

Elements of Knowledge in Nyaya and Mimamsa Schools of Indian Philosophy

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Abstract

Indian Philosophical tradition, which is ancient and traditional in nature, has three components, namely, Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Ethics. It is interesting to note that all the orthodox (astika) systems are metaphysical in nature and view their ontological standpoint to explain their position with regard to concepts like, God, world and moksa. Though there is a difference in their approach, it is an established fact that all the astika systems use metaphysics in order to explain their supreme truths. In other words, it can be said that Epistemology is used to prove the metaphysical presuppositions of each system of Philosophy. Though various means of knowledge (pramānā) are used in order to claim the metaphysical truth, there is no common agreement with regard to the number of means or methods of valid knowledge. It varies from one to six. Some accept two, some three, some four and some five and some six. These means of valid knowledge are as follows: pratyaksa, anumana, upamana, sabda, arthapatti and anupalabdhi. However, the uniqueness is that all the systems of Indian Philosophy accept perception (pratyaksa) as a means of valid knowledge. The main objective of this paper is to show how the Nyaya system of Philosophy has discussed the perceptual error (khyati). The word "khyati" means erroneous cognition or false apprehension. There are different khyatis mentioned in different schools of Indian Philosophy. They are as follows: Atma-khyati (Yogachara), Asat-khyati (Madhyamika), Akhyati (Prabhakara Mimamsa), Anyatha-khyati (Nyaya), Anirvaniya-khyati (Advaita), Sadasat-khyati (Sankhya), and Sat-khyati (Visistadvaita). The anyatha-khyati of Nyaya is also known as "misapprehension". The Nyāya theory of perceptual error is sometimes attributed to the Buddhists. Nevertheless, what the Buddhists had was a theory of perception not a theory of erroneous perception. To counteract the Nyāya stance of objects existing independently of consciousness, Buddhists advanced two theories: vikalpa and apôha. However, while contesting the Buddhists, the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā fell unconsciously into the clutches of Advaita.

Keywords: Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika schools, Vikalpa, Apôha, Indian Philosophy

I. Introduction

Nyāya is the Indian Philosophical School that put forward Epistemological thought on an ideological base. Nyaya Philosophy is a realistic Philosophy, which is mainly based on logic. It accepts four means of valid knowledge, namely, perception, (pratyaksa), inference (anumana), comparison (upamana) and testimony (sabda). The primary text for this dharcana is Gautama's Nyāya Sutra. Vātsyāyana transcribed a commentary for this work. It is notable that Dignāga, the Buddhist theoretician evaluated this work. Several works based on Gautama's text appeared Nyāya dharcana, which made its mark as an atheist doctrine transformed itself as a theist doctrine with the appearance of Gangesa's Tatvachinhamani. Thus, the later Nyāya dharcana is called navyanyāya. The logic of the Nyāya School has been so imbibed by other schools of Indian Philosophy that Nyāya could not last as a distinct Philosophy.

Nyāya considers that perception is the direct knowledge of objects produced by their relation to our senses. It may be due to external or internal organs. It is external when received from the sense organs like eye, ear or internal, like the mind. This implies that according to the Nyaya, perception is possible both by external as well as internal organ. Nyaya lists sixteen padārthās:

pramānā, pramāya samasaya, prayōjanā, drustānda, siddhānta, avayava, harga, nirGaya, vādha, jalba, vithandā, hethvābhāsa, jala, jāthi, and nigrahasthāna.

These are all epistemologically oriented. After its coalition with Vaicecika, Nyāya presents seven dravyās: guna, karma, sāmānyā, viceda, samavāya, abhāva.

It presupposes that knowledge points to the independent entity beyond the Self. It is also known as "pluralistic realism". Although at the early stages, the concept of God was not accepted, later it was accommodated. Hence, it can be considered pluralistic realism, which attempts to establish its ideology through pratyaksa, anumāna, sabda and upamāna. Although it accepts what is obtained through pramānās, as true knowledge it concedes that errors cannot be ruled out.

II. Background of the study

The Buddhist refutes the idea that “*This alone is Truth; and everything else is false*”. Buddha says that to be attached to one thing and to look down upon other things as inferior is what wise men call a deter. The Buddhist Philosophy is explained as follows. Mind is not spirit as opposed to matter. It should always be remembered that *Buddha* does not recognize a spirit opposed to matter. Mind is only a faculty or organ (*indriya*) like the eye or the ear. Consciousness, according to Buddhism is this: Consciousness is named according to whatever condition through which it arises, on account of the eye, and visible forms arises a consciousness called “*visual consciousness*”.

Similarly, one can talk about different consciousness. Thus, consciousness is named according to the condition through which it arises. Knowledge according to Buddhism has three degrees:

- (1) Opinion (*ditthi*),
- (2) Reasoning and reflection (*vitakka-vicara*) and
- (3) Intuition. i.e. illumination (*bodhi*).

Two concepts of truth are discussed in Madhyamika Buddhism, the *paramartha satya* and *samvrti satya*. The first is the Absolute truth. It is the knowledge of the real without any distortion. Usually, the categories are distorting the real. The Absolute truth is beyond thought, which is discursive, language and empirical activity. The *samvrti satya* is known as the so-called thought. It is defined as that which covers up entirely the real nature of things and makes them appear otherwise. The *samvrti* allows differences and degrees. *Nagarjuna* articulates that words like, “*I*”, “*mind*”, “*self*” or “*consciousness*” do not exist. They all are empty terms. However, one can use these words at the conventional truth level. They are only used to illustrate our speech. Negation is used in Madhyamika Philosophy as a weapon to deny their opponent’s Philosophy and reduce it to an absurdity. Normally we support the conventional truth and mis-understands it as ultimate problem. The problem comes arises here.

III. Rational of the study

Two schools of Buddhism, *Madhyamika* and *Yogachara* have dealt with the erroneous cognition. The *Madhyamika* rejects the existence of external objects as well as internal ideas, whereas the *Yogachara* rejects external objects but at the same time accepting the role of internal ideas. For them, there are no external objects apart from internal ideas. The *Yogachara* argues that illusory perception is the apprehension of the subjective cognition (*atma-khyati*).

In the case of *Madhyamika* school of Buddhism, it is argued that in illusory perception something non-existent is apprehended as existent. In the example of shell and silver, the silver is cognized as real; but it does not exist at all. Not only the silver is unreal, but also the shell. Both are non-existent. This background is necessary to contextualize the Nyaya theory of erroneous perception

The Buddha says: *No real thing is of such a nature that it passes away; A thing that is not does not exist at all*. He who imagines that things exist and exist not will never make pain to cease. *Nagarjuna* uses the concept of emptiness as a powerful weapon to strike and undermine all concepts, which are felt to have essence. He warns people not to look for essence but for their emptiness. He says: “*Those who perceive self-essence as well as other essence, existence as well as non-existence, they do not perceive the truth embodied in the Buddha’s message*”.

(Nagarjuna,

In Buddhism, perception is the contact between human organs and their respective objects; it is said to be the starting point of perception. Here mind plays an essential role in the process of perception. It is the sense perception caused by a dual relationship, i.e., individual as the perceiving subject and the world as the perceived object.

IV. Review of literature

Bijalwan, C.D., (2014) postulated based on his study that there has been such a wealth of literature, both classic and modern, on perceptual errors in Indian Philosophy. A comprehensive study of the various Indian theories of perceptual errors still did not exist and therefore this approach is attempted in order to highlight the significance of perceptual error. The extremely competent and unified survey of the theories of perceptual errors done by *Professor Karl. H. Potter* in his *Presuppositions of India’s Philosophies*. Considering the very unsystematic treatment of this important topic of error until the early sixties, the presuppositions certainly filled a major gap admirably.

Chatterjee, S., (2019) hypothesized based on his study that the Philosophy of *Nyaya-Vaiúesika* and its conflict with the Buddhist *Dignāga* School, the theories of perceptual errors had received little attention and therefore a greater encouragement was felt to continue the work. Nevertheless, at this stage it was realized that a dialectical reconstruction of the whole story of the evolution of the various schools of Indian thought with the concept of perceptual errors as a pivotal Epistemological idea was inevitable and it was taken up without any hesitation since it was an exciting adventure and almost definitely a philosophically rewarding experience.

Scholars of Indian tradition argue that the dispute between the Nyaya and the Buddhist is important in the context of global Philosophy.

Datta, D.M., (2021) appealed based on his study that the nature of erroneous perception has been discussed exhaustively by almost all Indian Philosophers. Important issues have been discussed on perceptual error. Perceptual error looms large is a matter that has been highlighted by both traditional as well as modern scholars. The ideological basis of the *Nyāya* and the *Vaiśeṣika* schools and the traditional views of the *Nyāya* proponents are not only discussed but also compared and contrasted with anti-Vedic ideologies and acknowledged.

V. Research Methodology

This study is mainly qualitative research solely based on literature review on the theory of perception. This is a descriptive, comparative study, which relies on both primary and secondary material such as academic books, journals and online archives.

Objective of the study

- To explore the inference as a source of knowledge in Indian philosophy.
- To compare the knowledge with reference to Nyaya and Mimamsa.

Hypothesis of the study

- It is hypothesized that the inference as a source of knowledge correlated to Indian philosophy.
- It is hypothesized that compare the knowledge correlated to Nyaya and Mimamsa.

VI. Results And Discussion

The *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā* schools were the first to develop a theory of erroneous perception. Interestingly, they did not do this primarily to oppose Buddhist theories of perceptual error, but rather to counter the idealistic implications of the Buddhist theory of perception itself. The Buddhists had put forward a strongly idealistic view, challenging the commonsense belief that objects exist independently of consciousness. In defending this view, Buddhists relied heavily on the theories of *vikalpa* (conceptual construction) and *apoha* (exclusion theory of meaning) two ideas that faced strong opposition from non-Buddhist thinkers.

A remarkably detailed and innovative account of the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* school can be found in *The Philosophy of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and its Conflict with the Buddhist Dignāga School*. This work convincingly demonstrates that many of the theories within *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, which otherwise seem odd or difficult to grasp, gain clarity and purpose when seen as responses to Buddhist theories developed by *Dignāga*.

It is surprising that historians of Indian philosophy have often failed to recognize that philosophical schools do not evolve in isolation. Instead, they develop through constant interaction with rival systems. The tendency to write histories focused on entire schools, rather than on individual philosophers or the development of specific concepts, may be one reason for this oversight. When we examine the evolution of *Nyāya* concepts with this in mind, a central purpose becomes clear: to refute the conceptual framework advanced by the Buddhists.

The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* School, another realist tradition, had a similar goal. Both *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā* were so focused on opposing the Buddhist worldview that they failed to notice how some of their own doctrines, if trailed logically, could lead to conclusions quite similar to those of the Buddhists.

An intriguing but lesser-known aspect of Indian philosophical history is that *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā* waged a long and intense intellectual battle against the Buddhists. In doing so, they developed many arguments that ultimately weakened not only the Buddhist system but also their own. As a result, all three traditions—*Nyāya*, *Mīmāṃsā*, and *Buddhism* eventually became vulnerable to the critique of *Advaita Vedānta*. From this perspective, one can trace a kind of progression: from the *Nyāya* theory of *anyathākhyāti* (misperception as misattribution), to Kumārila's *viparītakhyāti* (misperception as inversion), and then to the *Prābhākara* school's *akhyāti* (non-apprehension), which in turn lays the groundwork for Advaita's *anirvacanīya khyāti* (misperception as indeterminable). *Anyathā-khyāti* refers to a type of illusion where something is perceived as something else. For example, a shell is mistaken for silver. This is simply a case of misperception. The *Nyāya* school of philosophy explains how such illusions occur. When there is insufficient light, poor visibility, or a defect in the observer's eyesight, a person may perceive a shell as silver or a rope as a snake. In such cases, an object that is seen elsewhere is wrongly perceived in the current situation. As a result, the rope is mistaken for a snake.

The Buddhists strongly denied the idea that there are any external objects separate from consciousness. In response, the *Naiyāyika* (a proponent of the *Nyāya* school) argued that perception whether accurate or mistaken—always involves a real external object. According to the *Nyāya* perspective, both correct and erroneous perceptions can only be properly explained if we assume the existence of actual external objects. This argument is most clearly presented in the *Nyāya Sūtra*, IV.2.26–37, along with the traditional commentaries on these verses.

The *Naiyāyika* claims that the very possibility of error depends on the possibility of correct knowledge. For example, we can misperceive a pillar as a man only because we are capable of perceiving a pillar correctly—

as a pillar—in the first place. This correct awareness of the pillar is referred to as *tattvajñāna* or *tadhuddhi* (true knowledge or recognition of what something truly is). Error arises when we confuse “what is not that” (*atat*)—in this case, a man—with “that” (*tat*)—the pillar. The mistaken perception is corrected only when one gains the right knowledge.

VII. Conclusion

The *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā* schools developed a theory of perception in response to the Buddhist theory, which leaned toward idealism. Buddhist philosophers had questioned the existence of objects independent of consciousness. In reaction, the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* schools formulated their own views, aiming to counter the influence of the *Buddhist Dignāga* School. The *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā* schools took a position directly opposed to that of the Buddhists.

This philosophical disagreement persisted for centuries, until thinkers like *Kumārila Bhaṭṭa* and *Prabhākara* emerged, eventually contributing to the development of *Advaita Vedānta*. The *Nyāya* School argued for the existence of real entities such as *dravya* (substance), *guṇa* (quality), and *sāmānya* (universals), while Buddhists denied the existence of external objects beyond consciousness.

In Indian philosophy, perception is typically categorized into two types: determinate (*savikalpaka*) and indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*). Buddhists accepted only *nirvikalpaka* perception, claiming that perception occurs without conceptual content. In contrast, the *Naiyāyikas* (followers of *Nyāya*) argued that even incorrect perception still refers to something real.

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