

Concept of Five Elements - An Ancient Indian Approach

Moumita Bhattacharya

Assistant Professor,
The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata

&

Udoyan Banerji

Assistant Professor,
Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi

Abstract

The cosmic body is the grand total of material bodies and elements. The first and pure manifestation of those five elements are the inner conscience and bodily organs like ear etc. All matter is composed of five basic elements — panchamahabhutas — which inherit the properties of earth (prithvi), water (jala), fire (tejas), wind (vayu) and space (akasha). The subtlest is space and grossest is earth with every perceptive sense. Each of the five elements represents a state of matter in nature. Solid matter is classified as the “Earth” element. Water is everything that is liquid. Air is everything that is a gas. Fire is that part of Nature that transforms one state of matter into another. Ether is the mother of the other elements and is the basis of higher spiritual experiences. The paper tries to shed some light on the various ways these Panchamahabhutas are manifested and also to the very notion of their varied existence. (Ball, P .2004)¹

Keywords: Panchamahabhuta, Five Elements, RgVeda, Upanishads

Concept of Five Elements - An Ancient Indian Approach.

It is well-known fact that Asia in general, and India in particular, has a philosophical heritage as rich, subtle, and variegated in its own ways as is that of the West. It is also true that classical Indian thought presents a rich field for research and not merely to the historians or orientalists but also to the modern thinkers and the constructive philosophers grappling with issues of current importance. If we speculate over the origin and development of the concept of five elements in ancient

India, the above statement may be proved a undoubted one. A humble attempt will be made in this paper in this regard. We may start our investigation from the period of the Ṛgveda which is regarded as the oldest specimen of Indian literature.

1. It is interesting to note that all these five elements namely - Fire (Agni), Air (Vāyu or Marut), Water (Āpaḥ), Earth (Prithvi) and Sky (Dyou or Vyoma or Ākāśa) are mentioned and praised as deities in the Saṁhitā texts of the Vedas. We can give some examples from them which are as follows.

For Agni or fire - *Agnimille purohitam yajnassya Devamṛvijamhotāram ratnadhātāmam.*

In fact the Ṛgveda starts with this hymn for Agni.

And the very next Sūkta is for Vāyu which runs as - *Vayavāyahi darṣateme Somā aramkrtā Tesām pāhi śrudhi havam.*

It means, oh Vāyu come here, Somarasa has been prepared, come here and drink this, hear our invocation.

In like manner Āpaḥ have been invited as depicted in the following Mantra from the Atharavaveda - (1.1.4.3). *Apo devi rupa hvaye yatra gāvaḥ pivanti nah*

or in the yajurveda Mantra (*Āpo asmān mātaraḥ śunadhantu ghr̥tena no*) renowned sūkta which is called pṛthivisūkta or BhūmīSūkta (Ṛgveda 5.84).

Moreover, Pṛthvi has been regarded as Mother and Dyou has been regarded as Father in a mantra which is running as - *TanMātā pṛthvi tatpitā Dyouḥ*. All these examples reveal the religious beliefs and ideas of the people of the Vedic age. Not only these five objects, but also other such objects are found to be accepted as deities for worshipping in the Vedas. According to some historians like Ramshankar Tripathi et.al. the religion of the Ṛgveda is essentially simple, though it has many Gods. This is expectedly natural because the hymns of the Vedas are a product of a long period of priestly effort and represent the deities of different tribes. Not only that, but it is also observed that to a great extent the objects of devotion are the personification of natural phenomenons. As a result of this kind of propensity, many inanimate objects are found to be praised as honorable deities in the Vedas. Ācārya Sāyana, while commenting upon some Mantras like 'Svadhite Mainam himsi' (*kṛṣṇ Yajuḥ 1.2.1*) etc. confirmed the justification of addressing such life-less natural phenomena by quoting a sūtra from the Brahman-Sūtra which runs as - *Abhimānivyapadeśastu viśeṣanugatibhyām (Vede-Ṛgveda Bhasyopakramanikā)*. The importance of this Sūtra is as follows. For every inanimate object which is addressed in the Veda, there is its governing deity. So when an inanimate object seems to be addressed, actually in that case the governing deity of it is addressed. Hence, such invocation is not unreasonable.

What I have mentioned just shows that the Vedic people were very much conscious about these natural phenomenon like fire, air, water, earth and ether or sky. But what is mainly concerned in our present investigation is a bit different. If by 'element' we mean a causal element then we should proceed in a different way. In fact, there are some exceptional hymns, which are called by some western scholars, philosophical hymns, where some speculations about the nature of the root cause of the universe are revealed. Tradition attributes them to a number of names like Aghamarsana, Prajapati parameṣṭhin, Brahmaṇaspati etc. If we agree that to doubt is to philosophize, or to make an enquiry about the root cause is to philosophize, then these Sūktas are really worthy of being accepted as philosophical hymns. (Clulee, Nicholas H. 1988)².

For example, Nāsadiya Sūkta of the Ṛgveda. This Sūkta is attributed to Prajāpati parameṣṭhi. He is *sur* or *Ṛṣi* of this hymn. According to this, Prajāpati the original matter comes neither under the definition of *being* nor under the definition of *non-being*. Hence, it is said - Sūkt-Nāsadāsi mosadāsittadānini Nāsitrajo novyomā paro yat etc. meaning that, at times there was not “non-being” and not “being” also.

Then after two Mantras Parameṣṭhi prajapati declared - Tam āsit tamasā Gūṛhamagre Apraketam Salilam. This “Apraketam Salilam” is in another sense, causal water (Kāranārmava of later purānas). Parameṣṭhi offers water (Salila) as the fundamental principle of explanation. From water, all things are made. And hence water is the original substance according to him. It is also significant that he says that at time there was no sky and no air. Because of such a philosophical stand point Prof. Benimadhab Barua called this parameṣṭhi prajāpati, the Thales of India. Ancient Greek philosopher Thales was also of this opinion that water is the fundamental principle of the universe. Prajāpati says that there was the unfathomable depth of water-*gahanam gabhiram*. Water was that one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature-*Ānidavātam Svadhayā tadekam*. Water was concealed at first, in the darkness, in its indiscriminated or unmanifested form (*Apraketam*). Water was all (*Sarvamāidam*).

Similarly - it may be remembered that in the Anita Sūkla of the Ṛgveda (10.168). Vāyu has been praised as *Ātma devānam Bhuṇanasya garbhaḥ*. It is so important for our being alive. But still it is not accepted in this Sūkta as the cause of universe. It may be noted here that in later interpretation of parameṣṭhi's speculation in the Satapatha Brahmana (10.5.3.1), water is altogether forgotten, and Mind has taken its place - because Mind was at that time neither the existent nor the non-existent. (Sinha, P. 2006)⁵

2. Upaniṣad Period - It is in the period of the Upanisadas that we meet for the first time with a full-fledged conception of the five elements. Thinkers of this period undoubtedly advanced on the conception of a single water-element which is found in the Ṛgveda. But priority of the water-element was perhaps reconsidered. Because the order or serial succession of these phenomena with regard to their origin has been stated in a different way in which water is not the first one. Thus it is said in

the Taittiriyaopaniṣad - *Tasmādvā Etasmād Ātmana Ākaśaḥ Sambhūta. Ākāśād vāyāḥ, Vāyoragniḥ, Agnerāpaḥ, Adbhyaḥ Pṛthivi, Pṛthivyā, Pṛthivyā ośadhayaḥ. Ośadhibhyo' nnam, Annāt puruṣaḥ. Sa vā eṣa puruṣaḥ annarasamayāḥ.*

It means from the self (Ātman) sprang forth ether or Ākāśa, from ether or sky air, from air fire, from fire water and from water earth, from earth herbs, from herbs food, (Taitti-ii.). It may be noted here that in this journey from one element to the concept of five elements there was perhaps another phase, in the middle of this time span, when three elements like fire, water and earth were admitted. Hence, we get a sentence in the Chāndogyaopaniṣad which runs as - *Tadikṣata Bahu syām prajāyeya iti tat tejo' sṛjata. Tasmadyatra kva ca Śocati svedate vāpuruṣas tejasa Eva taddhyāpo jāyante*, (6.2.3) and then - *Tā Āpa oikṣata Bhvyāḥ Syām prajāyemahiti. Tā annamasṛjatanta'* - and in the next chapter it is said that - *Tesām khatvesām Bhūtānām Triṇyeva Bijāni Bhavaniti.* (The Indian Doctrine of Five Elements. 1966)⁶

Here only three elements are mentioned. And by the combination of these three elements in many ways all other things are made. This process is called Trivita-Karaṇa in Advaita Vedanta philosophy. While commenting upon this Acharya śaṅkara said - *Ekaikasya prādhānyam vayordvayoh Gunabhāvo' nyathā hi rajjvā ivaikameva Tri Brt Karaṇam Syāt.* This is true but later Vaidāntikas accepted and explained the process of Pāneikāraṇa also. Then again in the 4th khanda in this Upaniṣad it is said that "*yadagneḥ Rohitam Rūpaim tejasastadrūpam yacchukalam tadapām yatksnam tadannasya apāgādagneragnitvam vācaranbhaṇam vikāro Nāmadheyam triṇi rūpānityeva satyam.* Here also three tattvas are mentioned.

S. Radhakrishnan observed that - "possibly this view is the origin of the Sāmkhya doctrine of tanmātrās or subtle essences, giving rise to gross substances". But there is another interpretation of this from Sāmkhya point of view. They say that these three gunas represent three gunas as accepted by the Sāmkhya. Red for Rajas. White for Sattva and Black for Tamaḥ. Concept of Tanmatras is more distinctly presented in the following sentences of Prasnopaniṣad - "*pṛthivi ca pṛthivimātrā ca āpaścākāsamātrā ca*". Here the Pṛthivimātrā is clearly Gandhatanmātra - and so on. References are also available in the Aitareyopaniṣad and Kaṭhopaniṣad.

The process of Pancikarana has been explained in the later Vaidantika texts like Vedantasāra and tattvabodha etc. "There are five elements. These elements are in two forms: gross and subtle. Their subtle form is called tanmatra - they alone. That is in their subtle form each of these five elements is in a pristine pure state, unmixed with anything else. So they are neither experienced nor seen. When they become gross they are to be mixed with something else. Since there is nothing but the five elements only, they are mixed with one another. Thus in air there are water, earth, fire and space. In fire there are air, water, space and earth. Such is the case for others also. This mixing follows as a rule. The system followed is half of one element is mixed with one fifth of the others. This method is Paneikarna. Another fact is to be kept in mind in this connection that Ether comes first with single property of sound. It is that through which we hear. From ether we proceed to air which has the

property of ether and in addition that of tangibility. Thus fire has three properties sabda, sparśa and Rūpa. Water has four properties, Sabda, Sparśa, Rūpa and Rasa. And lastly earth has all the five properties including Gandha (see Radhakrishna vol. 1 page 162). This is the stand point of Naiyayikas and Vaisesikas also of the period of the philosophical systems (Motilal)⁴.

3. Epic period - we may remember here in this connection that the Mahabharata including Srimad Bhagavadgita also accepted the doctrine of five elements along with the theory of three guṇas which has a great affinity with the Saṅkhya philosophy though there are many points of differences also. But that cannot be fully discussed in small paper like this.

4. Period of philosophical systems - perhaps Sāmkyakārika of Iśvarakṛṣṇa has finalized the concept of five elements stating that -

pratṛtemahāmstato' haṅkārastasmād gaṇaśca Śoḍaśakaḥ |
Tasmādapi Śoḍaśakāt pancabhyh panea Bhūtāni ||

But Naiyayikas and Vaisesikas do not believe in the doctrine of tanmatra because they are atomists. They hold that atoms are of four types and those are eternal. There is another controversy also prevailing in this period about whether Sabda or Sound is a Substance or an attribute. Inclusion of Sky or Ākaśa in the group Mahabhūta was not supported by all. (Subbarayappa, B.V. 2017) Interestingly a Buddhist philosopher like Vasubandhu also in his Abhdharmamakośa stated that Bhūtas are four in number - *Bhūtāni pṛthividhāuraptejovāyudhātavaḥ ... Catvāri Mahābhutāni lleyante*. These are called Dhātavaḥ. Svalakṣanopādāyarūpadhāranat Dhātavaḥ.

So in conclusion we can say for Prithvi that one can use our senses and experience the feeling of touch of earth and can smell it too. Realizing the fact that there are two types of earth one that is Eternal or (nitya) meaning thereby that which is in the form of atom (Paramanu). The other type is in the form of anitya which is perishable and which exists in the form of Karya or Work at animate and inanimate levels.

Figurative conclusion can be drawn by saying, that our body, sense organs are the earth which in entirety gets the shape of Jiva or life but those are perishable. But elements or atoms are eternal as after death may we bury, or burn the body, all the atoms get disintegrated to come back to its original eternal form. So our Sharir and its Karya or Work are perishable as the earthen forms but the atom remains which are eternal. (Venkatesan, S)⁸.

Likewise Earth which has two characters so is the Water or Jal which is the second element which again i.e. nitya in the shape of atom and Karya (Work) be it any form of it for example river, pond or sea are perishable. As rain is the result of the water which gets evaporated from the sea or river in the sky as cloud and then again it falls on earth as rain so is the eternal atom which only changes its karya or shape of work and what we see is the degradable sign. We can also feel it with the help of sense organs as we can touch it to feel and taste it as well.

The two levels of earth and water is also present in the third element of Vayu or air and has an eternal atom and perishable Karya. The breath of oneself makes us feel the air. Air remains around us eternally primarily at atomic level though we feel the storm or strong breeze which is temporary. Puranas also mention some 49 types of Maruts or winds. Seven are of importance: 1. Pravaha, 2. Avaha, 3. Udvaha, 4. Samvaha, 5. Vivaha, 6. Parvaha and 7. Paravaha. The wind which takes the water from the ocean is called Udvaha.

The fourth element of Indian Panchabhuta is Fire or Agni and it has eternal and perishable elements also. The basic character of Fire is to generate heat. According to Hindu Mythology, Agni is one of the Eight guardians who guards our universe and is known as Asta-dik-palakas (Asta-eight, dik--Zone, Palaka-Guardian). The Rig Veda has an elaborate section on Agni.

Fire may be of various types according to our Indian mythology. The four important ones are of the stomach which includes hunger and digestive power of the stomach, then the fire of the earth within, fire of the sky and the fire we commonly use in day to day life.

Then comes the last of the five elements which is sound or ether which one can hear. What makes the Ether unique is because it is eternal. Ether is the carrier of sound be it man made or otherwise. As ether is the only eternal element of the five elements it caught attention of various sages from various times. The concept of Akashvani or Divine sound which is heard by sages of higher order is related to this Ether or Akasha. (Gopal, Madan 1990)³.

The cosmic body is the grand total of those material bodies and elements discussed above. The first and pure manifestation of those five elements are the inner conscience and bodily organs like ear etc. However, the inner conscience or Antarkaranas assumes four state or forms. Once conception and doubt arise it is called Mind. The process of examination and re-examination of a subject belongs to the state of intellect called citta. But with the feeling of "I" the ego or ahamkar bursts out. (Raju, T.1989)⁷. So we find the pure five elements gave rise to the inner conscience or Antarkarnana and then there are four states within it namely mind, buddhi, citta and ego.

In conclusion, we may say that the doctrine of five elements has been accepted and explained by various philosophers and Acāryas of ancient India through ages in their own ways. They are very essential in their character as they make our universe and likewise we are also part of them.

References

1. Ball, P. *The Elements: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP Oxford, 2004.
2. Clulee, Nicholas H. *John Dee's Natural Philosophy*. Routledge, 1989.
3. Gopal, Madan. *India through the Ages. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India*. Edited by K. S. Gautam, 1990.
4. *Motilal Bansaridas Publishers Bhagavata Purana Book 1 Skandha III*. pp. 374–375.
5. Sinha, Prasad. *Bharatiya Darshan Ki Rooprekha. Motilal Banarsidass Publisher*. 2006.
6. *The Indian Doctrine of Five Elements*. 1966,
<http://indianmedicine.eldoc.ub.rug.nl/id/eprint/7971>.
7. Raju, Tirupati. *Structural Depths of Indian Thought: Toward a Constructive Postmodern Ethics*. SUNY Press.1989
8. Venkatesan, Satish. *Ayurvedic Remedies: An Introduction*. Vyaha Publishing, 2013.