

The Mādhyamika Doctrine of Śūnyavāda

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the research paper is to understand the doctrine of Śūnyavāda in Buddhist philosophy. Every system of philosophy want to know and establish the ultimate reality by its own way, but everyone has faced a criticism in one way or the other way. Śūnyavāda is also an effort to establish the reality by demonstrating the various facts. This doctrine is also said to be middle path by avoiding the extreme position of affirmation and negation. The world, we perceive is an empirical world of phenomena and all elements of the world have relative and contingent reality. Śūnyata is only ultimate reality.

Key Words : Mādhyamika school, Existence, Non-existence, Relative phenomena, Essence, śūnyata

INTRODUCTION

The Indian philosophical thinkers over the centuries have been busy to unrevealing the real nature of cosmic and super cosmic reality. The quest to know the supreme real exist in the Indian thought from the days of Rig-Veda to contemporary time. It is very difficult for the thinkers or curious minds to remain content that the knowledge of supreme reality can be obtained. To see the futility of all his endeavours to find out the supreme reality has drawn the thinkers towards nihilism, which is the cry of philosophic despair.

The origin of Śūnyavāda lies not merely in the sporadic statement of the Tripitakas, where absolute negation is sanctioned, but in the further past where non-existence is posited, sometimes even as an entity. The Rigveda says that in primeval times existence was born out of non-existence¹. The Kathopanishad contains a reference to eschatological nihilism². So, this notion may have strengthened the belief in non-existence or negation as a category: The concept of Samjnāvedayilā – Nirodha mentioned in early Buddhism, had prepare the ground for the negation of the percipient consciousness and even for its extinction.

The notion of Śūnyavāda in Buddhism has shown similarity to some prepositions of Śamkhya-Yoga system of Philosophy. In the Śamkhya system, there is a description of the human self. When there is a complete cessation of the fluctuation of the mind stuff where as in Patañjala-Yoga, there is a description of the asamprajñata Samadhi, when the yogi realises almost the nothingness of his empirical self: **svarūpaśunyamiva arthamātranirbhāsam**.

Nāgārjuna, who is regarded as the greatest Buddhist Philosopher, founded Mādhyamika School of philosophy, The Philosophy of the Middle path. At the heart of the middle path is the concept of Nihilism (Śūnyata), Being a nihilistic philosopher, Nāgārjuna tried to establish his concept

of śūnyavada through demonstration of the falsity of all concepts like Gati (motion) Sambhāva (origination), Vibhāva (extinction), Samsarga (contact), Jāti (General characterises), Cerception, Samskārah (composite entities), Time (kāla), Svabhāva (inner essence) etc. We can compare it with Bradley's thought when he refuted the existence of external objects. Bradley also criticizes the existence of external entities just like things and qualities, space and time, self, motion and casualty, relations etc. While comparing the views of Nāgārjuna and Bradley; Stcherbatsky says "From the Indian standpoint Bradley may be characterized as a genuine Mādhyamika"³.

Nāgārjuna and his followers establish the doctrine of Nihilism (Śūnyata) by employing dialectical method with a devastating finality till he ended in universal scepticism and denied any specific predication regarding any entity⁴.

The Mādhyamikas school of Buddhist philosophy regarded external objects and subjective cognition to be equally essenceless (nihsvabhāva) with the śūnya as their eternal basis. They also regarded subject and object, and all object of thought as relative and conditional and, therefore, essenceless. They posit the reality of the śūnya which is the external and absolute reality. It is predicateless. It is not void or nothingness.

Nāgārjuna, the founder of Mādhyamika School argues for the concept of Nihilism (Śūnyata) of all entities and categories from the fact of their dependent origination *i.e.* Pratityasamutpāda. This dependence or conditional character impart on element of contingency and thus makes the essences (svabhava) unascertainable. Nothing has its own independent nature (svabhāva). Heat is not the essential nature of fire, for it heat is generated by its cause and conditions, and therefore produced and transient. The essential nature of thing must be independent of other things. If the things do not have the essential nature (svabhāva) then they cannot have other nature of the things (Parabhāva). In the absence of self-nature (svabhāva) other nature (Parabhāva), it is not a positive ending (bhāva). Nor is a negative entity or non-entity (Abhāva), self nature, other nature, being and non-being cannot be predicated of anything.⁵ The characteristics *i.e.* Laksana cannot exist apart from the characterised things. They are relative to each other. Therefore, they are not real.⁶

The Nāgārjuna accept the three degree of truth or we can say knowledge. The śūnya is the absolute truth (Paramārtha Satya). It corresponds to parinispāna knowledge of the Vijñānavādin. It is beyond the phenomena. The relative world of phenomena is relative truth (saṃvṛti satya). Saṃvṛti is the veil of ignorance (avidya). It veils the nature of the reality.

The nature of things is determined by its cause and conditions. It is relative, contingent and dependent nature of phenomena. Saṃvṛti satya (Relative truth) corresponds to dependent knowledge of the Vijñānavādin saṃvṛti is of two kinds, loka Saṃvṛti and aloka saṃvṛti. Loka saṃvṛti is relative truth of the external object which are recognised by common people as empirical realities. Aloka-saṃvṛti is the illusory truth of illusions of a yellow conch-shell, double moon, and the like, which are not shared by common people, but which are perceived by the perverted sense organ of certain individuals. Paramārtha Satya *i.e.* absolute truth cannot obtain without relative truth, which is the indispensable step to it. Those, who do not understand the distinction between the two kinds of truth, cannot know the real depth of Buddha's teaching. The Mādhyamika does not deny the relative truth of the empirical world of phenomenon, which is admitted to be real by common people, but he denies its absolute truth. He affirms the absolute truth of the śūnya which explain the world phenomenon. The absolute is the truth of phenomenal world.⁷

The Mādhyamika school of Buddhist Philosophy is so called because it adopts the mean between extreme affirmation and extreme negation⁸. So, it adopts absolutism on the basis of relativism, the śūnya is the absolute. It is the essence of the relative world.

By his dialects Nāgārjuna has shown that all categories of thought were self-discrepant and therefore relative, essenceless or ultimately unreal. Subject and object, substance and quality, whole and part, cause and effect, time, space, relation, compounded and un-compounded dharmas, change motion, rest, self nature (svahāva) other nature (Parabhāva), knowledge, self, God, Samsāra and Nirvāna are self discrepant and, therefore, relative or ultimately unreal.

The plurality of external objects and internal cognitions has been rejected by the Mādhyamika school because of their relativity, and posits the existence of the unique, indefinable (anirvacaniya) essence of being, the one-without-a-second. All the elements have relative and contingent reality. The śūnya is the only absolute reality. "The unique reality, although declared to be uncharacteristic (anirvacaniya), has been variously described as the element of the elements (dharmadhātu) as their relativity (śūnyata), as thisness (idamatā), as their relation to thisness (idampratayata), as suchness (Tathata), as the suchness of existence (bhutatathatā), as the matrix of the lord (Tathagatagarba), and as the cosmic body of the lord, as Buddha's Dharmakāya."⁹

Buddha is cognised by mystic intuition as real and eternal, sometimes śūnya and aśūnya both and said to be unreal because they are relative to each other.

This doctrine of Nihilism is the middle path (Mādhyama Pratipada) between existence and non-existence, between essenceless (śūnya) and essence of being (aśūnya)¹⁰. Śūnyata is not produced by other causes; It is absolute calm (sānta); It is not expressed by empirical definition and characteristics (Prapañca); It is one (Ananartha). It is apprehended by supra-intellectual intuition (Nirivikalpaka).¹¹ All dharmas are essenceless, they are relative and contingent. They are in their essence inexpressible (anaksara). They are manifested as calm and pure in the state of enlightenment.¹² Nagarjuna the expounder of Śūnyata, has used this word in two senses, the relative and the absolute. All dharmas are relative (śūnya). But they are grounded in the absolute (śūnya). Relativism is not the absolute truth. The relative is the way to the absolute, which cannot be obtained without the help of relative Nirvāna cannot be attained without knowing the absolute.¹³ So, the reality has been called śūnya in order to refute all other views. But those who cling to the view of Śūnyata are incurable.¹⁴

Gati (Motion) is unintelligible. Motion means co-existence of the same thing in two positions. A move from 'B' to 'C', but cannot exist in 'B' and 'C' position at the same time. 'A' is not passing the path which has already passed. 'A' is not passing the path which has yet to be passed. The path has been passed and yet to be passed is incomprehensible. There is not a third path except the path which has already been passed and the path which is yet to be passed. The path which has already been passed over. The path which is yet to be passed is not yet. There is no present path which is being passed at present. Therefore, motion is impossible. If the moving thing is different from motion, then the moving thing can exist without motion and motion can exist without moving thing. The moving thing cannot be identical without motion, since there cannot be moving thing without motion, they can neither be identical with, nor different from each other. In fact, motion, the moving things and the path traversed are unreal appearances. They are not ultimate realities.¹⁵

Causality is unintelligible. A thing cannot be produced by itself, by another, by both, or by neither. If a thing exists itself. It cannot be produced by itself. If it is produced by another, then light would be produced by darkness. If it is neither produced by itself nor by another, it cannot be produced by both. If it is not produced by itself or by another, then light would be produced by the darkness. If it is neither produced by itself nor by another, it cannot be produced by both. If it is not produced by itself or by another, then anything would come into being at any time. An effect is said to be produced come into being at anytime. As effect is said to be manifested by its causes, basic

cause or support (ālabhana-pratyaya), immediately preceding cause. (Zamanantara-Pratyaya) concomitant cause (Sahakari-pratyaya) and dominant cause (Adhipati-Pratyaya). But its essential nature (svabhāva) cannot exist in its causes. The cause and effect can be neither like each other nor unlike each other. Neither the existant (sat) nor the non-existant (asat) can be produced, neither of them can have a cause.

Sometimes the effect is said to be produced by the collection of conditions, it should be perceived in it. But it is not perceived in it. If it does not exist in the totality of its cause and conditions then it cannot be produced by it. It may be produced by other causes and conditions. If the cause (hetu) is destroyed without giving rise to the effect, then the effect is produced after the destruction of its cause would be causeless. The effect cannot come into being along with the totality of its cause and conditions at the same time. Cause and effect cannot be simultaneous. If the effect comes into being after its cause and conditions. If the effect comes into being after its cause is destroyed and transfer its influence to it, then the destroyed cause would again be born. The present effect cannot be related to the past cause. There can be no relation between the present and the past, the known and the unknown.

The identity between cause and effect cannot be established nor the difference between them be established. And if cause is identical with effect, we cannot speak of them as cause and effect. If both cause and effect different from each other then the cause would be the same as the non-cause. Again, if the cause produces the effect, does it produce it with its essential nature? It cannot produce the effect with or without its essential nature. Therefore causality is inconceivable and self contradictory. The relation of cause and effect is incomprehensible. Causality is relative and empirical. In the absence of production there are neither compounded (samskrta) nor uncompounded (asamskrta) dharmas.¹⁶

Genus (jati) the genus or generality cannot exist apart from the individuals, both genus (Jati) and the individual (Vyakti) are relative to each other. In fact, there is no generality at all. The so called genus of cow (gotwa) is nothing but mere a negation of non cow. Generality (Sāmānya) is mere apoha or distinction of an individual from other things.

Knowledge involves distinction. Distinction is a relation. There is no absolute knowledge, all knowledge is relation. So, neither generic properties (sāmānya) nor specific properties (visesa) of individuals can be known. They are mere phenomena. They are not ultimately real.

Time cannot be measured, but can be classified as, the past, the present, and the future, they are relative to each other. They are not self existent, but exist in relation to each other. Then past is that nature of an object which was produced and has been destroyed. The present is that nature of an object which has been produced but not destroyed. The future is that nature of an object which has not yet come into being. If the present and future exist depending upon the past, then they would exist in the Past, since the thing which depends upon another thing must exist at the time when it exists, if they do not exist in the past. They cannot depend upon the past, if they do not past; they are non-existent like the horn of an ass. Just as the present and the future are non-existent apart from the past, so the present and past are non-existent from the future, and the past and future are non-existent apart from the present. The present, the past, and the future are unreal without relation to each other. They have relative and conditional existence. So, they are just mere appearance or phenomenon. Time existence only depends upon its relation to things (Bhāva). It can exist apart from them. Things are unreal. Therefore, time is unreal.

Space is devoid of colour, form, or visible matter and is characterized by non-obstruction. If it exists before its characteristic come into existence, then it would be devoid of its characteristic.

But space which is unobstructed cannot exist. There is no being of its characteristic, if unobstructed space exists; it cannot on its characteristics of non-obstruction. If the space devoid of non obstruction exists, then also it cannot be characterised by non obstruction, then unobstructedness of space cannot be established.

Space have no form, without material elements, form are not possible, so it is just a name. Nothing exist which is not produced. Nothing is eternal (śāsvata). Eternal space is mere imagination of common people. It is just a name, convention, and phenomenal appearance. Spatial relation is relative and therefore phenomenal.

Karma is an action that one performs during his life and became mature after sometimes and bears fruit (Kāramphala). If karma persists till its fruition, it becomes permanent. If it is transient, it cannot produce its fruit after an interval of time. If Karma produces its fruits by its inherent nature (svabhāva). It must be permanent, since nature cannot be altered. If Karma is permanent, it can be the result of activity. If it is not the result of activity, then there will be attainment of unacquired merit and demerit and there will be no distinction between the virtuous and the vicious. If Karma, either produced or unproduced by its cause and conditions, does not exist, then the actor does not exist. If karma and the actor does not exist, then the fruit of action also does not exist, if the fruit of action does not exist, then the enjoyer of fruit does not exist, therefore Karma, and fruit of Karma are as unreal as day dream, they are not absolutely real.¹⁷

The eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the skin, and manas are the six sense organs and colour, sound, smell, taste, touch and thought are the objects of these six sense organs. All these sense organ are the source of knowledge they exist in relation to each other. Colour cannot exist apart from eye: the eye cannot exist apart from colour. Sound, smell, taste, touch and thought cannot exist apart from the ears, the nose, the tongue, the skin, and the mind; they also cannot exist apart from the sound, smell, taste, touch and thought respectively. The sense organs cannot apprehend their objects.

The eye cannot see itself and therefore cannot see other object. It may be argued that the eye can see another object, thought it cannot see itself even fire can burn other object, thought it cannot burn itself. This is the false analogy the act of seeing is unreal like act of burning.

The object of seeing must be either what has already been seen or what has yet to be seen. The object seen is non-existent now. The object not yet seen is also non-existent. In the absence of the object the act of seeing is non-existent. So, knowledge is impossible. The known and the knower are non-existent. Knowledge depends upon the known and the knower. If the knower and the known are non-existent, knowledge is non-existent. Therefore, knowledge is relative and phenomenal, it is not absolutely real.¹⁸

So, the mādhymika denies the ontological reality of external object and subjective cognition because they all relative and contingent and not exist independently, affirms the ontological reality of the śūnya or absolute.

Several thinkers of philosophy has criticised the concept of Nihilism. Samkara, the founder of Vedanta Philosophy said in the Brahma-sūtra-Bhāṣyam that it is impossible to doubt the existence of the self conscious ātman or experiencing cogniser.

Descartes, also criticised the theory of Nihilism, because he said and proved the existence of thinker through his dictum, 'I think therefore I am'.

The Śamkhya dualism is established on the basis of the felt and cognised reality of both the experiencing continuum and the vital potentiality or prakriti. Thus non-existence appears to be a philosophical abstraction. Hence, among the exponents of the Vaiseshika philosophy, there was

disagreement as to the existence of *abhāva* as a separate primal category.

Nihilism also appears unsatisfactory on the basis of epistemological grounds. It is difficult to ignore the fact of sensation and cognition and these presupposes a dualism.

Naiyāyikas, who are the realist emphasise the point that the non-controllability of our perception and sensation is a demonstration of the power of the external world on the subjectivist thinker. The agonizing and tormenting experiences of the world are too powerful to make any thinker, who claims to have a conscience and is truthful, shudder to maintain the position that the content of the walking world is as intangible, impermanent and unreal as the dream world.

Cosmic phenomena are a vital, even preponderant fact of epistemological cognition and they cannot be denied and neglected since they are concretely experienced. Even on the pragmatic and melioristic grounds, it can be said that the way for human welfare lies in viewing the world as the manifestation of a supreme spirit rather than in denying the existence of the world.

Mahāyanā Buddhism itself demonstrates inadequacy of Nihilism. The attempts of Nāgārjuna, Areyadeva and Nihilistic writer could not check the growth of a transcendent conception of super soul in Buddhism. Even Buddha was regarded as a supernal and immanent highest deity in Mahāyanism. While on the one side, Śānyavadi philosopher was pointing out the inadequacy of all kinds of positivism.

In the medieval sect of Mahāsukhavādins like the vajrayana and the sahayayana, śūnyata was concerned not only as *anirvacaniya*, *sat* and *chit* but also as *anivacaniya sukha*.¹⁹

It is said that if the law of relativity itself is an omnipresent operative existence then it can be assumed the shape or form of an absolute. Thus total Nihilism whether at the highest philosophical level or at the empirical level cannot be sustained.

From the above discussion, it has been concluded that the concept of nihilism is developed to established the ultimate truth by rejecting the two extreme position *i.e.* extreme affirmation and extreme negation. Nihilist philosophers adopted the middle path to establish this concept and according to them every entity and category exist because of relativity. Nāgārjuna argues for the concept of nihilism by saying that all entities categories have dependent origination and relative to each other. All exist in relation for their existence; independently nothing is real. To establish the position of nihilism, thinkers have demonstrate the falsity of the concept like motion, genus, sense organs, causality, time, space, karma, and knowledge etc. Mādhyamika school has rejected the plurality of external object and internal cognition because of their relativity. As this school believe that all elements have relative and contingent reality. Śūnya is the absolute reality.

Nāgārjuna's doctrine of middle path between existence and non-existence, between essencelessness and essence of being. Śūnyata is not produced by other caused like other things have cause for their origination; it is absolute calm and it's not possible to express it through empirical definition and characteristic. But it is apprehended by supra-intellectual intuition.

This concept has faced a lot of criticism by the system of philosophy as well as the Māhāyana school of Buddhism.

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