

# Indian Epistemology

Proceedings of National Seminar

Editor

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## INTER-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EPISTEMOLOGY IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

Dr. K.V. Suresh

Theory of knowledge, *Pramāṇa-Śāstra*, is a rich genre of Sanskrit literature, spanning almost twenty centuries, carried out in texts belonging to distinct schools of philosophy. Debate across school occurs especially on epistemological issues, but no author writes on knowledge independently of the sort of metaphysical commitment that defines the various classical systems (*darśana*), realist and idealist, dualist and monist, theist and atheist, and so on. And every one of the dozen or so major schools from early in its history takes a position on knowledge and justification, if only, as with the Buddhist skeptic (*prāsaṅgika*), to attack the theories of others. There are nevertheless many common epistemological assumptions or attitudes, the most striking of which is a focus on a belief's source in questions of justification. Mainstream classical Indian epistemology is dominated by theories about pedigree, i.e., views about knowledge-generating processes, called *pramana*, 'knowledge sources.' The principal candidates are perception, inference, and testimony. Other processes seem not truth-conducive or reducible to one or more of the widely accepted sources such as perception and inference. However, surprising candidates such as non-perception (for knowledge of absences) and circumstantial implication (defended as distinct from inference) provoke complex arguments especially in the later texts—from about 1000 when the number of Sanskrit philosophical works of some of the schools begins to proliferate almost exponentially. The later texts present more intricate views and arguments than the earlier from which the later authors learned. Classical Indian philosophy is an unbroken tradition of reflection expressed in the pan-Subcontinent intellectual language of Sanskrit. Or, we should say it is comprised of interlocking traditions since there are the distinct schools, all nevertheless using Sanskrit and engaging with the other schools. Later authors expand and carry

forward positions and arguments of their predecessors.

Through intellectual non-violence one can advance the cause of peaceful, mutual respect in our strife-ridden day and age. It is the cure for extremism, dogmatism and fanaticism which are largely responsible for the despair and disaster that arise out of a misunderstanding and lack of tolerance.

Is there a school in Indian philosophy which on epistemological grounds clearly helps us extract elements of it which can be relevant in an inter-cultural context? Can old and even ancient ideas be relevant for us in this day and age? We have seen that in Indian philosophy debate and discussion were crucial for the development of ideas and for the sharpening of the tools in philosophical activity. Early in the history of Indian philosophy it was understood that there can be different points of view with regard to any object of inquiry; debate and discussion brought these out to the fore. Jainism is an inalienable part of Indian philosophy with its contribution based on the teachings of Mahāvīra who was a contemporary of the Buddha. In his teaching Mahāvīra indicated simply that one could see a thing differently from different sides and that, accordingly, different answers would be possible. Later thinkers developed his method into a philosophical system according to which one tried, as a rule, to see everything from different standpoints and perspectives. They called it the 'theory of manifoldness' which avoids making one-sided, absolutistic statements about any object of inquiry. Jainism accepts that theoretically there can be an infinite number of standpoints and perspectives, although seven have come to be traditional. One Jaina thinker says that these are the only logical possibilities if one combines the following possible statements about any object of inquiry: a statement can be either positive, or negative, or neutral (i.e., indescribable, namely that an object cannot be described adequately from all viewpoints at once). The conclusion, then, is that the theory of manifoldness in Jainism takes all cases into consideration when talking about an object; basically it is a simple theory which avoids making one-sided (*ekānta*), absolutistic judgements and

any theme of discussion should be approached, according to Jainism, from various perspectives and standpoints. Depending on the point of view an observation may be, for example, both correct and incorrect, as with the colour of an object depending on the light, or with a person who can be both father and son at the same time. The basic point is simple: depending on the standpoint or perspective a particular view or statement can be both true and false at the same time: someone can be both a father and a son at the same time, namely, with respect to a particular person, i.e., depending on the standpoint. The crux of the theory lies in the fact that each of the seven statements is explicitly being made from one perspective or point of view, and that it says at the same time that there can be another perspective or point of view, and that all statements apply simultaneously.

To take the example of a person or an object like a pot, the following statements can be made about them according to the Jain theory of *Syādvāda* called *Saptabhāṅgi* (seven fold prediction):

1. From one point of view he is a father, or this is a pot (*Syād-asti* - in some ways something is).
2. From one point of view he is not a father, or this is not a pot (*Syād-nāsti* - in some ways something is not).
3. From one point of view he is both a father and not a father, (i.e., he is a son), namely, at the same time, or this object is both a pot and not a pot (*Syād-asti-nāsti* - in some ways something is and is not).

This assertion combining the first and second statements into a single unit is not contradictory. The assertion may be fully expressed in the form: a person can be a son of so and so but not a son at the same time, namely, of another person, or from one point of view this object exists (as a pot) and from another point of view it does not exist (namely, as a tree);

4. From one point of view it is not possible to adequately describe a person as a son, father, brother, etc. all at once; so the person is indescribable, or it is not possible to describe an object adequately from

possible perspectives all at once (*Syād-astī-avaktavyaḥ* - in some ways something is and it is indescribable).

5. From one point of view a person is both a father and is describable; this combines statements 1 and 4, the same with a pot. *vād-nāstī-avaktavyaḥ* - in some ways something is not and it is describable).

6. From one point of view a person is both not a father and is describable, this combines statements 2 and 4, the same with a pot. *vād-astī-nāstī-avaktavyaḥ* - in some ways something is, is not and is describable).

7. From one point of view a person is all at once: a father, not a father, and is indescribable, this combines 3 and 4 into one single statement, the same with a pot (*Syād-avaktavyaḥ* - in some ways something is indescribable).

If one bears in mind that the theory of non-violence, which is built on the metaphysics of Jainism, and its practice, is one of the fundamental teachings then it is understandable that the theory of manifoldness can easily be interpreted as a kind of intellectual non-violence, as has been done by many modern thinkers. This attitude has far-reaching consequences for the inter-cultural dialogue that has now become a significant feature of our day and age. Even during Mahāvīra's time there were different views of reality which he sought to reconcile on the basis of their validity from a particular point of view, without discarding them outright. Such an attitude presupposes learning about other views which not only brings about mutual understanding, but a deeper insight into one's own perspective. Through intellectual non-violence one can advance the cause of peaceful, mutual respect in our strife-ridden day and age. It is the cure for extremism, dogmatism and fanaticism which are largely responsible for the despair and disaster that arise out of a misunderstanding and lack of tolerance.

What inter-cultural significance can be extracted from what has been said, including the theory of manifoldness briefly mentioned above? Some points can be summarized as follows

In the context of debate, the attitude to discuss a system of thought on the basis of its own presuppositions, when employed constructively, can be immensely fruitful in inter-cultural dialogue. This attitude presupposes an earnest attempt to try and understand the other position and to discuss it from within as far as is possible. Such an attempt creates the possibility then of seeing one's own position from outside, objectively, as far as is possible.

The theory of manifoldness teaches a positive, basic attitude towards any object of investigation that may be undertaken in a debate. An attempt should be made to understand another position from its particular standpoint and to accept it as valid from that particular point of view. Non-violence, even in its intellectual form, serves as the guiding principle in trying to clear differences of opinions or points of view in inter-cultural dialogue.

An implicit rule that applies in inter-cultural dialogue and philosophy among the participants is that of providing sufficient room for a mutual desire to understand and to be understood. Here again, the pluralistic attitude of manifoldness can help to prepare this atmosphere. Jainism has an age-old tradition in trying to avoid one-sided positions and its theoretical, i.e., philosophical, justification can serve as a guide towards a practical implementation for inter-cultural understanding, adapted to our present situation. It can serve as a cure for the extremism, dogmatism and fanaticism just mentioned above.

The religious and even mystical aspect of Indian philosophy is contained in the means for realizing, i.e., having an intuitive experience of, the essential nature of the subject of cognition, the being who really knows. The means involved here include training in yogic or ascetic practices in which meditation and self-study play a vital role in the attempt to realize the consciousness described as the characteristic feature of the self, the true subject. The training involved in self-study may be seen as an attempt to strive towards authenticity and authentic existence. Such training would have a direct influence on authentic inter-cultural dialogue with all the positive and constructive intra-

Aspects of Indian philosophy can serve as a good starting point for a theoretical basis in actual inter- and intra-cultural dialogue, because such ideas were in fact implicit in the debates which took place among the different schools of Indian philosophy in ancient times. These ideas can be useful and relevant in setting up a philosophical basis that can be adapted to apply to our day and age.

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