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Syadvada: A Theory of Relativity of Truth in Jainism

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Abstract: The doctrine of *syadvada* is a teaching of Jainism which emphasizes all-embracing truth. The truth according to *syadvada* is not one-dimensional resulting in a dogmatic attitude, but it is a multi-dimensional reality that comes only when one humbles oneself to accept other's viewpoint as in the parable of the blind men. The sevenfold predication or *saptabhanginaya* is one such teaching of Jainism which attempts to unfold reality that lies hidden in the narrow and exclusive understanding of the reality. The reality, in one way, can be Characterized by the beautiful expression used by Jaina, that is, '*syat*'. The study of the theory of *syadvada* holds relevance in the context of the dogmatic scenario of our present world.

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Introduction

The doctrine of *syadvada* is a teaching of Jainism which emphasizes all-embracing truth. The truth according to *syadvada* is not one-dimensional resulting in a dogmatic attitude, but it is a multi-dimensional reality as that in the parable of the blind men. The sevenfold predication or *saptabhanginaya* is one such teaching of Jainism which attempts to unfold reality that lies hidden in the narrow and exclusive understanding of the reality.

Preliminary Understanding on *Syadvada*

Syadvada or the theory of relativity of Jainism stands upon *anekantavada* and *nayavada*. *Anekantavada* is a central philosophy of Jainism which declares that reality is relative (Krishnaswamy, Mishra & Ram, 2013: 27). *Anekanta* or non-one-sidedness is a negation to whatever is *ekanta* or one-sidedness. It is a philosophy of synthesis and toleration which tries to bring into synthesis the extreme views and finds a way out for reconciliation (Matilal, 1981). *Anekantavada* has two main accessories as it is said, the bird of *anekantavada* flies on its two wings of *nayavada* and *syadvada* (Padmarajiah, 1963: 273). *Nayavada* is an analytical method to investigate reality from different standpoints. It is defined as a particular opinion or a viewpoint which does not rule out the other viewpoints but rather it expresses the limitation we face in determining an object (Padmarajiah, 1963: 310).

Significance of the Word ‘Syat’

As being a complementary factor, *syadvada* investigates the various strands of the truth given by *naya* to integrate them into a consistent and comprehensive synthesis with the help of predication or an alternative or a possible truth (Krishnaswamy, Mishra & Ram, 2013: 333).

In ordinary Sanskrit, the word ‘syat’ refers to the third-person singular operative form of the verbal root *as* which means ‘exist’. In normal circumstance, *syat* could also be translated as ‘it could be’ or ‘it should be’ or ‘maybe’ or ‘it is possible that’ (Long, 2009: 146). For instance, if we ask the question “Is A B?” The possible answer to this question will be either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘may be’. The ‘may be’ refers to the third possibility, the possibility of ‘syat’ or probability (Koller, 2000: 404). But the Jaina sense of *syat* is not of the probability (*sambhavana*) of something but more than that, in a sense it is a conditional ‘yes’

which if put in the predication mean “If *p* then A is B” (Matilal, 1981). However, Padmarajiah points out that the significance of *syat* lies in its emphasis on the indeterminate or manifold nature of the real, meaning that real cannot be determined as having only such and such attributes and not something else. Hence, the conception of reality as extremely indeterminate is the essential

The significance of *syat* lies in its emphasis on the indeterminate or manifold nature of the real, meaning that real cannot be determined as having only such and such attributes and not something else. Hence, the conception of reality as extremely indeterminate is the essential meaning of *syat* meaning ‘in a certain sense’

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Sevenfold Predications of *Syadvada* (*Saptabhanginaya*)

Jainism proposes the doctrine of sevenfold conditional predication to understand the reality in the mode of *syat* because every proposition of existing thing gives us limited knowledge in affirming or denying since there is an endless account of the complexity of any reality (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 302). In *saptabhanginaya* all the seven predications are prefixed by the term *syat* which means ‘in a certain sense’.

***Syad asti* (a thing is).** In a certain sense, a jar exists. When we say jar exists, it exists of its own substance, attributes, place and time. The jar is an entity that exists when it is related to the thing it is made of, the place where it exists and the time when it exists (Gopalan, 1973: 154). Radhakrishnan sums up, “The jar exists as made of clay, in my room at the present moment, of such and such a shape and size” (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 302). The proposition (jar exists) signifies that for some reason in the moment of our assertion, our attention is primarily fixed on the positive existence of the jar (Padmarajiah, 1963: 343).

***Syad nasti* (a thing is not).** In a certain sense, a jar does not exist. The second mode of predication speaks of the non-existence of the jar. Just as the jar is existent under certain condition of its own substance, attributes, place and time, now in reference with another substance, attributes, place and time jar does not exist (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 302-303). When Jaina speaks about the non-existence of jar, what is denied is not the existence of the jar as a jar but the jar as metal or cloth (Gopalan, 1973: 154).

***Syad asti nasti* (a thing is and is not).** In a certain sense, a jar exists and in a certain sense, a jar does not exist. The third predication claims both ‘jar exists’ and ‘jar does not exist’ when analysing it from another point of reference. However,

these conjunctions are not repetitive but on the contrary, it expresses a unique feature of the Jaina logic where the combination of the two propositions presents the 'togetherness' of the two modes of reality, existence and non-existence (Gopalan, 1973: 155; Padmarajiah, 1963: 346).

Syad avaktavya (a thing is inexpressible¹). In a certain sense, the jar is inexpressible. The fourth predication of *syadvada* offers us the simultaneous presentation of the togetherness of the two modes (Padmarajiah, 1963: 346). The inexpressibility of the jar results from the incompatibility of existence and non-existence of jar which is mutually exclusive and cannot be attributed to the same thing (Gopalan, 1973: 155).

Syad asti avaktavya (a thing is and is inexpressible). In a certain sense, the jar is and is inexpressible. If we look from the point of view of the existence of a jar in its own property jar is expressible. But it is once again inexpressible if we look from the point of view of its existent and non-existent forms which are mutually exclusive (Gopalan, 1973: 155-156).

Syad nasti avaktavya (a thing is not and is inexpressible). In a certain sense, the jar is not and is inexpressible. In similarity with the fifth proposition, the non-existence of the jar is presented from another point of reference. Further, the simultaneous presentation of both positive and negative aspect of the jar results in inexpressibility (Gopalan, 1973: 156).

Syad asti nasti avaktavya (a thing is, is not and is inexpressible) In a certain sense, the jar is, is not and is inexpressible. The combination of the existence and non-existence of the jar signifies the successive presentation of

¹ Here Radhakrishnan uses the term unpredictable but we shall use the term 'inexpressible' used by Padmarajiah.

togetherness of two aspects namely, the positive and negative. Later, when looked at from the simultaneous presentation of existent and non-existent, we face the inability to express any description of the jar (Gopalan, 1973: 156).

The sevenfold predication (*saptabhanginaya*) insists on the correlativity of affirmation and negation of a thing because all judgements are dualistic in their character possessing the quality of both positive and negative (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 304). As Hiriyanna rightly puts it, “Jainism recognizes both permanence and change as equally real; hence raises the difficulty to express in one step the full nature of reality” (Hiriyanna, 1932: 165).

The Parable of the Blind Men

To illustrate the many-sided reality of an object from *syadvada* points of view, we can take the parable of the blind men, who each fumbled for the touch of the elephant and laid hands on different parts concluded in describing the whole animal (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 301). Having concluded describing their viewpoint they argued themselves about the true nature of the elephant which is partially correct and also partially incorrect in so far as one would disagree with the claim of the other (Long, 2009, 118).

Charges and Criticisms on *Syadvada*

The doctrine of *syadvada* has been grossly misunderstood by many schools of Indian Philosophy. They misinterpret the philosophy and put the following accusations:

The criticism comes from the *Vedantic* tradition of Sankara and Ramanuja on the ground that it is impossible that the two contradictory attributes co-exist at the same time (Padmarajiah, 1963: 363). In reply to their criticism Radhakrishnan writes, Jainas admit that a thing cannot have self-contradiction in itself but the reality is complex, and identity in difference. For instance, when we say the tree is

moving, it means that its branches are moving, and it is still not moving since its roots are fixed (Radhakrishnan, 1923: 304).

The *Vedantins* claimed *syadvada* as a theory of doubt or scepticism. Hiriyanna points out that it is a teaching which is prejudicial against absolutism (Padmarajiah, 1963: 365). Jainas answer this criticism by saying that *syadvada* is not the theory of probabilities rather relative and conditional signifying our partial knowledge of the truth. Shankaracharya retorts saying that relativity cannot be sustained without the Absolute because if all truth is partial then *syadvada* by its own merit will be only partially true and therefore, partially false (Sharma, 1976: 55).

The critiques have objected that the theory of *Syadvada* leads to agnosticism where we cannot have the knowledge of anything in certainty. As Belvalkar writes, *syadvada* denies the possibility of any predication where *S* may be, or may not be, or maybe or may not be both *P*. In such a purely negative or agnostic attitude, one cannot have any dogma (Padmarajiah, 1963: 366). This agnostic presentation of reality can lead us to a moral vacuum where we do not have any adequate grounding for our moral claims (Long, 2009, 151).

Conclusion

The conditional nature of looking at reality has a very significant role even in today's philosophy of life and experience. *Syadvada* teaches us that no final judgement or description of reality is possible. For when we absolutize our own belief and creed we end up becoming fanatics. As a result, we exclude others because they do not fit in "my system". In connection to the present-day situations in India, there are a lot of concerns that arise because of the feelings of exclusivity sprouting within the

political, religious, cultural, linguistic and economic groups resulting in mob lynching, hatred, riots and so on.

Syadvada as the doctrine of the relativity of the judgement has a very similar tone with the theory of relativity of Einstein (Atreya & Rampuria, 2012). The doctrine of *syadvada*, on the one hand, comes as a response to absolute (*advaita*) and non-absolute (Buddhist) viewpoints. In the same way, the theory of relativity of Einstein came as a response to the deterministic worldview of mechanistic science. As a matter of fact, *syadvada* is not the theory that rejects *advaita* or Buddhist's understanding but it only tries to integrate the dogmatic and non-inclusive teachings together. Einstein too does not reject the absolute understanding completely, but on the contrary, his view "represented the completion of the classical physics and the deterministic worldview" (Chandrakunnel, 2014: 291).

The doctrine of *syadvada* gives us a whole new perspective in looking at multi-dimensional reality of World-God-Man. It inspires us to see the three-dimensional reality from a relational approach. For in the past we have dogmatized these realities so much so as to serve our own selfish motives which have had repercussions. The Cosmotheandric vision of Panikkar in connection with *syadvada*, gives us an insight into seeing truth from a new perspective as complementing factor. *Syadvada* is a teaching of seeing truth from wider perspectives and can be acquired only when we live the way of Jesus who saw reality from the perspectives of the sinners and the righteous, the rich and the downtrodden, the intellectuals and the ignorant of letters and so on. The theory of *syadvada* can be a cure to the current problems of religious intolerance, violence in the world, the communal and border tensions.

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