

Interrogating the Theory of *Khyātivāda* with Special Reference to Four Major Buddhist Schools: Some Observations

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Abstract: In classical Indian Philosophy the concept of error is treated as an epistemological concept. The concept of error (*khyāti-vāda*) plays a significant role as a part of epistemology. *Khyāti-vādas* are mostly discussed through the illustrations derived from perceptual sources like mistaking a snake to be a rope, a shell to be silver etc. It is known from this that each of these theories of error centres its discussion over the nature and content of erroneous perception. In explaining the erroneous perception further the paper focused on the general aspects of the theory of errors namely *anyathākhyāti*, *akhyātivāda*, *viparītakhyātivāda*, *anīrvacanīyakhyātivāda*, *satkhyātivāda*, *atmākhyativāda* and *asatkhyātivāda*. Further, the paper focuses on the nature of a judgement with reference to truth and error and how is that all judgments are by default erroneous. If this is the case how are we account for the distinction between a true and false judgment leads to *khyāti-vādas* discussed in classical Indian philosophy in general and the Buddhists in particular is the crux of this paper.

Keywords: *Khyāti-vāda anyathākhyāti, akhyātivāda, viparītakhyātivāda, anīrvacanīya- khyātivāda, satkhyātivāda, atmākhyativāda and asatkhyātivāda.*

Introduction:

In Classical Indian Philosophy the concept of error is treated as an epistemological concept. It is contrasted from truth. It is only in the context of judgment the concepts like truth and error are significantly applied and are properly distinguished. All most all the schools of Indian Philosophy have paid their attention in explaining the concept of error under the frame work of the *khyāti-vādas*. *Khyāti-vādas* are mostly discussed through the illustrations derived from perceptual sources like mistaking a snake to be a rope or a shell to be silver or a post for a man etc. It is argued that each of these theories of error centres its discussion over the nature and content of erroneous perception. Hence the theory of error turns out to be an explanation of illusion or hallucination.

The term '*khyāti*' implies knowledge which means the faculty of discriminating objects by

appropriate designation.¹ In all cases of valid knowledge (*prāma*) there is a perfect harmony of content of cognition and the object in the external world. However in the case of invalid knowledge (*aprāma*) there is a mis-match between the content of cognition and the object. In the light of this it can be said that the different *khyāti-vādas* are merely different ways of explaining the nature and the process of perceptual error.² It is interesting to note that the explanations offered by them are in harmony with their metaphysical commitments. With this background an effort has been made in this paper to explain different *khyāti-vādas* along with its importance to explain it in terms of judgements. Further it also explains the nature of a judgement with reference to truth and error and tries to prove that all judgments are by default erroneous. Moreover, if this would be the case how are we to account for the distinction between a true and false judgment which leads to *khyāti-vādas* discussed in classical Indian philosophy in general and the Buddhists in particular is the crux of this paper.

According to the Naiyāyikas, knowledge is bound to be conceptualised or judgemental. The knowledge is presentational in so far as the judgement refers to the objects, directly presented. It is precisely here the question of truth (*pramā*) and falsity (*apramā*) is raised. When the judgement describes the referent as it is, it is true otherwise it is false. True judgement stands for judging the referent in that form of attributes which actually belong to it. Whereas false judgement is the judging of a referent in some form of attributes other than those which actually belong to it. Erroneous judgment is said as ‘judging something what it is not’.³ For instance, in a true judgement like ‘this is silver’, where ‘this’ is correctly known as silver. It is argued that the objective content of knowledge exactly corresponds to the external realities which include the attributes as ‘silverness’. Whereas in a false judgement like ‘this is silver’, wherein shell is mistaken for silver, the objective content of knowledge does not exactly correspond to the external realities represented by ‘this’ as silverness. In other words, in a case of wrong judgement ‘this’ is known as something otherwise has been described as *anyathākhyāti* or *viparitakhyāti* accepted by Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika schools.

Moreover, the Naiyāyikas maintained that while analysing error that the referent asserted in a wrong judgement is absolutely missed and the judgement fails to catch itself on to its referent. That object which is judged as ‘silver’ is ‘silver’ can never be denied. It is only the wrong judgement of that as what (i.e., silver) which is later on rectified but not as that itself. Thus for the Naiyāyikas, the wrong judgement is not possible bereft of referentiality. It must have a referent. My judging something is different from what it is, surely wrong. But this does not affect the referent of the judgement rather it shows that error is due to the descriptive part of the judgement. In against to the Naiyāyikas, the Prabhākara school of Mīmāṃsā holds that without

presupposing the external object knowledge is not possible. Accordingly their theory is known as *Akhyātivāda*.

Theory of *Akhyāti* is advocated to Prabhākara and his followers of Mīmāṃsā. It is also said that the early Sāṃkhya view of error remarkably resembles *Akhyātivāda*. For Prabhākara knowledge is possible only by the presupposition of an external object. Without external object, there cannot be any cognition. All knowledge is said to be objective. Memory is regarded to be invalid. This is because it gives no new knowledge rather it depends on a former experience. From this, it is clear that according to Prabhākara knowledge is defined in terms of the external given and in no case the knowledge can be wrong. Thus for Prabhākara all cognitive expressions are cases of only right judgements. A false judgement is inconceivable. A question may arise here that how cognition can apprehend an object and yet be invalid.⁴ Since perception is accepted as one of the valid means of knowledge it cannot give rise to some cognition which is invalid. Validity is the very inherent feature of all perceptual cognitions (*Svataḥ prāmāṇya*). For Prabhākara valid knowledge is so wide, doubtful and erroneous perceptions also included in it. For him, doubt and error are valid as long as they are apprehensions.

According to Prabhākara the erroneous judgement ‘this is silver’ is not the result of one single cognition, but is rather a composite of two cognitions. Prabhākara tried to introduce the two-cognition theory. Erroneous judgement for Prabhākara having two distinct components namely ‘this is silver’. In this judgement ‘this’ implies the external object of reference or the presented one. That something is presented is undeniable. Even in error something is presented otherwise how could there be an apprehension. Hence, for Prabhākara all judgements must have objective reference and hence must be true.⁵ On the other hand the Kumārila school of Mīmāṃsā holds the view that knowledge is understood in the sense of valid knowledge which is the determination of the external object. Accordingly their theory of error is known as *Viparītakhyātivāda*.

The theory of *Viparītakhyātivāda* is advocated by Kumārila and his followers.⁶ *Viparīta* means ‘contrary’ or ‘opposite’ and accordingly *Viparītakhyāti* means that the judgement, instead of judging the referent as it is, judges it in an opposite manner. According to it, there is always a reference to the referent yet the way in which the referent is described is rather a case of misdescription. In other words, error is a wrong judgement where there is application of a wrong predicate to the referent.

Kumārila believes in the objective character of knowledge. Knowledge, in the sense of valid knowledge is the determination of the external object. Kumārila recognises the invalid cognition which does not determine the referent as it is but as opposite to what it is. But Kumārila admits

the self-validity theory of knowledge. A question may raise here that if knowledge is self-valid then where is the scope of invalidity? Kumārila defines valid knowledge as definite or determinate cognition of objects, which does not stand in need of confirmation by other cognitions.⁷ From this it is clear that any cognition, in order to be valid, is not only firm or true determination of object but also must be absolutely new. It includes both unerring and newness is taken as the criteria of validity. Once this has been accepted it can easily be seen that such cognitions like *bhrama* and *smṛti* are nothing but invalid. Hence, for Kumārila there is the presence of invalid cognition along with valid cognition. In against to this Śaṅkara holds the view that right knowledge refers to knowing something as it is, but instead of which taking something as something else is *adhyāsa*. This theory of error is known as *Anirvacanīyakhyaativāda*.

Śaṅkara theory of error is known as *Anirvacanīyakhyaativāda*. Śaṅkara raises the problem of knowledge and error in the opening lines of *Adhyāsa-bhāṣya*.⁸ In it he tried to distinguish between two opposite concepts namely the subject and the object. The superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of one concept upon the other or the qualities of one concept upon that of the other is due to ignorance (*avidyā*). Thus it is to be admitted that ordinary judgement of all varieties is intrinsically erroneous from such logical point of view. Right knowledge refers to knowing something as it is, whereas taking something as something else is *adhyāsa*. For instance, the silver characteristic when superimposed upon the shell, the shell is no more known as it is but as something other than itself. From this Śaṅkara deduces his philosophical conclusion that all empirical cognitions are involved with the confusion of one element with the other and hence are all unreal. Hence, Śaṅkara philosophy understood as advocating illusionism⁹.

Against this illusionism, most of the orthodox philosophers criticise that Śaṅkara as being influenced by the Buddhism. In order to justify this position Śaṅkara talks about the three levels of reality. In the first level i.e., illusory is not totally unreal like that of barren women's son. In this regard a distinction has been made between *bhāsika satta* and the *tucca*. The former has at least a momentary existence while the latter is absolutely non-existent. When the erroneous perception of silver is replaced by the perception of shell, the 'shell' is treated as existent not merely at the time when it is actually perceived but also when the 'silver' was previously perceived. In other words, the 'shell' is only accepted to be real and the 'silver' is completely negated. For Śaṅkara the reality or the essence of a thing is that which persists through all its states.¹⁰ If anything is changeable and perishable becomes virtually unreal. The self is not changeable which means all else is mere illusion or *māya*.¹¹ In against to this the Viśiṣṭādvaitins holds that all judgements which are referring to illusion are true but not false. Their theory of error is known as *Satkhyativāda*.

The Viśiṣṭādvaita theory of error is known as *Satkhyāti*. Rāmānuja maintains that the appearance of illusory object is absolutely real and the content of the illusory experience really exists in the substratum of illusion. The judgement that there is silver is at once found to be inconsistent when it is marked with the referent of the said judgement is actually not silver but only shell. If perception is a form of knowing then the perceptual judgement ‘this is silver’ must be true. But the judgement, ‘this is silver’ is found to be incoherent with later judgement ‘this is shell’. All this doubtlessly challenges the validity of perceptual knowledge. It asserts that the judgement of illusion, ‘this is silver’ is as objective as the judgement of veridical perception, ‘this is silver’. All judgements which are referring to illusion or to veridical perception are true but not false. In against to all these theories of error the Buddhists holds the theories of *ātmakhyativāda* and *asatkhyativāda*.

Vaibhāṣika theory of *ātmakhyāti*:

In Buddhist tradition, the Vaibhāsika, the Sautrāntika and the Yogācāra advocate the theory of *ātmakhyati*, while the Mādhyamikas advocate *asatkhyativāda*.¹² However, the theory of *ātmakhyati* is explained differently in each of these schools. The basic metaphysical position of Vaibhāṣikas is *sarvam asti* as they are identified as *Sarvāstivādins*. According to the Vaibhāṣikas all judgments are by default erroneous as the judgments by definition refer to a determinate object (*savikalpavastu*) which is not a bare unrelated simple particular but a universalized complex. A question may arise that if all judgments are destined to be false then how are we to account for the distinction between a true and a false judgment? In reply to this Vaibhāṣikas holds that error consists in considering the internal object as external. For instance, in the case of rope, which is misperceived as snake, it is argued that snake is real as something mental and rope is real as something objective. Error arises in identifying the internal as the external. It would suggest that a false judgment like ‘this is snake’, it is the snake predicate, which is surely subjective and in no way belongs to the externally given referent, i.e., ‘this’. This snake is wrongly predicated of the given. However, ‘this’ as the bare referent of the erroneous judgment is real. There is no doubt that error is due to mischaracterization. The characteristic, which is attributed of the given, is something internal or subjective and does not in any sense belong to the given. From this explanation it follows that for the Vaibhāṣikas the ordinarily called false judgment refers something internal as external whereas a true judgment takes something in the same way in which it actually is. Hence their theory is referred to as *ātmakhyāti*.

It is to be noted that the Vaibhāṣika theory of *ātmakhyāti* cannot logically aim at explaining the empirical difference between true and false perceptual judgments. So far as it points out that

in error something is wrongly judged as something different from what it is, there is no logical inconsistency. According to the Buddhists *svalakṣaṇas*¹³ alone are real. Since *svalakṣaṇas* alone are real, there is no justification to consider whether it is snake or rope to be real as they are conceptual constructions. According to the Vaibhāṣikas following their theory of *svataḥprāmāṇya*, all judgments are conceptual constructions and as such they are false. It is a fact that no judgment is bereft of a description of an individual. All descriptions are conceptual constructions and hence are considered as unreal.

Sautrāntika theory of *ātmakhyāti*:

The Sautrāntikas are one with the Vaibhāṣikas in admitting the reality of the *svalakṣaṇas*. However, the Vaibhāṣikas admit the direct perception of the *svalakṣaṇas* (*bāhya-pratyakṣa-vādins*)¹⁴ while Sautrāntikas admit that the external object is not perceived but is inferred (*bāhya-anumeya-vādins*)¹⁵. The principle argument put forth by the Sautrāntika against the Vaibhāṣika is that since everything remains only for a moment and then it is succeeded by another, following their theory of momentary nature of objects (*kṣanikavāda*); it is difficult to admit in this context that the object is perceived directly. To be able to be perceived an object should be present at least for two moments such that the first moment of perception serves as the cause for the actual perception of the object in the next moment. From this it follows that in order to perceive the object it must remain at least for two moments, which is not possible according to their theory of momentariness. However, Sautrāntikas are one with the Vaibhāṣika position that any judgment, in so far as it involves *kalpanā*, is bound to be erroneous. It characterizes the given more than what it actually is. Since knowing is judgmental there is no escape from conceptualization. In all judgments there is the subjective attribution which distorts the real. In so far as their account of illusion is concerned it hardly matters whether the object in question is perceived as articulated by the Vaibhāṣikas or inferred by Sautrāntikas.

From what has been said above that according to the Buddhists all judgments be it perceptual or inferential are all considered to be erroneous. In fact the theory of *ātmakhyāti* is a critique of all judgments. If all judgments are erroneous, how are we to make distinction between an empirically true judgment from a false one, is a serious question. The Buddhists respond to this by taking recourse to the test of successful activity (*arthakriyākāritvaṃ*). For the Buddhists, all knowledge is invalid by its very nature. The validity of knowledge consists in its capacity to produce successful action. Hence prior to any successful activity knowledge is to be treated as invalid. We cannot say that validity belongs to knowledge simply because it has come to be, or has appeared. In that case, error will have to be regarded as valid knowledge because error too

appears as a form of knowledge. That knowledge which has been produced does not necessarily mean that there is in it a true cognition of the object, since the knowledge is liable to contradiction. Hence we are to say that invalidity belongs to knowledge at its inception, and its validity is due to the negation of invalidity by external conditions. From a sceptical or rather critical standpoint, the Buddhists take all knowledge as intrinsically invalid and treat validity as an extrinsic character which knowledge comes to have by way of conative verification. According to them, the truth of knowledge is constituted by successful activity. Hence it follows that prior to successful activity, knowledge is not-true. When any knowledge leads to successful activity we know that it is not not-true, i.e., it is true. Thus the Buddhists give a negative definition of truth as what is not false (*avisamvādakam*).

Yogācāra theory of *ātmakhyāti*:

The Yogācāra school of Buddhism is one with the Sautrāntikas and Vaibhāṣikas in accepting the theory of *ātmakhyāti* with a difference. The Yogācāra believe in the reality of consciousness.¹⁶ While explaining the theory of *ātmakhyāti* in terms of a specific illusory perception of snake-ropes, there is no difference between the Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas and the Yogācāras. However, the difference lies in regard to the Yogācāras emphasizing the reality of the external given. Further, the theory is not to interpret the referent of the judgement in an objective mode as opposed to the subjective mode. According to Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas, reality consists of the unique particulars (*svalakṣaṇas*) in the sense of bare referents for logically proper names. Even the Yogācāras also adopt this point for the purpose of their own logical argument. However, the difference between the Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas on one hand and the Yogācāras on the other is found to be very much explicit when these schools seem to draw different metaphysical conclusions from the common draw logical point. The Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas interpret the logical referent of the judgement not merely as bare particular but also as somewhat objective and hence external to subjective. On the other hand, the Yogācāras take these bare unique particulars, which initially are the outcome of a logical analysis of the nature of judgements, as some things subjective and as such term them as ideas (*viññānas*). Hence for the Yogācāras idea alone is real. Vasubandhu as one of the Yogācāras by affirming this accepts the mere awareness (*viññaptimātra*) as the only *sat* and thereby repudiates all forms of externality and objectivity.

According to the Yogācāra, in so far as the illusion of snake in a rope is concerned, it is the subjective idea of snake which is mistakenly taken to be present outside of consciousness. They strongly oppose to any idea which tries to interpret the subjective state of consciousness as

objective. All judgments refer to the ideas and not the external objects as their objective counterpart. For Buddhists the generic features are concepts which are of the nature of *vikalpa* having no objective reality. The objectivity of the external world is a myth. The simple ascription of the internal states of consciousness such as snake as external is sufficient to cause error. It is argued that the Yogācāra account of error directly contradicts with experience. If we have never seen an external object, it would be meaningless to express that consciousness appears as the external object. Objects are felt as existing external to our consciousness. In 'snake-rope' illusion the snake is perceived as out there. Even if we take into account the snake is to be subjective, still the fact that 'this' which is out there is confused as snake cannot be denied. Bluntly, outright rejection of 'this' which is existing external to our consciousness is contrary to experience. In the 'snake-rope' illusion, where rope is mistaken for snake, and after the mistake is corrected the rope has got to be accepted as a concrete physical entity external to the consciousness which cannot be denied. Further if the existence of external objects is denied then the distinction between 'the consciousness of snake' and 'the consciousness of rope' cannot be explained as the consciousness remain the same, it is only with regard to the objects they differ. Hence the view of the Yogācāra that consciousness alone is real and the external world is a figment of imagination is difficult to maintain and as consequence their theory of *ātmakhyāti* fails to explain adequately the perceptual error. However, for the Yogācāra, reality is a stream of cognitions bifurcated into a subjective and objective series. It is only the illegitimate process of projection of subjective ideas as objective and extra-mental facts is considered as erroneous. The concept *viññāna* does not have any substantive import in Yogācāra tradition. It is only the notion of experiencing (*viññāptimātra*) that can be admitted. All that is beyond experiencing are creations conceptual constructions which are not real. The Yogācāra by accepting the *viññāna* need not be understood to have accepted the reality of 'I' or the self. The term *viññāna* need not have any substantive import. The reality of the *viññāna* does not mean that subject as a substance is real as against the external objectivity. It is only the experiencing that can be admitted with significance.¹⁷ Anything beyond experiencing, either the subjective realm or the objective realm is not acceptable as both of these are the creations of conceptualizations. Yogācāra asserts on the sole reality of ideas and looks upon all objects as cognitions wrongly taken for external entities.

To sum up the whole discussion regarding the theory of *ātmakhyāti* advocated by Vaibhāṣikas, Sautrāntikas and Yogācāras, apart from the minor doctrinal differences, they agree that the logical referent of any judgement (*svalakṣaṇas*) is necessarily misdescribed in all instances. For Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas, the judgement by its very nature, ever becomes confined to its

own categories and concepts. Even Yogācāras too, subscribe the view that the judgement, by its very nature, ever becomes confined to its own categories and concepts. The only difference between Vaibhāṣikas and Sautrāntikas on one hand and the Yogācāras on the other is that the former schools maintain the falsity of all judgements to be due to the predicative aspect alone and the later school maintains the falsity of all judgements to be both due to the predicative as well as the subjective aspects.

Mādhyamika theory of *asatkhyāti*:

Besides *ātmakhyātivāda*, there is another theory termed as *asatkhyāti* or *śūnyakhyāti* which is ascribed to Mādhyamika School of thought. This theory was not found in *Mūlamādhyamikakārikā* and *Vigraha Vyāvartani*.¹⁸ References to this theory are found in the writings of rival schools of Indian philosophies including both the Hindu as well as the Jaina works. According to *asatkhyātivāda* error consists in the manifestation of the non-existent as existent. The cognition of snake in rope is erroneous because it manifests non-existent snake as existent, and we become conscious of this when our first cognition of snake is contradicted by the subsequent cognition of rope. It is *asat* which is falsely perceived as *sat*. That which appears to be real is actually not real i.e., the snake which appears to be real in the rope-snake illusion is not real. The theory of *Asatkhyātivāda* is subjected to criticism by the Naiyāyikas¹⁹ and Vedāntins. The Naiyāyikas argue that the illusion of snake in a rope is not entirely baseless. It cannot arise out of nothing. What is absolutely non-existent can never appear in consciousness in an illusion. The illusion of snake is due to something in the nature of rope. One can never have an illusion of snake in place of a stone. Quite often illusion occurs because of certain similarity between what is presented and what is cognized and not indifferently with everything. Even if it is argued that a non-existent object appears in consciousness though the intensity of subconscious impressions, it does hold water, as a sub-conscious impression presupposes the existence of a real object, because it is an impression left by the previous perception of a real object. Absolutely unreal and non-existent entity can never become an object of consciousness. It is a matter of experience that rope is misperceived as snake. It shows that something is being apprehended as something else. So, the snake characterization of the present object may be found to be wrong after verification but that something as the locus of snake is positively present even at the time of error. Hence it is not the absolute nothing (*śūnya*) which is perceived as something existent (*sat*) but something is apprehended as some other thing. However, rope in the form of ‘this’ remains, as the basis of cognition of snake. So, something existent appears as snake and not that non-existent appears as existent. Even if one agrees the point that the snake that is perceived in illusion is unreal yet the referent on which snake is perceived cannot be rejected as void or *śūnya*.²⁰ The defect in the

theory of *asatkhyātivāda* lies in the fact that it not only negates the silver but also the ‘this’ or the very basis of error along with the error.

It is pointed out by way of defending the theory of *asatkhyātivāda* that when the eyes are pressed the hazy mass of substances (*keśondrakas*) that appear before the eyes are without any *locus*. It is possible that a person while dreaming may have also another dream within that range of first dream. The second dream obviously does not have any real basis as that occurs only within another dream. So also it is argued that erroneous perception points at some unreal substance which has no real *locus*. It is argued that in error the *śūnya* is mistaken as shell and again this unreal shell is further taken to be silver.

To sum up the Mādhyamikas are quite consistent to the general Buddhist position, adopt the criticisms of concepts. While carrying this discussion to the logical end they conclude that the critique of concepts clearly reveals that the referent of any judgment is beyond all conceptual categories, and may thus be designated as *catus-koti-vinirmukta*.²¹ The Mādhyamikas point out that even by describing the referent as bare experience, there is, in principle, the chance of falsification. From a logical point of view it can only be consistently asserted that all descriptions carry the sense of falsification and as such, no judgment can be said as true. The referent of any judgment transcends all descriptions and that is why it is said to be intrinsically empty of all contents and is regarded to be void. Thus they are fully justified in holding *asatkhyātivāda*.

Notes and References

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error.

7. *Tasmāt drudham yadutpannam nāpi samvādam rucchati jñānāntareṇa vijñānam tat pramāṇam pratīyatām*, Śloka-Vārttika by Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Banaras, 2.80, 1898.
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11. Dasgupta, *Indian Idealism*, Cambridge University Press, 1933, p.163.
12. *Asatkhyativāda* is also referred to as *śūnyakhyativāda*.
13. Since *svalakṣaṇas* alone real for Buddhists in general and Vaibhāṣikas in particular they explains the actual content of perception as the result of mind imposing its own forms. *Kalpanā hi buddhi-viśeṣaḥ* quoted by M.Hiriyanna in *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000, New Delhi, p.204.
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21. *catus-koti-vinirmukta* means four categories of thought namely reality is neither existent nor non-existent, nor both existent and non-existent nor different from existent and non-existent.