



CRITIQUE OF PRAMĀṆA AND SAMŚAYA (DOUBT) IN VAIDALYASŪTRA OF NĀGĀRJUNA

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Abstract:

My contention here is mainly text-based exposition of Nāgārjuna's arguments against Gautama's *Nyāyasūtra* in the context of *pramāṇa* and *saṃśaya* (doubt). Apart from occasional reply from the Nyāya position no elaborate discussion is included in this presentation. Before entering into the textual details let us put the gist of the arguments of Nāgārjuna. He raises the objection that as claimed by the Nyāya philosopher, there is no necessary tie that exists between the truth of any cognitive position and how do we arrive at it. There lies an epistemic gap between our available causal evidence and asserted content. Nāgārjuna is critical about any kind of cognitive claim for certitude. He also questions the veracity of the law of excluded middle. He tries to show the patent incompleteness and inconsistency in the very assumption of the Nyāya philosopher. If *pramāṇa*-s are admitted as self-established and *prameya*-s are by *pramāṇa*-s, then this argument is nothing but an exercise of dogmatism (*dṛṣṭivāda*). It will be a case of assumption of putting it in privileged and sacrosanct class without sufficient logical ground. If *pramāṇas* are not *prameya*-dependent, then let *prameya* be not dependent on *pramāṇas*. If *pramāṇas* do not require *prameya*, then *pramāṇas* are *pramāṇas* of what? Let both be admitted as inter-dependent on this ground. Again, in case of arguing for the validity of *pramāṇas* on the basis of something external to *pramāṇa* itself, this will lead to the blemish of infinite regress. So in either way *pramāṇa* cannot be claimed as established. If *pramāṇas* themselves as causal instruments (*karaṇas*) are not established, there is no possibility of establishing *prameya* and *pramāṇa*. The claim to the possibility of non-erroneous and certain presentational cognition thus remains unestablished. Therefore, the very possibility of non-erroneous and certain cognition is doubtful. There cannot be any such thesis. Because, no knowledge-claim can be accepted as absolutely indubitable or certain. Our judgments are never free from obscurity and uncertainty. Had it been so, the question like 'Is the judgment true?' could not be raised. This indicates that there always remains an epistemic gap between our available evidence and asserted content. Then no certainty position is followed from the 'No Criterion Argument' (refutation of *Pramāṇa*). For Nāgārjuna, in this strict sense 'certainty' here means 'absolute certainty' and this is next to impossibility. He questions the Nyāya Cognitivist's assumption that the *Law of Excluded Middle* cannot be doubted. The claimer of the possibility of knowledge relies on the assumption that the judgment about the world of fact (either *bhāva* or *abhāva*) is either true or false. You are to accept either 'p or not-p'; there is no other alternative. But Nāgārjuna finds no sufficient rational ground to accept either of the two. To him, to any pro-argument for a thesis there is



an equally strong counter-argument, and therefore, honestly speaking, he cannot have any position to put forward or a thesis of his own. “The great individuals hold no thesis and are without disputes. How can there be a counter- thesis for those who do not have a thesis? When one assumes any position /thesis, one is destroyed by the deceitful poisonous snakes of the afflictions. Those individuals whose minds lack any position / thesis will not be destroyed”¹ The shunning of all standpoints (*sarvadṛṣṭiprahāṇa*) is the main content of *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā*. It is a kind of philosophy with 'no-position, no thesis'. It ends with contextual refutation of all views and with no further assertion. With these pre- requisites let us discuss the textual position of *Vaidalyasūtra* of Nāgārjuna in the context of *pramāṇa* and *pramā*.

Refutation of Pramāṇa:

In the *Treatise of Tearing (Vaidalyasūtra)* Nāgārjuna refutes the claims made by *pramāṇavādi* philosophers. In the *Aphorism of Logic (Nyāyasūtra)*, Gautama, the founder of the Nyāya school of philosophy has asserted the existence of sixteen objects of knowledge or in short, knowable beginning with the causal instrument of knowing (*pramāṇa*). The realists in general, and the Nyāya philosophers in particular admit the independent existence of knowable and causal instrument of knowing, and on the basis of this admittance, they developed their knowledge- claims. It is quite natural that Nāgārjuna who is engaged to question any kind of absolute claim about knowledge and to refute all kinds of exclusivism about what is real would advance intensive criticism against the Nyāya realism and as a matter of fact, Nāgārjuna has applied dialectics to tear, to refute the Nyāya assumption of the sixteen independent categories to pieces. So *Vaidalyasūtra* or ‘the *Aphorism of Tearing*’ or ‘*Treatise of Tearing*’ aims at demolishing or refuting the Nyāya philosophy of Gautama primarily and secondarily the other allied matters admitted also by other realist philosophers of philosophical debate-tradition.² He devoted nineteen verses numbering from 2 to 19 of *Vaidalyasūtra*² and twenty verses numbering from 31 to 51 of *Vigrahavyāvartanī*³ in order to refute the Nyāya claim for independent existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. If this claim of the Nyāya Cognitivist is refuted, then logically there cannot be any claim in favor of the possibility of valid cognition (*pramā*) which is necessarily characterized by ‘non-promiscuity’ and ‘certitude’.

Though Nāgārjuna has not mentioned the name of Akṣapāda Gautama in this *Treatise of Tearing/Refutation*, yet from the close reading of the text it is evident that it is Gautama’s sixteen categories or the objects of knowledge which have been subjected to tearing into pieces one by one. Gautama in the very first aphorism of his *Treatise on Logic (Nyāyasūtra)* states that the right cognition of the sixteen knowables will lead to emancipation (*niśreyasaḥ*). The sixteen categories, according to Gautama, are 1) the causal instrument of knowing (*pramāṇa*), 2) the object of knowing (*prameya*), 3) doubt (*saṁśaya*), 4) the purpose of activity (*prayojana*), 5) the corroborative example (*dṛṣṭānta*), 6) the proved thesis (*siddhānta*), 7) the inference component (*avayava*), 8) the hypothetical argument (*tarka*),



9) the final ascertainment (*nirṇaya*), 10) debate for the final ascertainment (*vāda*), 11) the debating maneuver (*jalpa*), 12) the commitmentless denial (*vitaṇḍā*), 13) the *pseudo-probans* (*hetvābhāsa*), 14) the purposive distortion of the counter-thesis (*chala*), 15) the futile rejoinder based on mere similarity or dissimilarity (*jāti*) and 16) the point of defeat (*nigraha-sthāna*). The right cognition of the afore-said categories of knowing leads, according to Gautama to the attainment of the highest good (*niśreyasaḥ*). All these sixteen categories of knowing have been refuted by Nāgārjuna one by one.

In the 1st *aphorism* Nāgārjuna uses the word ‘*yaḥ*’ (who) to indicate the author of *Nyāyasūtra* and his followers. This is in our opinion the philosophers who admit the objective reality of the aforesaid categories as independently existing and who on the logical strength of their admission express pride and arrogance in philosophical circle are Nyāya philosophers. Nāgārjuna thus starts his refutation right from the causal instrument of knowing (*pramāṇa*) and stops with the refutation of the point of defeat (*nigrahassthāna*). An important question may arise here: why is Nāgārjuna silent about ‘the right cognition of real that leads to emancipation (*tattva-jñānānṇiḥśreyasaḥ*)’, an important component of the first *aphorism* of Gautama’s ‘*Nyāya-sūtra*’? It is our considered opinion that it is the liberty of the author of any philosophical treatise to put something where it suits the most in his opinion. And as a matter of fact, Nāgārjuna has not left it untouched in his refutation. In the sixty sixth

aphorism of ‘*Vaidalyasūtra*’ Nāgārjuna clearly states, ‘*samastottaresvayaṁ prasaṅgahsyāt*’ – that is to say, Nāgārjuna intends to tell us here that one who understands his refutation from ‘*pramāṇa* to *nigrahassthāna*’ understands that in other remaining matters, the refutation would follow automatically from the aforesaid refutations done by him.⁴ In other words, when all sixteen categories of the Nyāya are refuted how can there be any knowledge of what is real? And in such a situation ‘the possibility of the question of emancipation through the knowledge of what is real’ stands irrelevant. It is to be noted here that after refuting the Nyāya claim with regard to *pramāṇa* and *prameya*, Nāgārjuna has used the Sanskrit word ‘*niṣedha*’ right from the refutation of doubt to the refutation of the point of defeat. The word *niṣedha* is ordinarily translated into English as ‘negation’. But the word ‘negation’ is used as ‘propositional negation’ (*paryudāsa pratiṣedhaḥ*) as well as ‘simple negation’ (*prasajya pratiṣedhaḥ*).⁵ In the first type of negation, if we negate ‘P’ as false, we are compelled to admit ‘Not-P’ as true. But in ‘pure negation’ we negate something without any commitment, that is to say, without any possibility of admitting ‘the counter-thesis’. Here Nāgārjuna’s use of the Sanskrit word ‘*niṣedha*’ is to be understood in the second sense of negation, that is to say, as ‘refutation -- pure and simple’.

But the Nyāya philosopher might argue here that Nāgārjuna’s “No thesis is a thesis”. The very denial of the veracity of all *pramāṇa* is self-referring, because otherwise it cannot make any ‘sense’. But from Nāgārjuna’s side it could be said that the Nyāya charge is based on the dogmatic assumption that “nothing is equal to something”. If I am asked whether there is ‘anybody’ in my room of the Guest



House of the University of Rajasthan now and if I reply, “there is nobody” do I mean ‘somebody’ by the word ‘nobody’? The answer is in the negative. When Nāgārjuna rejects all *pramāṇas* his rejection is to be understood as ‘meta-level’ statement, a second order activity where to deny ‘p’ does not necessarily imply the admission of ‘not- p’. Let me take two statements: “‘Dog’ has four legs” and “‘Dog’ has three letters”. In the first one I am speaking about the animal called ‘DOG’ and in the second I am speaking about the grammatical word “DOG” and by no means the two can be called the same sort of entity. Here Nāgārjuna would suggest the Nyāya Philosopher to take little effort to understand the distinction between ‘object-level’ and ‘meta-level’ statements.⁶ There is no room for ‘inconsistency phobia or self contradiction’. His statements are to be understood as ‘negations of their opposites’.⁷ He only questions the exclusive categorization of our possible worlds as ‘either ‘p’ or ‘not-p’’. If something is not possible how can it be necessary? If something is not necessary, then its denial does not lead to contradiction. In the denial of four possible ways of know-ability ‘p’ is ‘true for’ a specific set of individuals and ‘not-p’ stands for a separate set of individuals. The world of know-ability is a fluid one with all its fuzzy and definitely categorically indefinable character. We see only relative, context-bound, interdependent existence. Let us be non-assertive about categorical / independent existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. It would allow us to be open-ended and be non-egoist, and always ready to learn. Let us now see how Nāgārjuna carries further his refutation in *Vaidalya-sūtra* from the 2nd aphorism to aphorism 19th.

In the 2nd *aphorism* Nāgārjuna begins his refutation with the criticism of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* as independently real. According to Nāgārjuna, this claim of the Nyāya philosopher is unjustified. The so-called differentiating marks between the two are confusing. Neither the first nor the second can be established as existing something independent of others. The so-called causal instrument of knowing is worthy of name *pramāṇa* only when there exists a knowable, *prameya*. This means that without the knowable, the *pramāṇa* stands as the causal instrument of nothing. Again, a knowable (*prameya*) as the object of knowing is worthy of name only when there exists an instrument of knowing which causally justifies it. A *pramāṇa* is the causal proof for a knowable being existing. This shows that one is claimed to be established as existing *depending on the other* and *vice versa*. The rigid distinction between the two, Nāgārjuna argues, does not seem to hold good and as such the defining features of the two would become inter-changeable and they stand worthy of their names only on the basis of the mutual relation of dependence. In other words, the defining features of the one becomes applicable to the other and *vice versa* and this amounts to say that any one of them would function both as the causal instrument of knowing and as the knowable which may create a very confusing situation. This shows that neither of them as existing is established in the sense in which the Nyāya philosopher holds.

In the 3rd *aphorism* Nāgārjuna develops a fresh argument against the claim of independent existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. What is dependently existent is devoid of its own nature and what is devoid of any nature of its own cannot be established as an independent category. In other words, there is no



substantiality, no essence. It is a mistake, according to Nāgārjuna, to classify in absolute sense the furniture of the world into sixteen independent categories. The arising of a pot cannot be explained had it been existing independent of others. In such a case, it could not have been arisen depending on clay, instrument say a stick, the usually known causal conditions for arising of the pot. On the other hand, if something is independent, and by its own nature is non-existent like sky-flower or rabbit's horn, that is called fictitious. Nothing can be classified as both existing and non-existing in this sense. Neither *pramāṇa* nor *prameya* can be classified either as existent or non-existent or both because of their own dependent nature.

The *pramāṇa*-theorists like Nyāya philosophers may object here that the *pramāṇa* is required to establish the *prameya*, the knowable. The *pramāṇa* is like a *weighing instrument* and just as the *weighing instrument* measures other objects, *pramāṇa* establishes *prameya*. In response to such an explanation in favour of the independent existence of *pramāṇa* Nāgārjuna advances subtler implication of this and derives absurdity from it. He argues that if we admit that *pramāṇa* is required as the causal instrument in order to establish the knowable, *prameya* but *pramāṇa* itself belongs to a 'self-establishing, privileged and sacrosanct' class then the *pramāṇa*-theorist would be introducing arbitrariness and dogmatism (*drṣṭivāda*). And without sufficient logical ground the admission of the distinction between *pramāṇa* and *prameya* is as good as admitting inconsistency and discord. Again, another implication of admitting *pramāṇa* as self-established may amount to say that *pramāṇa* is established independent of *prameya*. In fact, in such a situation it would cease to be a *pramāṇa*, because it would be the *pramāṇa* of nothing. If one is established, however, through the other and *vice versa*, then none of them would have an independent nature. It would further be a case of proving what is already proved (*siddhasādhana*), because of the assumption that *prameya* is already established. In that case the necessity of *pramāṇa* itself for establishing *prameya* becomes superfluous. And when the independent nature of both *pramāṇa* and *prameya* remains un-established, the so-called 'knowledge claim' by the Nyāya cognitivism becomes unwarranted.

The 4th *aphorism* also contains the examination of the Nyāya cognitivist's arguments in favour of the existence of *pramāṇa* as an independent category. The *pramāṇa*-theorist there introduces the analogy of weighing scale. But Nāgārjuna refutes the justifiability of the analogy of the weighing scale or a lamp-light. What itself is not established cannot be the causal instrument for establishing others. If in order to avoid the arising of the aforesaid question it is said that a *pramāṇa* is established by another *pramāṇa*, then the so-called first instance of *pramāṇa* would turn out to be a *prameya*. In that case how can we distinguish between a *pramāṇa* and a *prameya*?

But the *pramāṇa*-theorist may, however, argue here that a *pramāṇa* is just like a lamplight which illuminates others as well as itself and when a *pramāṇa* is established through other *pramāṇa*, that other one is also a *pramāṇa*. But Nāgārjuna at this juncture brings the charge of infinite regress against the



pramāṇa-theorist. If in order to avoid the charges of non-accordance and of dogmatism, the *pramāṇa*-theorist adopts that a *pramāṇa* is established by another *pramāṇa* of the same type or of different type, this would instead of providing any justification for establishing *pramāṇa* as existing simply invite infinite regress. To cite an example of the first alternative, we may say that a perception, say P^1 is established through another perception, say P^2 , and P^2 by P^3 and so on, and for the second alternative, a perception, say P is established through an inference say F , and so on. But in either case, the blemish of infinite regress would be inevitable. The net outcome, according to Nāgārjuna, is that the existence of *pramāṇa* is not established.

The fifth and the sixth *aphorisms* contain a possible counter-argument by the cognitivist Nyāya philosopher and the refutation of that counter-argument by Nāgārjuna. We see in the *Nyāyasūtra* 2.2.19 that there is comparison of *pramāṇa* to a lamp-light (*pradīpa*). Light is the revealer of objects. But we do not require any other thing for revealing the existence of light itself. *Pramāṇa*, according to Gautama, functions in this manner in order to establish the existence of *prameya*. But Nāgārjuna, however, shows the unfitness of the afore-said analogy in the 6th *aphorism*. Darkness is opposite / contrary to light and there is no generally admitted connecting tie between the two. As there is no established connecting tie between the two, the light cannot be said to reveal objects being in connection with darkness. Now if light is in no way in connection with darkness, how can it destroy darkness? In a similar way it is absurd to say that *prameya* is established by *pramāṇa*. To strengthen his refutation, Nāgārjuna in the 7th *aphorism* introduces a possible analogy in favour of the opponent and refutes it subsequently. The opponent may argue that though light is not outwardly in connection with darkness, yet it can illuminate the object destroying darkness as it is seen in case of the hurtful influences of planets upon human beings despite there is no contact between the two. Similarly light can destroy darkness, though there is no direct contact between light and darkness. This shows that for influencing the cessation of darkness by light no direct contact is necessary between the two.

But Nāgārjuna refutes this possibility and considers the new analogy given by the opponent not only unfit but also contradictory to the example. In the given analogy, planets and individual human beings who are said to be affected by the inferences of the planets, both have bodies. But it is not fit for the case of light. In case of an individual, say Devadatta or Brahmadatta, it has a body to be affected by the evil influences of the planets. But this is not the case with darkness. Now if it is argued that even in the absence of any contact light destroys darkness, then it must also be admitted that a lamplight in a particular room is also able to destroy the darkness that prevails in the interior of the caves of the mountain or a distant dark place is illuminated by the lamp-light of this room.

In the 9th *aphorism* Nāgārjuna continues his refutation of *pramāṇa*. He says that darkness is considered as the absence of light. And both the common people as well as the scholars admit that darkness being the absence of light does not have any independent nature, that is to say, it does not exist independently.



Now if lamplight is compared to *pramāṇa* and darkness to *prameya*, then in the absence of *prameya*, (i.e. darkness) the role of *pramāṇa* (i.e. light) becomes irrelevant. So light cannot be claimed to be established as the illuminator of darkness. And this proves that the example of light and darkness is not a suitable one. Moreover, this 9th *aphorism* elaborates another dimension of the same argument. It is logically arguable that light can illuminate itself if and only if there is darkness. But light and darkness are mutually exclusive and therefore are contradictory and on account of this the claim that the presence of darkness is to be eliminated by the presence of lamplight remains unestablished.

In the 10th *aphorism* Nāgārjuna has constructed a counter-argument, we would like to call it '*darkness-analogy*' in contrast to the Nyāya-cognitivist's argument what we have titled as '*light analogy*'. The Nyāya cognitivists argue that light illuminates other things as well as itself. Analogous to this, we may say, according to Nāgārjuna, that 'darkness conceals the existence of itself as well as of other things.' But as a matter of fact, though darkness conceals the presence of other things, it does not conceal the presence of itself. What is evident here is that the claim of the *pramāṇavādin's* is not justified.

Next Nāgārjuna tries to show that neither *pramāṇa* nor *prameya* can be established as existing in any of the three times. The 11th *aphorism* thus continues the refutation of *pramāṇa* in a broad sense introducing the temporal consideration of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*. Nāgārjuna argues that if *pramāṇa* is meant to establish *prameya* (as existing), then it must exist either '*before* or '*after*' *prameya* or it must be admitted that *pramāṇa* and *prameya* are simultaneous. According to Nāgārjuna, none of the afore-said alternatives are tenable. If *pramāṇa* is temporally '*before*' *prameya*, then it must be admitted that '*pramāṇa* exists when *prameya* does not exist. But in that case *pramāṇa* itself cannot be worthy of its name; because without *prameya*, it is *pramāṇa* of nothing. The cognitivists themselves defined *pramāṇa* as the causal instrument of knowing and *prameya* as the object of knowing. So in the absence of the knowable how can the causal instrument of knowing be worthy of its name? Again, if it is argued that *pramāṇa* exists after the knowable, *prameya*, then it must also be admitted that even in the absence of the causal instrument of knowing, the object of knowing, the knowable (*prameya*) is already established (as existing), and in that case, there would not be any necessity for the role of *pramāṇa*. We cannot logically any more say that *pramāṇa* is required to establish *prameya*. But it is absurd to admit something as the causal instrument which comes into being *after* the very object whose existence is already established. And something being a causal instrument of knowing must be temporally *prior* to the object of knowing. This shows that something existent and something non-existent may be seen at the same time. But our practical experiences show that even the simultaneous existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* cannot establish *pramāṇa* as the causal instrument of establishing *prameya* just as the fact of simultaneity in existence of two horns of a bull cannot prove that the left horn causes the right horn.



In the 12th *aphorism* Nāgārjuna apprehends another counter-argument from the *pramāṇa*-theorists like a Naiyāyika. The objection is that if you deny the existence of *pramāṇa* in three times, the denial is not established as existing in any of the three times. If you deny everything, then you cannot deny the fact that ‘you are denying’. If you do not deny the fact that ‘you are denying’ then you are not denying everything. Only foolish or a mad person can deny all *pramāṇas*, all positions. Such a person can first burn his own finger in order to burn others’ finger later. It involves self-refutation.⁸

But Nāgārjuna in the 13th *aphorism* eliminates the possibility of the afore-said counter-argument as *non-sensical*. It is an admitted position to all that if something is negated earlier, then from that negation the existence of that thing cannot be followed. When something, say, *pramāṇa* is negated as existing, it is *non-sensical* to argue that here ‘negation’ itself is established as something existing. It is as good as saying ‘nobody’ is ‘somebody’. In such a situation, we are to accept the non-sensical derivation from “There is nobody” to “There is somebody who is called nobody”. Candrakīrti for a similar occasion states that suppose, A asks B for something and B replies “I have nothing to give.” Then A again says, “Give me *that nothing*.” (*yoḥ na kiñcidapi te panyam dāsyāmyuktaḥ, sa ced “dehi bhostadevamahyam na kiñcinnāmapanyam” iti bruyāt, sa keno’payena sakyah panyābhāvaṁ grahayitum*)⁹ Here A’s understanding of the meaning of the word ‘nothing’ as ‘something’ is ‘non-sensical’. Similarly, when the opponent’s cognitivist position is negated, that is to say, as the claim that “*pramāṇa* and *prameya* are existent and the former causally establishes the latter” is already negated, it must be admitted, that from the fact of *negation* of their existence, their existence cannot be claimed to be established.

In the 14th and 15th *aphorisms* Nāgārjuna simply continues the implication of his refutation of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* as existing. His main contention is that once the claim for the independent existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* has been shown unjustified, there remains no further scope or necessity for debate.¹⁰ However, Nāgārjuna sharpens his refutation of *pramāṇa-prameya* tradition by saying further that even if the *negatum* is non-existent, yet the *negation* is meaningful. How? He explains that in negation we deal with the *concept of negation* and with the *claim about something being negated*. Nāgārjuna’s aim in this ‘*Treatise of Refutation/Tearing*’ is to demolish the wrong philosophies and so he also refutes the idea of something non-established posing as existing something.

But the opponents (i.e. the *pramāṇavādins*), however, may loom a fresh argument in defense of their claim from the right act of knowing. They would begin with the first *pramāṇa*, say perception. The cognition which yields the correct object is called right (*yathārtha*) and only with correct cognition of object, we feel temptation of performing or non-performing certain acts. Nāgārjuna states this in the 16th *aphorism* and examines this claim in the 17th *aphorism*. His point is that even if for the sake of argument we admit the existence of *pramāṇa*, this by no means constitutes any guarantee for the existence of *prameya* as established. If something is a knowable for its being something perceived or



inferred, then there is no meaning in saying that it independently exists. Therefore, the independent existence of *prameya* is not established even if the existence of *pramāṇa* is admitted. And what is true about perception and inference with regard to their respective knowable is also true about other *pramāṇa-s* and their respective knowable.

If it is said by the opponent (i.e. the Nyāya cognitivist) that in the instance of a pot, the knowable is the pot and the idea of the pot is the causal instrument of knowing, Nāgārjuna keeps himself ready with a fresh refutation. ‘What is an idea about something?’ asks Nāgārjuna. The idea arises out of sense-object-contact in *knowledge-episode*. The pot constitutes a determining condition only with regard to the function of *pramāṇa*. But the idea cannot be the causal instrument of knowing. Again, the pot cannot fulfill the sufficient condition to be a knowable in the true sense, according to Nāgārjuna. The idea of the pot is temporarily *prior* to the cognition of the pot and therefore, it is non-existent during the time of cognition. In order to be a knowable, the pot must be independently existent at the time of cognizing. Since in the given instance, the pot does not fulfill this condition, it cannot be established as the right object of knowing. *Nyāyasūtra* (1.1.1) also characterizes *prameya* as “*ātma-śarīre-indriyārtha-buddhi-manah-pravṛtti-doṣa pretyabhāva-phala-dukhāpavargāstu-prameyam*” – this is to say, soul, bodies, senses, intellect, mindsuffering, liberation etc. are knowables. These are claimed to be established by the four different types of *pramāṇa*, according to Nyāya. Nāgārjuna, therefore, in the 19th aphorism continues his refutation of *pramāṇa* including its varieties.

Refutation of Doubt:

Nāgārjuna tries to strengthen his refutation of the *pramāṇa-prameya* trend of philosophical investigation by way of criticizing doubt as a pertinent knowable. All furniture of the world, as we have discussed earlier, are classified under several sets of knowable. In Nyāya system of philosophy knowledge is taken as something which always points beyond itself. A piece of cognition is valid if it can give us an indubitably true awareness of an object that exists independently. Nāgārjuna’s main concern in the refutation of Nyāya position here is *not to say* that what we know about the world is false; rather he maintains that the knowledge-claims made in the Nyāya philosophy of Gautama are not supported by adequate logical grounds. In Nyāya doubt (*saṃśaya*) is one of the indispensable categories of knowing, because it is the necessary pre-condition for any philosophical investigation. The *ipso-facto* doubt is to be dispelled by thorough investigation through *pramāṇa*. Unless there is initial doubt, the necessity of admitting the existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya* cannot be explained. Nāgārjuna, therefore, refutes the existence of doubt as a *prameya* as classified in Gautama’s *Nyāyasūtra*. In the 20th aphorism of *Vaidalyasūtra* Nāgārjuna apprehends the Nyāya position with a possible argument. This is that doubt cannot be arisen about an unreal object and therefore, it exists. Nāgārjuna examines three possibilities – the object of doubt may be something perceived or non-perceived or something seemingly perceived. In none of the cases, it is logically justified to admit the



existence of doubt as an independent category of knowable. The object of doubt is characterized by two mutually contrary attributes; here our mind vacillates between the two and unless this peculiar characteristic is attributed to the same object of knowledge, doubt would not be established as existing. But before elaborating Nāgārjuna's arguments against doubt as an existing knowable it is important to discuss, at least in short, the necessity of combating doubt according to Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna makes it clear in his *commentary* just before the 20th *aphorism* that the Nyāya *pramāṇavādin* might argue that the *pramāṇa-prameya* tradition is not refutable, because even the argument that 'what is called *pramāṇa* turns out to be a *prameya* and vice-versa' refers to the existence of doubt. And it enables the *pramāṇavādin-s* to admit *pramāṇa* and *prameya* as existing because they are the objects to which doubt refers. Doubt is accepted as an existing knowable in the Nyāya set of knowable and for this an unreal or a non-existing object cannot be referred by doubt. This is precisely the reason why Nāgārjuna takes so much care in refuting doubt as an independent category of knowable. In order to refute the *pramāṇavādin's* new argument in favour of the existence of *pramāṇa* and *prameya*, Nāgārjuna in the 20th *aphorism* contends that doubt is not possible about the perceived objects nor about the non-perceived objects nor even about the seemingly perceived objects. What is perceived is apprehended, cognized with certitude as existing. What is not-perceived is also apprehended, cognized with certitude as non-existing. So in these two cases, there is no possibility of doubt. Now remains the third possibility that is to say, the cases of seemingly perceived objects. When a piece of rope is seemed to appear as a snake, the object is cognized not with real defining characteristics but with the characteristics of something other than itself. So the cognition is surely a case of false cognition; there is no scope for uncertainty in that cognition. And since there is no scope of uncertainty, there is no possibility of doubt. The spirit of Nāgārjuna's refutation here seems to be as follows: Ascertainment of something by perception is a piece of confirmed cognition about that thing's existence. In fact, when we perceive something, we do have a mental picture of the object of the said perception. When we perceive something as a tree-trunk, we are sure about its existence. In case of true perceptual cognition there is always an element of certitude. The same is true about other alternatives. Even the case of false perception of a snake in a rope is not a case of doubt during the time of perception or after perception, because in that case there is the absence of representation of mental picture of a rope but there is no sufficient condition for producing doubt as we usually find in the example of the *mere non-perception*.

In Gautama's *Nyāyasūtra*, doubt is called a kind of wavering cognition (*vimarśa*) (*samāna-aneka-dharma-upapattēh vipratipattēh upalabdhi-anupalabdhi-avyavasthātāḥ ca viśeṣa-apekṣaḥ vimarśaḥ samśayaḥ* – 1.1.23). It is the contradictory 'apprehension about the same knowable which relies on the recollection of the specific distinguishing marks of each.' The five varieties of doubt are due to five different causal conditions. When we recollect the unique features of each objects and we are indecisive about the nature of the yonder object because of the apprehension of common features



we have the contradictory cognition of the same object. This is the first form of doubt. There we find common features, -- like the length and the breadth, between the man and the tree-trunk. From a distant place an yonder object may be perceived having the common features of the tree-trunk and the man. Next because of the nearness we can see the specific features of the moving of hand and feet etc. which distinguish it from a tree-trunk and we have the cognition of a man. Nāgārjuna's point is that there cannot be any relation between the state of doubt and the unique feature's awareness. The confusing features assigned to the same object is the distinguishing mark of doubt. According to Nāgārjuna, this is not possible. In the 22nd aphorism Nāgārjuna argues that the confusing features of the yonder object which is the distinguishing mark of doubt may either be known or unknown. If it is known, then there cannot be any scope for doubt. Even if it is not known, then also there is no possibility of doubt. When we know that there is tree-trunk or this is a man, in either case, there is no doubt. In either case it is the right cognition. If on the other hand the exact features of the object are unknown, it is then cognized (i.e. known) as unknown. There is also no scope for uncertainty. The cognition of distinguishing unique features of existence and non-existence cannot be possible in the same time. This leads Nāgārjuna to conclude that the existence of doubt cannot logically be established.

These objections of Nāgārjuna have immense value in the philosophical debate between the Nyāya of Gautama and the Madhyamaka critique of Gautama's categories of knowable. In the second chapter of the *Nyāyasūtra* while examining different objections against doubt Gautama in a very subtle way criticized the arguments of Nāgārjuna. Gautama in *Nyāyasūtra* 1-5 elaborates the objections against doubt and in 6-7 *sūtra-s* tries to defend the Nyāya position. The objections against Gautama's understanding of doubt as a separate category of existents have been elaborated by Vātsyāyana in his *commentary* and it is noticeable that the second and the fifth objections are directly the objections raised by Nāgārjuna in *Vaidalyasūtra* (i.e. 20-22 *sūtra-s*). Whether Gautama himself in the second part of *Nyāya-sūtra* (i.e. 2.1.1 – 2.1.7) could answer Nāgārjuna's charges or whether any later Nyāya philosopher is successful in meeting the charges raised by Nāgārjuna is a separate issue and this needs further research by the competent researchers who are well-versed in the development of both Nyāya and Madhyamakatradsitions.

Concluding Remarks:

From what has been explained above there seems to be *no commonly shareable ground* where both of them (Gautama and Nāgārjuna) can meet. Rather they seem to be walking on two parallel tracks without any meeting-point. Sometimes they use the same term in two different senses – 'relative' and 'absolute' - due to the difference in their meta-theoretic presuppositions. But this does not imply that the skeptical charges of Nāgārjuna leaves the arena of knowledge empty-handed. Nāgārjuna is right



in pointing out that the Nyāya cognitivist's conception of knowledge is *not well-defined* and that *the knowledge-claim and its causal ground is not sufficiently well-connected*. The risk of incoherence seems to be an in-eliminable fact of epistemic enterprise and a Nāgārjunian philosopher with skeptical orientation can avoid it by using different levels of language. Even when all object-level statements are asserted to be false it cannot affect the truth-status of the meta-level one. In meta-language the limits of our ordinary language can be conceived. This type of analysis seeks a much deeper root of our linguistic aberrations. All linguistic assertions are vitiated by some inner contradictions. The remedy, as would have been suggested by the non-cognitivists like Nāgārjuna, is the rejection of language as an adequate instrument for any veridical description of the real. It seems to be just on virtually the entire gamut of the subsidiary issues, related to the insufficiency of our knowledge. Nāgārjuna's statements are to be understood as *negations of their opposites*. The over- all ever dynamism in the context of knowledge will lead to an open question device applicable to all kinds of 'theory- making' regarding the infallibility of knowledge. The lacking in finalization and openness are the key notes of research for the philosophers with skeptical orientation. Such a philosopher understands the progress of science as a fundamentally historical project. The moot question here is not that a scientific theory is absolutely wrong and another theory is absolutely right. Scientific theories, as we know, are all the time 'better and better approximation and one is developed upon the realization of the limitation of the earlier one'. The Nāgārjunian skeptic's rejection of the Law of Excluded Middle seems to be consistent with the presupposition of many valued logic. It is a kind of logic that also works on modality. Our possible world does not have the exclusive categorization of "either 'p' or 'not-p'". And if something is not possible how can it be necessary? If $\neg Mp$ then $\neg Lp$. Therefore, the law of excluded Middle is not necessary. If something is not necessary, then its denial does not lead to contradiction. Like a Cognitive Skeptic Nāgārjuna's use of negation in Indian philosophy is *not propositional* but rather *pure or simple* which may be called '*verbally bound predicate negation*'. In actual state of affairs in the world there are ill-defined and vague areas where we are incapable of saying whether the concept or its negation is applicable to it. The Nāgārjunian skeptic points his finger to this important fact of our epistemic discourse. The Nyāya philosopher uses hypothetical reasoning (*tarka*) within the scope of only two alternative possibilities where one is the exhaustive denial of the other. But Nāgārjuna's rejection of each possible alternatives in a different context enables him to exercise the art of non-asserting and his use of dialectics is a case of negation of unrestricted principle of *Reduction ad Absurdum*, which is rather a case of *de-conditioning* instead of *deconstruction*. The Nyāya philosopher uses *paryudāsa pratiṣedha* whereas Nāgārjuna uses *prasajya pratiṣedha* and this roughly corresponds to Johnson's understanding of the difference between 's is not-p' and 's is non-p'.¹¹ Nāgārjuna negates different possibilities separately and in different senses. Like the cognitive skeptics in Western philosophy we cannot deny that Nāgārjuna 'has fought a stiff fight and has won many battles in its course'. Do the repeated cognitivist efforts ensure our claim to know in absolute term?¹² However, it is indeed admirable that many required clarification¹³, regarding our claim about



the nature of knowledge, can solely be gained “by analyzing how the key arguments deployed by the skeptic fail in the final analysis to establish his governing conclusion of the illegitimacy of claims to knowledge.”¹⁴ This presupposition is based on experience that we ‘cannot know’ more things than we ‘can know’. In other words, it is possible to say that whatever we can know is interdependent, relative and context-bound. There cannot be any absolute claim about the nature of the world. Context-free absolute claim is a non-sense. The world of our know-ability is a fluid one with all its fuzzy and definitely indefinable character. Our experiential data cautiously tell us that we cannot exhaustively demarcate in exclusive terms anything in the world as either real or unreal and therefore, cannot make any statement either as true or false in absolute or categorical term. All objects of the world have relative, context-bound, interdependent existence in our actual experience. *Nāsti ca mama pratijñā, - I have no thesis to advance.* Let us learn to be non-assertive and avoid dogmatism, be open-ended and always ready to learn, and be non-egoist.¹⁵

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Notes and References :

1. Nāgārjuna, *The Sixty Verses of Reasoning, (Yuktiṣaṣṭikākārikā)* of Nāgārjuna, vv, 50-51.
2. Vātsyāyana in his commentary on *Nyāya-sūtra V.1, 39-40* tries to give rejoinder to Nāgārjuna’s objection though Vātsyāyana does not mention the name of Nāgārjuna. He simply treats it as an opponent. But *Nyāya-sūtra IV.1, 39-40* seem to refer to the 15th chapter of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and a careful reader can read the reference of the chapter 7th of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* as



pūrvapakṣa in *Nyāya-sūtra* IV.2.31-32.

3. Nāgārjuna, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Eng Tr titled *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna* by Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, MLBD, Delhi, 1978, p. 113--114; also see, Bengali Tr and annotation by Dilipkumar Mohanta titled *Madhyamakadarśaner Rūparekhā O Nāgārjunakṛta savṛtti Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Mahabodhi Book Agency, Kolkata, 2006, p. 104 -105
4. Dilipkumar Mohanta, *Studies in Vaidalyasūtra (Treatise of Tearing) of Nāgārjuna*, Centre of Advanced Study in Philosophy, Utkal University, Bhuvaneswar, 2009, pp 72—79
5. “ aprādhānyam vidheryatra niṣedhe pradhānatā prasajya pratiśedho sau kriyayā saha yatrañān / prādhānyam hi videheryatra niṣdhopradhānatā/ paryyudāsa sa vijneyo yatrottarapadena ñān/” *Śabdakalpadruma*, vol 3, Motilal Banarasidass, 1961, p 298
6. ----- *Nāgārjunakṛta savṛttiśūnyatāsaptati*, Bengali Tr and Annotation titled *Bhāgirathivyākhyā*, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, 2011
7. ----- “Cognitive Scepticism of Nāgārjuna” published in *the Proceedings of the 20th World Congress of Philosophy*, ed E. Sosa, Boston, 2000
8. In Indian philosophy we may consider the case of the Nyāya philosopher as a cognitivist and the case of Nāgārjuna as a cognitive skeptic in a specific sense. Uddyotkara raises the charge of self-stultification against the cognitive skeptic. He compares a cognitive skeptic with a foolish person who burns his own finger in order to burn others. “*Naiṣa doṣaḥ, tasya svavacanavyāghāta codanāt.---yathā nāma kaścit svāṅgulijvālayā param didhakṣuḥ sa ca param dahanmā vā svāṅgulidāham-tāvadnubhavaṭīti.*”-- *Nyāya-Vārttika*, ICPR edition, 1997:183); also see, Uddyotkara, *Nyāyavārttika*, (Bibliotheca Indica), ed. V. P. Dvivedin, Chowkhamba, Varanasi, 1915
9. – *Prasannapadā* on *Mūla-Madhyamaka-Karikā (MMK)*, Vol 1, ed. R. R. Pandeya, Motilal Banarasi Das, Delhi, 1988, p. 241-242
10. For example, the Nyāya cognitivist (Vātsyāyana) uses the same entity both as an instrument of knowing and object of knowing in two different linguistic contexts. The use of case-inflections are not denotative of various things, but of potentialities for various ‘role- playing’. The use of rationality, for the Nyāya cognitivist, is flexible and not fixed in any absolute sense. But Nāgārjuna takes the absolute sense of rationality and asks for meeting that standard. Sometimes the cognitivist speaks from psychological consideration while the skeptic argues from purely logical consideration and brings the charge of infinite regress. A cognitivist may rely on deterministic assumption of two-valued logic and use first order language for describing what is real. On the other hand, a cognitiveskeptic like Nāgārjuna questions the validity of this assumption and prefers to speak in



second order language. He is aware of the possibility that the world cannot be explained exhaustively by two exclusive domains of 'is' and 'is not'; there remains the possibility of many-valued logic. It seems that these different meta-theoretic presuppositions do not allow the cognitivist and the skeptic in Indian tradition to share any common ground for holding any dialogue.

11. Johnson, W. E., *Logic*, Dover Pub. Inc. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1964 (1921)
12. E. Sosa, "Postscript to Proper Functionalism and Virtue Epistemology" in J.L. Kvanvig (ed), *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology*, Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, p.276
13. A. Dasgupta, Believer: The Locus of Epistemic Justification, *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, (ed) G. Mishra, vol XXV No 4, Oct-Dec, 2008, pp. 38-58
14. N. Rescher, *Scepticism*, 1980, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p.250
15. It is interesting to note that Buddha himself was in favour of critical analysis before accepting or rejecting any view. "To judge the purity of gold, it is burnt, cut and rubbed. In the same way, carefully examine the teachings I gave you. If you find truth in them, follow them zealously, do not have hatred for others, simply because it is not ours... Oh Bhiksu! Examine what is said by me through critical reason before admitting it. Please do not admit it just out of blind reverence or faith upon me", said by Gautama Buddha to his first five disciple. ('Tāpācchedācca nikaṣāt suvaṇṇamiva paṇḍitaiḥ, parīkṣyamadvācagrāhyaṁ, bhikṣave! Na tugauravāt' --See, Śāntideva, *Tattvasaṁgraha*, Kārikā, 3587) ; In the *Digha Nikāya* "Kesaputtara Kālāmāsutta" we see that "It is proper for you, Oh! Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Do not be led by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances; nor by delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea, this ascetic is our teacher. But rather, when you yourselves know [that] certain things are unwholesome and wrong, [that such] things are censured by the wise, and when undertaken, such things lead to harm, [then] abandon them." [DN 1.4]