Language and Reality:
The World-View of the Nyaya-Vaisesika System of Indian Philosophy

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No system of philosophy can be developed without the world-view of the philosopher.[1] One can examine the truthfulness of this statement even in the context of Indian philosophical systems. There are six astika darshanas and three nastika darshanas. Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisesika, Purvamimamsa and Uttaramimamsa are the astika-darsanas and Buddhism, Jainism, and the Carvaka-darshana are the nastika-darsanas. The first six are called astika because they believe in the authoritativeness of the Vedas and the later three are called nastika because they do not accept the authority of the Vedas. The classification of astika and nastika has nothing to do with the believing and non-believing in God. There is nirisvara-samkhya and Purvamimamsa which did not accept God and Vaisesika too did not believe in God during its early development and still they are called astika-darsanas.[2]

Although Nyaya and Vaisesika were distinct systems of thought in their initial period of development, they started merging gradually because of coming closer and closer in their world-views and by the nineth century AD the merger seems to be very close. This can be drawn from the following statement of Jayantabhatta, the celebrated Kashmiri logician of the 9th century AD:

Vaisesikah asmad-anuyayina eva (Nyayamanjari, Ahnika I)[3]

Purvamimamsa develped into three schools: Bhatta, Prabhakara and Murari.

Uttaramimamsa or Vedanta manifested in various forms: Advaita, Dvaita, Visistadvaita, Bhedabheda, Acintyabhedabheda and so on.

Even Advaita did not remain one. There is Advaita of Sankaracarya, Advaita of Bhartrhari, Advaita of Kashmir Saivism and Suddhadvaita of Vallabha.

Notable fact is this that all Vedantins, whether a Dvaitin or an Advaitin or a Visistadvaitin or a Suddhadvaitin, claim distinctness of their respective system of

philosophy on the evidence of the same Upanisads. Sometimes, the same Upanisadic sentence is quoted in favour of Advaita and also for Dvaita[4].

How could all this happen? Obviously, the philosophers enjoyed complete freedom of interpretation. The same sentence is interpreted in one way by the Advaitins and in another way by the Dvaitins. This difference in interpretatiion is based upon diferent sets of presuppositions or world-views held by diferent philosophical systems. The Purvamimamsa provided a powerful tool of treating some statement as metaphorical or Arthavada.[5] This has been freely used by philosophers of different schools as per their convenience. Thus, while the identity statements of the Upanisads are cited by the Advaitins to support Monism, the same sentences are treated as metaphorical by the Dvaitins.

These presuppositions of a particular philosophical system are the world-views of that system. A world-view is constructed by a philosopher over a period of time, out of direct experiences and reflections on the heritage inherited.

The Vedanta systems adopted a top-down model. It starts from the Upanisadic sentences and prepares the set of presuppsitions and wants to offer a logical basis to our experiences of plurality. If, for instnce, one brings the following Vedic statements together, they can very well help develop a world-view of Monism:

1. *ekam sat, viprah vahudha vadanti* (The Truth is One, wise men call it by various names).[6]

2. *Tat tvam asi* (You are the same Truth).[7]

3. *Aham brahma asmi* (I am the same Truth called Brahman).[8]

4. *Sarvam khalu idam brahma* (All this world of plurality is nothing but the same Brahman).[9]

5. *Prusha eva idam sarvam, yad bhutam yat ca bhavyam* (All that is present today, was present yesterday and will be present tomorrow, is nothing but the same Truth called Purusa or the Brahman).[10]

Obviously, these statements helped the philosophers, who tried to agrue in favour of Advaita, develop a set of philosophical world-views or presuppositions. This is what I call a **top-down moldel** of philosophical enquiry. Here, the Truth is presupposed to be One and in support of this presumption the Vedic statements are quoted. In other words, in this model the enquiry begins by accepting the validity of the Vedic statements.

Nyayasastra, on the other hand, offers a **'down-to-top' model** of enquiry and anlysis. The Naiyayikas start with analysing human experiences and ultimately demonstrate, how the Vedic sentences too say the same thing. In other words, the Vedic sentences are brought at the end to corroborate what has been arrived at by the application of logic.[11] Truth is not assumed first, rather Truth is arrived at by logical analysis.

The system of Nyaya-Vaisesika, therefore, believes that the world of our experience is plural, not only at the level of experience but also at the Source-level.[12] The 'Many' of our experience have emerged from the 'Many' of the Source. The plurality of the experience is as much true as their source. Hence, the entire world is Real and ultimately Real. There is no degree in Reality like transactional reality (vyavharika satta) or constructed reality (pratibhasika-satta). Reality can be of only one variety ie. Parmarthika or ultimate Reality.

As God is ultimately Real so also an atom (paramanu). This system of Nyaya-Vaisesika understands only dichotomy. If x exists in this world, it has to be real and if it does not exist and astill if we talk about it, it has to be taken as constructed or unreal and hence fictcious (alika or asat).

Such a world of plurality is accessible to us because we behave with this world all our life. We know seuch a world exists because it becomes object (visaya) of our knowledge and the knowledge reveals it with a Name (naman) and a Form (rupa) and also because our behviour is not frustrated (saphalapravrtti)[13]. Had there not been this world we could not have behaved with it consistently. When we are hungry we take food and hunger is satisfied; when we are thirsty we take water and our thirst gets satisfied. Thus, plurality is the Reality.

When the knowledge of the world emerges the world too plyas the role of a cause (karana) and so unless it existed, independent of my knowledge, it could not cause its own knowledge. The world, therefore, is knowable (jneya) and nameable (abhidheya)[14].

Since it is abhideya (nameable), one can communicate its knowledge to others and can undertand what was going on in others' mind[15].

One position in our intellectual and philosophical history was this that the idealist philosophers like Sankaracarya and the Buddhists had held the view that language cannot caputre Rality. Language is a liar. The Truth, as it were, is beyond the scope of language (a-van-manasoh gocarah)[16]. The idealist concept of Reality is this that Reality is without any attribute and hence without a structure. All

structures are mental constructions and since language presents only structured Reality, language is a liar.

The Buddhist idealists too held that the universe consists of only two types of entities: (a) svalaksanas (attributeless particulars) and (b) samanyalaksana or a series or a chain constructed out svalaksana. Svalaksana alone is a Fact or Reality and the samanya-laksana is a mental construction. Only samayalaksanana can be expressed by language, whereas svalaksana is beyond language[17].

Thus, in the idealists' philosophy, Reality cannot be captured by language.

As against this position of the idealists, the Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophers took a stand that the entire world consists of structured entities (dharma-dharmi-bhavapanna-padartha) and the elements and relations which form the structures also belong to the Reality and nothing of it is constructed by mind and hence language alone can capture Reality. If it is held that language cannot capture Reality then we cannot establish Reality through language. We cannot even talk about Reality. All our wordly transaction (lokayatra) will remain unexplained.

The world appears before us with a Name and a Form and only after that worldly transactions take place. Only because the world is nameable we can share our experience with others. There can be rapport (samvada) in our behaviour only becaue language referes to the world. There is a private world and a public world. Language presents both with a Name and a Form. Both are very much real. This is why, the Nyaya-Vaisesika philosophers are called utter Realists.

For samvada (rapport), the world has to be a common and sharable world. If there were no samvada, life would have been entirely miserable. It is not the case that there is no visamvada (lac of rapport) in life, but there is visamvada because of some other factors and not because language does not refer to Reality[18].

With this analysis in the back-drop, the Nyaya-Vaisesika philosphers modelled the entire universe in terms of language. For them the universe is a grand total of Referents of language (padartha i.e. padasya arthah)[19].

This universal Set of referents called the world of our experience consists of two sub-sets: (i) a set of positive entities (bhava-padartha) and (ii) a set of negative entities (abhavapadartha). Reality is nothing more than these positive entities and negative entities.

Vatsyayana, the Nyayabhasyakara, beautifully put this fact as follows:

Kim punah tattvam? satas ca sad-bhavah, astas ca asad-bhavah/

Sat sad iti grhyamanam yathabhutam aviparitam tattvam bhavati/ ast ca asad iti grhyamanam yathabhutam aviparitam tattvam bhavati/[20]

In other words, knowing x as x and y as y is the knowledge of Truth. Knowing bhava-padartha as bhava-padartha and abhava-padartha as abhava-padartha is the knowledge of Truth or Reality.

It may be noted here that as bhava is a padartha i.e. Referent of language so also abhava is a padartha or Referent of language or an entity[21].

Bhava-padartha, then, is divided into six sub-sets namely, dravya (substance), guna (quality), karman (action), samanya (universal), visesa (particular) and samavaya (permanent relationship) and the abhava-padartha is divided into two sub-sets such samsargabhava (relational absence) and anyonyabhava (mutual absence). Samsargabhava is further divided into three types namely, pragabhava (pre-absence), dhvamsa (destruction) and atyantabhava (absolute absence).

Then each of the bhava-padartha-subset has been further divided into its further sub-sub-sets till we are brought to the actual world around us.

Thus, substance is classified into nine namely,

Prthivi (earth), ap (water), tejas (fire), marut (air), vyoman (sky), kala (time), dis (space), atman (soul) and manas (mind).

Qualities are classified into 24 types such as

Rupa (colour), rasa (taste), gandha (smell), sparsa (touch), samkhya (number), parimana (size), prthaktva (discreteness), samyoga (contact), vibhaga (disjunction), gurutva (weight), dravatva (fluidity), sneha (moisture), paratva (remoteness), apratva (nearness), sabda (soud), buddhi (cognition), sukha (happiness), duhkha (unhappiness), iccha (desire), dvesa (aversion), prayatna (volition), dharma (merit), adharma (demerit) and samskara (impression).

Karman (action) can be seen in utksepana (upward movement), apaksepana (downward movement), akuncana (shrinking), prasarana (expanding) and in gamana (any other movement like rotating etc.).

Samanya is classified in two types namely, para (wider or pervader) and apara (narrower or pervaded).

There are as many permanent substances so many visesa-s (particulars or distinguishing features).

Samavaya (permanent relationship) is said to be only one[22].

This is the plural world of our experience, inner (antara)[23] and outer (bahya), minute (suksma)[24] and gross (sthula), abstract and concrete[25], spiritual and mudane: right from an atom (paramanu) upto God, the creator[26] of this universe. Entire universe is knowable and neameable i.e. an entity or padartha. It can be captured by language and it can also be communcated through language.

This linguistic modelling of the universe by the Nyaya-Vaisesika system establishes direct correspondance between language and Reality[27]. This also shows that universe can be known by more than one way. As it can be known by the physicists' model or by the model of the mathematician or by the model of the cognitive science or by any other model of physical science, it can also be known by a linguistic model as demonstrated by the Nyaya-Vaisesika system of Indian philosophy[28]. This is simply amazing.

The linguistic model is more comprehensive because human beings understand only through language. No human understanding is possible without language. Language, on one hand, helps acquisition of knowledge of the universe with clarity, and on the other hand, facilitates verbalisation of human thought for sharing.

The Nyaya-Vaisesika modelling of the universe is a distinct contribution of India to human knowledge. It is profound and at the same time it has universal applicability. As long as human beings feel the necessity of communication and sharing, this system of knowledge is not going to be irrelevant.

It can offer insights to even computer scientists, cognitive scientists and any other system designer to make use of this knowledge in their domain of knowledge-systems. Computer- scientists, particularly those who are working in the area of Artificial Intelligence, machine translation and the like can profitably derive insights from this long tradition of Nyaya-Vaisesika system of cognitive analysis[29].

In fact, the linguistic modelling of the universe of the Nyaya Vaisesika system should be incorporated into the main stream of education so that the next generation of learners can develop innovative tools for enriching human knowledge in various fields of knowledge.[30]

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Endnotes

[1] See "The Plural World of Our Experience" by V N Jha in the *Journal of Indian Intellectual Traditions*, Vol. II no. 2, pp.147-152.

[2] See Introduction of *Tarkasangraha* of Annambhatta Eng. Tr. By V N Jha, Chinmaya International Foundation, Veliyanad, Kerala, 2010, p. xiii.

[3] Mysore Edition, Vol. 1, 1970, p. 9.

[4] If it is quoted by an Advaitin he will argue that it is an identity statement and hence it supports Monism and if the same is quoted by a Dvaitin he will take it as a metaphorical statement (arthavada) and hence it does not prove Monism, they will opine.

[5] Arthavada is a narrative sentence which does not convey any injunction. But it becomes meaningful only when it is contrued with an injunction. It either praises the act enjoined by the injunction or decries a prohibited act. The sentences are not intended to convey their literal meaning. This was used by the philosophers as an effective tool to treat some expression as a metaphorical expression as per their need in tune with the accepted set of presuppositions.

[6] Rgveda 1.164.46.

[7] Chandogya 6.8.7.

[8] Brhadaranyaka 1.4.10.

[9] Brhadaranyaka.

[10] Rgveda 10.90.2.

[11] For instance, God is established first on the basis of pararthanumana (deductive logic) and at the end the relevant Vedic statement is quoted in order to corroborate the conclusion of the Inference. In this way the validity of the process of Inference is proved and that of the Vedic statement is also established.

[12] Some philosophers held that the Source is 'One' and others held that the Source should be 'Many'. Out of these two variables Four possibilities will emerge: (a) +One +Many; (b) +One -Many; (c) –One +Many and (d) -One -Many. Here (c) is the position of Realism (Nyaya-Vaisesika) and (b) and (d) are the stand of Sankaracarya and Dinnaga respectively. (a) represents Vallabhacarya.

[13] Human behaviours are of three kinds: (i) pravrtti (going forward to get something), (ii) nivrtti (withdrawal); and (iii) audasinya (indifference). All the three types of behaviour are prompted by knowledge. If one gets what was shown by the knowledge it is a case of successful behaviour (saphala-pravritti) and it is concluded that the prompting knowledge

is saphalapravrtii-janaka and when the behaviour is frustrated, the knowledge is called viphala-pravrtti-janaka.

14 For knowledge to emerge as the knower, his or her instruments are the cause, so also the object (visaya) of knowledge is considered to be the cause of knowledge because as without the knower or his or her instruments the knowledge cannot arise, in the same way, without the object, the knowledge of the object cannot arise. Hence, object must be treated as the cause of its knowledge. This also proves that the world is independent of mind and it is not mind-dependent as the idealists hold.

15 The solves 'the problem of other mind' as discussed in the Western philosophical tradition. When one speaks, the hearer can know the mind of the speaker.

16 For the Idealists the Truth is atributeless and language can work only if there is some property in the thing which is going to be named. That is why for the Idealists the Reality is beyond language. If it is beyond language it has to be beyond mind. Only that can be expressed which can be known.

17 The Buddhist Idealists's world consists of svalaksana and samanyalaksana. Svalaksana is without any attribute and hence Real. Samanyalaksana is made of svalaksana. It is a construction and hence false.

18 The cause of visamvada is multiple. The process of knowing may be faulty; the object may not be fit for ordinary perception. The object may be at a far distance or may be so subtle that it cannot be the object of perception. Mind may be unsteady. There is a number of reasons for erroneous knowledge to arise.

19 There are as many things so many names (*yavadartham vai namadheyasabdah*). So what language refers to is real. If one prepares the grand total of the Referents of language he will arrive at the notion of the universe.

20 See the Nyayabhasya on Nyayasutra 1.1.1.

21 Whatever is existent is an entity. There are positive entities and also negative entity. Both a pot and its absence are entities. Language refers to both. The referent of the negative particle in a language is 'absence'. See, *The Doctrine of Negation* by Bimal Krishna Matilal, Harvard Oriental Series, Volume 46, 1968.

22 The *Tarkasangraha* is one of the best texts which present the linguistic modelling of the universe so clearly. See English Translation of Annabhatta by V.N. Jha, Chinmaya International Foundation Shodha Sansthan, Veliyanad, Kerala, 2010.

23 The entities like buddhi (cognition), sukha (happiness), duhkha (unhappiness), iccha (desire), dvesa (aversion), prayatna (volition), dharma (merit), adharma (demerit) and

samskara (impression) constitute our inner world and the rest constitute the outer or public world.

[24] Like *paramanu* (atom), *dvyanuka* (diad). See *Tarkasamgraha* of Annambhatta.

[25] Like manifest entities which are observable.

[26] The Nyaya-Vaisesika system believes in pralaya (delusion) of the creation. At that time there remain God, all permanent substances like atoms, sky, time, space, souls, and minds and the properties in those permanent substances, universals, particulars and the permanent relation called inherence. God's knowledge and desire are permanent. When He wishes to destroy, the destruction of the universe occurs and all the effects go back to their initial states. When again God will have desire to create He offers forms to the effects step-by-step. See Prasastapadabhasya (GOS No.164 edition pp.60-64) and Kiranavali of Udayanacarya thereon.

[27] Reality becomes object of thought (jnana) first and then thought is expressed by language. Hence, Reality is related to language directly by thought. The Nyaya-Vaisesika system does not believe in bauddha-padartha (conceptual referent). The universe consists of Referents.

[28] Physicists' method is observation in phisical laboratory and analysis of the observed data. Hence their statements are Physical Laboratory Report. Nyaya-Vaisesika system's statements, on the other hand, are the results of language analysis since language is treated as encoded thought. This analysis is, therefore, a cognitive analysis. See *Nyaya-Vaisesika Metaphysics* by Sadananda Bhaduri published from Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune.

[29] The system of Nyaya-Vaisesika will provide deeper insights for preparing Wordnets of various languages, for improving the process of inferencing, for preparing software for machine translation and for many other areas of application. Many computer scientists are already engaged in these jobs.

[30] This system will generate competence in the students to analyse human thoughts which is the minimum requirement for engaging oneself in any intellectual activity. This knowledge-treasure created and developed by our forefathers must be made available to one and all by incorporating it in the main stream of education.