



CAN DOUBT BE CONSIDERED AS A WITCH (PIŚĀCINĪ)?

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Abstract:

The present paper considers the statement of Udayana in his *Nyāyakusumāñjali* regarding the status of doubt in philosophy. In fact, doubt or *saṁśaya* is taken by the opponents like Nāgārjuna, etc. as a non-entity. Some of the opponents consider it as having a negative impact. In the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* the Divine Teacher affirms that doubt as such is to be taken as a devil having negative impact on others in the following verse- ‘*saṁśayātmā vinaśyati*’ i.e., an individual having dubious state of mind is ruined. In the following an effort will be made to highlight the reasons given by the opponents in favour of negative attitude towards doubt. Ultimately it will be shown that doubt is not a devil having a negative impact, but it is part and parcel in philosophical exercise and growth following the line of Udayana who emphatically declares- ‘*na hyevaṁ sati śaṁkāpiśācyavakāśamāsādayati.*’¹

II

The theory of skepticism in Indian Philosophy is called *saṁśayavāda*. Though doubt or *saṁśaya* has been accepted by most of the schools of Indian Philosophy, there are certain thinkers who are said to be absolute skeptics.

Among these thinkers Jayarāśi and Śrīharṣa are in the first water. Jayarāśi had challenged all the epistemological and metaphysical findings of Indian Philosophy and refuted all of them. To him no feature of certitude (*niścaya*) can be maintained with regard to the epistemological and metaphysical standpoints of the philosophers. He had given a hair-splitting analysis to refute the definitions of valid cognition (*pramā*) and means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*). He himself denied providing any valid definition and a theoretical account of the world in response to the views of the opponents. Jayarāśi had neither justified the faultlessness of any instrument of cognition nor put forward any thesis of his own. His main objective was to show the inconsistencies and lack of clarities in others’ position. He had introduced the concept of *satlakṣaṇa* (real defining characteristic) as the determinant of the faultlessness of the *pramāṇa*-s. The term *satlakṣaṇa* of *pramāṇa* means its capacity of being devoid of doubt and error (*saṁśaya- viparyaya-rāhitya*). To Jayarāśi the valid cognition has been defined by the cognitivists as ‘non-erroneous’ (*avyabhicārī*). But how is the non-erroneous character known? It may be said that a piece of cognition may be taken as non-erroneous if it is produced by a set of causal factors which are non-defective in nature.²

The Sanskrit rendering of the term ‘doubt’ is *saṁśaya*, which is enumerated as one of the forms of



apramā (improper cognition), the definition of which is given by Viśvanātha as cognition characterized by the contrary properties of positivity and negativity belonging to a single object (*Ekadharmika-viruddha-bhāva-abhāva-prakāraḥ jñānam saṁśayaḥ*).³ The knowledge of the common properties remaining in two objects becomes the cause of doubt. The height etc. being common between trunk of a tree and a man, give rise to a dubious cognition in the form: ‘whether this is a trunk of a tree or a man’ (*sthānurvā puruṣo vā*). The common cognition of both trunk of a tree and a man is the cause of doubt. In the like manner, after apprehending the property of soundness (*śabdatva*) in a sound which is different from eternity or non-eternity one can have doubt in the form- ‘whether sound is eternal or non-eternal’ (*śabdo nityo vā anityo vā*). Though a word being uttered can give rise to cognition touching two alternatives (*koṭidvaya*) yet doubt has to be taken as a mental phenomenon (*kintu tatra śabdena koṭi-dvayaṁ janyate, saṁśayaḥ mānasa eveti*). In the same manner, it can be said that on the event of the doubt of validity (*prāmānya-saṁśaya*) of cognition there arises the doubt of the object and the doubt of the pervaded (*vyāpya-saṁśaya*) generates the doubt of the pervader (*vyāpaka-saṁśaya*). Moreover, it has been admitted by the Naiyāyikas that the cognition of the possessor of the properties (*dharmi-jñāna*) and the contact of the sense-organ with the possessor of property (*dharmi-indriya-sannikarṣa*) are the causes of doubt. Though the word through which something is known dubiously yet words do not have the capacity of generating doubt. But though two alternatives come to our mind through the instrumentality of a word yet doubt is said to be a mental phenomenon.

Gotama has defined doubt as follows. Doubt is nothing but a conflicting judgment regarding the precise character of an object. It originates from the recognition of properties common to many objects or of properties uncommon to any of the objects, from the conflicting testimony, and from irregularity of perception and non-perception. From this definition it can be presumed that there are five kinds of doubt arising from different causes. First, it may arise from the recognition of common properties (*samāna-dharma-upapatti*). Seeing an object in dim light it is not possible for us to ascertain whether it is a man or trunk of a tree on account of the fact that the common properties like tallness etc. belong to both the objects. Secondly, the recognition of properties not common (*aneka-dharma-upapatti*) may sometimes be cause for doubt. As for example, after hearing a sound one cannot ascertain whether it is eternal or non-eternal, because the property of soundness neither belongs to man, beast etc. that are non-eternal nor in atoms etc. that are eternal. Thirdly, the conflicting testimony sometimes may give rise to doubt. With reference to some textual references it is very difficult to ascertain whether self exists or not. As we have ample references in favour of both the alternatives, it is not always possible to ascertain the status of it. Fourthly, an irregularity of perception becomes sometimes the cause of doubt. As for example, we may have some perceptual awareness about water, but it is difficult to ascertain whether we are seeing real water or water in the mirage. A question always remains in one’s mind whether water is perceived in a place where water really exists or even when it does not exist (*upalabdhi-avyavasthātaḥ*). Lastly, an irregularity of non-perception (*anupalabdhi-avyavasthātaḥ*) may become the cause of doubt in some cases. We do not find water, for example, where it really



exists and also in the dry land where it does not.⁴ The situation leads us to a stage of confusion. A question arises whether water is not perceived only when does not exist or also when it does exist.

III

Now we may concentrate to the arguments given by Nāgārjuna on denying doubt or *saṁśaya* as a category (*padārtha*) in his famous *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* which is available in the Tibetan version. In this small but philosophically significant text Nāgārjuna has refuted all the sixteen categories accepted by the Naiyāyikas with special reference to Vātsyāyana. An attempt has been made to highlight the arguments given by Nāgārjuna on refuting *saṁśaya*, which is very much significant in the philosophical analysis.

In the treatise *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa*⁵ Nāgārjuna is of the opinion that the Naiyāyikas have introduced a new category called *saṁśaya* or doubt in order to prove the existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. If someone thinks whether something is *pramāṇa* or *prameya*, a doubt arises regarding this. The phenomenon of doubt allows someone to infer the existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. By virtue of being a *padārtha* doubt cannot refer to an unreal object.

Nāgārjuna has encountered this position of the Naiyāyikas and refuted their position with some convincing arguments. Nāgārjuna has emphatically established the impossibility of the doubt as a category. Because doubt is not related to something which is perceived and to something which is not perceived. The importance of such statement is grounded on the fact that the perceived object is an existent object while the non-perceived object refers to a non-existent one.

Nāgārjuna, however, assumes a third alternative, which may be taken as an object of doubt. To him there may remain an object which seems to be perceived apart from the two alternatives—a pure perceptual and a pure imperceptual. Even this third alternative cannot justify doubt, because there does not remain an entity, which seems to be perceived. Hence three probable alternatives cannot justify doubt as an entity.⁶

If the above-mentioned logical stand of Nāgārjuna is analyzed, the following clarifications can be offered. When an object is seen, a mere mental representation of that particular object is manifested. If an entity is known as, ‘as a man or a trunk of a tree’ (*sthāṇurvā puruṣo vā*), the corresponding image in the form of either man or a trunk of a tree is produced in the mind. If the object is a man and it is perceived as such, there is a valid cognition. On the otherhand, if the object is a trunk of a tree but it is perceived as a man or vice-versa, there is an illusory or invalid cognition, which is nothing but the lack of valid cognition. Perception, as Nāgārjuna suggests, provides us the data of the perceived object and hence our expression, which is dependent on these data, cannot provide us the cognition of the object as otherwise or the cognition, which can generate doubt. If a man is perceived, the mere representation



of a man bears no elements, which can generate doubt in the form; 'I am seeing a man or a trunk of a tree' or which can lead to think that what is known as a man is not an actual man. If, on the other hand, there is the mere absence of the perception of an object, it will lead to the cognition of its non-existence, but it does not bear any element, which can provoke doubt.

Apart from the above-mentioned two alternatives there maybe a third one. An object may be related to something that seems to be perceived. When a rope is perceived as a serpent, a rope is related to serpent, which seems to be perceived, accepted by the Naiyāyikas. In such cases, Nāgārjuna argues, there is only the false representation of a serpent in the place of rope- this false representation of a serpent is nothing but the lack of representation of rope generated through the mere absence of its perception. Hence there are no elements that can give rise to doubt.⁷

The Naiyāyikas may come up with the following justifications. To them doubt does not arise at all if there were no reference (*Itos pa, apekṣā*) to particular attributes or peculiarities (*khyad par, viśeṣa*). First, the Naiyāyikas give a description of an instance of doubt. After seeing an object from a distance there arises an uncertain cognition or a wavering judgement (*vimarśa*), which provides an uncertain cognition in the form: 'It is a man or a trunk of a tree'. In this case some common features between man and a trunk of a tree are perceived. It is justified by the definition- '*tad anavadhāraṇam jñānam samśayaḥ*'. Secondly, Vātsyāyana explains how the doubt is resolved. To him when the specific characters or differentiating features of a man or a trunk of a tree is known, the doubt ceases due to having certainty in the mind in the form- 'It is a man or a trunk of a tree'. Lastly, Vātsyāyana has added a novel feature of doubt. For, the perceived object can be or cannot be a man or a trunk of a tree, as the qualities common to the both are seen. This uncertainty of mind can generate a tendency to search (*Itos pa, apekṣā*) for the specific qualities, which can distinguish an object from the other (*khyad pa, viśeṣa*). As soon as these are available, doubt is resolved. As these differentiating factors or 'some features different from that' (*de las gzan du na*) are searched for, it leads to the presupposition that doubt persists in our minds. The 'looking for' or 'the search of' (*Itos pa, apekṣā*) or 'desire to know' (*bubhutsā*) the specific feature of the thing is the new element in Vātsyāyana's definition of doubt (*viśeṣāpekṣaḥ vimarśaḥ samśayaḥ*). Over all we get three stages: a) perception in a correct cognition or erroneous cognition. b) The perception of special features, which generate the correct cognition and rectify the wrong one. c) There is a third moment when a knower's mind wavers due to the non-ascertainment of the thing perceived, which leads to looking for the specific character. The last one generates doubt in one's mind.⁸

Nāgārjuna in his *sūtra* xxiii has refuted the above- mentioned view and proved that doubt does not exist at all. As the doubt is nothing but a fiction to him, there is no room for the relation between doubt and peculiarities. In the stock example- whether it is a man or a trunk of a tree, if the characteristic features distinguishing them are perceived, there is no doubt at this moment, as it gives rise to certain cognition presenting things as such (*yan dag pa jilta ba bzin du, yathābhūta*), i.e., a man as a man or a



trunk of a tree as a trunk of a tree. On the other hand, if the characteristics perceived are not adequate to give a correct cognition, there is no doubt due to having ‘a lack of cognition’ (*mi ses pa, ajñāna*). In other words, if the peculiarities of ascertaining an object exist, there is knowledge. If these do not exist, or not perceived, there is the lack of knowledge. The third alternative, which asserts the existence and non-existence of peculiarities at the same time, is denied by Nāgārjuna. Hence doubt does not at all exist.⁹

IV

When Nāgārjuna considers the third alternative, i.e., rope is considered as serpent due to the lack of presentation of rope (*ajñāna*), it reminds me the Mīmāṃsā theory of error technically called *akhyātivāda*. It explains error (e.g., snake in the place of rope) as the absence of the knowledge of discrimination between snake and rope (*yatra yadadhyāsastadvivekāgrahanibandhano bhramaḥ*).¹⁰ Nāgārjuna takes the same position when he says that the understanding of snake as rope is due to the absence of the cognition of rope.

The Naiyāyika could say that doubt arises when there is a cognition touching both the alternatives (*ubhayakoṭīkajñāna*). When an object is known as either as a man or a trunk of a tree, it is true that there is some lack of cognition. It can be interpreted that when there is cognition of a man, it is due to the lack of cognition of a trunk of a tree. When there arises the cognition of a trunk of a tree, it is due to the lack of the cognition of a man. Whatever may be the case we must admit that there is certainly a cognition sometimes taking man as its content and sometimes taking a trunk of a tree as its content. An individual’s mind waves between two cognitions successively, but not simultaneously. That is why; such wavering cognition arises from the mental state metaphorized as the movement of the cradle (*dolācalacittavṛtti*). The cognition of a man may be caused by the absence of the cognition of a trunk of a tree or otherwise, but the existence of the cognition of a man for one moment and the cognition of a trunk of a tree for the next moment must be accepted. In this case the existence and non-existence of the peculiarities in a man is known in the successive moment, but not simultaneously as accepted by Nāgārjuna. Herein lies the difference between two schools- Bauddha and Nyāya.

When the determinants are not available in determining the nature of an object, doubt arises there. The absence of determining proof of an entity, which is the object of knowledge, is the cause of doubt. Doubt plays a positive role in generating critical thinking of mankind after removing blind faith from them. In other words, doubt is the revealer of the windows of our critical and open-minded thinking. Considering this aspect Gautama has enumerated it as one of the sixteen categories, the right cognitions of which lead us to the land of success-- mundane and transcendental (*niḥśreyasādhigamaḥ*). To Vātsyāyana doubt has been given a due emphasis in Nyāya on account of the fact that logic can alone be applied to the object in doubt, but not to an object which is purely known or unknown (‘*Tatra nānupalabdhe na nirñīte’rthe nyāyaḥ pravarttate. Kim tarhi? saṁśayite’rthe*’ -Nyāyabhāṣya on sūtra



no.1.1.1.). From this statement it is proved that Nāgārjuna's thesis that something is either known or unknown is wrong. If it is known, he says, it is a kind of valid cognition. If it is unknown, it is to be taken as illusion. Vātsyāyana is of the opinion that this is the ideal case where we can have doubt. To him doubt is a kind of intellectual activity arising out of the confrontation by two different philosophical positions called *pakṣa* (thesis) and *pratipakṣa* (antithesis) at the same time.¹¹ To think an entity as both known and unknown does not lead us to admit its fictitious character, but it is a kind of doubt. This view of the Naiyāyikas will find support in Vācaspati Miśra's *Bhāmatī*, where he accepts the dubious character of an object as a criterion of an enquiry about it.¹²

We may recall Udayana in this connection. To him if there is mistrust among the family-members, social-beings etc, our empirical doubt will not be possible. If, on the other hand, there is no doubt, there does not arise any philosophical enquiry (*Śamkā cedanumāstyeva na cecchāṅkā tatastarām/vyāghātādvadhīrāśāṅkā tarkaḥ śamkādvadhirmataḥ.*)¹³ If there is doubt, there is inferential cognition or an inferential procedure is to be resorted to, with a view to resolving doubt. If not, inference is established easily. Such doubt is permissible so long there does not arise self-contradiction (*vyāghāta*). Sometimes the method of *Tarka* (*reductio-ad-absurdum*) is taken into account. From this it is proved that doubt has got a positive role in philosophical methodology if it is taken as a category.

The Buddhists in general and Nāgārjuna in particular cannot accept the perceptibility and imperceptibility simultaneously due to various presuppositions in their minds. To them a perceptual entity remains only for a moment, as per the theory of momentariness, and hence it is of *svalakṣaṇa* nature. An imperceptible entity does not come under the purview of it due to its vitiation by the mental constructions (*kalpanā*) and hence it bears a character of *sāmānyalakṣaṇa*. On account of such ontological commitments, the Buddhist cannot feel the existence of the contradictory properties in an entity. For this reason Nāgārjuna does not accept the existence and non-existence of the peculiarities of an object at the same time, leading him to the non-acceptance of doubt as an existent object.

Thus Nāgārjuna cannot accept the dubious character of an object which is *svalakṣaṇa* (unique particular) in nature.

V

In the same way it has already been shown that doubt (*saṁśaya*) is not to be taken as a witch (*'na hyevam sati śamkāpiśācyavakāśamāsādayati'*) destroying all positive actions. It may play a positive role, particularly in philosophical analysis. Philosophy cannot go further, had there been no confusion or doubt regarding some concepts. The arousal of confusion leads to the composition of so many commentaries like *Ṭīkā*, *Bhāṣya*, *Vārtika* etc. That is why; in philosophy no conclusion is to be taken as final but ad hoc. One can easily doubt or challenge the thesis propounded by an individual or a section of philosophers and can refute or substantiate the earlier thesis. In this way, philosophy grows



through *Pūrvapakṣa* and *Uttarapakṣa* debate. Doubt is the seed through which the philosophical plant grows and hence doubt is the mother of invention.

Apart from the above-mentioned arguments, we can supply some more from common sense point of view. Any discovery, scientific or philosophical, presupposes doubt about something. Newton had discovered the law of gravitation as he had some doubt regarding the falling of an apple downwards. His doubt was why it cannot go up. Before this apple had fallen down many times, but no question was raised about it due to the absence of doubt. That is why; doubt is taken as the key of discovery or invention. Doubt prompts an individual to question regarding something. If there is questioning, it is to be presupposed that there prevails a kind of doubt. Our Upaniṣads start with a question from an innocent disciple. The Kenopaniṣad has started with a question which runs as follows: '*kenēṣitām patati preṣitam manah, kena prāṇaḥ prathama praiti yuktaḥ/ kenēṣitām vācamimām vadanti cakṣuḥ śrotram ka u devo yunakti//*'.¹⁴ That is, by whose desire does our mind direct towards an object? By whom our vital organ has received first prominence? Whose desire does make, our speaking organs function? And by whom our eye and hearing organs are engaged in revealing the objects. Again, in Kathopaniṣad Naciketā, a representative of the youth, asks the question of knowing self to the great teacher Yama, which is very much appreciated as '*varāṇameṣo varastrītyaḥ*' (i.e., among the three boons third was the most desired one as it involves doubt regarding self). Following the same line Maitreyī in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad asks question to Yājñavalkya- '*yenāham nāmṛtām syām tenāham kiṁ kuryāma*' (What can be done with that which cannot provide me Immortality?). Even Narendranath who was known as Swami Vivekananda afterwards went to Ramakrishna with a question- 'Have you seen God?' All these questions are prompted by some doubt regarding a particular object. Keeping this in view *Śrīmadbhagavad-gītā* has taken *paripraśna* or repeatedly questioning as a method of learning (*praṇipātena paripraśnena sevayā*). In fact there are three methods of learning- repeatedly questioning (*paripraśna*), deep regards towards teachers (*praṇipāta*) and service to the teachers (*sevā*). All these activities are backed by certain doubt to know the truth. In ancient time when a student used to feel tension being disturbed by some doubt regarding some incident, he tried to dispel his doubt through questioning about this again and again to the senior persons. Sometimes the teacher is given service to get some enlightenment from him, which is also prompted by doubt in mind on certain subject. It is already known to us that a student having profound regards to his preceptor can attain knowledge alone (*śraddhāvān labhate jñānam*). One who has regards can attain education from the preceptor and in this way doubt in the form of darkness is dispelled. If we seriously think about it, the proper education is meant for removing doubt from the mind.

Those who are engaged in laboratory for scientific discovery try to dispel some sort of doubt there. Had there been no doubt, no discovery is possible. That is why; we get so many scientific discoveries. There are two types of doubt- positive and negative. The positive doubts are called non-pathological doubts which are otherwise called epistemological or metaphysical doubts. These doubts are virtuous



in nature as they lead us to phenomenon of philosophical analysis. At the same time there is another type of doubt called pathological doubts which have no importance in our philosophical enterprise. It has been said in the Bhagavad-gītā –‘*saṁśayātmā vinaśyati*’. Those who are possessing doubt are ruined. For smooth running of our empirical and spiritual life we must have a sense of reliance towards our Vedic and secular codes that are called *vidhi*-s. If we do not have reliability towards our laws formulated by the state machinery, our society would be turned into an anarchic state, which is not desirable. That is why; we must maintain the laws and orders in the society. If we always nourish doubt, regarding the efficacy of such laws, we shall refrain from obeying it, which ultimately leads to the world of chaos technically called *mātsyanyāya*. Just as big fishes can swallow the smaller ones due to having greater physical power, the powerful persons would have killed the weaker section (*śūle matsyānivāpakṣyan durbalān balavattarāḥ*). If we want to live in a society, we have to maintain civic laws without any doubt on them. We always depend on our near and dear relatives and hence some sort of reliability lies on them. Had there been doubt, our life would not have been smooth and steady. In habitual cases (*abhyāsadaśāyām*) we cannot doubt about the efficacy of an object as told earlier. Depending on our past experience we take food when hungry, drink water when thirsty, when sick, take medicines, when tired take rest. These are habitual behaviors grown after repeated experience. If somebody expresses doubt even in these cases, this leads to contradiction (*vyāghāta*). A question may be asked to a person entertaining doubt- if doubt pertains whether water will quench thirst or not then why does he ask for water? Even after this if he carries on doubts about the efficacy of water, food, medicine etc., then this doubt is to be taken as pathological one having no importance in philosophical activities. This type of doubt is taken as *bhayāvaha* or frightening. For the phenomenon of doubting may be treated as psychological disorder. Such pathological doubt leads one to the state of disbalance described as a ruin or *vināśa*.

The *Sāṁkhya-kārikā* begins with enquiry being moved by the suffering of three types (*duḥkhatrayābhighātād bhavati jijñāsā*).¹⁵ When an individual suffers from sorrow, he will have doubt whether such suffering can be removed or not. This doubt gives rise to the innovation of a path for it. In *Tattvakaumudī* it has been explained that a sufferer has got doubt about its removal, because such suffering cannot be dispelled through an ordinary means (*laukika upāya*). The suffering related to body (*ādhyātmika duḥkha*) and suffering caused by external factors like animal etc. (*ādhibhautika duḥkha*) can somehow be managed if an individual takes prior precaution. But doubt regarding its removal is more prominent when we see our helplessness in case of suffering arising out of Divine will (*ādhidaivika duḥkha*). The calamities caused by earth-quake, draught, flood etc. are not under the control of human being and hence it is under Divine will. So prior precaution cannot help us to remove such suffering. Doubt becomes stronger in such cases regarding the impossibility of its removal. To the Sāṁkhya system, the absolute cessation of suffering is not possible even through the super-normal means (*alaukika upāya*). Doubt is clear when Īśvarakṛṣṇa has prescribed a path, for the knowledge of



discrimination between Purusa and Prakṛti. Most of the systems of Indian Philosophy are found to be worried about suffering and its removal. Hence Indian systems are not free from doubt, giving rise to philosophical exercise.

Again, a question may be raised that sometimes over reliance on some authority; person or institution makes no room for doubt which sometimes leads to a chaotic situation. Just like over-confidence over-reliance is harmful and hence the doubt on some principles of the authority or person or institution makes them self-critical and self-assessing. Doubt remaining in the opponents or critical points helps them to rectify themselves. This is true in case of philosophical or any type of writing. Had there been doubt giving rise to critical analysis, the writer would have been cautious in self-assessment leading to their self-rectification. All these cases are the results of positive or constructive or virtuous or non-pathological doubt and hence its methodological value can never be ignored.

Notes and References :

1. *Nyāyakusumāñjali*, prose portion, under verse no.3/6, edited by Sri Padmaprasad Upadhyaya & Sri Dhundiraj Sastri, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1957, p.341.
2. Jayarasi Bhatta: *Tattvopaplavasīmha* (The Lion of Upsetting all Principles), edited by Sukhlalji Sanghavi etc., Gaikward Oriental Series-87, Baroda, 1940, pp.1, 2 & 68.
3. *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* on *Bhāṣāparichheda*, Verse no. 129, Trs. By Panchanan Bhattacharyya, Kolkata, 1374 (BS).
4. *Nyāyasūtra*-01.01.23 with *Vātsyāyanabhāṣya*
5. Nāgārjuna's *Vaidalyaprakaraṇa* (Tibetan with English trs), Edited by Fernando Tola & Carmen Dragonetti, Motilal, 1995. Henceforth *Vaidalyaprakarana*