

The original beginning of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*

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Abstract

This article explores the textual history, evolution, and structural integrity of the opening portion of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* (VS). It specifically evaluates the prominent academic hypothesis that the text originally functioned as a pure nature philosophy before undergoing systematic modifications under later religious influences to incorporate an orthodox doctrine of liberation. By analysing and comparing the major modern scholarly perspectives of Erich Frauwallner, Barend Faddegon, Mahadev Rajaram Bodas, Anantalal Thakur, and Harsh Narain, the paper addresses ongoing doubts surrounding the authenticity of the initial *sūtras*—particularly the highly debated status of VS 1.1.4. Ultimately, the study highlights critical internal textual contradictions, insights from historical commentary traditions (such as *Vyomavatī*, *Nyāyamañjarī*, and *Kiraṇāvalī*), and the evolving role of Vedic authority to shed light on the original structural framework designed by Sage Kaṇāda.

Keywords- *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*, Kaṇāda Philosophy, Ancient Indian Philosophy, *Vaiśeṣika* School, Atomism (Paramāṇuvāda), Metaphysics (Padārtha Theory)

Introduction

The opening sequence of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* has long been a subject of intense debate within both Western philology and indigenous Indian tradition. In the presently available orthodox system, the first four *sūtras* explicitly frame the philosophy as a doctrine of liberation. However, pioneering scholars like Erich Frauwallner argue that a soteriological focus is fundamentally incompatible with the genuine spirit of early *Vaiśeṣika*, which he characterizes as a pure nature philosophy completely detached from liberation doctrines. This tension strongly suggests that the introductory portion known today is a later modification driven by religious trends, which effectively replaced an older, secular beginning.

Historical Indian commentators themselves felt these structural inconsistencies. For instance, **Durveka Mishra** highlighted the awkward transition in the text where Kaṇāda explicitly promises to explain *dharma* but immediately proceeds to expound the six categories (*ṣaṭpadārthī*). To resolve these mismatches, various modern researchers have proposed distinct theories regarding textual corruption and interpolation:

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There are three major stands over the issue:

1. Beginning portion of the VS undergone modification (Erich Frauwallner)
2. Beginning portion had not changed – Wilhelm Halbfass and others.
3. Only VS 1.1.4 was not there in original VS – Bodas, Faddegon etc.

Erich Frauwallner's view¹:

¹ (Frauwallner, E., & Soni, J., 1994)

○ According to Erich Frauwallner, the beginning portion of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* had also undergone modification because of the religious influence. The first four *sūtra*-s mentioned in the orthodox system are characterized as a doctrine of liberation. But Frauwallner thinks that the doctrine of liberation is not compatible with the spirit of the Vaiśeṣika, for Vaiśeṣika is a pure nature philosophy and it has nothing to do with the doctrine of liberation.

○ It is not only Europeans' view, Indians also felt it. As Durveka Mishra says - “*nāpi ādivākye saty apy āśvāso yujyate, anyatpratijñātavatām api anyavyutpādanadarśanāt | yathātaḥ (yathā --"athātaḥ) dharmam vyākhyāsyāmaḥ"* [VS 1.1.1] *iti pratijñāya śatpadārthīpratipādanamkaṇādasya |*”.² It suggests that the presently available (as mentioned above) beginning of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra*-s is a later addition under the influence of religious trends, replacing the older beginning.

○ In *Vyomavati* we can find twice the same sentence with a slight difference in the following manner: ‘*yad iha bhāvarūpaṃ tat sarvaṃ mayopasaṃkhyātavyam*’ *‘iti pratijñā muneḥ*’ and “*pratijñātaṃ ca maharṣiṇā ‘yad bhāvarūpaṃ tat sarvaṃ abhidhāsyāmaḥ’ iti*”. Udayana also quotes the same sentence in his *Kiraṇāvalī*³. This sentence sounds like the start of a *sūtra* and is ascribed to Kaṇāda. There was a close relation between Lokāyata and Vaiśeṣika. In *Nyāyamañjarī* Udayana mentioned - “*athātas tattvam vyākhyāsyāmaḥ*”, if we assume it as the original beginning of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* which was replaced by later revisions then it implies that till the time of Udayana such incident was known to the scholars.

○ Haribhadra sūri in his book *Nyāyapraveśakavṛttiḥ* described the basic features of the Vaiśeṣika category theory⁴. Haribhadra's description especially the beginning portion following the VS 1.1.5, 1.1.6 and 1.1.7, so it seems to Frauwallner that words like ‘*dravyaguṇakarmasāmānyaviśeṣasamavāyāḥ śat padārthāḥ*’ can be regarded as *sūtra*, as for the case of theory of categories requires to describe sequentially, naming and enumeration of the categories. These words serve the purpose and also have a *sūtra* like form.

If we put together the found phrases, the original beginning of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtras* will be such— *Yad (iha) bhāvarūpaṃ tat sarvaṃ abhidhāsyāmaḥ* 1.1.1

Dravyaguṇakarmasāmānyaviśeṣasamavāyāḥ śat padārthāḥ 1.1.2

prthivyāpastejo vāyur ākāśaṃ kālo dig ātmā mana iti dravyāṇi 1.1.3

² *Hetubinduṭika* of Bhaṭṭa Arcaṭa with the Sub-Commentary entitled *Āloka* of Durveka Misra. Baroda : Oriental Institute 1949, pp. 233-411. (Gaekwad's Oriental Series, CXIII)

³ “*atra hetuḥ ‘prthag anabhidhānāt’ sarvārthopadeśapravṛttena maharṣiṇā hi tena ‘yad bhāvarūpaṃ tat sarvaṃ abhidhāsyāmaḥ’ iti*” – *Kiraṇāvalī*

⁴ “*vaiśeṣiko bauddhānprati| kena punaḥ sambandhena ? iti| ucyate| tasya siddhānto dravyaguṇakarmasāmānyaviśeṣasamavāyāḥ śatpadārthāḥ| tataḥ prthivyāpastejovāyurākāśaṃ kālo digātmā mana iti dravyāṇi| guṇāścaturviśatiḥ| rūparasagandhasparśasaṃkhyāparimāṇāni prthaktvaṃ saṃyogavibhāgau paratvāparatve buddhiḥ sukhaduḥkhecchādvēṣāḥ prayatnaśceti sūtroktāḥ| caśabdāt dravatvaṃ gurutvaṃ saṃskāraḥ sneho dharmādharmau śabdaśceti| evaṃ caturviśati rguṇāḥ| pañca karmāṇi| tad yathā utkṣepaṇamavakṣepaṇamākuñcanaṃ prasāraṇaṃ gamanamiti karmāṇi| gamanagrahaṇābhadrāmanārekanaspanandanādyavarodhaḥ| sāmānyaṃ dvividhaṃ paramaparaṃ ceti| tatra paraṃ sattā bhāvo mahāsāmānyamiti cocyate| aparaṃ dravyatvādi*” - Dhruva, A.B ed. *Nyāyapraveśakavṛtti*. India: Srisatguru Publications, 1987, 1-29.

Faddegon's view⁵: Faddegon had doubts about the authenticity of the VS 1.1.4⁶ that listed six categories together. According to him the present form existed in the time of Praśastapāda. He thinks its original form was something like this: '*dravya-guṇa-karmaṇām padārthānām sāmānyaviśeṣābhyām tattvajñānāt niḥśreyasam*'.

Bodas's view⁷: Bodas is also equally doubtful about VS 1.1.4. Bodas found it as interpolation because of three reasons:

- Firstly, unlike other sūtra-s, it is inordinately long and involved and contains distinct propositions that would have sufficed for half a dozen sūtra-s.
- Secondly, it is very awkwardly worded if not positively ungrammatical.
- Thirdly, it seems to be an adaption of Praśastapāda's opening passage - '*dravyaguṇakarmmasāmānyaviśeṣasamavāyānām ṣaṇṇām padārthānām sādharmaivaaidharmyatattvajñānām niḥśreyasahetuḥ*'⁸.

According to Bodas, this sūtra is an interpolation that happened after śrīdhara, otherwise after having the sūtra in his knowledge, he could not raised the question of inconsistency.

Anantalal Thakur's view⁹: But Anantalal Thakur's solution of this problem seems to be better. According to Thakur dharma is padārtha-dharma here and Praśastapāda made it clear '*padārthadharmasṃgrahaḥ pravakṣyate mahodayaḥ*'¹⁰. As the dharma-s are said in dharmaśāstras, so Veda seems to lose its importance as an authority. To mention Veda as an authority, the next sūtra came '*tadvacanāt ...*'¹¹ as Veda also says about the padārthadharmas. So it seems that the word dharma was there at the beginning of the Vaiśeṣika-sūtra but with the meaning of padārthadharmas.

Harsh Narain's view¹²: Narain also was following Bodas and Faddegon, and added more to this discussion. Udayana noticed that this passage explained only the first three sūtra-s of VS and implies that the fourth sūtra listing the six categories was not in knowledge of Praśastapāda as well as Udayana. Śrīdhara also appeared to be ignorant of this sūtra in its part or whole. He seems to agree with the Bodas's view.

Critique:

● Some scholars think that making an argument to prove the older Vaiśeṣika as detached from the theory of liberation, is intentional but not true. But the beginning of the Vaiśeṣika always raised debate in the tradition itself. Popular verses like - *dharmam vyākhyātukāmasya ṣaṭpadārthopavarṇanam / sāgaram gantukāmasya*

⁵ (Faddegon Barend, 2013), p.107

⁶ *dharmaviśeṣaprasūtāt...*

⁷ Bodas, XXXVII-XXXVIII

⁸ Praśastapādabhāṣya, p.15

⁹ Thakur, Vaiśeṣika nibandhāvalī, p.21.

¹⁰ Praśastapādabhāṣya, p. 3, Bengali edition

¹¹ Vaiśeṣika-sūtra

¹² (Larson & Narain, 1978)

himavadgamanopamam // . If we assume that the first three of the *sūtra*-s of Vaiśeṣika are as Frauwallner suggested, then few problems would remain undecided. Firstly, the suggested three *sūtra*-s of Frauwallner do not contain any reference to dharma. If Udayana was aware of the original beginning of the

- Erich Frauwallner searched for and suggested a new beginning. According to him, the older beginning is replaced by the newer thoughts.

- Thakur's interpretation supports Frauwallner's idea that Vaiśeṣika was a nature-philosophy and also bridges the gaps existing in Frauwallner's suggested new beginning. If the new *sūtra*-s (according to Frauwallner) also indicates the nature-philosophical aspect of *Vaiśeṣika* then a new beginning is uselessly introduced. No such useless addition was in practice as it was not appreciated in the sphere of Indian philosophy.

- '*tadvacanāt āmnāyasya pramāṇam*' is the last *sūtra* of the VS. Why it is repeated? The economy is one of the main characteristic features of *sūtra*. Especially when a seer is trying to explain the worldly objects, known by sensual perception and inference. Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika believe in '*mānādhīnā premayasiddhiḥ*' and among the *pramāṇa*-s previous ones are stronger than the later ones, because if the previous one contradicts the existence of one thing then the later *pramāṇa* cannot prove it again). *śabdapramāṇa* (i.e. words of the *yathārtha-vaktā* and also words of Veda) is included in the *anumāna* *pramāṇa*. So in the logical sense, Vedic injunctions can be supportive *pramāṇa* of *pratyakṣa* or *anumāna*. Not even that Veda is defined as '*pratyakṣeṇa anumityā vā yastūpāyo na vidyate...tasmāt vedasya vedatā*' – it means where the other *pramāṇa*-s are existing to prove there Veda has to do nothing (but to be supportive and it cannot negate the fact proved by *pratyakṣa* *pramāṇa*). So it seems that the '*tasmādāmnāyasya prāmāṇyam*' was not there at the beginning of the original, but a later interpolation. Kaṇāda might have suggested to consult vedic injunctions only if the other *pramāṇa*-s fail to help. Vedic injunction may be the last refuge. Not even that *śabda pramāṇa* started gaining more importance in later times in Vaiśeṣika system as scholars like Vyomaśiva accepted Veda as *śabda pramāṇa*.

- Now the question remains that if *padārthadharmā* helps us to get *abhyudaya* and *niḥśreyas* then why VS 1.1.4 refers only *niḥśreyas* as a result of *tattvajñāna*? Why *abhyudaya* is absent in VS 1.1.4. There is also another gap that invokes doubt towards the originality of 1.1.4 and that is if 1.1.4 is an interpolation and introduced into Vs from PpBh where it was written as a summary of the first three *sūtra*-s of VS, then words like '*sādharmyavaidharmya*' or list of *padārtha*-s were not there in the first three *sūtra*-s. and VS 1.1.5 continues with the subdivision of the *dravya*-s. So, how *sūtrakāra* may be enumerating *dravyas*, without making clear the position of *dravya* in the Vaiśeṣika cosmology? It seems that if VS 1.1.4 is an interpolation (according to Bodas) then Frauwallner's suggested VS 1.1.2 is justified as it is enumerating the *padārtha*-s.

Conclusion

The debate over the original beginning of the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* reveals deep-seated structural ambiguities regarding how an early Indian nature philosophy transitioned into an orthodox theological system. Textual and historical evidence strongly indicates that VS 1.1.4 is a later interpolation. Its total omission of *abhyudaya* (worldly prosperity) and its abrupt structural placement create an unnatural leap to VS 1.1.5, which directly initiates the subdivisions of substances (*dravya*) without a proper contextual introduction. If VS 1.1.4 is indeed a post-Śrīdhara addition adapted from Praśastapāda's commentary, then Frauwallner's proposed reconstruction—which positions the explicit naming and sequential enumeration of the categories in VS 1.1.2—becomes highly justified and logically necessary for the text's continuity.

Furthermore, the status of Vedic authority (*āmnāyasya prāmāṇyam*) within the text appears historically altered. Given that economy of words is a defining feature of the *sūtra* genre, the repetitive insistence on Vedic authority at both the beginning and the very end of the text points toward a later interpolation. In the original logical framework of the system, direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*) reigned supreme; Kaṇāda likely intended Vedic injunctions to serve merely as a supportive tool or a last refuge when empirical methods failed to provide answers.

While Frauwallner's reconstructed nature-philosophical opening leaves certain traditional issues unaddressed—such as omitting the word *dharma* entirely—Anantalal Thakur provides a superior, harmonizing solution. By clarifying that *dharma* at the beginning of the *sūtra* was never meant to signify religious merit, but specifically *padārtha-dharma* (the intrinsic properties and duties of ontological categories), Thakur effectively bridges the gaps in Frauwallner's model. This critical distinction preserves the text's authentic identity as a rigorous nature philosophy while explaining why the tradition seamlessly integrated it into a broader framework of liberation over time.

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