

Anekanta Philosophy as a Way of Life

Narendra Bhandari

Jain Academy of Scholars

and

Science and Spirituality Research Institute, Ahmedabad 380009.

(nnbhandari@yahoo.com)

Life style at the level of an Individual, family, society, nation and in international relations can be peaceful if the philosophy of *anekanta* is adopted in all arguments and activities to resolve disagreements and disputes. But before adopting such a life style, the meaning of Anekanta must be clearly understood and realised. Anekanta is a law of nature although colloquially it is used as a general term encompassing three doctrines i.e. Anekantavad, Nayavad and Syadvad. These three terms which can be translated as multiplicity of modes, perspectivism and Non-absolutism of Truth. These doctrines are fundamental descriptions of Nature. They correctly define the nature of objects, observers and the knowledge and can not be ignored just as one can not ignore laws of physics while dealing with material objects. We will discuss these concepts after we address a more important concept related to truth and falsehood.

In practice, Anekanta is taken as respecting opinions of others even when their views do not agree with one's views. This is not a policy just to avoid conflicts but is based on the true understanding of the nature of things and the laws of nature. Since these doctrines are related to 'truth' and the way the world really is, they should be based on facts and falsity and untruth has no place in it. Let us begin with a simple example. If some one says that this wall is black whereas, in reality, it is white, one need not respect his opinion. That would be absurd. So the first point is that falsehood must be eliminated, based on facts, definitions and logic. Wrong can not be considered right and Anekanta can not be

stretched to include falsehood. Here the logic of distinction (Bhed vigyan) must be exercised. Further, at gross levels, in the deterministic world, anekanta can not be applied. It is applicable to subtle, atomic or subatomic level of matter (dravya), which is governed by quantum mechanics, as also on thought (bhav), which is also made of subtle matter. The second point, equally important, is that anekanta should not mean vagueness, doubt or confusion. I agree with others not because I am not sure about the matter in question or others are doubtful. Anekanta comes into play after falsehood and doubts are eliminated. Anekanta is the real truth, as closer to truth as can be, and frees one from falsehood or confusion. Not that 'a particular thing' can possibly be like this, but it is in reality like this, uncertain, because of the very nature of the universe. It is not based on logic alone, but based on true nature of things.

Everything in the universe can be classified in three groups: The object to be known (gyeya or knowable), The subject who wants to know (Gyayak, or observer) and the knowledge (gyan, Knowledge), the subject perceives about the object. Anekantavad, Nayavad, and Syadvad relate to these three aspects respectively, as we will describe below.

Anekantavad:

Multiplicity of modes. Everything in the universe changes all the time (t), in its mode, but not in its essence. Essence (E) is everlasting, permanent and unchanging, mode (M) is everchanging, transient and in flux.

We can express a thing Y as made up of two components E and a time variable component, m(t)

$Y = E + m(t)$, where t = time

E can be known but it does not define Y completely; its transient and complementary part, m is changing every instant, Y changes before one can know it at a particular instant, thus making it impossible to know a thing completely. So anything is unknowable in all its aspects, as a function of time, past, present and future. This is the Jain view of real uncertainty, which describes the real nature of a thing.

Perspectivism:

We know that an observer is subjective. Therefore, as far as the observer is concerned, there are two aspects, we need to consider: his View point, defined by the relation of the observer and the observed. We can also call it observers frame of mind, taking analogy of

the Special Theory of Relativity (STR), where the observed motion of an object depends on the inertial frame of reference of the observer in relation to the object. In the present context we can say that it depends on the mental frame of reference of the observer.

The other point is the limitation of the observer. If observer is observing through his sense organs, then we know that every body's sense organs are not perfect. They have limitations of efficiency, sensitivity and also depend on the environmental conditions. And at the next stage, the mind, which integrates the information obtained from all the sense organs and provides a final product or experience, comes into play. Mind is never perfect. It updates and improves a little with every observation. Mind is updating all the time. Only in case of an omniscient, who gets information directly by consciousness (*pratyaksha gyan*), without the help of sense organs and mediation of the mind (*paroksh* or indirect *gyan*), the information may be perfect. This is akin to the universal observer in case of STR, we discussed above.

The well known anecdote of an elephant and six blind men is very apt in understanding the principle of perspectivism. Each of the six blind men observe different parts of the elephant and the one who observes the leg, call it a like a pillar; the one who observes the body, calls it wall like; the one who observes the trunk, calls it like branch of a tree and so on. No one has a correct description but if one integrates all the information (or views), obtained by all the six observers, he approaches the truth. So every description is partially right, none is totally wrong, and all views taken together are closer to reality.

Syadvad is a very fundamental concept since it relates to the nature of Truth. It states that there is 'No One Absolute Truth'. Truth can have multiple manifestations. So every Truth is a Truth in its own right but is not unique. Ask, for example, how the universe is made? There can not be just one way; rather it can be made in multiple ways. Or ask another important question: what happens after death. It need not be a particular, singular consequence. This principle of Syadvad is, the only law which is infallible, as Acharya Amritchandra says.

‘जो सदा नियम का निषेध करता है और निपात रूप से सिद्ध है,

उसे स्यात कहा गया है। वह वस्तु का सापेक्ष सिद्ध करता है।’

“Syat always denies the validity of a single (universal, eternal) Law and is a proven ‘infallible’ law in itself. This law proves the Relativity of Reality.”

One should therefore be careful in making an absolute statement, true for all places and times since such an assertion leads to falsehood. ***The only statement one can make with certainty is that “No proposition can be made with certainty”*** . It does not mean ambiguity, confusion or uncertainty but makes our understanding as certain and complete as it can be, because this is how the Nature is.

The legend has it that Mahavir swami, while instructing his disciples, said “That now you have taken a vow to always tell the truth, qualify every statement with Syat”. Syat here means ‘May be’. To be factually correct, one should leave some scope of uncertainty in defining a thing or a process. There may be other ways to get the same result.

One more point need to be made in connection with Reality. Reality can always be experienced, never correctly described in any language or formula.”Truth can not be written (or told) and what can be written can not be the Truth”, declared Lao Tzu, when asked by one of his students to write down what he knows. This brings us to the concept of indescribability, first enunciated in Jain philosophy and realized by quantum mechanics, the physics of the small objects like atomic or subatomic particles.

Physics tells us that gross bodies that we can see with the unaided eye are deterministic and follow the classical mechanics, whereas the behaviour of subtle or micro-bodies is probabilistic and follows quantum mechanics. A table will always appear as a table, being gross, but an electron may not always appear as electron; it may appear as a wave or it may not even exist till it is observed. Strange as it may seem, it is true and has been established by experiments as well as theory. Thus an electron (or any other particle) may be in a state which can not be described.

Indescribability is an important and practical concept and provides the only way some paradoxes can be explained. One of the famous paradox is the Theseus paradox in which a ship A is disassembled, one part at a time and, from those parts, a new ship B is reassembled. The question is: Is B the same ship as A or another ship B? This can be answered differently based on the view point of utility, constituents, contextuality, and if one is looking for a single answer than indescribability has to be invoked.

Another relevant concept is unknowability. Scientific knowledge is based on the idea that something is unknown to start with. Its study slowly increases its knowledge and ultimately, all the information can be known. Thus unknown can be converted to known through its knowledge.

Unknown and known are the two end members of the knowledge system and Unknown is gradually but surely converted into known. Jain concept is based on three component system: known, unknown and unknowable. There is always something unknowable by sensory organs. It can be only known by Omniscient by direct gyan (*pratyaksha*) without assistance of sensory organs or brain/mind (Fig.1).

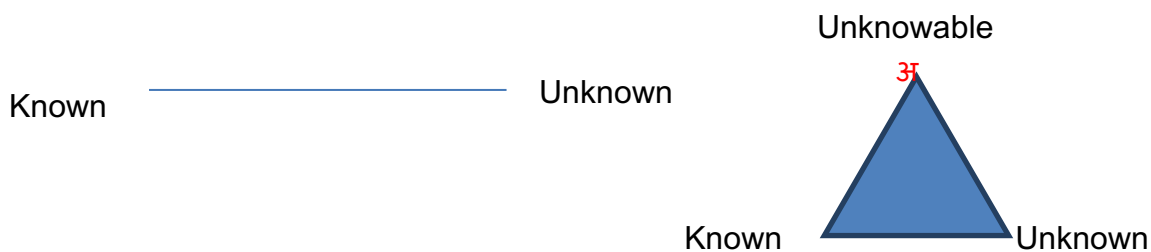


Fig.1. Scientific and Jain approach to knowability. Scientific study (shown on the left) has a linear two end member approach, i.e. any unknown can be converted into known through study of the object. Jain knowledge system is based on three component model (right), Known, Unknown and Unknowable (represented by ॐ), which can only be experienced by omniscient.

Having defined the three aspects of reality, related to the object, subject and the knowledge itself, and other relevant concepts of indescribability and unknowability, we now turn to their practical applications in life. A philosophy based on these basic concepts of nature of things must be the basis of a correct life style. Things always do not happen the way one wants. The life is not deterministic at all levels. We may try our best and all the things may

apparently fall in place except the outcome. The life is probabilistic and not deterministic at subtle level. Thus any consequence should be taken in the light of Anekanta philosophy. At personal level and thinking this is the most useful application of Anekanta.

In daily life we come across many situations in which there may be lack of knowledge about something, or there may be disagreement between various members of the family, society or nations. Anekanta (Anekantavad, Nayavad or Syadvad) should not be taken as a first option, to arrive at an agreement; it is rather the last resort. First the problems should be resolved by collecting information and increasing knowledge, then based on facts and logic. Only at the subtle level, when all other efforts are exhausted and disagreement persists, then the differences can be settled by resorting to anekantavad, that things (modes) change with time, their perception changes with people's view point and may be what every body says represents some partial, uncertain and relative truth.

These three principles exclude any rigidity because there is inherent uncertainty in each one of them. Flexibility and acceptance of things as they unfold is the only basis of a correct, peaceful and truthful life style. Resorting to anger and quarrelling have no place in anekanta life style.

In family, usually there are differences on behaviour and disputes for property. Anekanta does not imply that wrong behaviour is an acceptable solution under the pretext of anekanta but efforts should be made to find the right solution, keeping in mind that there is no solution which is absolutely perfect. Just like one can live with the philosophy of non-violence with the realization that no body can really live or survive with absolutely zero violence, and adopts the life style of minimizing violence, so is true for anekanta philosophy. Anekanta philosophy does not mean no arguments, no disputes but advocates adoption of the path of minimum disputes, giving the benefit of doubt to others, because they may be equally right or their understanding or need may be more than yours. Only when one's survival is in danger, and no solution is found based on policies, law, tradition, or discussion, the parties involved can adopt the anekanta philosophy and arrive at the solution of minimum disagreement. Many a times a little sacrifice can lead to much peaceful life. Similar situations exist in the societal, religious or political context, at

national levels as also in international affairs. Thus anekanta philosophy can have practical application in all contexts and implies four principles:

- Absence of rigidity, dogmatism and fanaticism
- Coexistence, not only at physical level but also at intellectual and philosophical levels
- Freedom of speech and thought but not of action. The freedom is not absolute but limited to certain sphere, to certain extent till it does not interfere with the freedom of others.
- Tolerance and cooperation:
- Forgiveness: Every body does not know everything and there are some aspects of nature which are unknowable except by Omniscient. Keeping this limitation in mind, one should adopt the path of forgiveness.

Recent studies of the brain (e.g. Davidson, 2005; Campbell, 2010) have established that forgiveness produces neurotransmitters (e.g. dopamine, serotonin, norepinefrine and endorphin) which play a role in happiness. A few studies point to the role of cortisol and adrenaline (adrenal gland) and oxitocin (pituitary gland) in controlling happiness. ‘Happy’ chemicals like GABA, lead to good health benefits whereas aggressiveness and anger produces bad and unhealthy chemicals. Actually arguing without getting angry or aggressive, i.e. without personal or emotional involvement, is the key to good, peaceful and healthy life.

Actually The law of coexistence and cooperation is the law which nature follows in all its activities (Bhandari, xxxx), so it is best to obey this law in all activities for one’s own good. These principles lead to the principle of unity in diversity at all levels.

Anekantavad is also law of equality. No one is superior or inferior and this is a big principle in life. There is no place for ego in anekanta philosophy. Thus anekanta is not a single principle but composed of many fundamental principles enumerated above. It has a solid theoretical foundation based on nature of Nature as also practical application for a better life style in many spheres of human activity. It would not be an exaggeration to say

that it is what makes our species civilized, and acts as a back bone of a civilized society. Without it, humans will be like animals preying on each other.

Any sacrifices or losses incurred by adopting a life style based on Anekanta philosophy is more than compensated by the peace and goodwill earned. Thus anekanta philosophy leads to minimum disagreements and disputes at all levels of activities and should form the basis of a balanced and peaceful life style.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Munishri Mahendra Kumarji swami for clarifying to me many points discussed here.

References:

Bhandari Narendra and Pokharna Surendra Singh (2016) Syādvāda and Anekāntavāda in the Modern Scientific Context, in Scientific Perspectives of Jainism, (Samani Chaitanya Prajna, N. Bhandari and N.L. Kachhara, Editors (Payorite Press, Udaipur).

Bhandari, Narendra (2019) Theory of multiple manifestations (*anekantavad*) *Jin Vani*, 77(06),1-10.

Bhandari, Narendra (2015) *Jainism : The Eternal And Universal Path To Enlightenment*

Prakrit Bharati Academy, Jaipur.

Campbell A (2010). Oxytocin and human social behavior. *Personal Soc Psychol Rev*, 14 (3): 281–295.

Davidson RJ (2005). Well-being and affective style: Neural substrates and bio behavioral correlates. In Huppert FA, Keverne B, Baylis N (Eds.), *the science of well-being*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 107–139.

Haldane, J.B.S., (1957) The Syadvad System of Predication , Samkhya- The Indian Journal of Statistics.

Jain M.K., (2007) Affirmative reasoning Naya , The Jain Nyay (a) Hira publications, Potomac Falls, VA. USA.

Kothari, D.S. (1985) The complementarity principle and Eastern philosophy, Neils Bohr Centenary Volume, A.P. French and P.J. Kennedy, (Editors) Harvard University Press, USA.

Mookerji, S. (1994) The Jaina philosophy of Non-Absolutism, Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi.