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Speak Up

DEBATE AS A PATH TO TRUTH: MODERN SCENARIO

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In Indian philosophy, the tradition of debate is not merely a means of exchanging ideas, but a way to find the truth. For millennia, Indian culture has upheld the practice of debate (*śāstrārtha*), and there has also been reflection on the very method of conducting such debates. Indian logicians expressed their views, among whom Jain scholar — especially Akalaṅka (8th century CE) — furnished detailed definitions in his texts such as *Nyāyaviniścaya*, *Siddhiviniścaya* and *Pramāṇasaṅgraha*.

Dialogue was categorized as truth-oriented discussion (*vāda*), argument for victory (*jalpa*), and mere refutation (*vitaṇḍā*). Their nomenclature itself clarifies the nature of debate and its boundaries. It is significant that Akalaṅka appears to have advocated the traditional view propounded by the Vedic scholar Akṣapāda Gautama (6th century BCE - 2nd century CE) who has explained his theories in his works like *Nyāyasūtra*.

In modern times, the system of ancient debate has become very relevant. Today, debates often degenerate into conflict and polarization; electronic and social media present anything in the name of dialogue, often crossing the limits of decency. The genuine methods of discussion adopted by traditional scholars are now largely absent, a decline clearly visible among the youth. Therefore, in this critical situation, revisiting these concepts becomes extremely necessary.

Truth-oriented discussion (Vāda)

Vāda in English has the meaning ranging from the act of talking or speaking to discussion, or even a simple conversation. The ancient form of debate is represented by *ānvīkṣikī* (logic or metaphysics) which is primarily related to the path of self-realization (*tattvabodha*). It can be summed up in the maxim *vāde vāde jāyate tattvabodhaḥ*, meaning through repeated debates, true knowledge is attained.

Akalaṅka clarifies this in his *Nyāyakumudacandra* (2/7/339) by defining *vāda* as a special form of dialogue undertaken for the preservation of truth, which may incidentally result in gain, honor, or fame (*vāda eva ekaḥ kathāviśeṣaḥ tattvādhyavasāyasaṁrakṣaṇa phalaḥ lābha-pūjā-khyāti hetuḥ*).



With this, we can understand that *vāda* embodies five essential features:

- it is based on valid sources of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) and logical reasoning (*tarka*);
- it does not contradict established principles (*siddhānta*);
- it conforms to the classical five-membered syllogism of Indian logic;
- it remains open to either party prevailing in the discussion; and
- it emphasizes intellectual *ahimsā* (non-violence in speech), making it both a philosophical method and an ethical practice.

This makes *vāda* the best form of debate.

Argument for Victory (Jalpa)

Jalpa is similar to *vāda*, but the main difference is that debaters exercising *jalpa* have the intention to win. Akalaṅka, in his *Pramāṇasiddhiviviscaya* (55), defines *jalpa* as the act of refuting the opponent in regard to the subject under discussion (*sādhyē paratiraskārō jalpah*).

It is aimed at achieving victory over the opponent, and it relies on exposing defeat through techniques such as quibble (*chala*), fallacy (*jāti*), and points of refutation (*nigrahasthāna*). Unlike *vāda*, which seeks truth, *jalpa* is essentially competitive, often translated as “wrangling,” where the debater’s primary concern is triumph rather than genuine understanding. Wrangling, which aims solely at gaining victory, is the defense or attack of a proposition through quibbles, trivialities, and other disputation tactics that invite rebuke. A wrangler is one who, engaged in debate, seeks only triumph, indifferent to whether the arguments employed genuinely support their own position or even that of the opponent.

This makes *jalpa* a pointless form of debate.

Mere Refutation (Vitaṇḍā)

It is the type of debate that aims primarily at defeating the opponent’s case without establishing one’s own. While it is still based on valid sources of knowledge (*pramāṇas*) and logical reasoning (*tarka*), it differs sharply from *vāda* and *jalpa* in three respects: it is not aligned with established norms (*siddhānta*), it need not conform to the five-membered syllogism of classical logic, and it seeks to achieve the opponent’s defeat at any cost.

Akalaṅka describes *vitaṇḍā* in his *Syādvāda-mañjarī* (10/107/13) saying it is mere babbling, without any genuine inquiry into truth or falsehood (*pratipakṣasthāpanāhīno vitaṇḍā*).

Thus, *vitaṇḍā* represents a destructive form of disputation, focused less on truth or structured reasoning and more on negation and refutation, a clear deviation from the constructive spirit of *vāda* and the competitive drive of *jalpa*.

This makes *vitaṇḍā* a futile form of debate.

Conclusion

In the traditions of Vedic as well as Jain philosophy, debate (*sāstrārtha*) has never been a mere contest of words, but a disciplined pursuit of truth. The classifications of *vāda*, *jalpa*, and *vitaṇḍā* reveal the

ways in which dialogue can either illuminate reality, devolve into wrangling, or collapse into destructive refutation. Among these, *vāda* stands out as the highest form of intellectual exchange — valid knowledge, logical reasoning, and ethical restraint.

In particular, Jainism ensures that debate is not only a logical exercise but also a moral discipline. Akalaṅka clearly demonstrated that the pursuit of truth must be accompanied by humility, restraint, and respect for multiple perspectives (*anekāntavāda*). This makes Jainism's contribution unique: it transforms debate into a spiritual practice, where dialogue itself becomes a path to liberation through truth-seeking and ethical conduct.

Yet, the degeneration of debate in modern times — where competitive victory or mere negation often overshadows the quest for truth — reminds us of the urgent need to revisit these traditional phenomena. By re-engaging with the principles of *vāda*, and by embracing Jainism's vision of non-violent, truth-oriented dialogue, we can restore debate as a constructive practice. In doing so, discussion remains not a source of division, but a means of enlightenment, ethical growth, and genuine understanding.

