

SYĀDVĀDA AND SAPTABHAṄGA: CONDITIONAL DIALECTIC EXPRESSION OF ANEKĀNTA

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Abstract

Communicability of the knowledge to the other is of great importance and is accomplished through propositions. According to the Jain philosophy, every object has infinite characteristics. Permanence and change, generality and particularity are reconciled in every object without any incongruity. *Syādvāda* is the method of communicating those manifold characteristics and the word *syāt* is used to communicate only one characteristic at a time but also leaving the possibility of formulating other propositions with regard to that object. This paper thoroughly discusses seven distinct propositions (*saptabhaṅgas*) that express the content of knowledge regarding an existent/object. Also, in this paper, an allegation of the self-contradiction of *syādvāda* is briefly discussed and refuted. In opposition to formal logic, Jainism claims that the source of the law of non-contradiction should be sought not in *a priori* thought, but in experience of the behavior of things. Thus, there is no contradiction in asserting that an object possesses the characteristics of both existence and non-existence at the same time.

Introduction

The significant fact about knowledge is its communicability. When knowledge is for one's own self, the question of communicability is not an issue; but when it is for the other, the question needs much more serious consideration. Communicability is accomplished through properly worded propositions. Thus, knowledge to be communicable is to be reduced to propositions. This goes without saying that the formulation of propositions is dependent on the content of knowledge. It is not idle to point out that if there is discordance between the content of knowledge and the formulation of propositions, serious misunderstandings are bound to arise. *Syādvāda* is the linguistic device to represent the content of knowledge without any omission or distortion. Thus, in a way *syādvāda* and knowledge become the obverse and converse of the same coin.

Syādvāda, Anekāntavāda and Syāt

Knowledge, according to the Jain philosophy, reveals itself and the object.² In consequence, Jain thinkers propound that the object has infinite characteristics³ – some known, some in the process of being discovered, and many as yet unknown. The acceptance of infinite and vivid characteristics of an object is known as the doctrine of *anekāntavāda*. *Syādvāda* is the method of communicating the manifold characteristics of a thing to the other. In the absence of this technique, real knowledge of a thing cannot be passed on to others without any incongruence.

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² “*tatprāmāṇyaṃ svataḥ parataśca*” (Parīkṣāmukha 1.13)

³ “*anekāntakam vastu gocaraḥ sarvasamvidam*” (Nyāyāvātāra 29)

Thus, *syādvāda* is the expression of *anekāntavāda*.

The significant point to be comprehended regarding *anekāntavāda* is that every characteristic of a multiphase thing maintains its identity through the existence of its opposite.⁴ In fact, a thing cannot be the same without the negation of other things. For example, a color cannot remain a color without the negation of other characteristics like taste, smell, etc. Thus, non-existence is as much an essential aspect of the real as existence is. Negative propositions cannot be asserted without accepting non-existence as an element in the constitution of the real/object. Similarly, the characteristics of one and many, permanence and change, generality and particularity are reconciled in a thing without any incongruity.⁵ Thus, when a Jain is faced with the problem of expressing the complex content of knowledge in a language, he devises the method of *syādvāda*. The word *syāt* implies that the object, for example, *ghaṭa* (pitcher), is a manifold of attributes like being colorful is one of the aspects of the *ghaṭa*. There are many other characteristics in the *ghaṭa* at the same time and talking about only one does not negate the presence of others. The word *syāt* is used to communicate only one characteristic at a time. In other words, certainty of color along with the manifoldness of other characteristics is indicated by the word *syāt*.

The word *syāt* can also be understood differently, though the difference is of expression and not of meaning. As already pointed out, an object is the repository of infinite attributes. Hence, the apprehension of it from a particular perspective or point of view, technically called *naya* does not exhaust the description of the whole of the multiphase thing.⁶ It is important to note that the *naya* is objectively given and not subjectively contemplated. So, in order to avoid the possible misunderstanding that a thing is exhausted by a particular *naya*, every proposition should be preceded by the word *syāt* thus making us aware of the possibility of other propositions with regard to that thing.⁷ Thus, *syādvāda* is the custodian of clarity, certainty, and non-ambiguity in the field of the Jain philosophy. It is by no means the doctrine of doubt and uncertainty.

Saptabhaṅgī

Although an existent or an object possesses infinite attributes, the knowledge of it is not a simple matter. The question is, what does it mean to know a thing? And how many propositions are required to express the content of knowledge? The view/opinion/stance of the Jain philosophy is that seven distinct propositions (*saptabhaṅgas*), neither more nor less,

⁴ “*tarhyekasyaiva pūmsastattadupādhibhedāt piṭṭva-putratva-mātulatva-bhāgineyatva-piṭṭvyatva-bhātṭvyatvādi dharmāṅgāṃ parasparaviruddhānāmapi prasiddhidarśanāt kim vācyam | evamavaktavyatvādayo’pi vācyā iti ||*” (Anyayogavyavacchedadvātrimśikā on Syādvadamañjarī 24)

⁵ “*tathā dravyamapi sāmānyārpaṇayā nityam, viśeṣārpaṇayānityamiti nāsti virodhaḥ | tau ca sāmānyaviśeṣau kathāncid bhedābhedābhyāṃ vyavahārahe tū bhavataḥ ||*” (Sarvārthasiddhi 5.32.588)

⁶ *kathāncit te sadeveṣṭam kathāncidasadeva tat | tathobhayamavācyam ca nayayogāṇna sarvathā ||* (Āpta-Mīmāṃsā 14)

anekāntātmakam vastu gocaraḥ sarvasamvidam | ekadeśaviśiṣṭo ’rtho nayasya viśayo mataḥ || (Nyāyāvatāra 29)

⁷ *vākyeṣvanekāntadyotī gamyaṃ prati-viśeṣakaḥ | syānnipāto ’rthayogitvāt tava kevalināmapi ||* (Āpta-Mīmāṃsā 103)

are needed to express the content of knowledge regarding an existent/object. It should be noted that each proposition is not the result of mere subjective necessity that possesses attributes as an ontological truth. The existents or their characteristics are infinite in number. Each of them can be expressed in seven propositions. Consequently, there is a seven-fold set of propositions without any inconsistency. Seven propositions that can be predicated of a substance are as follows⁸:

1. *Syāt asti* (it is in some respect)
2. *Syāt nāsti* (it is not in some other respect)
3. *Syāt asti nāsti* (it is and it is not in some other respect)
4. *Syāt avaktavya* (it is indescribable in some other respect)
5. *Syāt asti avaktavya* (it is and is indescribable in some other respect)
6. *Syāt nāsti avaktavya* (it is not and is indescribable in some other respect)
7. *Syāt asti nāsti avaktavya* (it is, it is not, and is indescribable in some other respect).⁹

Let us now illustrate the doctrine of the seven-fold proposition by taking an example of a pen¹⁰, about its attribute of existence:

1. The first proposition is **Syāt pen exists**. This means that the existence of a pen is contextual, the context being its *sva-dravya* (substance), *sva-kṣetra* (space), *sva-kāla* (time), and *sva-bhāva* (state).¹¹ It is by virtue of this context that the pen derives its individuality and becomes meaningful. In fact, this context is interwoven into the formation of the pen itself, so it cannot be separated from the object. This proposition opposes the possibility of the unqualified existence of a thing without considering its substance, space, time, and state.
2. The second proposition is **Syāt pen does not exist**. The proposition does not, as it seems, negate the existence of the pen referred to in the first proposition, but it states the non-existence of the pen in respect of the other i.e., *para-dravya*, *para-kṣetra*, *para-kāla*, and *para-bhāva*. Thus, it strengthens the first proposition rather than negating it. The existence of a pen in respect of its *sva-dravya*, *sva-kṣetra*, *sva-kāla*, and *sva-bhāva* cannot maintain its identity if non-existence of a pen in respect of *para-dravya*, *para-kṣetra*, *para-kāla*, and *para-bhāva* is not considered the concomitant aspect of the pen.

⁸ *siya atthi ṇatthi uhayam avvattavvam puṇo ya tattidayam |
davvam khu sattabhamgam ādesavaseṇa sambhavadi* || (Pañcāstikāyaḥ 14)

⁹ Akalaṅka gives a detailed explanation of *saptabhaṅgī* in his *Tattvārtha-vārtika* [*Rājavartika*] where he gives the example of *ghaṭa*. (Tattvārtha-vārtika [*Rājavartika*] 4.42)

¹⁰ Nathmal Tatia uses the similar example of pen to explain the seven-fold predication (Tattvārthasūtra: That Which Is 139-40).

¹¹ *sadeva sarvam ko necchet svarūpādicatuṣṭayāt |
asadeva viparyāsāna cenna vyavatiṣṭhate* || (Āpta-Mīmāṃsā 15)

Thus, existence and non-existence are co-present in the pen without any contradiction. According to the Jain philosophy, non-existence is as much constitutive of the nature of the thing as existence. The critics fail to see that a contradictory statement can be made about a thing if the context is changed. The idea of the Jain philosophy is that if this proposition is denied, it should be difficult for us to account for the differences in things. Hence, by asserting this proposition, we come across a new aspect of a thing, which is not given in the first proposition.

3. The third proposition is **Syāt pen exists and does not exist**. In this proposition, the two attributes of existence and non-existence in their relevant contexts are successively predicated on the pen.¹² Thus, this proposition might appear a combination of the first two propositions, but in reality, it is not. It expresses a new aspect of the very same pen. This aspect is not present in the first or second proposition when considered separately.
4. The fourth proposition is **Syāt pen is inexpressible**. In this proposition, the two attributes of existence and non-existence instead of being asserted successively, as in the third proposition, are asserted simultaneously. The need for the simultaneous assertion of these appositive attributes is man's desire to express in words the apprehension of the pen as such. Since words are incapable of expressing this apprehension of the pen, it is inexpressible. It may be noted here that inexpressibility is a novel and factual characteristic of the pen. The distinction between the third and fourth propositions is that in the former the novel attribute is the result of consecutive togetherness of the elements of existence and non-existence, whereas in the latter it is the result of simultaneous presentation of the two elements in question. This inexpressibility is not absolute, it is only so in the context of the two opposite attributes being together synchronically. Therefore, the aspect of the object under consideration cannot be rejected simply because it is inexpressible by a single proposition.
5. The fifth proposition is *Syāt pen exists and is inexpressible*.
6. The sixth proposition is *Syāt pen does not exist and is inexpressible*.
7. The seventh proposition is *Syāt pen exists and does not exist and is inexpressible*.

All these propositions according to Jainism represent new aspects of the existent/object. Now the question arises: on what basis the number of propositions is seven, and neither more nor less? Since both affirmation and negation are possible concerning the existent/object, only seven propositions are possible. The propositions to comprehend the existent/object are dependent on its seven objective aspects. In fact, the inquiry starts upon the initial doubt, for example, does the pen exist or not? Or is a thing permanent or changing? The answer can be given with seven distinct propositions or *sapta bhāṅgas*.

¹² “*kramārpitadvayād dvaitam sahāvācyamaśkatitaḥ*” (Āpta-Mīmāṃsā 16)

In summary, out of the *sapta bhaṅgas*, the first three propositions are the main and the rest are the combination of the first three.¹³ Furthermore, the first four are empirically verifiable and the last three are mathematically possible. If one speaks of more than seven *bhaṅgas*, there will either be duplication or assertion of propositions neither confirmed by mathematics nor by experience; if one speaks of a smaller number of propositions, there will either be omission or suppression of the aspect of the existent/object predicated either mathematically or experientially.

Anekāntavāda and Saptabhaṅga

It may now be argued whether the seven propositions apply to *anekāntavāda* (non-extremism or non-absolutism). Yes, it does. Knowledge which takes into account the nature of the existent/object as consisting of an infinite plurality of attributes is called *pramāṇa*¹⁴ and this is non-absolutism, knowledge that takes into account one attribute without negating the other attributes present in the real is called *naya* and this is *ekāntavāda*. In other words, *anekānta* cannot be sustained without admitting *ekānta* as its opposite, just as a tree cannot be saved if the branches are taken out.

Syādvāda is alleged of self-contradiction as this doctrine flagrantly violates the law of non-contradiction which says that A cannot be both A and B at the same time. Thus, how can a pen have the characteristics of both existence and non-existence simultaneously? Before answering this question, let us first discuss the law of non-contradiction propounded by formal logic. The conviction of the Jain philosophy is that the law of non-contradiction is *a priori* and thus does not state any facts about reality. If it were asked what is the criterion of contradiction the reply would be that it is the experience and not pure thought. It is by the former that the notion of contradiction should be decided. Two facts are contradictory if they are not found to coexist in experience just as light and darkness, heat and cold, and the like. On the contrary, if experience confirms the coexistence of seemingly contradictory attributes in a thing, it should be regarded as valid.

Thus, Jainism insists that the source of the law of non-contradiction should be sought not in *a priori* thought, but in experience of the behavior of things. Following this mode of logic, the Jain philosophy finds no empirical contradiction in asserting that a pen has the characteristics of both existence and non-existence, as has been explained above.

Summary

This paper brings a thorough introduction to the fundamental Jain doctrines namely – *anekāntavāda*, *syādvāda*, and *saptabhaṅgī*. In its introductory part, it underlines the importance of the communicability of knowledge and its accomplishment through properly worded propositions. Further, it defines *syādvāda* as the method of communicating the

¹³ “*amīṣāmeva trayāṇām mukhyatvāccheṣabhaṅgānām ca samyogajatvenāmīṣvevāntarbhāvāditi*” (Anyayogavyavacchedadvātrīṃśikā on Syādvadamañjarī 24)

¹⁴ ‘*anyānyapi parābhimatāni pramāṇāsāmānyalakṣaṇānyalakṣaṇatvād-upekṣyante | tasmāt-sva-parāvabhāsanāsamartham savikalpmagrhitagrāhakaṃ samyagñānamevājñānamarthe nivarttayat-pramāṇam-ityārhatamatam*’ (Nyāyadīpikā 1.28)

manifold characteristics of a thing to the other, pointing out that *syādvāda* is the expression of *anekāntavāda* which is understood as the acceptance of infinite characteristics of an object.

Next, the significance and the implications of the word *syāt* are given which play a very important role in the doctrine of seven-fold propositions (*saptabhaṅgī*). By using *syāt* in propositions, we are aware of the possibility of other propositions with regard to a particular object. The paper also discusses seven propositions stressing their number as sufficient, in order to describe the infinite characteristics of an existent/object. The paper finally refutes the allegation of self-contradiction in *syādvāda* by emphasizing that the law of non-contradiction should be sought not in *a priori* thought, but in the experience of the behavior of things, therefore confirming the coexistence of seemingly contradictory attributes in an object.

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