

A NOTE ON SAÑJAYA'S AMARĀVIKṢEPAVĀDA

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The earliest available account of philosophical scepticism may be traced to Sañjaya, the son of Bairatī and an older contemporary of Lord Buddha. Sañjaya is said to have propounded a unique method of philosophizing of his own and this method in later philosophical discourses is popularly known as the method of '*amarāvīkṣepa*' the tortuous method of *eel-fish*. It is not inconceivable that there were many other critical philosophers during the life period of Goutama Buddha and Mahāvira. There are evidences to consider Sañjaya as the precursor of sceptical arguments in Indian philosophy as in later days, such thought has been represented by 'Nāgārjuna - Jayarāsi - Śrīharṣa' tradition.¹ The exposition of Sañjaya's philosophical method in modern philosophic terms is a long felt desideration for an understanding of the sceptical tradition of later days from historical perspective. Chisholm feels a similar necessity when he argues about the relevance of Sextus Empiricus' 'Pyrrhonism' towards the understanding of present century's 'empiricism' and 'phenomenalism'.² Burnet refers to a strange fact of history that the philosophical insight of Pyrrho was influenced by Indian dialectical thinking. He goes a step forward to state with all probability that Pyrrho visited India and supposed to have been trained under the Buddhist dialectician.³ Oldenburg also describes dialectical approach of the Greeks 'as a species of Indian sophistic' philosophy.⁴ Jayatilleke has, however, expressed doubt about the influence of Buddhism on Pyrrho.⁵ He has contended, on the other hand, that Pyrrho was influenced by the sceptical method of Sañjaya in philosophising. But in the absence of sufficient historical evidences, we do not like to enter into the subtle polemics

about the extent of influence. All that we can say is that some early Greek thinkers (i.e. Scepticists) who raised doubt or question against the existing ethical and metaphysical claims in ancient Greek society seem to be similar as done by Sañjaya against the metaphysical 'theory-builders' in ancient India. Matilal comes in support of Jayatilke when he says that "Pyrrho was most probably under the influence of Indian scepticism as propounded by Sañjaya and not really under the direct influence of Buddhism".⁶

However, it is indeed true that metaphysical and moral claims made by both brahmanas and śramaṇas were questioned by Sañjaya. What Sañjaya propounded seems to be that, the metaphysical and ethical queries can not be categorically answered with truth and certitude, the two indispensable marks of assertion and therefore all claims made about the possibility of knowledge regarding these matters are unwarranted and should be discarded. There were followers of his view in ancient India. Dīghanikāya tells us that Sāriputra and Moggallāna, the first two disciples of Lord Buddha were, in fact, the disciples of Sañjaya and later on they being attracted by the Buddha's teaching as explained to them by Āsvajit, embraced Buddhism. This event as it is said that, led more than two hundred and fifty other disciples of Sañjaya to abandon his disciple-ship and to come to the Buddhist fold. We do not have sufficient historical evidences to question the narration of the Buddhist Nikāya. But it is clear even the Buddhist canons that Sañjaya was one of the dominant philosophers of Buddha's life time and participation in debate in philosophic or religious matters was almost an unavoidable order in the society for the learned. It is a peculiar aspect of the Buddhist scriptures that they "describe Sañjaya and his followers on the one hand as *dull* and *stupid* and on the other hand, recognise them as well-known and famous *recluses* having a number of followers."²⁷ Popularity of Sañjaya's method of philosophising probably lies in its unique character of not only avoiding 'defeat' in debate but also in not 'asserting any position' while showing the limitations of opponents' arguments. It is interesting for any researcher in Indian epistemology to take note of Sañjaya's sceptical method of philosophizing. In the following paragraphs I have ventured to present an expository survey of Sañjaya's philosophical method as it could be gathered from the literary canons of

Buddhism.

A careful study of the buddhist canons may show evidence of dialectical approach to philosophical problems. It has its preśramanic origination and one such fullfledged method of philosophy has received mature-shape in Sañjaya's '*amarāvikṣepa*' method. *Amarā* or *eel-fish* has a very slippery body and goes tortuously and thus it becomes almost impossible to catch it. Likewise, when Sañjaya had been asked any philosophical question, he used to avoid answering it in either categorization of affirmation or negation by using four types of dilemma. He was utterly indifferent to making any assertion regarding metaphysical questions about the final cause of the world, the existence of life after death and the implication of the law of karma. Here little reflection about the development of critical philosophy may allow us to say that Sañjaya's being not in favour of giving any categorical answer might have been inspired by his awareness about the limitation of human knowability. Perhaps his intention was to show that human knowledge can not go beyond the phenomenal world to investigate into the ultimate cause of this world. The *Dīghanikāya* elucidates how according to Sañjaya four alternative replies are possible to any metaphysical question or problem. The *Dīghanikāya* depicts a story where Lord Buddha explains to his disciples how the '*amarāvikṣepi*' Sañjaya uses tortuous philosophical technique in order to avoid any kind of cognitive assertions about metaphysical questions. The *amarāvikṣepi* avoids cognitive assertions in the following way :

i) This is not my view (*evam pi me no*), ii) that is not my view (*tathā ti pi me no*), iii) another third different view is also not of mine (*aññathā ti pi me no*); iv) 'neither this nor that' - I am not saying this (*no ti pi me no, no no ti pi me no ti*).⁸ The first step is the denial of any affirmation about the aforesaid questions, the second is the denial of any negative description or assertion, in the third having the form of a conjunction of both the first two alternatives is denied. But the extreme form of non-committal refutation is expressed in the fourth alternative. It is a form of denial of a thesis not being assenting to a counter-thesis. It may be called a 'commitment - less denial.'

Let us now investigate what could be the plausible explanation of the causes and ways of treatment of any philosophical problem by Sañjaya

the '*amarāvīkṣepī*'. '*Amarāvīkṣepavāda*' seems to be important as a method of philosophising for more than one reason. Firstly, as recorded in the Buddhist scriptures, there were ascetics who used to follow this tortuous way of logical dilemma, because, they neither, did know what the 'being is' nor what the 'non-being' stands for. Being unaware about the nature of reality, it is unworthy to make an assertion about what really exists. If reality were described as what it is not, the description would be erroneous (*duṣṭa*) and if it were erroneous, it would become self-destroying and therefore, irrelevant. On account of this, most probably Sañjaya tried to avoid any assertion either about 'being' or about 'non-being'. This, as depicted in the *Dīghanikāya*, could be the first ground for which some ascetics (*śramaṇas*) and brahmins following the tortuous way of argument prefer not to make any assertions about reality.

But what is depicted in the Buddhist canons as limitation of Sañjaya's method seems to us a great merit of his philosophical method. A person who is not adequately sure about the answer of a question about reality better not to indulge in any kind of assertion either in affirmative or in negative way and this logical attitude is to be morally more appreciable. Any way, the second reason for relying on this tortuous '*amarāvīkṣepī*' technique might be the awareness about the incompatibility of our ordinary linguistic discourse to characterise properly what is real. Thus it is preferable not to say anything categorically as 'It is real' or 'It is not real'. What could be the third cause for which some ascetics and brahmins would have been tempted to follow this tortuous technique of *eel-fish* (*amarā*)? Sañjaya would have replied this question by saying that an user of the method of *amarāvīkṣepa* is aware of the limitations of human knowability either in terms of affirmative or negative categorisation. But the limit of my knowledge does not mean the limit of reality 'in-itself'. Whenever I know, I know with certain conditions and therefore, I can not claim with adequate warrant that what I say about reality is exactly the nature of reality 'in-self'. What I claim to know as true may be proved wrong subsequently by a stronger argument. The best way, thus considered Sañjaya, is to avoid the metaphysical question following this tortuous way of argumentation. The last step of using this tortuous way although discouraged in the Buddhist literature from the ethical consideration seems

to be very important. It must have also been considered as the germination point of philosophical scepticism in Indian tradition. Lord Buddha's main concern was the moral uplift of the common masses in society and perhaps that is why he discouraged the tortuous logical polemics for them. But this art is specially meant for a very few people with philosophic insight. This contention may be supported with reference to the later development of philosophic thought in Buddhism itself. It has direct bearing upon Nāgārjuna's '*catuṣkoti-vinirmukta*' position of philosophising.⁹

From what has been discussed above it is clear that Sañjaya position in methodological approach is very much like the Greek sceptic Pyrrho. Pyrrho suspends judgement in order to attain 'the state of unperturbedness' (*ataraxia*). Sañjaya might have thought that mental perturbation that arises due to the unwarranted cognitive claim could be avoided by using '*amarāvikṣepa*' method of not committing to any 'theory-making'. It is possible to argue, as Matilal contends that scepticism as a philosophical method 'might have been started in India by Sañjaya'.¹⁰ Had Sañjaya been acquainted with the linguistic phraseology of Sextus Empiricus, he might probably have expressed himself in the same vein, that is to say, "the man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad, neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly and in consequence, he is unperturbed".¹¹ For Sañjaya, if I make a claim that I have known answers to the questions when in fact, I did not, my claim would be false and this is morally wrong. This brings 'perturbation' and disturbs mental peace. Sañjaya would have suggested that the tortuous technique would enable a philosopher not making any false claim regarding the possibility of knowing answers to metaphysical questions and to save him from doing moral wrong - the root cause of all 'perturbance' and hindrance to mental peace.

NOTES

1. B. K. Matilal : *Logical and Ethical Issues of Religious Belief*, University of Calcutta, 1982, p. 62.
2. For details see : R. Chishlom : 'Sextus Empiricus and Modern Empiricism', *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 8, 1941.

3. J. Burnet : *Early Greek Philosophy*, London, A and C, Blact, 1892, Reprint 1958, p. 68.
4. H. Oldenburg : *The Buddha*, Tr. W. Hoey, Edinburgh, 1982.
5. K. N. Jayatilleka : *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1963, p. 82.
6. B. K. Matilal : *Op. Cit.* p. 61.
7. *Ibid.* p. 54.
8. *Dīghanikāya* (ed. T. Rhys Davids and E. J. Carpenter) I, ii, 24, Vol. I, London, 1890, p. 25.

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1. B. K. Matilal, *Epistemology and Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 63.
2. For details see B. Chakrabarti, *Scepticism, Empiricism and Indian Philosophy*, *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 8, 1961.