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# The Samkhya System and the Visnu Purana

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**ABSTRACT:** Puranas are the most important religious literature of India after the Vedas and the Mahakavyas, i.e. The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Among the 18 Puranas Visnu Purana is one of the most authoritative and secret treatises of the Vaisnavas. The creation theory of the Visnu Purana deals with the Samkhya system that is why in this paper I tried to discuss mainly the Samkhya system and how it is co-related with the Visnu Purana.

**KEYWORDS:** Purana, Purusa, Prakriti, Gunas, Samkhya

## I. INTRODUCTION

It has already been mentioned that the creation process in the Puranas as also in the *Visnu Purana*, corresponds to a great extent to the Samkhya theory of creation. But there are some differences also.

The Samkhyas accept two ultimate realities, viz., the *Prakriti* and the *Purusa*. But the *Visnu Purana* regards Visnu as the Ultimate Reality, *Prakriti* and *Purusa* are only two modifications of Visnu. They do not have any independent existence. According to the Samkhyas, *Prakriti* is the ultimate material cause of the material world. *Prakriti* is of opposite nature of the *Purusa* or the self. Though *Prakriti* and the *Purusa* are, thus, distinct and opposed to each other in nature, there is such a harmony between the two that the movements of the *Prakriti* are invariably adapted to the needs of the *Purusas*. When all the *adrstas* or the merits and demerits of the *Purusas* require that there should be a world for their enjoyment. Isvara Krsna says that *Prakriti* and the *Purusas* come in contact with each other, because *Prakriti* wants to be known by *Purusa* and the *Purusa* wants to attain liberation.<sup>1</sup>

*Prakriti* is the state of equilibrium of the three *gunas* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. When this equilibrium is disturbed creation starts. Now the question is how this equilibrium is disturbed. The Samkhya holds that the equilibrium of the *gunas* is disturbed by the nearness (*sannidhya*) of the *Purusas*. The Samkhya holds that these two principles co-operate in the same way as a blind man and a lame man co-operate with each other. The lame man may sit on the shoulders of the blind and point to him the way, while the blind man may walk and thus both reach the destination. In the same way the inactive and conscious *Purusa* comes in contact with the unconscious and active *Prakriti* and as a result the equipoise of the *gunas* is disturbed and thereby evolution starts.<sup>2</sup> However, this contact is also not the real contact. By contact the Samkhyas simply mean that *Prakriti* is influenced by the mere presence of the *Purusa* just as a piece of iron is moved by a piece of magnet.

But relation or co-operation between the *Purusa* and *Prakriti* is the most perplexing point in the Samkhya philosophy. How can the *Prakriti*, an unconscious principal come in contact with *Purusa*, which is quite indifferent and inactive? The *Prakriti* though active cannot take the initiative, because it is unconscious. Neither can the *Purusa* come in contact with *Prakriti* as it is inactive. The Samkhyists cannot satisfactorily solve this problem, as they do not accept any supreme reality or God who helps in bringing about this connection between the *Purusa* and *Prakriti*. The *Visnu Purana* on the other hand, maintains that Visnu in the form of *kala* brings about the conjunction of *Pradhana* and *Purusa* at the time of creation and disjunction of both of them at the time of dissolution.<sup>3</sup> It is also mentioned there that God Visnu enters into *Prakriti* and *Purusa* at the time of creation and produces agitation in them.<sup>4</sup> In this way the Lord becomes the governor of the creation process. Thus, according to the *Visnu Purana*, Visnu is the Ultimate Cause and not *Prakriti*. Not only the *Visnu Purana* but also all the *Sattvika Puranas* and also other Puranas conform to this view.

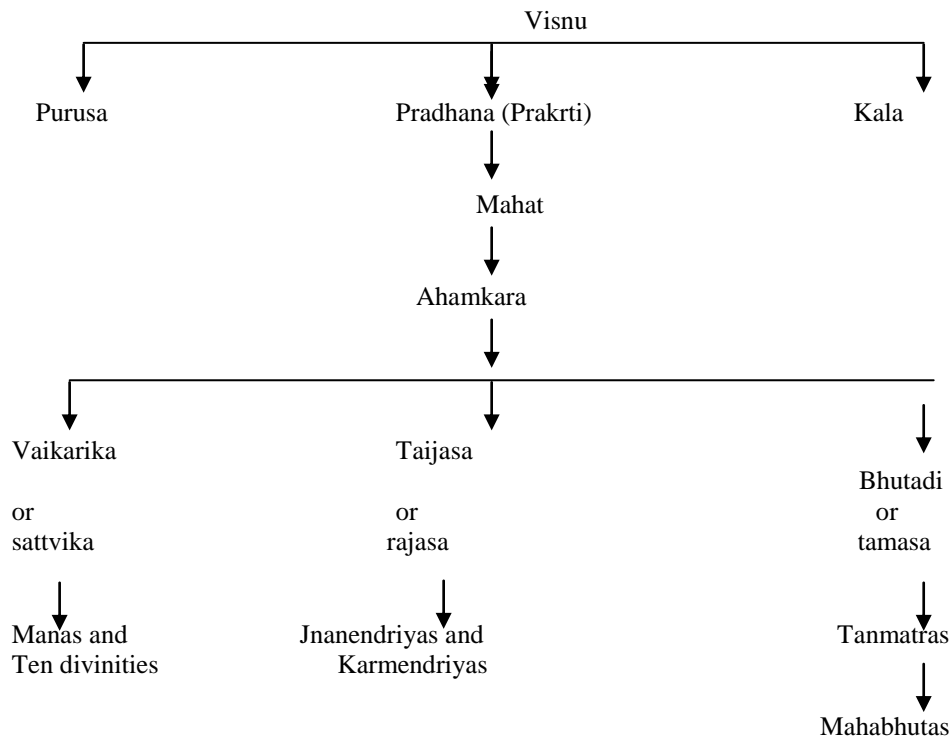
In this way we find that the *Visnu Purana* and other Puranas unanimously uphold Visnu as the ultimate cause and not *Prakriti*. The riddle of how an inert object like *Prakriti* and an inactive principle like *Purusa* come in contact cannot be solved in the Sankhya system, while it is solved by the Puranas making God as the governor of the creation process. Thomas J. Hopkins says, “The *Visnu Purana* begins with an account of the creation of the universe by Visnu. Visnu in this account is Brahman, of one essence but containing in his own nature the entire universe. He exists in the forms of spirit (*Purusa*), primary matter (*Prakriti*) and eternal time (*kala*) which brings about the connection and separation of *Purusa* and *Prakriti*.”<sup>5</sup>



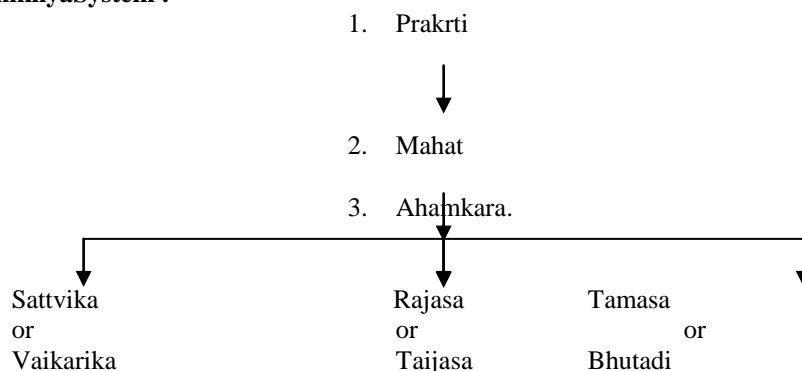
The evolutes of the *Prakrti* are accepted by the Puranas in the same order with slight difference. The evolution process in Samkhya Yoga starts from *Prakrti*. From *Prakrti* *Mahat* is born. It is also called *Buddhi* or intellect. Being evolutes of *Prakrti*, it is material. *Mahat* produces *Ahamkara*, which is said to be of three kinds, viz., *Vaikaarika* or *Sattvika*, *Taijasa* or *Rajasa* and *Bhutadi* or *Tamasa*. From *Sattvika* *Ahamkara* are produced the five sensory organs, five motor organs and the mind. From the *Tamasa* *Ahamkara* arise the five *Tanmatras* and the five gross elements arise out of these *Tanmatras*.<sup>6</sup> The Samkhya system maintains that the eleven *indriyas* are evolved from *Vaikaarika* *Ahamkara*. But in the *VisnuPurana* it is found that the *indriyas* are born from the *Taijasa* *Ahamkara* and the *Vaikaarika* is the cause of the mind and the presiding deities of the *indriyas*. The Samkhyas do not regard the *Taijasa* *Ahamkara* as the generator of anything. Thus here we find slight difference otherwise the course of evolution is the same both in the *VisnuPurana* and the Samkhya system.

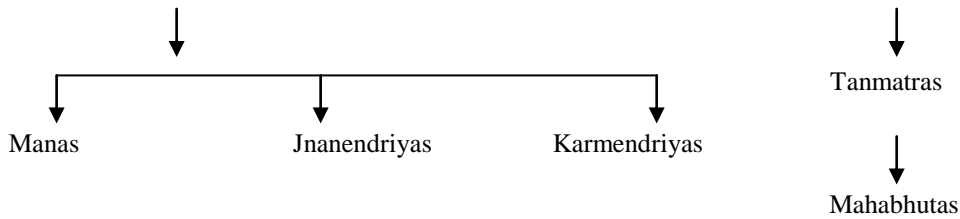
The comparative account of the creation process of the *VisnuPurana* and the Samkhya system can be shown in tabular forms as follows:

**The *VisnuPurana*:**



**The Samkhya System :**





Hence, we can conclude that the primary creation in this Purana corresponds to a great extent to the Samkhya system. But the *VisnuPurana* accepts an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God who is the real source and guide of the world process. *Kala* or time is said to play a vital role in the creation process of the *VisnuPurana*. This is no doubt a departure from the Samkhya doctrine. It is also noticed that in the Samkhyan scheme *rajas* does not account for the emergence of the ten senses, while in the *VisnuPuranic* account it does.

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