

UNIVERSALS IN NYĀYA-VAIŚEŚIKA SCHOOL

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Abstract: One of the most common and difficult topic of philosophy is the problem of universals. According to Raja Ram Dravid, broadly we have two kinds of knowledge about things: sensuous and conceptual. Sensuous knowledge is the knowledge of sensation which presents a concrete and particular aspect, whereas conceptual knowledge is the knowledge of ideas, which is dependent upon knowing through the use of reason. There are mainly three views, namely, realism, nominalism and conceptualism. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā schools advocate realism, they believe that both the particulars and the universals are objectively real. The doctrine of *sāmānya* or *jāti* in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophy is the starting point of the controversy over universals in Indian Philosophy. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika takes realistic stand in its extreme form in formulating *sāmānya* or *jāti*. According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the external world reveals both diversity and unity. It holds that if there is no bond of unity among the things, then their comprehension would be beyond the reach of human intellect. Hence, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika gives the name *sāmānya* or *jāti* to these common features. One can analyze that the theory of the universal as an objective reality is the basic tenet of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika realism. For them universals are eternal and independent common characters that inhere in all members of a class. Nyāya claims that without universals no proper accounting can be given to natural classes. Again, without universals no proper account can be given, for laws of nature such as that heat expands bodies. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika explains the theory of universals from its pluralistic and realistic standpoint. They do not accept the universals at the cost of the particulars. The particulars are there, and they are united under the roof of the highest universal existence.

Key Words - *Sāmānya, Jati, Upādhi.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most common and difficult topic of philosophy is the problem of universals. According to Raja Ram Dravid, broadly we have two kinds of knowledge about things: sensuous and conceptual. Sensuous knowledge is the knowledge of sensation which presents a concrete and particular aspect, whereas conceptual knowledge is the knowledge of ideas, which is dependent upon knowing through the use of reason.¹ In other words, the objects outside the mind as presented by sensuous knowledge are particulars, whereas our concepts of them are general or universal. So the question is, are these general concepts true? Does this universal concept in the mind stand for something that is objectively real?

There are mainly three views, namely, realism, nominalism and conceptualism. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā schools advocate realism, they believe that both the particulars and the universals are objectively real. The Buddhist's view is known as nominalism or *apohavāda*. According to it, the universals are only names and not reals. The conceptualist view is defended by Vedāntins and Jainas. They say that the universal exists apart from our mind in the particulars, but not over and above them. In point of existence it is identical with the particulars.²

The doctrine of *sāmānya* or *jāti* in Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosophy is the starting point of the controversy over universals in Indian Philosophy. Though a few scholars ascribe it to the early grammatical tradition (especially to Patañjali) in the *Mahābhāṣya*. *Sāmānya* or *jāti* is one of the seven categories of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika takes realistic stand in its extreme form in formulating *sāmānya* or *jāti*. It is also pluralistic since it holds that the ultimate reality is constituted of irreducible particulars. Besides, as it is realistic, it regards the world as constituted of real things which exist independently of the knowing mind, and we can have the knowledge of these things through our experiences. Thus, it accepts the empiricist account that there are no innate ideas. According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the external world reveals both diversity and unity. It holds that if there is no bond of unity among

¹ Raja Ram Dravid, *The Problem of Universals in Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1972), 1.

² C. D. Sharma, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 180.

the things, then their comprehension would be beyond the reach of human intellect. Hence, the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika gives the name *sāmānya* or *jāti* to these common features.

II. THE DEFINITION OF THE UNIVERSAL

Gautama defines the universal as, "Genus is that whose nature is to produce the same conception" (*tsamānaprasavātmikā jātiḥ*).³

According to Kaṇāda, universals have ontological existence, and they are not mere conceptual constructs. According to him, the notions, genus and species, are relative to the understanding (*sāmānyam viśeṣa iti buddhyapaḥsam*).⁴

Praśastapāda also describes the universals as the cause of assimilation of different particulars (*sāmānyam aṇuvṛttipratyayakāraṇam*).⁵ It is the objective basis of the notion of common characters possessed by many individuals. The universal, according to Praśastapāda, is the unity for which different individuals are identically conceived, and which subsists identically and wholly in each of its subjects.

Śrīdhara describes universals as the cause of the knowledge of common character possessed by many individuals, which are quite different from one another (*atyantavyāvṛttānām piṇḍānām yataḥ kāraṇād anyonyasvarūpānugamaḥ pratīyate tat sāmānyam*).⁶

Further, Udayana describes it as the essential and common character of many individuals. Hence, it is natural and not accidental (*samānānām bhāvaḥ svābhāviko'nāgantuko bahūnām dharmāḥ sāmānyam*).⁷

However, many of these definitions are not up to the mark because these definitions are to be accepted as the definition of the universal in so far as it serves to distinguish it from the particular and the configuration. Hence, Neo-Naiyāyikas redefine it. For example, Annambhaṭṭa defines it as, "The universal is something that is eternal (*nitya*), unitary (*eka*) and 'related to more than one thing' (*anekānugata*)".⁸ This definition has three essential characteristics: i. Eternality, ii. Commonness, and iii. Inherence. In the absence of these qualifications the definition of the universal will be too broad. The first qualification is necessary to prevent conjunction (*samyoga*) from being included in the definition because the definition of conjunction includes the second and third aspects of the definition. However, it is not eternal. The second qualification is needed to exclude the dimension (*parimāṇa*) of *ākāśa* which is both eternal and inherent, but not common. And the third qualification is indispensable to avoid the inclusion of absolute non-existence (*atyantābhāva*) under the definition of the universal. The absolute non-existence is eternal and common, but not inherent in anything. Hence, the all three qualifications according to Naiyāyikas are must for a precise definition of the universal.⁹ Naiyāyikas hold that the universal is absolutely different from the particular and it is not found separately because it is inseparably related with the latter by the relation of *samavāya* or inherence. *Samavāya* is defined by the Naiyāyikas as a relation generating the idea of constitutive locus with regard to inseparable things (*Ayutasiddhanam ihapratyaya hetuh*).¹⁰

III. A FEW CHARACTERISTICS OF SĀMĀNYA

Praśastapāda describes its characteristics as follows,

- i. *Sāmānya* inheres in all its proper individuals. The universal is entirely present in each individual and yet present in all the individuals at the same time. It is not limited to a particular place. It exists in all its proper individuals, which are produced by their causes and collocations of conditions.
- ii. *Sāmānya* has identically the same form. The form in which *sāmānya* resides in one object is the same in which it resides in another object as well. This can be proved by our experiences, that the universal inheres in the same form in two

³ NS 2.2.71

⁴ VS 1.2.3

⁵ *The Praśastapāda Bhāṣhya with Commentary Nyāyakandali of Śrīdhara*, ed. Vindhyesvari Prasad Dvivedin (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1984), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ Udayana, *Kīraṇāvali* (Benares: Saṁvat, 1941), 22.

⁸ Annambhaṭṭa, *Tarkasamgraha-Dīpikā on Tarkasamgraha*, trans. Gopinath Bhattacharya (Calcutta, Progressive Publishers, 1994), 365.

⁹ Dravid, *The Problem of Universals in Indian Philosophy*, 15.

¹⁰ *The Praśastapāda Bhāṣhya*, 14.

objects as well as in many objects. It is their common and essential nature. The genus of cow (*gotva*) exists in all cows. It is perceived as identical in many individuals. However, it does not exist in one unique individual for example ether, time and space, because ether is one so also time and space.

- iii. Universal is perceived in one individual and remembered in other individuals perceived in the past. When one compares the perceived individual with the individuals remembered due to revival of their impressions one recognizes a certain common character among them, which inheres in all of them.
- iv. *Sāmānya* is all-pervasive. *Sāmānya* simultaneously exists in its identical nature in many individuals, and produces the concept of their common character. When a new member of a class is born, the universal becomes manifest in it. Before, birth it lay unmanifest within the embryo. The universal exists entirely, simultaneously and continuously in many individuals, hence it is said to be all-pervasive.
- v. The common characters are caused by the concept of *sāmānya*. It produces the notion of inclusion, because it exists in its identical nature in many individuals. It has an objective existence. It is the universal class-essence existing in many similar individuals.
- vi. *Sāmānya* is one in all its substrates, and it is because it has no marks of special characters in them.
- vii. *Sāmānya* is eternal. Universal is one in many individuals, therefore, it is eternal. If, it was not eternal, then it would be produced when individuals are produced and destroyed when these are destroyed. Hence, universal is eternal.¹¹

IV. TYPES OF UNIVERSALS

Praśastapāda distinguishes two types of universals: the higher (*para*) and the lower (*apara*). The universal having the widest extension is called *para* and the rest having lesser extension are called *apara*. The higher universal is that of 'existence' because it extends over the largest number of things; as well as, it is a generality which is pure and simple, always serving as the basis of comprehensive cognitions. The supreme function of a universal is synthesis and existence being the ground of synthesis alone is the universal par excellence.

The universals, viz., those of substance, quality, action, etc., which extend over a limited number of things are lower universals. They are universals, because they discriminate their proper individuals from other kinds of individuals. They synthesize the members of their own class and also serve to differentiate them from the members of other classes. Hence, they are both universals and particulars. They are particular only in a derivative sense, for they serve to distinguish things belonging to different classes.¹² Śivāditya adds to them another universal, those having intermediate extension (*parapara*).¹³ For example, 'substancehood' is less extensive than 'existence' and more extensive than 'earthhood'. Hence, it belongs to the intermediate type.

Existence (*sattā*) is the highest universal. Substance, qualities and actions exist through relation to existence. Existence is common to them as well as existence is different from them. Substances, qualities, and actions are different from one another, but existence is identical with them. So it is different from its substrates. It inheres in them.¹⁴

V. UNIVERSAL AND CAUSALITY

Later followers of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika describe universals as indispensable conditions for the regulation of causal linkages (*karaṇatavacchedaka* and *kāryatavacchedaka*). Udayana argues for the very existence of universal on the basis of the principle of causality. His chief argument is that causal relation being necessary and uniform, it cannot be said to exist on particulars as such, but between particulars having a class nature (*jāti*). A denial of this will be contrary to the nature of things as discovered by us. If causal relation is supposed to be held between bare particulars, then we cannot explain the notion of the potential (*svarūpayogya*) cause. We search for the specific material which has the potentiality for the desired effect. This potentiality or causal efficiency (*karaṇatva*) is possessed by a thing by virtue of its class nature (*jāti*).¹⁵ Visvanatha, the author of *Nyāya Siddhānta Mukṭāvalī*, proves the very

¹¹ *Padārthadharmaśāstra of Praśastapāda with the Nyāyakandali of Śrīdhara*, trans. Ganganatha Jha (Baneris: E. J. Lazarus and Co. Medical Hall Press, 1916), 653-651.

¹² *The Praśastapāda Bhāṣya with Commentary Nyāyakandali of Śrīdhara*, 28.

¹³ Śivāditya, *Saptapadārthī*, Commentary by Jinavardhana Suri (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 1963), 8.

¹⁴ VS 1.2.7-8.

¹⁵ Dravid, *The Problem of Universals in Indian Philosophy*, 19-20.

existence of the universal substanceness (*dravyatva*) on the basis that it is inevitable as a causal delimiter (*karaṇatavacchedaka*) of the inherent causality of an effect (*kārya*) or of conjunction (*saṃyoga*) and distinction (*vibhāga*), (*kāryasamavāyikāraṇatāvachhedakatayā, saṃyogasya, vibhāgasya, vā samavāyikāraṇatāvachhedakatayā dravyajātisiddhiriti*).¹⁶ Thus it is clear that the idea of causality as a consistent and essential relation between things necessarily implies the existence of universal.

VI. SĀMĀNYA AND UPĀDHI

To understand the proper nature of universal or *jāti* it is important to understand what *upādhi* or non-*jāti* is. *Upādhis* or *jātibādhakas* are the counter examples of universals. It is a case to which the definition does not apply. A *jātibādhaka* is an argument which is put forward to defend the definition of universal or *jāti* against a counter example. The universal according to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika is the natural and eternal class-essence, such as redness, cowness, potness, etc., and this is the permanent feature of particular things. Other general characteristics such as cookness, blindness, tallness, etc., are adventitious features, and are recognized not as universals but as *upādhis*. As far as from what we have understood of the universal, things belonging to the categories of substance, quality and action can alone be legitimately regarded as possessing genuine universal. The other categories, viz., universal, particularity, inherence and non-existence, although we might have general conceptions of them, cannot be said to have real universal inhering in them. So how do we distinguish *sāmānya* and *upādhi*? Udayana elucidates six impediments called *jātibādhakas*, in the following *sūtra* (*vyakterabhedaṣṭulyatvaṃ saṅkaro'thānavasthitiḥ rūpāhānirasambandho jātibādhakasaṅgrahaḥ*),¹⁷ and the very presence of it disqualifies a characteristic from being recognized as a universal. The six impediments are as follows:

- i. *Vyakterabheda*: The character belonging to a single thing, for example, *ākāśatva* cannot stand for *jāti*. Because it is unique to *ākāśa*, and a proper universal must have more than one individual as instances.
- ii. *Tulyatva*: Two general names having the same meaning do not stand for different universals. For example, *ghatatva* and *kalasatva* cannot be considered a pair of universals. It is because the words *ghata* and *kalasa* denote the same particular. The same individuals cannot be the substrate of two distinct universal properties.
- iii. *Sāmkarya*: If one of the two properties does not fall completely within the other, then neither is a proper universal property. However, one of them must be imposed properties. This fault is known as cross-connection (*sāmkarya*). The cross-connection characters that which co-exist yet exclude one another example *bhutatva* (being an element) and *murtatva* (having limited dimension) are present in the four elements earth, water, fire, air and *bhutatva* is present in *ākāśa* but not *murtatva*.
- iv. *Anavasthā*: The universality cannot be visualized to be as inhering in further universality as this would lead us to an infinite regress. If the incorporation of any property leads to an infinite regress (*anavasthā*) then it should not be regarded as a proper universal, but an imposed property.¹⁸
- v. *Rūpāhāni*: No universality can subsist in particularities, since that would destroy the very nature of the particularity. The particularity of objects cannot have further principle of unity as it would contradict their essential nature and their mutual difference would be annihilated.¹⁹
- vi. *Asambandha*: The absence of the relation of inherence excludes *samavāyatva* and *abhāvatva* from being reckoned as universal. The universal in the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika view is, by definition, inherent in its subjects. This implies that the thing in which nothing can inhere cannot be the substrate of a universal. The universality cannot subsist in inherence, since there is no relation of inherence between that universality and inherence. So there is no universality of inherence.²⁰

Every common quality does not constitute universality. Hence, universality is distinguished from *upādhi*.

VII. BUDDHIST CRITICISM

¹⁶ *Kārikāvalī of Viśwanātha Nyāyapañcānana Bhattācārya with the Commentaries Mukṭāvalī, Dinakarī, Rāmarudri* (New Delhi: Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, 2002), 35.

¹⁷ Udayana, *Kīraṇāvalī*, 33.

¹⁸ Dravid, *The Problem of Universals in Indian Philosophy*, 23.

¹⁹ *Padārthadharmasāgraha* English trans., 30.

²⁰ *Kārikāvalī of Viśwanātha Nyāyapañcānana Bhattācārya*, 59.

The Nyāya theory of universals is criticized by many other schools of Indian philosophy. However, we shall consider here only a few criticisms from the Buddhists perspective. According to the Buddhists, the objects of knowledge (*prameya*) are divided into two: the unique self-characteristic (*svalakṣaṇa*) and the generic class-characteristics (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*), and with reference to these two kinds of *prameyas* two means of valid knowledge, perception and inference are requisitioned, by the former we apprehend the *svalakṣaṇa* aspect of things which alone is perceptible and by the latter the *sāmānyalakṣaṇa* which is imperceptible. As there cannot be more than two kinds of *prameyas*, there cannot be more than two *pramāṇas* perception and inference. Buddhism states that in perception, we perceive only particular events or sensation. Apart from sense data, no diverse and eternal truths exist in the world. Dignāga would say that all words, all names and all concepts are necessarily relative and therefore unreal. Hence, according to Buddhists there are no universals in the outside world and thus they are conceptual constructs or *apoha*. It is maintained by them that the universals are only words, and they are made universals by being used by a number of different particulars. For them realities are momentary particulars, and they are absolutely discrete self-characteristics or the *svalakṣaṇas*.²¹ These *svalakṣaṇas* are given to us as pure sensation where as the universals or *sāmānyalakṣaṇas* are given to us by the understanding as an innate constructive tendency or *anadividyavasna*. The reality viewed as *paramārtha* and *saṃvṛti* conceptual knowledge is not absolutely deprived of value though ultimately illusory.

The Buddhists say that a universal should be either, all-pervading or limited to certain individuals, belonging to the same class and neither is possible. If the universal is found in all objects, then cowness must be found in horses, stones, etc., in which case we shall have an intermixture of genera (*sāṃkaryā*). Or if universal exists only in a select group of individuals, then how do the Naiyāyikas account for the appearance of a universal in a new born particular? And how do Naiyāyikas account for its disappearance, when it ceases to be? When a new pot is made, does the eternal potness come suddenly into being in the newly made pot, or, when the pot is broken, does the eternal potness cease to be? Further, we cannot say that the universal has moved from the place where it already existed to the place where the cow is born, because a universal is not a substance; and according to the Nyāya, only substances are capable of motion. So also we cannot say that cowness already existed at the place where the cow was born, because then it should have been perceived there even before the cow was born.²² However, the Naiyāyikas say that this is due to improper understanding of Buddhist philosophers about the nature of universals. For Naiyāyikas a particular cannot exist at more than one place at the same time; but a universal, by hypothesis, is capable of residing at many places at the same time. So the natural thing to say is that a universal resides in all objects belonging to the class (*svaviśayasarvagata*). So also the universal also resides in a new member that happens to be added to the class by being produced and there is nothing problematic or mysterious about it. When an object is produced, the sum total of causal conditions (*kāraṇasāmagrī*) determine its nature and thus to which class it should belong.²³

Further, when the universal inheres in a particular instance of it, does it inhere in it in its entirety, or does only a part of it inhere in the particular instance? However, both the alternative is not acceptable to them. If, the universal is present in its entirety in one particular, then it could not be present in other particulars for example, if there be one individual cow there will be no other cows. Likewise, we cannot say that it exists particularly only in a part, if, so then we are landed in the absurdity that an individual cow is only partly a cow and partly some other animal such as a buffalo.²⁴ For Naiyāyikas, the universals for example, 'cowness' it is neither a substantial whole, nor an aggregate (*avayavī*); the word 'part' applies to members of an aggregate or to elements of a substantial whole; the word 'entire' applies to such members of elements when all of them are taken together without a remainder. Cowness is neither an aggregate nor a substantial whole; hence the words 'entire' and 'partial' is not applicable to it.²⁵

Moreover, if the universal as Naiyāyikas say, be admitted on the basis of the notion of belonging to the same class, then it is inconclusive, because there are cases where we do have the notion of belonging to same class but no common simple character may be found to be possessed by all members of the class. For example, the class of cooks, what is common in them is the act of cooking and by this common character, if we bring them under a class, why could we not do so with respect to other classes like man, horse, etc.? Further, when we apply a general word, such as cow, to an individual cow we do not mean that it is of the same kind as other

²¹ Th. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, Vol. II (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2008), 404-407.

²² Susil Kumar Maitra, *Fundamental Questions of Indian Metaphysics and Logic* (Calcutta: Chuckerverty, Chatterjee and Co., 1956), 34-35.

²³ Kishor Chakrabarti, "The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Theory of Universals" in *Indian Philosophy a Collection of Readings*, ed. Roy W. Perrett (New York: Routledge, 2001), 47-48.

²⁴ Maitra, *Fundamental Questions of Indian Metaphysics and Logic*, 35.

²⁵ Chakrabarti, "The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika Theory of Universals", 47-48.

cows. What we mean is that it is different from everything that is other than a cow. By applying the word cow, we differentiate the object from every non-cow such as horse, man, etc. Hence, a general word primarily as a negative meaning signifying differentiation from others (*anyāpoha*) and not a positive meaning as a Naiyāyika holds.²⁶ The Naiyāyikas like Vācaspati Misra and Jayanta would say that, If the meaning of cow is to be ascertained through the negation of non-cow, circularity is inevitable. 'Cow' is to be ascertained through negation of non-cow, but negation of non-cow is possible only through an ascertainment of what cow is.²⁷ However, Naiyāyikas held that the admission of universals for man, cow, etc., is acceptable on the basis of experience. For example, at the time of perceiving two individual men, we directly observe that both share the common property of humanity and this kind of direct experience cannot be nullified by an appeal to cases like the class of cooks. The Naiyāyikas, however, accepted the point that there are cases where in spite of the notion of belonging to the same class, no universals could be admitted. In fact the Naiyāyikas held that before a universal is admitted on the basis of the knowledge of identity, one must ascertain that no violation has been made of any of the restrictive conditions for universals (*jātibādhaka*).²⁸

The universal is an object of perception as the individual, and not a mere fancy of imagination, and we feel the difference between the cognition of the universal and that of the particular. Simply because we perceive in the same object and at the same time both the universal and the particular, we cannot confuse the two. The cognition of universals is inclusive in nature, while that of particulars is exclusive in character.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can say that the theory of the universal as an objective reality is the basic tenet of the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika realism. For them universals are eternal and independent common characters that inhere in all members of a class. Nyāya claims that without universals no proper accounting can be given to natural classes. For example, lions and tigers are two different species of animals. No lions are tigers and no tigers are lions. But what makes all lions (past, present and future) different from all tigers (past, present and future)? One reasonable answer is that all lions share a common feature that is missing in all tigers. Again, without universals no proper account can be given, for laws of nature such as that heat expands bodies. Unless all heat share some objective common feature, how can it be that all heat expand bodies? This common feature is nothing but universal. The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika explains the theory of universals from its pluralistic and realistic standpoint. They do not accept the universals at the cost of the particulars. The particulars are there, and they are united under the roof of the highest universal existence.

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²⁶ Maitra, *Fundamental Questions of Indian Metaphysics and Logic*, 35.

²⁷ Dharmendra Nath Shastri, *The Philosophy of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Its Conflict with the Buddhist Dignāga School* (Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, 1976), 366-367.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

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