

# The Concept of Jñāna (Knowledge) in Indian Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

*The word jñāna is derived from the root jñā, which is etymologically related to the English word know. In Indian Philosophy the word jñāna denotes for both true cognition or knowledge and false cognition or knowledge. For this reason in Indian Philosophy the word 'pramā' stands for true cognition. And the cognition which is not true is called 'apramā'. Knowledge reveals the world of reality. We fulfill all our practical activities through knowledge. True knowledge leads us to success. Our activities are not blind reactions to objects. A successful activity presupposes a correct knowledge of objects. We proceed to act in a particular way with reference to an object on the belief that our knowledge correctly reveals its nature. But sometimes we do not find a thing where and how we expect it to be, and thus we are shocked to learn the knowledge is not always a correct representation of reality, and that it frequently misguides us and leads to painful results. In this way we come to distinguish between true and falsehood. True knowledge is the correct representation of reality. Knowledge is a self-transcending property of the self. The self is a spiritual substance. It is the abode of intelligence. Indian epistemology or the theory of knowledge attempts to provide a rational basis for an intelligible discourse on matters of common, every day experience, on the one hand and in concentrating on the subject of cognition, it attempts to offer insight into the real, that is, essential nature of this subject, the being who cognizes.*

**Key Word:** knowledge

Epistemology or the theory of knowledge had no such higher status in the European Philosophy of ancient period, as it is in modern period, particularly in the philosophy of Locke, Hume and Kant. But in the history of Indian philosophy the position is different. From the very beginning of the different systems of philosophy, discussions in the problem of knowledge have formed essential

part of philosophy. The reason for this can be found in the fact that all schools of Indian Philosophy, except the cārvākes, have recognised ignorance (*avidyā*) or false knowledge (*mithyājñāna*) as the root cause of human sufferings. So all of them have tried at their best to discover the means and processes of true knowledge (*pramā*) by means which reality (*tattva*) can be known and the human misery can be overcome. This feeling of all Indian philosophers have been echoed by the voice of Vācaspati in commentary to first sūtra of Gautama's NyāyaSūtra. He comments that the study of *pramāna* (the sources of knowledge) is necessary. Only through it we can properly know reality (*tattva*) and truly guide our actions so as to be able to attain desirable end and avoid sufferings. So all the Indian philosophers have given high importance on the discussion of proper or true knowledge (*pramā*) in their philosophical investigation.

In Indian Philosophy the word Jñāna denotes for both true cognition or knowledge and false cognition or *apramā* (false knowledge). For this reason in Indian philosophy the word '*pramā*' stands for true cognition (Yathārthājñāna). And the cognition which is not true is called '*apramā*'. In Western philosophy knowledge always stands only for the cognition that is true. The false knowledge is not a cognition. Cognition is always mingled with belief and truth. So, cognition turns out to be false if there is no belief or truth. So, knowledge always stand only for a cognition that is true. The division of knowledge into true knowledge and false knowledge is meaningless and false knowledge is only a name for no knowledge. So, the word false is positively contradictory.

Knowledge reveals the world of reality. We can fulfill all our practical activities through knowledge. By true knowledge we can act successfully. True knowledge is the correct representation of reality. The self is a spiritual substance and intelligence (*caitanyaśraya*) is an essential property of the self. Desire, pain, pleasure and cognition are the specific properties of the self. The different ontologies of the various traditions of Indian Philosophy necessitate different notions of jñāna. According to Brahminical schools, jñāna is a momentary property of the eternal individual soul (ātman). The relationship between jñāna and soul is the relationship between quality and substance. It is the same relation that occurs between a color and the material substance like a pot in which it inheres. In contrast, Buddhists reject the idea of substance in general and of a permanent soul or self in particular. According to them an awareness (jñāna) is a primitive (non derivative) element of existence (dharma) that depends only on its causes and

conditions (e.g., sense, object and previous mental factors), not on any substrate such as a permanent soul. The Sâmkhya and Yoga are unique in the Brahminical tradition in claiming that the cognitive and psychological processes occur in the realm of matter and have no direct contact with the conscious soul, which is distinct from them and completely passive an awareness, or consciousness, arises from the combination of the material elements earth, water, fire and wind when they evolve into body, sense and object just as the power of intoxication arises when certain substance ferment.

Valid knowledge is a special form of cognition (*buddhi*). All cognitions are not valid knowledge. So, in order to understand the nature of valid knowledge we first come to know the nature of cognition or knowledge (*Jñâna*).

Knowledge illuminates things other than itself. The object of apprehension may be a thing or a quality, an act or an emotion, the existent as well as the non-existent. But in every case in which there is knowledge there must be something that stands out as the object of knowledge. All things are revealed to us when they become objects of knowledge.

Knowledge is a self-transcending property of the self. The self is a spiritual substance. It is the abode of intelligence. Intelligence is an essential property of the self, which distinguishes it from the material substances. Self is a purposive entity because it being acts with some end in view. When the self attains its ultimate goal then it frees itself from its specific properties but it is never devoid of its intelligence.

Nyâya believes “knowledge reveals both the subject and the object which are quite distinct from itself. All knowledge is a revelation or manifestation of objects. Just as a lamp manifests physical things placed before it, so knowledge reveals all objects which come before it.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the Nyâya-Vaiúecika philosophy knowledge means awareness or apprehension of objects. The object of our cognition or apprehension may be a thing or a quality, an act or an emotion. It may be existent as well as non-existent. All objects are revealed or manifested by knowledge to the self. By the luminous light of knowledge we can perform all our practical activities.

According to the Nyâya-Vaiúesika the self is not a series of conscious phenomena. But it can determine the sense impressions and has the power to react upon them. Self is a conscious entity which receives sense impressions and knows the external objects through them. Knowledge

is cognitive way by which we can understand the objects when we cognize an object we may also a feeling pleasure and pain. But knowledge is not a sense of feeling or the will though they connected with it. Knowledge has some specific characteristics of its own. Knowledge is distinct and self-sufficient. Knowledge is the acquired characteristics of self. Through *mânas* and sense organs self acquires it. Cognition is psycho-physical organism and depends upon the mind-body relationship. After the separation of the body from the self, the self acquires its natural entity of a pure substance devoid of cognition, pleasure, pain, desire etc. So, according to the Nyâya and the Prâbhâkara the self is a pure substance and cognition is the acquired characteristics of the self and it can no effect the nature of self.

According to the Nyâya-Vaiśeṣika doctrine cognition is not self-luminous. It comes to be known in a subsequent state of cognition called '*anuvyâvasâya*'. It is an internal perception. When I perceive a table then my first awareness is 'This is a table'. This first awareness is called '*vyâvasâya*'. And in the next moment I come to know that I have a perception of table. This later perception is known as the '*anuvyâvasâya*' of the original perception (of the table) which is known as '*vyâvasâya*.'

The Nyâya system denotes that cognition is the accidental quality of self. The self acquires it when it comes into the contact of *mânas* and sense organs. But when the body disjoined from the self and the self is in a state of release the cognition, pleasure, pain and desire go without affecting its essential nature. Then the self acquires its natural form of a pure substance.

Vâtsyâyana defines, "valid perception as the knowledge that represents the real character of its object or apprehends what exists in it".<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, according to Kumârila, the father of Bhâṭṭa School, sentience is the very essence of the self, which is inseparable with selfhood. Consciousness is the very core of selfhood. Specific cognition arise occasionally without making any difference to the natural purity of the self. Inactivity of sense organs implies the absence of cognition, through the cognitive potency will remain intact.

According to Pârthasârathi Miśra, an eminent BhâṭṭaMîmâmsâ philosopher, in the state of release not only the object consciousness is lost but even the self-consciousness is lost because *mânas* and the other sense organs are lost due to the exhaustion of all the karmas and its connection with the word is served.

Answering the objection ‘why *jñāna* does not arise in the state of release if the potency exists’, Kumārila said that the self is naturally equipped with the power of cognition but during the state of release, because the summum bonum of life has been achieved by the self, it no more feels the need of cognizing objects as there is no more dealing with the objective world.

Sālikanātha says, “cognition is one of nine ephemeral attributes of soul. Cognition to be self-maintaining and the rest to be cognizable through mental perception”.<sup>3</sup>

According to Sucarita Misra a distinguished Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsā philosopher, consciousness is the inherent property of the self and in the state of release the self is not devoid of consciousness. Cognitive power or consciousness is inseparable with the self. And when there is no awareness of objects it has the self as its object because cognition can never be without an object to be cognized. Mānas which is the instrument of cognition is eternal and the self joined with it even in the state of release. Mānas is always depend on the external world for object-cognition. Object consciousness is given up during release but self consciousness is not given up. It is eternal and indestructible.

According to the advocates of Prābhākara self conscious is involved in every cognition and in the state of release the self becomes unconscious because it is not tinged with object forms due to the absence of sense organs. The sense organs or body or cognition are not the knowing subject. It is the self that is knower and it can in no case and at no time be devoid of knowership.

Pārthasārathi says, “cognition is that which necessarily manifests object; therefore the self is not cognition. Thus the self is not knowledge but knower and the reality is not knowledge but the object of knowledge. Knowledge does not constitute reality; it is the revelation of reality”.<sup>4</sup>

Śamkara, the chief exponent of Advaitavedānta philosophy, distinguishes between higher knowledge and lower knowledge. Higher knowledge is true knowledge (*Vidyā*) and lower knowledge is false knowledge (*Avidyā*). The former renders that the knower and the known are ultimately one reality. It is the absolute knowledge of reality. The higher knowledge is not conditioned by space, time and causality. It is subject – objectless consciousness. The lower knowledge depends on spatio-temporal world. True knowledge is immediate, integral experience, which annuls *avidyā* and reveals the nature of absolute reality. True knowledge is intuition which annuls the intellectual knowledge of duality. Though *vidyā* and *avidyā* opposed to each other, the latter is a step to the absolute knowledge. The intellect is a means to intuition.

According to Râmânuja, the propounder of Viśiṣṭâdvaitavedânta, self is both self luminous and self conscious. It can only reveals itself but cannot the object. Knowledge can show itself as well as its objects. But it cannot know either itself or its object. But the self can know both itself and its object. Knowledge is not the essence of the self but an attribute of the self. The self is not knowledge but qualified by knowledge. All knowledge involves discrimination and we cannot know any undifferentiated object. Râmânuja said that all our knowledge is imperfect and partial. When we mistake a piece of shell for silver we perceive some features and miss others. Both true and erroneous knowledge are incomplete by nature. The former serves our practical purposes while the latter fails to serves our needs. The mirage is an error, because the water in it does not quench our thirst. The true knowledge always represents the object as it is (*yathârtha*) and practically it is useful in life (*vyavahârânuguga*).

In Indian philosophy the Bauddha uphold the view that knowledge, as an existent fact, consists in the act of showing and leads to an object.

The Jaina contends that a cognition can apprehend an object, only when it apprehends itself. Knowledge, like a lamp, illumines itself as well as an external objects.

The Sânkhya view is that, cognition is neither a mode nor a quality of the self. It constitutes its essence, the self being essentially conscious. Knowledge is not a material product. It is the activity of a non-material substance which is the self. Knowledge is formless (*nirâkâra*), quality less and can never be the material cause of others. It is not a substance but it is the modification of buddhi which is its substratum.

Thus, knowledge is the basis of all practical activities. The act of knowledge is to illuminate things other than itself. In an act of cognition there is an object that is revealed, a self to whom it is revealed and lastly the fact of revelation itself. These three factors are clearly distinguishable. But in the act of cognizing, cognition always relates the self to the object which is known by it.

Annambhatta, from the Nyâya point of view, in the Tarkasamgraha, defines cognition, “Sarvavyavahârahetuḥ-gunaḥ-buddhi-Jñānam.” AnnaAbhamma has listed three characteristics of cognition:

- i) It is a quality (*guna*);
- ii) It is the ground of *all* linguistic usage (*vyavahâra*);
- iii) It has the attribute ‘consciousness’ (*jñânatva*).

Of these three characteristics 'consciousness' (jñānatva) is the defining mark of cognition.

Knowledge is a cognitive fact by which we can understand the objects. Knowledge consists in the manifestation (prakāsa) of objects. By the luminous light of knowledge we can perform all rational practice and intelligent activity. It is the most fundamental fact of reality. It is the intrinsic character of all reality.

According to Advaita Vedānta knowledge grows by connecting the unknown with the known. Our mind is not a blank sheet of paper. The mind is already in possession of some knowledge. This is incomplete knowledge and making use of these we make it more complete and fruitful knowledge. Advaita holds that knowledge is not an acquisition of the soul but its very essence. It is not adventitious but constitutive of the soul. The precondition of all knowledge is consciousness. No knowledge will arise if they are not illumined by consciousness. The above is a brief account of the nature and status of jñāna (knowledge) in Indian philosophy.

In consideration of the above discussion we may state that the Advaita definition of knowledge is a meaningful and satisfactory definition. Moreover, although it is primarily intended to deal with the objects of empirical world, it may also be applied to the transcendental reality. Broadly speaking, the Advaita Vedānta philosophy views knowledge in its empirical and in its metaphysical or transcendental aspect. Knowledge in its metaphysical or transcendental aspect is pure consciousness or Brahman. According to the Advaitin, the true knowledge of a pot, an object of empirical reality is the knowledge of an object which is now previously known (anadhigata) and not contradicted (abādhita). In the same way, it may also be said that the knowledge of Brahman is the knowledge of the transcendental reality which is not previously known (anadhigata) in the transmigratory state (samskāarakale) and is not contradicted (abādhita) in past, present and future.

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