

# ANEKANTA:

## The Philosophy of Non-absolutism

by Acharya Mahaprajna

In all corners of the world one hears a common voice of people visualizing a new man, a new society and a new world. Efforts are also afoot to realize the above vision.

How meaningful is the above voice? Will the efforts succeed? The quest for meaning and success cannot be based on the basis of the permanent. The permanent does not undergo any change, and the vision of a new man, a new society and a new world cannot be realized without effecting a change.

From the viewpoint of *Anekanta* the permanent is real, but so is the impermanent or the changeable. Being can be explained in terms of the permanent for it is unchangeable. One of the intrinsic parts of the unchangeable is change, for change and changelessness are not two different things. Both co-exist.

Since change is possible, the vision of a new man, a new society and a new world is not unattainable or impossible.

The basic cause of change is the viewpoint. On its basis is built a theory and implementation of the theory results in change. We do want to bring about a change but lack the right faith; nor do we want to develop it. The biggest obstacle between change and right faith is personal belief(s). Each individual or organization has its own beliefs. A new man, a new society or a new world cannot be visualized on the basis of these beliefs.

A belief is based on selfishness and the concern for personal gain as a result of which one disregards the good or gain of the others. Concentration on a caste or a sect is rooted in the individual beliefs. The same root is responsible for the growth of conflicts, disputes and wars.

With the growth of right faith, belief changes into a quest for the truth and the opposition between conflicting interests also comes to an end. It is commonly believed that the interests of any two castes, sects and classes are mutually antagonistic. Though in reality they are not antagonistic, they are regarded so because of perverted faith or what

we call *mithyatva*. Once the right faith develops the antagonism disappears and even the conflicting interests become complementary instead of being antagonistic.

Right faith implies non-absolutism. Perverted faith means absolutism or the assertion that nothing but what one thinks is right. To treat a mode or thought as absolute or inclusive is absolutism; to treat it as relative and incomplete is non-absolutism. To determine a real, one should have a non-absolutist view. *Anekanta* has two basic viewpoints: absolute and non-absolute or relative. For determining the substance one should use the absolute viewpoint; for determining the relations one should use the non-absolute viewpoint.

### Relativity

The first principle of *Anekanta* is relativity. Two castes or two sects can be held in a mutually antagonistic relation only by adopting an absolute viewpoint. On the contrary, different individuals, castes and sects can survive and obtain relative benefits only on the basis of the non-absolutist viewpoint. In fact, the interests of the factory owner and the workers are not incompatible. By keeping in mind the workers' interests, productivity increases and the factory owner's interests are served. Likewise, by keeping in mind the owner's interests those of the workers are served. If both seek to serve their interests in absolutely independent terms, the interests of both are jeopardized.

The principle of class differences and their hostile vested interests needs to be examined in the context of relativity, for on the basis of relativity even antagonistic interests can be reconciled. When these interests are examined in absolute terms, the inevitable result is conflict, violence involving the abandoning of the principle of the purity of means.

### Reconciliation

The second principle of *Anekanta* is reconciliation. It is the principle of the quest for unity between two apparently different characteristics of the substance. Characteristics that differ are not altogether different. They have identity also. Reconciliation can be brought about only by recognizing the identity principle. The principle of ecology is one of reconciliation and of interrelationship between different substances. Balance in the universe cannot be established on the basis of the premise, "I alone exist". We survive only by adhering to the principle that "besides me, the other also exists and we are interrelated". The balance in the universe can be explained on the basis of the above concept of interrelatedness.

## Co-existence

The third principle of *Anekanta* is co-existence. Anything's or anybody's existence must have their opposite - *yat sat tat sapratipaksam*. Without the opposite, naming is impossible and so is characterization. The animate and the inanimate are two extremes. Yet they co-exist. The body is inanimate; the soul is animate. They co-exist.

The permanent and the impermanent, the similar and the dissimilar, the identical and the different - all these are mutually contradictory; yet they co-exist. They co-exist in an object. The permanent is not altogether separate from the impermanent, nor is the latter completely separate from the former.

The principle of co-existence is as much practical as it is philosophical. Though the terms system, individual taste and viewpoint have different denotations even implying inherent opposition, the principle of co-existence applies to them too. Democracy and dictatorship, capitalism and communism are ideologically different political systems. But even they are no exception to co-existence. 'You or me' not 'you and me' is an instance of absolutism by which the problem gets compounded. The holiness of the world of religion has been destroyed by the view: "Only those have the right to survive who follow my religion, all the rest should be extirpated". The main strengths of religion are nonviolence, friendliness and fraternity. The absolutist view has changed nonviolence into violence, friendliness into hostility and fraternity into animosity.

Co-existence implies tolerance and freedom of thought. Both tolerance and freedom of thought are meaningless if we try to enforce our likes, ideas, lifestyle and principles on all others.

Nature has infinite variety, which lends it splendor. Beauty will lose all its charms and meaning if all plants, trees and flowers look alike. The combined principle of *satyam* (truth), *shivam* (benefaction), *sundaram* (beauty) inheres in the principle of unity in diversity and diversity in unity. It is only the above harmony, which forms the basis of co-existence.

Monism and dualism are two principles belonging to philosophy. Unity cannot be explained in the absence of monism and diversity cannot be explained without dualism. A harmonious combination of monism and dualism alone constitutes a holistic viewpoint for explaining the world. Likewise, there are enough factors of unity between the animate and the inanimate. On its basis we are able to realize what existence means. There are factors of diversity also between the animate and the inanimate. On its basis we are able to divide and analyze existence.

Harmony is a principle of the search for unity, but it does not negate the pre-existent diversity. It is only in this way that we can explain an individual as well as society.

Every person has both individual and communal consciousness. Some thinkers give greater importance to the individual, while others give greater importance to society. It violates the principle of harmony. We cannot assess an individual properly without paying attention to his/her personal qualities. There are seven bases of innate personal characteristics:

1. Physiology
2. Heredity
3. Thinking power of mind
4. Soul's inclination or feeling
5. Sensitivity
6. Instinct
7. Knowledge or capacity to acquire

The people who think merely of building a new society without taking into consideration the innate traits of an individual cannot accomplish their visions. If equal attention had been paid to individual innate characteristics in socialistic and communistic systems efforts at building a new society would have got a healthy basis. The basic principles essential for socialization are related to innate individual characteristics.

There are five bases on which a new social order can be built: interdependence, sensitivity, fixing a limit to one's possessions; fixing a limit to one's freedom and development of the language, intellectual development, development of ideas, development of technology and art.

In the class view (*samgraha naya*) there is a division of oneness - absence of all distinctions. Society is built on this foundation.

In the analytic view (*vyavahara naya*) there is predominance of distinction or difference. It is the basis of securing the identity of the individual.

If rules, laws and order are formulated by conciling both society and the individual their compliance will be natural and comprehensive.

There are situations in which the individual interests are secondary and social interests are primary even as there are situations in which social interests are secondary and individual interests are primary. This principle differentiating between what is primary and what is secondary in a given situation is very useful for a wholesome order. Society cannot be built unless difference or distinction is considered secondary and the freedom of the individual suffers unless sameness or oneness is subordinated. This principle of *Anekanta* relating to primary versus secondary is extremely useful for a successful organization of society.

The biggest problem of an organization, community or nation is related to emotion. Individuals differ in their emotions. They can be classified in four categories. 1. similar to a marsh or a quagmire 2. similar to water full of mud 3. similar to water full of sand and 4. similar to water steadily floating on a rock.

The first type of people having an impure state of the soul (those endowed with the excessively impure modal standpoint) turn the world into a hell. They can neither provide sound organizational set up nor can they adhere to any system.

The second type of people having an impure state of the soul (those endowed with impure modal standpoint) encourage bestiality in society and can never be helpful in bringing about a healthy and nonviolent social order.

People having the third type of the state of the soul (those endowed with pure modal standpoint) can cooperate in building a healthy society. They can induct health in the social order.

People having the fourth type of state of the soul (those endowed with purified modal standpoint) can develop divine consciousness in society. They can promote the purity of means and a beneficent outlook.

The first two types believe in the power of punishment. The last two types believe in bringing about a change of heart and in the purity of means.

Spiritual people like Mahatma Gandhi kept dreaming of building a nonviolent society and people like Karl Marx kept nursing a vision of a communist society. Neither of the two visions has been fulfilled. Neither could a nonviolent society come into being, nor could a communist

society gain vigor. The reason is an absolutist viewpoint. If we do not make the two visions absolutist, we can enter in a new society.

By nature an individual is inclined towards selfishness and personal comfort. The effort to forcibly make him exclusively corporatist cannot succeed. According to the *Anekanta* viewpoint it is possible to make communism dynamic by balancing the claims of individualism and collectivism.

No two individuals share the same emotions. Some people have subdued emotions; others have intensive emotions. Therefore a nonviolent society cannot be built merely on the basis of a change of heart. Dwelling exclusively on a change of heart denotes an absolutistic view. The *Anekanta* or non-absolutistic is that a nonviolent society can be built on the basis of balanced amalgam of punishment and change of heart.

### **Anekanta and Democracy**

Variedness is a part of human nature. Even tastes and ideas differ from person to person. Nor is ordinary behavior identical. There are a number of languages and sects. To keep them all united, democracy follows the principle of equality of fundamental rights. Democracy does not divide people on the basis of inequality. On the other hand, it seeks to forge unity among diverse groups on the basis of equality.

Democracy cannot project glorious image without balancing the claims of diversity and unity. The philosophical basis of this balancing system is *Anekanta*. According to *Anekanta* nothing is altogether disparate or identical. A general characteristic lends identically to things and a specific characteristic makes them disparate. Absolute insistence on identity destroys usefulness, for then individual specific characteristics cannot be put to use. Absolute insistence on disparateness makes things devoid of their basic generality. It is for this reason the *Anekanta* posits the following:

An object is perhaps identical - from a certain point of view all objects are identical.

An object is perhaps disparate - from a certain point of view all objects are disparate.

Unity can be strengthened on the basis of identity. Disparateness can be used to utilize an individual's specific qualities. Therefore, it is necessary to know the limitations of both identity and disparateness. A mechanical insistence on identity robs a nation of its meritorious and talented people. An absolute insistence on disparateness becomes

the cause of a nation's disintegration. Therefore, there is need to develop a philosophy which balances and harmonizes identity and disparity. Unity involves belonging to a common geographic region. No one who lives within that region can be discriminated against in terms of their need for food, clothing, housing etc. Everyone enjoys an equal opportunity to develop. It is on this basis that everyone in a democracy has the right to become President, Prime Minister, etc. What limits this right is individual excellence or quality. High offices can be manned only by those people who have a highly developed intellectual and administrative competence. Nature has plenty to offer. A democracy can be given a healthy base only by appreciating reality of both identity and disparity.

Jayacharya, the fourth Acharya of the Svetamber Jain Terapanth Order, applied a harmonious combination of the general and the specific on the basis of *Anekanta* in dealing with the Terapanth Religious Order. As a result the Order kept progressing constantly and avoided being embroiled in mutual conflicts. The above positive viewpoint remains an ideal to this day. Once Jaiprakash Narain told Acharya Tulsi, "Your Order is a perfect example of socialism. What is needed is that it should now percolate down to each individual throughout society."

### **Anekanta and Economic Policy**

Now and again one hears everywhere that violence is increasing day by day. Why is it so? The factors responsible for the increase have also been investigated from time to time. Of the many causes put forward the most prominent is economic greed, which is endangered by a false or perverse conception. It consists in the belief that one's capital should be enhanced through borrowing with the illogical assumption that returning the loans involves greater efforts, more business and higher production. Taking loans has now become a source of inspiration, a basis of economic development.

This one-sided or exclusive view of economic development totally disregards physical health, mental peace, emotional balance and environmental protection. This absolutistic economic development has made the human mind purely mechanical. Everyone has the inordinate desire to build an economic empire.

*Anekanta* has four main viewpoints: substance, space, time and bhava (state of the soul). The assessment of anything should be relative to substance, space, time, and bhava. Absolute and unqualified assessment creates a number of problems. It is ironical that the economics of development relegates physical health, mental peace, emotional balance and environmental protection to a secondary position.



Increase in consumables through artificial means was deemed necessary because of the increase in population. Economic development was deemed necessary also for removing poverty. Chemical sprays add poison to foods, vegetables and fruits. Despite being aware of this fact people consume these articles. The craving for increasing consumption created by the economic race is, far from reducing poverty, increasing it. Economic wealth is getting more and more confined to a handful of nations and individuals. All this is result of the absolutistic view of development. A balanced economic policy can be envisioned if man is placed at the center of economic development and if it is not used for building economic empires. An economic policy unrelated to general human needs is proving self-destructive. It cannot be salvaged by adopting an absolutistic approach.

By forgetting the principle of restricting consumption as propounded by Mahavira, the world has got into a serious situation. Let us again try to view it in the light of *Anekanta*.

The issue of freedom and dependence is also not beyond controversy. It cannot be explained on the basis of absolutism. No man given to emotional attachment can ever be fully free. There are a number of alternatives like individual freedom, social freedom, and constitutional freedom. They can be explained only relativistically. True freedom is relative to dependence. No other freedom, which is absolutistic and not relative to dependence can ever be useful for individuals or for society as a whole.

Absolute freedom to corner wealth and to consume is being instrumental in creating economic disparities and environmental pollution. Poverty, environmental pollution, conflicts, arms race and wars are the result of an absolutistic approach. Without integrating temporal and spiritual considerations it is impossible to solve the problem of poverty.

Similarly, the environmental problem cannot be solved without combining restraint on consumption with physical efforts, nor can conflicts be avoided without integrating balancing of passions and organizational effort. The urge for manufacturing destructive weapons cannot be got over without developing the mentality of non-aggression and a spiritual viewpoint of individual rights.

The propensity of war cannot be put to an end without diffusing a humanistic viewpoint and without controlling egotism and greed. It is not easy to reconcile the above contradictions. Their intractability can be best addressed by integrating emotional balance with a proper system of governance.



Even apparently opposed events can be reconciled by *Anekanta*. There is complete reconciliation and co-existence in the real world. It is our intellect that has imagined the idea of opposition. Creation and destruction, life and death, permanent and impermanent always go together.

It is very difficult to satisfy the desire for convenience and luxury. Therefore, it is essential to reconcile material progress with spiritual development.

No Problem - individual, social, national or global - can have a proper and enduring solution on the basis of an absolutistic approach. It is only a relativistic one-sided view that can lead to the direction of a proper solution. An absolutistic one-sided view can provide no solution. Ideas are individual in nature. Any two persons can think in opposite ways. If both of them happen to meet, dogmatic attitude will control the thought. One will say, "Only that which I say is true. What you say is not true." The absolutistic insistence has only one aim - to prove oneself right and the other wrong. It is called dogmatism. It is a by-product of absolutistic view. Such insistence vanishes when one adopts a relativistic attitude. Two apparently opposed ideas can be true if seen in the context of space, time and circumstance.

The happy outcome of *Anekanta* is the birth in an individual of an attitude of non-insistence or refraining from insistence. A person with the above attitude analyses an event from multiple angles as a result of which he develops a viewpoint of reconciling different parts and aspects of the truth. Viewed thus, we can say that *Anekanta* views partial truths in a relativistic and reconciliatory way.

There are countless social problems and they cannot be solved unilaterally or absolutistically. Social life implies interrelations and mutual relations can be explained only from a relativistic point of view. People have held varied views regarding marriage and divorce influenced by time and space considerations. The propriety or otherwise of any one view cannot be upheld on the basis of a single viewpoint.

There are problems like poverty versus affluence and equality versus disparity. It is essential to review and investigate them thoroughly from the *Anekanta* point of view. Again, the nation faces a number of major problems relating to language, region, autonomy, casteism and sectarianism. They are defying solution simply because the viewpoint of those involved in solving them is not relativistic and reconciliatory. Inflated egos, imperialistic expansion, market monopoly etc. are international problems. World peace and the aspirations of the people of the present age demand that all prominent people in the family,

community, nation and the world should adopt a non-absolutistic outlook. They should undergo training in relativity, reconciliation, co-existence and freedom. Such a training will be the best way of solving problems relating to world peace.

Developing philosophical consciousness should precede developing practical consciousness. Behavioral changes are brought about only on the basis of philosophy. It is essential to deliberate on the following philosophical principles for bringing about behavioral changes:

- Truth is none other than itself. It does not change from person to person. Even then it is all too evident that what I consider true is considered true by someone else and equally I consider that untrue which someone else considers true. This controversy about truth leads to untruth. To solve it Mahavira propounded *Anekanta* and said, "Truth cannot be enunciated or propounded. What can be enunciated or propounded is only a fraction of truth."
- Jain philosophy has explained both idealism and realism relativistically.
- Idealism and realism viewed absolutistically become parts of untruth; on the contrary, viewed non-absolutistically or relativistically, they become parts of truth.
- Every real entity in the world is a natural combination of the permanent and the impermanent.
- The quest for truth has been by reflection, contemplation and philosophy. It has developed in a social context.
- Both the animate and the inanimate represent absolutistic truth. The changes they undergo represent relativistic truth. The real truth lies in a combination of the absolutistic truth and the relativistic truth.

### **The Quest for Truth and Consonance**

Truth is eternal. One who investigates it does not propound it; he only interprets or explains it. Mahavira was not a propounder of truth. He was its interpreter or expositor. He directly experienced truth as a result of long penance and explained it within the limitations of language. He found that truth can be directly experienced, but it cannot be expounded in its entirety. Only partial truth can be explained. Knowledge belongs to the knower, whereas its elucidation is meant for others. Knowledge in itself is direct. When it comes to understanding, knowable is both direct and indirect. In itself it is neither valid knowledge (*pramana*) nor invalid knowledge (*apramana*). While trying to

understand the knowable, it is both valid knowledge and invalid or false knowledge. Uncertain or doubtful or disorganized knowledge is invalid or false knowledge. Decisive knowledge is valid knowledge. The good-bad or high-low sequence of the growth of knowledge, selfish and benevolent, direct and indirect and valid (true) or invalid (false) - these different forms of knowledge have divided truth into various forms

*Anekanta* has paved the way for uprightness and flexibility or non-insistence. He alone realizes the truth who is pure and who accepts things as they are; does not try to fit them in a preconceived mould, does not superimpose his own propensities and personal impressions on others, does not try to use arguments for harmonizing dissonant and opposed modes. This dedicated practice of uprightness or purity is the practice of total eschewal of bias; it is the practice of emptiness of thoughts. An upright or pure person has no inclination either towards Mahavira or towards anyone else. His mind and brain are empty.

It is the absolutists who have given rise to all the questions, problems and complexities in the quest for truth. An absolutist accepts one fractional truth to refute another fractional truth. Many unnecessary questions are given birth to in the quest for truth by mutual bickering between two absolutists whose sole aim is to prove each other's fractional truth as fractional untruth. They are not prepared to accept the real as real. They want to attain truth only either through verbal authority or through canonical authority. They are averse to practice with dedication, uprightness or ideational vacuity. It is people of this kind who have trumped up false opposition between fractional truths and thereby have raised questions about the multifacetedness of truth and dissonance between seers and sages.

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