

Anekantavada

Anekāntavāda (Devanagari: अनेकान्तवाद), meaning "non-absolutism," is one of the basic principles of [Jainism](#) that encourages acceptance of relativism and pluralism. According to this doctrine, truth and reality are perceived differently from different points of view, and no single point of view is the complete truth.^{[1][2]}

The word *anekāntavāda* is a compound of two [Sanskrit](#) words: *Anekānta* "manifoldness" and *vāda* "school of thought."^[3] The term *anekānta* consists of the Sanskrit negative prefix *an*, the number one *eka* and the word for "attribute," *anta*—"not of solitary attribute."^[3]

Jain doctrine states that objects have infinite modes of existence and qualities so they cannot be completely grasped in all aspects and manifestations by finite human perception. Only the Kevalins—the omniscient beings—can comprehend objects in all aspects and manifestations; others are capable of only partial knowledge.^[4] Consequently, no specific human view can claim to represent the absolute truth.

Anekāntavāda is literally the doctrine of "non-onesidedness" or "manifoldness;" it is often translated as "non-absolutism." As opposed to it, *ekānta* (*eka*+*anta* "solitary attribute") is one-sidedness. Jains compare all attempts to proclaim absolute truth with *adhgajanyāyah* or the "maxim of the blind men and elephant." In this story, one man felt the trunk, another the ears and another the tail. All the blind men claimed to explain the true appearance of the elephant, but could only partly succeed, due to their narrow perspectives.^[5]

Anekāntavāda encourages its adherents to consider the views and beliefs of their rivals and opposing parties. Proponents of anekantvāda apply this principle to [religion](#) and [philosophy](#), reminding themselves that any religion or philosophy, even Jainism, which clings too dogmatically to its own tenets, is committing an error based on its limited point of view.^[6] In this application, anekantvāda resembles the Western principles of cultural and [moral relativism](#). The principle of anekāntavāda also influenced [Mahatma Gandhi's](#) principles of religious tolerance, [ahimsa](#) and [satyagraha](#).^[7]

Three Jain doctrines of relativity

According to McEvilley, the [Jain](#) theory of knowledge is not a phenomenalism but a realistic correspondence view.^[8] The Jain doctrine lays a strong emphasis on *samyaktva*, that is, rationality and logic.^[9] Jain suggests that the ultimate principle should always be logical and no principle can be devoid of logic or reason.^[9] Thus, one finds in the Jain texts, deliberative exhortations on any subject in all its facts.^[10] In the process, the Jains came out with three doctrines of relativity^[11] used for logic and reasoning.

- **Anekāntavāda**—The theory of relative pluralism or manifoldness
- **Syādvāda**—The theory of conditioned predication
- **Nayavāda**—The theory of partial standpoints

These Jain philosophical concepts made very significant contributions to the ancient [Indian philosophy](#), especially in the areas of skepticism and relativity.^[8]

Syādvāda

[Syādvāda](#) is the theory of conditioned predication which provides an expression to anekānta by recommending that epithet *Syād* be attached to every expression.^[12]

Syādvāda is not only an extension of Anekānta [ontology](#), but a separate system of logic capable of standing on its own force. The Sanskrit etymological root of the term *Syād* is "perhaps" or "maybe," but in context of syādvāda, it means "in some ways" or "from a perspective." As reality is complex, no single proposition can express the nature of reality fully. Thus the term "syāt" should be prefixed before each proposition giving it a conditional point of view and thus removing any dogmatism in the statement.^[13] Since it ensures that each statement is expressed from seven different conditional and relative view points or propositions, it is known as theory of conditioned predication. These seven propositions also known as *saptabhangi* are:^[14]

1. **Syād-asti**—"in some ways it is"
2. **syād-nāsti**—"in some ways it is not"
3. **syād-asti-nāsti**—"in some ways it is and it is not"
4. **{[IAST|syād-asti-avaktavyaḥ}**—"in some ways it is and it is indescribable"
5. **syād-nāsti-avaktavyaḥ**—"in some ways it is not and it is indescribable"
6. **syād-asti-nāsti-avaktavyaḥ**—"in some ways it is, it is not and it is indescribable"
7. **syād-avaktavyaḥ**—"in some ways it is indescribable"

Each of these seven propositions examines the complex and multifaceted reality from a relative point of view of **time, space, substance, and mode**.^[14] To ignore the complexity of the objects is to commit the fallacy of dogmatism.

Nayavāda

Nayavāda is the theory of partial stand-points or view-points. Nayavāda is a compound to two [Sanskrit](#) words—Naya "partial view point" and vāda "school of thought or debate."^[15] Nayavāda is used to arrive at a certain [inference](#) from a point of view. An object has infinite aspects to it; but in practice when one describes an object, one speaks of only relevant aspects, ignoring the other irrelevant aspects.^[15] This does not deny the other attributes, qualities, modes and other aspects; they are currently not relevant from a particular perspective. For instance, when one talks of a "Blue BMW" one is simply considering the color and make of a car; but the statement does not

imply that the car is devoid of other attributes like engine type, cylinders, speed, price and like. This particular view point is called "naya" or a partial view-point. As a type of critical philosophy, the nayavāda holds that all philosophical disputes arise out of confusion of stand points, and the standpoints one adopts are, though one may not realize it, "the outcome of purposes that we may pursue."^[16] While operating within the limits of language and seeing the complex nature of reality, [Māhavīra](#) used the language of nayas. Naya, being a partial expression of truth, enables us to comprehend reality part by part.^[17]

Syncretisation of changing and unchanging reality



Mahavira employed Anekanta extensively to explain the Jain philosophical concepts.

Māhavīra's responses to various questions recorded in Bhagvatisūtra demonstrate a recognition that there are complex and multiple aspects to truth and reality and a mutually exclusive approach cannot be taken to explain such reality:

Gautama: Lord! Is the soul permanent or impermanent?

Māhavīra: The soul is permanent as well as impermanent. From the point of view of the substance it is eternal. From the point of view of its modes it undergoes birth, decay and destruction and hence impermanent.^[18]

Jayanti: Lord! Of the states of slumber or awakening, which one is better?

Māhavīra: For some souls the state of slumber is better, for some souls the states of awakening. Slumber is better for those who are engaged in sinful activities and awakening for those who are engaged in meritorious deeds.^[19]

Thousands of questions were asked and Māhavīra's responses suggested a complex and multifaceted reality with each answer qualified from a view point. Even a [Tirthankara](#), possessing and perceiving infinite knowledge cannot express reality completely because of limitations of language, which is of human creation.

This philosophical syncretisation of paradox of change through anekānta has been acknowledged by modern scholars:

Our experience of the world presents a profound paradox which we can ignore existentially, but not philosophically. This paradox is the paradox of change. Something—A changes and therefore it cannot be permanent. On the other hand, if A is not permanent, then what changes? In this debate between the "permanence" and "change," Hinduism seems more inclined to grasp the first horn of the dilemma and Buddhism the second. It is Jainism that has the philosophical courage to grasp both horns fearlessly and simultaneously, and the philosophical skill not to be gored by either.^[20]

In Jain scriptures and teachings

Anekānta is firmly entrenched in the Jain texts as is evident from the various teachings of the Jain scriptures. Ācārya Amrtacandra starts his famous tenth century C.E. work *Purusathasiddhiupaya* by paying obeisance to the doctrine of anekānta:^[21]

I bow down to the anekānta, the source and foundation of the highest scriptures, the dispeller of wrong one-sided notions, that which takes into account all aspects of truth, reconciling diverse and even contradictory traits of all objects or entity.

Ācārya Siddhasena Divākara, fifth Century C.E., explains the nature of truth in the court of King Vikramāditya:^[22]

Vikramāditya: What is "truth"? That which is said repeatedly, that which is said loudly, that which is said with authority or that which is agreed by the majority?

Divākara: None of the above. Every one has his own definition of 'truth' and that it is conditional.

Vikramāditya: How about traditions? They have been established by our ancestors and have passed the test of time?

Divākara: Would the system established by ancestors hold true on examination? In case it does not, I am not here to justify it for the sake of saving the traditional grace of the dead, irrespective of the wrath-I may have to face.

-*Dvātrimṣikā* (6/2)

particular view is wrong."

Ācārya Vidyānandi provides analogy of ocean to explain the nature of truth in *Tattvarthaslokaṭīkā*: "The water from Ocean contained in a pot can neither be called an ocean nor a non-ocean, but simply a part of Ocean. Similarly, a doctrine, though arising from absolute truth can neither be called a whole truth nor a non-truth."^[23]

Ācārya Haribhadra, one of the leading proponent of anekānta, was the first classical author to write a doxography, a compendium of a variety of intellectual views which, rather than espousing narrow partisan views, attempted to contextualise the Jain

thoughts within the broad framework of possible intellectual orientations available to Indian thinkers around the eighth century C.E.^[24] Going beyond *anekānta*, Yasovijayaji, seventeenth century Jain monk, advocated *madhayastha*, meaning "standing in middle or equidistant," a position that allowed him to praise the qualities in others even though they may be non-Jain and belonging to other faiths.^[25]

The Blind Men and an Elephant

The Jain concepts of *Anekantvāda* and *Syādvāda* are often explained with the parable of Blind Men and an Elephant. It is also known as *andhgajanyāyah*, which is translated as "the maxim of blind (men) and elephant." The following parable (and many of its variants) is used by the Jain authors to explain the multifold nature of truth:

"A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect and know it by touch of which we are capable." So, they sought it out, and when they found it they groped about it. In the case of the first one person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said "This being is like a drain pipe." For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, "I perceive the shape of the elephant to be like a pillar." And in the case of the one who placed his hand upon its back said "Indeed, this elephant is like a throne." Now, each of these presented a true aspect when he related what he had gained from experiencing the elephant. None of them had strayed from the true description of the elephant. Yet they fell short of fathoming the true appearance of the elephant."^[5]

Intellectual ahimsā and religious tolerance

The concept of *anekānta* and *syādvāda* allows the Jains to accept the truth in other philosophies from their perspective and thus inculcating a tolerance for other viewpoints. *Anekantvāda* is non-absolutist and stands firmly against all dogmatisms, even including any assertion that only [Jainism](#) is the right religious path.^[26] It is thus an intellectual *Ahimsā* or *Ahimsā* of mind.^{[27][28]}

Māhavīra encouraged his followers to study and understand the rival traditions as evidenced in *Acaranga Sutra*:^[29]

"Comprehend one philosophical view through the comprehensive study of another one" (5.113).

In *Anekantvāda*, there is no "battle of ideas," because this is considered to be a form of intellectual *himsa* or damage, leading quite logically to physical violence and war. In today's world, the limitations of the adversarial, "either with us or against us" form of argument are increasingly apparent leading to political, religious and social conflicts.

Sutrakritanga, the second oldest canon of Jainism, provides a solution by stating:^[30] "Those who praise their own doctrines and ideology and disparage the doctrine of others distort the truth and will be confined to the cycle of birth and death."

This ecumenic and irenic attitude, engendered by Anekānta, allowed modern Jain monks like Vijayadharma suri to declare: "...He is neither [Jain](#) nor Buddhist, Vaisnava nor Saiva, [Hindu](#) nor [Muslim](#), but a traveler on the path of peace shown by the supreme soul, the God who is free from passion."^[31]

Even the mounting ecological crisis is linked to adversarialism, because it arises from a false division between humanity and "the rest" of nature. The modern judicial systems, democracy, [freedom of speech](#), secularism, all implicitly reflect an attitude of Anekānta. Many authors like Kamala Jain, have advanced that the Jaina tradition with its emphasis on Ahimsā and Anekānta is capable of providing a solution to a host of problems facing the world: Religious intolerance, [terrorism](#), wars, depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, and so on.^[32]

Influence on Mahatma Gandhi

Since childhood, [Gandhi](#) was exposed to the actual practice of non-violence, non-possession and anekāntavāda.^[33] He grew up in an area with a continued Jain population and one of his good friend was a Jain. According to his biographers like Uma Majumdar, Rajmohan Gandhi and Stephen Hay,^[7] these early childhood impressions and felt experiences contributed to Gandhi's character formation and further moral and spiritual development. Mahatma Gandhi, in his writings, attributed his seemingly contradictory positions over a period of time to his learning process, experiments with truth and his belief in anekāntavāda.^[34] He proclaimed that the duty of every individual is to determine what is personally true and act on that relative perception of truth. According to Gandhi, while duty bound to act according to his relative truth, a [satyagrahi](#) is equally bound to learn from truth held by his opponent.^[35] In response to a friends query on religious tolerance, he responded in Journal "Young India—21 Jan 1926:"



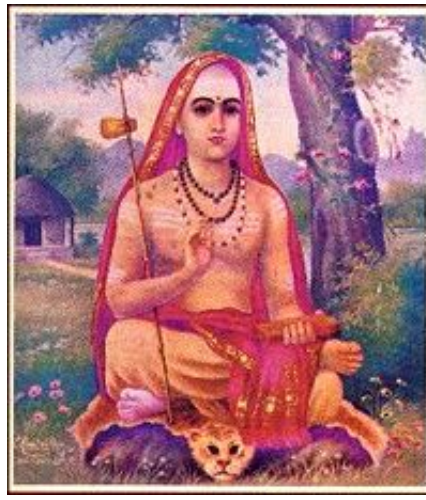
Gandhi was deeply influenced by Jainism

I am an [Advaitist](#) and yet I can support [Dvaitism](#) (dualism). The world is changing every moment, and is therefore unreal, it has no permanent existence. But though it is constantly changing, it has something about it which persists and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an Anekāntavadi or a Syādvādi. But my Syādvāda is not the Syādvāda of the learned, it is peculiarly my own. I cannot engage in a debate with them. It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the man who knew the elephant. I very much like this doctrine of the manyness (sic) of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Musulman (sic) from his standpoint and a Christian from his. Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa. I want to take the whole world in the embrace of my love. My Anekāntavāda is the result of the twin doctrine of [Satyagraha](#) and [Ahimsa](#).^[36]

Criticisms

The interrelated doctrines of Anekānta and Syādvāda are often criticized on grounds that they engender a degree of hesitancy and uncertainty and may compound problems rather than solve them. It is also pointed out that Jain [epistemology](#) gains assertability for its own doctrine, but at the cost of being unable to deny contradictory doctrines. Furthermore, it is also argued that this doctrine becomes self-defeating when it is argued that if reality is complex and nothing can describe it completely, then this doctrine itself is incomplete and hence an ekantvadi.^[37] This criticism seems to have been anticipated by Ācārya Samantabhadra when he says, "From the point of view of *pramana* (means of knowledge) it is *anekānta* (multi-sided), but from a point of view of *naya* (partial view) it is *ekanta* (one-sided)."^[38]

In its defense, Jains also point out that anekānta manages to reconcile the opposing view points rather than simply refute them and helps in avoidance of one-sided errors and confusion that the ekantvadins tend to make.



Adi Sankarācārya, the [Advaita](#) philosopher, 9th Century C.E., criticised the doctrine of anekāntavāda

The doctrine of anekāntavāda had also received criticism from the Vedantists, especially from [Adi Sankarācārya](#). Sankara attempted to refute some of the tenets of Jainism in his commentary on the Brahmasutra (2-2-33 to 36), wherein he shows considerable disdain for the doctrine of Anekantavāda:

It is impossible that contradictory attributes such as being and non-being should at the same time belong to one and the same thing; just as observation teaches us that a thing cannot be hot and cold at the same moment. The third alternative expressed in the words—they either are such or not such—results in cognition of indefinite nature, which is no more a source of true knowledge than doubt is. Thus the means of knowledge, the object of knowledge, the knowing subject, and the act of knowledge become all alike indefinite. How can his followers act on a doctrine, the matter of which is altogether indeterminate? The result of your efforts is perfect knowledge and is not perfect knowledge. Observation shows that, only when a course of action is known to have a definite result, people set about it without hesitation. Hence a man who proclaims a doctrine of altogether indefinite contents does not deserve to be listened anymore than a drunken or a mad man.

[39]

However, Sankara failed to take the real position of Anekānta into account by identifying syādavāda as sansayavāda, that is, "[agnosticism](#)" which was once articulated by Sanjaya Belatthiputta. [40] He failed to take into consideration that the affirmation of the existence of an object is in respect to the object itself and its negation is in respect to what the object is not, giving an object positive and negative attributes at the same time without any contradictions.

Another Buddhist logician Dharmakirti ridiculed Anekānta in *Pramānavarttikakārika*:

"With the differentiation removed, all things have dual nature.

Then, if somebody is implored to eat curd, then why does not eat camel?" [40]

The insinuation is obvious: If curd exists from nature of curd and does not exist from nature of camel, then one is justified in eating camel, as by eating camel, he is merely eating the negation of curd. Ācārya Akalanka, while agreeing that Dharmakirti may be right from a view point, took it upon himself to issue a rejoinder:

"The person, who criticises without understanding the prima facie view, is acting like a jester and not a critic.

The Buddha was born a deer and deer was born as Buddha; but Buddha is adorable and deer is only a food.

Similarly, due to strength of an entity, with its difference and similarities specified, nobody would eat camel if implored to eat curd."^[40]

Role in ensuring survival of Jainism

Anekāntavāda played a pivotal role in the survival of [Jainism](#) in ancient [India](#) during the onslaught from [Shaivas](#), [Vaishnavas](#), Buddhists, [Muslims](#), Christians at various points of time. According to Christopher Key Chapple, Anekāntavāda allowed Jains to survive during the most hostile and unfavourable moments in history.^[41] According to John Koller, Anekāntavāda allowed the Jain thinkers to maintain the validity of doctrine, while at the same time respectfully criticize the views of the opponents.^[41] Anekāntavāda was effectively used by Ācārya Hemacandra to convert king Kumarapala of Gujarat to Jainism.^[42] Certain Brahmins who were jealous of Hemacandra's rising popularity with King complained that Hemacandra was a very egoistic person and he did not respect Hindu Gods and refuses to bow to lord [Shiva](#). When called upon to visit Siva temple with the King, Hemacandra readily bowed before the idol of Siva, but by saying:^[42] "I am bowing down only to that god, who has destroyed the passions like attachment (raga) and hatred (dvesa) which are the cause of worldly life, whether he is Brahma, Visnu, or Jina."

At one stroke he ensured that he remained true to tenets of Jainism, namely, a Jain should bow down only to a passionless and detached God (that is, a Jina) and at the same time managed to please the King. Ultimately, the king became a devoted follower of Hemacandra a great champion of Jainism.^[42]

Notes

1. [↑] Dundas (2002), 231.
2. [↑] Koller (2000), 400-7.
3. [↑] ^{3.0} ^{3.1} Grimes (1996), 34.
4. [↑] Jaini (1998), 91.
5. [↑] ^{5.0} ^{5.1} Hughes (2005), 590-1.
6. [↑] Ronald Huntington, [Jainism and Ethics](#). Retrieved July 8, 2007.
7. [↑] ^{7.0} ^{7.1} Hay (1970), 14-23.

8. ↑ [8.0](#) [8.1](#) McEvilley (2002), 335.
9. ↑ [9.0](#) [9.1](#) Duli Chandra Jain (ed.) (1997) p.21
10. ↑ Hughes, (2005), 590.
11. ↑ Griffin (2005), 145.
12. ↑ Chatterjea (2001), 77-87.
13. ↑ John M. Koller, Syādvāda as the epistemological key to the Jaina middle way metaphysics of Anekāntavāda, *Philosophy East and West* 50 (3): 400-8. ISSN 00318221.
14. ↑ [14.0](#) [14.1](#) Grimes (1996), 312.
15. ↑ [15.0](#) [15.1](#) Grimes (1996), 202-3.
16. ↑ McEvilley (2002), 335-7.
17. ↑ Shah (1998), 80.
18. ↑ *Bhagvatisūtra* (Ladnun: Jain Vishwa Bharti Institute).
19. ↑ *Bhagvatisūtra* (Ladnun: Jain Vishwa Bharti Institute): 12/53,54.
20. ↑ Sharma (2001), xii.
21. ↑ J.P. Jain (2006), Verse no. 2.
22. ↑ *Ācārya Siddhasena Divākara: Vardhamana Dvātrimṣikā* 6/2.
23. ↑ Śloka-vārtikā of Ācārya Vidyānanda, Commentary on Tattvārthasūtra, verse 116.
24. ↑ Dundas (2002), 228.
25. ↑ Sethia Tara (2004), 134.
26. ↑ Ronald Huntington, [Jainism and Ethics](#). Retrieved July 18, 2007.
27. ↑ Adian Rankin (2006).
28. ↑ Matilal, 61.
29. ↑ Jacobi (1884), 5.113.
30. ↑ Jacobi (1895), 1.1.50.
31. ↑ Dundas (2002), 227.
32. ↑ Sethia (2004), 113.
33. ↑ Majmudar (2005), 44.
34. ↑ Griffin (2005), 145.
35. ↑ Sonnleitner (1985), 14.
36. ↑ Gandhi (1955).
37. ↑ Mark Owen Webb, [The Jain Philosophy](#), The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved March 18, 2008.
38. ↑ Pandya (2001), 5210.
39. ↑ Nakamura (1992), 169-70.
40. ↑ [40.0](#) [40.1](#) [40.2](#) Pandya (2001), 5209-10.
41. ↑ [41.0](#) [41.1](#) Sethia (2004), 7-8.
42. ↑ [42.0](#) [42.1](#) [42.2](#) Jain World, [Hemacandra](#). Retrieved May 6, 2008.

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