

Vāda Discussion as a Rhetorical Practice: Reimagining Dialogue through Ancient South Asian Traditions

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Introduction

Modern rhetorical practice, especially in discussions of critical societal issues (e.g., race, immigration, climate change, war, abortion, and social justice) is often driven by a "win-or-lose" mentality, leaving little space for genuine engagement and understanding. This "win-or-lose" adversarial approach to argumentation prevents the collaborative and mutually supportive deliberations necessary to recognize society's complex problems. Rhetoric and composition scholars have long sought alternatives that transform conflict into cooperative inquiry (e.g., Anderson; Burke; Kearney; Lassner; Lynch et al.; Mendelson). Yet ancient South Asian tradition remains largely absent from history-of-rhetoric pedagogy: the South Asian practice of *vāda* discussion, often described as an honest discussion or debate. By introducing *vāda*, as a teaching resource in rhetoric classrooms, instructors can equip students with tools for Non-Western engagement, expanding the rhetorical canon while fostering wide-ranging, collaborative learning. The *vāda* debate offers a pedagogical approach focused on mutual understanding, intellectual humility, and common inquiry between the proponent(s) and opponent(s).

The *vāda* discussion is rooted in the *Nyayasutra* method, first introduced by Aksapada Gautama (Gotama) between 200 BC and 150 C.E. (Ganeri, "Introduction"). The *Nyayasutra* is a "more systematic" manual for public debate, widely available in ancient times, and provides rhetorical and philosophical guidelines for various aspects of argumentation, such as motivation, rules for debate, confutation, and fallacies (Lloyd, "Rethinking Rhetoric"; Lloyd, "A Rhetorical Tradition"). In *Nyaya* rhetoric, "a rhetor must work from a position of fairness and truth, by positively 'ascertaining' facts and propositions, determining questions through the removal of doubt, and engaging and hearing out both or all sides" (Sharma 94).

Too often, debates complex topics become more about asserting dominance over opposing viewpoints than about exchanging ideas and genuinely understanding the issues at hand. Given this situation, "We must shift our

discipline's focus from debate and confrontation toward more engagement, from persuasion and conversion toward more conversation, from rejection and exclusion toward more inclusion, from hierarchy and hegemony toward more harmony—at least where such shifts are intellectually productive or socially feasible" (Sharma 94.). As Sharma wrote, we need to reframe our dialogue models to transcend adversarial confrontation—"The goal of dialogue [should be] to create and support a caring community..." (Lloyd "Logic" 3), while still working to understand the issue.

In *vāda* debate, students move beyond confrontation, experiencing an 'acting-knowing' phase where they work toward *tattvabodha*—understanding truth of knowledge/true nature/reality and finally reaching to self-realization. According to *vāda* discussion, "after going through a series of *vādas* [*vade vade jayate tattvabodha: वादे वादे जयते तत्त्वबोधः*], true knowledge is acquired" (Gupta, Kaur, & Vasdev 45) and students gain deeper, authentic knowledge. An important aspect of *vāda* debate is that both parties are driven to search together to understand the issue being discussed. Drawing an idea from Caraka about the logic of a good debate, contemporary Indian rhetorical scholar B. K. Matilal writes:

One need not be afraid of defeat in such a debate for one may learn the truth about the subject matter under discussion. Besides, in such a debate, if one defeats the other, one need not take pride or feel overjoyed. One should not speak ill of the other, nor should one stupidly stick to a view which is decidedly one-sided (*ekanta**). In such a debate one should not speak about something one does not know well. And above all, one should respect the opponent. ("The Character" 38)

In *vāda* debate, as stated in the above paragraph, two equals contend without fearing each other for winning or losing. The entire effort of the contestants is to understand the topic without necessarily defending one side to believe in. Both parties are involved in discussions about being equally respectful to each other.

Vāda pedagogy can be especially transformative in courses on rhetorical theory, argumentation, and global communication. It reframes argument not as conquest, but as a common search toward understanding. Embracing *vāda* pedagogy will be significant for a few reasons. First, it deepens our understanding of a Non-Western traditional pedagogical approach,

expanding the rhetorical canon to include different cultural approaches and frameworks. Second, *vāda*'s focus on fairness and mutual respect offers valuable insights into the ethics of rhetoric—particularly relevant in a time when public discourse around the world is often marked by polarization and hostility. Finally, this pedagogy has the potential to revitalize ancient rhetorical practices as tools for social cohesion, collaboration, and humility in addressing today's issues of global debate.

Course Applicability: This resource will be applicable to both graduate and undergraduate level.

Graduate Level Courses

- *History of Rhetoric*
- *Non-Western Rhetorics*
- *Rhetoric and Pedagogy*
- *Global Rhetorical Traditions*
- *South Asian Rhetoric*

Undergraduate Courses

- *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*
- *South Asian Communication and Culture*
- *Non-Western Argumentation*
- *Global Public Speaking*

Key Pedagogical Themes

Collaborative Inquiry: The *vāda* tradition reframes argumentation as a collaborative process that prioritizes mutual comprehension over competitive victory. Unlike antagonistic rhetorical models that often emphasize agonism, *vāda* fosters intellectual humility and active listening, encouraging participants to engage in a shared pursuit of truth. In the teaching resource, this theme can be illustrated through classroom activities by guiding students in structured dialogues, where they articulate their perspectives while attentively considering others' viewpoints. For example, students can be prompted to engage in discussions modeled on *vāda* principles, focusing on understanding the issue at hand rather than asserting superiority,

thereby cultivating a classroom environment that values collective insight and respectful exchange.

Historical Roots of *Vāda*: The *vāda* tradition, originating in ancient South Asian philosophy, particularly through Aksapāda Gautama's *Nyāyasūtra*, offers a non-confrontational approach to rhetorical inquiry. This theme explores how *vāda*'s emphasis on reasoned dialogue for truth-seeking challenges the competitive frameworks often found in current rhetoric. In the resource, this theme can be illustrated by comparing *vāda*'s principles to Western rhetorical traditions in classroom discussions, encouraging students to analyze primary texts from both traditions. For instance, students might examine excerpts from the *Nyāyasūtra* alongside Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (e.g., ethos, logos, pathos, etc.) to identify how each tradition conceptualizes the purpose and practice of argumentation, fostering a deeper appreciation for diverse rhetorical histories.

Dialogic Pedagogy for *Tattvabodha*: The *vāda* tradition, exemplified in the dialogue between Bhagavan Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, serves as a pedagogical model for fostering *tattvabodha* through non-confrontational discussion. This theme highlights how *vāda*'s dialogic approach encourages students to understand true nature of knowledge and reality. In the resource, this theme can be illustrated through case studies where students analyze the Krishna-Arjuna dialogue as a model of empathetic and reflective exchange. Classroom activities may include role-playing exercises where students emulate this dialogic structure, engaging in guided conversations that prioritize understanding and self-awareness over debate, thus applying *vāda*'s principles to modern pedagogical contexts.

Dialogic Equality: *Vāda* establishes a fundamental equality among participants, regardless of social status or rhetorical expertise and training, challenging the hierarchical structures often embedded in Modern-day debate traditions. This theme underscores *vāda*'s potential to create inclusive academic spaces where all voices are valued equally. In the teaching resource, this theme can be illustrated through classroom practices that encourage equitable participation, such as structured dialogue protocols where students take turns speaking and listening without interruption. These activities ensure that diverse perspectives, including students of color, LGBTQ, and multilingual students, are heard and respected, fostering a classroom environment conducive to social justice and inclusive discourse.

Essential Terminologies

1. *Vāda* (वाद)

A form of reasoned dialogue in classical Hindu philosophy aimed at uncovering truth through mutual discussion between equals. There is no matter of winning or losing debate; instead, both proponent and opponent seek truth with common inquiry.

2. *Nyāyasūtra* (न्यायसूत्र)

Nyāyasūtra, a foundational text of the *Nyaya* school of logic, is propounded by Aksapāda Gautama between 200 BCE and 150 CE. It deals with methods of reasoning, debate, and epistemology.

3. *Tattvabodha* (तत्त्वबोध)

Realization or comprehension of knowledge of truth, which comes through meaningful dialogic engagement, *Śravaṇa* (श्रवण) – listening, *Manana* (मनन) – reflecting, *Nididhyāsana* (निदिध्यासन) – deep contemplation, *Sādhana* (साधन) – spiritual practice & discipline, and *Guru Kripa* (गुरु कृपा) – grace of the Guru.

4. *Vitandā* (वितण्डा)

A destructive debate (called *vitanda*), where the goal is to defeat or demolish the opponent, by any means necessary (Matilal, “Introducing” 184–85), something which is explicitly discouraged in *vāda* pedagogy.

5. *Pramāṇa* (प्रमाण)

Valid means of knowledge or evidence, used in reasoning and argumentation within the *Nyaya* framework.

6. *Purvapakṣa* (पूर्वपक्ष) — *Prior view / Initial argument*

7. *Uttarapakṣa* (उत्तरपक्ष) — *Counter view / Response*

Comparative Visual Model Plan

Vāda vs. Antagonistic Debate: A Comparative Pedagogical Model

Feature	Agonistic Debate	<i>Vāda</i> Discussion
Goal	Win the argument, convince the intended audience	Discover shared truth (<i>tattvabodha</i>)

Feature	Agonistic Debate	Vāda Discussion
Structure	Competitive, binary (pro/con)	Question-answer, collaborative
Participants	Opponents, each one leveraging advantage of ethos, status, credibility Pressure for winning	Equals regardless of status/class/gender No fear of losing or winning
Process	Assertion → Counter assertion	<i>Purvapakṣa</i> → <i>Uttarapakṣa</i> → Resolution
Outcome	Victory/defeat	Mutual understanding, self-realization/ <i>Tattvabodha</i>
Evaluation Criteria	Strength of rebuttal, ethos, logos, and pathos	Depth of comprehension and self-realization
Pedagogical Tone	Adversarial	Engagement, conversation, harmony, inclusion

Primary Sources

Prabhupāda, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami. *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is*. Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1986.

The *Bhagavad-gītā*, a foundational South Asian philosophical text, presents a dialogic exchange between two characters Bhagavan Krishna and Arjuna that exemplifies the *vāda* tradition's non-confrontational approach to rhetorical inquiry. Addressing complex themes such as war, duty, metaphysics, ethics, and philosophical questions spanning ontology, epistemology, and axiology, the text models a discourse grounded in mutual respect, intellectual humility, and reflective engagement. The Krishna-Arjuna dialogue serves as a pedagogical exemplar of *vāda*, demonstrating how ethical and philosophical clarity emerges through collaborative, non-coercive conversation rather than domination or confrontation. All chapters in the *Gītā* are relevant for drawing ideas on *vāda* discussion, as each contains a dialogue between Bhagavan Krishna and Arjuna. Depending on their focus, instructors can use excerpts from the *Gītā* (e.g., Chapters 2–3 on duty and dialogue) to design activities such as role-

playing or reflective journaling, aimed at cultivating honest discussion and self-awareness. The chapter 11 is also useful for understanding Bhagavan Krishna's cosmic (universal) form—*Viśvarūpa*.

Gotama, Akṣapāda. *The Nyāya Sūtras of Gotama*. Translated by M. M. Satisa Chandra Vidyabhusana and Nanda Lal Sinha, Motilal Banarsidass, 1990.

This foundational text of the *Nyāya* school of Indian philosophy articulates sixteen dialectical categories that form the basis of logical and rhetorical inquiry, including means of right knowledge (*pramāna*, 1), objects of right knowledge (*prameya*, 2), doubt (*samśaya*, 3), purpose (*prayojana*, 4), familiar instance (*dṛṣṭānta*, 5), established tenet (*siddhānta*, 6), members (*avayava*, 7), discussion (*vāda*, 10), wrangling (*jalpa*, 11), cavil (*vitaṇḍā*, 12), futility (*jāti*, 15), and occasion for rebuke (*nigrahasthāna*, 16). Categories 1–10 deal with positive elements, while categories 11–16 are negative ones. The tenth category, *vāda*, is particularly relevant to this teaching resource, as it delineates a non-confrontational approach to dialogue that prioritizes mutual understanding and truth-seeking over competitive debate. This text is essential for tracing the historical and philosophical origins of *vāda*, supporting the pedagogical theme of *Historical Roots of Non-Confrontational Rhetoric* by providing a primary source for comparing *Nyāya*'s dialogic principles with Western rhetorical traditions, such as those of Aristotle or Plato.

Tripathi, Radhavallabh. *Vāda in Theory and Practice Studies in Debates, Dialogues and Discussions in Indian Intellectual Discourses*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla, 2021.

This book explores the theory and practice of *vāda*. Drawing on Hindu and Buddhist philosophical traditions, the book provides an in-depth analysis of *vāda*'s principles, making this text an essential resource for educators and students seeking to integrate Non-Western rhetorical frameworks into history of rhetoric and writing pedagogies. Chapter 1 is particularly valuable, providing *vāda*'s etymological roots, historical background, and various forms of dialogic engagement, including *samvāda* (dialogue), protests, and dissents. It also addresses key aspects such as the ethics of debate, conversational appreciation, non-violent speech, sandhi (agreement), and stylistic elements of language, providing a robust foundation for understanding *vāda*'s non-confrontational approach. Chapter 1 is recommended for its foundational overview, but other chapters can also be selected based on specific needs, for example, history of *vāda*, *vāda* in modern age, etc.

Secondary Sources

Gupta, Meenu Aggarwal, Kamalpreet Kaur, and Mohit Vasdev. "Vāda: An Analysis into Its Origin, Traditions and Essence." *Tattva Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2022, pp. 43–64.

The paper explores the Indian tradition of *vāda* and its subcategories, highlighting its all-encompassing and holistic nature as a tool of cultural studies in theory and praxis. By analyzing various examples from daily life and the historic-literary world, the paper endeavors to establish *vāda* as a comprehensive way to attain correct knowledge and the truth as used since ancient times in South Asia.

Lloyd, Keith. "Learning from India's Nyāya Rhetoric: Debating Analogically through *Vāda*'s Fruitful Dialogue," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2013): 285–299.

This article explores the rhetorical dimensions of *Nyāya*, a classical South Asia school of logic. In the article, Lloyd argues that *Nyāya*'s reliance on analogical reasoning, respectful debate, and cooperative argumentation contrasts with the agonistic tendencies in Western rhetorical traditions. He draws connections between Indian and Western thought but also highlights the unique ethical and dialogic orientation of *vāda*, which prioritizes shared understanding over persuasion or victory. Towards the end of this article, Lloyd discusses *Nyāya vāda* in modern contexts. For instructors and students interested in integrating *vāda* into classroom discussion, it provides both historical context and contemporary relevance, offering a robust Non-Western framework for dialogic teaching.

Lloyd, Keith. "The Rhetoric of Performance in India: The Confluence of *Nyaya vāda* (Logic) and *Sadhāranikaran* (Performance) in Past and Present Discourses." *Foreign Language and Literature Research Journal*, 2015, 88–99.

This essay introduces two South Asian traditions—*Nyāya*, a philosophical system focused on logic and persuasion, and the *Sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* model of communication. By contrasting these approaches with Aristotle's more familiar rhetorical theories, the essay presents both historical and contemporary South Asian perspectives on rhetorical delivery shaped by *Nyāya* and *Sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*. It will be

particularly useful for instructors and students seeking to explore *vāda* (dialogic discussion), offering insights that can be compared and connected with Western concepts of dialogue and argumentation.

Paudel, Jagadish. "The rhetoric of the Bhagavad Gita: Unpacking persuasive strategies from a non-western perspective." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 53.2 (2023): 172-185.

By providing a brief overview of the *Gita* and situating it within the literature of rhetorical analysis, this article analyzes the dialogue between the two main characters of this sacred text using the *Nyāyasūtras* method. This article examines the *Gita* through three rhetorical strategies: the *āstikya/bhāva* (ontological) strategy, the *jñāpaka* (revelatory) strategy, and the *tattva/nyāya* (axiological) strategy. Along with these, it also exemplifies *vāda* debate briefly and offers counter criticism of the *Gita*. This article will be useful for understanding a few instances where Bhagavan Krishna and Arjuna engage in honest discussion.

Sharma, S. "Beyond Colonial Hegemonies: Writing Scholarship and Pedagogy with *Nyayasutra*." *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise*, edited by Damian Baca and Romeo García, U of Pittsburgh P, 2019, pp. 93–105.

Drawing ideas from postcolonial and decolonial theory, as well as *Nyāya* rhetoric from South Asia, this chapter illustrates how perspectives from Non-Western rhetoric and composition can help us appreciate the sense of justice as a critical element of ethos for sound arguments and productive rhetoric. This chapter can help us productively explore histories and dynamics of power, including how disciplines normalize conflict, foster intellectual complacency about marginalization, and perpetuate hegemony. It also examines how academic discourses frame arguments as confrontation, persuasion as conversion, scholarship as product, quality as rigor, and so on.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the main differences between *vāda* discussion and Antagonistic adversarial debate?
How do these differences affect the goals, tone, and outcomes of classroom discussions?

2. The Sanskrit phrase *vāde vāde jayate tattvabodhaḥ* translates to “through dialogue, true knowledge arises.”
What does this saying suggest about the role of disagreement, listening, and reflection in learning and rhetorical inquiry?
3. In what ways does the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gītā* exemplify *vāda* pedagogy?
How does Bhagavan Krishna guide Arjuna toward self-realization rather than “winning” an argument?
4. How might *vāda*’s emphasis on equality challenge common assumptions about who gets to speak and be heard in academic spaces?
What are the implications for classroom participation, especially for marginalized or quieter voices?
5. How could a typical classroom debate topic (e.g., gender, climate change, abortion issue, war, immigration policy, or AI in education) be reframed using *vāda* principles?
What would change in how students prepare, participate, and respond to each other?
6. What are some modern-day examples (in media, politics, or education) where *vitandā*—the act of merely refuting an opponent without offering a counter-position—is dominant?
What are the ethical and rhetorical consequences of this approach?
7. How can *vāda*’s principles be adapted for group projects, peer review, or online discussions?
What tools or norms could help ensure mutual understanding and intellectual humility?
8. In your own words, how does *vāda* discussion promote deeper learning compared to debate focused on persuasion over conversation?
To what extent is this approach effective in a competitive academic environment?
9. Why is it important to include Non-Western rhetorical traditions like *vāda* in the history of rhetoric curriculum?
What does this inclusion do for students, the field of rhetoric and writing, and broader social discourse?

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Disclosure:

I used AI tools (ChatGPT.com and Grok.com) for wording and editing support. All ideas and cultural representations are my own and were carefully verified for accuracy.

