

NAGARJUNA AND CANDRAKĪRTI ON SUNYATA

Śūnyatā is very important in the Mahāyāna tradition of Buddhism in particular and the Buddhist thought in general. It has, however, received numerous varied and divergent interpretations at the hands of the different scholars. Some have interpreted it to signify nihilism, void or vacuity¹ while others have interpreted it in the sense of non-exclusiveness.² Situation of this kind raises more problems than it solves. But in face of such deep-rooted difference of opinion it becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to find out and locate what exactly does *Śūnyatā* mean. This demands a fresh look at it. We shall attempt, in this paper, to do this and present its import as at least two important and prominent exponents of it, viz. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, wanted to expound.

According to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, we believe, the entire discussion of *Śūnyatā* brings three main considerations to the foreground. First, what we are given (ontologically) in this world are the extreme particulars, no two of which are either similar or identical with one another. Each one of them is uniquely particular and none of them is eternal and everlasting. Secondly, our knowledge at any time is of particular things only. It is irrelevant whether such knowledge is intersubjective, methodologically subjective or even peculiarly individual. It is further irrelevant whether such things are given simultaneously or in succession. Our knowledges of different particular things do not fully, partially or even spirally overlap. Our discovery of each one of the particular things is a fresh endeavour and our knowledge of one particular thing does not presuppose knowledge of another particular thing on our part. Nor does our knowledge of a particular thing yield knowledge of another particular thing as its consequence. Thirdly, *Śūnyatā* behaves as if it is a threefold methodological censor— censor of *Dharma* (predicate and predicative language), *Padārtha* (conceptual and categorial frame) and *Bhāva* (states and modalities). These three censors are termed as *Sarvadharmasūnyatā*,³ *Sarvapaḍārthasūnyatā*⁴ and *Sarvabhāvasūnyatā*⁵ respectively. Although all these three aspects of *Śūnyatā* are

interrelated the greater emphasis seems to be laid both by Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti on the third aspect of it. It is this third aspect of *Śūnyatā* which we want to investigate in this paper as it marks a prominent deviation from the traditional interpretation of it. We want to maintain that both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti do not, or need not necessarily, deny the world⁶ or the uniquely particular things⁷ which are parts of the world.

I

Nāgārjuna peculiarly combined philosophical and logical thought in his work called *Madhyamakaśāstra*. The same trend is noticeable in the commentary of Candrakīrti called *Prasannapādā*. There are some works of Nāgārjuna like *Vigrahavyāvartani* and *Śūnyatāsaptati* with his own commentaries which are predominantly, logical in treatment. But *Madhyamakaśāstra* is mainly given to the elaboration, clarification and explanation of *Śūnyatā*. In the very beginning we are told that the problem the present work proposed to take up was that of *Pratītyasamutpāda* and that *Pratītyasamutpāda* was characterised by eight prominent characteristics (*aṣṭa viśeṣaṇa viśiṣṭaḥ pratītyasamutpādaḥ—Prasannapādā*, 1.1). But we are told later in the same work that *Śūnyatā* is nothing else but *Pratītyasamutpāda* itself (M. S. 24.18). Thus *Śūnyatā* itself becomes the topic of the investigation in the *Madhyamakaśāstra*.⁸

What then do Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti understand by *Pratītyasamutpāda* or *śūnyatā*? There are particular things in this world, and in fact both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti take extremely particular things alone to be the primary components of the world.⁹ Both of them assure us that we take that to be the case what people normally take to be the case (*Prasannapādā*, 18.8). None of these particular things, according to them, is eternal. All arise some time or the other, continue to be for some time and eventually die out. These particular things are given simultaneously or in succession. When particular things are given in succession it is called flow. Of course although flow is a permanent possibility it need not necessarily be permanent. Further, even if there is a flow it is not and need not necessarily be the flow of the same things. We normally tend to describe emergence of particular things teleologically or causally. But the only thing we are warranted to say is that there are particular things, given either simultaneously

or in succession. Yet, this in itself does not enable us to say either that one is the cause of the other or that the other is the effect of the first. Unfortunately we do not grasp this clearly and accurately. Instead of saying just that there are particular things we also say that not only things but also their states and modes arise from one another. On the basis of the data supplied by experience or on account of the teleological or other kind of explanation we come to connect things, their states and modalities with one another causally, sequentially and even consequentially. This gives rise to confusion. The other kind of confusion arises out of the fact that we inevitably employ language to describe the nature of things which either we genuinely experience or believe them to be there.

II

According to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, we do not merely experience particular things. We connect them with one another inadvertently. We also try to describe them. In our attempt to describe things the simplest tool that we can and do employ is that of predicative language, kind of language in which we come to say that a particular thing has or does not have a particular property, relation, state or modality. Such a kind of language not only employs a subject-predicate model of description but also distorts the nature of things attempted to be so described. Subject-predicate mould of descriptive language itself is beset with certain unsurmountable difficulties, not keeping track of which may further mislead and misguide us. But descriptive language has additional difficulties too. Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti have very elaborately considered many examples and indicated how descriptively used language logically creates difficulties.

We said that according to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti the predicates that we employ in describing particular things fall primarily into three kinds: characteristics, states and modes. Each one of them has its own difficulties. But predicative language itself poses certain problems. By the very nature of the case every predicate that we normally employ is or rather can in principle be said to be applicable to more than one thing of that kind at a time. It is irrelevant whether such things are given simultaneously or in succession. That is, every predicate is a predicate of a class of objects. But since according to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti there are no two objects which are similar or identical, no two

objects are of the same kind. Now, if there are no two objects at all of any kind and if every thing is absolutely uniquely particular we should even in principle be unable to employ any predicate (*dharma*) to bring out a significant feature of a thing. We are unable to use predicative language descriptively not because things do not even contingently have characteristics but precisely because any predicate, by its very nature, is intended to bring out a common, similar or even identical character of things. But no two things are similar or identical. No two things have similar or the same characteristics. Thus predicative language is utterly unsuited to bring out the nature of an extremely particular object.

However, if we rule out predicative language altogether because it is incompetent, sterile and impotent to bring out particularity and peculiarity of each one of the particular objects we shall be left with no tool with the help of which we shall be in a position to describe the nature of such objects. Descriptive and predicative language may be unsuitable in so far it fails to bring out the real nature of an object. But this is not the case in regard to every property or *dharma*, which finds a place in language. The natural *dharmas* (*svabhāvadharmāḥ*) do succeed in presenting the real nature of an object. All *dharmas*, therefore, cannot be treated alike. Moreover, such *dharmas* as *rūpa*, *śabda*, *rasa*, *gandha* and *spṛśa* are important basis of our descriptions of things.

But Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti rebut this objection : "No matter what *dharma* we are talking about, it is incapable of bringing out uncommon and peculiar nature of any *svalakṣaṇa* (peculiarly unique things)."⁹ Any predicate states either a common, similar or the same feature. Since no two things have even the similar features, we should say that no predicate whatsoever is 'applicable'.¹⁰ Everything that is is *Svalakṣaṇa*. Such a thing alone should be the basis of our description of it. The *dharmas* and predicates that we attribute to a thing are not given. We are not given things, predicates and *dharmas*, nor things possessing predicates and *dharmas*. What are given are things. In the world of things, each one of which is *svalakṣaṇa*, there would be nothing like *dharmas* whether natural or non-natural. No *dharma* is a *svabhāvadharmā*. Our contention that there are particular things and *dharmas* or that some *dharmas* at least are *svabhāvadharmas* is imaginary.¹¹ It has no basis either in the world of things or in the nature of uniquely particular things.

There is also another argument which Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti bring forward to establish that no *dharma* 'describes' and at the same time brings out the nature of any *svlakṣaṇa* thing. Independently of ascribing a particular *dharma* to a particular thing how do we know that it is a *dharma* of it? Unless we are independently sure that a given thing has the given *dharma* and that thing alone has it we are neither methodologically right nor logically justified in ascribing a *dharma* to a given thing. But by the very nature of the case no *dharma* is given independently of a thing. It also is not there independently and naturally as a matter of fact.¹² Like a thing no *dharma* is peculiar and particular that it can be given independently of anything else. This being the case *dharmas* are nothing in comparison with things of which they are said to be *dharmas*. Thus understood *dharmas* are ill-suited to bring out the nature of particular things. There is again no particular and peculiar justifiable reason why we should ascribe any *dharma* to any particular thing 'context-freely'; while contextual ascription of a *dharma* does more violence than justice to the nature of a thing. Every *dharma* is necessitated by our explanation of a thing or by the context, none of which is necessary to understand and discover things as they are given. *Śūnyatā*, therefore, amounts to accepting total incompetence of predicative language descriptively used to bring out the nature of uniquely particular or *svlakṣaṇa* things.

III

Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti are, thus, critical of predicative language maintaining that the characteristics which such a language brings to the focus are neither given nor are they necessarily constitutive of those particular things. They are equally critical of conceptual and categorial frames which we normally employ as explanatory and justificatory devices. Their chief complaint is that a particular conceptual frame is not necessarily tied down to an accepted categorial frame, for given a certain categorial frame it is possible to envisage alternative conceptual frames. Moreover, no conceptual or categorial frame is so tied with particular things that any one or both of them are given. They are given neither along with things nor prior to them. They are not independent either. (P. P. 1.3) Concepts and categories are methodological tools. As methodological tools they are certainly important.

But that does not mean that they exist in their own right. They are not constitutive of the nature of particular things either. Given things no concepts and categories are inevitably thrust on us. It is our intention to communicate about things or our knowledge of things that makes acceptance and employment of concepts and categories necessary. But these devices which are logical, linguistic and methodological in character are dictated not by the fact that there are particular and peculiar things nor by our intention that we want to discover them as they are. There may also arise the problem of preferring a better conceptual or categorial frame out of the alternative conceptual or categorial frames. According to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, however, even such a preference is not necessitated by the nature of things. For, things do not dictate acceptance of any conceptual or categorial frame nor do they necessitate a preference among them. Hence for Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti concepts and categories are totally unhelpful as tools, in our exploration of uniquely particular (*svalakṣaṇa*) things.

IV

In bringing out the nature of uniquely particular things *Sūnyatā* does not merely bring within its perview impotence of predicative language. It also aims at making conspicuous incompetence of concepts and categories as tools of capturing the peculiarity of such particular things. Further it aims at bringing out theoretical unjustifiability of the ascription of any state or modality to any of the extremely particular things that is there. In spite of all our talk to that effect no state or mode of a thing is given independently of a thing. There are uniquely particular things given as a matter of fact. But the states of things or the modes which we ascribe to things are not there as parts of the furniture of the world. If we insist on the retention of what actually is there as a part of the world alone then we shall also have to do away with all our talk about things through states and modes. For, how do we know and how are we in a position to justify that a given thing has a particular state or mode as a matter of fact? If experience is the basis then we may not only experience states or modes of a thing that is there but also of a thing that is not there at all or is illusorily or hallucinatorily perceived. It may be contended that states or modes we speak of with reference to things are necessitated by the conceptual or categorial frames

within which we generally describe things. But since, according to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, neither conceptual nor categorial frame is an ontological or methodological necessity, the states and modes they bring to the horizon too must be counted to be a sheer contingency. The particular things do not dictate concepts and categories. But they do not dictate acceptance of particular states or modes either.

We, no doubt, can and often do ascribe such features, state and modes to things which they do not actually have. Nor do things need have them to be those kinds of things. Moreover, we are never given things and their states, modes or features. We are given things. Each one of them is unique, particular and peculiar. That is all. Through our coming to ascribe states, modes and features to things we first introduce the problem of distinguishables and then taking things, their features, states and modes to be equally real and equally genuine parts of the furniture of the world raise distinguishables to the status of separables. Thus understood states, modes, features and properties are not the things that are there but rather are the spectra created by our expectations about things, our taking experience to be the only necessary condition of our coming to discover things and by the conceptual and categorial frames which we conveniently employ to bring out the nature of things given to us. The extremely particular things are so constituted that no two of them can have either similar or common states or modes. Actually no particular thing necessitates any state or mode, common or otherwise.

V

Logically and methodologically *Śūnyata* aimed at pointing out sterility and incompetence of predicative and descriptive language in bringing out and catching the nature of the uniquely particular and peculiar things that are there. It is also intended to show that the very language of things and their states, modes and features along with the conceptual and categorial frames it brings in, raises more problems than it solves. *Prima facie* that may be only tool with the help of which we can and do communicate about things; but on that count it is not the best tool. It is also not dictated by things. We shall not be in a position to say meaningfully that a particular thing has a particular feature naturally. No two things have anything in common or similar, much less identical. It is also not plausible to hold that states or modes of a thing arise

from one another. They do not and cannot be said to be arising from particular things. Methodologically understood *Śūnyatā* is a censor of proliferative, unjustifiable and untenable platonism.¹³ These logical and methodological considerations envisaged to be brought forward exclusively, or in conjunction with other aspects alone do not go to show that what is intended to be conveyed by *Śūnyatā* is utter void, a complete non-existence of anything at all.¹⁴ Both Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti spare no effort to dispel this misgiving.¹⁵ They argue that what is meant by *Śūnyatā* is not utter non-existence. Rather *Śūnyatā* is intended to be a tool of dispelling unwarranted platonism that arises out of linguistic confusions and conceptual bewilderments. It is not *Śūnyatā* properly understood that is detrimental to our coming to discover the world and the extremely particular and peculiar things which are parts of its furniture but rather misunderstood *Śūnyatā*.¹⁶ For, *Śūnyatā* is a tool through the proper wielding of which we can come to grasp *Tattva*—that which is the case.¹⁷ *Śūnyatā* is designed to bring out methodological unserviceability of *Samvṛttitattva* and not of *paramārthatattva*. In fact we are also told that *Śūnyatā* is a middle path¹⁸ which is intended to avoid both the extremes of eternal existence and absolute non-existence.¹⁹ *Śūnyatā* is not at all intended to dispell and annihilate philosophically that which is there. It is rather a tool wielded by a nominalist to shave off Plato's beard, an Occamian razor to get rid of an ontological slum that results out of our resorting to linguistic traps, conceptual puzzlements and categorial nightmares. It is not a matter of quibbling or hair-splitting.²⁰ It is a device whereby *parāmārthasatya* is to be segregated from *Lokasamvṛttisatya*, for it is the latter that embraces the dreadful platonism. Thus *Śūnyatā* is neither total doing away with things and making the world void nor is it a hold-all that can accommodate any number and kind of odd things, however cumbersome philosophically it may be to accept them as part of the furniture of the world. It is rather a very powerful tool of taking unfortunate flies out of fly-bottles or of sweeping the house of philosophy of its rubbish. It is this methodological aspect of *Śūnyatā* that is both powerful and fascinating.

NOTES

1. Banerjee, N. V.: *Glimpses of Indian Wisdom*; pp. 9, 28
Banerjee, N. V.: *Nihilistic Absolutism : The Spirit of Indian Philosophy*;
p. 228.
Bagchi, S.; Introduction entitled "Śūnyavāda" to *Madhyamakaśāstra*
of Nāgārjuna (ed) Vaidya, P. L.
2. Ramanan, K. Venkat: *Nāgārjuna's Philosophy*; p. 42
3. Śūnyatā nāma sarvadharmāṇām sāmānya a lakṣaṇamiti abhyupagamāt
Prasannapadā, 13.7
Śūnyāḥ sarvadharmāḥ, Ibid, 22.11
Śūnyāḥ sarvadharmāḥ, Ibid, 15.11; 24.14.
. atyantaśūnyāḥ sarvadharmāḥ, Ibid, 24.40
Madhyamakaśāstra, 25.22-23.
4. mṛṣāsabhāvanām padārthānām, *Prasannapadā* 1.3
. sarveṣāmeva hi padārthānām sarvabhāvāntargatavāt śūnyatvam,
śūnyatvāt ca sarve eva hite padārthā nopalabhyanta. . . .
Prasannapadā, 27.29.
5. mṛṣāsabhāvā api bhāvā. . . . ; *Prasannapadā*, 1.3
. vāyam brūmaḥ na santi sarvabhāvāḥ iti, *Prasannapadā*, 15.10
see also note 4 above.
bhāvānām niḥsvabhāvānām na sattā vidyate yataḥ—*Madhyamakaśāstra*,
1.12; 13.8
Vigrahavyāvartani, 1, 9, 22, 25, 26, 60
6. avināśamanutpannam dharmadhatusamam jagat |
Sattvadhātum ca deṣeti eṣā lokānūvartanā II *Prasannapadā*, 26.2
sarvasamvyavahāraṇṣca laukikān pratibadhase |
Yatpratītyasamutpādāśūnytām pratibadhase || *Madhyamakaśāstra*, 24.36
Vicitrabhiḥ avasthābhiḥ svabhāvaracitam svabhāvena eva racitam
apratītyasamutpannam jagat svabhāvaśūnyavādinām | Svabhāvena eva
yadi bhāvāḥ syuḥ, tadā svabhāvasyākṛtrimattvāt avyāvartanāt ca sarvam
idam jagat ajātam anirndham ca syāt | ajataniruddhatvāt jagat
Kūṭastham syāt | *Prasannapadā* 24-38.
na vāyam vyavahārasatyam pratyākhyāya vyavahārasatyam anabhyu-
pagamya kathayāmaḥ śūnyāḥ sarvabhāvāḥ iti *Vigrahavyāvartani*, 28
7. nisvabhāvāḥ eva santaḥ ghatādayaḥ loke svakaryakṛt upalabhyante
Prasannapadā, 17.30.
dharma śabdāḥ pravacane tridhā vyavasthāpitaḥ | Svalakṣaṇa dhāranār-
theṇa | *Prasannapadā*, 17.1
Sarvathā anutpādāḥ eva agnyādinām paranirapekṣatvāt akṛtimatvāt
svabhāva iti ucyate | Ibid, 15.2

8. It is interesting to note in passing that as *Śūnyatā* can be understood in three important aspects *Pratītyasamutpāda* too can be, since they are the same. Further, since *Nirvāna* and *Śūnyatā* are the same, similar consideration would also hold with regard to *Nirvāna*. Consider, for example, the following statement by Candrakīrti —
tasmāt śūnyatā eva sarvaprāpancānivr̥ttilakṣaṇatvāt nirvāṇam iti ucyate । *Prasammapadā*, 18.5
9. bhāvānām anyāśadhāraṇamātmīyam yatsvrūpam tat svalakṣaṇam । *Prasammapadā*, 1.3
 na hi vāyam dharmānām svabhāvam pratisedhayamaḥ, dharmavinirmuktasya kasyacit arthasya svabhāvam abhyupagacchamaḥ । *Vigrahavyāvartani*, 61 nisvabhāvatvam eva sarvadharmāṇām spṣtam āveditam । *Prasammapadā*, 7.15
10. Śūnyatā nāma sarvadharmāṇām sāmānyalakṣaṇam iti abhyupagamat— *Prasammapadā* 13.7
 dharmāḥ eva śūnyāḥ — *Prasammapadā*, 13.8.
 Svalakṣaṇa āśadhāraṇāt nirvāṇagrādhārma ādhāraṇāt dharmāḥ—*Ibid*, 23.7.
11. rūpaśabdārasaparśāḥ gandhū dharmāca kevalaḥ । M. S. 23.8.
 Kevalaḥ iti parikalpitamātraḥ nisvabhāvāḥ ityārthaḥ —P. P. 13.8.
12. Śūnyāḥ sarvadharmāḥ nisvabhāvayogena — P. P. 15.11
13. bhāvan tu nāstitvam Śūnyatartham prapāñcajālam eva samvardhyamaḥ ni śūnyatāyaḥ prayojanam veti — P. P. 24.7
14. evam pratītyasamutpādasabdaśya yaḥ arthaḥ saḥ eva śūnyatā śabdsya arthaḥ, na punaḥ abhāva śabdasya yaḥ arthaḥ saḥ śūnyata śabdasya arthaḥ । abhāvaśabdārdham ca śūnyatarthamityādhyāropya bhāvan asmānupālābhate । — P. P. 24.7
 M. S., 24.7.
15. M. S., 24.13
 P. P. 24.13
Vigrahavyāvartani, 25
16. M. S., 24.7; 24.11
17. M. S., 18.9
18. madhyamaḥ margāḥ — M. S., 24.18
19. M. S., 15.10
20. M. S., 18.8
 Lokaḥ mayā sārddham vivadati nāham lokena sārddham vivadāmi yat loke asti sammatam tat mama api asti sammatam । yat loke nāsti sammatam, mamāpi tannāsti sammatam P. P. 18.8.