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WATER AND OCEAN

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In an interesting recent article Walter Slaje (2001) has examined the way salt was conceived of in ancient and classical India. He comes to the conclusion that “[s]alt was conceived of as being ... substantially the same as water, albeit in a particular crystallized state of water, similar to, e.g., ice or hailstones as frozen states of water” (p. 42). In support of this conclusion Slaje presents some textual passages from classical philosophical literature. One of these passages will here be reconsidered. It may not provide the backing it is believed to provide.

The passage concerned occurs in the Padārthadharmasaṅgraha of Praśastapāda (WI §34-40), the classical presentation of the Vaiśeṣika philosophy. Here, as Slaje observes (p. 35), in treating the elemental substance ‘water’ Praśastapāda gives a fuller account of all the perceivable manifestations (*viśaya*) of water. This account includes “rivers (*sarī*) and the ocean (*samudra*)”.¹ On the following page Slaje concludes from this that *samudra* must have been regarded as a particular, objective manifestation of the elemental substance ‘water’: “although *salty tasting*, the ocean (*samudra*) was considered *water* in its very essence”. This is remarkable, he thinks, for elsewhere in the same passage of the Padārthadharmasaṅgraha the only taste allowed for water is ‘sweet’ (*madhura*).² Slaje believes that “[t]he clue to this problem of sweetness comprising salty taste .. might be found in Jaina sources where ‘saltiness’ has been treated as a variety of ‘sweetness’ since canonical times”. He also strongly suggests that the very mention of the ocean in the enumeration of perceivable manifestations of water may be due to the different taste which water from the ocean has, viz. salty. In other words, salty water is water in its very essence, and solid salt is a particular crystallised form of water.

I do not think that the Padārthadharmasaṅgraha allows of such an interpretation. It overlooks some of the fundamental tenets of Vaiśeṣika ontology. Let me repeat here the main points, which I have more elaborately dealt with elsewhere.³

¹ WI §40: *viśayas tu sarīsamudrahimakarakādīḥ*.

² WI §36: *śuklamadhuraśītā eva rūparasasparśāḥ*.

³ See Bronkhorst, 1992; 1999: 24 ff.

All that exists is either substance (*dravya*), quality (*guṇa*), action (*karman*), universal (*sāmānya/jāti*), particular (*viśeṣa*) or inherence (*samavāya*). Nothing that exists can combine these so-called categories (*padārtha*): nothing can e.g. be both substance **and** quality, for this would imply the fault of *jātiśaṅkara*, ‘mixture of universals’. Most of these categories have subdivisions. In the case of substance, for example, there are nine subdivisions, nine kinds of substance; these include the five elements: earth, water, fire, wind, ether. Once again, nothing can be more than one of these at the same time; nothing, e.g., can be both earth **and** water. These elements again have further subdivisions; in the case of earth these subdivisions are particularly numerous: they cover most of the objects denoted by common nouns, such as trees, pots, etc. etc. Trees in their turn can be divided into different kinds of trees. But however far one descends in this ontological scheme (which looks like a genealogical tree), the prohibition of *jātiśaṅkara* is valid at every single level. For example, a certain tree cannot be both a Śiṃśapā tree **and** a Palāśa tree, a beech **and** a fir.

This way of interpreting reality raises some obvious questions. Many, perhaps most, of the things we are familiar with do combine several categories. The most obvious example is the body, be it human or animal, or indeed the body of a tree. The body consists (from a Vaiśeṣika point of view) of earth and water (plus other substances, such as the digestive fire). How then is a body to be categorised, given that it cannot belong to more than one category? The Vaiśeṣika takes in this respect the following position: the body is earth, whereas water and whatever other substances there may be are not part of the body: they are merely connected with it (through *saṃyoga* ‘contact’, not *samavāya* ‘inherence’). This is equally true of the organs: they are connected with the body through contact. This applies even to the organ of touch.⁴ That is to say, normal bodies are earth in essence, but they are in contact with other substances.

Because real physical bodies always combine different elements, Praśastapāda does not hesitate to speak of bodies of water, fire, and wind. All of them are fortified with earth, which does not however strictly belong to those bodies; it is merely in contact with them.⁵ The bodies themselves are, in their very essence, water, fire and wind respectively.

⁴ WI §192: *tvagindriyaśarīrayoḥ ... yuteṣv āśrayeṣu samavāyo 'stīti paraspareṇa saṃyogaḥ siddhaḥ.*

⁵ See for the water body WI §38: *śarīram ayonijam eva varuṇaloke pāṛthivāvayavopaṣṭambhāc copabhogasamartham*; for the fire-body WI §45: *śarīram ayonijam evādityaloke pāṛthivāvayavopaṣṭambhāc copabhogasamartham*; for the wind-body WI §52: *ayonijam eva śarīraṃ marutāṃ loka pāṛthivāvayavopaṣṭambhāc copabhogasamartham.*

Another example is gold. Gold, Praśastapāda tells us, is a form of fire.⁶ However, he also tells us that the touch of fire is hot and hot only.⁷ Yet the touch of gold is not hot. And gold has other features, too, that do not belong to fire but which do belong to earth, such as taste. How is one to explain this? Praśastapāda has his answer ready: such other qualities inhere in the other substance or substances with which fire is here in contact.⁸ In his account of creation Praśastapāda describes the golden egg from which the universe is created as made from fire atoms together with earth atoms.⁹ Once again, gold is fire in its very essence, but it is accompanied by one or more other elements that do not strictly speaking belong to it, but that are in contact with it.

Another point has to be emphasised here. In order to find out what entities exist, Vaiśeṣika uses a simple instrument: the words of the Sanskrit language. Indeed, Praśastapāda draws sometimes ontological conclusions from the use of certain words.¹⁰ With few exceptions, the nouns of the Sanskrit language provide a good inventory of the substances that exist. Most of these substances are, of course, earth from the point of view of the Vaiśeṣikas: trees, pots, houses, etc. etc. There are far fewer common nouns that denote objects constituted of water, fire and wind. But there are some. In the case of water, there are words like river, lake, pond, and ocean. This, and nothing else, is the reason why Praśastapāda enumerates rivers and the ocean as manifestations of water.

With the preceding reflections in mind, we can try to apply Vaiśeṣika-style reasoning to the ocean: where does it fit in the ontological scheme of that school? The first observation to be made is that the ocean exists, because there is a word for it. Once we know it exists, it has to be determined whether it is a substance, a quality, or any of the remaining principal categories. The answer is not problematic: the ocean is a substance. Which substance? Again, there are no serious candidates apart from water. Being water, the taste of the ocean should be sweet (*madhura*). It is however salty. How is that possible? According to Praśastapāda's Padārthadharmasaṅgraha there are six tastes, two among them being 'sweet' (*madhura*) and 'salty' (*lavaṇa*).¹¹ Most of the substances have no taste at all;

⁶ WI §47: *ākaraṇam [tejah] suvarṇādi*.

⁷ WI §43: *uṣṇa eva sparśaḥ*.

⁸ WI §47: *tatra saṃyuktasamavāyād rasādyupalabdhir iti*. The Vyomavati (Vy I p. 87 l. 8) explains: *saṃyuktam suvarṇādau pāṛthivam dravyam, tatra samavetā rasādaya upalabhyante*. The Nyāyakandalī (Ny p. 117 l. 9 - p. 118 l. 2) goes further: *katham tarhi gandharasayor anuṣṇāśītasparśasya ca gurutvasya copalabdhir ata āha: tatreti/ bhoginām adṛṣṭavaśena bhūyasām pāṛthivāvayavānām upaṣṭambhād anudbhūtarūpasparśam piṇḍibhāvayogyam suvarṇādikam ārabhyate, tatra pāṛthivadravysamavetā ime rasādayo grhyante/*

⁹ WI §59: *taijasebhyo 'ṇubhyaḥ pāṛthivaparamāṇusahitebhyo mahad aṇḍam ārabhyate*.

¹⁰ See the references given in note 3, above.

¹¹ WI §119: *raso ... madhurāmlavaṇatiktakaṭukaṣāyabhedabhinnah*.

water is sweet and nothing else; only earth can have all the six tastes.¹² The conclusion is straightforward: the salty taste of the ocean cannot but be explained by the presence of earth that is in contact with the ocean. More precisely: because different manifestations of earth can have different tastes, there must be a form of earth in the ocean (i.e., in contact with the ocean) which is salty. Whether this form of earth is the substance salt or something else that has a salty taste, the Praśastapāda does not permit us to know. What we can know is that this admixture of earth does not strictly belong to the ocean, that it is only in contact with it. The salty taste, too, therefore, does not strictly belong to the ocean, just as the cold touch of gold does not really belong to the essence of gold, which is fire.

This is, as far as I can see, the correct Vaiśeṣika way of accounting for the saltiness of the ocean. Any other explanation does not do justice to the internal logic of the system. Vaiśeṣika philosophy is often strange, sometimes outrageous, but permeated by the urge to be precise and logically coherent. This does not exclude the possibility that traditional beliefs have occasionally been preserved in it. Yet it would be a mistake to invoke such traditional beliefs in order to explain features of the system without first exploring all systematic possibilities offered by the texts.

It may therefore well be true that some, or even many, Indians of ancient and classical India looked upon salt as being substantially the same as water. However, Praśastapāda the author of the Padārthadharmasaṅgraha was not one of those.¹³

¹² WI §29: *rasaḥ ṣaḍvidho madhurādīḥ*.

¹³ After this article had gone to press, the following half-verse from Śaṅkara's Upadeśasāhasrī (verse portion 1.14) came to my notice: *kāraṅy upamṛdnāti vidyā 'bbuddhim ivoṣare*. Mayeda translates this: "Knowledge destroys the factors of action as [it destroys] the notion that there is water in the salt desert." All dictionaries seem to agree that *ūṣara* means "saline, impregnated with salt". Did Śaṅkara not consider salt a form of water?

References:

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- Slaje, Walter (2001): "Water and salt (I): Yājñavalkya's *saindhava dr̥ṣṭānta* (BĀU II 4,12)." *Indo-Iranian Journal* 44, 25-57.

Abbreviations:

- Ny Nyāyakandalī [of Śrīdhara], with three subcommentaries, ed. J.S. Jetly and Vasant G. Parikh, Vadodara: Oriental Institute, 1991
- Vy Vyomavatī of Vyomaśivācārya, ed. Gaurinath Sastri (2 vols.), Varanasi: Sampūrṇānanda-saṃskṛta-viśvavidyālaya, 1983-84
- WI Word Index to the Praśastapādabhāṣya: A complete word index to the printed editions of the Praśastapādabhāṣya, by Johannes Bronkhorst & Yves Ramseier, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994