

Sanskrit Philosophical Commentary

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It has been said that an interpretation of a literary work is prized to the extent that it shows the work in question to possess those qualities which, in the opinion of the times, distinguish literature from other forms of writing.¹ Adapting this suggestion, we might say that a commentary on a philosophical treatise succeeds to the extent that it demonstrates that the treatise is rich in the features which, for the community of readers to whom the commentary is directed, are held to be characteristic of good philosophy. In other words, a successful philosophical commentary helps its target audience to *read philosophically* the text being commented upon, and mediates between the text and a given readership. Potentially, the features which mark out a text as being a valuable work of philosophy might include coherence and completeness in the description of a point of view, sound argument in favour of the view described, engagement with alternative views, demonstration of the utility of the view in question, and so on. At later times or in other cultural communities, new audiences can approach a philosophical commentary as a window through which to see what the practice of philosophical reading has meant to others.

Formally, two aspects of philosophical commentary in Sanskrit are especially noteworthy: i) The base texts are generally extremely compact. Indeed, compactness is seen as a commendable property in the foundational texts of all types of technical writing. So a characteristic function of one genre of philosophical commentary is to *decompress* the text being commented on. ii) Commentary writing is heavily nested; that is to say, there are in general multiple commentaries on any given text, commentaries on those commentaries, commentaries on the subcommentaries, and so on. This nesting gives rise to another characteristic function of philosophical commentary, which is to *adjudicate* between rival commentary at a lower level. These two aspects lead to a distinctive, canonical pattern in the commentarial literature (§2):

0. *sūtra*. An aggregation of short formula-like assertions.
1. *bhāṣya*. A commentary on a *sūtra* whose function is to unpack and weave together.
2. *vārttika*. A subcommentary on a *bhāṣya*, defending its particular construction of the *sūtra* over alternatives, making revisions and adjustments as necessary.
3. *nibandha*, and other higher-level commentarial works, which continue the process of revision and adjustment until a state of reflective equilibrium is reached.

The importance accorded to such a commentarial activity reveals that one of the most prized qualities of a philosophical work resides in its ability to enable the reader to *understand patterns of inter-relatedness* within a complex set of ideas. Typically this is

¹ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 351.

achieved in a two-step process in which the sūtras are first marked-up as belonging to small thematically unified groupings (*prakaraṇa*), and then contiguous groupings are made to stand in causal, evidential or explanatory relationships with one other (*saṅgati*), a process governed by the commentator's overall aim, which typically combines a systematic ambition to *display* the text as having a certain content (*abhidheya*) with a pedagogical goal to *guide* the audience's reading in such a way that their understanding improves (*prayojana*) (§3). This commentarial pattern is creatively appropriated and adapted in a variety of ways. So powerful is the sūtra+bhāṣya style that it is not uncommon for a writer to construct a single text imitating and playing with that formal structure. In such compositions, the sūtra-like skeleton are called *kārikā*, and also sometimes *vārttika*, in what is a second sense of that term (§4).² What I will not be able to do here is to form any clear hypotheses about the history of the emergence of different kinds of commentary in India.

1. Generic Functions of Commentary

Every commentary engages to a lesser or greater extent in the “bottom-up” activity of explaining individual expressions in the text, thereby aiming to clarify the syntax of the text and to supply paraphrases of its lexical items, phrases and sentences. This is how the generic term *vyākhyāna* ‘commenting’ is understood in the *Nyāyakośa*:

Stating the meaning [of the root text], using different words which have the same meaning [as those in the root text], with the aim of preventing confused opinion (*apratipatti*), contradictory opinion (*vipratipatti*), or contrary opinion (*anyathāpratipatti*). For example, in Nyāya, the *Didhiti* and the *Mathuranāthī* are commentaries on the *Tattvacintāmaṇi*. In Vedānta, the *Nyāyasudhā* is a commentary on an exegetical work (the *Anuvyākhyāna* of Madhva) which explains the meaning of the *Brahmasūtra*.

This has been said: “Commenting has five characteristic features: 1. word-division (*padaccheda*), 2. stating the meaning of the words (*padārthokti*), 3. analysis of grammatical compounds (*vigraha*), 4. construing the sentences (*vākyayojanā*), 5. solving problems (*ākṣepesu samādhāna*).” A divergent reading [of the above statement] has it that there are considered to be six aspects of commenting, with solutions (*samādhāna*) and problems (*ākṣepa*) kept distinct. In every commentary, however, the seed (*bīja*) should be thought of as [preventing] confused, contradictory, and contrary opinions.³

A commentary which confines itself solely to performing this role will call itself a *vṛtti* or *vivṛti* or *vivaraṇa*.⁴ In a more technical sense, a *vivaraṇa* in is a kind of grammatical-semantic analysis, combining structural paraphrase and lexical substitution. The

² For example, the grammatical *vārttikas* of Kātyāyana, or Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*. Kumārila's *Ślokaivārttika* is *vārttika* in both senses, being also a free commentary on Śābara's *bhāṣya* on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra*.

³ *Nyāyakośa or Dictionary of Technical Terms of Indian Philosophy*, Bhimacarya Jhalakikar, revised by Vasudev Shastri Abhyankar (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1928); sv. *vyākhyānam*. For further analysis of the verse, see Gary Tubb and Emery Boose, *Scholastic Sanskrit: A Manual for Students* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007), pp. 3–5; Prabal Kumar Sen, *Nyāyasūtras with Nyāyarahasya of Rāmahadrasārvabhauma and Ānvīkṣikīttattvavivaraṇa of Jānakīnātha Cūḍāmaṇi* (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2003), Volume I, pp. xlvi–xlix. Note that an *anuvyākhyāna* is defined as a commentary which “explains or illustrates difficult sūtras, texts, or obscure statements occurring in another portion” (Monier Williams).

⁴ For instance, see the entries for these terms in the *Śabdakalpadruma* (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 2006 [1822]).

canonical form of such a paraphrase is into a qualificand-qualifier structure, in which the principal qualifier is either the nominal subject or the finite verb. For example, one can paraphrase “Hari sees a bird” (*harir vihaḡam paśyati*) as either “Hari is qualified by an effort generating the activity of seeing which has a bird as object” (*vihaḡa-karmaka-darśanānukūla-kṛti-mān hariḥ*) or as “The operation generating the activity of seeing which has a bird as its object is qualified by Hari as its doer” (*vihaḡa-karmaka-darśanānukūla-vyāpāro hari-kartṛkaḥ*).⁵ If an obscure word occurs in the original, it might be replaced in the paraphrase with a more familiar equivalent. It goes without saying that both in the provision of lexical alternatives and in the decomposition of compounds there is frequently room for considerable exegetical license. What is interesting to note is that, even at this minimal level, commentary is given the evaluative task of considering alternative possibilities and steering the reader away from mistaken, confused and contradictory construals.

A commentary whose function is only to elucidate obscure or otherwise tricky words in the text is styled a *ṭikā*. The *Śabdārthacintāmaṇi* defines a *ṭikā* as “an explanation of difficult words [in the root text]” (*viśamaḡadavyākhyāyām*).⁶ We might compare this with the *O.E.D.* definition of the English *gloss*: “A word inserted between the lines or in the margin as an explanatory equivalent of a foreign or otherwise difficult word in the text; hence applied to a similar explanatory rendering of a word given in a glossary or dictionary. Also, in a wider sense, a comment, explanation, interpretation.” When the text being thus elucidated is itself a commentary, the elucidation may often be called a *ṭippaṇa* or *ṭippaṇī*.⁷ The term *ṭikā*, again like *gloss*, is also used in a more general sense, as a synonym then of *vṛtti*⁸ or *vivarāṇa*⁹.

2. An Overview of the Types of Philosophical Commentary

Bhāṣya. As already noted, the *bhāṣya* is a highly distinctive holistic style of philosophical commentary in the Sanskrit literature. It represents an “elaboration” or “development” of an aggregation of brief statements called *sūtras*, a reading (or literally, a ‘speaking’) of them. A *bhāṣya* has been defined in the tradition as “an amplification or expansion (*prapañcaka*) of what is said in the *sūtras*” (*sūtroktārthaprapañcakam*).¹⁰ Another traditional author tells us that a *bhāṣya* is a commentary “where the meaning of a *sūtra* is specified in terms that closely follow the *sūtra*, and its own terminology is also specified” (*sūtrārtho varṇyate yatra padaiḥ sūtrānusāribhiḥ | svapadāni ca varṇyante*

⁵ This nice example is found in B. K. Matilal, *Logic, Language and Reality: An Introduction to Indian Philosophical Studies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1985), pp. 411–2. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of *vivarāṇa*, see George Cardona, “Paraphrase and Sentence Analysis: Some Indian Views,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 3 (1975), pp. 259–281.

⁶ *Śabdārthacintāmaṇi* (Jaipur: Printwell, 1992 [1860]), Vol. 2, p. 1031.

⁷ Cf. Apte, sv. *ṭippaṇa*: ‘a gloss on a gloss’.

⁸ *Śabdārthacintāmaṇi*, sv. *ṭikā*.

⁹ *Śabdakalpadruma*, sv. *ṭikā*.

¹⁰ *Śabdakalpadruma*, p. 509, citing Hemacandra.

bhāṣyaṃ bhāṣyavidō viduḥ ||).¹¹ I will say more about this type of commentary in the next section.¹²

Vārttika. While *bhāṣya* signifies the extraction and elaboration of philosophical systematicity from the *sūtras*, *vārttika* stands for a critical engagement with the ideas so elaborated, including processes of defence, revision, and adjudication. The *Śabdakalpadruma* says that it is “a reflection on ideas expressed, not expressed, and badly or wrongly expressed”.¹³ There is a role for such commentary when competing *bhāṣyas* exist on a single set of *sūtras*, and when ideas from “outside” need to be evaluated. A *vārttika* is thus a critical analysis of earlier commentaries, with two aims:

- i) to achieve reflective equilibrium in the system, and
- ii) to defend the system against competitor systems.

Uddyotakara, for example, begins his *Nyāyavārttika* by saying that his aim is to remove the errors of poor logicians (*kutārkika*).¹⁴ Who were they? First, Dignāga and other Buddhists who were challenging the philosophical doctrines and methods of the Nyāya system, and second, rival interpreters of the *Nyāyasūtra*. Uddyotakara’s adjustments of the *bhāṣya* were radical enough for there to come to be two Nyāya camps, the Followers of the Commentator, Vātsyāyana (*vyākhyātāraḥ*), and the Followers of the Teacher, Uddyotakara (*ācāryāḥ*).¹⁵ Each philosophical system, school or sub-school develops through sub-commentary towards a stable state of reflective equilibrium, a process driven by dialectic between rival readings and rival systems (*paratantra*). A general term for commentarial work of this sort is *nibandha*.¹⁶ Dissatisfaction with the achieved

¹¹ *Śabdakalpadruma*, sv. *bhāṣya*, citing Bharata. The preceding two verses specify the ideal character of a *sūtra* text: *svalpākṣaram asandigdham sāravadviśvato mukham | astobhamanavadyaṅca sūtram sūtravido viduḥ || laghuni sūcītārthāni svalpākṣarapadāni ca | sarvataḥ sārabhūtāni sūtrānyāhur maṇiṣiṇaḥ ||*. Quoting them, P. K. Sen says that “these verses maintain that a *sūtra* should contain only a few words, which are themselves formed out of only a few letters, they should indicated their meaning in such a way that there should be no doubt about their import, they should be free from defects (like containing unnecessary words), and they should also contain what is important or essential.” Sen, *Nyāyasūtras*, Vol. I, p. xlviii.

¹² In Tibetan exegetical literature, the distinction between *bhāṣya* and *ṭikā* is preserved, though not systematically, in the terms *’grel ba* and *’grel bshad*; see Georges Dreyfus, “Where Do Commentarial Schools Come From?”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28.2 (2005), pp. 273–298, at p. 285; Luis Gómez, “Buddhist Literature: Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Mc Millan, 1987), Vol. II, pp. 529–540, at p. 532.

¹³ *uktānuktaduruktānām cintā yatra tu kriyate | taṃ granthaṃ vārttikaṃ prāhuḥ vārttikajñāḥ maṇiṣiṇaḥ || Śabdakalpadruma*, sv. *vārttika*, citing Hemaçandra.

¹⁴ *yadaḥṣapādaḥ pravaro muninām śamāya śāstram jagato jagād | kutārtikājñānavirttihetuḥ kariṣyate tasya mayā nibandhaḥ ||* Anantalal Thakur ed. *Nyāyabhāṣyavārttika of Uddyotakara* (Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1997), p. 1,1-2.

¹⁵ Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, *Nyāyamañjarī with the commentary Granthibhaṅga by Cakradhara*, edited by Gaurinath Shastri (Varanasi: Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, 1982), Volume I, pp. 105–6. For a detailed and informative discussion, see P. K. Sen, *Nyāyasūtras*, pp. xxxiv–xli.

¹⁶ For comparison, consider the sequence of texts in the Grammarian tradition: *sūtra* = Pāṇini’s *sūtras*, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*; *vārttika* = Kātyāyana’s *vārttikas*; *bhāṣya* = Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya*; *ṭikā* = Bhartṛhari’s *Mahābhāṣyaṭikā*; *nibandha* = Kaiyaṭa’s *Mahābhāṣyapradīpa*. While the *vārttikas* are supplementary grammatical rules, perhaps reflecting developments in Sanskrit usage, “the *Mahābhāṣya* analyzes each rule into its components, adding items necessary for the understanding of the rule, giving examples and counterexamples illustrating how the rule operates and discussing the need for the *vārttikas* to bring out

stable state means going back to the sūtras and starting afresh. This is achieved either through a new commentary directly on the sūtras (as with, for example, Viśvanātha's seventeenth century *Nyāyasūtravṛtti*), or by writing a new text inspired by them (for example, Gaṅgeśa's thirteenth century *Tattvacintāmaṇi*, which led to the emergence of Navya Nyāya, and upon which an elaborate commentarial literature and associated network of 'schools' was to develop from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century).

Guḍhārtha. Some commentators set out to uncover a hidden or deep meaning in the base text, often in opposition to earlier or more established interpretations.¹⁷ These commentaries might be thought of as allegorizations. Nīlakaṇṭha's famous commentary on the *Mahābhārata* has elicited mixed reactions among Indologists, who have frequently criticised it because of its lack of historical accuracy and apparent infidelity to original authorial intention. Muir said that “[i]t is scarcely necessary to remark that the narrator of the legend himself appears to have had no such idea of making it the vehicle of any Vedantic allegory such as is here propounded,” while Bopp speaks of “scholiasts, who uncritically interpret everything in the biases of their sect and time, and who treat language and myths in an arbitrary fashion.”¹⁸ We no longer imagine that the function of such commentary is to recover the author's intentions or provide historical analysis, but rather to mediate in a conversation between the text and a given community of readers.¹⁹ This remains the case even if a commentator prefers to describe their work simply as “making clear” what is going on in the text. Thus, among various terms used to indicate when the purpose of a commentary is the extraction of a deep or hidden meaning in the text, we find: *tātparya* (or *tātparya-ṭīkā*) in the sense of a gloss revealing the true intended meaning of the author; *guḍhārtha*, which is the

the full significance of Pāṇini's sūtra or to account for usages apparently not covered by the rule or against the rule... Patañjali often presents arguments to support or reject several views, leaving it difficult to know his 'finally accepted view' (*siddhānta*)... The *Ṭīkā* is not a regular word-for-word commentary on the *Mahābhāṣya*. It contains observations and comments on select words and points raised by them... The *Pradīpa* is an elaborate and complete commentary on the *Mahābhāṣya*, elucidating the meanings of words and expressions in that work and discussing the different views held by scholars in the interpretation of particular passages... the importance of the *Pradīpa* in elucidating the views of Patañjali and Bhartṛhari is considerable.” Harold G. Coward and K. Kunjuni Raja, *The Philosophy of the Grammarians*, Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophers, Volume 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 115, 173, 204.

¹⁷ Abhinavagupta, for example, says that his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* is not superfluous, in spite of the detailed commentaries written already, because it will reveal its hidden meaning (*guḍhārtha*). See *Gītārthasaṃgraha*, maṅgala 5.

¹⁸ See Christopher Minkowski, “What Makes a Work ‘Traditional’? On the Success of Nīlakaṇṭha's *Mahābhārata* Commentary,” in Federico Squarcini ed., *Boundaries, Dynamics and Construction of Traditions in South Asia* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2005), pp. 225–252. Minkowski points out that the commentator Nīlakaṇṭha was perfectly “aware that he was doing something unprecedented, both in his content and his approach” (p. 237). In a different spirit, Pierre Hadot has observed how important what he calls ‘creative mistakes’ in exegesis have been to the development of philosophy: see his “Philosophy, Exegesis, and Creative Mistakes,” in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), pp. 71–78.

¹⁹ Norman Culter discusses the relation between “cultural values” and the commentarial enterprise in his extremely perceptive article, “Interpreting Tirukkural: The Role of Commentary in the Creation of a Text,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112.4 (1992), pp. 549–566. He compares the Brahminicizing commentary of Parimēlaḷakar with twentieth-century Dravidian interpretations of the Tamil classic.

meaning covered up or hidden; *sphuṭārtha*, if the meaning is to be made bright and clear; *bhāva*, presenting the drift, gist, substance of the text; and *viveka*, the meaning discriminated, made distinct.

Other genres of philosophical commentary. A *subodhinī* is a companion, an aid to understanding. A *parīkṣā* or *vicāra* is an investigation, examination. When clarification is foremost, especially when there are divergent earlier readings and interpretations, a range of options are available, including: *pradīpa*, *prakāśa*, *prakāśikā*, *uddiyotana*, *dīpa*, and *āloka*. Poetic terms such as *taraṅginī* (sea), *darpaṇa* (mirror), *candrikā* (moonlight), *amṛta* (immortal), are used with subtle gradations of commentarial intent.

3. Bhāṣya: A Paradigm of Philosophical Commentary in Sanskrit

Udayana states that a technical treatise or *śāstra*, in any discipline, should aspire to clarity (*vaiśadya*), compactness (*laghutā*), and completeness (*kṛtsnatā*). A compilation of *sūtras*²⁰ maximises compactness and completeness, at the expense of clarity. A *bhāṣya* is complete and clear, but not compact. A group of *sūtras*, a ‘section’ or *prakaraṇa* of the whole compilation, is clear and compact, but not complete.²¹ The *sūtras* achieve compactness i) by making sequence significant, ii) letting one item stand for or range over many, and iii) using grammar and lexicon artificially. The background model is always Pāṇini’s grammar for the Sanskrit language, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, which exploits a range of brevity-enabling devices to compose what has often been described as the tersest and yet most complete grammar of any language. In philosophy, collections of philosophical *sūtras* aspire to achieve in metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind what the *sūtras* of Pāṇini had accomplished for the Sanskrit language. Although the genre is largely unique to Indian philosophical writing, comparisons could be drawn with the philosophical application of Euclid’s “geometrical method” in such works as Proclus’ *Elements* and Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and also with Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. A compilation of *sūtras* aims at an ideal of maximal semantic content with minimal physical text.

A *bhāṣya* binds the *sūtras* into a unified conceptual web (*tantra*; lit. ‘warp’), and so into a text with coherence and continuity. Vātsyāyana tells that “a *tantra* is a system (*śāstra*) consisting in the statement of a collection of inter-related ideas”.²² It regards the root text as having a meaning that is not encrypted but only very compressed. Perhaps indeed it would be appropriate to think of a collection of *sūtras* as like a compressed archive file in need of “decompression”, with the caveat that the decompression is not uniquely determined. Given what we have said about the devices employed in a *sūtra* to

²⁰ Note that the term “*sūtra*” is used to refer both to the individual statements and to a compilation of them.

²¹ *vaiśadyaṃ laghutā kṛtsnatā ca prakaraṇaḥ preśabdena dyotyate | sūtre vaiśadyābhāvāt bhāṣyasyātivistaratvāt prakaraṇādīnāṃ caikadesatvāt | Kiraṇāvalī with the Commentary of Vardhamānopadhyāya*, edited by Siva Chandra Sarvabhouma (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1989), p. 34.

²² *tantram itaretarābhisambaddhasya arthasamūhasya upadeśaḥ śāstram | Anantalal Thakur ed. Gautamīyanyāyadarśana with Bhāṣya of Vātsyāyana* (Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1997), p. 27,15.

achieve compactness, a number of prima facie constraints on *bhāṣya* follow. First, since the sequence in which the sūtras are arranged itself can be the vehicle for carrying information, a commentary should not re-order the sūtras without good reason. A typical *bhāṣya* extracts a great deal of content from the existing arrangement of the sūtras (see below). This echoes the fact that in Pāṇini's grammar, words and contexts carry over from one sūtra to the next within a specified range, thereby avoiding repetition and redundancy. If a commentary engages in wholesale rearrangement of the material in the sūtras, then its entitlement to the status of *bhāṣya* is compromised: such is the case with the *Padārthadharmasamgraha* of Praśastapāda on the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*, whose entitlement to its alternative title *Praśastapāda-bhāṣya* is tendentious; perhaps it is better regarded as an autonomous treatise. Second, a *bhāṣya* should fix scope of general terms and other abbreviating expressions; in particular the range of the often-used particle *ādi* “and so on”. Third, a *bhāṣya* should make decisions about what is colloquial and what artificial in the original text, if a term has been introduced by that text on the model of the technical terms in Pāṇini, or is in some way used with a sense specific to the text. For it is clearly the case that a technical treatise can achieve greater compactness through the judicious use of stipulation. In recognition of the importance of this function, Śābara begins his *bhāṣya* on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* by setting out what his own policy is going to be:

The words of the sūtras are, wherever possible, to be taken in those senses only which are given to them in ordinary usage and speech: no special sense is to be attributed to them by means of the assumption of ellipses or of special technical significations. In this way, Vedic passages only are explained by the sūtras; while otherwise (i.e. if meanings other than the generally accepted ones were to be sought for the words of the sūtras) the task would become a doubly onerous one, as comprising in the first place the explanation of Vedic texts and, in the second place, the explanation of the meaning of the sūtras.²³

Śābara cites economy of effort as his reason for assuming this literalist policy, but includes the caveat “wherever possible”. In other words, a decision to accord a word a special sense must always be motivated, and the default position is to take words in their ordinary sense. Śābara does not tell us, however, whether this “ordinary sense” refers to linguistic practice at the time when the commented-on text was composed, or the linguistic practice at the time when his commentary is being read.

It has been remarked that “[w]hen one takes a broad view ... of traditional Indian literatures, one finds that texts created through a process of binding independent verses make up a major portion of the literary canon.”²⁴ The *bhāṣya* genre of

²³ *loke yeṣv artheṣu prasiddhāni padāni, tāni sati sambhave tadarthāny eva sūtreṣv ity avagantavyam | na adhyāhārādibhir eṣāṃ parikalpanīyo 'rthaḥ paribhāṣitavyo vā | evaṃ hi vedavākyaṅy eva ebhir vyākhyāyante | itarathā vedavākyaṅyāni vyākhyeyāni svapadārthāś ca vyākhyeyāḥ | tad yatnagauravaṃ prasajyeta | Śābarabhāṣya on Mīmāṃsā-sūtra 1.1.1, trans. George Thibaut, “The Bhāṣya of Shabara Svāmin on the Mīmāṃsā-sūtras of Jaimini,” *Indian Thought* 2 (1910), p. 22.*

²⁴ Norman Cutler, “Interpreting Tirukkural,” p. 560. Christopher Minkowski has pointed out an extreme example of such creative re-weaving in a genre invented by Nīlakaṇṭha called *mantrarahasyaprakāśa*, in which Nīlakaṇṭha “assembled verses selected from the *Rgveda* and commented on them in such a way that, regardless of their meaning in their *Rgvedic* context, they were found to disclose the narrative of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in one case, of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* in another, of the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa* in a third, and of the *Brahmasūtra* in a fourth.” Minkowski, “What Makes a Work ‘Traditional’?”, p. 234.

commentary is paradigmatic of this approach to literary production, being a way to create a coherent text by stitching the sūtras together. It achieves this in three principal ways:

1) Identify a leading theme as the subject-matter (*abhidheya*) of the root text; identify something as the principal purpose (*prayojana*) of the text; and identify what is the relation (*sambandha*) between them. It is normal practice for a commentator to make such identifications in their prefative remarks.²⁵

2) Impose a structure on the list of the sūtras. This is done by ordering the collection of sūtras into thematically coherent and interconnected groups, each of which is called a 'section' (*prakaraṇa*; *adhikaraṇa*). There are rules governing the internal structure of a section, and rules about the relationships between sections. In this way what was a mere list becomes a richly articulated web of associated ideas and arguments. Many of the rules are such as to render the text essentially dialectical in structure, as we will see below.

3) Contextualize interpretations of individual sūtras within the framework of a text that now has thematic unity and formal structure, in such a way as to establish coherence of meaning across the text. For an example of this, one might consider how Vātsyāyana achieves a consistency between *Nyāya-sūtra* 1.1.10 and 3.1.1, interpreting them in such a way that they both refer to an argument for the self based on facts of recognition and reidentification rather than on the idea that mental qualities must have a substratum.²⁶

How Bhāṣya Structures Sūtra

A block of sūtra text resembles a raw data file. Here, for instance, is a randomly selected part of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*:

²⁵ For example, Śrīdhara explains the first verse in Praśastapāda's *Padārthadharmasamgraha*, "... leading to the best of results, an anthology about the categories of things has been composed" (*padārthadharmasamgrahaḥ pravakṣyate mahodayaḥ*), as identifying the purpose of the work and the connection with its topic, explaining that a student will not be motivated to read, nor a reader motivated to by their reading to engage in action, unless they understand these things, since all action must be motivated. V. P. Divedin ed., *The Praśastapādabhāṣya with the Commentary Nyāyakandalī of Śrīdhara* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1984), p. 6. See also Kumāri, *Śloka-vārttika* 1, 12–18, who adds that it is better for the author to state the purpose of their text and not leave it to the commentator to do so. Gadādhara, in his comments on the first sentence of the *Prāmāṇyavāda* chapter of the *Tattvacintāmaṇi*, which itself explains the declaration at *Nyāyasūtra* 1.1.1 that philosophical knowledge leads to the highest good, shows in detail why the reader must understand the connection between the subject-matter of a text and its purpose, as well as the two individually.

²⁶ See here Francis Clooney's discussion of *Brahma-sūtra* commentaries in "Binding the Text: Vedānta as Philosophy and Commentary," in Jeffrey R. Timm ed., *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 47–68. Clooney has contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the relation between commentary and philosophy in theology; see also his *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), and "Vedānta, Commentary, and the Theological Component of Cross-Cultural Study," in F. Reynolds and D. Tracy eds, *Towards a Comparative Philosophy of Religions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 287–314.

... kārāṇasāmānye dravyakarmanāṃ karmākāraṇam uktam | 1,1.29 | kārāṇābhāvāt kāryābhāvaḥ | 1,2.1 | na tu kāryābhavāt kārāṇābhāvaḥ | 1,2.2 | sāmānyam viśeṣa iti buddhyapekṣam | 1,2.3 | bhāvaḥ sāmānyam eva | 1,2.4 | dravyatvaṃ guṇatvaṃ karmatvaṃ ca sāmānyāni viśeṣāś ca | 1,2.5 | anyatrāntyebhyo viśeṣebhyaḥ | 1,2.6 | sad iti yato dravyaguṇakarmanāsu | 1,2.7 | dravyaguṇakarmanābhyo 'rthāntaram sattā | 1,2.8 | ekadravyavattvān na dravyam | 1,2.9 | guṇakarmanāsu ca bhāvān na karma na guṇaḥ | 1,2.10 | sāmānyaviśeṣābhāvāc ca | 1,2.11 | ekadravyavattvena dravyatvam uktam | 1,2.12 | sāmānyaviśeṣābhāvena ca | 1,2.13 | guṇe bhāvād guṇatvam uktam | 1,2.14 | sāmānyaviśeṣābhāvāc ca | 1,2.15 | karmanī bhāvāt karmatvam uktam | 1,2.16 | sāmānyaviśeṣābhāvāc ca | 1,2.17 | sallīṅgāviśeṣād viśeṣalīṅgābhāvāc caiko bhāvaḥ | 1,2.18 | rūparasagandhasparśavatī pṛthivī | 2,1.1 | rūparasasparśavatya āpo dravāḥ snigdhas ca | 2,1.2 |

In this block of text the supplied numbers are already indicative of structure, resembling the metadata that accompanies a computer file. With these numbers, the following tree-like structure is imposed on the text: i) The list of sūtras is divided into *adhyāyas* or chapters; ii) Each chapter is divided into two *āhnikas* (½-chapters) or four *pādas* (¼-chapters); iii) Each half- or quarter-chapter is made of several *prakaraṇas* or sections.²⁷

A “section” has a canonical inner structure, ideally including representatives of the following types of sūtra:

- 1) A statement of the topic of the section (*viśaya*).
- 2) A statement of a doubt or question (*saṃśaya*).
- 3) The view of an opponent, with reasons (*pūrvapakṣa*).
- 4) The decided view, with reasons (*siddhānta*).
- 5) The purpose served by the discussion in that section (*prayojana*).

A section is, therefore, a unit of dialogical argument, establishing a position with respect to some disputed issue in the face of a provisional opponent. It is important to stress that the text itself does not generally mark its own sūtras according to these types, and that the classification is largely the work of the commentary itself. The text itself, in particular, will rarely mark a sūtra as *pūrvapakṣa* or as *siddhānta*. The fluidity in these processes of labelling and classifying lend plasticity to the commentary, and leave room for later commentators to re-mould the text in response to changing circumstances, the emergence of new dialectical opponents or new domains of “cultural values”. Consider, for example, the following three sūtras from the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*:

3.2.15 Self is one, since there is no difference in the production of pleasure, pain and cognition.

3.2.16 Self is manifold because of circumstance.

3.2.17 Also from the authority of the śāstra.²⁸

One commentator (Śrīdhara) reads these sūtras as representing first an Advaitin opponent who thinks that there is just one soul, *brahman*, and then the decided view, that there is a plurality of individual souls. But another commentator (Vyomaśiva)

²⁷ Strictly, therefore, one needs four numbers not three, so that, for example, 2.1.3.7 would refer to *adhyāya* 2, *āhnika* 1, *prakaraṇa/adhikaraṇa* 3, *sūtra* 7.

²⁸ Trans. Anantalal Thakur, *Origin and Development of the Vaiśeṣika System* (Delhi: PHISPC Volume II Part 4, 2003), p. 65 (slightly modified).

supplies a quite different interpretation, that the first view is the correct view that within a single body there is just one soul, and the the second view that of a Buddhist opponent who thinks that there is a continuous stream of momentary souls. In both cases, the interpretation is speaking to the concerns of a readership contemporaneous with the commentator. Here again, there is a conversation in which the text is an instrument in a philosophical practice. It misses the point to ask if the commentary is faithful to the author’s original intentions, or is accurate historically. In fact, there is a sliding scale with formal commentary at one end and autonomous treatise at the other; somewhere in-between fall texts such as Jayanta’s *Nyāyamañjarī*, a work which, as Esther Solomon has put it well, “used the Nyāya sūtras as pegs to hang on them the detailed discussions of various problems of philosophy”.²⁹

Having identified segments of text carrying internal dialogical unity, a commentary interrelates them. According to the standard theory, one of six types of interrelation (*saṅgati*) should hold between consecutive sections within a chapter:

- 1) *prasaṅga* – corollary.
- 2) *upoddhāta* – prerequisite.
- 3) *hetutva* – causal dependence.
- 4) *avasara* – removal of an obstacle to further inquiry.
- 5) *nirvāhakaikya* – the adjacent sections have a common end.
- 6) *kāryaikya* – the adjacent sections are joint causal factors of a common effect.³⁰

For example, a section in the *Nyāyasūtra* in which a tripartite division of inference is described (NS 2.1.37–38) is immediately followed by a section on the “three times”, past, present and future (NS 2.1.39–43). A commentator might wish to see such textual contiguity as indicative of a logical, explanatory or evidential relationship between the topics in the two sections. B. K. Matilal has argued that “the discussion of the problem of three time-stages is related to the discussion of the examination of inference by *upoghāta saṅgati* or *prasaṅga saṅgati*”, from which one can deduce that the tripartite division of inference has a temporal basis.³¹ The sections of *Nyāyasūtra* Adhyāya 2, Āhnikā 1, according to the *bhāṣya*, are as follows:

1. doubt;
2. sources of knowledge in general;
3. perception;
4. whole and part;

²⁹ Esther A. Solomon, “Trilocana—A Forgotten Naiyāyika,” *Sanskrit and World Culture* (Berlin, 1986), pp. 560–6; at p. 565.

³⁰ See *Nyāyakośa*, sv. *saṅgati*; *Śabdakalpadruma*, sv. *saṅgati* (Vol. V, p. 217); N. Veezhinathan, “*Saṅgati*,” in Pranab Kumar Sen ed., *Philosophical Concepts Relevant to Sciences in Indian Tradition* (Delhi: PHISPC Volume III, Part 4, 2006), pp. 793–8. Vedāntic exegesis of the *Brahma-sūtra* finds that it needs to appeal, additionally, to “chapter” (*adhyāya*-), “objection” (*ākṣepa*-), “analogy” (*udāharaṇa*-), and “counter-analogy” (*pratyudāharaṇa*-) modalities of *saṅgati*. There are important variations in the way different exegetical disciplines perceive structure in their respective sūtra-texts, only partly deriving from exigencies dictated by the texts themselves.

³¹ B. K. Matilal, *Logic, Language and Reality* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1985), p. 38.

5. inference;
6. time;
7. comparison.

A commentator might argue that the relationship between the section on perception and the section on whole and part is one of “corrollary” (*prasaṅga*), and the relation between the section on wholes and parts and the section on inference one of “removing an obstacle” (*avasara*), and be led to philosophically important ideas about the perception of whole objects and the role of inference in perception.³² So a section creates a group of sūtras with a dialectical unity, and a chapter creates an explanatorily inter-connected group of sections. The end result is a text with thematic coherence and formal continuity, modulating the representation of the world provided by the core sūtra text.

4. Imitations of the sūtra–bhāṣya Paradigm

It has been observed that “a striking feature of the Sanskrit tradition is the frequency with which works that may as well have been independent treatises are cast into the external form of a commentary on an earlier text. In this way many treatises of great originality have been made to depend, at least nominally, on earlier works that they leave far behind.”³³ In fact, one can go further, for many treatises are composed in a “text and commentary” form from the beginning, with a single author exploiting the expressive and hermeneutical richness of commentary to generate textuality and structure in their composition. The terms *kārikā* and *vārttika* are used instead of “sūtra” when an author composes an original work mimicking the sūtra–bhāṣya genre. For example, Udayana’s *Nyāyakusumañjalī* consists in a core set of *kārikās*, bound together with his own gloss. Other philosophers have felt free to write their own commentaries on these *kārikās*; there is even a late commentary on them from a Vedāntic rather than a Nyāya perspective. A different example is Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, which is a sūtra-like composition upon which Gaudapāda’s *Sāṃkhyakārikā–bhāṣya* provides commentary. While the term “sūtra” refers both to the individual affirmations and to the entire collection, the terms *sāra*, *saṃgraha*, *kośa* and *samuccaya* are used for collections of *kārikās*. Typical examples include Bhāsarvajña’s *Nyāyasāra*, with the author’s own *bhūṣaṇa*, and Annaṃbhaṭṭa’s *Tarkasaṃgraha*, with the author’s *dīpikā*. The composers of such compilations will sometimes explain that the ideas and teachings about the topic in question are scattered throughout larger bodies of textual material, and are in need of orderly collation.

³² As indeed Matilal has done; see his *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 266–275.

³³ Tubbs and Boose, *Scholastic Sanskrit*, p. 2.

Buddhist philosophers play with the basic genre and adapt it to their own purposes.³⁴ First of all, they call the original dialogues of the Buddha sūtra, or sutta in Pali. Early Sinhalese commentaries on the three “baskets” (the Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma), were used as the basis of the great fifth century Pali commentaries of Buddhaghosa.³⁵ Both Dignāga and Dharmakīrti write texts in the form of collections of verses accompanied with commentaries of their own composition: Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, with his own *vṛtti*; Dharmakīrti’s *Pramāṇavārttika*, with his *svopajñāvṛtti*. Of particular interest is the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu, again a collection of verses and on which Vasubandhu provides a commentary, which he actually calls a *bhāṣya*, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. According to one story, “Vasubandhu supported himself by lecturing on Buddhism before the general public. At the close of each day’s lecture, he composed a verse which summed up his exposition for the day. These constitute the *Abhidharma-kośa*.”³⁶ If this story is to be believed, then we have a case in which the “commentary” is written first, followed by the text being “commented” on! According to another opinion, equally intriguing, Vasubandhu wrote the *kārikās* from one philosophical perspective, and the *bhāṣya* from another, having in the meantime converted from one Buddhist school to another. Another Buddhist philosopher, Saṃghabhadra, is led to write a rival commentary on the same *kārikās* in order to “correct” Vasubandhu’s own misleading commentary. Indeed, like several other authors, he wrote both a longer commentary, the *Nyāyānusāra*, and a shorter, abbreviated commentary, the *Abhidharmasamayapradīpikā*.³⁷ In the introduction to the shorter commentary, he explains his intentions:

By means of extensive explanations that conform to correct principle, I will counter the accepted positions of other schools and manifest the fundamental meaning. When the Sūtra master’s statements

³⁴ As do the Jainas; see Ludwig Alsdorf, “Jaina Exegetical Literature and the History of the Jaina Canon,” in A. N. Upadhye ed., *Mahāvīra and his Teachings* (Bombay: Bhagavan Mahavira 2500th Nirvana Mahotsava Samiti, 1977).

³⁵ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli says that “the system found in the Commentaries [of Buddhaghosa] has moved on (perhaps slightly diverged) from the strict Abhidhamma-Pitaka standpoint. The Suttas offered descriptions of discovery; the Abhidhamma map-making; but emphasis now is not on discovery, or even on mapping, so much as on consolidating, filling in and explaining. The material is worked over for consistency.” Introduction, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), p. xlii. We know that Buddhaghosa came to Sri Lanka from India, and that he had studied the Sanskrit philosophical śāstra.

³⁶ Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), pp.16-7, referring to a story of Paramārtha.

³⁷ It is not uncommon for a commentator to write both a long and a short commentary. Some examples include: Prabhākara (c.700), *Bṛhatī* and *Laghvī* on Śabara’s *Mīmāṃsāsūtrabhāṣya*; Koṇḍa Bhaṭṭa (c. 1650), a long commentary, *Vaiyākaraṇabhūṣaṇa* “The Ornament of Grammarian Philosophy”, and a summary, *Vaiyākaraṇabhūṣaṇasāra* “Summary of the Ornament”, defending the Grammarian theory of meaning against Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā, on Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita’s *Vaiyākaraṇamattonmajjana*; Mahādeva Puntāmkar (c. 1680), a long commentary, *Bhavānandī-prakāśa* “An Illumination of the Bhavānandī”, and an “aid”, *Bhavānandī-sarvopakāriṇī* “An Aid to the Bhavānandī”, on Bhavānanda’s *Bhavānandī* on the *Tattvacintāmaṇidīdhiti*; Nāgeśa (c. 1714), a long and short commentary on Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita’s *Siddhāntakaumudī*, the *Bṛhat Śabdenduśekhara* “The Long Divine Crest of Language” and the *Laghu Śabdenduśekhara* “The Short Divine Crest of Language”. He also wrote a long work on the Philosophy of Grammar (the *Bṛhatmañjuṣā*), a shorter version of it (the *Laghusiddhāntamañjuṣā*), and an extremely short version of the same (the *Paramalaghusiddhāntamañjuṣā*).

conform to reasoned argument and scriptural authority, I will reproduce them as they are and not attempt to refute them. [However,] if they contradict the basic purport of the Abhidharma or the sūtras in any way, I am determined to scrutinize them further and vow to purge them. The treatise I have already composed is entitled “Conformance to Correct Principle” (*Nyāyānusāra*); it is to be studied by those who delight in meticulous analysis... In contrast to the Sūtra master’s erroneous explanations, I will present the correct interpretation and will manifest the true and extraordinary meaning of the accepted doctrines of our school.”³⁸

Samghabhadra accepts Vasubandhu’s core text, the compilation of *kārikās*, but equips them with an entirely different commentarial gloss from that of Vasubandhu himself (the “Sūtra master”). In effect, he creates a rival *bhāṣya* from the core text. If behind a work such as Vasubandhu’s lies an anxiety that the truth will be buried in a welter of textual over-production, Samghabhadra’s worry is rather that it will be obscured by mistaken interpretation. This case is also a rather dramatic example of the point that the author has no special authority over the commentator in reading meaning from the text.

5. Conclusion

The *bhāṣya* is a fundamental paradigm in Sanskrit philosophical commentary. One basic reason for the discursive richness of the model is that it permits one to state something at a high level of generality and then go on to qualify or restrict, to moderate or modulate, what one has just said. Indeed, in every act of self-commenting, such as writing a footnote, this way of expressing oneself is exploited.³⁹ As an exegetical mode of thinking, it is a distinctive type of rationality intrinsic to the commentarial approach. Wilfred Sellars has observed that whenever we have a model of some aspect of reality, we also need a commentary, “which qualifies or limits—but not precisely nor in all respects—the analogy between the familiar objects and the entities which are being introduced by the theory.”⁴⁰ A second reason for the power of the paradigm is that, as we have seen in some detail, it places structure and inter-relatedness in the foreground, encouraging creative association under the umbrella of a governing conception. For both these reasons, *reading* philosophically is a way of *thinking* philosophically.

³⁸ Trans. Collett Cox, *Disputed Dharmas: Early Buddhist Theories on Existence* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1995), pp. 55–6.

³⁹ In an aside, Barry Smith interestingly suggests that the structure of the *Tractatus* might be understood as a nested sequence of commentary, “built up out of chains of self-commentaries (glosses on glosses), in which the commentary-structure has been deliberately left exposed.” Barry Smith, “Textual Deference,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 28.1 (1991), pp. 1–12; at p. 2.

⁴⁰ Wilfred Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 96.