The problem of negation is primarily an epistemological one: How do we know the absence of a thing? On this question the Indian Logic is divided into two main groups: the Realist and the Idealist. The former consists of the systems in which the absence (abhāva) is conceived as a real non-entity (padārtha) and as such is a real object of its corresponding negative cognition (abhāvadhi). In spite of certain differences the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and the Bhāṭṭa-Mimāṃsā systems belong to this group.

The second group comprises of the later Buddhist logicians led by Dharmakirti and the Prābhākara-Mimāṃsā thinkers who reject the objectivity ascribed to ‘abhāva’ by the Realists. According to the Idealists negation is an inferential judgment and as such the cognition of absence of a thing is only a logical synthesis (vikalpa). Absence of a perceptible thing (drśya) is inferred from its non-perception (anupalabdhi) and from the perception of something else, namely, the bare locus (bhūtalamaṭra). The suggestion of the perception or the presence of the thing negated remains as an imposed ideal situation (drśyatvabuddhau samāropāt).

Now the question is: Can Negation be an independent means of knowledge (pramāṇa)? The view that it is an independent means seems to be very old. According to the Bhāṣya of Praśastapāda the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra (IX.i.5.) rejects the view of the negative means. In the Nyāya

1 The present investigation will be limited to the Buddhist and the Bhāṭṭa-Mimāṃsā systems of Indian Philosophy.

2 The term ‘pramāṇa’ is not well defined in Indian logical writings. It is used in the sense of either (a) the means of knowledge, or (b) the form of cognition, or (c) the means of proof. (Cf. Ganganath Jha, Sadholal Lectures, p. 28.) Here the term will be used in the first sense. It should also be noted that the term ‘Negation’ will be used to express Kumārila Bhaṭṭa’s theory of ‘abhāva-pramāṇa’, ‘Non-opprehension’ for the later Bhāṭṭa’s theory of ‘yogyaṇupalabdhi’, and ‘Non-perception’ for the Buddhist theory ‘drśyānupalabdhi’. However, in quotations of modern writers they may occur as synonyms.

Sūtra (II.ii.2) there is refutation of negation as the means. Subsequently, with the exception of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā all schools of Indian logic rejected this theory.⁴

II

The theory of the negative means evidently belongs to the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā system alone. This system accepts the six means of knowledge: (1) Perception (pratīyāśa), (2) Inference (anumāna), (3) Analogy (upamāna), (4) Verbal Testimony (śabda), (5) Presumption (arthāpatti), and (6) Negation (abhāva).⁵ The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika admits only the first four while the Prābhākara-Mīmāṃsā rejects the last one, namely, the Negation.⁶ The Buddhist logicians accept only the first two pramāṇas.⁷ It is evident from the early texts of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā that it was this school of thought alone that propounded Negation as a pramāṇa. Śabarasvāmin commenting on the Jaimini-Sūtra (I.i.5.) said that “Negation stands for the non-existence (or the non-operation) of the (other five) means of Knowledge; and it is what brings about the cognition that ‘... does not exist’ in regard to things that are not in contact with the senses.”⁸ Śabarasvāmin appears to have endorsed the view of a Vṛttikāra, most probably Upavarṣa, who had postulated the six means in the system before Śabara.⁹ Kumārila Bhaṭṭa in his exposition of the Śabara Bhāṣya affirms: “Validity (pramāṇa) of Negation (as the means of knowledge) is to apprehend the fact (sattā) of the (negative) entity (vastu) where the five (positive) means of knowledge in case of cognising the (negative) form of reality (vastu-rūpe) fail.”¹⁰

III

Now the problem arises: How do we determine the validity of a negative

⁵ Śloka-vārttika (henceafter Śī. V.) of Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, ed., with the commen. ‘Nyāyaratnācharaka’ of Pārthasārathi Miśra by Ram Shastri Tailanga (= Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series) (Banares, 1898), Codanā-sūtra, verse 111, p. 60.
¹⁰ Cf. Damodarvishnu Garge, Citations in Śabara-Bhāṣya, p. 11.