

## Modes of Perception (Nirvikalpaka and Savikalpaka): An Analysis from the Perspective of Nyāya

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### (Abstract)

Perception leads to the most significant concept in Indian Epistemology. The controversy related to this concept is never-ended. It is not only the primary source of human knowledge but also the base of all other means of knowledge. All the Indian Schools present their different views concerning the notion of perception. Indian philosophy basically admits two modes of perception based on the character of the perceptual experience of the content i.e. *nirvikalpaka* or indeterminate and *savikalpaka* or determinate. In *nirvikalpaka* perception, the object doesn't possess any determinate character or *prakāra*. This stage of perception is unpredictable, non-relational or uncharacterized. When the non-rationally apprehended elements are differentiated and related in the form of a judgement then this stage of perception is called *savikalpaka* perception; which is relational, predictable and characterized.

Though the distinction between *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka* perception is generally admitted in all the systems of Indian philosophy, but there is much difference of opinion, among the scholars of different schools, as to their exact nature and validity. The Nyāya system admits that both *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka* perceptions equally are valid and grounded in reality. But the problem is there is an enormous controversy among the scholars of Nyāya, either Classical or Navya, to determine the exact nature of *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka* perception.

So, this research paper would critically analyze the divergent views of the Naiyayikas as regards the modes of perception and determine the validity of *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka* perception. This paper also discusses the position of Buddhists, Grammarians and Mīmāṃsakas on these two modes of perception and differentiated their position from the Naiyayikas. Besides, this paper is an attempt to consider- (i) The definition of these two modes of perception, (ii) Whether the perception is conceptualized or not? (iii) Can we account for a cognition without the necessity of the *nirvikalpaka* stage?

**Key Words:** Nyāya, *Nirvikalpaka*, *Savikalpaka*, Perception, Navya-Nyāya, *Pramāna* etc.

### Part I

Perception is regarded as the most fundamental and final test of knowledge. It supplies the corner-stone of the philosophy of the world. It is an immediate process of the consciousness of an object. According to Western Philosophy, the truth of perception is unquestionable and self-evident. One can question the truth or validity of inference etc., but one can't question the

truth or validity of perception; it is beyond question. Hence, W.T. Marvin states that “perception is the ultimate crucial test and as such it doesn’t presuppose its own possibility. It simply is, and the man who questions it assumes it in order to do the questioning.”<sup>1</sup>

The Indian term of perception is *pratyakṣa*. This word is ambiguous as this word used for both the result, the apprehension of the truth and the process for the operation which leads to that result. Classical Indian Philosophy accepts this perceptual experience as the primary means of knowledge (*pramāṇa*). It is the most important means of knowledge than other sources like inference, comparison, testimony, implication, and non-apprehension in Indian philosophy. The chief problem in the epistemology of perception is that of explaining how perception could give us knowledge or justified belief about the external world, about things outside of ourselves. Is the sensory essence everything there is to the content of a perceptual experience? Are the objects of perception internal to consciousness or external? Are they restricted to individuals or are universals also perceived? How about relations? Whether the content of a perceptual experience is restricted to being unconceptualized (*nirvikalpaka*), or can any part of it be conceptualized (*savikalpaka*) as well? These are the questions that always attract the attention of all the thinkers in both Eastern and Western traditions throughout the centuries.

Indian philosophy admits of two modes of perception- indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*) and determinate (*savikalpaka*). Broadly speaking, there are four divergent views concerning the modes of perception. According to the Buddhists, indeterminate perception alone is valid; a determinate perception which is independent of object is invalid. The Grammarians’ view is diametrically opposed to that of the Buddhists in denying indeterminate perception and holding that determinate perception is the only valid mode of perception. Similarly, the Jainas reject indeterminate perception. But the Nyāya and the Mīmāṃsā accept both of them as valid. On the other hand, according to the Advaita Vedānta, the sole object of perception is pure being and the indeterminate perception alone can apprehend it. The debate among the philosophers particularly the Buddhists, the Naiyayikas and the Mīmāṃsakas over the problem is both exciting and illuminating. They have put forth arguments in defence of their views and counter arguments to meet the challenge of their opponents.

According to the grammarians, every perception can be expressed in a verbal proposition and is consequently predicative in its character hence all perceptions are *savikalpaka*. They argue that since language enters into the very texture of all kinds of knowledge without exception, a knowledge that is worth the name must be always determinate.<sup>2</sup> They proclaim that there can’t be any *nirvikalpaka* perception because we can’t think things without words. In fact, all objects are invariably connected with the words by which they are denoted. To cognise a thing, it should be expressed in words or language. All our cognitions confined in verbal propositions, they are inseparable from verbal expressions such as, ‘I can see this’, ‘I have the taste of it’ etc. Thus the indeterminate stage of perception necessarily ruled out from the grammarian’s standpoint.

The Naiyayikas generally define *nirvikalpaka* perception as a bare, non-verbalized perception. In the stage of *nirvikalpaka*, an object doesn’t possess any determinate character or *prakāra*.

Though there are substantives and attributes in it, yet we can't know or understand that this is substantive or this is an attribute. According to Naiyayikas without the concession of *nirvikalpaka* perception, *savikalpaka* perception can't be possible since the cause of relational cognition of the qualified (*visistajñāna*) is the cognition of qualifying attributes (*visesajñāna*). In the stage of *savikalpaka* perception objects possess definite character. Perception has generally defined the perception of a definite object i.e. *visistadrāvyapratyakṣa*. The three things-substantives, attributes, and substantives as characterised but attributes make a qualified cognition. So the perception which is of the nature of relational perceptual cognition i.e. *visistajñāna* is simply called determinate perception.

When perception takes place at the very first moment, we don't have the knowledge of an object characterized by any character; however, it apprehends some unrelated elements. This primary stage is *nirvikalpaka* perception. This stage of perception is unpredictable, non-relational or uncharacterized. Again, when the non-rationally apprehended elements are differentiated and related in the form of a judgement, this stage of perception is called *savikalpaka* or determinate perception, that is, relational, predictable and characterized. The existence of the primary stage of perception is not, however, directly experienced, but it can be logically proved to exist as a necessary presupposition of our determinate knowledge of the object. In the stage of determinate perception, a thing is ascribed with all its qualities, but to take this substance-attribute relation one should precede the stage of *nirvikalpaka*.

In Buddhist philosophy perception is identified with indeterminate perception and determinate perception is rejected outright. It is invalid on the ground that it is not determined by the object but by mental categories or conceptual constructs. Diñnāga has defined perception as a cognitive state free from imaginative construction. Though Dharmakīrti has added an additional epithet such as 'Abhrānta' (non-erroneous), both of them have admitted that perception is a cognition which is not associated with mental construction. Construction involves the application of mental categories to the datum.

## Part II

Gautama, the founder of Nyāya system defines perception: "*Indriyārthasannikarṣotpannamjñānavyapadeśyamavyabhichāri vyavasāyātmakampratyakṣam*". This definition implies that perception is a cognition resulting from sense-object contact which is inexpressible by words, which is not erroneous but it is determinate or definite in character. The significance of this definition is that the attributes used in this definition- *avyapadeśyamandvyavasāyātmakam*. The literal meaning of the term '*avyapadeśyam*' is 'unnameable' or 'non-expressible', which can't be express through words or language, consequently, it suggests the idea of indeterminate perception as in *nirvikalpaka* stage there is no verbal element. Hence, some scholars think that the term '*avyapadeśyam*' has been introduced in the definition in order to include indeterminate perception under the category of perception. Indeterminate perception is that kind of perception that doesn't express through language. At the first time when our sense-organ comes into contact with a

particular object, then the knowledge, then the knowledge of that object can't be expressed by any language or words. However, we can't be ignored the existence of such knowledge, as it becomes the cause of the later knowledge provided with name, class, etc. So thinkers come to the conclusion that the term '*avyapadeśyam*' indicates that the indeterminate perception is a kind of perception too. In the same way, some thinkers say that the term *vyavasāyātmakam* is inserted in the definition to include determinate perception (*savikalpakajñāna*) under the purview of perception.

VācaspatiMīśra, the author of Nyāya-vārttika-tātparyāṭīkā, gives a remarkable interpretation of the *sūtra* of Gautama I.I.4. According to him, part of the *sūtra* I.I.4. viz., '*Indriyārthasannikarśotpānamjñānamavyabhichāri* i.e.' the uncontradicted knowledge produced by sense-object-contact' is the definition of perception, and the two terms *avyapadeśyam* and *vyavasāyātmakam* indicate two kinds of perception viz. indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*) and determinate (*savikalpaka*).<sup>3</sup> So, in the Nyāya system, VācaspatiMīśra is the one who has categorized perception in two types for the first time.

Gaṅgeśa, the founder of Navya-Nyāya, for the first time, classified two types of perception, viz. *laukika* and *alaukika* perception in a systematic way. The perception produced by the ordinary or usual contact of the sense and the object is called ordinary perception. And the perception which is not produced by the usual or ordinary contact of the sense and the object rather caused by the transcendental or extra-ordinary contact of the sense with the object is called extra-ordinary perception.

Ordinary perception is of two kinds, viz., external (*bahya*) and internal (*manasa*). External perception is produced by the external senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Internal perception is brought about by the contact of the internal sense with the internal objects like pleasure (*sukha*), pain (*dukha*), aversion (*dveṣa*), cognition (*jñāna*), and volition (*icchā*), etc.

Ordinary perception involves epistemic relations (*sannikarṣa*) of six kinds, viz., 1. Visual Perception (*Cākṣuṣapratyakṣa*), 2. Tactual perception (*Śpārśanapratyakṣa*), 3. Auditory perception (*Śrautrapratyakṣa*), 4. Gustatory perception (*Rāsanapratyakṣa*), 5. Olfactory perception (*Ghrāṇajapratyakṣa*), and 6. Internal perception (*Manasa*).

Extraordinary perception is of three kinds: 1. *Samanyalaksanapratyakṣa* i.e. perceptions of all instances of a universal, 2. *Jñānalaksanapratyakṣa* i.e. the perception of an object by a sense-organ although the object is not a proper object of ordinary perception by that sense-organ, 3. *Yogajapratyakṣa*, the perception for the yogins. The first two types of perceptions are common to all human beings. But the third kind of special perception is accessible to only yogins who can perceive very small things like atoms, distant or future things and so on. Gaṅgeśa also asserts that there are two modes of perception to validate the cognition of an object, viz., *nirvikalpaka* and *savikalpaka*. To understand Gaṅgeśa's view on these two modes of perception, first, we have to understand the definitions of perception given by him.

To remove the defects of Nyāya-sūtra definition I.I.4., Gaṅgeśa offers two definitions of perception. He offers his first definition of perception to take the idea of divine or eternal *pratyakṣa* in the range of perception. The definition is

“*pratyakṣasyasākṣātkāritvaṃlakṣaṇam*” means “cognitive immediacy” does define perceptual cognition. The common character of all perception is the immediacy or *sākṣātkāritvam*. The perceptions like visual, auditory and other kinds of perception are alike connected with the feeling that something is immediately known by the subject or the knower.

To cover the perception of individual and that of Superhuman agency he offers the second definition of perception as “*jñānā-karaṇakamjñānamituvayam*” i.e. perception is that cognition which cannot have another cognition as its instrumental cause or *Karaṇa*. Perception is that knowledge which is not brought about by the instrumentality of any antecedent knowledge. This definition is applicable in all the cases of perception either it is human or divine. Simultaneously this definition excludes other kinds of knowledge like inference, testimony, and comparison. The recollection of invariable concomitance is considered as the instrumental cause of inferential cognition. In analogy, the comprehension of similarity (*sādrśyajñāna*) is the instrumental cause. And in the verbal cognition, the comprehension of words is being considered as the instrumental cause. But in a perceptual cognition both *janya* and *ajanyapratyakṣa*, the sense-organ is regarded as the *Karaṇa*. So all the perceptual cognition whether it is a perception of an individual or Superhuman agent doesn't have any cognition as its instrumental cause.

It is the only perception where our knowledge is not caused by our experience. But it is wrong to be said that all the knowledge of perception is caused without the knowledge of our previous experience. Because there is a stage of perception called *savikalpaka* is conditioned by the previous knowledge. A determinate perception of an object, as having certain attributes and belonging to a class, is conditioned by the previous knowledge of those attributes as standing for a certain class of things. But even here our perception of the object is only conditioned but not caused by the previous knowledge (*jñānajanya* and not *jñānakaranaka*).<sup>4</sup> The present perception of a thing such as pot before me doesn't arise out of my previous knowledge about pots, despite the character of that perception is determined by such antecedent knowledge. Hence according to Nyāya, perception is not the result of a conscious application of antecedent knowledge to a present case. They exclude all the conscious conditions of knowledge from the definition of perception. But according to Buddhist perception is a knowledge that is directly produced by the object alone. Except, for an object, they exclude all the conscious and unconscious conditions of knowledge from perception. Hence for it, perception is not wholly undetermined by previous experience; rather if it be determined by prior experience, it is not consciously brought about by that experience. Therefore perception is defined as the knowledge which is not brought about the instrumentality of any antecedent knowledge.

Gaṅgeśa has explained a secondary (introspective) cognition of a primary cognition of an object. For example, if the primary cognition is of a cow, the secondary cognition is of the form ‘I cognize the cognition of a cow’. According to Gaṅgeśa, a cognition is perceived indeterminately in introspection; however, the cognition of a cow is a determinate perception. Hence the whole introspective cognition is the mixture of indeterminate and determinate perception; if one part is indeterminate then the other part is determinate.

Gaṅgeśa has followed the dictum of old Naiyayikas as well as his predecessor Śāśadhara and tries to establish the validity of indeterminate perception. The term *nirvikalpaka* is paraphrased as *nāstivikalpamprakāroviśeṣaṇamvāyatrajñānataṅnirvikalpakaṃ*. It means *nirvikalpaka* is a perceptual cognition that does not show the structure of qualifier-qualificand type through all the requisite qualifications is present indistinctly in that cognition. The cognition which reveals such a structure of qualifier-qualificand type is known as *savikalpaka*. It is otherwise called as *saprakāraḥajñāna*.

In general, the theory of indeterminate perception maintains the position that, despite illusion, there are instances that exist independently from our minds. Nothing comes from the side of the subject. But it does not mean that they deny the role of mind or subject is an awareness process. Though the Naiyayikas are pure realists, yet they admit that in some cases or complex perceptions we cannot deny the subjective elements. Subjective elements are to be explained in such situations. They also admit that there is some cognition which we get from our memory. They do not completely deny the role of memory in the perceptual process. They hold that recognitions are with content by the establishment of a hidden memory impression, *saṃskāra*, which is something seemingly ‘subjective’, on the side of the subject.<sup>5</sup> But they said that with the first-time perception, nothing on the side of consciousness could provide the object as ‘a pot’. The knowledge of ‘potness’ is provided by only a direct sensory connection with the object as it is in the world. Potness causes an indeterminate perception that has it as its object.

In the two-stage process of perceptual awareness, determinate perception is a cognizing of a qualificandum qualified by a qualifier where the qualifier is provided by prior cognition-things have multiple properties some of which normally go undetected on any given occasion of experience.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, NavyaNaiyayikas considers that there is no direct, apperceptive evidence for *nirvikalpakapratyakṣa*. This is raw perception because it is not a cognition of an entity as qualified, where a qualificandum is cognized as qualified by a qualifier. It has no predication content.<sup>7</sup> This type of perception is accepted by Gaṅgeśa to be only theoretical postulate for which the evidence is indirect and systematic. It is not itself perceptible; in fact, it is the only type of cognition that can’t be apperceived. The evidence for indeterminate perception is indirect and is proved by the inferential process.

## Part III

In the 20th century, some scholars have analyzed indeterminate perception in their writings passionately. Among them, we can discuss the writings of B.K. Matilal, Arindam Chakrabarty, Jonardon Ganeri, and Stephen H. Phillips. Through the word ‘*vikalpa*’ or ‘*kalpanā*’, B.K. Matilal has explained the ideas of *savikalpaka* and *nirvikalpaka*. *Kālpāna* or *vikalpa* signifies ‘imagination’ in ordinary Sanskrit. Matilal attempts to demonstrate that the Sanskrit word ‘*kalpanā*’ has a comparative, or maybe a progressively significant, task to carry out in the traditional Sanskrit scholar’s discussion of perceptual knowledge. The long-standing differentiation found in the entire traditional writing on the Sanskrit philosophy of perception

is made with the assistance of this word '*vikalpa*': *nir-vikalpapratyakṣa*, 'perception without imagination' and *sa-vikalpapratyakṣa*, 'perception with imagination'. Matilal uses the words 'conception-free' and 'conception-loaded' rather than *nir-vikalpa* and *sa-vikalpa* perception.<sup>8</sup> The use of the term *vikalpa* in philosophy is very pervasive. The Naiyayikas utilize the term *vikalpa* (in their differentiation of *nir-vikalpa* and *sa-vikalpa*) in the sense of any thought-construction which incorporates even the genuine construction, for example, the construction that, as indicated by them, genuinely represents to the structure of reality. In fact, by normal consent classical Indian scholars utilized the term *vikalpa* in their epistemological clarification for anything that, let us state, mind adds to or perceives in, the 'given'.<sup>9</sup> It avoids just the 'given' i.e. the pure sensory datum.

Can there be awareness of the so-called conception-free awareness? Generally, Navya-Nyāya figures two standards that clarify the idea of our awareness in a somewhat more clear style. In Matilal's manner, we can explain Navya-Nyāya's position. "Firstly, at whatever point an object *x* figures (or floats, or swims= *avagāhate*) in our awareness, it figures or features there as recognized in some way or other (*kīñcit-prakāreṇa*). Second, a pre-condition for having a clear and distinct awareness with this sort (we will call this a qualificative awareness) is a further awareness of the qualifier or the recognizing or 'attributive' component (*viśeṣaṇa*). Allegorically, when an object *x* includes particularly in our awareness, it is recognized by a cloak that may either be put upon it by us, or that may have a place there at first, and be perceived by us all things considered. Further, it is guaranteed that we have such a recognizing (qualificative) awareness, we need to have an earlier awareness of the distinguisher or the cloak."<sup>10</sup>

Let us make the principles in the following way-

P1: If something *x* is introduced to one's awareness, it is exhibited there under the cloak of an indicated qualifier.

P2: To offer ascent to an awareness in which the object *x* is introduced as qualified by *f*, an earlier awareness of *f* is required as one of its causal components.

P2 implies that all together that one might have the option to describe or qualify *x* by *f*, or ascribe *f* to *x* in his awareness, he should be in control of an awareness of *f*, before it. Except if he comprehends what 'blue' or being blue is, he can't pass judgment on something to be blue.

P1 raises an undeniable issue. On the off chance that one knows about *x* as recognized by a property *f*, at that point *f* is additionally a piece of what he knows about. This suggests *f* should likewise float in his awareness as much as *x* does, and henceforth one can contend that we need a further distinguisher for qualifying *f*. If one knows about a bit of gold as a bit of gold at that point being gold is additionally what he should know about. On the off chance that would be foolish to guarantee that he doesn't have the foggiest idea what gold is or what being gold resembles, but then he realizes that this will generally be gold. On the off chance that this case is correct, at that point by our P1 we should state that on the off chance that somebody recognizes what being gold is (or goldness), he should know it, for example, know about it, under a further characterization. This prompts the risk of infinite regress: If *x* figures

in somebody's awareness by method for being gold, and being gold figures thereby method for being something different, at that point there will be no halting. To stay away from this issue, a special case of P1 is figured by Matilal:

Example: When somebody knows an ultimate universal, a simple property (a *jāti* or an *akhaṇḍaupādhi*), he may know it as such (unqualified).

We must observe two things in this specific situation. To begin with, the feeling of such expressions as 'indicated property', 'ultimate universals', and 'simple property' might be taken to be ontologically impartial. Such properties could conceivably be isolated real or existent in the mind-autonomous objective world. It might be that there are just chairs in this world; however, no different things called 'chairhood'. Our articulate of chairhood is confined uniquely to its being a recognizable qualifier (*viśeṣaṇa*). Nyāya mustn't make any distinction in this context between a real (objective) universal (*jāti*) and a nominal universal to the extent that they assume the logical role of 'simple' properties. A simple property is ultimate in the sense of being a property that is (further) unanalysable (unbreakable).<sup>11</sup>

Some contemporary Nyāya scholars say that the truth of *nirvikalpaka* perception is proved with the assistance of an inference by methods for the accompanying:

The awareness of a qualified entity (*viśiṣṭa*) is expected to:

- The awareness of the qualifier (*viśeṣaṇa*); and
- The awareness of "cow" is the knowledge of a qualified entity.

Hence, the awareness of 'cow' is because of the awareness of a qualifier.

"An individual holding a stick" (*Dandipurusha*), from this knowledge, somebody has the knowledge of something having the character "with a stick". One can't have the knowledge of 'one with a stick' (*dandi*) except if and until somebody accompanied by the knowledge of "stick" (*danda*). Subsequently, the awareness of "one with a stick" (*viśiṣṭa*) is followed from the awareness of 'stick' which is again followed from the awareness of its qualifier, i.e., stickness if the stick is taken as a qualified object. Here, the awareness of stickness is the *nirvikalpakajñāna*. To affirm that it builds up the reality of *nirvikalpaka* is to state that the awareness of a qualifier is the awareness of something that isn't itself qualified. In such a case that the awareness of a qualifier was taken to be determinate or *savikalpaka*, at that point its lead to the fallacy of infinite regress.<sup>12</sup>

For instance, 'cow', is the awareness of a qualified entity and it is because of the cognition of its qualifier 'cowness', again, the awareness of the qualifier 'cowness' is because of the perception of its qualifier cownessness. Much the same as that, it will involve in the fallacy called infinite regress. To avoid such trouble, the Naiyayikas recognize the qualifier of a qualified element as *nirvikalpaka* or indeterminate. Here the awareness of 'cowness' is cognized in itself, that is, with no other qualifier. And, in this way, the reality of *nirvikalpaka* perception is verified.

We can conclude this paper by stating that both indeterminate and determinate perception is valid in the process of acquiring knowledge. To attain determinate cognition of a thing we must precede indeterminate perception. It means knowledge is a mixture of both indeterminate and determinate perception. For example, the perception 'a pot' is both



determinate and indeterminate as in the perception of 'a pot', the pot is the qualificand and potness is the qualifier. The pot is cognized as being qualified by potness, but potness itself is cognized under no mode. So far as the cognition of potness is concerned, it is indeterminate, and the cognition of the pot under the mode of potness is determinate. If the indeterminate stage is not accepted here, then potness would be cognized under a mode and so on ad infinitum. This infinite regress of modes of modes of cognition would rob the theory of indeterminate perception of all cogency.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The New Realism, pp. 66-67

<sup>2</sup> Datta, Dharendra Mohan. *The Six Ways of Knowing*. University of Calcutta, 1997, p. 78

<sup>3</sup> Sastri, Dharmendra Nath. *The Philosophy of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and its Conflict with The Buddhist Dignāga School (Critique of Indian Realism)*. Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, Delhi, 1964, p.431

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 127

<sup>5</sup> Phillips, Stephen H. and N.S. Ramanuja Tatacharya. *Epistemology of Perception Transliterated text, Translation, and philosophical Commentary of Gangesha's tattvacintamani (Jewel of Reflection on the Truth) Pratyaksa-Khanda The Perception Chapter*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass publ., 2009, p. 609.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 610

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 610

<sup>8</sup> Matilal, Bimal Krishna. *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 303.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 314

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 343

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 344-45

<sup>12</sup> Ghosh, Raghunath. *Knowledge, Meaning and Intuition: Some Theories of Indian Logic*. New Bharatiya Book Corporation, 2018, p. 26.