, though material in substance, are absolutely devoid of all grossness, in as much as "they had neither an interior nor an exterior."

We find that Jainas are in agreement with the Vaiśeṣikas regarding the ultimate particles of the world which are part-less, eternal, indivisible and imperceptible. But unlike the Vaiśeṣikas and like the Greek atomism of Leucippus and Democritus, they believe that atoms are qualitatively alike. They become different only by developing the qualities like colour, taste, smell and touch. Though Buddhism considers that, atoms are indivisible,

momentary, and imperceptible and the elemental units of the rūpa-skandha, some Buddhists, for example, Sautrāntikas think that atoms are a dynamic force or energy. Atoms are always in an aggregate and they never exit as separate.

Though the old canonical Buddhist literatures do not contain any account of atomism, it is Hinayāna, a Buddhist sect, accepts the existence of atom and thinks that atom is indissoluble, imperceptible and intangible. But unlike the Vaiśeṣika system, in this school, atoms are not regarded as particles of any composite things, rather they are considered as force or energy. In Buddha System, there are total eight atoms. Amongst them four are fundamental namely earth (solid), water (liquid), fire (hot) and air (moving). The rest four atoms are secondary namely colour, smell, taste and touch. Thus, unlike the Vaiśeṣika Philosophy, in this system, the qualities are also considered as atomic.

IV. Conclusion: In fine, it might be argued that the Vaiśeṣika's concept of atomism deserves great importance. We find all physicists from the antiquity to the present admit that matter is real and has atomic character. The conceptions of Vaiśeṣika system that atoms are the fundamental particles of matter, that they are infinite in number, that the formation and dissolution of the gross things are the respective effects of the mutual combinations and separations of atoms, that they are eternal and imperceptible are accepted by the modern physics. Hence, Maḥarṣi Kaṇād, the founder of Vaiśeṣika system, can be considered as "The Father of Atomic Theory", because though atomism is dealt with in the Jaina and the Buddha systems, it is believed that Vaiśeṣika philosophy preceded both Jainism and Buddhism.

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