

# Doṣa as the Root Cause of Suffering: A Nyāya Perspective

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## Abstract :

In Nyāya philosophy, the concept of *doṣa* (defect) occupies a central position in explaining the origin and perpetuation of human suffering (*duḥkha*). The Nyāya system, grounded in a realistic and analytical approach to knowledge, identifies *doṣa* as intrinsic psychological impurities that distort cognition and motivate erroneous actions. Primarily classified into three categories—*rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion) these defects function as the root causes of bondage and cyclic existence (*saṃsāra*). According to Nyāya, suffering does not arise arbitrarily but follows a causal chain beginning with *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge). This ignorance gives rise to *doṣa*, which in turn leads to *pravṛtti* (volitional action). Such actions generate *karma*, resulting in repeated birth and consequent suffering. Thus, *doṣa* serves as a crucial intermediary link between ignorance and suffering, making it a key focus for philosophical and ethical inquiry. Nyāya emphasizes that *rāga* binds individuals through excessive attachment to pleasurable objects, while *dveṣa* creates hostility toward undesirable experiences. *Moha*, the most fundamental defect, clouds judgment and prevents the apprehension of reality as it truly is. Together, these defects distort rational decision-making and perpetuate a cycle of desire, action, and suffering. The Nyāya solution to this existential problem lies in the attainment of *tattvajñāna* (true knowledge), achieved through valid means of cognition (*pramāṇas*). By cultivating correct understanding, one can eliminate *moha*, which subsequently weakens *rāga* and *dveṣa*. The cessation of *doṣa* leads to the termination of karmic activity and ultimately results in liberation (*apavarga*), characterized by the complete absence of suffering. Thus, Nyāya presents a systematic and rational framework wherein *doṣa* is identified as the psychological root of suffering, and its eradication through knowledge becomes the pathway to ultimate freedom.

**Keywords :** Doṣa, Duḥkha, Mithyājñāna, Rāga, Dveṣa, Moha, Apavarga

## Introduction:

In Nyāya philosophy, *doṣa* (defect) is systematically identified as the fundamental psychological cause of human suffering (*duḥkha*), forming a crucial link in the causal chain that sustains worldly existence (*saṃsāra*). The Nyāya thinkers, particularly as articulated in the *Nyāya Sūtra*, argue that suffering arises not merely from external conditions but from internal cognitive and affective distortions rooted in *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge). This ignorance gives rise to *doṣa*, which are primarily classified into *rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion). These defects influence volitional activity (*pravṛtti*)<sup>i</sup>, leading individuals to engage in actions driven by desire and aversion. Such actions generate *karma*, which in turn results in repeated cycles of birth and suffering. Among these, *moha* is considered the most foundational, as it obscures true knowledge and perpetuates misapprehension of reality. Consequently, *rāga* and *dveṣa* emerge as secondary manifestations, binding the individual through attraction and repulsion toward objects of experience. Nyāya thus presents a rigorous epistemological and ethical framework wherein the eradication of suffering is contingent upon the removal of *doṣa* through the attainment of valid knowledge (*tattvajñāna*) via reliable means of cognition (*pramāṇas*). When true knowledge dawns, it dispels *moha*, thereby weakening *rāga* and *dveṣa*, and ultimately halting *pravṛtti* and

karmic accumulation. This cessation leads to *apavarga* (liberation), defined as the absolute cessation of suffering. Therefore, in the Nyāya system, *doṣa* is not merely a moral flaw but a deeply rooted epistemic and psychological condition that underlies the entire structure of bondage, making its elimination the central aim of philosophical inquiry and spiritual practice.

## The Concept of Doṣa in Nyāya Philosophy

In Nyāya philosophy, the concept of *doṣa* (defect) is developed with remarkable psychological depth and epistemological precision, serving as a foundational element in explaining the dynamics of human cognition, action, and suffering. *Doṣa* is not to be understood merely as a superficial moral weakness or ethical lapse; rather, it denotes deeply ingrained internal dispositions that corrupt the process of knowing and consequently distort volitional behavior. According to the Nyāya system, human beings are essentially rational agents, yet their rationality is frequently compromised by these defects, which arise from *mithyājñāna* (false or erroneous knowledge). This ignorance is not simply the absence of knowledge but a positive misapprehension of reality, wherein things are perceived and judged incorrectly. It is from this epistemic distortion that *doṣas* emerge and operate as motivating forces behind all purposive activity (*pravṛtti*).

The *Nyāya Sūtra* systematically identifies three primary *doṣas*: *rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion), each representing a fundamental mode of psychological disturbance. Among these, *moha* occupies a primary and generative role, as it directly concerns the failure to apprehend reality as it truly is (*tattva*). *Moha* clouds the intellect, obstructs discrimination (*viveka*), and sustains  $\square\square\square\square$  (confusion), thereby creating a fertile ground for the emergence of *rāga* and *dveṣa*<sup>ii</sup>. When an individual, under the influence of *moha*, misconstrues an object as a source of pleasure or pain, it gives rise to *rāga* or *dveṣa* respectively. *Rāga* manifests as an intense attachment or craving toward objects deemed pleasurable, leading to desire, clinging, and dependence. Conversely, *dveṣa* arises as aversion or repulsion toward objects perceived as unpleasant, generating emotions such as anger, hatred, and hostility. These two defects operate in a complementary and cyclical manner, continually reinforcing each other and binding the individual to patterns of attraction and repulsion. Furthermore, these *doṣas* have a profound impact on cognition itself. They do not merely follow from false knowledge but actively perpetuate it by biasing perception, inference, and judgment. Under their influence, the individual selectively interprets experiences in ways that confirm pre-existing attachments and aversions, thereby deepening ignorance. This results in a self-sustaining cycle where *mithyājñāna* gives rise to *doṣa*, and *doṣa* in turn reinforces *mithyājñāna*. In practical terms, this leads to irrational decision-making, unethical conduct, and actions that ultimately produce suffering (*duḥkha*). The Nyāya philosophers thus emphasize that *doṣas* are both cognitive and conative in nature they distort understanding while simultaneously driving action. Importantly, Nyāya does not regard these defects as permanent or insurmountable. Since they are rooted in ignorance, they can be eradicated through the acquisition of true knowledge (*tattvajñāna*) by means of valid cognition (*pramāṇas*). When *moha* is removed through correct understanding, the very basis for *rāga* and *dveṣa* is undermined, leading to their gradual cessation. In this way, the analysis of *doṣa* in Nyāya is not merely diagnostic but also therapeutic, offering a clear and rational pathway for overcoming the internal causes of suffering and achieving liberation (*apavarga*)<sup>iii</sup>.

## Doṣa and the Causal Chain of Suffering

In Nyāya philosophy, the doctrine of the causal chain of suffering presents a highly systematic and rational explanation of the origin and perpetuation of human misery, situating *doṣa* (defects) at a pivotal intermediate stage between ignorance and suffering. The sequence—*mithyājñāna* → *doṣa* → *pravṛtti* → *karma* → *janma* → *duḥkha*—is not merely a theoretical construct but a deeply insightful analysis of the existential condition of embodied beings. At the root lies *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge), which is understood not as a simple lack of awareness but as a positively erroneous cognition that misrepresents reality. This distorted knowledge leads individuals to wrongly identify the self with the body, to perceive impermanent objects as permanent, and to mistake sources of suffering for sources of pleasure. Such fundamental misapprehensions create the conditions for the emergence of *doṣa*, namely *rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion), which function as

powerful psychological forces influencing both cognition and behavior. Once *doṣa* arises, it propels the individual into *pravṛtti* (volitional activity), which includes all forms of intentional action—mental, verbal, and physical—directed toward the attainment of desired objects or the avoidance of undesirable ones. Under the influence of *rāga*, a person actively pursues pleasurable experiences, while *dveṣa* motivates avoidance or opposition to painful situations; both are sustained and intensified by *moha*, which continues to obscure the true nature of reality. These actions, performed with intention and desire, generate *karma*, which is conceived in Nyāya as an unseen moral force (*adr̥ṣṭa*) that accumulates and bears fruit in the future. The accumulated *karma* does not perish with the death of the body but persists, necessitating *janma* (rebirth) in accordance with its moral quality. Each new birth, in turn, becomes the locus for the experience of *duḥkha* (suffering), which includes not only physical pain but also mental distress, frustration, and existential dissatisfaction. What is particularly significant in this Nyāya model is the role of *doṣa* as the indispensable link between *mithyājñāna* and *pravṛtti*. Without the presence of *doṣa*, false knowledge alone would not necessarily lead to action; it is the affective and motivational dimension introduced by *doṣa* that energizes and directs behavior. Thus, *doṣa* transforms cognitive error into practical engagement with the world, thereby initiating the chain that culminates in suffering. Conversely, if *doṣa* is eliminated, the impetus for *pravṛtti* ceases, leading to the cessation of karmic accumulation and ultimately breaking the cycle of rebirth and suffering. This demonstrates that *doṣa* is not merely a passive consequence of ignorance but an active and dynamic force sustaining the cycle of *samsāra*. Moreover, this causal framework underscores the Nyāya commitment to rational analysis and philosophical clarity. Suffering is not viewed as arbitrary, divinely ordained, or inexplicable; rather, it is the predictable outcome of identifiable causes rooted in human cognition and psychology. By mapping out this chain in a precise and logical manner, Nyāya opens the possibility for intervention and transformation. If the root cause—*mithyājñāna*—can be removed through valid knowledge (*tattvajñāna*), then *doṣa* will cease, *pravṛtti* will be neutralized, *karma* will no longer accumulate, and the cycle of *janma* and *duḥkha* will come to an end. Therefore, the Nyāya theory of the causal chain of suffering not only explains the problem of human misery but also provides a clear, step-by-step pathway toward its ultimate resolution in *apavarga* (liberation).

## Identification and Function of Doṣas

In Nyāya philosophy, the three principal *doṣas*—*rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion)—are understood as distinct yet profoundly interconnected psychological forces that shape human cognition, emotion, and behavior, ultimately sustaining the cycle of suffering (*duḥkha*). Each of these defects operates in a specific manner, yet none functions in isolation; rather, they are dynamically interrelated, forming a self-reinforcing network rooted in ignorance (*mithyājñāna*). *Rāga* denotes an intense attraction or attachment toward objects perceived as pleasurable. This attachment is not merely a passive liking but an active craving that binds the individual to the object, generating desire, longing, and dependence. Under its influence, individuals become preoccupied with acquisition, possession, and enjoyment, often losing their capacity for rational judgment and ethical restraint. This attachment leads to repeated engagement in actions aimed at securing pleasure, thereby perpetuating karmic accumulation and dissatisfaction when desires remain unfulfilled or are only temporarily satisfied. On the other hand, *dveṣa* represents aversion or repulsion toward objects deemed unpleasant or harmful. It manifests as negative emotional responses such as anger, hatred, resentment, and hostility. Just as *rāga* binds through attraction, *dveṣa* binds through rejection and opposition, compelling individuals to avoid, resist, or even destroy perceived sources of discomfort. This aversive tendency disturbs mental equilibrium and often results in harmful actions toward others, further entrenching the individual in cycles of suffering and moral consequence. Importantly, both *rāga* and *dveṣa* are not merely emotional reactions but are rooted in deeper cognitive distortions about what is truly beneficial or harmful. At the foundation of both lies *moha*, the most fundamental of the three *doṣas*. *Moha* signifies delusion, confusion, or ignorance regarding the true nature of reality (*tattva*). It is this defect that obscures correct understanding and gives rise to misperception and false judgment. Under the influence of *moha*, individuals mistake the impermanent for permanent, the painful for pleasurable, and the non-self for the self. This cognitive error becomes the breeding ground for *rāga* and *dveṣa*, as one becomes attached to what is wrongly perceived as desirable and repulsed by what is mistakenly judged as undesirable. Thus, *moha* is rightly regarded as the root defect, while *rāga* and *dveṣa* are its derivative expressions in the affective domain.

The interplay between *rāga* and *dveṣa* governs the majority of human behavior, creating a continuous cycle of attraction and repulsion that dictates decision-making and action. Individuals are constantly drawn toward certain objects and pushed away from others, rarely acting from a standpoint of true knowledge or equanimity. This oscillation not only perpetuates *pravṛtti* (action) and *karma* but also reinforces *moha*, as each action undertaken under their influence further distorts perception and deepens ignorance. Consequently, these *doṣas* not only generate suffering directly through emotional disturbance and unethical conduct but also obscure the very means of overcoming suffering by clouding the intellect and preventing the rise of true knowledge (*tattvajñāna*). Nyāya philosophy thus presents these three *doṣas* as both the psychological engines of bondage and the primary obstacles to liberation. Their eradication is not merely a matter of moral discipline but requires a profound transformation of cognition through valid knowledge (*pramāṇa*). When *moha* is dispelled, the illusions that sustain *rāga* and *dveṣa* collapse, leading to the cessation of attachment and aversion. In this way, the detailed analysis of these interconnected defects underscores Nyāya's broader philosophical vision: that human suffering is rooted in correctable cognitive errors, and that liberation (*apavarga*) becomes possible through the systematic removal of these defects by means of true knowledge.

### Epistemological Basis for the Removal of Doṣa

In Nyāya philosophy, the eradication of *doṣa* (defects) is fundamentally grounded in the acquisition of valid knowledge (*tattvajñāna*), reflecting the system's deep commitment to epistemology as the primary means of human liberation. Unlike approaches that emphasize ritual, asceticism, or purely ethical discipline, Nyāya asserts that the root cause of bondage lies in *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge), and therefore only its direct opposite—true and valid cognition—can effectively eliminate the defects arising from it. This valid knowledge is not arbitrary or subjective but is attained through well-defined and reliable means of cognition (*pramāṇas*),<sup>v</sup> namely *pratyakṣa* (perception), *anumāna* (inference), *upamāna* (comparison or analogy), and *śabda* (verbal testimony, especially from trustworthy sources such as scriptures and competent authorities). Each of these *pramāṇas* plays a crucial role in correcting different forms of cognitive error and collectively contributes to a comprehensive and accurate understanding of reality (*tattva*). At the heart of this epistemological process lies the removal of *moha* (delusion), which is the most fundamental of all *doṣas*. *Moha* represents a deep-seated confusion or ignorance about the true nature of the self, the world, and their interrelations. It is this delusion that gives rise to *rāga* (attachment) and *dveṣa* (aversion), as individuals, under its influence, misjudge what is truly beneficial or harmful. When *tattvajñāna* is attained through the proper functioning of *pramāṇas*, it directly dispels *moha* by revealing things as they really are. This illumination of truth undermines the very basis upon which attachment and aversion are formed. Consequently, *rāga* and *dveṣa* begin to weaken, as the individual no longer clings to transient pleasures or reacts with hostility to temporary discomforts, having understood their impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory nature. As these *doṣas* diminish, their motivational force over human behavior correspondingly declines. In Nyāya, *pravṛtti* (volitional activity) is driven by desire and aversion, both of which are products of *doṣa*. When these defects are attenuated, the compulsive drive to act in pursuit of pleasure or avoidance of pain is gradually brought to a halt. This cessation of motivated action has profound implications for the doctrine of *karma*. Since *karma* is generated through intentional actions performed under the influence of *doṣa*, the weakening and eventual elimination of these defects result in the cessation of new karmic accumulation. Existing karmas may continue to bear fruit for some time, but without the generation of new ones, the cycle of bondage begins to dissolve. Thus, Nyāya presents a clear and rational progression: from valid knowledge arises the destruction of *moha*; from the destruction of *moha* follows the weakening of *rāga* and *dveṣa*; from the cessation of these defects comes the end of *pravṛtti*;<sup>vi</sup> and from the cessation of action follows the exhaustion of *karma*. This epistemologically grounded process ultimately leads to *apavarga* (liberation), the complete cessation of suffering. In this way, Nyāya elevates epistemology from a merely theoretical discipline to a transformative force with direct ethical and spiritual consequences. Knowledge is not pursued for its own sake alone but as the essential instrument for overcoming the deepest roots of human suffering, making it the foundation upon which both moral purification and ultimate freedom are built.

## Liberation (Apavarga) as the Cessation of Suffering

In Nyāya philosophy, the concept of *apavarga* (liberation) represents the highest and ultimate goal of human existence, defined with striking clarity as the complete and irreversible cessation of suffering (*duḥkha*). Unlike several other Indian philosophical traditions that portray liberation in affirmative or experiential terms—such as bliss (*ānanda*), union with the Absolute, or realization of pure consciousness—Nyāya adopts a rigorously analytical and, in a sense, negative characterization. *Apavarga* is described not as the attainment of a new state filled with positive qualities, but rather as the absolute absence of all forms of suffering, including physical pain, mental distress, and the very conditions that give rise to them, such as *doṣa* (defects), *karma*, and *janma* (rebirth). This negative definition does not imply deficiency but reflects Nyāya's commitment to a realistic and precise understanding of liberation as freedom from all limiting and painful conditions that characterize worldly existence (*saṃsāra*). Central to the attainment of *apavarga* is the total eradication of *doṣa*, which, as Nyāya consistently maintains, functions as the immediate cause of action (*pravṛtti*) and the accumulation of *karma*. These defects—*rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion) are deeply rooted in *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge), and thus cannot be eliminated by mere external practices or moral effort alone. Instead, their removal requires the sustained cultivation of *tattvajñāna* (true knowledge), acquired through the proper application of valid means of cognition (*pramāṇas*). As true knowledge arises, it dispels *moha*, the foundational defect that sustains the others. With the destruction of *moha*, the cognitive distortions that give rise to *rāga* and *dveṣa* are also dissolved, leading to the gradual weakening and eventual cessation of these affective disturbances. Once *doṣa* is eliminated, its motivating force over human action comes to an end. Without attachment and aversion, there is no longer any impulse to engage in desire-driven or aversion-driven activities, and thus *pravṛtti* ceases. This cessation of action has a direct impact on the doctrine of *karma*, as no new karmic impressions are generated in the absence of motivated action. Although previously accumulated karmas may continue to bear fruit for a limited duration, they eventually become exhausted. With the complete cessation of karmic accumulation and fruition, the necessity for *janma* (rebirth) is removed. Consequently, the entire causal chain—*mithyājñāna* → *doṣa* → *pravṛtti* → *karma* → *janma* → *duḥkha*—collapses in a systematic and irreversible manner. The attainment of *apavarga*, therefore, signifies a state of absolute freedom from the cycle of birth and death, a condition in which the self exists devoid of all suffering and its causes. In this liberated state, there is no experience of pleasure or pain, no cognitive error, and no engagement in action; the self remains in its pure, unaffected nature. Nyāya's conception of liberation, though seemingly austere, underscores its philosophical rigor and its emphasis on the complete eradication of all sources of bondage. It presents liberation not as an emotional or mystical experience, but as the logical culmination of the removal of ignorance and its effects. Thus, *apavarga* stands as the final and definitive resolution to the problem of suffering, achieved through the disciplined pursuit of true knowledge and the total elimination of *doṣa*<sup>vii</sup>.

## Critical Analysis

Nyāya's analysis of *doṣa* as the root cause of suffering presents a remarkably sophisticated and psychologically nuanced framework that integrates epistemology, ethics, and human behavior into a coherent philosophical system. By identifying *mithyājñāna*<sup>viii</sup> (false cognition) as the foundational source of *doṣa*—namely *rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion)—Nyāya effectively situates the problem of suffering within the domain of cognitive distortion. This approach demonstrates a striking parallel with modern psychological theories, particularly those that emphasize the central role of perception, belief systems, and cognitive appraisal in generating emotional disturbances. Just as contemporary cognitive psychology and therapies such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) argue that maladaptive thoughts lead to negative emotions and dysfunctional behavior, Nyāya asserts that erroneous knowledge gives rise to defective mental states, which in turn motivate harmful actions and perpetuate suffering. In this sense, Nyāya can be seen as anticipating, in a philosophical context, the core insight that transforming cognition is essential for transforming experience. At the same time, the Nyāya emphasis on *tattvajñāna* (true knowledge) as the primary and sufficient means of liberation may invite critical reflection. Its strong epistemological orientation tends to privilege rational cognition over other dimensions of human life, potentially underestimating the complexity of emotional, social, and practical factors that also

contribute to human suffering. Human behavior is not always governed solely by knowledge or ignorance; it is also shaped by habits, social conditioning, interpersonal relationships, cultural influences, and deeply embedded emotional patterns that may not be easily resolved through intellectual understanding alone. From this perspective, one might argue that Nyāya's model, while logically rigorous, presents a somewhat idealized account of human transformation, where the acquisition of correct knowledge automatically leads to the cessation of *doṣa*. In lived experience, however, the persistence of emotional tendencies even in the presence of intellectual clarity suggests that the process of overcoming suffering may require a more integrated approach, combining knowledge with ethical practice, emotional regulation, and social engagement. Nevertheless, despite these potential limitations, Nyāya offers a profoundly valuable and enduring model for understanding the intricate interplay between cognition, emotion, and action. It recognizes that human suffering is neither arbitrary nor inevitable but arises from identifiable and correctable causes rooted in the structure of human understanding. By emphasizing the transformative power of correct cognition, Nyāya underscores the importance of critical inquiry, logical analysis, and disciplined reflection as tools for self-transformation. Its framework encourages individuals to examine their beliefs, question their assumptions, and seek reliable knowledge through valid means (*pramāṇas*), thereby fostering intellectual clarity and psychological freedom. Moreover, by linking epistemology with ethical and soteriological goals<sup>ix</sup>, Nyāya elevates the pursuit of knowledge beyond mere theoretical interest, presenting it as a practical and liberating force. In this way, Nyāya's treatment of *doṣa* not only provides a compelling explanation of the roots of suffering but also offers a rational pathway toward its resolution. It highlights that the correction of cognitive error is not simply an intellectual exercise but a deeply transformative process that reshapes emotional dispositions and behavioral patterns. Even when viewed in the light of modern interdisciplinary perspectives, Nyāya's insights remain relevant, inviting a dialogue between classical philosophy and contemporary thought on the nature of mind, suffering, and human flourishing.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Nyāya philosophy offers a profoundly coherent, logical, and systematic account of the origin, continuity, and cessation of human suffering by identifying *doṣa* as its immediate and operative cause. Rooted in *mithyājñāna* (false knowledge), these defects—*rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (aversion), and *moha* (delusion)—function as powerful psychological forces that not only distort cognition but also actively motivate human behavior. Through their influence, individuals become entangled in *pravṛtti* (volitional actions), which generate *karma*, ultimately leading to repeated cycles of birth (*janma*) and the inevitable experience of *duḥkha* (suffering). Nyāya thus demonstrates with analytical precision that suffering is neither accidental nor metaphysically imposed, but arises from a definable and intelligible causal chain grounded in human cognitive error and affective disturbance. What distinguishes Nyāya's approach is its unwavering emphasis on epistemology as the key to resolving existential problems. The system asserts that since *doṣa* originates from ignorance, its complete eradication is possible only through the attainment of *tattvajñāna*<sup>x</sup> (true knowledge), acquired by means of valid cognition (*pramāṇas*). This transformative knowledge dispels *moha*, thereby weakening and ultimately eliminating *rāga* and *dveṣa*, which in turn brings an end to motivated action and karmic accumulation. As the entire causal chain collapses, the cycle of *saṃsāra* is broken, culminating in *apavarga*—the final state of liberation characterized by the absolute cessation of suffering. Thus, Nyāya not only provides a rigorous philosophical diagnosis of the human condition but also offers a clear and rational pathway toward ultimate freedom. By highlighting the central role of correct knowledge in overcoming psychological and existential bondage, it affirms the transformative power of reason, critical inquiry, and disciplined understanding. In doing so, Nyāya establishes itself as a deeply relevant and intellectually robust system that continues to illuminate the path from ignorance to liberation.

## References

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- <sup>iii</sup> Udyotakara, *Nyāya Vārttika*, elaborates on the causal relation between *doṣa* and *pravṛtti*.
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