

# Ancient Rules of Indian Debate: Retrieving Models of Dialectal Reasoning

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## Debate in Indian History

- An emphasis on the *method* of discourse rather than the *content* – anything can be discussed in the public square so long as proper method is respected
- Traditional forms of scripture are more often than not dialectical:
  - The ancient Buddhist *Piṭakas* contain many debates between the Buddha and those who oppose his views, e.g. the followers of the Upaniṣads.
  - The ancient Jain *Āgamas* tell of “vādins,” people who took it upon themselves to defend Jain teachings dialectically by critically engaging opposing schools
  - The ancient Hindu epics like *Mahābhārata*<sup>1</sup> have developed discussion of debates
  - Patañjali’s ancient *Mahābhāṣya* (a work on Sanskrit grammar) describes many logical and dialectical terms
  - *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (7.1.2-4) names dialectics, logic and scriptural reasoning as subjects that a Brahmin should study (*śāstrārtha*, *vākovākya*, etc.)
- Ancient South Asia and South East Asia, perhaps more than any other ancient civilization, was an advanced literary cosmopolis in which multiple religions and philosophies were debated:
  - Is the self real or unreal, enduring or not?
  - What is the moral life, and how is it known?
  - Is scripture or testimony a reliable means of knowing, or is it only reason and perception?
  - What is language, the nature of human experience, the goal of life?
  - Is there a god or not, and if so what is the means of knowing?
- There was, therefore, a need to develop formal rules for debate, or a “science of dialectics” (*vādavidyā*), and this was done by Hindu, Buddhist and Jain thinkers as early as 500 BC; participants and judges (*madhyastha*) were expected to know the rules for debate.
  - Success in debate often meant royal patronage, disciples, and the general acceptance of one’s ideas – as such it was not uncommon for scholars to go on debating tours, sometimes traversing thousands of miles, from Sri Lanka to modern day Afghanistan.

## The Naiyāyikas (logicians) on the three types of discussion (*kathā*)

1. VĀDA OR DISCOURSE. *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.2.1 (c. 150 AD): “Discourse is when (two people) assign a thesis (*p*) and an anti-thesis (*not-p*), which are criticized and supported by means of argumentation (*tarka* and) and the instruments of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), such that the final conclusions of *p* and *not-p* are not contradicted, by presenting the five aspects of a syllogism.”<sup>2</sup>

### VĀTSYĀYANA, 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AD

- “Criticism and support of the two theses should be mutually connected until one of the two theses is rejected and the other established, such that the criticism of the rejected and the support of the established is unshaken.”
- The arguments must be about the same topic (*adhikaraṇa*), which *seems* obvious but isn’t always.

### PRAMĀṆA – THE INSTRUMENTS OF KNOWLEDGE

- i. Sense perception (*pratyakṣa*); ii. Inference (*anumāna*); iii. Comparison (*upamāna*); iv. Testimony (*śabda*)
- Different types of debates might ensue based upon which instrument(s) is accepted by participants – this allows for scripturally based debate
  - I believe that many controversies surround a confusion of the instruments of knowledge

### SYLLOGISM

- i. (hypothesis) there is fire on the mountain; ii. (reason) because there is fire; iii. (example) wherever there is smoke there is fire, as in a kitchen; iv. (application) this such a case; v. (conclusion) therefore, there is fire on the mountain.
- Indians focus on grammar as the basis of logic, unlike Westerners who focus on mathematics

<sup>1</sup> The *Mahābhārata* (Śāntiparvan, 308) contains a speech by Sulabhā, a female-ascetic, on what makes for a good discussion, e.g. it should not be prompted by lust, anger, fear, greediness, crookedness, shame or conceit.

<sup>2</sup> *pramāṇa-tarka-sādhānopālambhaḥ siddhāntāviruddhaḥ pañcāvayavopapannaḥ pakṣa-pratipakṣa-parigraho vādaḥ ||*

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- Indian logic would not allow for the distinction between *valid* and *sound* arguments since a syllogism requires an *example*.
- Nyāya at least considers a properly formed inference a form of knowledge, not a mere probability

## **TARKA – ARGUMENTATION**

- *reductio ad absurdum* arguments to support one's inference by attacking the opponent's
2. **JALPA OR SOPHISTRY.** *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.2.2: "Sophistry is like discourse but involves criticizing and supporting arguments through the use of methods that would equal defeat in a discourse (e.g. one doesn't understand the opponent's argument, one gets confused, one can't reply in the time limit), pointless rejoinders and quibbling (e.g. taking words out of context, subtly misconstruing them, taking them as literal when they are clearly metaphorical, etc.)."<sup>3</sup>
  3. **VITAṆḌĀ OR GRUMBLING.** *Nyāya Sūtra* 1.2.3: "Grumbling is sophistry but devoid of any attempt to establish a particular thesis."<sup>4</sup>

## **Example: Buddhist Idealism vs. Hindu Realism**

### **VASUBANDHU'S TWENTY-VERSES (4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)**

This world is nothing but mental impressions, since it manifests like an unreal object, just like in the case of those with cataracts see unreal hairs on the moon, etc....Spatial [and temporal] determination is established as in sleep[.]

### **UDDOYAKARA'S DISCUSSION OF LOGIC (EARLY 7<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)**

It is not true that the means of knowledge and the object of knowledge exist like objects in a magic show, or like the appearance of a castle in the cloud, a mirage, dream, etc. For the thesis cannot be proved. No reason has been given when it is asserted that unreal objects exist like dream objects. What reason could there be that objects in a dream-experience are unreal? [Opponent]: The reason is that they appear in experience. We maintain our thesis that objects in waking-consciousness do not have a separate existence from consciousness on the basis of objects in a dream. [Reply]: No, your example of a dream requires proof, just as your thesis does. What is the reason for believing that objects in dream-experience are not distinct from the dream-consciousness? [Opponent]: The objects do not exist [as distinct from dream-consciousness] because they are not apprehended by those who are awake. [Reply]: ...The fact of being not apprehended by the waking person cannot be cited as a reason because it is incapable of establishing the contra-positive,<sup>5</sup> i.e. apprehension of objects by the waking person proves the existence of those objects. If apprehension proves existence, then it is warranted that non-apprehension can prove non-existence. We contend that the reason should be capable of establishing the contra-positive [but it can't]. [Opponent]: Objects are not distinct from consciousness, like feelings. [Reply]: A feeling is a feeling of either pleasure or pain. Consciousness is a cognitive state of mind. A cognitive state is distinct from the feeling of pleasure or pain. Therefore, your supporting example is not correct.

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<sup>3</sup> *yathoktopapannaś chala-jāti-nigrahasthāna-sādhānopālabho jalpaḥ ||*

<sup>4</sup> *sa pratipakṣa-sthāpanāhino vitaṇḍā ||*

<sup>5</sup> If x, then y → if not y, then not x.

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