

An Examination of *Sahagamana* in the *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava*: Scriptural Hermeneutics and Conclusions

Dr. Debashis Ghosh¹

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Scottish Church College, Kolkata

Received: 20 Dec 2020, Accepted: 31 Dec 2020, Published with Peer Review on line: 31 Jan 2021

Abstract

This paper analyses the deliberation on *Sahagamana* (the practice of Sati) within the 18th-century *Dharmaśāstra* text *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava*, compiled by Mahāmahopādhyāya Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana under the aegis of Sir William Jones. Applying *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* hermeneutical principles, the study highlights how Jagannātha categorizes *Sahagamana* not as an obligatory daily duty (*nitya-karma*), but as a voluntary, goal-directed rite (*kāmya-karma*) requiring explicit individual volition (*icchā*). The text delineates the distinctions between *Sahagamana* and *Anugamana* while establishing clear eligibility exclusions that barred pregnant women, mothers of infants, and menstruating women from the pyre. Crucially, Jagannātha posits lifelong *brahmacharya* (ascetic celibacy) as a spiritually superior alternative, contrasting the impermanent, desire-driven rewards of heaven (*svarga*) with the eternal spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) achieved through self-restraint and knowledge. By framing *Sahagamana* as an *āpaddharma* (exceptional practice) and explicitly condemning deaths driven by fear or societal pressure (*mohatyāga*), the *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava* set structural boundaries around the practice. This nuanced synthesis provided foundational scriptural precedents subsequently utilized in British colonial jurisprudence and by 19th-century social reformers, most notably Raja Ram Mohan Roy, to challenge the mandatory authority of Sati.

Keywords- *Sahagamana*, Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana, *Dharmaśāstra*, *Anugamana*, *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava*

Introduction

The *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava*, composed in the eighteenth century, stands as a monumental source text in the history of *Dharmaśāstra*. This treatise was compiled by Mahāmahopādhyāya Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana under the aegis and inspiration of the British administrator Sir William Jones. Alongside extensive discourses on subjects such as inheritance (*Dāyabhāga*) and legal procedures (*Vyavahāra*), the text presents a comprehensive deliberation on *Sahagamana* (the practice of Sati) within the section dedicated to the duties of women (*Strīdharmā*). Although this practice is prohibited in the contemporary era, analysing how the text systematically synthesized the diverse and conflicting viewpoints prevalent during that period remains highly significant.

Scriptural Foundations of *Sahagamana*

Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana supports the practice of *Sahagamana* by citing classical injunctions from sages such as Aṅgiras, Viṣṇu, Hārīta, and Vyāsa. He quotes:

"*mṛte bhartari yā nārī samāroheddhutāśanam | sā nivasati svarge'pi lomakoṭitrayaṃ yathā* ||"¹

¹ *mṛte bhartari yā nārī samāroheddhutāśanam | sā'rundhatīsamā rāmā svargaloke mahīyate || vyavahāramālā*

(The woman who ascends the funeral pyre upon the death of her husband shall reside in heaven for as many years as there are hairs on the human body, i.e., three and a half crores.)

Tarkapañcānana posits that *Sahagamana* is not merely a desperate act born out of grief. Rather, it is characterized as a *kāmyavrata*—a voluntary, goal-directed vow observed for a specific desired fruit—which results in the absolution of sins for the woman's paternal, maternal, and marital lineages.

Typologies of *Anugamana*

The *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava* delineates two distinct categories of this practice:

- ***Sahagamana*:** The act wherein the wife immolates herself on the exact same funeral pyre alongside her deceased husband.
- ***Anugamana*:** In instances where the husband dies in a distant land or foreign territory, the wife subsequently ascends a separate pyre, entering the fire accompanied by an object representing his memory (such as his wooden sandals).

Eligibility Criteria (*Adhikāri-Nirṇaya*)

Tarkapañcānana explicitly clarifies that not all women possess the eligibility (*adhikāra*) to perform *Sahagamana*. He outlines several strict scriptural prohibitions:

1. **Pregnant Women (*Garbhīṇī*):** A pregnant woman is forbidden from ascending the pyre, as it incurs the grave sin of foeticide (*garbhahatyā*).
2. **Mothers of Young Children (*Bālapatnyā*):** A woman with an infant or young child must prioritize her primary maternal obligation of nurturing the child over embracing death.
3. **Menstruating Women (*Rajasvalā*):** A woman undergoing her menses is restricted from participating in this rite until she has undergone mandatory ritual purification.

The Alternative: Ascetic Celibacy versus Concremation

A salient feature of the *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava* is that Jagannātha, drawing upon the authoritative edicts of Manu, introduces a viable alternative, thereby demonstrating that *Sahagamana* is by no means compulsory. He references the *Viṣṇu Smṛti*:

"mṛte bhartari brahmacaryaṃ tadanvārohaṇaṃ vā |"

(Upon the death of the husband, [the widow should choose] either ascetic celibacy or ascending the funeral pyre.)

Tarkapañcānana concludes that if a woman is capable of enduring rigorous lifelong celibacy and self-restraint (*brahmacarya*), she should opt for a life of ascetic penance rather than choosing death. This very scriptural

Similar text can be found in *garuḍa purāṇa* (*pretakhaṇḍa*, adhyāya 4, śloka 95)

mṛte bhartari yā nārī samāroheddhutāśanam /
sārandhatīsamācārā svargaloke mahīyate //

see also;

mṛte bhartari yā nārī brahmacaryavrate sthitā |
sā mṛtā labhate svargaṃ yathā te brahmacārīṇaḥ || parāśarasmṛti 4.31
tisraḥ koṭyo 'rdhakoṭī ca yāni romāṇi mānuṣe |
tāvatkālaṃ vasetsarge bhartāraṃ yānugacchati || parāśarasmṛti 4.32

precedent was subsequently leveraged as a primary authoritative justification by later social reformers, most notably Raja Ram Mohan Roy.

Internal Conflicts and Dialectical Deliberations (*Vipratishedhaḥ Vimārśaśca*)

Within this treatise, Jagannātha actively addresses the intellectual skepticism raised by contemporary scholars. To the critical query—"Is *Sahagamana* not a form of suicide?"—Tarkapañcānana responds that because the act is explicitly sanctioned by the scriptures (*śāstravihitatvāt*), it cannot be classified as suicide. His rationale dictates that just as the sacrificial slaughter of animals within a Vedic ritual (*yajña*) is not deemed an act of violence (*hiṃsā*), similarly, relinquishing one's physical body in strict accordance with scriptural protocol does not generate sin.

Nevertheless, he introduces a highly nuanced philosophical caveat: for an individual who prioritizes ultimate spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), the temporary rewards of desire-driven actions (*kāmya-phala*, such as heaven) are essentially trivial. Consequently, for women who follow the path of knowledge (*jñānamārga*), lifelong *brahmacarya* is infinitely superior. This is because the enjoyment of heavenly realms naturally terminates once an individual's accumulated merit (*punya*) is exhausted, whereas spiritual knowledge culminates in eternal liberation.

The deliberation on *Sahagamana* within Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana's *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava* is not an uncritical or blind adherence to tradition; rather, it is anchored in a sophisticated and rigorous methodology of logical reasoning. This discourse can be structurally examined through three core dimensions:

1. Jagannātha's Hermeneutic Methodology: *Kāmya-karma* versus *Nitya-karma*

Jagannātha explicates this contentious subject by applying the foundational principles of *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* hermeneutics. According to his analysis, *Sahagamana* is not a *nitya-karma* (an obligatory daily duty), but rather a *kāmya-karma* (a goal-directed, volitional action).

- **The Primacy of Volition (*Ichchā*):** A widow should only enter the fire if she explicitly desires to enjoy celestial pleasures alongside her husband in heaven. If she lacks this specific desire, the scriptures do not exert any coercive pressure upon her.
- **The Mechanism of Absolution (*Pāpakṣaya*):** Tarkapañcānana validates the statement of Āṅgiras, which uses the analogy of a snake-catcher forcefully extracting a serpent from its subterranean hole to illustrate how a woman performing *Sahagamana* delivers her husband from hellish realms to enjoy celestial bliss. The underlying logical premise here is that the moral sacrifice of the wife possesses a spiritual potency that far outweighs the husband's sins.

2. The Spiritual Superiority of Widow-Celibacy

As indicated previously, Jagannātha leaves open the alternative path of *brahmacarya*. Here, he makes a critical metaphysical distinction: 'Heaven' (*svarga*) is fundamentally transient, whereas 'Liberation' (*mokṣa*) is eternal.

- **Imperishable versus Perishable Fruits:** The heavenly residency achieved via *Sahagamana* is subject to termination, operating under the well-known axiom, "*kṣīṇe puṇye martyalokaṃ viśanti*" (upon the exhaustion of merit, they re-enter the mortal world).
- **The Path to Direct Liberation:** Conversely, a widow who spends her life practicing sensory restraint and steadfast *brahmacarya* directly qualifies for *mokṣa*.
- **Conclusion:** Jagannātha's profound, latent intent is that an enlightened or knowledge-seeking (*jñānavatī*) woman should preferentially adopt *brahmacarya* over *Sahagamana*, as it is spiritually far more meritorious.

3. Sociological and Legal Synthesis

The era of Jagannātha (the eighteenth century) was a highly volatile period of social transition, during which several corrupted practices of *Sahagamana* were manifesting in the Bengal region. To counter these abuses, he firmly re-established the following canonical restrictions:

- **Renunciation of External Coercion (*Mohatyāga*):** If a woman ascends the funeral pyre out of fear, societal pressure, or a dread of public slander (*lokāpavāda*), her sacrifice is entirely futile. Any death embraced without genuine internal faith (*śraddhā*) is devoid of religious merit.
- **The Rule of Ritual Purity (*Śauca-niyama*):** Even when a husband dies abroad and the wife opts for *anugamana* using his relics or personal tokens, rigorous adherence to ritual purity remains an absolute prerequisite.

Impact on British Jurisprudence

When Sir William Jones embarked on compiling the monumental *Digest of Hindu Law*, he appointed Jagannātha as his chief pundit and advisor.

- **Utilization in Lawmaking:** The British colonial administration sought to determine whether the practice of Sati was an absolute, non-negotiable obligation under Hindu law.
- The detailed analysis of the *brahmacarya* alternative provided in Jagannātha's *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava* eventually served as a foundational legal and scriptural precedent in colonial courts to challenge and oppose the practice of Sati. Social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy actively utilized Jagannātha's hermeneutic arguments to conclusively prove that Sati lacked mandatory scriptural sanction.

Conclusion

In the *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava*, Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana maintains a deeply synthetic and integrative vision. According to the treatise, *Sahagamana* is treated not as a normative social rule, but rather as an *āpaddharma*—an exceptional duty reserved for times of extreme distress.

Through his dialectics, Jagannātha protects the fundamental dignity of a woman's personhood; instead of reducing her existence to an object of self-immolation, he carves out a path toward a higher, contemplative spiritual life via *brahmacarya*. He does not act as a unilateral champion of *Sahagamana*; rather, he robustly defends its alternatives, such as ascetic widowhood. His treatise establishes that *Sahagamana* was historically intended to be a voluntary, desire-driven option (*kāmya-karma*) rather than a forced societal punishment. Utilizing scriptural authority, he clearly demarcated protective eligibility exclusions to safeguard women from coercion.

Thus, while offering a nuanced analysis of the Sati practice within the orthodox tradition, the *Vivādabhaṅgārṇava* explicitly defines and enforces its structural boundaries. From a contemporary standpoint, the practice is rightfully viewed as inhumane, yet this text highlights how an eighteenth-century scholar like Jagannātha systematically opened avenues for alternative choices while operating strictly within the boundaries of scriptural decorum.

Bibliography

1. Altekar, Anant Sadasiv. (1973). *The position of women in Hindu civilization from pre-historic times to the present day*. Motilal Banarsidass.

2. Kane, Pandurang Vaman. (1977). *History of Dharmaśāstra: (Ancient and mediaeval religious and civil law in India). Vol. 5, Pt. 2 (santis; purānas and dharmaśāstra; tantras and dharmaśāstra; pūrvamīmāṃsā and dharmaśāstra; sāṅkhya, yoga, tarka and dharmaśāstra; cosmology, karma and punarjanma; fundamental and leading characteristics of hindu culture and civilization; future trends)*. Poona Bhandarkar Oriental Research Inst.
3. Tarkapanachanana Jagannantha. (2013). *A Digest of Hindu Law, on Contracts and Successions*. Cambridge University Press.
4. *Vivādabhaṅgārṇavaḥ* – Jagannātha Tarkapañcānana (Sanskrit Manuscript from Asiatic Society Kolkata collection).
5. व्यवहारमाला: *Vyavaharmala*. (1971). Anandashram. Anandashram Sanskrit Series 121.