



LEGAL REASONING IN ANCIENT INDIA AND THE JURISPRUDENTIAL LEGACY OF NIRŪAYA SINDHU

Dr. Haider Ali*
Varalakshmi Tadepalli**

Abstract

This paper argues that Legal Reasoning in ancient India did not emerge from logic but interpretive jurisprudence rooted in dharma. It opens with a discussion of how law and logic differ in nature and function—law evolves through societal experience, while logic demands consistency and form. The introduction builds on three chapters of conceptual groundwork, defining legal ontology, the role of assumptions and fictions, and the recursive structure of legal meaning. When used rigidly, the central body explains why logic misleads judicial thinking and cannot substitute for legal reasoning. This limitation sets the stage for the *Nirūaya Sindhu* by Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa. As a *smṛti-nibandha* text, the *Nirūaya Sindhu* moves from scripture to synthesis, offering determinate guidance through context-sensitive tools like *Tātparya Nirūaya*, *Lakṣaṇā*, and *Desa–Kāla–Pātra–Paristhiti*. It systematises law not through abstraction but through calibrated discretion. The paper concludes by showing how this classical model of Legal Reasoning offers a foundation for understanding judicial discretion under Article 142 of the Indian Constitution. It argues that proper legal judgment arises not from logic alone but from a tradition that privileges harmony, equity, and reasoned resolution.

Key Words

Legal Reasoning, *Nirūaya Sindhu*, Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa, Indian Jurisprudence, Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Tarka, Vaiśeṣika, Anvīkṣikī, Dharma, Classical Indian Logic, Legal Hermeneutics, Judicial Discretion, Epistemology of Law, Interpretive Reasoning.

*Dr. Haider Ali B. Com., LL. B., M.A. Sociology, LL.M., Ph. D. (A.M.U. Aligarh.) is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department, Institute of Legal Studies and Research. Mangalayatan University, Beswan Aligarh. Email : haider.ali@mangalayatan.edu.in

**Varalakshmi Tadepalli,-MA (Eng Litt), LLM, PG Diploma in Human Rights (HCU), PG Diploma in Media Laws (NALSAR), Advocate, Telangana High Court- India Legal Advocates, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad: Email-varalakshmi@indialegaladvocates.com ; varalakshmitadepalli@gmail.com

Introduction

Legal reasoning in India did not begin with logic. It began with dharma. Ancient Indian jurists built their legal methods on experience, context, and equity, not on rigid inference. While logic brings consistency, law draws strength from lived reality. The two operate on distinct planes. Logic seeks coherence within its own structure. Law, by contrast, seeks justice within society.

This paper draws from the foundational concepts of law and logic. It argues that law is not reducible to formal logical structures. Logic operates by universal principles: the law of excluded middle, propositional consistency, and binary classification. These make sense in mathematics or philosophy. But they falter when applied to human disputes requiring nuance, equity, and context.

There is an ontological divide between law and logic. Law originates in societal needs, moral expectations, and historical contingencies. Logic emerges from fixed assumptions and strives for abstract clarity. Courts cannot employ logic in adjudication because logic, as a subject, remains extrinsic to law. Legal Reasoning, by contrast, arises intrinsically from the law itself. It is grounded in the legal statutes' structure, purpose, and interpretive depth. Logical reasoning, riddled with fallacies, non-axiomatic tautologies, and recursive loops, fails to serve the real-world demands of justice. When logic attempts to override legal provisions, it risks reducing law to abstraction, making it blind to social needs.

Indian jurisprudence treated law as a living order, responsive to *deśa* (place), *kāla* (time), *jāti* (class), *pātra* (person), and *paristhiti* (circumstance). This required a distinct kind of reasoning. Not logic, but Legal reasoning. It used assumptions, presumptions, legal fictions, and recursive structures. These were not logical tricks. They were interpretive devices that preserved the internal balance of law. They allowed courts to maintain coherence without becoming rigid.

Logic that works through deductive, inductive, and analytical patterns helps in disciplines seeking abstract certainty. However, it does not assist legal reasoning, which must handle the fluidity of human affairs. Fallacies like *petitio principii* (circular reasoning) or tautologies (self-evident statements) might pass logical scrutiny. But they fail the test of equity and purpose. The ancient Indian schools of Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā knew this. They built systems of logical inference, but also warned against over-reliance. They identified fallacies and recursive loops not to promote logic in law, but to guard Legal Reasoning against its misapplication.

Therefore, Law and logic are not interchangeable. Courts must not use logic as a decision-making framework. It is external to law and unsuitable for interpreting statutes designed to serve society. Legal Reasoning stands alone and is intrinsic to the legal subject. It arises within the statute, shaped by its purpose, context, and application. Legal Reasoning is a sui generis method. It interprets, adapts, and resolves.

This distinct method finds its fullest expression in the Nirṇaya Sindhu of Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa. But to understand that treatise, we must first understand why logic alone misleads. The next section explores that.

The Limits of Logic in Law

When detached from the normative field of law, logic becomes a foreign lens. It imposes categories of thought that suit formal systems but distort substantive justice. With its binary premises and universal conclusions, Logic ignores the organic complexity of legal texts that evolve from lived realities. When courts adopt logic as a judgment mode, they risk treating law as an equation rather than an institution. This misapplication leads to flawed outcomes.

Logical recursive structures—where conclusions loop back into premises—may provide internal coherence, but they obstruct forward movement in adjudication. They create closed circuits of thought, which Legal Reasoning must avoid. Legal Reasoning must remain open to circumstance, responsive to context, and committed to equity. Logical reasoning cannot accommodate these values.

Fallacies, another hallmark of logic, further illustrate this disconnect. A circular argument (*petitio principii*) may satisfy logical form but offers no objective justification. Tautologies may sound persuasive, but provide no interpretive insight. These forms of reasoning are redundant in law. A court that applies them reaches decisions that may be logically valid but socially and legally irrelevant.

Non-axiomatic tautologies—statements presumed valid without basis—appear frequently in legal disputes. Logic may allow them. Law cannot. Law demands reasoning grounded in statutory purpose, doctrinal coherence, and interpretive prudence. Logic, by contrast, tolerates abstractions if they obey syntactic rules. This is a luxury the judiciary cannot afford.

Further, logic's insistence on the Law of Excluded Middle—every proposition must be true or false—clashes with the interpretive space of law. Legal texts are not binary. They speak in shades. They anticipate ambiguity. They are drafted for people, not machines. The rigidity of logic disrespects this design.

Thus, the application of logic to law introduces constraints. It narrows the interpretation. It amplifies form over function. It undermines equity. The province of logic must therefore be excluded from judicial reasoning. Where logic demands mechanical application, law calls for purposive engagement. Where logic insists on exclusion, law embraces harmony.

This clarifies why the judiciary must not rely on logic in deciding cases. It shows that logic, by its very nature, contradicts the essence of law. To illustrate how Indian legal thought resolved this conflict, we now turn to the Nirṇaya Sindhu—an interpretive text that exemplifies the intrinsic Legal Reasoning India has long preserved.

The Jurisprudential Genius of Nirṇaya Sindhu

The *Nirṇaya Sindhu* of Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa stands as a towering testament to India's legacy of legal reasoning. Composed in the 17th century, this *Smṛti-nibandha* was not a work of abstract theology nor an exercise in logic. It was a manual of adjudication—resolute, interpretive, and practical. Its goal was not to prove but to resolve. It did not seek consistency in argument but harmony in application. It did not chase abstract truth but preserved dharma in action.

Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa's genius lay in synthesising diverse scriptural sources without falling into contradiction. He recognised the multivocal nature of dharma. Instead of forcing coherence through logic, he allowed meaning to emerge from context. He employed *Tātparyā Nirṇaya* (ascertainment of intent), *Lakṣaṇā* (derivation of implied meaning), and *Tātkālika-Upādāna* (temporal contextualisation) to read the texts not as rigid prescriptions but as living guides.

The *Nirṇaya Sindhu* embodies Legal Reasoning at its most mature. It accepts the fallibility of language, the plurality of meanings, and the variability of human affairs. It uses legal tools—not logical ones—to maintain order. Harmonisation (*samanvaya*) is central to its method. Where texts appear to conflict, it does not discard one for the other. It draws a reconciliatory inference, preserving both as parts of a larger, evolving jurisprudence.

This is not mere hermeneutics. It is an adjudicative craft. The *Nirṇaya Sindhu* does not aim to codify law in a closed system. It does not follow axiomatic progression. It is aware that justice lies in discretion, not deduction. Kamalākara's jurisprudence recognises that dharma cannot be forced into the frame of logic—it must be understood through the lens of lived experience.

Nyāya and Nirṇaya Sindhu

Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa, in the *Nirṇaya Sindhu*, demonstrates a keen awareness of the *Nyāya* school of logic but never allows it to dominate his method of legal reasoning. He selectively uses *Nyāya*'s analytical tools—such as the five-part syllogism (*pañcāvayava*), the identification of fallacies (*hetvābhāsa*), and structured inference—not as foundations for judgment, but as diagnostic devices to evaluate doctrinal consistency. He applies them sparingly to expose weaknesses in earlier arguments or to highlight contradictions among commentaries. However, Kamalākara never reduces adjudication to syllogistic formalism. Unlike the *Nyāya* approach, which seeks epistemic certainty through structured reasoning, *Nirṇaya Sindhu* values reconciliation and context over rigidity. Legal reasoning, in Kamalākara's view, must be fluid, responsive, and grounded in dharma, not bound by logical coherence alone. Thus, while *Nyāya* contributes to the clarity of discourse, it does not dictate the outcome of legal interpretation.

Tarka and Nirṇaya Sindhu

Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa does not treat *Tarka* as a formal epistemic method, but he uses its spirit to support interpretive clarity. In classical Indian logic, *Tarka* (hypothetical reasoning or *reductio ad absurdum*) tests propositions by drawing out their consequences. In *Nirṇaya Sindhu*, Kamalākara applies this indirectly—he examines the

doctrinal implications of competing interpretations, especially when scriptural sources conflict. Rather than follow every prescriptive text literally, he considers what interpretation avoids contradiction, maintains ritual integrity, and ensures social applicability. This mirrors the *Tarka* process: testing for coherence by pushing interpretations to their logical end. Kamalākara often presents multiple scriptural views, weighs them against prevailing custom (*ācāra*) and context (*paristhiti*), and chooses the interpretation that upholds the broader intent of dharma. In doing so, he reflects *Tarka's* function—not as an end in itself, but as a critical instrument of adjudicative reasoning, one that eliminates incongruities without slipping into abstraction. He keeps it subordinate to legal purpose. *Tarka* sharpens his discretion, but never replaces it.

Mīmāṃsā and Nirṇaya Sindhu

Mīmāṃsā exerts a more profound and more lasting influence on *Nirṇaya Sindhu*, primarily through its hermeneutic framework. Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa draws heavily on interpretive tools such as *Tātparyā Nirṇaya* (ascertainment of intent), *Lakṣaṇā* (deriving contextual meaning), and *Apavāda* (exceptions to general rules) to mediate conflicting texts and determine legal duty. He embraces Mīmāṃsā's method of resolving ambiguity and reconciling contradictions but resists its ritualistic absolutism. His aim is not to preserve sacrificial orthodoxy but to provide actionable legal guidance within a living society. Therefore, while *Mīmāṃsā* principles shape his interpretive strategies, they are always applied with discretion. Kamalākara uses them to uphold dharma through relevance and applicability, not through abstract fidelity to scriptural form. In this way, *Nirṇaya Sindhu* absorbs the strength of Mīmāṃsā's logic but reorients it toward jurisprudential purpose.

Vaiśeṣika and Nirṇaya Sindhu

Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa's *Nirṇaya Sindhu* does not cite the *Vaiśeṣika* school overtly, yet it echoes its classificatory discipline and ontological distinctions in how it frames legal categories and prescribes duties. *Vaiśeṣika*, as a metaphysical system, focuses on enumerating categories of reality—substance (*dravya*), quality (*guṇa*), action (*karman*), universal (*sāmānya*), particularity (*viśeṣa*), and inherence (*samavāya*)—to ensure epistemic clarity. Kamalākara internalizes this approach when he demarcates legal obligations based on *pātra* (the person), *desha* (place), *kāla* (time), and *paristhiti* (circumstance). He classifies individuals by social roles and capacities, distinguishes between primary and subsidiary duties, and correlates rights with ritual eligibility. This mirrors *Vaiśeṣika's* insistence on contextual essence (*svabhāva*) and relational ontology. Though Kamalākara's aim is not philosophical taxonomy, he maintains ontological discipline in jurisprudence—ensuring that each rule applies precisely to the person and context it is meant for, without overextension. In this way, *Nirṇaya Sindhu* reflects *Vaiśeṣika* not through metaphysical argument, but through its structural application of categorical thought to legal reasoning.

Anvīkṣikī and Nirṇaya Sindhu

Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa's *Nirṇaya Sindhu* aligns with the intellectual discipline of *Anvīkṣikī*, even if it does not name it. *Anvīkṣikī*, as the ancient Indian science of inquiry, combined logic (*nyāya*), reflection (*tarka*), and moral reasoning to reach epistemic clarity in decision-making. Kamalākara, though working within a legal-ritual

framework, mirrors this approach by treating each legal dispute as a problem to be examined from multiple angles—textual, customary, contextual, and ethical. He does not accept scriptural authority at face value; he interrogates its applicability, reconciles conflicting injunctions, and extracts intent (*tātparya*). His method is not mechanical but deliberative—an inquiry that seeks resolution through layered reasoning. In doing so, *Nirṇaya Sindhu* captures the spirit of *Anvīkṣikī*: it is not just a digest of rules, but a juridical exercise in critical thought, where law is not applied blindly but interpreted through intellectual scrutiny and ethical purpose.

Moreover, the *Nirṇaya Sindhu* internalises the very values modern courts seek: equity, purposiveness, and proportionality. It does so not by invoking external principles but by staying faithful to the inner structure of dharma. In this way, it upholds the law as a rule and a reasoned resolution.

In conclusion, the *Nirṇaya Sindhu* exemplifies the intrinsic nature of Legal Reasoning. It reminds us that the Indian legal tradition never relied on logic to adjudicate. Instead, it built a robust, context-sensitive, and morally anchored system of resolving disputes that respected law's purpose, not just its form. This legacy endures in modern courts' interpretive role under provisions such as Article 142. But the foundation was laid long before—in the reasoned dharma and subsequently simplified by texts like the *Nirṇaya Sindhu*.

