



## Gettier-like Problem in Indian Epistemology

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### Abstract:

There is a widespread tendency among modern scholars of Indian philosophy to locate Nyāyā epistemology in Western tradition. Modern scholars like B.K. Matilal, J.N. Mohanty, and P.K. Sen have tried to discover the justified true belief factor in the Nyāyā concept of *pramā*. In the first part of my paper, I have distinguished a few kinds of scepticism and their sources. I have also shown that like the contemporary epistemologists the classical Indian Philosophers were aware of these. But the approach the Indian Philosophers adopted to meet the challenge of scepticism is significantly different from the approach epistemologists adopt. In the second part, at least one Gettier-like problem is found in Indian philosophy and is cited and explained. In the third part, I have discussed an instance of the characteristic way in which the Indian Philosophers meet the challenge of scepticism like Śrīharṣa.

### Introduction:

Man is an epistemic animal. He wants to unravel the mystery around him. Not only he wants to know, he also wants to know why things happen the way they happen. Man also endeavours to know what will happen in future on the basis of what he knows now. Philosophers since antiquity have been grappling with the nature of knowledge and the means of knowing. All these are questions constitute what is known as epistemology or theory of knowledge.

This seemingly simple question has aroused the interest of numerous philosophers of East and West from ancient time down to the present, and very many different answers have been given. This article aims at giving a clear account of the definition of knowledge along with some observations thereon. Let me start with an analysis of the ancient idea of the knowledge as found in Greek philosophy as there is a widespread tendency among the modern scholars to interoperate the western concept of knowledge into Indian system.

### (I)

Before 1963, Western philosophers seemed that the definition of knowledge is justified true belief (JTB)<sup>i</sup>. In 1963, the renowned philosopher Edmund L. Gettier<sup>ii</sup> claimed that justified true belief is not the sufficient condition of knowledge. The importance of (Gettier and) Gettier-like problem is best understood in the context of scepticism. And scepticism is a major concern of philosophers of every age and culture.

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The founder of skepticism is supposed to Pyro, the Greek philosopher. He claimed the no knowledge is possible. But the pyro's theory is not established due to extremist. But there is another type of skepticism that is moderate skepticism. This type of skepticism had a great influence on philosophy. There are two types of moderate skepticism, namely antecedent and consequence skepticism. However, the main goal of both types of skepticism was to cast doubt on the definition of knowledge. Gettier also use sceptic method to raise doubts on the definition of knowledge.

In order to show the inadequacy of the traditional definition, Gettier offers two counter-examples. In both these examples Gettier has tried to show the absence of knowledge even if justified true belief is present.<sup>iii</sup>

### Case I:

In the first counter-example, two men Smith and Jones are found to have applied for job. Smith has been told by the president of the company that Jones would get the job. Further, Smith counted the coins in Jones's pocket a few minutes ago. This gave Smith sufficient justification for believing the conjunctive proposition "Jones will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket". Then Smith derives the proposition "The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" from the conjunctive proposition. However, Smith gets the job, though he did not expect it. And unknown to Smith, there were ten coins in his pocket. The proposition "The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" becomes true and Smith is justified in believing the proposition and he believes it. Thus, Smith has justified true belief, but he cannot be said to know, for his being right in this case is due to chance or luck.

### Case II:

The second counterexample runs as follows. A person called Smith has ample evidence for believing the proposition (1) 'Jones owns a Ford'. The evidence may be that Jones has given Smith a ride while driving a Ford and he remembers that Jones had always in the past owned a Ford. Now Smith has a friend called Brown whose whereabouts are unknown to Smith. Smith picks up three place names quite at random and constructs the following three disjunctive propositions:

- (2) Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Boston.
- (3) Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona.
- (4) Either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Brest Litovsk.

All the three propositions (2), (3), and (4) are entailed by (1) and Smith knows (1) and comes to believe each of the propositions (2), (3) and (4).

Surprisingly enough, Jones does not own a Ford. The car he was seen driving is a rented car. However, quite accidentally, Brown happens to be in Barcelona. The proposition (3) thus happens to be true. Smith is justified in believing the proposition and he believes it. But he has no knowledge about it for he does not know where at present Brown is. So, we can see that justified true belief is there but Knowledge is not achieved.

## (II)

### Gettier Types Cases in Nyāya Epistemology:

There is a widespread tendency among the modern scholars of Indian philosophy to locate Nyāyā epistemology in Western tradition. Modern scholars like B.K. Matilal, J.N. Mohanty, and P.K. Sen have tried to discover justified true belief factor in the Nyāyā concept of *pramā*.<sup>iv</sup> According to P. K. Sen, "we cannot allow any definition of *pramā*

which would identify it with a mere true belief”<sup>v</sup>. He identifies the concept of *pramāṇajanyatva* with the concept of justification and suggests that the former concept must be inserted in the Nyāya definition of *pramā* in order to make it acceptable.<sup>vi</sup> Before discussing Gettier type cases in Indian epistemology, I would like to give an idea of the concept of *pramā* in Nyāya philosophy.

Goutama, who propounded Nyāya philosophy for the first time, did not mention any definition of *pramā* directly. But in *Nyāyadarśana*, vol-1, translated by Phanibhusan Tarkavagisa, we find a definition of *pratyakṣa*<sup>vii</sup>.

‘indriyārthasannikarṣotpannam jñānam avyapadeshyam                      avyabhichāri vyavasāyātmakam  
pratyakṣm’.<sup>viii</sup> |I|4|

In Nyāya Kusumāñjali, Udayanācārya discussed the definition of *pramā*,

“Aprāpterdhikvyāpterlakṣṇmpūrbdrk |

Yathārthānubhavomāmanapekṣatayeṣyate”<sup>ix</sup> |I|

In *Bhāṣā-pariccheda*, Viśvanātha discussed the definition of *pramā*,

Athavā tatprakaraṇajñānaṁ tadviśeṣyakam |

Tat pramā, na pramā nāpi bhramḥ syannirvikalpakam<sup>x</sup> ||135

From the above discussion, we can summarise the definition of *Pramā* in general. An awareness episode is considered as *pramā* only if it satisfies the following three conditions:

It should be a presentation (*anubhava*) of things,

It should be true or unerring (*yathārtha*), and

It should be indubitable and assured (*asamdigdha*).

For a proper understanding of this definition, it is necessary to grasp what the Naiyāyikas mean by the key terms *asamdigdha*, *yathārtha*, and *anubhava*.

Let me substantiate the point by referring to the Gettier type counter-examples discussed by Matilal<sup>xi</sup>. These are the examples primarily given by Śrīharṣa in his *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* against Udayana’s definition of *pramā* as ‘true presentative cognition’ (*tattvānubūtiḥ pramā*). I will briefly narrate the examples to facilitate the discussion.

A man holding three coins in his palm asks the cognizer: how many coins are there in my hand? The cognizer having no clue makes a guess and says ‘three’; but her guess turns out to be true. The cognizer should not be credited with *pramā*, even though it satisfies the definition of *pramā*. So, it has turned out to be true only by accident (*ajā-kripānīya-nyāya*). It cannot be regarded, according to Śrīharṣa, as a case of *pramā*.

A person sees a cloud of dust on a distant hill, but he mistakes it for smoke. On the basis of this misperception or the false evidence provided by the senses, he concludes that there is fire on the hill. As a matter of fact, it so happens that there is fire on the hill, which makes his awareness episode true. It cannot be regarded a case of *pramā*.

From a distance, a person sees two horns and infers the presence of a bull in the field. But later it is discovered that he sees a pair of wooden horns. The real horns of the animal were cut-off and, in its place, artificial ones were fitted a long time back. In this case, the subject's awareness about the presence of bull was true and there was evidential justification for the truth of the awareness. Śrīharṣa's point is that though all the conditions of knowledge are satisfied, this would not be considered as a case of knowledge.

Śrīharṣa<sup>xii</sup> point out that as justification in the above cases does not ensure the truth of the awareness episodes, truth is not properly and adequately connected to the awareness episode. Truth being only accidental to the awareness episode under discussion, there is always the possibility of error.

### (III)

Now I would like to focus on B.K. Matilal's interpretation. He tried to overcome the Gettier type problems in Indian philosophy. In his book *Perception* he discussed this in detail. To quote:

"I shall now try to formulate, deriving my points from the philosophical insights of Gaṅgeśa, the possible Nyāya response to Śrīharṣa's criticism. The following considerations are directly relevant for resolving the problem with Śrīharṣa's examples.

First, following Gaṅgeśa, we might want to restrict the primary (philosophical) use of 'to know' (*pramā*) to designate simply any 'truth-hitting' cognitive episode, any awareness that grasps x as F provided x is F. This will turn many cases of awareness into true awareness, into knowledge, even when we are not sure that those events are not knowledge-events.

Second, Gaṅgeśa emphasizes that knowledge-hood and illation-hood are not two mutually exclusive class-properties or universals (*jāti*). A particular cognitive event can therefore be instantiating the property knowledge-hood only in one part and lack of it in another part. It has been argued that even in a typical illation 'this is a snake' there is knowledge-hood in so far as the word 'this' correctly refers to an object lying in front of the speaker (which means that the object referred to is qualified by whatever is signified by 'this-ness').

Third, following Nyāya, we might introduce a distinction between one's knowing and one's knowing that one knows. As we shall see, in the Nyāya analytical study of knowledge, these two are treated as two distinct events. Presumably they arise in us in quick succession and thereby falsely generate the notion of simultaneity (or on rare occasion may arise simultaneously provided all the required conditions are fulfilled). It is mentioned that these two events often remain indistinguishable in ordinary parlance. One's knowing that p is much simpler event than one's knowing that she knows that p, and hence the set of 'causal' factors leading to the first is non-identical with those leading to the second. Ordinarily, whenever I can say that I know, I can unhesitatingly say that I know that I know. But when we can say of somebody else that he knows, it is not invariably the case that we can say that he knows that he knows. In other words, the subject must be aware of some 'evidential' support, and this awareness (*liṅga-parāmarśa*) will give the required 'casual' basis for the knowledge that he knows".

If the above considerations are taken into account, we can proceed to resolve Śrīharṣa's problem as follows. In all such cases we have to say that the subject 'knows' (in the primary sense defined by Gaṅgeśa) as long as the cognitive episode is endowed with the truth-hitting character. But the subject does not know that he knows, for his inference, his evidential support, has not been faultless! The subject thinks that he knows and hence being asked can cite his evidence (false awareness of smoke or dewlap), but if his mistake is pointed out he would withdraw

saying, ‘Oh! I did not know’. One could interpret this as saying, ‘Oh! I thought I knew, but I did not know that my awareness was right for a different reason.

### Upshot:

I think that in Indian philosophy there is no Gettier-type problem as they can be found in Western tradition. If we summarise the Nyāya definition of *pramā* given by different Naiyāyikas, we can say it is ‘*Yathārthānubhava pramā*’ and ‘*pramā karaṇama pramāṇam*’. There are four kinds of *pramā* and *pramāṇa* (perception, inference, Comparison, testimony) in Nyāya philosophy. If we study carefully the process of *pramāṇa* referred to here, we must acquire the concept of valid cognition. So the examples given by Gettier<sup>xiii</sup> and the Indian sceptic philosopher Śrīharṣa<sup>xiv</sup> cannot make the definition of *pramā* invalid. The main foundation of inference is *vyāpti jñāna*. If *vyāpti jñāna* occurs correctly, inference must be valid. So the example of misperception of dust as smoke given by Śrīharṣa is not appropriate here, because there is no valid *vyāpti jñāna*. Though there is a *vyāpti* relation between smoke and fire, it is not possible to draw any *vyāpti* relation between dust and fire. Therefore we can say that Śrīharṣa could not apply the process of inference properly in this case. This is why Śrīharṣa could not achieve valid inferential knowledge.

In the case of Śabda *pramāṇa*, the example of Śrīharṣa<sup>xv</sup> is invalid. The statement of *āpta vyakti* is called testimony. We cannot doubt the statement of *āpta vyakti*. If we doubt the statement, *vyakti* cannot be called *āpta*. So the example, ‘a man holding three coins....’ given by Śrīharṣa cannot be valid because if the referred person is ‘*āpta*’, he has knowingly talked about three coins. If we doubt his knowledge, it cannot be said ‘*āpta-vyakti*’. So in my opinion, there is no Gettier-type problem in so far as the Nyaya definition of *prama* is concerned.

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