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External world in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna: A study **Rajlakshmi Kalita**

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Abstract

Buddhism was propounded by the Buddha almost twenty five hundred years ago in India. And gradually Buddhism became a world religion and spread throughout the world. Within one hundred years of Buddha's Mahāparinirvāna teachings of the Buddha was interpreted by many of His followers and they were divided into many sects in the course of time. Two main sects of Buddhist philosophy were Mahāyāna and Hināyāna. Mahāsaṅghikas paved the way for Mahāyāna school by going against the orthodox Hināyāna sects. Nāgārjuna was a prominent Buddhist philosopher appeared around 2nd century A.D. He with his Mādhyamika dialectic presented his doctrine of Śūnyavāda. The objective of his philosophy is to present the original teachings of the Buddha without any modification. Nāgārjuna with the help of catuṣkoti or fourfold concerned arguments carried on his philosophy. In his philosophy he established the relative existence of the external world which he expressed with the help of dharma-nairātmya or śūnyatā by adopting the middle way or madhyam pratipad. The objective of this paper is to show the status of the world in his philosophy.

Key Words: Mādhyamika, Madhyam pratipad, Praṭīyasamutpāda, Dharma-nairātmya, Śūnyatā.

Introduction

Inquisitiveness compels men to enquire into unknown aspects of their life and the world. As a consequence of these attempts to know different aspects of life and world different branches of sciences arise. Philosophy is a branch of humanities which is inseparably related to human livelihood. Enquiry into the origin, nature and existence of external world is one of the chief problems of philosophy. Metaphysics as a branch of philosophy enquires into the nature of reality and existents by going beyond the physical sciences. Generally in many philosophical systems enquiry into reality falls within the area of Metaphysics. But, Buddha in revealing the nature of the world in a unique way explained truth on the basis of Four Noble Truths. Throughout his philosophy he avoided any metaphysical explanation in examining the external world. For him as everything is caused. Nothing is self-existent or eternal. But, after Mahāparinirvāna of the Buddha his followers gave rise to different schools of thought. Though the basic teachings of Buddha like Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Noble way were unchanged yet some interpretations arose among these schools which tend to vary from the Buddha.

Almost after six centuries after the Buddha when Nāgārjuna made his appearance with his tremendous philosophical potentials. He lived between last half of first century and first quarter of second century A.D. At his time almost eighteen Buddhist schools were alive with their own versions of Tripitakas. The objective of Nāgārjuna is to represent the original teachings of the

Buddha without his any new speculation. The philosophy of the Buddha was carried on by Nāgārjuna. He opposed the Abhidhammika tendency of superimposing metaphysics upon reality and Sthaviravādin tendency of imposition of self-nature and other-nature. He adopted the Middle Way or Madhyam pratipad prescribed by the Buddha. Middle Way refers to the way between extreme eternalism and extreme annihilation. He very systematically analysed each concept associated with the life and existence. The aim of this paper is conceptual analysis of his philosophy and find out the nature of the external world in his philosophy.

Literal Contributions of NĀgĀrjuna

Nāgārjuna was a prominent Buddhist philosopher. He is often regarded as the Second Buddha by his followers. There was a long gap between the period of Buddha and that of Nāgārjuna. During that period many interpretations of Buddhist teachings were emerged. Various schools analysed Buddhist philosophy from their own perspectives. The mission of Nāgārjuna was to preserve the original teaching of the Buddha. In doing this he wrote a number of works, including commentaries, poetic works and epistles. Among them chief works attributed to Nāgārjuna are Mūlamādhyamikakārikā or Mādhyamika-sāstra, Vigrahavyāvartanī, Śūnyatā-saptati, Yukti-sastika, Mahāprajñāpāramita-sāstra, Suḥṛllekhā and Ratānavālī. Among these works Mūlamādhyamikakārikā, Vigrahavyāvartanī, Śūnyatā-saptati and Yukti-sastika are primary sources of the Mādhyamika philosophy. Mūlamādhyamikakārikā is one of the chief works of Nāgārjuna, which is a commentary on the Buddha's Kaccāyanagottasutra. It is a systematic and detailed work on Buddha's teachings. His philosophy is reflected in this commentary. This paper is chiefly based on the philosophical interpretation found in the Mūlamādhyamikakārikā.

Method Used by NĀgĀrjuna

Nāgārjuna is regarded as '*the master of dialectic*'. Dialectic literally means *debate or discourse*. Dialectic is a self-conscious effort, within which movement is carried on from thesis to anti-thesis. He by using dialectic as a means of critical investigation moved to reveal the truth or a reductio-ad-absurdum. His philosophy is basically a philosophy of dialectic deconstruction. He dialectically deconstructs all the possible views or *dr̥ṣṭis*. There is a structure of his dialectical method. It consists of the following four steps,

- 1) A positive hypothesis.
- 2) A negative contradictory hypothesis.
- 3) Affirmation of both of the above hypothesis.
- 4) Rejection of both of the above hypothesis.

Nāgārjuna examines dialectically all relevant issues with the help of prasaṅga method. The objective of this method is dialectic deconstruction. But he did not aim at nihilism. Rather his aim was to deconceptualise the human mind and to free their knowledge from all the a priori empirical and metaphysical notions.

External World in the Philosophy of NĀgĀrjuna

Nāgārjuna was the pioneer of Mādhyamika Buddhist tradition. The main characteristic of his philosophy is Madhyam pratipad. Nāgārjuna considering the Buddha's Middle Way as the foundation of his philosophy avoids both the extreme points of existence and non-existence. Nāgārjuna while discussing the Buddhist philosophical system classified all the groups into three types i.e. Petaka, Abhidhammika and śūnyavāda. The Petaka (the Tripitakas) are the reliable sources

of Buddhist tradition. They are the attempts to spread philosophy, beliefs and practices of Buddhism. On the other hand the Sarvāstivādin are the advocates of the Abhidhamma tradition. And the third group advocates the śūnyavāda and Nāgārjuna put under this group. He attempted to re-establish the original śūnyavāda of Buddha. And this original teachings of Buddha have been progressing till present time in the carriage of Mādhyamika philosophy of Nāgārjuna.

Nāgārjuna carries on his voyage of philosophy in a rigorous way by considering all the philosophical interpretations of his contemporary period. He digs into the philosophies of his opponents in order to re-establish the original teachings of the Buddha. He realises that, “original Buddhism had emphasised transcendental wisdom intuiting Reality, disparaging empirical and speculative elements, but Abhidhammic Hinayāna concentrated on building a metaphysics of elementary essences underlying the flux of empirical states or a metaphysics of pure phenomenal flux (Pande G.C. 1993, p.45). Keeping in view this ‘transcendental wisdom’ of the Buddha Nāgārjuna re-established the edifice of Mādhyamika system. The characteristic features of his philosophy are,

- For Nāgārjuna, there is nothing which is not causally dependent. Everything of the external world is of dependent on others in order to exist. For him, praṭītyasmutpāda is the prapañcopaśamaṃ. In other words, praṭītyasmutpāda or dependent origination is the auspicious or śivaṃ and the ground of the world of creation. In his philosophy dependent origination is the characteristic mark of the external world.
- In order to find out the status of the objects of the external world, Nāgārjuna examined (parīksā) every views (dṛṣṭis) with the help of catuṣkoti or fourfold reasoning. By examining causation (pratyaaya) and change (gatāgata) he came to the conclusion that the four causal theories, effect, present change or present movement do not possess self-nature. Therefore they are not evident or self-existent. Causation and change are two chief problems the Buddhist philosophers dealt with. In order to find out the nature of world two problems play the most significant role.
- In his epistemology he accepted perception and inference as two sources of knowledge. But he left no space for extra-ordinary perception. Again, while examining perception and inference as valid mode of cognition Nāgārjuna in his philosophy showed the connection between experience and relativity. As the nature of experience is relative, so our valid modes of cognitions are also relative. Cognitions cannot be self-existent. Cognitions do not exist apart from the objects of cognition. Therefore they are interdependent. He described the relation between objects and cognition of object with help of an analogy. He held that if the son is produced by the father, then reversely it will follow that from the son the father arises. Here both of them have no existence apart from one another. Similarly the external world also has no independent existence of its own.
- Nāgārjuna discussed about elements of the earth or the Dhātus out of which the objects are constituted. He recognized six elements and they are bhū or earth, jala or water, tejas or fire, anila or wind, ākāśa or space and vijñāna or consciousness. For him elements of the world cannot exist independently. The elements are neither existent nor non-existent, neither characterisation nor characterised. By conceptualising the elements one cannot grasp the real nature of them. Elements of the world are neither eternally existent nor eternally non-existent. In this way he put emphasis on appeasement of the objects or dispositions or obsessions rather than promotion or elimination in explaining the world.

- The Mādhyamka philosophy is basically of pragmatic nature. Throughout his philosophy he avoided metaphysical speculations. His status of the external world is reflected throughout his theory of momentariness or kṣanabhaṅgavāda. According to him, the objects of the world are combination of present arising, arisen and cessation. But none of these statuses are stationary. Objects cannot be described with the help of eternality, neither positively nor negatively. So, in the philosophy of Nāgārjuna objects of the world are momentary and relative.

Thus, Nāgārjuna positively deconstructed all the metaphysical speculations in explaining the external world. He dialectically established the objects of the world as momentary. For him, all the dispositions are illusive or deceptive or are delusions (mṛṣā). Dispositions create the untrue world of experience as true. In this connection, he re-introduced Buddha's theory of śūnyatā. Neither self-nature nor other-nature exists. An entity possessing self-nature cannot change. On the other hand an entity for possessing other-nature must possess varying nature. Therefore objects of the world are non-substantial or empty. These concepts of non-substantiality (dharma-nairātmya) and emptiness (śūnyatā) can be acquired by going beyond the metaphysical views (dṛṣṭi). They are not subject to conceptualisation; rather result of relinquishing all false views.

Implication of Śūnyatā

Pratītyasamutpāda, Dharma-nairātmya and Śūnyatā are key notions of Nāgārjuna's philosophy. Etymologically śūnyatā is a Sanskrit term composing of two root words. Śūnya means void or empty and 'tā' is equivalent to 'ness'. So, literally śūnyatā means nothing. But, śūnyatā of Nāgārjuna is different from this. He essentially used the term as a part of his Dialectic system. Śūnyatā in his system used to mean indescribable (avāchya or anabhilāpya). Anything beyond the four categories of reasoning (chatuskoti-vinirmukta) is śūnya for him.

Philosophy of Nāgārjuna is based on this concept of śūnyatā. But, in his philosophy it is beyond noumenal and phenomenal description. Rather, he described phenomena with the help of śūnyatā. According to him, every object of the external world is subject to arising, ceasing and subsistence. The nature of these objects is transient. So, objects are of dependent origination and are momentary. Though objects are real from empirical perspective yet the objects do not possess independent and eternal existence. This nature of objects of external world is described by Nāgārjuna as śūnya or empty. By describing the world as empty he did not attempt to prove the unreality of the phenomena, rather attempted "to rectify the perspective from which that individuality of the object is viewed, so the non-substantiality of the object is intended to refine the perspective from which the objective world is viewed, not to cause the abandonment of all views about the object" (Kalupahana, David J. 1994, p.84). In his philosophy śūnyatā implies the empirical reality of the world. Phenomenon for him is like upāya or means, which can be employed as a means towards enlightenment. Thus, Nāgārjuna re-established Buddha's two levels of reality. These are Samvriti sat or truth of worldly convention and Paramārtha sat or truth of in terms of ultimate goal. The world of objects is conventional nature. But Paramārthasat for him also is not metaphysical.

Because of ignorance human beings consider the world of convention as eternally existent. With the help of dvāśaṅga or twelvefold causal chain of individual life-process Nāgārjuna explained the nature of the world and ultimate goal. In his philosophy the world of convention is a step towards the ultimate goal or nirvāna. But this ultimate goal is not metaphysical. Truth (both conventional and ultimate) is emphasised in a pragmatic manner by him. 'The wise equipped with the perception of truth' (vidyāṃs tattva-darśanāt) attains nirvāna and becomes Tathāgata. In this whole process

understanding śūnyatā is essential. Therefore he stated that, “is saṃsāra is from another point of view is Nirvāna itself” (M.K. Ch. 25, v. 20, cited from Kalupahana, 2006, p.367).

External World

Nāgārjuna dialectically analysed phenomena or the external world. By maintaining a logical sequence he maintained the middle way taught by the Buddha. The objects of the world are not from the causal relation. And causation is of relative nature. Again in the world there is dependent origination. But, for him the world is neither a real transformation (Parināmvāda) nor mere imposition (Vivartavāda). It is neither an appearance of any metaphysical entity nor it is derived from an eternal material existence. The nature of the world is dependent origination or praṭīyasamutpanno. Because of ignorance on the basis of empirical cognition individual considers the world as real. But human ignorance is not like that of cow’s and dog’s. Though because of perversion ignorance arises yet man contains seeds of knowledge within them. As soon as nature of the world is revealed in front of him ignorance is swiped out. Thus, Nāgārjuna established the non-substantiality of the objects of the world in a dialectical way. According to him, “saṃsāra is like appearance of a circle of fire produced by a fire-brand whirled around” (Ratnāvalī, I, 35-36, cited from Prof. Lalmoni Joshi Commercial Lecture Series, Naiḥśreyasa Dharma, p.3). Following points are noteworthy in finding out the status of the world in his philosophy,

- The objects of the world lack self-nature (svabhāva). So, the nature of the objects is empty (svabhāva-śūnyatā).
- Without self-nature nothing can exist independently. Therefore the objects of the world do not exist independently.
- Phenomena are not created by any Absolute metaphysical entity. They have no eternal existence like atoms of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas. Nor they are illusion like Hare’s horn.

In his philosophy objects of the world is a combination of a series of changes. To know the nature of the world right view is necessary. For him, the wise people are like the dragon who keeps its tail in the ocean and its head in the sky and brings showers on the earth (Prajñāpāramitāsāstra, 263c, Ramanan, K. Venkata, 2002, p.42).

Conclusion

Nāgārjuna is an authentic philosopher. He following the original teachings of the Buddha put emphasis on two points. Firstly he used language carefully and systematically while presenting the philosophical interpretation. Secondly, truth was expressed by him in a unique way with the gradation of reality. There are evidences gradation of reality both in Eastern and Western tradition. Śaṅkarācārya in Advaita Vedanta and Kant in his Absolute Idealism presented their versions of gradation of truth or existences. But, Nāgārjuna while grading truth did not use metaphysical interpretations unlike them. In his ontology the external world or the world of convention is explained by the words vyavahāra or praññāpti or saṅketa. The world of convention (vyavahāra) is an illustration (prapañca) of the names (nāma). World of convention for him includes three main implication. Firstly truth associated with the world of convention is synonym to ignorance or avidyā. Secondly, conventional truth implies lack of self-nature. Thirdly conventional truth is combination of the concepts and words which are based on perception or experience. So, in his philosophy conventional truth is empirically real and neither ultimately real nor ultimately unreal. The external world is śūnya or empty. Here emptiness is used to show transcendental illusion, not empirical illusion. In Nāgārjuna’s philosophy ultimate does not imply metaphysical thing-it-itself. Therefore

everything is empty. By establishing absolute of epistemic knowledge of phenomena is established as most important and essential throughout his philosophy.

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