

COMMON SIMILES AND METAPHORS IN HINDU PHILOSOPHICAL LITERATURE

Hindu philosophical and religious literatures are replete with similes and metaphors that are cited to support and to elucidate the theories propounded. Some of these similes occur in more than one philosophical system. This is understandable because the basic treatises of the six philosophical systems, the *saddarśana*, are nearly contemporaneous.¹ Even the Śaiva Siddhānta school of thought, whose doctrinal texts appear some centuries later, draws on the same philosophical heritage.²

The metaphor that is commonest by far, occurring in both Hindu and Buddhist literature, is that which compares worldly life to an ocean. The ocean of worldly life

1. *The Saddarsana*

Sāṅkhya	-	earliest work, <i>The Sāṅkhya Kārikā</i> of Isvarakrśna, circa 5th century A.D.
Yoga	-	Yoga Sūtra of Patanjali, 5th century A.D.
Nyāya	-	<i>Nyāya Sūtra</i> of Gautama, 2nd century B.C.
Vaiśeṣika	-	<i>Vaiśeṣika Sūtra</i> of Kanada, between the 2nd century B.C. and the beginnings of the Christian era.
Mīmāṃsā	-	<i>Mīmāṃsā Sūtra</i> of Jaimini, circa 2nd century A.D.
Vedānta	-	<i>Vedānta Sūtra (Brahma Sūtra)</i> of Bādarāyana 3rd century A.D; <i>Māṇḍūkya Kārikā</i> , Gaudapāda's commentary on the <i>Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i> , 7th century A.D.

2. *Maikāṅṭa Cāttiram*, the 14 doctrinal works of the Śaiva Siddhānta school, 11th to the 14th centuries A.D.

Maikāṅṭa Cāttiram Patinaangu, (MSP) Vol.I &II, The South India Śaiva Siddhānta Works Publishing Society, Tinnevely (1969) contains the following Śaiva Siddhānta works referred to:

Civaṅānapōtam	(SJB)	MSP Vol I
Civaṅānacittiyār	(SS)	MSP Vol. I
Civappirakācam	(Civa)	MSP Vol. II

has to be 'crossed', the root *-tṛ* 'to cross' being often used in this context.³ And one has to get to the other 'shore', *pāra*, which in the context means *mokṣa* 'liberation'.⁴ *Jñāna*, 'knowledge', which is the means to liberation, is compared to a boat or raft.⁵ *Karma*, 'ritual', then becomes an 'unreliable boat'.⁶ This metaphor which occurs in the Upanisads, becomes commonplace in Sanskrit literature. It is further elaborated by later Hindu poets and singers. Thus the Tamil saints, Manikkavacakar, Tayumanavar and Pattinattar compare human life to a voyage across a storm-tossed sea amid the dangers of sharks such as the senses.⁷ Life has also been compared to a river. Knowledge of the *ātman* 'soul' then becomes a 'bridge' *setu* across the river.⁸

The simile of the tree that is turned upside down, with its roots reaching upwards and its branches spreading downwards, is adopted by the Upanisads to illustrate the immanence of Brahman/God in creation.⁹ Creation with its manifold variety is grounded and proceeds from the one unitary source, Brahman, which is also immanent in it. This simile goes back to even earlier Vedic thought,¹⁰ where the sacrificial cult which sustains the world is compared to a tree, 'the hymns being the leaves which keep the tree and the branches alive'. The Upanisadic simile of the tree with 'its root above

³. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (ChUp) in S.Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (PU) London (1953) VII. i. 3; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BAUp) IV. iii. 22; *Kaṭhā Up* i. 17; iii. 2; *Muṇḍaka Up.* (*MuṇḍUp*) II ii.6; *MaitrāyaṇīyaUp* (*Mait Up*) vii.28; *Bhagavadgītā* (Gītā) ed. S. Radhakrishnan, London (1971), xii.7; *Mahābhārata* (Mbh) Critical Edn. xiv. 18. 31; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (Vive) of Sankara, ed. Swami Madhavananda, Calcutta (1944) 35, 37, 40, 79 etc.

⁴. *ChUp* VII. i. 3; xxvi. 2; *MuṇḍUp* II.ii. 6; *KaṭhaUp* ii. ll; iii. 2; 9; *MaitUp* vi 28; 30.

⁵. *Śvetāśvatara Up* (*ŚvetUp*) ii. 8; *MahanārāyaṇaUp* vi. 2; 5.

⁶. *MundUp* ii. 7.

⁷. *Tiruvācakam* of Manikkavacakar, trans. K.M.Balasubramaniam, Madras (1958) p. 61; *Paṭṭinattuppillaiyār Tiruppādalgal*, Part II, Madras (1990), p. 33-4; Ponnambalam Arunachalam, 'Selections from Tayumanavar' in *Studies and Translations*, Colombo (1937) p. 134.

⁸. *BaUp* IV. iv. 22; *Muṇḍ.Up.* II. ii. 5; *Mait.Up.* vii. 7; Mbh. XIV. 52. 87; *Vedānta Sūtras* (Ved.S.) *Sacred Books of the East* (SBE) vol. 34, p. 154; 156.

⁹. *SvetUp* iii. 9; *KathaUp* vi. 1; *MaitUp* vi. 4.

¹⁰. *Gītā*, *op. cit.* p. 326-7;

and branches below' is repeated in the *Bhagavadgītā*.¹¹ But here the tree refers to the 'cosmic tree'. Its leaves are the Vedas; its branches extending below are nourished by the three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*)¹² with sense objects (*viṣaya*) as its twigs. This 'firm-rooted' tree has to be cut off with the 'strong sword of non-attachment'. This tree, according to the *Gītā*, has roots spreading below too, in the world of men, which result in actions. Sankara, the great exponent of Advaita Vedānta, takes these downward spreading roots as 'secondary roots', as the *vāsanā*, the traces or predilections souls carry as a result of past deeds.

The metaphor of the tree occurs also in the Sanatsūjātīya¹³ section of the Mahābhārata. Here the tree is the world process. 'The great tree of Brahman is eternal. It is produced from the avyakta (i.e. primeval matter) as its seed, with the understanding as its trunk, with egoism as its branches, and the senses as sprouts. . .'. Here too the wise man gets emancipation by cutting with the 'sword of knowledge of the truth' and giving up bonds in the shape of attachments which cause birth etc.

The *Vivekacūdāmaṇi*¹⁴ of Sankara too speaks of life on earth as a tree, whose seed is *tamas* 'spiritual blindness', 'inertia'. Its sprout is the conviction that the body is the soul, attachment its leaves, *karma* its sap, the body its trunk and the *prāṇa* 'vital airs' its branches. . . . The tips of the branches are the senses; the flowers are the objects of enjoyment; its fruit the varied sufferings which are the result of *karma*. The experiencing soul is the bird. These two latter references describe the nature of conditioned existence and not God's immanence. They do not, therefore, say that the tree is upside down.

Though immanent, Brahman/God is also transcendent. The Upanisads and the Advaita Vedānta speak of Brahman as *niṣprapañca* 'beyond creation'.¹⁵ Brahman, according to this view, is not totally identified with creation. There is in Brahman an 'otherness' which is beyond comprehension, yet all life and nature are dependent in it and are in some way affected by it. Thus Brahman/God is regarded as 'uninvolved', as aloof from creation but affecting it by its/his mere presence, as the magnet attracts the iron without touching it. This simile occurs many times in philosophical literature. The

¹¹. *ibid.* xv 1-3.

¹². Matter, according to Sāṅkhya and some other philosophical systems, has three *guṇas* or constituent elements, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

¹³. *SBE* vol. 8, pp. 370-71.

¹⁴. *op.cit.* p. 145.

¹⁵. The word first occurs in Sankara's commentary on *ŚvetUp* vi. 5.

Māpātīyam, the great commentary on the Śaiva Siddhānta work *Civaṇānapōtam*,¹⁶ says:

Just as the attraction of the iron is due simply to the presence of the magnet, so this experience of souls is due simply to the presence of the Primal One who dwells in them not by action but by volition. So the Primal One does not, through the soul's experience, himself experience change.

Elsewhere in the Śaiva Siddhānta the same simile is used differently. The magnet attracts the iron that someone has placed within its field of attraction. So the soul experiences the karma that God apportions to it in that life.¹⁷ Vyasa commenting on the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patanjali¹⁸ compares the mind to a magnet. In the Yoga and Sāṅkhya schools of thought, the fundamental 'ignorance' of the soul is its mistaken identification of itself with the evolutes of *prakṛti* 'matter'. The mind, *manas*, also is an evolute of matter, but on account of its 'nearness' to the soul, it is able to make the soul imagine that the fluctuations of the mind-stuff are indeed the feelings of its own self. So Vyasa says, 'The mind is like a magnet that is energized by nearness alone. Since it can become an object, it is possessed by its Lord, the soul'. The same simile occurs in Nyāya literature to denote a natural attraction. The *Nyāya Sūtra* of Gautama says that the new-born approaches the breast of its mother as the iron approaches the magnet.¹⁹

Another common simile, that of the rose and the crystal, occurring in Vedānta, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya and Śaiva Siddhānta literatures,²⁰ illustrates the relationship

¹⁶. *Sivaṇānabodham*, (SJB) Ed. Gordon Matthews, Oxford (1948) p. 46; also p. 27; 74.

¹⁷. *ibid.* p. 10.

¹⁸. B.D.Basu, ed., *Sacred Books of the Hindus* (SBH) vol. IV, Allahabad (1924), i. 14; ii. 17; See also *Aphorisms of the Sankhya Philosophy of Kapila*, (SāṅkhyaS), Allahabad (1852), i. 99.

¹⁹. *SBH*, ed. B.D.Basu, vol. vii, III. i. 23 (p. 88).

²⁰. *Brahma Sutra* (BS) ed. S.Radhakrishnan, London (1960), p. 295; *VedS. SBE* vol. 34, p. 187; vol. 38, p. 153; vol. 48 (Ramanuja's Commentary) p. 481 - 2; Sankhya. *op. cit.* i. 17; *Sāṅkhya Pravacana Sūtram* (Sāṅkhya PS) of Nandalal Sinha in *SBH* XI, Allahabad (1915) ii. 35; *Yoga Sūtra*, *op. cit.* I. 3; 34; 41; *Ātmabodha* of Sankara, *Works of Sankarācārya*, vol. 15, (Srirangam) verse 5.; *Upadeśāśahasrī of Sankara* (*Upadeśa*) Trans. Swami Jagadānanda, Sri Ramakrishna Math. Bombay (1943) 17: 16; 18: 122.

between the soul and the world/body. The soul by itself is utterly different from the body of matter, but like the crystal that reflects the colour of the rose/object placed near it, the soul also is 'coloured', influenced, by matter and identifies itself with the body. Sankara says:²¹

Just as the crystal which is white and transparent is not discerned to be separate from the adjuncts of red or blue colour, the individual soul which is pure consciousness or light appears to be of the nature of the *upādhis* or adjuncts - of body, sense and mind and to be endowed with the activities of hearing, seeing etc. on account of the lack of discrimination.

The same thought is echoed in Śaiva Siddhānta literature. The *Civañānapōtam* says:²²

Like the crystal which displays many colours, the soul thinks its nature is displayed in the sense organs, like the (crystal's) many colours. Then perceiving that the false sense-organs, like the (crystal's) many colours are different from it, it sees the True and rejects the false as false; and, being different from the non-real, it becomes dependent on the True'.

Vyasa commenting on the *Yoga Sutra*²³ says that the mind is 'coloured' by the object presented to it and then appears in the form of the object. The 'redness of the crystal' is a well-known *nyāya* 'maxim', as testified to by Jacobi in his collection of *nyāyas*, the *Laukika Nyāyanjaliḥ*.²⁴

Another common simile, that is seen even as early as the Upaniṣads, is that of the clay and the pot. In the famous dialogue in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*,²⁵ Uddālaka Āruṇi, in explaining to his son Śvetaketu the manifold variety of the visible world as distinguished merely in name and form, uses this illustration. Just as vessels made of clay differ in name and shape, but are in reality only clay, all visible things though differing in name and form are just Brahman, the underlying existent One. This simile

²¹. As quoted by S.Radhakrishnan, BS *op.cit.* p. 295; *VedS. SBE*, vol. 34, p. 187.

²². Matthews, *op.cit* pp. 21-2.

²³. *op.cit.* I. 41.

²⁴. G.A. Jacob, ed., Bombay (1907) p. 88, *Sphātikalauhityanyāyah*.

²⁵. VI. i. 41.

occurs in Sāṅkhya, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Śaiva Siddhānta philosophies to explain the evolution of the world of matter. These philosophical schools maintain that all things material evolve from a primeval, unevolved material stuff called *prakṛti* just as pots are formed from clay. They contend that the effect is contained in the cause (*satkāryavāda*) and that the cause undergoes modification (*pariṇāma*) and appears as the effect. The Viśiṣṭādvaita and the Śaiva Siddhānta further treat God as the efficient cause, the potter, and clay as the material cause.²⁶

Salt dissolved in water provides another illustration found in the Upanisads and in Śaiva Siddhānta literature. In the famous dialogue referred to earlier from the *Chāndogya Upanisad*, Uddālaka Āruṇi, uses the union of salt and water to explain the presence of Brahman in creation. Salt dissolved in water though invisible can yet be detected by tasting. Brahman though invisible is present in all things.²⁷ This same simile occurs in Śaiva Siddhānta literature to illustrate the indivisible oneness of God and soul in liberation, of two distinct entities united inseparably.²⁸ It occurs elsewhere in Śaiva Siddhānta as an illustration of the presence of egoism in the soul.²⁹

A fundamental perception of Indian religious thought, Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina, is that the body needs to be 'yoked' or 'controlled'. The word *yoga* connotes just this, the 'yoking' that leads to self-integration. This perception finds expression in the famous metaphor of the chariot and the horses, which occurs not only in Sanskrit Hindu literature, but in Buddhist Pali literature and also in Greek literature.³⁰ The chariot in this metaphor is the body and the horses are the senses. The soul is the rider in the chariot. It is the *rathin* or the *rathita* 'the carted one'.³¹ The *buddhi* 'intellect' is the chariot-driver and the *manas* 'mind' that keeps the senses under control, is the reins.

²⁶. *VedS.*, vol. 48, pp. 418-19; *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* of Iśvarakṛṣṇa, trans. By Henry Thomas Colebrooke with the commentary of Gaudapada, trans. and illustrated by H.H. Wilson, Bombay (1924) xi, commentary; Matthews, *op.cit.* p. 31; M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, London (1956) p. 403.

²⁷. *ChUp* VI. xiii.

²⁸. Matthews, *op.cit.* p. 27; 53.

²⁹. *ibid.* p. 20; 56.

³⁰. *KathaUp.* iii. 3 - 9; *ŚvetUp.* vi. 9; *MaitUp* vi. 6; *MBh.* XI 7 - 13 - 15; XIV 50 2 - 7 (*SBE*, vol. 8, p. 187); Radhakrishnan, *PU*, *op.cit.* p. 623, note on *KathaUp* I. iii. 3; *VedS*, *SBE* vol. 34, p. 121; 239; 244; 246; vol. 48, pp. 355-56; *SS. op.cit.* iv. 2 - 4.

³¹. *MaitUp* vi. 6; *SvetUp* vi. 9.

Senses that are uncontrolled, like vicious horses that drag the chariot to destruction, would drag the soul into *saṁsāra*, while the senses that are controlled by the mind and the intellect, like good horses, will lead the soul to liberation.

All these philosophical systems agree that to be 'free' and not be saddled with a mortal body is the essential nature of the soul. Yet because of the beginningless 'ignorance' the soul is subject to, it is caught in the state of *saṁsāra*. So then enlightenment, when it comes, is a realization on the part of the soul of its own true state. This situation is compared to that of a prince, who through some confusion grows up among the savage Sabaras as one of them, but is suddenly told that he is a prince in truth and is rescued from his savage companions by his father, the king. This metaphor occurs with slight variations in Sāṅkhya, Vedānta and Śaiva Siddhānta literature.³² According to Ramanuja in his commentary on the *Vedānta Sūtras*³³ the prince strayed from home and was brought up by a good brahmin till in his sixteenth year he learns that he was a king's son and is claimed by his father, the king. The Śaiva Siddhānta compares the five senses to the savages. The *Civaṅānapōtam*³⁴ says:

Brought up among savages, the five senses, thou hast lost
consciousness (of thy true state); the soul leaves them and being none
other (than Hara) reaches Hara's feet.

The person who tells the prince about his royal birth would, in all these philosophies, be the *guru* who enlightens the soul.

What happens to the residue of karma when enlightenment finally comes, is a question all philosophical systems have to face. Here again there is consensus not only in the explanation given but also in the similes used. Karma, according to Vedānta and Śaiva Siddhānta, is of three types: *sañcita* 'accumulated' karma; *prārabdha* 'begun', that is those that are being endured in the current birth; and *āgama* 'that would come', that is those that would accrue to the soul in the present birth. Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Advaita Vedānta, and the Śaiva Siddhānta are agreed that when liberation comes, the *sañcita* karma ceases to be effective. It loses the power to generate new birth and experiences

³². Sankara's commentary on *BAUp.* II. 1. 20 in *The Works of Sankaracarya*, *op.cit.* vol. 8, p. 259 - 60; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, (1945) p. 143; *Sāṅkhya.PS. op.cit.* iv. 1; Matthews, *op.cit.* p. 20; 56; *SS. op.cit.*, viii, 1.

³³. *SBE*, vol. 48, p. 199.

³⁴. Matthews, *op.cit.* p. 20; 56.

as the roasted seed that will not germinate.³⁵ The *prārabdha*, however, will continue to operate during the duration of the present life, like the potter's wheel that will rotate a few more times, while the momentum lasts, even after the stick that propels it is taken away.³⁶ There is no common simile to illustrate what happens to the *āgāmya* karma. The Upanisad says that evil action adheres not to him who has knowledge, as water adheres not to the leaf of the lotus flower.³⁷ The Śaiva Siddhānta says that the *āgāmya* karma of the liberated person vanishes like darkness before light.³⁸

There are a few other similes that occur, though not too commonly. The soul lives and moves in its body like a showman animating his puppets.³⁹ As one meditates on the truth 'I am He', ignorance/egoism leaves the soul as the effect of snake's poison does as one meditates on the Garuda mantra.⁴⁰ The bonds of karma and worldly attachment that cease to bind the soul when enlightenment comes, could again bind the soul that is not vigilant, like the moss on the surface of a well or tank that clears when a stone is thrown into it but covers the water again.⁴¹ The soul leaves its body at death as the snake discards its slough.⁴²

Finally, in liberation, the soul becomes one with or united inseparably with Brahman/God like the rivers that flow into the ocean and lose themselves in the ocean waters.⁴³ Advaita Vedānta holds that the soul becomes one with Brahman retaining no

³⁵. *VedS*, *SBE* vol. 38, p. 358; *Yoga Sūtra*, *op.cit.* ii. 2; *SāṅkhyaK*, *op.cit.* Commentary of Gaudapada on verse 67; *SāṅkhyaK.PS.* iii. 82, Vijñānabhikṣu's commentary; *Civa. op.cit* verse 89.

³⁶. Sankara's commentary on *ChUp.* II. xiv. 2; *VedS. SBE*, vol. 38, p. 358; vol. 48, p. 199; Radhakrishnan, *BS. op.cit.* p. 531; *SāṅkhyaK. op.cit.* 67; *SS. op.cit.* x. 6.

³⁷. *ChUp* IV. xiv. 2.

³⁸. *Civa. op.cit.* Verse 89.

³⁹. *SBE.* vol. 34, p. xxiv; xciv; f.n.; *SS. op.cit.* IV. 24.

⁴⁰. *Upadesa.* 18.5; *SS. op.cit.* IX. 7.

⁴¹. *Vive. op.cit.* 135; 324; *SS. op.cit.* viii. 30.

⁴². *BAUp.* IV. iv. 7; *SS. op.cit.* ii. 38; *Vive.* 549.

⁴³. *ChUp* VI. x. 1; *MuṅdUp.* III. ii. 8; *PrasnaUp.* vi. 5; Matthews, *op.cit.* p. 22; *SS. op.cit.* viii. 37.

distinction while Śaiva Siddhānta maintains that the soul remains soul though united inseparably with the Lord. The more popular simile in this context is the iron heated red hot in fire, that glows like fire without becoming fire.⁴⁴ The soul too like the iron retains its soulhood, says Śaiva Siddhānta.

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⁴⁴. *Vive. op.cit.* 135; 193; *SāṅkhyaK. op.cit.* 20; Matthews, *op.cit.* p. 24; *SS. op.cit.* viii.12; xi. 12; *Upadesa. op.cit.* 18. 85; 86.