

AKHYĀTIVĀDA: AN EXEGETICAL AND CRITICAL STUDY

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In Indian philosophy the problem of error is discussed in different theories usually known as the *khyāti-vādas*. The word *Khyāti* stands for knowledge and hence *khyāti-vāda* may mean theory of knowledge. The word *jñāna* has been used in Indian Philosophy in two different senses by two different sets of thinkers. In one set, it is taken in the sense of *pramā* only. The Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas championed this theory. For them, *jñāna* always means true cognition (*jñāna*). A cognition can never be invalid. Hence, *bhrama* for the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas cannot be a variety of *jñāna*. The Prābhākaras do not accept *samsāya*, *viparyaya*, etc. as necessary constituents of cognition. Hence, their view of *jñāna* is restricted only to the scope of valid cognition. On the other hand, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophers accept the word '*jñāna*' with a wider scope and in a very comprehensive sense. Unlike the Prābhākaras, they include both valid and non-valid cognitions within the jurisdiction of *jñāna*.

The Naiyāyikas are common sense realists. They analysed error through common sense realism. In our daily life we make mistakes. If we do not make any mistake then how will we learn to do it correctly? The correction of wrong teaches us the correct one. When we apprehend rope as a snake, we make a mistake. When we realize it later, we correct it that 'it was a wrong judgment'. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas accept the word 'cognition' in episodic sense. According to the Nyāya philosophers, knowledge in the sense of *pramā* is always 'object oriented'. According to them, *jñāna* is infallible in some cases and fallible in some other. They put forward various causal and justificatory grounds (*pramāṇas*) for distinguishing the infallible kind of *jñāna* from fallible one. And that very reason, they advanced logical grounds for admitting *apramā* within the jurisdiction of *jñāna*. Hence, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika accept the word *jñāna* in a much wider sense which includes both valid and non-valid cognition.

Nature of Knowledge

In Indian philosophy, the Sanskrit word *jñāna* is used in a variety of senses. It is often used in the sense of *buddhi* (cognition) or *anubhava* (consciousness) and it

also means *upalabdhi* (apprehension). The basic characteristics of a valid piece of knowledge, which are accepted by all schools of Indian philosophy, are unanimous or non-contradictory.¹ A valid cognition cannot be rejected by any subsequent cognition. In the case of invalid cognition, it is substituted by the subsequent cognition. So, every philosopher holds the view that truth should be non-erring, non-dubious and novel. But when we perceive a snake in a rope, it is not a valid cognition. As we perceive the rope properly without any barrier, the cognition of 'rope-snake' is sublated by the real cognition. It is clear that valid cognition cannot be neglected.

Another characteristic of a valid knowledge is that it must be definite and it can be distinguished from all indefinite, dubious and hypothetical cognition. In other words, valid knowledge is always connected with firm belief which is free from error. That means, valid knowledge cannot be refuted any time or anywhere by any posterior cognition. Knowledge here corresponds to the word *pramā* which is defined as novel in nature.² Novelty means that knowledge should be true and new or previously not acquired. If truth is the only characteristics of *pramā* then memory is also to be called *pramā*. A remembered experience is to be considered as true, just because it is regarded as identical to the content of a past experience which it claims to put forward. So, the experience which reveals the new is called *anubhūti*. In other words, reproduced knowledge is called *smṛti*.

Any valid knowledge is called *pramā*. In the case of valid cognition, the object of knowledge is called *prameya*. When we perceive a pot by our sense organ, we gain knowledge of a pot and we know it with its attribute of pot-ness. Pot-ness is called *dharma* and the pot is called *dharmī*, because pot-ness inherits in a pot and their relation is not detached. As for an example, the knowledge about silver-ness of silver - the attribute of this object is called 'dharma' or 'this-ness' and the object is called *dharmī* or 'this.' So, the detachment of those objects and attributes is not accepted to the knower.

On the flip hand, regarding the knowledge about 'silver' in a shell – no relation exists between the 'silver' and the shell. Here, the knowledge of detachment

¹ D.M. Datta, *The Six Ways of Knowing*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London), 1932, p. 20.

² *Ibid*, p.20

or *asaṃsarga* remains as there is no relation between the *dharmā* and *dharmī*. Here, *dharmā* is silver-ness and *dharmī* is shell. Silver-ness inherits in silver and similarly, shell-ness inherits in shell. But when we get to know the shell as silver, we know the shell with the attribute of silver-ness. They are detached or *asāmbandha*. So, it is not the valid knowledge or *pramā*. It is actually invalid knowledge or *apramā*.

Meaning of *Akhyāti*

The word *Akhyāti* means non-apprehension. But this non-apprehension is not explained as due to non-objectivity. It is said to be due to non-judging of the discriminative features between two cognitions.³ The theory of *Akhyāti* is also named as *Bhedāgraha* or *Asaṃsargāgraha* or *Smṛtipramoṣa*.⁴ Śālikanātha Mīśra in his *Prakaraṇapañcikā* established the validity of all cognitions before defending *Akhyātivāda*. Because the establishment of *Akhyātivāda* is dependent upon the establishment of the validity of all cognitions. It is notable that the Prābhākaras hold that all cognitions are actually 'self-revealed'. According to the Prābhākaras, all cognitions are valid or non-erroneous.

We have to accept that when we perceive the silver in a shell then the silver is the object of knowledge in the shell-silver case and for this reason, this cognition becomes valid. According to the Prābhākaras, it is impossible that the object appears otherwise than it is. In the silver-shell case, the silver is the object of knowledge which is accepted by all philosophers. It is already mentioned that the accepted all cognitions as intrinsically valid. So, the cognition of 'silver' in a shell is also valid. On the other hand, the cognition of 'silver' in silver is also valid cognition. If the cognition of 'silver' in a shell becomes adulterous with its own object then it would become doubtful to us that all types of cognition are erroneous. As a result, all knowledgeable things would be doubtful to us. So, all cognitions are valid in themselves.

³ Tadevam sati sarvatra samyagrahaṇam bhramah"- Prābhākara //- Bijayananda Kar, *The Theories of Error in Indian Philosophy*, (Ajanta Publication, Delhi), 1978, p. 34.

⁴ Bijayananda Kar, *The Theories of Error in Indian Philosophy*, (Ajanta Publication, Delhi), 1978, p. 34.

From the Prābhākaras' epistemological scheme, it is clear that knowledge is defined in terms of external given. According to them, no knowledge can be wrong. It is something logically impossible that the object appears otherwise than it is. On the other hand, it may be said that all cognitive expressions are the cases of only right judgement. There is no cognitive error. Validity is the very inherent feature of all perceptual cognitions. Any knowledge is valid in itself. Thus, in the case of a cognition of a snake in a rope, the rope does not appear otherwise than it is. The cognition of snake arises through memory as its shape which is common with rope. We perceive rope without its rope-ness and referring it with snake through memory. Hence, this view of error is called *Akhyāti* or non-apprehension.

Invalid Knowledge is theoretically Impossible

The Prābhākaras are the chief exponents of this view of error called *Akhyātivādain* Sanskrit. According to them, all cognition is valid in itself. According to the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas, *jñāna* is necessarily restricted to the scope of valid cognition. The Prābhākaras define valid knowledge as apprehension (*anubhūti*).⁵ All apprehension is direct, intermediate and valid in itself. A cognition which apprehends an object cannot be intrinsically invalid.

According to the Prābhākaras, non-valid cognition is not only theoretically impossible but it also involves self-contradiction.⁶ Valid cognition is apprehension but contrarily, we cannot say that all apprehensions are valid cognition. Valid cognition is something different from remembrance (*smṛti*) which is not valid.⁷ Memory arises from the impression of a prior cognition (*anubhava*) and therefore, cannot be treated as a valid cognition. Memory is invalid since, the object is not directly known but merely recollected or remembered.

⁵ *Anubhūtiḥ pramāṇam sā smṛteranyā smṛtiḥ punaḥ / pūrvavijñāna-saṃskāra mātrajannam jñānamuchate //* - *Prakaraṇapañcikā: Sālikanātha Mīśra* [with *NyāyaSiddhi*.] (Ed) A. Subrahmanya Sāstrī, (Banaras Hindu University Darsana Series, Benaras), 1962, p. 127.

⁶ According to the Prābhākaras, knowledge is self-revealing and guarantees its own truth without reference to anything else. Every unit of knowledge must carry in it an element of truth assurance and we should have no doubt on it. In this sense, a non-valid cognition is a case of impossibility and self-contradiction.

⁷ Gaṅgānātha Jhā derives the Prābhākaras' definition of *pramā* from the following verse of the *Prakaraṇapañcikā: pramāṇamanubhūtiḥ sā smṛteranyā na sā smṛtiḥ na pramāṇam smṛtiḥ pūrvapratipattivyapekṣaṇāt*, Gaṅgānātha Jhā, *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* in its Sources, (Second Edition, Banaras Hindu University, Benaras), 1964, p. 70.

Why do we make a Mistake?

According to the Prābhākara Mīmāṃsakas, all cognitions are valid. The property of valid cognition is called *pramāṭva*. In the same way, the property of invalid cognition is called *apramāṭva*. According to the Prābhākaras, *apramāṭva* or invalidity is not the property of cognition. Always *pramāṭva* or validity exists in cognition. On the other hand, *apramāṭva* does not exist in cognition. *Apramāṭva* or invalidity exists in usages.

Illusion does not arise due to wrong apprehension of one thing as another but due to lack of apprehension of the distinction between memory and perception and their respective objects. We cannot decipher between two different types of cognition and their contents. When we perceive a snake in a rope, we perceive only the presented object which is rope without its rope-ness. Although, we do not perceive the snake but it is also true that we have a cognitive expression of a snake. Now the question arises: Why do we perceive a snake in a rope? The answer lies in the cognition of snake that arises through memory which we perceived earlier elsewhere. This is a valid knowledge of a snake. This cognition is a composite form of memory and perception. Although, we are not being able to distinguish between the presented object and the represented object. Now the question arises: why do we make a mistake to differentiate between these two different types of cognitions and their objects? The cognition of a snake is real and the perception of *Idam* or *this* is also real. We perceive only the common features of two elements, like the rope has in common with a snake which is “shape”. This partial perception revives the memory of a real snake. This is also the cause of the non-discrimination between memory and perception. As a result, the knowledge arises as the composite form of two cognitions and appears as a unitary one.

***Akhyātivāda* is Not a Unitary Cognition**

In the case of erroneous cognition, the perceptual error is not a unitary cognition. It is a composite form of memory and perception. The Akhyātivādīns do not accept a unitary cognition in the illusory case. The *idam* or ‘this’ and ‘rajat’ or the ‘silver’ are separated from each other. They are known through perception and memory. At first, a perceptual cognition originated due to the

connection between the object and the knower where the object exists in front of the sense-organ of the knower. After that the memory of 'silver' originated due to the similarities between the shell and silver. Since, we already had the impression of the 'silver' which is apprehended to the knower earlier.

The objects of memory are those things which we have already known before. Here, we have already been aware of the knowledge of silver. That is why, when we perceive a 'silver' in a shell, we misapprehend it due to the similarities between these two - such as the characteristic shine-ness and white-ness. Thus, unable to distinguish between 'this' and 'that' we perceive 'this', and memorize 'that.' But here the knowledge is the combination of two cognition and we are totally unaware of it. When we confront it as "this is silver", it is a combination of two types of knowledge which are memory and perception. We only perceive 'this' without its special attribute. On the other hand, we memorized 'silver' which we perceived before. But when we express it then we express it as 'this is a silver', not as 'that is a silver.' Actually, error arises due to the non-discrimination between two types of knowledge. But when we know what is the right knowledge, the 'silver-ness' vanished in the erroneous case. The difference between these two types of cognition like the perception and memory cannot be grasped due to their simultaneous occurrence. This knowledge is the non-discrimination of two cognitions which is the cause of fruitless inclination. As a result, it is called 'error.'

Critique of *Akhyātivāda*

The Naiyāyikas do not admit the Prābhākaras' view of *Akhyātivāda*. According to the Prābhākaras, *Akhyāti* is a "negative non-distinction." Anyathākhyātivādīns accept the intrinsic positivity of error which is different from "negative non-distinction" or *Akhyāti*. The Naiyāyikas point out that every error is a single complex unitary experience. It is not the combination of two psychoses which is falsely confused. In the snake-rope illusion, we are apprehended a single complex unitary experience of 'this' which is appearing to be a snake. When the perceiver comes to know that 'this is not a snake' and 'this is a rope', the correction does not cancel a negative non-distinction of two confused experiences. It rejects the single composite experience. Let us see, the difference between the Nyāya view of *Anyathākhyāti* and the Prābhākara view of *Akhyāti* in a nutshell. According to the

Akhyātivādīns, the two cognitions involved in error are different in nature - one is presentation and the other is representation. But according to the Naiyāyikas, it is not conjoined of two cognitions, like perception and memory. It is a single, composite, presentative and a unitary cognition.

According to the Akhyātivādīns, an error arises due to non-discrimination of two cognitions - memory and perception. We cannot distinguish between two objects as one is collected through perception and another is recollected through memory. On the other hand, the Nyāya has refuted the Prābhākaras' view. 'This' and 'snake' both are perceived through our sense organs. One is an ordinary and the other is an extraordinary perception. It is a unitary composite cognition where 'snake' and 'this' are both present. When we perceive a snake in a rope, we perceive only 'this' through sense experience. 'Snake' is perceived through *jñānālakṣaṇapratyakṣa*, a kind of extra-ordinary perception. Somewhere we perceived a real snake through our sense experience. The apprehension of a snake was real. When we perceive a snake in a rope, we perceive only "this" without its special attribute. Actually, error arises when we mischaracterize the snake as a rope. According to the Nyāya, error is a false cognition. It is not a non-discrimination of two cognitions.⁸

Kumārila and his followers like Sucarita Misra, are the direct critique of *Akhyātivāda*. They first denounced the theory on the ground that the theory is not a faithful rendering of Śābara's view that Prabhākara at least claims to have generally followed. Unlike the Prābhākara's view that the error arises due to non-discrimination. Śābara has clearly stated that error consists in a positively false cognition and is due to some defects in the source. Vimuktātman points out that if according to the Prābhākaras, all knowledge is self-revealed, two judgements i.e. one derived from memory and the other from perception are to be assumed as self-revealed. For this reason, these judgements need not to discriminate and confuse among themselves.

⁸ Sushil Kumar Maitra, *Fundamental Questions of Indian Metaphysics and Logic*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, (First Edition, Published by the author, 48G, Anath Nath Dev Lane, Calcutta), 1956, p. 131.

According to the Prābhākaras, error is due to non-cognition of the distinction between two experiences and also between their respective objects. But this non-cognition of distinction is not possible for distinction. According to the Prābhākara, distinction is nothing but the nature of the distinct objects. So, along with the manifestation of cognitions and their objects, their distinction is also known, as the distinction is nothing else that they correlate themselves. Therefore, it cannot be said that though the distinct is cognized, the distinction itself is not cognized. Prabhākara says that perception and recollection of ‘this’ and ‘silver’ respectively are not known to be different in the shell-silver case. But this is actually not possible.

Concluding Remarks

While we discuss the problem of error from the Indian philosophical point of view, we find different approaches. In the knowledge episode, ‘what is true’ and ‘what is false’ is an integral part of philosophical study for acquisition of the highest knowledge. The nature of knowledge depends upon the mind. The cognitive faculties of the subject depend on the conditions in which the object is situated in relation to the subject. An error is caused due to a peculiar relation formed by the perceiver. *Khyātivāda*-s are seemed to base on the assumption that an erroneous perception negates the value of perception. This is not simply the human failure to perceive correctly. But it is something which occurs due to some peculiar special circumstances. The cognition can be either valid or non-valid. Non-valid cognition includes doubt and hypothetical reasoning in addition to invalid cognition. Error is an invalid cognition.

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