

Importance of Sanskrit Commentaries

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Abstract

This paper has been written to present and discuss the importance of Sanskrit Commentaries.

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Article

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. Adapting this suggestion, we might say that a commentary on a Sanskrit text succeeds to the extent that it demonstrates that the text is rich in the features which, for the community of readers to whom the commentary is directed, are held to be characteristic of good language. In other words, a successful commentary helps its target audience to read understandably 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 the text 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 commentary as a window through which to see what the practice of textual reading has meant to others. Formally, two aspects of textual 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 textual 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 sub commentaries, and so on. This nesting gives rise to another characteristic function of textual commentary, which is to adjudicate between rival commentaries at a lower level. These two aspects lead to a distinctive, canonical pattern in the commentarial literature: A. *sūtra*, an aggregation of short formula-like assertions. B. *bhāṣya*, A commentary on a *sūtra* whose function is to unpack and weave together. C. *vārttika*. A sub commentary on a *bhāṣya*, defending its particular construction of the *sūtra* over alternatives, making revisions and adjustments as necessary. D. *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 work resides in its ability to enable the reader to *understand patterns of inter-relatedness* within a complex set of ideas. Typically this is 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*). 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. 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. 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 *Dīdhiti* 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. A commentary which confines itself solely to performing this role will call itself a *vṛtti* or *vivṛti* or *vivarāṇa*. In a more technical sense, a *vivarāṇa* in is a kind of grammatical semantic analysis, combining structural paraphrase and lexical substitution. 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 *ṭīkā*. The *Śabdārthacintāmaṇi* defines a *ṭīkā* as “an explanation of difficult words in the root text” (*viśamaṇapadavyākhyāyām*). 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 commentary is an explanation with interpretation.” When the text being thus elucidated is itself a commentary, the elucidation may often be called a *ṭippaṇa* or *ṭippaṇī*. The term *ṭīkā*, again like *gloss*, is also used in a more general sense, as a synonym then of *vṛtti* or *vivarāṇa*.

2. Types of 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*). 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” (*sūtrastham padamādāya bākyeih sūtrānusāribhiḥ | svapadāni ca varṇyante bhāṣyaṃ bhāṣyavido viduḥ* ||).

Vārttika. While *bhāṣya* signifies the extraction and elaboration of a text 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”. 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. A general term for commentarial work of this sort is *nibandha*.¹⁶ Dissatisfaction with the achieved 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. These commentaries might be thought of as allegoric. *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 “It 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.” 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. 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: *tātparyā* (or *tātparyā-ṭīkā*) in the sense of a gloss revealing the true intended meaning of the author; *guḍhārtha*, which is the 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.

3. Bhāṣya: An example of Sanskrit text

Udayana states that a technical treatise or *śāstra*, in any discipline, should aspire to clarity (*vaiśadya*), compactness (*laghutā*), and completeness (*krtsnatā*). A compilation of *sūtras* 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. 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. 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, and so into a text with coherence and continuity. We have said about the devices employed in a *sūtra* to 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*. 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. 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. At the linguistic practice time, the commented-on text was composed, or the linguistic practice at the time when his commentary is being read. It has been remarked that "when 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." The *bhāṣya* genre of 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 perfective remarks. 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. 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. 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* (chapters) or four *pādas* (chapters); iii) Each half- or quarter-chapter is made of several *prakaraṇas* or sections. 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 (*saṁśaya*). 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*).

Having identified segments of text carrying internal dialogical unity, a commentary interrelate them. According to the standard theory, one of six types of interrelation 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.

Many thousands of commentaries have been written by philosophers on Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin and Sanskrit texts. Thinkers of Sanskrit commentaries such as *Shankarachariya*, *Mallinatha*, *Kalluk Bhatta*, *Amarakosha*, *Sayan*, *Medhatithi* etc. have likewise called forth a substantial commentary literature on Sanskrit literature writings. For where Sanskrit-language philosophers have utilized the commentary form in systematic ways, this seems in every case to have reflected a concern with one or other of the more textually oriented traditions. Their important commentaries on various Sanskrit literature helps the reader to understand the root text and of these explanations.

A commentator might argue that the relationship between the section on perception and the section on whole and part is one of “corollary” (*prasaṅga*), and the relation between the section on wholes and parts and the section on inference one of “removing an obstacle” (*avasara*), 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. Emulations of the *sūtra*–*bhāṣya*

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. 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. 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 *Nyāya*. 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*.

5. Conclusion

The *bhāṣya* or *commentary* is a fundamental paradigm in Sanskrit 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 goes 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. 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.” 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 with a will is a way of understanding the text easily.

Information Source

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