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Five Classical Elements (panch tattva) of Creation - A Perspective from Sri Guru Granth Sahib

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Abstract

Various religious philosophies the world over, although differ in many details, yet they all emphasize the basic unity of the universe, through the recognition of *panch tattva* as the basis of creation. Most of these philosophies agree that a continuous exchange between these basic elements life and the creation, helps to balance the ever ongoing cycles of creation and destruction. The existence of *panch tattva*, with their extraordinary qualities, makes us aware of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things. They help us to transcend the notion of an isolated individual self and to identify ourselves with the ultimate reality. In this article on *panch tattva*, a perspective from Sri Guru Granth Sahib is outlined

Introduction

Ancient Greek and Indian philosophy describes four classical elements of creation and life. These elements are named as earth, water, air and fire. Empedocles (ca. 490–430 BC) called these the four “roots”. Plato (424 BC – 348 BC), was first to use the term “element” in reference to air, fire, earth, and water [1]. The Greek word for element, *stoicheion* meant “smallest division”, a smallest unit from which a word/thing is formed”. Aristotle added aether (quintessence) reasoning that the stars must be made of a different, unchangeable, heavenly substance [2].

In the European tradition the fifth element is referred as ‘aether’ while in Indian tradition, it is called as ‘akasha’ These basic elements of nature are also known as ‘the elements of life’ or ‘the elements of survival’. It is important to note that within these, and through these, life has prevailed and evolved. Without these elements life could not exist.

These five elements (*panch tattva*) of nature are basically classical in nature and are not resonant with the concept of element as referred to in modern science.

According to modern science, air is a mixture of several gaseous elements and compounds. Water is a compound. Earth or soil is a mixture of several solid compounds. Fire is electromagnetic energy. Aether or akasha is closest parallel to space-time continuum.

An element is made up of atoms. An atom is the smallest division of a substance to exist independently, and contains the characteristics of the substance. Scientists have discovered that there are 92 naturally occurring elements. For example, helium gas is an element. A compound is made up of two or more elements. For example, water is a compound of oxygen and hydrogen elements. Thus the classical elements cannot be treated as elements in the modern sense.

However, *panch tattva* is a classical concept to explain the phenomenon of the world and life. A brief introduction of these classical elements is as under;

Air

Air is of fundamental importance to life. It is provider of breath to living beings. Ancient Greeks called it 'aer' meaning the dim lower atmosphere [3]. It can't be seen, held or captured or tamed, but can be felt. It influences the weather, the seasons and represents the essence of time. It can be destructive (as a howling tornado) as well as soothing (as a gentle breeze). It can be oppressive, hot and stifling (as in summer and rainy season). It can be cool and calming (as in spring and autumn). Air is resonant with the gaseous state of matter.

Water

To a large degree, plant, animal or sentient life in order to survive, depend on the water element. It is the most common liquid on earth. Water gives much, but takes as easy everything back. Water as the "primal liquid", appears in different shapes and forms. In its natural state water can be salty or fresh. Fresh water is found in wells or in rivers. Salt water is mostly found on seas. Water is an unpredictable element. It can cause death and destruction upon those living near open water, but it also grants life. It is a mysterious element; it can disappear in no time on a hot day in front of your eyes and nobody knows for sure where it has gone. In nature, water is resonant with the liquid state of matter.

Earth

Earth encompasses all the living and non-living substances, within the terrestrial environment. Its diversity is of extremely high order. Earth represents nourishment on all levels. It is an essential *element of life* and an *element of survival*. It represents the solid phase of matter.

Fire

The ancient name of this element of nature is 'fire' whereas the modern scientific name of it is electromagnetic energy. It has two types based on its origin; terrestrial fire (camp-fire, forest fire) and cosmic fire (sunshine, stars). It provides heat and light. It is prime-mover of the life sustaining water-cycle. It is also primary source of energy for photosynthesis. It is a creator as well as destroyer. It can heal or harm. It can bring about new life or destroy the old and worn.

Aether or Akasha

Between the four elements (air, earth, fire and water) is the finely dispersed fifth element called aether. The ethereal substance is so delicate that it is all permeating. Aether has no direction, yet it encompasses all directions. It is the center, the circumference, above and below. It is beyond seasons and time, yet is all seasons and time. In Hindu philosophy [4], akasha or aether is the one, eternal, all pervading and imperceptible physical substance. It is the substratum of the quality of sound. Akasha is actually an East Indian word meaning inner-space, reflecting our belief that the universe is both within and without ourselves. Aether is in many ways the strongest element. It is the scaffolding of reality, it holds it up, it is the adhesive of reality, it holds it together. Though aether mostly follows time's steady flow, it also seems to exist with some degree of independence.

In Sikhism, the number five has a special significance as it is associated with several important aspects of the religion e.g. five takhats, five banis of nitnem, five beloved ones, five sacred Sikh Symbols - panj kakars e.g. kesh (unshorn hair), kangha (the comb), kara (the steel bracelet), kachhehra (the soldiers' shorts) and kirpan (the sword). Five virtues e.g. sat (truth), santokh (contentment), daya (compassion), nimrata (humility) and pyare (love)). Five evils (vikaar) e.g. kaam (lust), krodh (anger), lobh (greed), moh (attachment), and hankaar (ego). So the

five elements of nature also have a special place of significance in Sikhism. These basic elements are described as *panch tattva* in Sri Guru Granth Sahib [5-7].

In Sikh's holy scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, panch tattva are named as ap (water), tej (fire), vaaye (air), pirthmi (earth) and akash (aether). Gurbani describes that all these elements were created from the primal void by the creator. All the creation (including human being) is made up of these five basic elements. Upon death, the human body dissolves into these elements, balancing the cycle of nature.

ਅਪੁ ਤੇਜੁ ਵਾਇ ਪ੍ਰਿਥਮੀ ਆਕਾਸਾ ॥ ਤਿਨ ਮਹਿ ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਘਰਿ ਵਾਸਾ ॥ (ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 1031)

Water, fire, air, earth and aether, in that house of the five elements, they dwell. (Mehl 1, p 1031)

In Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) [5-7], the origin of these elements is described as;

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਸੁੰਨਹੁ ਪਰਗਾਸਾ ॥ (ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 1038)

From the Primal Void, the five elements became manifest. (Mehl 1, p 1038)

It is enunciated in Gurbani that the whole creation was created, from these five elements by the creator.

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਕਰਿ ਤੁਧੁ ਸ੍ਰਿਸਟਿ ਸਭ ਸਾਜੀ ॥ (ਮ. 4, ਪੰਨਾ 736)

You created the entire Universe out of the five elements; (Mehl 4, p 736)

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਕਾ ਰਚਨੁ ਰਚਾਨਾ ॥ (ਮ. 5, ਪੰਨਾ 1073)

The creation was created of the five elements. (Mehl 5, p 1073)

Describing the evolution of the world Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, expressed;

ਹਰਿ ਆਪੇ ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਬਿਸਥਾਰਾ ਵਿਚਿ ਧਾਤੂ ਪੰਚ ਆਪਿ ਪਾਵੈ ॥ (ਮ. 4, ਪੰਨਾ 720)

The Lord Himself directs the evolution of the world of the five elements; He Himself infuses the five senses into it. (Mehl 4, p 720)

It is pointed out explicitly that human body is made of these basic elements of nature;

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਦੇਹੀ ਕਾ ਆਕਾਰਾ ॥ (ਮ. 3, ਪੰਨਾ 1128)

The five elements join together, to make up the form of the human body.

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਕਾਇਆ ਕੀਨੀ ॥ (ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 1030)

The body is formed from the union of the five elements. (Mehl 1, p 1030)

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਇਹੁ ਤਨੁ ਕੀਆ ॥ (ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 1039)

From the union of the five elements, this body was made. (Mehl 1, p 1039)

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਕਰਿ ਪੁਤਰਾ ਕੀਨਾ ਕਿਰਤ ਮਿਲਾਵਾ ਹੋਆ ॥ (ਮ. 5, ਪੰਨਾ 884)

From the five elements, the puppet was created with its actions. (Mehl 5, p 884)

The human mind which includes all mental faculties, thought, volition, feeling and memory is described by Guru Nanak Dev, first Sikh Guru, as made up of these basic elements.

ਇਹੁ ਮਨੁ ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਤੇ ਜਨਮਾ ॥ (ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 415)

This mind is born of the five elements. (Mehl 1, p 415)

Bhagat Kabir described the mind (consciousness) as the inherit quality of these elements.

ਇਹੁ ਮਨੁ ਪੰਚ ਤਤ ਕੇ ਜੀਉ ॥ (ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਜੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 342)

This mind is the life of the five elements. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 342)

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, elaborated that the light (essence) of the creator is infused into His creation.

ਪੰਚ ਤਤ ਰਚਿ ਜੇਤਿ ਨਿਵਾਜਿਆ ॥ (ਮ. 5, ਪੰਨਾ 1337)

From the five elements, He formed it, and infused His Light within it. (Mehl 5, p 1337)

Guru Nanak Dev described that the Earth has been established as the abode of Dharma, in the midst of these basic elements e.g. wind (air), water, fire and nether region (space or akasha).

ਰਾਤੀ ਰੁਤੀ ਥਿਤੀ ਵਾਰ ॥ ਪਵਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਅਗਨੀ ਪਾਤਾਲ ॥ ਤਿਸੁ ਵਿਚਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਥਾਪਿ ਰਖੀ ਧਰਮ ਸਾਲ ॥ (ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 7)

Nights, days, weeks and seasons; wind, water, fire and the nether regions – in the midst of these, He established the earth as a home for Dharma. (Mehl 1, p 7)

Guru Nanak explained the importance of these basic elements, for the well being of the creation, in his Bani 'Japu Ji' as;

ਪਵਣੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਪਾਣੀ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਾਤਾ ਧਰਤਿ ਮਹਤੁ॥ਦਿਵਸੁ ਰਾਤਿ ਦੁਇ ਦਾਈ ਦਾਇਆ ਖੇਲੈ ਸਗਲ ਜਗਤੁ॥(ਮ. 1, ਪੰਨਾ 8)

Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and Earth is the Great Mother of all. Day and night are the two nurses, in whose lap all the world is at play. (Mehl 1, p 8)

Here day can be seen as representing the element fire (in the form of Sun) and the night can be seen as representing the element akasha (in the form of night sky with its millions of stars or worlds). Thus all the five basic elements are crucial for the well-being and prosperity of the whole creation.

Describing the essential nature of the basic elements for life, Bhagat Kabir advises the Sikhs to follow the Guru's path.

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਕੀ ਕਰਿ ਮਿਰਗਾਣੀ ਗੁਰ ਕੈ ਮਾਰਗਿ ਚਾਲੈ ॥ (ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਜੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 477)

Making the five elements his deer skin to sit on, he (gurmukh) walks on the Guru's Path. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 477)

Bhagat Kabir warns us that we shouldn't be engrossed in the worldly illusion of these elements.

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਲੈ ਹਿਰਦੈ ਰਾਖਹੁ ਰਹੈ ਨਿਰਾਲਮ ਤਾੜੀ ॥ (ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਜੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 970)

Enshrine the five tattvas - the five elements, within your heart; let your deep meditative trance be undisturbed. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 970)

Describing the phenomenon of death, Bhagat Kabir enunciated that at the time of one's death, these elements, which have been basic constituents of one's body are returned to their primal source.

ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਮਿਲਿ ਦਾਨੁ ਨਿਬੇਰਹਿ ਟਾਂਡਾ ਉਤਰਿਓ ਪਾਰਾ ॥ (ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਜੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 333)

The five elements join together and divide up their loot. This is how our herd is disposed of! (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 333)

The bani of Bhagat Kabir makes us aware that these basic elements of nature will also perish with time.

ਜਰ ਕਛੁ ਅਹਾ ਤਹਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਨਾਹੀ ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਤਹ ਨਾਹੀ ॥ (ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰ ਜੀ, ਪੰਨਾ 334)

Where something existed, now there is nothing. The five elements are no longer there. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 334)

From the above discussion it is obvious that gurbani enunciates that *panch tattva* (the five basic elements) were created from the primal void. These elements are the basis of creation and there is a continuous exchange between these and the creation. These elements are perishable. The contemplation of *panch tattva* of nature, makes us realize that as these are perishable so is a human being, which is composed of these elements. It is emphasized in gurbani that although one should enshrine the *panch tattva*, within one's heart, thus living a life of joy and bliss, yet one shouldn't be engrossed in the worldly illusion created by these. It is further advised that one should follow the Gurmat marg to attain salvation from worldly entanglements.

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