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BUDDHIST NOMINALISM: AN ONTOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION ON
UNIVERSAL

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Introduction

Is there any universal property that exists? In our day-to-day life, we talk about everything, including particular objects and abstract or universal objects. There is no problem with particular objects because we can justify the existence of these objects based on our function of sensory stimulations. But, when we talk about some abstract object or universal objects, like “cowness”, “roundness”, etc., we face the problem. Like the particular objects in the outside world, we cannot experience any universal property with the help of our sense organs. Now, the question is whether the universal properties really exist or not. If they exist, then how can we justify their existence? Or, if universal properties do not exist, how can we talk about universal? The problem of Universal is a deep ontological problem regarding the existence of universal. Let's look back at the history of Indian philosophy and Western philosophy. A serious debate can be found among different groups of schools regarding the ontological status of universal properties/ entities. The dispute between nominalism and universal realism concerning *universal* is the most famous. Both of them propounded a different point of view on universal. In this paper, an attempt has been made to show the ontological status of universal from Buddhist perspectives based on their epistemological and metaphysical grounds.

In Indian philosophical history, especially from the sixth century, a controversy emerged between Buddhist logicians who were nominalists and the *Nyāya* realist philosophical school. The *Nyāya* school and *Mīmāṃsaka*ⁱ hold a radical, realistic point of view concerning universal (*sāmānya*ⁱⁱ). They both accepted the existence of a universal and a concrete relationship between a particular object and a universal. *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* philosophy is considered universal (*sāmānya*) as an independent category (*padārtha*). According to them, universal is an independent category with an *inherent relationship* among a specific group of particulars. On the other hand, a critical examination of *Sāṃkhya* and *Buddhist* philosophy exemplifies an opposite point of view. Buddhist nominalism or *apoha-vāda* (discussed later in the below) is a theory that clearly rejected the objective existence of universal and its relationship with particulars.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, philosophers have given different theories over universal based on their own ontological point of view. Universal realists, like *Nyāya* Philosophers, explained that universal properties exist independently, like other particular objects in the world. According to them,

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“cowness”, “redness”, etc., are the inherent quality of a particular, and they exist independently. And therefore, for them, universal properties have their ontological status. For example, “This jar is blue”. In this example, three different entities can be articulated viz. “jar”, “blue”, and the property “blueness”. And for the *Naiyāyika[s]*, these three entities really exist independently.

On the other hand, for the nominalists, universal properties do not exist because we can't experience any universal property with the help of our sense organs. According to them, when we talk of a particular blue jar, we can only have the stimulation of a jar and the colour blue, but we never experience any blueness. For them, “blueness” is nothing but a name to identify some particular objects; we impose a common name and nothing else. So, “blueness”, “redness”, “cowness”, etc. are mere names for identifying particular groups of objects.

In Indian philosophy, *Buddhist* philosophers supported nominalism to explain the ontological status of the universal. Let us explain the Buddhist theory of nominalism.

Buddhist Nominalism (*Apoḥa Vāda*)

Buddhist *apoḥa* (*vedāgraḥa*) theory deals with the meaning of a word and the relationship between pure particular and universal. In everyday life, we perceive a pot, and identify the pot with the help of the name “pot”. In this example, the term “pot” is used for the universal property shared by many particular pots. Now, the *Buddhist* argues how sharing a common property (i.e., universal) to some particular objects is possible. To answer this question, we need to understand the ontological status of the universal. Their negative ontological aspects regarding universal are sometimes called “Buddhist Nominalism”.

However, to understand Buddhist nominalism or *Apoḥa -vāda* adequately, we must know about the history of universal in Indian philosophy. It is because the Buddhist *apoḥa* theory comes by rejecting the universal realistic view that *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* and *Mīmāṃsaka* supported regarding universal propounded. By a universal property, we understand a common quality that a particular group of objects shares. Indian great semantic Panini used three different logical terms to indicate universal. i.e., *Sāmānya*, *jāti*, and *akṛiti*.^{iv} How can we identify a word as universal? Indian philosophers used a technical suffix, viz—*Tva* or *ta*, to identify a word as a universal property. For example, the term “*gottva*” is universal because here we can see the suffix “*tva*”, and the term “*gottva*” refers to all particular cows. The suffix “*tva*” is identical to the western suffix “ness”. The Indian Grammarians distinguished between a particular object and a universal based on this suffix.

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However, a central debate between *Nyāya* and *Mimāṃsā* with *Buddhists* appeared between the fifth and sixth century BCE regarding the ontological status of universal. *Nyāya* and *Mimāṃsā*'s realistic view of the universal was rejected by Buddhist philosophers based on their metaphysical view on reality, i.e., *Kṣāṇikattva-vāda* (theory of momentariness).^v *Nyāya*- *Vaiśeṣika* philosopher accepted seven different substances (*padārthas*), which are called real^{vi}. They advocated universal (*sāmānya*) as an essential substance that plays a crucial role in identifying particulars. *Vaiśeṣika* philosopher explains that *sāmānya* is something that determines the “sameness” of some particular group of objects. For example, the universal “cowness” determines the identity of all particular cows by imposing the property “cowness”. So, for them, it is a real property like all particular objects and exists in mind independently. The question arises: if universal is a real property, how can we know universal? It is clear to us that if a universal property exists, its existence must differ from that of a particular object. We can perceive a cow, but we can never perceive any “cowness” outside the world. To answer this question, *Nyāya* philosophers endorsed the theory of *sannikarṣa* (we can say stimulation contact with the object) to perceive the universal. In their theory of epistemology, they have accepted six different kinds of sense contact (*sannikarṣa*) with the object. For them, like particular objects, we can perceive a universal property. For example, when we perceive a cow, at the same time based on “*saṃjukto-samavāyasannikarṣa*”^{vii}, we perceive the universal property “cowness”. So, there is no problem created regarding the knowledge of universal.

However, *Nyāya*'s argument about acquiring the knowledge of universal seems to be a useless clarification to define the understanding of universal. If we look at the view of *Nyāya* philosophers, they have made a mistake by displaying that we can perceive a universal property. If we can perceive a universal, then we must perceive the universal in the first case of our experience. Still, we cannot perceive any universal property in the first case of our perception. And it proves that a universal property is an abstract property, which is not perceivable. So, their understanding of the ontological value of universal is become false. As they provided, the nature of universal seems to be a baseless, arbitrary argumentation without any logical ground.

Dignāga was the most critical figure in Buddhist philosophy. From the time of Dignāga, a new tradition can be seen in Buddhism. His new practice in Buddhist philosophy is called the school of Buddhist logicians.^{viii} He is a *Yogāchār-Sautāntrik* philosopher. His tasks are to set an epistemological foundation that should conciliate the debate between *Yogāchārin* idealism and *Sautāntrikas* realism.^{ix} His epistemological view for knowing reality differs from *Nyāya*'s epistemology. Instead of accepting four different *pramānas* (valid means of knowledge) taken by *Naiyāyikas*, he carries only two, viz. perception and inference, and sets an opposite ontological view.

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The epistemological and ontological development made by Dignāga and Dharmakṛti is remarkable in Buddhist philosophy. Buddhist logic has been developed after that. The theory of *Apoḥa*, which is the paper's central point of investigation, is highly connected with Buddhist's epistemology and their ontological viewpoint. Dignāga defined perception as “something which is free from any kind of conceptualization” (*kalpanā-apoḥom*). The term “*Kalpanā*” from the definition as mentioned earlier of perception refers to conceptualization that involves certain qualities like naming, class, action, quality, etc. The definition, therefore, implies that when an individual conducts a perception, it must be free from any kind of conceptualization. Because, for them, perception consists of the first moment of contact between our sensory organs and the object. Since objects change in every successive moment, as a human being, it is impossible to formulate a determinate perception; therefore, the subject matter of perception (*pratyakṣa*) is only pure particular objects (i.e., objects of a particular moment). For Dignāga, in the case of perception, we cannot impose any label, i.e., names, classes, concepts, etc. This is to be noted that the fundamental principle of Buddhist philosophy, momentariness (*kṣanik-vada*), implies that “everything is momentary, nothing is called permanent”. For them, everything is changing at every moment, and that is why the journey of a seed to a big tree appeared. Therefore, only moments exist. They used the technical term “*svalakṣana*” to indicate the momentary existence of an entity. *Svalakṣana* is only the subject matter of our perception. Now the question is: why is perception not possible with any label? Buddhist philosophers argued that we need at least two different moments to conceptualize an entity. Conceptualization is a matter of our psychological function of mind. Perception is only a matter of stimulus function of our sense organs. So, when we perceive an object by a sense organ, at that time we cannot conceptualize the knowledge about this object. For conceptualization, we need another moment. The fact is that everything is changing at every moment. So, when we impose any quality over an object in the very second moment, the object that I perceived in the very first moment changes. And the consequence is we assess one's quality to others. It clearly shows that perception is free from any conceptualization. Buddhist scholars like Dignāga asserted that we can cognize only *sāmānyalakṣana* or universal (the conjunction of some successive moments), which is the matter of our inference (*anumāna*). Hence, conceptualization is purely a matter of inference, i.e., the construction of our mental psychological function.

However, it is clear to us that the Buddhist epistemological view indicates that the fundamental nature of the world is momentary. Based on this point of view concerning the real nature of reality, Buddhist philosophers divided the world into *pāramārthik-sat* (real world) and *samvṛti-sat* (conventional world). In the true sense of the world, it is free from labels; it is momentary and the only matter of perception. On the other hand, the conventional world is the fictional construction of the

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mind, and it has only pragmatics value. So, objects or such a thing as “cow”, “table”, “humans” conventionally exist. The real nature of the world is inexpressible in language. Language can be used only in our conventional world to refer to such an entity.

Buddhist epistemological point of view is the backbone of *Apoḥa-vāda* (theory of exclusion). The development of the *apoḥa* theory for showing how the meaning of words is related to pure particular and to reject the realist view over universal that different groups of thought like Nyāya propounded. As Tom Tillemans mentioned that:

“*Apoḥavāda*, that is, the position that words express some type of double-negative property, is a similar attempt to split the difference, in that supposedly allows one to express both a quasi-universal and particular.”^x

What does a word mean? What do we want to tell when you paraphrase the term “cow”? The term cow can be either used for a particular “cow” or the property “cowness”. As Buddhist philosophy concerns a word indicates a universal property. In the above case, the term “cow” refers to a universal property. i.e., “cowness”. Now, the question arises: how does the term “cow” refer to a universal property rather than a particular object? According to Buddhist philosophers (like Dignāga and Dharmakṛti), only pure particulars are composed by *Svalakṣana* (momentary). And the fact is that *svalakṣana* is incognizable. It is free from any kind of *Vikalpa* (label). So, to express or cognize pure particular with the help of language is impossible. What can we know? We can know only *sāmānyalakṣana* (universal), which is nothing but a fictional construction of the mind. This theory of Buddhist philosophers indicated that our conceptual framework of mind does not cognize the meaning of a positive. The meaning of a word is exclusion (*apoḥa*) of the double negative principle. For example, take the sentence “there is a red cow”. In this example, the word “cow” becomes meaningful positively because the reality is something inexpressible in language. So, the meaning of the term “cow” should be understood negatively as “non-not-cow”. In the case of cognizing the meaning of the term “cow”, we neglect the difference between the pure particulars, like, C1, C2, C3, etc...

However, based on the nature of the universal, Buddhist logicians can formulate another argument against the ontological commitment of the universal. It is argued by universal realists that universals are eternal, and at the same time, it is independent. If this is the case, then how is it related to particulars? Universal is a common property shared by some particular groups of objects. For example, the universal property “redness” is common to all red objects. Against this view of realism, the Buddhist logicians claim that two particulars share no common quality. They argued that pure

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particular is something “thing-in-itself”, independent, and not related. The real nature of reality (*pāramārtik-sat*) is something that is inexpressible in language. The reality we experience in our day-to-day lives is just a human psychological construction, which is fictional in the true sense. The words “cow”, “human”, and “table” are considered a name we use for our practical purposes. A name, according to Buddhist logicians, is our mental construction, which is neither external nor mental; it is an illusion of the human conceptual scheme.^{xi} This view of Buddhist logicians makes it clear that only pure particulars have the ontological commitment because, in the true sense, only the pure particulars exist. The ontological commitment is the commitment to the existence of an object or entity. Being universals are mental fictions do not exist. And this makes it clear that they have no ontological commitment.

In the *Pramāna-samuccaya*^{xii} by Dignāga and in the *Pramānavartikā*^{xiii} by Dharmakṛti developed the *apoḥa* theory. *Apoḥa* is the apprehension of the human mind by direct perception. For example, consider the universal property “U” shared by particular like P1, P2, P3, etc., is nothing but a fictional conceptualization of the human mind made possible by direct perception.^{xiv}

The Grammarian Bhartṛhari belonging to the fifth century A.D. provides an impact on Dignāga’s *Apoḥa* theory. In the *Pramāna-samuccaya*, Dignāga mentions Bhartṛhari’s view on universal. Indeed, the theory of universal, which Bhartṛhari provides, is different from Dignāga’s theory of nominalism. Bhartṛhari, in his *Vākyapadiya*^{xv}, mentions that a universal (*akṛiti* or *jāti*) is something that defines a whole class of particular objects, and the objects fall under this universal.^{xvi} According to Bhartṛhari, everything reduces from the higher universal, i.e., *Śabdabrahman*, and it isn’t easy to describe which term for universal or individual. A name, for him, expresses the universal property that it possesses. The name theory of Bhartṛhari, moreover, is explained by Katyāyana before the six hundred years of Bhartṛhari.^{xvii} According to Katyāyana, a name designates an object or thing because of the quality inheres in it. For example, the word “cow” refers to a particular cow because it possesses the quality “cowness”. However, the theory of name as developed by Grammarians (Katyāyana and Bhartṛhari) is interesting in deciding the grounding occurrence of the name. Both of them (Grammarians) have a similar view on name theory, but not identical. Katyāyana holds that a name is expressed based on its quality. Two terms are not related unless they are used as a compound name.

On the other hand, Bhartṛhari holds that a name is expressed on the basis of the universal, which is inhere in it. Indeed, both of them accept that because of this quality or universal, a name designates an object or refers to something. From the above view of Katyāyana and Bhartṛhari, it is clear to us that a name designates a substance (*dravya*).

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However, we already mentioned that the *Apoḥa* theory rejects any possibilities of universal property. This theory of meaning signifies the meaning of a word based on the exclusion or double negative principle. Let us explain the meaning of a word based on exclusion. Consider the sentence:

This has H

This has non non-H

If we look at these two sentences, we can see an element “H” composed with both these sentences. The element “H” used in the second sentence is a double negation of the element “H” used in the first sentence. The second sentence is based on the Buddhist logician’s principle of *Apoḥa*. In the first case, the element “H” denotes an object in space/time based on the universal “H-ness”. Likewise, in the second case, the element “H” denotes the same individual (non non-H) in space-time having a universal property “H-ness”). Here, the differences between the first and second occurrence of the element is based on the ontological ground. Buddhist ontology accepts only the ontological commitment of pure particulars, and the fact is that we cannot express pure particulars within the language. It states that we cannot say anything about a pure particular. The paradox is that whenever we talk about an object or entity, we try to refer to an object in space-time. For example, consider the sentence “there is a black cat”. Here, in this example, the term “cat”, as uttered by a speaker, signifies a particular cat, which is a matter of our perception. Buddhist logicians define perception as something free from any quality or label (*vikalpa*). We can't express something positively. So, when we cognize the knowledge of the term “cat” we use the principle of exclusion. As Radhika Herzberger mentions that:

“...the *apoha* doctrine of Dinnaga is a complex built out of the three separate operations of abstraction, deletion and negation. The three-fold operation functions on a three-fold content associated with names: a name associated spatio-temporal content, which is abstracted of its unique features and left with a residual unity (*ekatva*) a name associated denotative complement associated with name, the universal, whose complement is negated.”^{xviii}

The *Apoḥa* theory of Buddhist logicians takes development through different stages. In *The Buddhist Philosophy of Universal Flux (Calcutta, 1935)* Satkari Mookerjee mentions that different Buddhist logicians propound three stages of development of *Apoḥa-vāda*: (a) Dignāga’s and Dharmakṛt’s theory of negative principle, (b) positivists like Santaraksita and Kamalaśilā, and (c) the synthesists like Ratnākṛti.^{xix} However, among these stages of development of *Apoḥa* theory, the

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neglected theory by Dignāga and Dharmakṛti was more highlighted. Some philosophers mention that the development of *Apoḥa* theory that appeared in Dharmakṛti's *Pramāna-vartikā* is a more satisfactory explanation of the theory of meaning from Dignāga's *Apoḥa* theory.

Conclusion

The *Apoḥa* theory, as discussed above, signifies that the ontological commitment of a universal is impossible. The nature of reality, according to Buddhist philosophers, is momentary. Only momentary, i.e., *svalakṣana* have ontological value. It is the *paramārtik-sat* (absolute world). The world of language is a mental, psychological construction and, at the same time, fictional. Within the realm of language, we talk about objects by giving them a particular name. For example, to describe the object table, we use the name "table". And, the utterance of the term signifies the particular object, i.e., table. The grammarians, like Katyāyana and Bhartṛhari, hold this view as a name and reference theory. A name, according to them, designates a particular object because of its quality or universal property, which is a common property. So, there is a relation between a particular and a universal, and the relation is called "inherence" (*samavāya*). The Buddhist metaphysical view of reality rejects this realist view. According to Buddhist logicians, everything is momentary, and that is why everything changes in every moment.

Two different moments signify two different pure particulars, which I shall call atoms. Between two pure particulars, there is no similarity; both are independent of each other. The only principle, i.e., the dependence origination (*pratītya-samudpāda*) can apply here. The journey of a seed from a sprout to a big tree was made possible with the principle of dependent origination. This principle states that every moment gives birth or another moment and destroys himself. So, the second moment depends on the first moment. This dependence origination does not provide that there is a similarity between two different pure particulars or that they have any common quality. A name indeed signifies something when it is used in language. According to Buddhist logicians, a name signifies a universal. For them to cognize the pure particular, we need at least two different moments. The fact is that the pure particular which appeared in the very first moment gives birth to a new pure particular in the second moment and destroys himself. So, to describe a pure particular within the realm of language is never possible. This indicates that a name can never designate a pure particular; rather, it designates a universal property. For example, consider the sentence "this is a cow". In this example, the term "cow" designates the universal property "cowness", not a particular cow, according to Buddhist logicians. It should be mentioned that in our everyday language, when we utter a name, we want to designate the particular object we perceive. Here, the inconsistency arises in Buddhist epistemology. And that is

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why they make a distinction between the practical world and the real world. The real world, which is composed of pure particulars, is inexpressible in language. On the other hand, the practical world of our everyday life is constructed by our language. The practical world is nothing but the fictional construction of language. The Buddhist definition of perception makes it clear that it is free from any label. We can cognize the knowledge of an object through inference. According to them, the inference is not valid. Only there is *svalakṣana*, and it can be known only through perception. So, the knowledge we claim about the objects is merely fictional, *which is the conceptualization of the human mind*. So, talking about universal, like “cowness”, “horseness”, “redness”, etc. are mere names. In the end, it seems to us that Buddhist nominalism is like a scientific theory because there is no doubt that the real nature of reality is changing at every moment. Only there exists pure particulars and changes. So, to think about something eternal is totally making him a fool. The universal realists, like Nyāya, hold that the eternal is the necessary feature of the universal. Within the realm of change, nothing is eternal and permanent. So, talking about universal is nothing but *the illusion of the human mind*.

ⁱ One of the oldest Indian philosophical schools especially known for their epistemological concerns.

ⁱⁱ *Sāmānya* has been considered an important category among the seven categories those accepted by Nyaya-Vaisesika to refer a class of a specific group.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stcherbatsky, TH. *Buddhist Logic*. Vol. I, New Delhi: Matilal Banarasi Das Publishers, 1994. Pp.48.

^{iv} Siderits, Mark, Tillemans, T. & Chakrabarti, Arindam. *Apoha Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition* (edited). New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. Pp. 2.

^v *Ibid*, Pp.4

^{vi} From Nyaya perspectives the term “real” and “existence” must be understood from different points of view. Existence here indicates to the objects of our sensory stimulation; on the other hand, real refers to the ontological status of an entity that must not be understood on the basis of existence as like a particular object. Some entity may not exist but they can be real like *Sāmānya* and *Samavaya* as discussed by Nyaya-Vaisesika.

^{vii} The Nyaya school of Indian Philosophy accepted six different types of *sannikarsa* for cognizing an ordinary person. *Samyukta-samavaya sannikarsa* is one among them.

^{viii} Siderits, Mark. *Indian Philosophy of Language* (edited). Springer-Science + Business Media, B. V., 1946. Pp. 87.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, Pp. 87.

^x *Op. Cit.*, *Apoha Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition*, Pp. 52.

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^{xi} Opp. Cit., *Buddhist Logic*, Vol. II, Pp. 411.

^{xii} *Pramana samucchaya* is one of the greatest philosophical treatises of Buddhist Philosophy especially *Buddhist Logic* by Dignaga, later included in *A Dictionary of Buddhism* by Damein Keown in 2014.

^{xiii} *Pramanavartika* is another great Buddhist Philosophical Treatise, later translate by Raniero Gnoli with the title *The Pramanavartikam of Dharmakriti*, published by Roma in 1960.

^{xiv} Opp. Cit., *Apoha Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition* (edited). Pp. 55

^{xv} *Vakyapadiya* is a great work by Bhatrihari on philosophy of language later translated by K. Raghavan Pillai with the title *The Vakyapadiya*, published by Motilal Benarasidas in 1971.

^{xvi} Matilal, Bimal Krishna & Evans, Robert D. *Buddhist Logic and Epistemology* (edited). Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1986. Pp. 144.

^{xvii} Ibid, Pp. 146.

^{xviii} Ibid, pp.153.

^{xix} Ibid, Pp.171.