

Nyāya System of Philosophy: A Significant Aspect of Indian Culture

JOHN VATTANKY
De Nobili College
Pune

In the last decades interest in Indian philosophy and culture has been steadily growing both in India and outside. In the wake of the discovery of the heritage of India by the great orientalists of the western world, especially from the beginning of this century and after the pioneering works of Rādhakrishnan, Dasgupta and a host of others, various aspects of Indian thought have been studied more and more deeply and meticulously. However, Indian philosophy was pictured predominantly in terms of Vedānta particularly in its *advaita* form found in Śankara which was and is, perhaps, not entirely correctly interpreted as a monistic system. This went along with a very spiritual interpretation of the whole of Indian culture. In fact this is a one-sided presentation of the whole of Indian philosophy, for Indian philosophy includes various systems which command the attention of the scholar as well as the general reader.

One such system is the *Nyāya*. In the extent of the literature it has produced and in the depth of the philosophical problems it discusses, it is of considerable interest and importance. However, the spirit of pure rationality in which *Nyāya* discusses these problems and the techniques it makes use of in handling them are quite different from other systems of Indian thought and at once renders it a unique achievement of the Indian mind. *Nyāya* has been sedulously cultivated in restricted circles of traditional learning. Of late it has become the object of intense research by various scholars, both in India and abroad. Early scholars like Vidyabhusana and others with their pioneering works on *Nyāya* have done much to create interest in the study of the *Nyāya* system. The monumental translations of the *Nyāyasūtras*, the *Bhāṣya* of Vātsyāyana and the *Varttika* of Uddyotakara by Ganganatha Jha greatly helped scholars like H.N. Randle to produce a consistent account of early *Nyāya*. All these inspired various scholars to work on

different aspects and different authors of the Nyāya system. Today, however, the study of *Nyāya*, particularly of what is usually called modern (*navya*) *Nyāya* has become a highly sophisticated field of study, as is clear from the works of such scholars as Frauwallner, Matilal, Bhattacharya and others. The purpose of this essay is not to give an account of these conspicuously abstruse studies, but rather to give some of my reflections on the significance of *Nyāya* studies in order to gain a full and comprehensive view of Indian culture in general and of Indian philosophy in particular. For this purpose we shall preface these thoughts with a few remarks on the *Nyāya* system in general.

The beginnings of the *Nyāya* system could be found in the *Nyāyasūtras* of Gautama. Critical scholars, of course, will point out that the *sūtras* themselves had a long pre-history and they were the result of several decades, if not centuries, of earlier developments. In fact the *sūtras* themselves are not a homogeneous work and it is very likely that several thinkers contributed to the formation of the *sūtras* as we have them today. However, the main purpose here is not to give a critical estimate of this work. We only want to point out that the source of the *Nyāya* system, both old and new, is the *Nyāyasūtras* and that they are traditionally attributed to Gautama. The most important commentators on the *sūtras* are Vātsyāyana, Uddyatkara and Vācaspati Misra who wrote their *Bhāṣyam*, *Vārttikam* and *Tātparyatika* respectively. In the *navya-nyāya* period there developed an exclusive interest in the four means of valid knowledge to the exclusion of all other considerations on metaphysics, which was by and large borrowed from the sister system of Vaiśeṣika. Udayana, one of the very greatest of Indian philosophers and certainly one of the most important philosophers in the history of *Nyāya* stands between the time of the so-called old *Nyāya* and the modern *Nyāya*. Udayana is also one of the few *Naiyāyikās* who wrote independent works on specific topics such as God and the souls and treated them elaborately and profoundly. *Navyanyāya* proper begins with the monumental work of *Tattvacintāmaṇi* of Gaṅgeśa in which he discusses in detail the four means of valid knowledge viz. perception, inference, comparison and verbal testimony. In fact in the course of time the main interest of *Navyanaiyāyikas* centered round the problems concerning inference. The discussions on the definition of inference, the conditions of inference, the fallacies of inference and allied problems occupied their minds. This exclusive interest on inference was also the cause for winning a lot of adverse criticism on the later *Naiyāyikās*. Thus we find in the early part of this century scholars who gave out their opinion that later *Nyāya* is interested only in philosophical hair splitting. This criticism has

unfortunately been reiterated subsequently by other scholars too. But the fact is that such critics never made a thorough study of the basic texts of the school, the works of the genuinely creative thinkers like Udayana, Gaṅgeśa and Raghunāthaśiromani. Often they were acquainted with Sanskrit works only of late scholars who were little more than school masters who composed primarily text books for the use of their pupils. They were never able to draw the wider philosophical implications involved in the discussion of the various topics of *Navyanyāya* and therefore, they failed to a large extent to grasp the profound significance of certain problems which were discussed at length in the treatises of *Navyanyāya*.

From the early part of this century onwards, there is a revival of interest in *Navyanyāya* studies with modern methods of research. Bengal was, for centuries, the home of *Nyāya* studies and so it can naturally be expected that the revival of *Nyāya* was, by and large, brought about by the efforts of Bengali scholars in the early part of this century.¹ However, Sileswar Sen may be the first scholar who wrote explicitly on the *Navyanyāya* topic using modern critical methods. He published his work, *A Study of Mathuranātha's Tattvacintāmaṇirahasya*, in 1924 in Holland.² The book dealt with what in *Nyāya* is called *vyāpti* or invariable concomitance. This is a central topic in *Navyanyāya* and Saileswar Sen made use of modern techniques to explain its nature. Obviously, Sen was not much interested in comparative philosophy in general, much less in the possibilities of *Nyāya* studies for the revival of Indian thought. Following his pioneering work, Professor D.H. Ingalls of Harvard University, a distinguished Sanskritist, brought out a very significant work on *Navyanyāya*, after having studied the intricacies of *Navyanyāya* with some of the most authoritative pandits in Calcutta. His book entitled, *Materials for the Study of Navy-Nyāya Logic*³ was a pioneering work, published in 1951. Though neither extensive nor exhaustive—actually the work contains a translation and interpretation only of a few sentences from the section on *vyāpti* in the *Tattvacintāmaṇi*—the book of Ingalls played an important role in the revival of interest in *Navyanyāya* in recent times. This was partly because the book came from the pen of a renowned Sanskritist and partly because it was written in a lucid style even when it treated altogether abstruse topics.

The tradition of the work of Ingalls was continued by Prof. B.K. Matilal, who was probably the most outstanding contemporary scholar in *Nyāya*. He was the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford and the editor of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. His first major work deals with *The Doctrine of Negation in*

Navyanyāya,⁴ in which he goes much further than Ingalls himself in treating the basic concepts of *Navyanyāya* along with a translation and interpretation of the section of 'absence' in the *Tattvacintāmaṇi* by Gaṅgeśa. His other important works are *Logic, Language and Reality*⁵ where he discusses the important themes in Indian philosophy mostly from an analytical point of view as developed by *Nyāya*. His most recent work on 'perception'⁶ is a penetrating study of this topic from the *Navyanyāya* perspective, taking into account the modern development, particularly the Anglo-Saxon philosophical traditions.

A Dutch scholar by name C. Goekoop has done commendable work in translating and commenting on the section of 'inference' in the *Tattvacintāmaṇi* of Gaṅgeśa.⁷ His method has, however, limited value since he does not take into account the earlier *Naiyāyikās* nor the commentaries of Gaṅgeśa. Fruwallner has done considerable service by his few articles on Raghunāthaśiromani drawing attention to the corpus of writing in the form of commentaries on the *Tattvacintāmaṇi* of Gaṅgeśa between the times of Gaṅgeśa and Rahunāthaśiromani.⁸ None of these commentaries have been published and Frauwallner went about the work in the typical German fashion, going to the manuscripts themselves, studying them and drawing a picture of the actual development of *Nyāya* during this period. The present writer also has translated and interpreted a significant section of *Tattvacintāmaṇi*, namely the *īśvaravāda* dealing with the proofs for the existence of God.⁹ It is also the longest single section of *Tattvacintāmaṇi* so far translated and interpreted.

What is the central problem which *Nyāya* sets out to tackle with all the philosophical tools it has at its disposal? *Nyāya* and in particular, *Navyanyāya* studies with unparalleled rigour and exactitude the nature, the dimensions and conditions of human knowledge. And by common consent the philosophical problem par excellence is the problem of knowledge. With rare insights, both the old and modern *Nyāya* examine the problem connected with human knowledge and sets forth in detail the exact conditions in which valid knowledge is possible. But in so describing human knowledge *Nyāya* does not forget itself in the details of the questions. In fact, in and through the analysis of human knowledge, *Nyāya* presents us also with a self-understanding of the human person which deserves attentive study and unqualified appreciation. Thus its definition of *vyāpti* is not a sterile definition of the concept involved but profound description of an aspect of human knowledge itself and its true significance comes out when the *Naiyāyikās*

raise the question of the existence of a creator God and try to answer it positively based on their analysis of human knowledge. Similarly, the *Nyāya* treatment of word and its meaning has a very long history and development often in conflict with other schools—notably the system of Grammar—and is therefore practically unsurpassed in philosophical literature of all times. In this way one sees how the analysis of arguments which *Nyāya* presents on any topic is philosophical analysis in the highest degree.

This manner of philosophical analysis of knowledge is seen perhaps at its best when the *Naiyāyikās* raised the question of the existence of God. Here we find *Naiyāyikās* confronting themselves with the other schools of Indian thought, particularly the Buddhists. In fact one of the most fascinating phases in the development of Indian philosophical thought is the prolonged and persistent polemics between the Buddhists and the *Naiyāyikās*. The controversy extended over a wide variety of topics such as the nature of reality, means of valid knowledge and so on. The conflict, however, was most intense regarding the nature of inference and as a consequence the arguments purporting to establish the existence of God assumed great significance. While the *Naiyāyikās* tried their best to marshal arguments with superb logical acumen to establish the existence of God, the Buddhists sought every means that logic and reason had to offer to disprove the same. The *Naiyāyikās* give many arguments to establish the existence of a God who creates the universe and providently directs it. However, the most important argument is that from the causality of the world. As Gaṅgeśa puts it 'the earth and so on have an agent because they are effects' (*kṣityankurādīkam sakartykam kāvyatvāt*). But the true significance of this argument lies not so much in each of the arguments taken in itself, but from the context of the accurate and profound analysis of human knowledge which the *Naiyāyikās* undertake to present in their works. This context is nowhere explicitly mentioned, but it forms the very presupposition of most of the discussions on various topics and permeates them.

What is this context? Why does such a context necessarily raise the question of the Absolute? Primarily the context is epistemological. The *Nyāya* proofs for the existence of God presupposes a theory of knowledge according to which it is possible to raise the question of God whereas the Buddhists of the Dharmakīrti school propose a theory of knowledge according to which it is radically impossible not only to establish the existence of God but even to conceive an idea of him. Thus the *Nyāya* system has as horizon a theory of knowledge which renders possible the

proofs for the existence of God. That is why it could be validly asserted that in the *Nyāya* theory of knowledge the Absolute becomes the horizon of all knowledge and therefore, off all human activities. This aspect of the *Nyāya* theory of knowledge in all its details is not developed explicitly in the *Nyāya* treatises. In fact, to my mind, this aspect is more implied than explained in detail in any of the books. But of course it does not mean that such an interpretation is purely subjective. On the contrary, such an interpretation is based on the very foundation of the system itself.

In order to explain this it is necessary to speak about some of the very basic theories in the *Nyāya* epistemology. Intimately connected with it is the fundamental *Nyāya* theory about what is usually known as invariable concomitance or *vyāpti*. In fact, a large part of the *Nyāya* discussions on the theory of knowledge and inference in general, is all about this concept of *vyāpti*. Further, this concept is of primary importance in practically all the major systems of Indian thought. In fact, prolonged and persistent controversies ranged among the different ontological positions on the basis of this aspect of their theory of knowledge. The controversy was most acute between the Buddhists, especially of the Dharmakīrti school, and the *Naiyāyikās*. And the main point of difference between these two schools is that in *Nyāya* it is possible from what we have known we could assert also what we have not known, whereas the Buddhists would tend to deny this. But this, of course, is an oversimplified statement.

In slightly more technical terms the Buddhist position would be the following: We can know a thing whose existence we have not directly perceived only if that thing belongs to the class of things which could be the object of direct experience. And the *Naiyāyikās*, on the contrary, hold that we can, on the basis of the experience of those class of things about which we have direct knowledge assert the existence of a thing even if that thing does not strictly belong to the class of things that could be perceived. This in fact, in simplified terms, is the crux of the problem according to the Buddhist and *Nyāya* theories. Consequently the argumentations regarding the existence of God became the centre of heated controversy. *Nyāya* holds that it is possible for us to know the unknown from what we have known. It also means that this unknown need not necessarily belong to the class of those things which are already known, but according to the Buddhist system, as represented in the school of Dharmakīrti, it is necessary that this unknown thing should belong to a class of things that are already known. Otherwise we

cannot make any affirmation whatever about this unknown thing. Thus the epistemological presupposition of *Nyāya* theory of inference involves by implication, first of all the capacity of the human intelligence to rise above what is of immediate experience. We could further draw the important conclusion that this *Nyāya* theory implies that human beings cannot think except in the context of an Absolute. No theory of knowledge is possible without implying, at the same time, the existence of an Absolute and the inherent capacity of the human intellect somehow to grasp this absolute. And such an interpretation of the basis of the *Nyāya* theory of knowledge, particularly with reference to the concept of invariable concomitance is quite legitimate because it is based on sound philological and philosophical analysis of the texts concerned.¹⁰ This implies, therefore, that the *Nyāya* theory of knowledge can be adequately explained and validated only against the background of the basic and inherent capacity of the human intellect to rise above mere phenomena or objects which are directly perceived by it.¹¹

From this delineation of some of the central aspects of the *Nyāya* system of philosophy it can easily be seen that it enjoys a unique position in the history of Indian culture in general and that of Indian philosophy in particular. Here we cannot go into the most interesting question whether *Nyāya* contributes significantly to the problems of pure formal logic itself. Such a discussion would lead us again into quite technical and intricate analysis of argumentations. Suffice to say that any proper account of Indian culture and philosophy can be given only if we take into consideration the unique significance of the *Nyāya* system of philosophy. And such a presentation will naturally show also how *Nyāya* treats concisely much of the problems that are treated in contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy.

Further, systematic researches and interpretation of *Nyāya* can have wider implications. In fact they can be of tremendous help in the reconstruction and development of Indian philosophy and Indian culture and even in furnishing solutions for our social problems. In this way it contributes at least indirectly, to creating an India where there is social justice and peace.

For the development of Indian philosophy in general, *Nyāya* studies can be of immense help. This is because in global philosophy the reflections connected with language and logic have been at the centre of the stage for the last several decades. This is very much the case in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical traditions led by such seminal thinkers as Wittgenstein, Chomsky, and others. But this is also the case even in

continental philosophy where the later Heideggerian thought is very much centred around language.

What however, is not often realized is that in Indian philosophical tradition there has been intense philosophical activity concerning the various philosophical dimensions of language. Karl H. Potter rightly remarks: 'Western philosophers sometimes seem to suppose that the "linguistic turn" in recent philosophy is a unique phenomenon, a turning point in the history of philosophy. Perhaps it is, but if so, it took place many centuries ago in India.' While the contributions of the Grammar school on language is becoming known more and more through the works of scholars such as Subramanya Iyer, Gauinatha Sastri and so on, there is scope for extensive researches in the field of *Nyāya* philosophy of languages.¹²

In the revival of Indian culture also *Nyāya* studies can be of immense help. For long Indian culture has been interpreted very one sidedly as spiritual and metaphysical. While this aspect of Indian culture is not to be neglected, it should be complimented by the accurate and analytic spirit of Indian thought as is found in *Nyāya* tradition. That is why we should insist on what is positive in the development of *Nyāya* and evaluate it critically in an enlightened manner. This is very much the need of the hour. Reference may be made here to the recent discussions on the characteristics of the Indian mind. The late Professor Ramanujan of Chicago delineated the Indian mind as essentially grammatical.¹³ I would rather describe the features of the Indian mind in terms of the three rigorous *śāstras* — Grammar, *Nyāya* and *Mīmāṃsā*. *Padavākya-pramāṇajñāḥ* i.e. an adept in Grammar, *Mīmāṃsā* and *Nyāya* is the classical ideal of learning.

The effect of the revival of *Nyāya* philosophy need not be confined purely to philosophical and cultural circles. Anyone who is acquainted even in an elementary manner with the *Nyāya* argumentations especially of *Navyanyāya* will marvel at their exactitude and rigour. How did our culture as a whole seem to have lost this rigour and exactitude in the last couple of centuries? This is a question which I address to serious sociologists. Our culture, economy and social organisations should be characterized by the spirit of this exact thinking which *Nyāya* inculcates. Once we re-discover this spirit of exactitude and assimilate them and apply them to concrete problems in our individual and national lives we will not be far from realizing the dream of the founding fathers of our republic which has such a glorious past probably equalled only by few other civilizations of the world.

But for all these, systematic researches into the Nyāya tradition and enlightened interpretations of its thought pattern are absolutely necessary. First of all there should be critical editions of the vast Nyāya literature that remains still to be edited and published. This is especially the case with regard to the Nyāya works written during the three centuries that separate Gaṅgeśa from Raghunāthaśiromaṇi. Then there should be translations and studies of these texts according to the methods of the modern researches. Interested cultural organisations and individuals should come forward to do the work. If such work is systematically carried out in an enlightened manner then the results can be of great help in the reconstruction of our cultural heritage and the creation of a new India. Then we will realize that what Bloomfield remarked about Panini's Grammar, that it is one of the greatest monuments of human intelligence can be equally well applied to the Nyāya philosophical tradition.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Cf., for instance, the elaborate *History of Indian Logic* by Satischandra Vidyabhusana, Calcutta, 921.
2. Saileswar Sen, *A Study of Mathuranātha's Tattvacintāmaṇirahasya*, Wageningen February, 1924.
3. Ingalls, Daniel Henry Holmes, *Materials for the study of Navya-Nyāya Logic*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951. Unfortunately, after the publication of this work, Ingalls did not pursue his studies in Navyanyāya in any significant way. He turned his attention, rather, to Sanskrit literature.
4. B.K. Matilal, *The Navyanyāya Doctrine of Negation*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 1968.
5. B.K. Matilal, *Logic, Language and Reality: An Introduction to Indian Philosophical Studies*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1985.
6. B.K. Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.
7. C. Goekoop, *The Logic of Invariable Concomitance in the Tattvacintāmaṇi, Gaṅgeśa's Anumitinrūpaṇa and Vyāptivāda with Introduction and Commentary*, Dordrecht, Holland, 1967.
8. E. Frauwallner, 'Rghunatha Siromaṇi,' *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd und Ostasiens*, Vol. X, 1966, p. 86ff, Vol. XI, 1967, p. 140ff, Vol. XIV, 1970, p. 16ff.
9. John Vattanky, *Gaṅgeśa's Philosophy of God: Analysis, Text, Translation and Interpretation of Īśvaravāda section of Gaṅgeśa's Tattvacintāmaṇi with a Study on the Development of Nyāya Theism*. The Adyar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1984.
10. For further clarification: Cfr. J. Vattanky: 'Aspects of Early Nyāya Theism,' *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 6 (1978) pp. 393-404; Sasadhara's *Īśvaravāda: An important source of Gaṅgeśa's Īśvaravāda*, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 7 (1979)

pp. 257-266, and 'The Inference of God to Establish the Existence of God'; *Ibid* 10 (1982) 37-50. More recently, in my book *Gaṅgeśa's Philosophy of God*, The Adayar Library and Research Centre, Madras, 1984.

11. A further corroboration of my argument will find support in the way in which the *Naiyāyikās* answer to the basic objections of the Buddhists. The objection is: *kṣityankurādīkam na sakarṭrakam sarīrājanyatvāt*. Implied here is the assumption that the principle of causality holds good only within the realm of our experience. *Nyāya* denies this and asserts that the principle of causality is trans-empirical, i.e. transcendental. This is the implied meaning of the assertion of the *Naiyāyikās* that there is invariable concomitance between being produced and having an agent.
12. In this context mention may be made of my recent book: *Nyāya Philosophy of Language*, Sri Satguru Publication, Delhi, 1995.
13. Cfr. A.K. Rāmānujan: 'Is there and Indian way of thinking?' An informal essay, in Makim Marriott (ed.) *India through Hindu Categories*, p. 53. On this see also the comments of Fred Dallmayr, 'Western Thought and Indian Thought: Comments on Ramanujan,' *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 44, No. 3, July 1994, p. 527ff.