



## NYAYA AND LEGAL REASONING: ANCIENT WISDOM FOR THE MODERN INDIAN LAWYER

---

Saransh Bhatia\*

### ABSTRACT

*The Nyaya school of Indian philosophy, with its detailed systems of logic and knowledge, offers a new way to approach modern legal reasoning, one that focuses on seeking truth rather than just winning arguments. This article connects ancient ideas with today's legal practices by showing how Nyaya's methods, such as the Pramana theory (ways of knowing), Vada debate (truthful discussion), and Nigrahasthana's rules for defeat, relate to and improve current legal procedures. Through comparing Nyaya's sixteen debate categories to modern courtroom steps (like Pramana as evidence and Dristanta as precedent), it argues that Nyaya's ethical focus on clarity, consistency, and honest reasoning can fill gaps in India's heavily procedural legal system. The article also looks at how Nyaya can help lawyers handle challenges like hostile litigation. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of Indian philosophical traditions, especially Nyaya, as key to developing a just system grounded in cultural context and balance.*

**Keywords:** Nyaya Philosophy, Legal Reasoning, Praman Theory, Vada-Vidhi.

### INTRODUCTION

There has always been a misconception that Indian philosophy is limited to old beliefs, strange religious practices, and a mix of spirituality and unclear thinking focused only on the liberation of the soul. It gives the false idea that Indian thinkers lacked deep thinking about language, logic, or important concepts. This belief, along with the blind following of the British administrative and legal framework, has further deprived us of critical enquiry into the epistemological or logical foundation of our civilisation.

---

\*LLB, FINAL YEAR, LAW CENTRE-1, FACULTY OF LAW UNIVERSITY OF DELHI.

Most of the efforts of scholars have been mainly focused on the Dharmashastras (the teaching or science of righteousness). There is no doubt that the Dharmashastras are the main texts of ancient Indian legal philosophy, but our understanding would remain incomplete if we do not place them in their proper logical and philosophical context. Modern legal systems often focus heavily on procedures and technical reasoning, but ancient Indian traditions like the Nyaya School of Philosophy offer a deep and ethical approach to legal reasoning and argumentation. Unlike debates meant to win at any cost, Nyaya encouraged discussions that were fair, truthful, and purposeful. Nyaya rejected arguments driven by ego or selfishness. This article revisits the Nyaya school of Indian philosophy to highlight its rich tradition of logic and argumentation. It demonstrates Nyaya's continued relevance to modern Indian legal reasoning.

## NYAYA LOGIC AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge or the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. The Nyaya Sutra enumerates sixteen categories, the knowledge of which leads to the highest good. What is remarkable is that these sixteen categories are arranged in a way that perfectly represents the process of logical discussion and clear understanding.

**Pramana:** Signifying means of knowledge.

**Prameya:** It means the object of knowledge.

(*Pramana* and *Prameya* together form the basis of any debate, where the thesis needs to be proved.)

**Samsaya:** It means doubt that arises due to conflicting judgments between disputants.

**Prayojana:** It means the purpose or goal behind the debate.

**Dristanta:** It refers to the familiar instances cited to clarify a point, which are not open to doubt.

**Siddhanta:** The case is then shown to rest on the tenets which are accepted by both parties.

**Avayavas:** A five-point demonstration to validate the case.

**Tarka:** The disputant then uses reasoning (*Tarka*) and argumentation against any contrary suppositions.

**Nirnaya:** Ascertainment or conclusion (once the reasoning is complete)

**Vada:** If the opponent is not satisfied with the process of demonstration, he will enter into Vada means a formal discussion or a debate.

The discussion may take the form of;

**Jalpa:** Wrangling, where the aim is to win rather than to find the truth

**Vitanda:** Cavil or Destructive criticism without a positive counter-argument.

If unable to prove their point, the opponent may resort to using:

**Hetvabhasa:** Fallacious reasoning

**Chhala:** Quibbles or deceptive tactics

**Jati:** Refutations based on false analogies

When these tactics fail, the opponent is defeated at **Nigrahasthana**, The stage of defeat, consisting of twenty-two grounds for losing the debate. The Nyaya school employs a detailed system of logic and methods to understand reality and pursue the highest good through reason, making it a uniquely profound way of philosophising. In this approach, logic, moral laws, and the quest for selfhood are deeply interconnected. This provides a very logical sequence, the subsequent flowing out of the preceding without any interference in between. This structured reasoning of Nyaya philosophy closely mirrors many elements of the modern Indian legal system. The correspondence between Nyaya's categories and contemporary legal components becomes even clearer when compared side by side, as shown below:

<b>Nyaya Philosophy</b>	<b>Modern Court System</b>
Pramana (Means of Knowledge)	Evidence/Witness Testimony
Prameya (Object of Knowledge)	Facts in Issue
Samsaya (Doubt)	Legal Disputes/Conflicts
Prayojana (Purpose)	Cause of action
Dristanta (Example)	Precedent
Siddhanta (Agreed tenets)	Settled Law
Avayava (Five-step demonstration)	IRAC (Issue – Rule – Authority – Conclusion) format of reasoning
Tarka (Reasoning)	Logical argumentation
Nirnaya (Conclusion)	Judgment/Finding
Vada, Jalpa, Vitanda	Pleading styles: good vs hostile litigation
Hetvabhasa, Chhala, Jati	Fallacies/Misleading arguments
Nigrahasthana	Dismissal/Defeat in arguments

### **PRAMANA THEORY**

Pramana refers to the means of knowledge. It means how the true knowledge of a thing is acquired. It not only provides the sources of true knowledge but also the tools for acknowledging the truth of any claim.

It identifies four valid sources of knowledge:

**Pratyaksha (Perception):** It is considered as *Jyeshtha Pramana*, i.e., the primary source of all knowledge. This is the accurate knowledge that arises from the direct contact between the senses and the object that is free from all doubts. For example, we say that it is raining because we can see and feel the water droplets. Both “see” and “feel” are direct sensory experiences.

**Anumana (Inference):** It is the knowledge that follows perception and is threefold, i.e., from effect to the cause, from cause to the effect or from that which is commonly seen. It involves asserting a thing based on the reason (*hetu* or *linga*) which is associated with it. For example, when we see smoke rising from a hill, we infer that because the same cannot be without fire, there is fire on the distant hill.

**Paksha:** The locus where the claim is to be proved.

**Sadhya:** It refers what is to be proved or established?

**Hetu/linga:** The reason employed to prove the claim.

Here, the hill is the *Paksha*, fire is the *Sadhya*, and Smoke is the *Hetu*. A valid inference must meet certain conditions such as the *hetu* must always be found with the *sadhya* (as in a kitchen) and never without it (as in a lake with no smoke or fire). Nyaya formalises this reasoning through a five-step demonstration (*Avayava*) as follows:

- Preliminary statement of the thesis to be proved (*Pratijna*), there is fire on the mountain.
- Citing a reason (*Hetu*) because there is smoke.
- Giving an example (*Udaharana*), as seen in a kitchen.
- Applying to the present case (*Upanaya*), the mountain also has smoke.
- Asserting the conclusion (*Nigamana*), therefore, there is fire on the mountain.

In legal reasoning, such structured logic helps draw reliable conclusions from evidence, much like judges infer guilt or liability from proven facts.

**Upamana (Comparison):** It is knowledge gained by comparison with a thing that is already known. For example, a person has never seen a dragon fruit before. When he asks a friend, the friend says, “It looks like a pink kiwi but with spikes on the outside”. Later, when the person sees a fruit like that in the market, he says, “Oh! That’s a dragon fruit.” This helps in applying known examples to new and unfamiliar situations. This is similar to how the common law system works—judges often rely on past judgments and analogies to decide new cases, allowing legal rules to grow and adapt over time.

**Shabda (Testimony):** In Nyaya philosophy, Shabda means knowledge gained from a reliable authority. This could be a sage, a noble person, or even a foreign expert. What matters is that the person is trustworthy (*Apta*). A reliable statement, when heard and understood properly, can give true knowledge. This is a very distinctive feature of ancient Indian reasoning. A sentence, by being uttered by a competent speaker and heard by a competent listener, generates in the latter valid knowledge about the state of affairs.

## LEGAL REASONING AND ARGUMENTATION

When we presume something to be true and, based on that presumption, conclude that something else is also true, we are making an inference. When we express this chain of reasoning in language, we are presenting an argument. What distinguishes good inference from bad inference is **logic**. In Indian philosophy, logic developed in two major streams:

- The Vada tradition focuses on structured debates. It involves identifying fallacies, tricks, and arguments used not to find the truth, but to defeat the opponent.
- The Pramana tradition focuses on establishing reliable sources of knowledge (as has been discussed earlier).

### VADA-VIDHI (Method of debate)

Legal reasoning includes two key aspects one is deductive justification, which explains how a judge arrives at a decision, and dialectical evaluation, which involves examining and weighing different arguments and viewpoints. The Nyaya philosophy of Vada (debate) and Vada-Vidhi (method of debate) promotes critical thinking, structured disputation, and logical argumentation, contributing significantly to jurisprudence and the pursuit of justice.

Nyaya philosophy divides debate into three categories - Vada, Jalpa, and Vitanda.

**Vada (Truth-seeking debate):** This is an ideal form of debate where both parties seek to discover the truth.

- Both parties present a thesis and counter-thesis, but with an open mind and not fixed beliefs.
- Arguments are based on valid knowledge (Pramana) and reasoning (Tarka).
- Each side follows a proper five-step logical demonstration (Avayavas).
- The logic used must not contradict accepted doctrines or tenets.
- Even when one side is defeated (Nigraha), there is no hostility.

Example: Unlike TV debates filled with noise and personal attacks, Vada encourages respectful and logical discussion focused on resolving the issue.

**Jalpa (Debate for Victory):** Here, the goal is to win the debate, and not the establishment of truth. This shares only the first two characteristics of Vada.

The parties may rely on tricks:

- Chhala the wordplay or deception.
- Jati the False analogies or misleading arguments.
- If these fallacies are exposed, the speaker faces defeat (*Nigrahassthana*).

**Vitanda:** It is a type of debate where the speaker does not present their viewpoint. Instead, they only try to attack or criticise the other person's argument without offering any alternative. Since they do not make a clear claim, their opponent has nothing to argue against.

### **NIGRAHASTHANA (Points of Defeat)**

Nigrahassthana refers to twenty-two specific mistakes that can cause a debater to lose. They show weakness in arguments or reasoning. Knowledge of these points helps the debaters to avoid errors and also to expose faults in the opponents' arguments.

Some of the key points are as follows-

- Abandoning the thesis by accepting the opponent's example against your original arguments.
- Changing the thesis by presenting a different argument than the one started with.
- Contradicting the thesis by giving reasons that don't support your main point.
- Renouncing the thesis by denying your position.
- Changing the reason by modifying your original reason when it is successfully challenged by the opponent.
- Introducing irrelevant topics.
- Using meaningless and unintelligible arguments.
- Being incoherent and unclear in speech.
- Presenting arguments confusingly and incompletely.
- Repeating yourself unnecessarily or failing to understand the point.
- Evading questions or admitting an opponent's opinion without challenge.
- Misunderstanding or overlooking valid objections.
- Using false reasoning or fallacies (Hetvabhasa).
- Lack of ideas.
- Admission of the opponent's opinion.
- Overlooking the objectionable.
- Objecting to the unobjectionable.
- Deviating from a tenet states something inconsistent with those very tenets.



Nigrahasthana, or the points of defeat, play a crucial role in legal reasoning. A debater is seen as defeated when they display confusion or faulty logic. These twenty-two indicators serve as checks to ensure and maintain clarity and consistency in arguments. Identifying them helps prevent mistakes in one's reasoning and reveals weaknesses in the opponent's case. Nyaya logic is about what makes reasoning sound and valid. This aligns closely with modern legal argumentation, where claims must be supported by logic and evidence. It emphasises clarity, consistency, and accuracy key skills that help lawyers create convincing arguments and effectively address opposing points.

## CONCLUSION

Nyaya teaches the importance of clear thinking, ethical behaviour, and honesty—qualities essential for a fair legal system. It focuses on logical reasoning and promoting social harmony, making it highly relevant for modern Indian law. By studying Nyaya, lawyers can improve their skills in careful analysis, ethical argumentation, and presenting strong, well-reasoned cases. Nyaya also emphasises that arguments should lead to mutual understanding and practical results, not just winning debates. It rejects selfish or pointless arguing, a view supported by Indian scriptures like the Mahabharata.

Understanding Nyaya philosophy offers several important advantages for modern lawyers:

**Enhanced logical reasoning:** The systematic approach helps lawyers construct clear, precise and well-founded arguments. By focusing on sound inference and evidence-based conclusions, lawyers can strengthen their case-building and reduce errors in reasoning.

**Anticipation of counterarguments:** Understanding of this approach prepares lawyers to better respond to challenges in court, thereby making their arguments stronger and more convincing.

**Using Illustrative Examples (Dristanta):** Just like Nyaya uses examples everyone agrees on to explain points, lawyers use past cases and precedents to support their arguments. This helps make legal arguments clearer and stronger.

**Ethical Framework:** Nyaya encourages critical thinking along with a commitment towards honesty and truth. This helps lawyers argue well while staying honest, avoiding dishonest and unfair tactics that Nyaya and Indian scriptures disapprove of.

**Relevance to Modern Legal Challenges:** With law facing new issues like artificial intelligence and algorithms, Nyaya's broad and logical approach can help lawyers interpret evidence and legal rules more effectively in these complex areas.

## REFERENCES

1. S N Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (2022) [Classical foundational text on Indian philosophy, including Nyaya]
2. M R Dasti, 'Nyaya' (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, n.d.) <https://iep.utm.edu/nyaya/> accessed
3. B K Matilal, *Logic, Language and Reality: An Introduction to Indian Philosophical Studies* (1985).
4. *Jurisprudence – II Case Material*, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi, Logic and Epistemology in Indian Thought [https://lawfaculty.du.ac.in/userfiles/downloads/\(Updated\)%20LB%20604%20JURIS%202%20Course%20Material.pdf](https://lawfaculty.du.ac.in/userfiles/downloads/(Updated)%20LB%20604%20JURIS%202%20Course%20Material.pdf)

## GLOSSARY

A brief explanation of key Sanskrit or philosophical terms used in the article.

<b>Nyaya</b>	The Indian philosophical system focuses on logic, reasoning, and debate.
<b>Pramana</b>	The Indian philosophical system focuses on logic, reasoning, and debate.
<b>Prameya</b>	The object or subject matter of knowledge.
<b>Samsaya</b>	Doubt or uncertainty arising from conflicting views.

<b>Prayojana</b>	The purpose or goal behind an argument or case.
<b>Drishtanta</b>	An example or analogy used to support a claim.
<b>Siddhanta</b>	Accepted principle or conclusion agreed upon by both parties.
<b>Avayava</b>	The five-step logical structure is used to demonstrate inference.
<b>Tarka</b>	Reasoning or critical analysis is used to test arguments.
<b>Nirnaya</b>	Final decision or conclusion based on reasoning.

<b>Vada</b>	Truth-oriented debate using ethical reasoning.
<b>Jalpa</b>	Debate aimed at winning, often using misleading tactics.
<b>Vitanda</b>	Destructive criticism without offering an alternative viewpoint.
<b>Hetvabhasa</b>	Fallacious or deceptive reasoning.
<b>Chhala</b>	Quibble or deliberate misinterpretation through wordplay.
<b>Jati</b>	False analogy or misleading counter-argument.
<b>Nigrahasthana</b>	Points of defeat in a debate due to errors or inconsistencies.
<b>Paksha</b>	The subject or locus where a claim is to be proven.
<b>Sadhya</b>	A proposition or point that must be established in an argument.
<b>Hetu/Linga</b>	Reason or sign used to justify an inference.