

AN ANALYSIS OF 'SYAT' IN SYADVADA

Many scholars have acknowledged the importance of the role that *Syādvāda* or *Saptabhāṅgi* plays in the exposition and explanation of the central tenet of the Jaina Philosophy. In the elaboration of the doctrine of *Syādvāda* the expression 'syāt' is rendered by such corresponding expressions as 'possibly', 'may be', 'it is possible that', 'perhaps' etc. The point of such renderings and their explanations is that some kind of modal predicate or possibility is involved in the doctrine. But, unfortunately, hardly any effort is made to analyse and explain the kind of possibility that is involved in such a doctrine. It is the object of this paper to focus attention on this issue. The entire paper falls into four main sections : the first deals with the brief statement of the various kinds of possibilities which western philosophical and logical discussion have brought to forefront, the second attempts to offer interpretation of 'syāt', the third focusses on the question of the kind of possibility or possibilities that such an interpretation of 'syāt' embraces and the final section discusses some of the important consequence this explanation leads to.

I

Starting from Aristotle many philosophers and logicians have concentrated their attention on elaborate explanation of such modal predicates as necessity, possibility, impossibility etc. Of late, logicians like von Wright have also been maintaining that modes are principally of four kinds : Alethic modes or modes of truth, Existential modes or modes of being, Epistemic modes or modes of knowing and Deontic modes of obligation. The entire discussion is very important. But we need hardly concentrate on it here. For *Sāyādvāda* in particular and Jaina Logic and Philosophy in general do not talk about every modal predicate but rather about one modal predicate viz. possibility. Even if we decide to focus our attention only on one mode viz. possibility, we might not have to, as will appear later, take into account all kinds of possibilities. We shall, therefore mainly concentrate only on the mode of possibility.

If we think over the various kinds of possibilities that have been considered during the development of modal notions in western

philosophical thought. it would be clear that they fall under six main heads : (i) the Absolute possibility (ii) the Relative possibility (iii) the Epistemic possibility (iv) Possibility understood as ability, capacity, disposition or what Aristotle called potentiality, (v) Technical or etiological possibility and (vi) Possibility as minimal probability. The first again is of two kinds : (a) Conceptual or apriori and (b) nomological, physical or real. Similarly, the relative possibility can be considered under (a) and (b) above.

We shall presume the general sense in which these modal notions are understood in modern philosophical thought. However, some discussion about them may be useful to us for the consideration of the concept of ' *Syāt* '. First, the notion of possibility as minimal probability is not usually employed in technical language, although in our ordinary language we are familiar with such a notion. Secondly, not only the absolute nomological possibility can be subsumed under absolute conceptual possibility or the relative nomological possibility can be subsumed under relative conceptual possibility but also the relative conceptual and nomological possibilities are definable in terms of the absolute conceptual and nomological possibilities respectively. Thirdly, the major controversies that have arisen recently are about the possibilities of the first and fourth kind. Again, the way sometimes its explanation is given, the fourth kind of possibility is tied to an important presupposition about both the world and things in it. Lastly, possibility of the third kind presupposes the possibility of the fourth and sixth kinds but not vice versa.

In connection with the discussion of possibility in Aristotle Hintikka¹ has argued that the Aristotelian broad notion of possibility really embraces two important kinds of it within its fold : (a) ' possibility proper ' or what we would term today to be conceptual possibility and (b) possibility as contingency. The latter kind of possibility, again is of two kinds : (a) Possibility that is short of necessity and (b) the one that is descriptive of something indeterminate. This kind of possibility is generally expressed in the form of ' thus ' or ' not thus ' without prevalence of either one of the alternatives. Hintikka has further argued that although Aristotle mentions and uses both these kinds of possibilities yet no sharp distinction between them is made by

him and that the second kind of possibility is, according to Aristotle, connected with generation or change of a thing while the first is not. The first kind of possibility of these comes to be stated in terms of what Quine calls 'eternal sentences' while that of the latter kind in terms of what Quine calls 'occasion sentences'. All these earlier considerations about possibility as also the points Hintikka has made have an important bearing on the discussion of possibility or possibilities indicated by 'syāt'.

II

Although there is an important relation between *Anekāntavāda* and *Syādvāda* yet it should be borne in mind that the two are distinct. Similarly, although there is an important relation between *Nayavāda* and *Syādvāda*, one should not be confused with the other.² The point, however, is made to avert the possible confusions of mixing between them.

The expression '*Saptabhaṅgī*' suggests a set of seven formulae.³ Each one of such formulae is prefixed by the expression 'syāt'. It is on account of this perhaps that the doctrine of *Saptabhaṅgī* is also known as *Syādvāda*. The expression 'syāt', as mentioned in the beginning of the paper, is rendered and understood in a particular way; i. e. in the sense of a modal predicate or modal notion.

It may be admitted that the expression 'syāt' is used by grammarians in different ways i. e. as a form of 'as' and as *Avyaya*. In the context of *Syādvāda* these two uses seem to be important. Several scholars have used it as *Avyaya* (indeclinable or grammatical particle).⁴ In the sense of potential *liṅ*, however, *Syāt* is left understood by some texts. This sense is clear, however, not only from dictionaries but also from reliable Jaina philosophical texts.⁵

It is urged that although the word 'syāt' is understood in the sense of *anekānta*, *vidhi*, *vicāra* etc. yet in the context under consideration, viz in the context of *Saptabhaṅgī* it is only to be understood in the sense of *Anekānta*. *Anekānta* means that a given object or thing is (potentially) beset with many *dharma*s.⁷ The grammatical particle (*avyaya*) *syāt* is indicative (*dyotaka*) of this. *Syādvāda* as a doctrine arises from this consideration. *Syādvāda*,

thus, essentially is that hypothesis (*abhyupagama*) in accordance with which it is maintained that (any) one thing is (potentially) beset with many *dharma*s, invariable or variable (*nityānitya*).⁸ Understood in this way *Syādvāda* emphasises that different *dharma*s can be predicated of a given thing.

There is, however, another equally important, sense in which the word *syāt* is used. In this use it is the potential third person singular of the root 'as'.⁹ But it is not merely the grammatical consideration that brings this sense to the foreground. Equally important are the philosophical and modal considerations. 'Syāt' in this sense brings out symptomatically (*pratirūpakah*) that a thing is a collection or conjunction (*Nipātaḥ*) of *dharma*s potentially it is beset with.¹⁰

If both these interpretations of the expression 'syāt' are brought to bear upon each other then two important consequences seem to follow, the fuller implications of which will become clear as we proceed, and they are : (a) *Syādvāda* is the explanatory foundation of *anekāntavāda*, the explanatory frame in terms of which *anekāntavāda*, the doctrine according to which a thing can have many *dharma*s without contradiction,¹¹ becomes significant and meaningful; and (b) *Syādvāda* is connected with potentiality, capacity or dispositions of a thing which actualize. Such actualized dispositions are given either right with the emergence of a thing (*sahabhāvīdharmas*), in which case they are called *guṇas* or as those which happen to be actualized collectively or sequentially (*kramabhāvi*) in course of time. In the latter case they are called *Paryāyas*. Both these interpretations have important consequences in the context of the Jaina Philosophical explanation, but more of it later.

III

In order, for us, to determine the kinds of possibilities that are involved in the doctrine of *Syādvāda* we shall have to understand the expressions, *dharma*, *guṇa* and *paryāya*. The nature of a *Dravya* can be understood only in the light of these expressions. To me it appears that the Jaina philosophers use the term *Dharma* for any potential feature of a thing. We need to assume that totality of such *dharma*s are given to us as dispositions. *Guṇa*, on the other hand, means for them the actual feature of a thing. But such a

feature shall be either of the nature of a differentia or proprium. These features of a thing are given along with it. *Paryāyas*, again, are those features of a thing which are actualized through a thing undergoing a change. Such features are actualized either simultaneously or successively in course of time. These features could be of the nature of accidents – inseparable or separable.¹²

In Jaina philosophical texts, it appears that, the terms *Padārtha*, *Dravya*, *Tattva*, *Vastu* and *Sat* are used almost interchangeably. This leads to number of problems. But we need not bother about them here. It is for this reason, perhaps, that what is said about a *dravya* becomes *inter alia* applicable to a *vastu* or *sat*.¹³ We shall understand these terms broadly in the sense of any physical thing.

One striking point about a thing that is brought out in one definition of it is that it has three kinds of characteristics: (a) emergence (*Utpāda*) (b) decay or degeneration or change (*vyaya*) and (c) some kind of permanence (*dhrauvya*).¹⁴ that becomes the basis of re-identification and recognition of it. Such a definition of a thing reveals a general, although important, feature of a thing. Such a thing further has two kinds of features (on the plain of actuality): (a) *guṇas* or those features that are given to us experientially along with the thing itself and are, as stated above, of the nature either of differentia or proprium, and (b) those features which the thing has only contingently. They, as argued earlier, could be of the nature of accidents. We describe a thing either in terms of *guṇas* or *paryāyas* or both.¹⁵ Since any feature that is epistemically given to us is given in course of time and since epistemically any descriptive statement about a thing presupposes maximally the totality of such features that are either collectively or alternatively given to us in course of time, either along with the emergence of a thing or in course of its life-history, a thing is also defined as the one that has many (literally innumerable) such features.¹⁶ The reason being that a thing can change and through a change can come to have newer and newer features and never shall we be in a position to say that a thing has so many features and not more. A statement about a thing can be made only with reference to the given occasion. If we make a statement about a thing independently of the stipulation of occasion it would hardly be informative in the genuine sense of the term.

A thing, nevertheless, does not have those and only those features that are given to us in experience from time to time. We shall rather be in a position to say that a thing either has at least those features which it is now having or those which it would have in the course of time. Thus a thing potentially has not only those features that are actualized but also those which were or will be actualized. That is, a thing potentially has all the features, whether they are actualized or not. This is how a thing is also defined as that which is beset with totality of all features potentially.¹⁷

If we bring to bear these three descriptions of the nature of a thing upon one another then it turns out that the possibilities that we can envisage with regard to a thing fall readily into two groups : (a) epistemic possibilities— the ones which figure in the descriptive statement about a thing, and (b) possibilities understood as capacities, abilities or dispositions. Here capacities or dispositions or potentialities are understood perhaps as a sub-visible structure of a thing. Unless a thing has potentialities they will never be actualized. It is in this sense that dispositional possibilities are prior to epistemic possibilities. But, contrarywise, all our statements about dispositions of a thing are anchored in epistemic possibilities and which are, therefore, prior to possibilities as potentialities. But the features a thing comes to have either as differentia or otherwise are those and only those, it is maintained by Jaina philosophers and logicians, which it must have as dispositions. It is in this sense that epistemic possibilities presuppose possibilities as potentialities.

One important question arises here. Granting that there are possibilities, what kind of possibilities are they ? In this connection four alternative stand out prominently : (a) possible events, both specific and otherwise, (b) possible courses of events, (c) possible kinds of individuals, and (d) possible individuals or particulars. Out of these, in the context of *Syādvāda*, the first two are ruled out simply because they are basically technical possibilities. Although they are explainable in terms of nomological possibilities, to the extent to which they are at heart etiological or causal possibilities and to the extent to which Jainas are talking about physical objects independently of causal chain in the context of *Syādvāda*, these possibilities are out of question. The basic issue the *Syādvāda* is concerned with is to describe a thing vis-a-vis the feature it has.

Some of these are given along with the thing, others the thing comes to have in course of time. Further, these features the thing comes to have simultaneously or in succession. This issue is different from the issue of the explanation of the either emergence of a thing or its features. It is in this context that etiological possibilities will figure. More importantly, however, we should understand that every genuine characterization of a thing consists in giving a determinate value to determinables; and for this determinables need not at all be conceived as causally enchained possibles. But what about the last two? In some text it is argued that the expression 'Syāt' is envisaged to bring forward the possibilities in the sense of such objects as a *ghata*.¹⁸ But an object may be considered as a kind of individual or as an individual or a particular. Now, out of these the former is ruled out at least so far as the contention of some texts is concerned. The reason for this is that same text adds that such an entity, which is potentially beset with many *dharma*s, must be the one that is existent.¹⁹ But this view does not seem to be uniformly borne out by all scholars or Jaina philosophers would not have an objection, it seems, to the acceptance of the kind of individuals. In this case, however, the possibilities that would figure in our consideration would not be existential possibilities but nomological possibilities although they are explicable in terms of conceptual possibilities. But the issue being of the description of a thing absolute conceptual possibilities are out of questions, as such statements would be descriptively impotent and irrelevant. The conceptual possibilities would figure on the level of explanation and justification of descriptive statements. But that is quite different a story.

Even then a question may be posed that can we not say that although the Jaina thinkers do not expressly deal with formal possibility in the context of the descriptively significant statements, might they not be dealing with relative possibility? This alternative too is ruled out. For the question of relative possibility arises only where we are talking about a thing either with reference to another thing or a prior state of itself. The descriptive statements in terms of possibility that Jainas envisage in the context of *Syādvāda* are non-relative statements and are, by the very nature of the case, supposed to be about a particular thing alone independently of the

reference to another thing or its prior state. Hence the alternative of relative possibility, too, is ruled out.

Out of the two kinds of possibilities Aristotle talks of the Jaina philosophers are not talking about what Hintikka calls 'possibility proper' or logical possibility. They are rather considering possibility of the kind of contingency. Such contingency they further understand in both of its senses : either the one that is short of necessity or the one that is descriptive of an indeterminate.

The kind of statements that bring out possibility in the sense of contingency that Jaina philosophers envisage are also those in which contingency is understood in the sense of two features of a thing going together or their compatibility, a notion weaker than that of consistency of two *dharma*s or *guṇa*s or *paryāya*s. Further, it is important to remember that possibilities that are under consideration in the frame of *Syādvāda* are those that come to the foreground with respect to emergence, or degeneration or change of a thing. This is why, perhaps, eternal sentences are considered to be out of question and occasion sentences are emphasized upon.

The entire programme that Jaina logic envisages to put forward in terms of its doctrine of *Syādvāda* needs to be considered in a still wider perspective. In contrast to the view of the modern logicians, the Jaina logicians seem to hold that although a given sentence may express the same proposition on different occasions, yet in spite of the fact it is the same proposition, its truth-value changes with time. The propositions that are considered relevant in the context of *Syādvāda* are descriptive propositions. As sameness of a thing does not preclude it from undergoing change and taking on different features similarly although it is the same proposition that is expressed on different occasions, this in itself should not prohibit it from taking different truth values. That things change, in spite of retaining their identity, is a fact. Thus things assume different features in course of time. Correspondingly, on the plane of propositions, Jain logic seems to hold, that although propositions are the only bearers of truth-values yet they are bearers of not the same but perhaps of changing truth-values. It accepts change both of truth-value of a proposition and features of thing. On the plane of things it seems to argue that things or *dravya*s are the only entities that can take contrary *guṇa*s or *paryāya*s on different occasions and yet retain their

numerical identity at least which can form basis of re-identification and recognition of them. That is why temporally indefinite sentences are taken to be paradigms of informative sentences. In saying this they indeed are in a great company of such masters as Aristotle. The reason for this seems to be that temporally indefinite sentences about a thing are the proper vehicles of communication. This contention obviously presupposes that knowledge properly so called must come ultimately in terms of direct acquaintance.

This position, moreover, seems to propound that correspondence between proposition and facts is the basis of assigning truth values to propositions. Things change and take on new features. Such changed things cannot be matched with older propositions and yet get truth value truth. In order to be able to cope with the situation of things changing their features and our being able to describe them by means of propositions which not only bring out new features of a thing but also take truth-value truth we shall have to take either one of the following two courses : (a) frame altogether new propositions or (b) allow older propositions to change their truth-values. Without ruling out the first alternative completely the Jaina logicians seem to maintain that to be able to cope with such a situation propositions should also be taken to be changing their truth-values. Either changed proposition or propositions with changed truth-value correspond with changed things and this is how they take truth-value truth. Thus correspondence is the crux of the problem and changing thing is the reinforcing situation. Both these taken together seem to thrust on them acceptance of the change in truth-value of a proposition. This is what Jaina logicians seem to advocate. It is perhaps this which they intend to convey when they say that truth-value of no descriptive proposition is fixed in so far as things change.

The contention that truth-value of a proposition changes, however, raises two important issues : (a) what is the basis of drawing a line of demarcation between sentences and propositions ? and (b) if it is maintained, and it is so maintained by Jaina logicians, that a thing has number of potentialities, then how to account for change in the truth-value of a proposition ? For whereas insistence on number of potentialities would demand an assumption of number of propositions descriptive of them, a change in the truth-value would demand that number of propositions available at our disposal is a

limited one. Perhaps a distinction is sought to be made between propositions descriptive of potentialities and those descriptive of actualities, the latter being treated as genuinely descriptive of the nature of a thing. Obviously the number of the statements of the latter kind is limited. If this phenomenon is connected with changing things then change in truth-value seems a possible alternative. But still, why not frame a new proposition? In spite of the fact that Jaina logicians admit temporality within the fold of their logic what would be their reaction to this problem is very difficult to say. But we need not bother further about this issue here.

One thing, nevertheless, is clear. The doctrine of the change of truth-value neither amounts to the doctrine of relativity, nor scepticism nor again to the notion of historical relativity. For the position of an historical relativist is different from that of the one who holds possibility of change in truth-value of a proposition. What historical relativist is out to maintain is that we do not have any absolute truths simply because we do not have any absolute criterion of truth. The one, on the contrary, who argues in terms of changing truth is not at all bothered about change in the criterion of truth. That is, he is not saying the truth value changes because our criterion of truth changes. What he focusses his attention on is change in object about which we are making a statement. Since things change, he seems to argue, the truths we have discovered will have to undergo change too for we shall have to rediscover the truths about the changed thing although the criterion of truth, viz. correspondence which Jaina philosophers accept, is retained. For him, in this way, discovery of truths about changing things is a never-ending and yet not a hopeless and fruitless programme.

The entire contention of Jaina logicians seems to be based on the presupposition that the dispositions that a thing has happen to be actualized in course of time. Every genuine possibility is actualized in time. It is not necessarily the case that each possibility is realized but it can be assumed to be realized without contradiction. They hold that everything has a 'sub-visible structure of dispositions' that are, as Quine maintains, 'its built-in enduring structural traits'; yet the typical sentences used to express human knowledge in the form of descriptive sentences are not 'eternal or standing sentences' but rather what are called 'occasion sentences.' Although the

modern general philosophical opinion is that the former kind of sentences are superior, Jaina logicians seem to maintain that the sentences of the latter kind are the ones to which we assent or from which we dissent. Such assent or dissent is further determined by the feature or features of the occasion on which they are uttered. Such sentences are temporally indefinite to make explicit the full sense of which we have to employ such expressions as 'now' etc. Even if, therefore, it is assumed that there is a correspondence between grammatical and logical form of a sentence, yet it requires stipulation of occasion. Independently of such stipulation of occasion our assent to or dissent from is impotent, misleading and even logically indefensible.

IV

Our investigation so far has made it clear that out of the many kinds of possibilities Jaina logicians do not consider technical possibility in the context of *Syādvāda*. The cases where causal consideration are predominant an account of technical or etiological possibilities is significant. But such considerations are unimportant from the point of view of descriptive statements about a thing, the proper context of *Syādvāda*. It is for this reason that such possibilities are beside the point in this context. Similarly, the possibility as minimal probability, too, is nowhere considered. Further, absolute conceptual possibility is not expressly and explicitly employed, although it is possible to say that it is presupposed for explanation of nomological possibility. In the context of *Syādvāda* three kinds of possibilities are clearly acknowledged : possibility as potentiality, epistemological possibility and nomological as well as existential possibility. Etiological possibility that figures in the causal explanation falls outside the perview of *Syādvāda*.

Jaina logicians and philosophers believe that this world is full of things or *dravyas* and hence accept, it seem, what A. O. Lovejoy calls the Principle of Plentitude. In this they are in great company of Aristotle and Leibnitz. They further hold that dispositions are actualized in course of time. Possibilities for them, thus, figure on two levels : potentiality and actuality. Potentialities are given in order of being, but not necessarily in order of knowing. Actualities are given in order of knowing. This is how they become epistemic

possibilities. All our statements, descriptive of the nature of things to which one can assent or from which one can dissent, are and should be occasion sentences and not eternal sentences, although former are explainable in terms of latter. Jaina logicians and philosophers, however, do not clearly draw a line of demarcation between possibility proper and contingency, for neither on the level of potentiality nor on the level of epistemic possibility can this distinction be drawn. The distinction comes to the foreground, that is, not on the level of truth-conditions but on the level of explanation of the way truth-conditions are presumed to be given to us. This is indeed an important consideration and a detailed account of it would require consideration of three main issues : (a) total-truth values acknowledged, (b) the kinds of truth-conditions envisaged and (c) the way truth-conditions are presumed to be given to us. These considerations, although important in the full context of *Syādvāda*, must be set aside here because our purpose here is to analyse ' *syāt* ' and the possibilities it brings to the fore.

In conclusion it can be said that Jaina logicians and philosophers acknowledge, in the context of *syādvāda*, possibilities of potency, epistemic and nomological along with existential possibilities. Outside the context of *syādvāda* etiological possibilities too are acknowledged. They seem also to accept conceptual possibilities in the context of explanation although not for describing. Moreover, in the case of descriptions, according to them, no distinction can be drawn between possibility proper and contingency understood in any sense.

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NOTES

1. Hintikka, J. : *Time and Necessity*, 1973, Oxford.
2. It would not be possible, in this paper, to deal in details with the relation between *Anekāntavāda* and *Syādvāda*.
3. Vadideva Sūri : *Pramāṇanayatatvālokaṅkāra* : IV.14

4. *Abhidhānarājendrakōṣa* : Vol. VII, P. 848.
5. Monier-Williams, M. : *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. p. 1273.
Vimaladāsa : *Saptabhāṅgitarāṅgiṇī* : p. 16.
6. Vimaladāsa : *Op cit* p. 16.
7. *Op cit*
8. *Abhidhānarājendrakōṣa* : Vol. VII, p. 848.
9. Monier Williams : *Op cit*
10. Devabhadra : *Nyāyāvatāravivṛtitiṭippanī*, 30
11. Vimaladāsa : *Op cit*.
12. *Abhidhānarājendrakōṣa* : Vol. III. p. 510.
13. *Tattvārthādhigamaśūtra*, V. 37 V. 29.
Prāmāṇyamayatattvālokaṅkāra : VII 9.
Nyāyāvatāra, 29
Syādvādamāñjarī, 22
14. Malliṣeṇesūri : *Syādvādamāñjarī*, 22.
15. *Tattvārthasūtra*, V. 29,
16. Umāsvāti : *Tattvārthādhigamasūtra* : V. 37.
17. Kundakunda : *Pravacanasāra*, I. 49
18. Vimaladāsa : *Saptabhāṅgitarāṅgiṇī*, p. 16
19. *Op cit*.

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