

NA VĀG GACCHATI: A DISCOURSE ON THE LIMIT OF LANGUAGE

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There are some grey areas in the field of knowledge that can never be expressed through language. One of such areas is awareness of indeterminate cognition (*nirvikalpakaanubhūti*), which is admitted by the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta traditions. As per the nature of the sense-object-contact (*indriyārtha-sannikarṣa*), which is instrumental to all perceptions, perception has been divided by the Naiyāyikas into two broad classes' viz., *laukika* or normal and *alaukika* or supernormal perception. Again, normal (*laukika*) perception has been divided into six classes i.e., olfactory, gustatory, visual, tactual, auditory and mental perception due to six kinds of sense-organ. There is another classification of normal perception viz. *nirvikalpaka* or the indeterminate perception and *savikalpaka* or the determinate perception.

Though the distinction between *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka* perceptions is generally recognized in Indian philosophy, there is difference of opinion among the different systems as to their exact nature and validity. To some thinkers, *nirvikalpaka* is not at all a case of perception; and hence all perceptions are *savikalpaka*. But, according to the Naiyāyikas, *nirvikalpaka* is as much a case of perception as *savikalpaka*.

Literally *nirvikalpaka* means that in which there is no 'vikalpa' ('substitute' i.e., name, universal, language etc.) and *savikalpaka* means that in which there is *vikalpa*. Now what is to be understood by the term *vikalpa*? The term 'vikalpa' means name, universal, a quality or a relation of 'characteriser-characterised' (*viśeṣya-viśeṣaṇa-bhāva*). So, *nirvikalpaka* perception is a perception which is not endowed with name, universal, quality or relation of characteriser-characterised, i.e., any form of linguistic expression.

In other words, *nirvikalpaka* cognition means *niṣprakāraka*, which has no *prakāra* or qualifier. *Prakāra* denotes 'something having some character' (i.e., *viśeṣaṇa*). *Nirvikalpaka* cognition is thus a cognition whose object is not endowed with some character. That is to say, indeterminate or *nirvikalpaka* cognition is thus a cognition whose object is not associated with some character. That is to say, an indeterminate or *nirvikalpaka* perception is a cognition which does not apprehend the relation between the qualifier and the qualificand.¹ But in the case of determinate perception there is the apprehension of the relation between the qualifier and the qualificand. When a jar is known, there is apprehension of qualifier (i.e. jariness), qualificand (jar) and their relation (i.e., inherence)². But *nirvikalpaka* cognition of objects like jar etc., for example, would be the cognition of something which is not characterised by the specific features of the jar. The object of *nirvikalpaka*-cognition would be a simple or bare entity and not anything complex. How can the reality of the *nirvikalpaka* perception be proved?

The reality of such perception is proved with the help of an inference in the following way:

The cognition of a qualified entity (*viśiṣṭa*) is due to the cognition of the qualifier (*viśeṣana*).

The cognition of 'cow' is the cognition of a qualified entity.

Therefore, the cognition of 'cow' is due to the cognition of a qualifier.

From the cognition - 'a person possessing a stick' (*dandīpuruṣah*) we have the cognition of something having the character 'with a stick'. But without the cognition of 'stick' (*danda*) one cannot have the cognition of 'one with a stick' (*dandī*). The cognition of stick is the cognition of qualifier. Here the cognition of 'one with a stick' (*dandī*) is followed from the cognition of 'stick' which is again followed from the cognition of its qualifier, i.e., 'stickness' if stick is taken as a qualified object. And the cognition of 'stickness' is here the *nirvikalpaka* cognition. To claim that it establishes the reality of *nirvikalpaka* is to claim that the cognition of a qualifier is the cognition of something that is not itself qualified. Because if the cognition of a qualifier were taken to be determinate or *savikalpaka*, the defect of *infinite regress* would crop up. For example, the cognition of a qualified entity 'cow' is due to the cognition of its qualifier. Again, the cognition of 'cowness' is due to the cognition of its qualifier 'cowness' which again is due to the cognition of its qualifier 'cownessness'. In this way it will lead to the defect called *infinite regress*. So in order to avoid this difficulty the Naiyāyikas accept the qualifier of a qualified entity as *nirvikalpaka* or indeterminate. So here the cognition of 'cowness' is cognised in itself, that is, without any further qualifier. And the existence of *nirvikalpaka* perception is proved in this way³. Such indeterminate awareness is accommodated in the definition of perception as formulated by Goutama by the term '*avyapadeśya*' ('that which is not expressed through language')⁴

Let us consider the purpose of the inclusion of the term '*avyapadeśya*' which means 'unnameable' or 'non-expressible' through words. According to Vātsyāyana, every individual manifestation of knowledge of an object which is produced out of the contact of the sense-organ with the object is expressed by words like colour, taste etc. The cognition which is expressed through words would be taken as produced from verbal testimony. In order to exclude this possibility the term *avyapadeśya* has been inserted in the definition. It has further been stated that the name of the perceived object is necessary when this knowledge is being communicated to others.

The main purpose of the use of the terms is to point out the knowledge produced from the sense-object-contact can never be considered as verbal comprehension.⁵

Some scholars think that the term '*avyapadeśya*' has been inserted in the definition in order to include indeterminate perception (which is not expressed through words) under perception. When our sense-organ has got contact with a particular object, the knowledge of that object cannot be expressed at first. Moreover, it has been said by the Naiyāyikas that an object remains attributeless and actionless for a moment just after its origination. If substance (*dravya*) and attribute (*guṇa*) are produced simultaneously, substance cannot be an antecedent and hence it cannot be an inherent cause (*samavāyīkāraṇa*) of the attribute (*guṇa*). For this reason attribute and action are taken to be produced just after a moment of its origination of the substance⁶. But the existence of such knowledge cannot be ignored, as it becomes the cause of the later knowledge endowed with name, universal etc. Hence the term '*avyapadeśya*' indicates that the indeterminate awareness of an object is also a kind of perception.

So far as this theory is concerned, one might think that the definition of perception unduly extends to the verbal cognition leading to the defect of impossibility, as each and every individual manifestation of knowledge is expressed through words. Through the insertion of the above-mentioned term Gautama wants to indicate that there is at least the existence of a state, which is not endowed with a word, its denotation and their relation. Though the judgements like 'this is a cow' are verbalised knowledge, there is the initial sense-perception which is capable of being defined and this has become possible through insertion of the adjunct '*avyapadeśya*'.

One problem has been raised in the *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* as to how an object can exist without being endowed with its characteristic features. As indeterminate cognition is cognition, it must have some object, for there can be no knowledge without any object (*aviśayaka*). The Naiyāyikas are of the view that if there is any contentness (*viśayatā*) in the indeterminate cognition, it should be in the form of *viśeṣyatā* (qualificandness), *viśeṣanatā* (qualifieriness) and *samsargatā* (relationness). As an indeterminate cognition does not possess any of these forms of contentness,

there is no *viṣayatā* at all. For this reason Viśvanātha has emphatically denied the perceptuality of such cognition (*jñānamyannirvikalpākhyaamtadatīndriyamīṣyate*).

However, the above mentioned contention of Viśvanātha to some extent goes against the Nyāya position which at first has accepted two forms of perception- *savikalpaka* (determinate) and *nirvikalpaka* (indeterminate). Now if it is said that the *nirvikalpa* is not at all perceptual, because it is beyond the reach of the sense organ (*aīndriya*), it will go against the previously accepted division of perception leading to the contradiction of the Nyāya position. Considering this aspect Pundit Pañcānan Bhaṭṭācārya has tried to give some solution by admitting that the indeterminate cognition is not free from contentness (*viṣayatā*). Though the said three types of accepted contentness are not present in it, there is a fourth type of contentness called *turīyaviṣayatā* which cannot be explained due to its peculiarity in nature.⁷ Hence, the status of *nirvikalpaka* as a perception remains as it is. Whether this position of Bhaṭṭācārya is acceptable or not is a different issue, but his philosophical endeavour to defend a tradition is noteworthy. One may raise question about the status of the fourth *viṣayatā* (*turīyaviṣayatā*)⁸. Even if there is such contentness, it remains non-comprehensible due to not having the said relation between qualifier and qualificand (*tadevavaiśiṣṭyānavagāhvevajñānam*). If it is so, what is the use of accepting a kind of *viṣayatā* which one may think as utopian or imaginary? In this context one can take the privilege of describing this fourth type of *viṣaya* as non-linguistic. In spite of this it is a noble and novel attempt to justify *nirvikalpaka* as a perception.

Such indeterminate awareness has been admitted as non-linguistic by the Buddhists also when they formulate that an object free from linguistic ascriptions (*kalpanā*) is called perceptual one. To them the ‘unique character’ (*svalakṣaṇa*) of an object is absolutely real (*paramārthasatya*) due to having its ‘causal efficacy’ (*arthakriyākāritva*). Hence this is a prominent area in Indian epistemology which is not illumined by language and herein lies the limit of language.

For Dharmakīrti, the relation aRb does not obtain at an ultimate level, but only at the empirical level (*samvṛtisatya*) as called by the Buddhists i.e., a level where a real is covered up by language. In order to situate Dharmakīrti’s polemic one should understand two Buddhist key-terms- *svalakṣaṇa* and *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*. The former

means ‘that which is characterized by itself’ and the later means ‘that which characterized by general features’. The first is open to a form perception what the Naiyāyikas call ‘*nirvikalpakapratyakṣa*’ which means ‘perception without being transformed by a concept’. Any description, on the other hand, involves of predicates to this singular (*svalakṣaṇa*) which is neither an act nor an object of perception, rather it is the *experiential singular*. But the general features (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*) by their nature are constructions in language. An object in its own nature has got its causal efficacy as it can serve the purpose of an individual but not quality, name etc., associated with the object. Grasping something in terms of general features involves using predicate, which are nothing but linguistic construction (*kalpanā*). The ‘*real*’ escapes the net of language. All descriptions including relation are brought about by linguistic mapping. What is due to linguistic mapping cannot be causally efficacious, the characteristic of being *sat* or real. Hence the Buddhists do not admit relation as real. Hence this is a prominent area in Indian epistemology which is not illumined by language and herein lies the limit of language.⁹

In this context an attempt is made to show whether there is cognition without any content (‘*aviśayaka-jñāna*’). Generally ‘knowledge’ means ‘knowledge of something’ in the epistemic sense. But in the Advaita Vedānta system of philosophy there is ‘pure knowledge’ having no content which is called ‘contentless cognition’ (‘*aviśayaka-jñāna*’) leading to certain philosophical problems. An effort will be made to address the same.

It is true that objects are very much there, but there is the lack of awareness of their existence. A particular object at this stage is not seen as such, but as the manifestation of Brahman or Self. Such type of experience, being purely subjective or private is not communicable to others. Before the attainment of this stage an individual takes refuge of duality in order to express his emotion and thought. When a man attains seerhood, there is no room for such duality and hence, no room for descriptions of the external objects like jar, cloth etc., conceptualizing the contents. In other words, when Brahman is realized, all objects bearing different names, designations, etc., become ‘*bādhita*’ or ‘contradicted’ or ‘falsified’, which will find support in the *Vedāntaparibhāṣā*.¹⁰ In connection with the definition of ‘*pramā*’ (‘valid cognition’), Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra has pointed out that all objects become

‘*bādhita*’, or contradicted or illusory after the self-realization. In the transmigratory state there is no question of ‘falsification’ (‘*bādhitva*’) due to the non-realization of Brahman, and hence the objects are capable of being described due to having the notion of duality. After the self-realization the notion of duality ceases leading to falsity of objects as having different designations.¹⁰ It is also true that conceptual designations are usually denied of the Supreme Reality, still they are necessary means and aids to the human intellect and help in preparing the ground for the later realization. So, conceptual designations are means through which the goal i.e., the realization of Self can be achieved. Though these designations cannot give us a full picture of the reality, the rough idea received through them is highly essential, as it serves as an index and pointer to the Truth. That is why, the epistemic ‘knowledge having some content’ (‘*saviṣayaka-jñāna*’) is essential. Just after the attainment of Brahman, all these descriptions become illusory (‘*māyā*’). That is why, Sankara has pointed out clearly that all the scriptures, which give injunctions and prohibitions and regulate moral and social life, are taken as ‘superimposed’ (*adhyasta*) after the realization of Brahman, not to speak of ordinary languages.¹¹

This knowledge which is Brahman has been accepted by the Advaitins as the only knowledge; the rest is described as non-knowledge. Hence, the knowledge in the form of Brahman alone can be said to have the property of *jñānatva* (‘cognitionhood’). But this knowledge is without an object owing to the annulment of epistemological duality at this stage. The definition of *pramā* given by Dharmarāja Adhvarīndra covers the empirical cognition only, the truth of which is determinable. In order to point out this the adjunct ‘*arthaviṣayaka*’ (i.e. ‘having some object as content’) is inserted to *jñānatva* (‘cognitionhood’). That is to say, *pramātvā* (‘the property of being a valid cognition’) is *jñānatva* (cognitionhood) having some object at its content (‘*arthaviṣayaka*’). As a result of inserting this term, the knowledge in the form of Brahman, which has no object at all (*aviṣayaka*), would not come under the purview of the definition of valid cognition.⁶ At this stage of awareness the subject and the object become identical, and hence, there is no epistemic duality. Thus, empirical cognition alone, having an object, should come under the definition of *pramā*. If it is said that *jñāna* or cognition having no content (‘*aviṣayaka*’) is ‘the knowledge of Brahman’, it would be treated as wrong as the

term indicates genitive which is not compatible in the Advaita Vedānta as it presupposes duality. Hence, the ‘*aviśayaka-jñāna*’ (‘cognition without content’) would be the pure knowledge which is equivalent to Brahman as per the essential characteristics - ‘*Satyam jñānamantam Brahma*’, i.e., Brahman is Truth, Knowledge and Infinitude.

From above it is evidenced that there is a limit of cognition incapable of being revealed in language. Perhaps this type of cognition which is called *asābda* has got some role of its own. In Nyāya such cognition of *asābda* nature has got some logical necessity. But in Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta such *asābda* cognition belongs to the ultimate domain of reality (*paramārthasatya*). Behind admitting such limitation of language there is some metaphysical scheme admitted by them. Unlike grammarians they might say that reality is not confined within the four walls of language, but it can take us to the world where language cannot go or has got some limitations which is endorsed in Kenopaniṣad-
“*natatracakṣurgacchatinavāggachhati*”.

References:

1. *Tarkasamgraha with Dīpikā*, edit. Gopinath Bhattacharya, Progressive, 1983, pp.53-237. “*Niṣprakāramjñānamnirvikalpakam*”, “*Viśeṣaṇa-viśeṣya-sambandhāvagāhi-jñānamityarthah*”
2. *Ibid*, pp.53-238, “*Sapprakāramjñānamsvikalpakam*”, “*Nāma-jātyādi-viśeṣya-viśeṣaṇa-sambandhāvagāhi-jñānamityarthah*”.
3. *Tarkasamgraha-dīpikā*, p.238, “*Nanunirvikalpakahpramānamiticenna, gauritiviśiṣṭa-jñānamviśeṣaṇa-jñāna-janyamviśiṣṭa-jñānatvāt, dandītijñānavatityamumānasyapramāṇatvāt. Viśeṣaṇa-jñānasyāpisavikalpakatve navasthā-prasangātnirvikalpakasiddhīh*”.
4. *Nyāyasūtra-1.1.4*.
5. “*Tatredaminindriyārth-sannikarṣādutpannamarthajñānamrūpamītvā ityevamvābhavatīrūpa-rasa-śabdāścaviṣaya-nāmadheyam. Tena vyapadiśyatejñānamrūpamītijānīte rasa itijānīte. Nāmadheyaśabdenāvyapadiśyamānamsacchābdamprasajyateataāhaavyapadeśyamīti*.” *Nyāyabhāṣyaon Sūtra-1.1.4*.
6. “*Dravyasyaguṇa-kriyā-samavāyi-kāraṇatvātguṇa kriyayorutpattehprāktatsattvam. Atoevotpannamdravyamkṣaṇamaguṇamītiṣṭhatūtinīyamah.*” *Siddhānta-muktāvalīon Verse no.14*.
7. *Bhāṣāparichheda*, Verse no.58.
8. “*Nanutrividhācehaviśayatā- prakaratā-viśeṣyatā-samsargatā-bhedāt. Tatrajnānamātrasyasvaviśayatāvenanirvikalpakēpikācidviśayatāpekṣitēti cet. Turīya-viśayatāyēvatatrābhyupagamāt.*” *Muktāvalīsamgraha on Siddhāntamuktāvalī on verse no.58*.
9. *Nyāyabandīṭīkā*, trans. Mrinalkanti Gangopadhyaya, *Pratyksaparichheda*, Indian Studies, Calcutta, 1974.

10. *Brahma-sākṣātkārānantaram hi ghaṭādīnāmbādhah, yatravasyasarvamātmaivābhūt, tat kenakampasyeditīśruteh'* Bhattacharya, Panchanana, Bengali Translation and Elucidation, 1377 (Bengali Samvit) *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*, p.7, Kolkata.
11. “*Natusamsāradaśāyāmbādhah, yatra hi dvaitamivabhavati, taditaraitarampaśyaītiśruteh. Tathā ca bādhita-padenasamsāradaśāyamabādhitatvamvivakṣitamitinaghaṭādi-pramāyāmyāptih.*” *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*, p.7, Kolkata.