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Relevance of Sāṃkhya and Yogā Philosophy in Contemporary Thoughts

Pratap Chandra Debnath ^{a†} 

^a Department of Philosophy, Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, Dhupguri, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, India

[†] Corresponding Author:

✉ pcdebnath79@gmail.com (P. C. Debnath)
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relevance of Sāṃkhya and Yogā philosophy in addressing the psychological, ethical, and existential challenges of contemporary life. The study explores how the metaphysical insights of Sāṃkhya and the practical disciplines of Yogā contribute to mental well-being, self-awareness, and spiritual growth in the modern world. Employing an interpretative and analytical methodology, the study is based on a qualitative examination of classical Indian philosophical texts, including the Bhagavad Gita, the Sāṃkhya Kārikā, and Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras, along with contemporary scholarly works on Indian philosophy and well-being. The study focuses on key concepts such as Puruṣa, Prakṛti, the three Guṇas, Citta Vṛtti, mindfulness, and liberation. The findings suggest that the distinction between consciousness and material reality, together with Yogic practices such as meditation, breath regulation, and ethical discipline, offers valuable resources for coping with stress, anxiety, identity crises, and the search for meaning. The paper contributes to contemporary philosophical discourse by presenting an integrated understanding of Sāṃkhya and Yogā as complementary systems capable of promoting holistic well-being and inner transformation.

KEYWORDS: Sāṃkhya; Yogā; Consciousness; Puruṣa; Prakṛti; Holistic well-being; Spiritual growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present era has witnessed remarkable changes in human life due to the development of technology, materialistic desire and digitization. While material progress and technological developments fill our lives with convenience and connect people across distances, these developments also bring several challenges. In the era we live in today, many people experience stress, anxiety, and emotional instability even after progressing materially. Constant responsibilities and information overload often make it difficult for individuals to relax or even remain aware of themselves. Against this backdrop, the ancient Indian systems of philosophy as espoused by Sāṃkhya and Yogā are immensely significant for us today (Feuerstein, 2008).

Sāṃkhya is one of the oldest and most established schools of thought of the many classic philosophies existing in India. It is mainly founded on the essential duality between Puruṣa—pure

consciousness and Prakṛti, or the material world. The Sāṃkhya school holds that human suffering stems from failing to differentiate between these two concepts. As people, we identify with our physical bodies, minds, and emotions, which creates attachments, desires, dissatisfaction, and suffering. Sāṃkhya guides individuals toward overcoming this condition by emphasizing the necessity of viveka, or discriminative knowledge, enabling them to realize their true nature and attain liberation. Sāṃkhya guides individuals towards overcoming this state by emphasizing the necessity of viveka or discriminative ā m knowledge, enabling an individual to realize who they are and move to liberation (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

Linked closely with the philosophical framework of Sāṃkhya, Yogā provides a practical approach to applying its principles in daily life. While Sāṃkhya is primarily concerned with explaining the nature of reality and the distinction

between consciousness and matter, Yogā focuses on inner transformation and spiritual discipline. It aims to cultivate mental clarity, self-control, and inner balance through ethical conduct, meditation, concentration, breath regulation, and physical practices. Through these methods, Yogā guides the aspirant from mere intellectual understanding to direct experiential realization. The Yogic system is designed to calm the fluctuations of the mind and lead individuals towards harmony, self-awareness, and spiritual liberation (Vivekananda, 1999).

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore Sāṃkhya and Yogā from an epistemological perspective and examine their relevance to contemporary human life. The study seeks to examine how these systems respond to contemporary psychological and existential challenges such as stress, anxiety, attachment insecurity, and a sense of inner dislocation. It also examines how the ethical principles of mindfulness, self-discipline, restraint from excessive gratification, and self-knowledge can contribute to a balanced and purposeful life (Feuerstein, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

This study is primarily analytical and interpretative, drawing upon classical philosophical texts and contemporary scholarly interpretations. The paper analyses how the practical philosophies of Sāṃkhya and Yogā remain relevant in the contemporary age by offering guidance for mental well-being, ethical living, and spiritual growth (Radhakrishnan, 2008; Feuerstein, 2008).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an exploratory analytical research method to understand the philosophical roots and present-day significance of Sāṃkhya and Yogā in human life. The study is mainly theoretical and interpretative and aims to explore central philosophical ideas and their practical relevance in the context of contemporary psychological and social issues. The research is qualitative in nature and involves a close reading and evaluation of classical Indian philosophical texts and contemporary academic commentaries (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This research is primarily based on secondary sources and includes translated versions of significant primary texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Sāṃkhya Kārikā, and the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali. The study also draws upon books, journal articles, and preprints pertaining to Indian philosophy, spirituality, psychology, mindfulness, and well-being in order to develop a broader

understanding of the topic. An interpretative approach has been adopted to elucidate concepts such as Puruṣa, Prakṛti, the Gunas, and Citta Vṛtti, along with ideas related to liberation and mindfulness (Gambhirananda, 2000; Ishvarakrishna, 1995; Vivekananda, 1999).

This research also investigates the teachings of Sāṃkhya and Yogā as possible responses to contemporary issues such as stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, identity crises, questions of selfhood, and the search for meaning and inner peace (Feuerstein, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

3. THE ORIGINS OF SĀMĀKHYA AND YOGĀ PHILOSOPHY

3.1. Sāṃkhya Philosophy

Sāṃkhya, a classical Indian philosophical system, is traditionally attributed to Kapila. The term Sāṃkhya is derived from a Sanskrit word that means “number” or enumeration, and it conveys this systematic way of breaking down the elements of existence into categories (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

Sāṃkhya provides an account of reality that is rational and organized rather than mythic or ritualistic. It has profoundly influenced other schools of Indian philosophy, particularly Yogā and Vedānta, throughout the centuries. Sāṃkhya is based on a clear form of philosophical dualism. It provides an account of the universe in terms of two generating principles that could not be more different—Puruṣa and Prakṛti. Understanding the distinction between these two principles is essential for understanding the self (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

Puruṣa may be understood as pure consciousness, the silent witness within. It is neither the body, nor the mind, nor emotions, nor even thoughts. What is there instead is the awareness that watches all of this. Sāṃkhya maintains that Puruṣa is eternal, passive and unchanging. It does not do, make or break; it merely sheds light on experience. This principle is present within every living being as consciousness itself. While individuals seem separate, in reality Puruṣa is infinite and incapable of birth, death, pleasure or pain. This witnessing self that can observe the inner experience is instrumental in attaining spiritual freedom (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

The principle of nature or material reality is known as Prakṛti. This includes everything that is changing and ever-evolving - our body, our senses, our mind, our emotions and the world around us. Prakṛti is vibrantly active and dynamic, unlike

Puruṣa. It is dominated by the three fundamental qualities called Gunas: Sattva (purity, harmony, balance), Rajas (activity, passion, motion), Tamas (inertia, darkness, resistance). These three qualities are interrelated and constantly interact, generating the diversity and complexity of life. When Sattva predominates, the mind becomes calm and clear; when Rajas dominates, restlessness and desire arise; and when Tamas prevails, confusion and inertia become prominent. Various psychological and physical states may be understood through the interaction of these Gunas (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

Sāṃkhya emphasises that all suffering is because of confusion between Puruṣa and Prakṛti. Human beings often misidentify themselves with the body, mind, and social roles: I have anxiety; I am successful; I am suffering. These experiences are in fact all Prakṛti, and the true self—Puruṣa—is unaffected by it all. This false identification traps individuals within the cycle of birth and rebirth (Saṃsāra). As long as consciousness is attached to material nature, it remains within the ever-changing realm of dissatisfaction (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

Now there is a subtle connection between Puruṣa and Prakṛti. Although entirely distinct, their proximity gives rise to experience, much like iron is attracted to a magnet without becoming identical to it. Puruṣa is pure awareness, while Prakṛti provides the content. Together, Puruṣa and Prakṛti make possible the world of experience, although their essential natures remain distinct. When this distinction is clearly realized, liberation becomes possible. For example, in Sāṃkhya, liberation (Mokṣa) comes via knowledge (Jñāna), not through ritual/service or with the help of the divine. This knowledge is not merely intellectual; it is the direct realization of the distinction between subject and object. When the mind is trained, it can distinguish with precision: thoughts, emotions, and bodily changes are all objects of awareness and not the self. As this realization becomes firmly established, attachment gradually weakens. One is no longer conditioned by pleasure or pain; it is then that liberation is attained (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

An exceptionally refined analysis of the human mind also appears in Sāṃkhya. The relationships of the intellect (Buddhi), ego (Ahaṃkāra) and sensory mind (Manas) to Prakṛti are then expounded. These internal faculties colour our experiences of reality and construct the illusion of separate selfhood. However, they too are products of nature, affected by the influence of the Gunas. Human beings tend to identify themselves with thoughts,

sensations, and emotions, but by observing this process awareness gradually returns to its essential nature.

Thus, Sāṃkhya offers not only a metaphysical theory of existence, but a fundamental psychological and functional way of approaching the human condition. It encourages people to meditate, examine their assumptions about identity and discover the silent consciousness that underlies all change and transformation. A clear interpretation differentiating Puruṣa from Prakṛti leads one to spiritual awakening and knowledge of the self. Even today, this ancient system offers clarity, depth, and a meaningful path toward inner freedom.

3.2. Yogā Philosophy

Yogā is an ancient Indian philosophical system that promotes the harmonious development of the body, mind, and spirit. It emphasizes holistic well-being by integrating physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of human life. Today, Yogā is often associated primarily with physical exercise, although its original scope was much broader. The system is rooted in the teachings of Patañjali, whose Yoga Sūtras constitute a foundational text of classical Yogā philosophy and practice. The ultimate goal of Yogā is self-realization and liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, commonly referred to as Mokṣa or Kaivalya—the realization of one's true nature beyond the body-mind complex (Vivekananda, 1999; Eliade, 2009).

In contrast to the more comprehensive metaphysical rendering of reality contained in Sāṃkhya, Yogā is largely a practical science. It offers, above all, a systematic approach to inner transformation through regular practice. The human mind is powerful yet restless, and Yogā emphasizes the need to discipline and direct its capacities through sustained practice. Patañjali describes these disturbances as the fluctuations of the mind (Citta Vṛtti). Citta Vṛtti refers to the constant fluctuations of thoughts, emotions, and memories that disturb mental clarity and distort perception. Classical Yogā holds that suffering arises when individuals identify themselves with these mental fluctuations rather than with their true nature (Vivekananda, 1999).

For this reason, the primary objective of Yogā is to still these mental fluctuations. Clarity comes naturally when the mind is calm and stable. When the mind becomes calm, the practitioner realizes Puruṣa—the pure consciousness that is distinct from Prakṛti, the ever-changing realm of material

existence. This awareness is not merely theoretical; it is realized through direct experience. Through sustained practice, the practitioner gradually moves from mental agitation to tranquility and from confusion to self-awareness (Vivekananda, 1999).

To facilitate this transformation, Yogā prescribes a series of practical disciplines. The most famous among these is Āsana, the practice of physical postures. These postures help develop strength, flexibility, physical health, and bodily discipline. More importantly, they prepare the body for prolonged periods of meditation. In classical Yogā, the body is regarded as a means to spiritual realization rather than an end in itself (Vivekananda, 1999).

The same goes for Prāṇāyāma or breath control as well. Breath is the connection between body and mind. When breathing is irregular, the mind tends to become agitated; when breathing is steady, the mind becomes calm. Through conscious regulation of the breath, practitioners can influence the autonomic nervous system, promoting relaxation, reducing stress, and enhancing mental clarity. This insight is consistent with contemporary scientific findings regarding breathwork and emotional regulation, for example about breath work and how we regulate emotions (Feuerstein, 2008).

Meditation, or Dhyāna, is the soul of Yogā training. Meditation trains individuals to observe thoughts without becoming attached to them. It cultivates a witnessing awareness that enables individuals to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively to external stimuli. This nurtures emotional balance, temperance, and awareness of the underlying levels of being through time.

Yogā also teaches ethical living and right behavior through the principles of Yamas and Niyamas. The Yamas and Niyamas include principles such as non-violence, truthfulness, self-discipline, contentment, self-study, and ethical responsibility, which together form the moral foundation of spiritual practice. They remind practitioners that inner peace cannot be divorced from ethical responsibility and compassion (Vivekananda, 1999).

Concentration is another key stage known as Dhāraṇa. When attention is focused on a single object, sound, or idea, the mind becomes more stable and less distracted. This focused attention gradually develops into deeper concentration and meditative absorption.

Ultimately, Yogā serves as the practical counterpart to the philosophical principles of Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya provides a rational basis for

the separation of consciousness and matter, while Yogā affords an experience of this truer reality. Yogā provides an authentic path to freedom, clarity and balance through ethics, physical discipline, breath control, concentration and meditation. Its lessons are still incredibly relevant to day-to-day life in the modern world, directing one to inner peace and deep serenity even today.

4. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF SĀMĀHYA AND YOGĀ

4.1. Mental Health and Psychological Well-being

In this fast-paced and demanding world, suffering from anxiety, depression or chronic stress has become quite common. Though medical interventions and therapy remain important, there has been a growing interest in holistic approaches that address the deeper causes of emotional imbalance. In this context, the principles of Sāṃkhya and Yogā provide a valuable framework for understanding psychological well-being from both experiential and philosophical perspectives (Feuerstein, 2008).

The dualistic framework of Sāṃkhya distinguishes between Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (the material world, including the mind and emotions). This perspective suggests that human beings are not identical with the thoughts and feelings that arise within them. Stress, fear, and sadness belong to the changing realm of Prakṛti, whereas one's deepest identity lies in Puruṣa, the witnessing consciousness. Developing an awareness of this distinction enables individuals to observe their emotions with greater detachment rather than becoming overwhelmed by them. Such awareness fosters emotional maturity, self-understanding, and a balanced response to the challenges of life (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

Yogā translates this philosophical understanding into practical experience. Yogā provides practical techniques such as meditation, breathing practices, and physical postures to calm the nervous system and soothe the mind. Prāṇāyāma helps regulate breathing patterns associated with stress, while meditation encourages non-judgmental awareness of thoughts. These techniques are now widely integrated into modern therapeutic settings because of their documented benefits in reducing anxiety and enhancing emotional stability (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005).

The combined wisdom of Sāṃkhya and Yogā offers both theoretical insight and practical

guidance, helping individuals understand the nature of the self and cultivate inner discipline. Rather than encouraging the suppression of emotions, these traditions promote self-awareness and the cultivation of self-compassion. Through these approaches, these millennia-old traditions offer a comprehensive and humanistic path toward mental equilibrium and lasting psychological well-being.

4.2. Holistic Approach to Health

In an era of increasing specialization in medicine, many have come to realize that optimal wellness cannot be achieved by merely treating symptoms. Contemporary integrative medicine now emphasizes care for the entire human being—body, mind & emotional life. This holistic view resonates deeply with ancient insights of Sāṃkhya and Yogā, that have always considered human beings multi-dimensional and interdependent (Feuerstein, 2008).

Health is not just the non-existence of disease, as per Sāṃkhya; it is an inner balance. It advances the idea that everything in nature is governed by three fundamental qualities, or Gunas: Sattva (clarity and balance), Rajas (activity and restlessness), and Tamas (inertia, dullness, and ignorance). When these forces remain in balance, a person feels healthy and clear-headed. When this balance is disturbed, physical illness and emotional instability may arise. This understanding encourages individuals to cultivate balance in their daily routines, thoughts, and lifestyles (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

Yogā provides practical methods for restoring balance and maintaining overall well-being. Through physical postures, breath regulation, meditation, and ethical living, Yogā promotes both physical health and mental balance. Today, Yogā is widely recognized as an effective complementary approach for managing chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and stress-related disorders. Research on meditation and breathwork also supports the positive effects of these practices on cognitive functioning, emotional regulation and overall resilience (Iyengar, 2005).

By promoting self-awareness, moderation, and conscious living, Sāṃkhya and Yogā offer a timeless framework for achieving holistic health and well-being. They remind us that genuine healing begins within and that lasting well-being arises from balance, harmony, and conscious self-care.

4.3. Mindfulness and Self-Awareness

In Western psychology and wellness culture, mindfulness has emerged in recent decades as a popular approach to well-being. Its deeper roots, however, lead back to the traditions of Sāṃkhya and Yogā philosophy. Long before mindfulness gained widespread popularity in contemporary Western societies, these traditions emphasized self-awareness, focused attention, and detachment from constantly changing external circumstances (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

The ultimate aim in Sāṃkhya is Viveka, or discrimination—the insight that the true self (Puruṣa) is separate from the changing phenomena of Prakṛti. The realm of nature, changing and impermanent, contains thoughts, feelings, achievements and disappointments. If we become too attached to them, we suffer. Sāṃkhya encourages individuals to observe their inner experiences with detachment and to recognize the silent awareness that exists beyond thoughts and emotions. This realization fosters a deep sense of inner freedom, stability, and psychological security (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

Yogā translates these philosophical insights into practical methods for everyday life. It trains you to watch your thoughts through meditation, breath awareness and disciplined attention exercises. Rather than reacting automatically to emotions and impulses, these practices cultivate a calm observational attitude and a deeper connection with the present moment. This approach forms the foundation of modern mindfulness-based interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which are widely used to reduce anxiety and enhance emotional well-being (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Together, Sāṃkhya and Yogā facilitate the transition from distraction and mental restlessness to awareness and inner clarity. Their teachings offer a source of clarity and stability in an overstimulated and fast-paced world. Regular mindfulness practice can help individuals respond to life's challenges with greater balance, develop deeper self-understanding, and cultivate lasting inner resilience.

4.4. Philosophy of Consciousness

The phenomenon of consciousness - what it is and how it occurs - persists as one of the most intriguing unsolved problems in philosophy and science. Sāṃkhya and Yogā provided a profound and systematic account of consciousness and the mind-body relationship long before the emergence of modern philosophical and scientific debates.

Unlike many materialist explanations, Sāṃkhya and Yogā distinguish between Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (the material realm, including the mind and body), thereby refusing to reduce consciousness to a mere byproduct of physical processes (Chalmers, 1996).

Consciousness is frequently explained through concepts such as emergence, where it becomes a result of neural activity in models of both science and philosophy. However, the questions pertaining to subjective experience - why we feel things, see things and have self-awareness have not been solved yet. The mystery is approached differently by Sāṃkhya and Yogā. They maintain that consciousness is not produced by matter; rather, it is an independent and eternal principle. These systems maintain that the mind functions as an instrument through which consciousness operates; the mind itself is not consciousness (Chalmers, 1996).

This view finds an alternative to purely materialist explanations and calls for a more profound reflection on the nature of selfhood. By affirming the distinction between awareness and physical processes, Sāṃkhya and Yogā offer a deeper understanding of human existence and encourage dialogue between inner experience and external inquiry (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

In contemporary times, as modern research begins to investigate contemplative science and the nuances of perception, these ancient philosophies still offer valuable knowledge. They invite us to reconsider what it truly means to be conscious, aware, and fully alive (Vivekananda, 1999).

4.5. Spirituality and the Search for Meaning

In a world dominated by materialism and competitive lifestyles, many individuals silently wrestle with profound questions: What makes life meaningful? What remains when prosperity and material wealth can no longer provide lasting fulfillment? The philosophical traditions of Sāṃkhya and Yogā address one of the most fundamental and enduring human quests—the search for meaning (Feuerstein, 2008).

Both traditions teach that lasting happiness cannot be found solely in external achievements or material success. Instead, they encourage inward reflection through meditation, self-discipline, ethical living, and the cultivation of self-awareness. A central teaching of Sāṃkhya is the distinction between Puruṣa, or pure consciousness, and Prakṛti, the ever-changing material world. This theory holds that most of our pain comes from

mistaking temporary jobs, feelings and situations for who we really are. Seeing the unchanging, deeper human self brings you to clarity and freedom (Gambhirananda, 2000).

Yogā provides the practical means through which the philosophical insights of Sāṃkhya can be experienced and realized. Through practices such as breath regulation, meditation, and disciplined living, Yogā promotes harmony between body, mind, and spirit. Such practices cultivate inner calm and resilience, enabling individuals to face life's uncertainties with greater confidence and composure. (Vivekananda, 1999).

These teachings are particularly relevant in an age marked by existential uncertainty and social isolation. They remind us that the search for meaning is not primarily an external pursuit. Rather, it unfolds gradually through the cultivation of self-awareness and inner growth. By nurturing silence, compassion, and insight, Sāṃkhya and Yogā encourage individuals to develop deeper human connections and a more enduring sense of spiritual fulfillment (Gambhirananda, 2000; Vivekananda, 1999).

5. CONCLUSION

The complexities of modern life, including growing mental health challenges, material pressures, and existential uncertainty that affect everyday life, make the wisdom of Sāṃkhya and Yogā highly relevant in contemporary times. Despite being many centuries old their insights are surprisingly topical. Sāṃkhya distinguishes between Puruṣa (pure consciousness) and Prakṛti (the changing material world)—this allows us to see how we suffer when we identify too much with roles, emotions, and accomplishments. This perspective reminds us that our true self exists beyond these fluctuations (Ishvarakrishna, 1995).

The practical application of this philosophical clarity is found in Yogā. Yogā provides practical methods for cultivating emotional balance and inner resilience through discipline, mindfulness, ethical living, breath regulation, and meditation. Rather than encouraging withdrawal from the world, Yogā teaches individuals to engage with life in a more balanced, conscious, and stable manner. Together, Sāṃkhya and Yogā offer an integrated path that unites philosophical reflection with practical experience (Vivekananda, 1999).

Yogā complements the philosophical insights of Sāṃkhya by providing practical disciplines aimed at self-control, concentration, and inner balance. In classical Yoga philosophy, breath regulation (prāṇāyāma), meditation (dhyāna), and

ethical living are regarded as essential practices for calming the mind and cultivating spiritual awareness (Patañjali, 2009). Contemporary research also highlights the effectiveness of yogic practices in promoting psychological well-being and reducing stress (Feuerstein, 2008; Brown & Gerbarg, 2005).

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DR. PRATAP CHANDRA DEBNATH is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, affiliated with the University of North Bengal. He holds a Ph.D. from Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University on “*The Problem of Time in Indian Knowledge Systems*.” He completed his graduation from Alipurduar College and post-graduation from the University of North Bengal and qualified the UGC-NET in 2012. His research interests include Indian and Western Epistemology, Metaphysics, and Logic. Dr. Debnath has published more than 15 research articles in national and international journals and actively participates in academic research, teaching, and curriculum development.

