



THE CONCEPT OF PRĀMĀṆYA IN INDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract:

The present paper delves into the intricate concept of the validity of knowledge “*prāmāṇya*” in Indian philosophy, exploring into the diverse perspectives presented by various philosophical schools. With a focus on Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā traditions, the paper seeks to unravel the intricate theories of *parataḥprāmāṇya* (external validation) and *svataḥprāmāṇya* (self-validation), respectively. The central issue revolves around the nature of truth and falsity, examining whether knowledge is an inherent and self-evident quality or if its validity is contingent upon external conditions. Through a comprehensive analysis of primary texts and scholarly interpretations, this research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate epistemological frameworks that have shaped the discourse on the validity of knowledge in Indian epistemology.

Keywords : *prāmāṇya*, *svataḥprāmāṇya*, *parataḥprāmāṇya*, validity of knowledge.

Introduction:

The concept of *prāmāṇya* (truth) is one of the most significant and central concepts used in epistemological discussions in Indian Philosophy. All schools of epistemology in India are unanimous in holding that *prāmāṇya* should be the differential mark of *pramā* (true cognition/knowledge), even though they put forth divergent views regarding the precise nature of *pramā* and *prāmāṇya*.

The word *prāmāṇya* can be used in two different senses, namely (1) *pramāṭva* and (2) *pramākaraṇatva* /*pramāṇatva*. In the first sense *prāmāṇya* belongs to *pramā* and constitutes its differential character, whereas in the second sense it pertains to *pramāṇa* as its property of being instrumental in bringing about *pramā*. In this sense, *prāmāṇya* belongs to the various instrumental causes of true knowledge. In this case a distinction is drawn between *pramāṇa* and *pramāṇaphala* (*pramā*). Of these two senses the first one is logically prior because the very idea of being instrumental in bringing about *pramā* cannot be understood without understanding what is meant by true knowledge and in effect without understanding what is meant by truth.



The word '*prāmāṇya*' is derived from '*pramāṇa*'. The tadhita suffix '*ṣyañ*', which is generally used to denote an abstract sense, is added to it.¹ The word '*pramāṇa*' can convey three different meanings: (i) valid-cognition (*pramā*), when the affix *lyuṭ* is used in the abstract sense (*bhāva*); (ii) the cogniser (*pramātā*), when it is used in the sense of an agent (*kartr*); and (iii) the means of knowledge'(*pramāṇa*) when it is used in the sense of an instrument (*karaṇa*).² In Indian Philosophy it has been used in all the three senses. Here, the word '*prāmāṇya*' is related to its first meaning i.e., true cognition and denotes the truth of cognition.³ '*Aprāmāṇya*' is its opposite to it, conveying the absence of truth in cognition.⁴

In this paper, I would like to consider the following problems as to the truth and falsity of knowledge. The question arises as to how the truth and falsity of cognitions originate and are ascertained? In other words, we can ask whether the causes which produce knowledge also produce at the same time, its reliability or is knowledge produced one way and its reliability established by a subsequent operation of the mind?

Conditions of the Origin of Knowledge and Truth

When truth of cognition, for its origin (*utpatti*) does not require any extraneous cause, other than the causes of the origin of its cognition, it is called 'intrinsicity in origin (*utpattau svatastvam*)'.⁵ Similarly, when the truth for its ascertainment (*jñapti*) does not require any external cause other than the causes required for the apprehension of its cognition, it is called 'intrinsicity in ascertainment (*jñaptau svatastvam*)'.⁶ Contrary to it, the view that the validity of knowledge in respect of its origin and ascertainment both depends upon the fulfilment of an extra condition, it is known as *parataḥ prāmāṇya*.

Thus, the truth or falsity of cognitions can be explained in two different ways: intrinsic (*svataḥ*) and extrinsic (*parataḥ*). Each of them can be divided further into two parts from the point of view of its origin (*utpattau svatastvam*, *jñaptau svatastvam*) and ascertainment

¹ *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*. skt.-hindi-kośa, p.690.

² *Tattvārtha (rāja) Vārttika*, 1.49

³ *Jñānasya Yāthārthya lakṣaṇaṁ prāmāṇyam, Tarkabhāṣā*. (Keśava Miśra), p. 141, line 4.

⁴ *Aprāmāṇyam hi nāma prāmāṇyabhābah Śloka Vārttika vyākhyā Tātpariya, Tikā*, p.45, line 1.

⁵ *Śarvadarśana Saṅgraha*, p.565.

⁶ *Tarka-bhāṣā*, (Keśava-Miśra), p.136.



(*utpattaḥ paratastvam*, *jñaptaḥ paratastvam*). The key terms '*svataḥ*' and '*parataḥ*' literally mean 'from within' and 'from without' respectively.

Svataḥ Prāmāṇyavāda

The most prominent advocates of this theory known as *svataḥ prāmāṇyavāda* in Indian philosophy are the schools of Mīmāṃsā, the Sāṅkhya and the Vedānta.

According to the Vedānta, the word *svataḥ* applies in the case of the origin of true cognition as well as in the case of our knowledge of its truth. But then, the former application of this word does not mean that true cognition originates of itself or is not due to any cause. On the contrary, its origin as the Vedānta system holds is due to certain causes, but the causes concerned are the usual ones and not anything extraordinary characterized by the quality of excellence (*guṇa*) as held by the system of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas.

The Advaitins hold that the truth of a cognition is determined by the entire causal complex and that the complex of conditions that give rise to the cognition determine its truth also.⁷ No extrinsic factor is necessary to make the cognition true once it has already arisen. The cognition and its truth are not produced successively by separate sets of conditions.⁸ The reason for this is that it is not possible to determine a uniform and single, condition/standard of truth common to all cognitions.⁹ According to them, although true cognition and false cognition are equally due to the usual causes of cognition as such, these causes in the case of true cognition are free from defects (*doṣābhāva*), whereas in the case of false cognition they are characterized by the presence of defects (*doṣa*). Absence of defect is a condition for the truth of a cognition. This does not make the truth extrinsic for the reason that the truth can be said to be extrinsic only when there is dependence on some positive extraneous factor.

Again, if mere absence of defect is the cause of knowledge, this will lead to the fallacy of infinite regress. The absence of defect being considered here an operative cause, must have another absence of defect as its causal condition and so on. This means that the truth of cognition cannot be finally established. Hence, the truth of knowledge must thus be conditioned by the conditions of knowledge itself, it must be intrinsic to knowledge.¹⁰ Invalidity of

⁷ *vijñānasāmagrījanyatve saty ajanyatādadanyataḥ pramāyāstat svatastvam*: Citsukhi, p.122.

⁸ *na tu adhikaguṇam apeksate*, *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*. p. 109

⁹ *Pramāṇātre anugataguṇabhāvāt*, *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*, p. 109.

¹⁰ *Vedānta-paribhāṣā*, ch. VI.



cognition is extrinsic, is determined by defect, and is inferred from the failure of the cognition to lead to successful action.

The Sāṅkhya thinkers hold that both truth and falsity are intrinsic to cognitions that come to us through the *pramāṇas*. This view follows from the Sāṅkhya theory of the pre-existence of effects in its material cause (*satkāryavāda*). According to this view, causation is only manifestation of the effect that potentially pre-exists in the constitutive cause. Hence, the truth/falsity of cognitions as causally determined effects must be regarded as somehow inherent in the cognitions. If truth/falsity does not exist intrinsically in the cognition, it can never be produced / ascertained by any extraneous means as nobody is able to get smell from fire / oil from sand. Thus, the truth and falsity of knowledge are self-evident,¹¹

The Mīmāṃsakas and the Vedāntins maintain that all our experiences are intrinsically true, but sometimes they are rendered illusory/erroneous by some extraneous causes/factors.¹² Kumarila, an eminent Mīmāṃsakas while establishing that truth is inherent in all types of cognitions, for a faculty by itself non-existing cannot possibly be brought into existence of any other agency.¹³ He also agrees with the Vedāntins in holding that true cognition is generated by the usual causes of cognition in general, unaffected by anything extraneous to them such as *guṇa* (excellence) and consequently its truth is intrinsic (*svataḥ*). They declare that all apprehensions/cognition are intrinsically valid.

The Kumarila school of Mīmāṃsā is in agreement with the Vedāntins for the doctrine of *parataḥ prāmāṇya* of false cognition. Both Kumarila and Prabhākaras hold in common that agreement with its object is a characteristic feature of true cognition whereas disagreement with its object is a distinguishing feature of false cognition. The falsity of cognition alone is proved extrinsically by causes other than the causes of the cognition like discrepancy/defect.¹⁴ Doubt arises only when we recognise the defects in the causes of cognition like the defect in the visual organ. The doubt with regard to any particular cognition can be corrected by a

¹¹ *Siddhāntacandrikā*, p.20

¹² *Sarvadarśanasamgraha*, p.557.

¹³ *Ślokavārika*, 1.1.2

¹⁴ *Ślokavārtika*: II, p.85 and 87.



specified number of repeated cognitions on observations. They claimed that repeated observations carried out will certainly give true knowledge.¹⁵

The Mīmāṃsakas advocate intrinsicity of truth of knowledge both in respect of its origin and ascertainment. The truth of knowledge arises together with that knowledge and it is also known as soon as that knowledge is known. The very conditions which give rise to knowledge also give rise to its truth as well as to the belief in that truth. Thus, for them the truth of knowledge is self-evident¹⁶, and its falsity is known only when it is contradicted by some other strong cognition.¹⁷ This means that knowledge *per se* is true. If in any case it is rejected as false, that is only because it fails to lead up to certain expected results (*viparīṭavyavahāra*), and not because it fails to reveal its object. When any knowledge is as a matter of practical usage (*vyarāhāra*), called false, that is either because it is contradicted by some other knowledge or because it is perceived to arise from certain defects in its natural conditions. The falsity of knowledge is thus both constituted and known by external conditions other than the conditions of knowledge itself.

Parataḥ Prāmāṇyavāda

The Naiyāyikas maintain that neither truth nor falsity of cognition is self-evident. The two are inferred from its capacity or incapacity to produce successful activity.¹⁸ All our knowledge is tested by its practical efficiency in bringing about successful action (*pravṛtti sāmāthyam*). When our knowledge induces an activity which fails in bringing about the desired results, it is false, when the activity succeeds in bringing about the desired results, then the knowledge that started the activity is true. The truth and falsity of knowledge depend respectively on its conformity and non-conformity to objects / facts.

In Nyāya philosophy, the veracity of knowledge stems from the effectiveness of the conditions of knowledge (*kāraṇaguṇa*), while its falsehood arises due to deficiencies in these conditions (*kāraṇādoṣa*). Both efficacy and inadequacy represent distinct positive and negative conditions, respectively, which alter the general conditions of knowledge, resulting in its truth or falsity. Essentially, the specific nature of knowledge, whether true or false, is explained by

¹⁵ S. Radhakrishnan: *Indian Philosophy*. Vol. II, p. 404-405.

¹⁶ *śvataḥ sarvapramāṇānāra prāmāṇyam iti grhyatām. ŚlokaVārtika*, p. 48.

¹⁷ *doṣataś cāpramāṇatve svataḥprāmāṇya vādinām. Śloka-Vārtika*, p.49.

¹⁸ *pramāṇatorthapratipattau pravṛttisāmāthyād arthavat pramāṇam iti tasmād aprāmāṇyam api paroḥṣam ity ato dhvanyam api parata ity eṣa eva pakṣaḥ sreyān. Nyāya-Maṇjari*, p. 160.



particular characteristics of its general conditions.¹⁹ For instance, the general condition for perception is the interaction of a sense organ with an object. However, the accuracy of perception depends on specific factors such as the normal functioning of the sense organ, the proximity of the object, adequate lighting, and appropriate contact with the sense object. Conversely, when general conditions are altered or compromised by specific factors like illness, distance, darkness, or weak sense-object contact, perception becomes false. The same principle applies to inference and other forms of knowledge. Consequently, the validation or invalidation of knowledge is contingent on extrinsic factors distinct from the inherent conditions of knowledge itself (*parataḥ utpatti*).

Once again, according to the Naiyāyikas, the determination of the truth or falsity of knowledge is contingent upon external conditions distinct from the conditions inherent in knowledge itself (*parataḥ prāmāṇyaprāmāṇyajñapti*). The Naiyāyikas argue that if every cognition were self-evident, the possibility of doubt would cease to exist.²⁰ Conversely, if the knowledge of falsity were a result of the conditions of knowledge alone, erroneous actions would be eliminated. In other words, if truth were inherently self-evident, there would be no room for doubt or disagreement in matters of knowledge. On the contrary, if falsity were self-evident, illusions and disappointments would be non-existent. The inquiry into the truth or falsity of knowledge only becomes relevant after the emergence of knowledge itself. Knowledge arises initially as a pure cognitive act, and its subsequent classification as true or false is determined by external conditions.

Inquiring into the external factors influencing the truth and falsity of knowledge, the Naiyāyikas assert that both can be ascertained through inference. They posit that not all our cognitions are inherently true; for instance, we perceive the sun as moving from east to west, a perception that does not align with the actual motion. The possibility of such perceptual errors leads to the conclusion that the assurance of the truth of our knowledge can only be attained through an inferential or mediate process of reflection. It is argued that the cognition is initially apprehended through inner sense perception, while the validation of its truth is achieved through the application of inference.²¹

¹⁹ *doṣo pramāyā janakaḥ pramāyāstu guṇo bhavet, etc.. Siddhāntamuktāvatī, p.216*

pramā jñānahetvatiriktahetvadhīnā kāryyatve satī tadviśeṣatvāt apramāvat, Kusumāñjali, p. 207-09.

²⁰ *prāmāṇyaṁ na svatogrāhyam saṁśayaṁupapattitāḥ, Bhāṣā Pariccheda, p.221.*

²¹ *Tarkabhāṣā, p.94.*



According to the Buddhists, the inherent nature of all knowledge renders it invalid. From the available Buddhist logical texts, it appears that Dharmakīrti was the first among the Buddhists to delve into the issue of the truth of cognition. In subsequent periods, this theory underwent extensive discussions by scholars such as Śāntarakṣita, Kamalaśīla, Manorathanandin, and Prajñākara Gupta in their respective treatises. The Tattva-Saṃgraha and the Pañjika are widely considered as the most authoritative sources presenting the Buddhist perspective on the truth of cognition.

Dharmakīrti's perspective posits that cognition is inherently self-cognized, and its truth becomes apparent through subsequent successful activities. Therefore, prior to any such successful activity,²² every knowledge is to be regarded as false. In the Buddhist view, falsity is considered a natural aspect of cognition. This acceptance arises from the understanding that falsity, being a non-entity, cannot originate from discrepancies in the cause. Conversely, truth, being a positive entity, emerges in cognition due to the merits of the cause. This quality is also referred to as the 'Purity of Cause' (*Kāraṇa śuddhatva*).

The Buddhists adopt a negative definition of truth, characterizing it as that which is not false (*avisamvādakaṃ*). From this perspective, they conclude that falsity is inherent, while truth is extrinsic to knowledge. According to their stance, a knowledge is considered true if it reveals an object with a purpose (*artha or prayojana*), contribute to the accomplishment of a goal, or supports a successful volition (*saṃvādi pravṛtṭyanukūla*).²³ This viewpoint bears a striking resemblance to the modern pragmatic theory in the West.

The Nyāya theory of *parataḥprāmāṇya* (knowledge validated by external means) and the Mīmāṃsā theory of *svataḥ prāmāṇya* (self-validating knowledge) are likened to the Western theories of correspondence and coherence, respectively.

The theory of correspondence in the West asserts that truth is a definite and external relationship between two separate and independent entities. In fact, knowledge must align with external reality. Western realists maintain that the nature and criterion of truth lie in correspondence with external reality.

²² Svarūpasya Svato gatīḥ pramāṇyaṃ

YāyavahāreṇaPramāṇavārtika, 1.6-7.

²³ Tataḥ Artha kriyā-samartha vastu-pradarsakam samyag jñānam, Nyāyabindu, Chap. i.



On the other hand, the coherence theory, advocated by idealists, posits that 'Reality' is a concrete Identity-in-difference, a comprehensive entity immanent in its diverse interconnected parts. Truth, according to this theory, is the systematic coherence characteristic of a meaningful whole. Reality is seen as free from contradictions due to its harmonious integration.

Nyāya, aligning with Western realism, supports a realistic pluralism and contends that knowledge's nature involves correspondence with external reality. However, it introduces an indirect test for truth, emphasizing consistent (*saṃvādi*) and practical efficiency (*arthakriyājñāna*), thus incorporating elements of pragmatism. True knowledge, according to Nyāya, informs us of the existence of something where it truly exists/ predicates a character truly possessed by it.

Mīmāṃsā, akin to the coherence theory, posits that knowledge is intrinsically true. It shares with Nyāya the belief that valid knowledge accurately represents an external object, with correspondence being the nature of knowledge. Both agree that falsity arises from extraneous conditions. However, Mīmāṃsā adds that all knowledge is inherently true since all cognitions manifest corresponding objects, meeting the conditions of freedom from defects and non-contradiction. While coherence and self-consistency characterize Mīmāṃsā's understanding of knowledge, it differs from Western coherence theories by not conceptualizing reality as a concrete whole but as a juxtaposition of distinct, independent entities.

Conclusion:

In the diverse landscape of Indian philosophy, *prāmāṇya* emerges as a critical concept, serving as an important indicator/pointer for the legitimacy and accuracy of knowledge. As explored within different philosophical traditions, from Nyāya's emphasis on external alignment with reality to Mīmāṃsā's focus on internal coherence and the scepticism in certain Buddhist perspectives, *prāmāṇya* forms the very foundations of Indian epistemology. It acts as a guiding principle in determining what constitutes genuine and dependable cognition. The refined perspectives on *prāmāṇya* reflect a profound engagement with the nature of truth and the intricacies of human understanding across various philosophical systems, leaving an enduring imprint on the Indian philosophical traditions.



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