

MORAL BASIS OF LINGUISTIC STANDARD IN PATAÑJALI'S *MAHĀBHĀṢYA*

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Abstract

This paper explores the moral foundations of linguistic standards as elucidated in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*, examining how ethical considerations intertwine with grammatical correctness. Patañjali's conception of *śiṣṭa* (the cultured or learned speaker) serves as a normative model, reinforcing the idea that linguistic propriety is deeply connected to moral and social discipline. The study critically evaluates whether the values embedded in the *Mahābhāṣya* are universal and eternal, questioning the assumption that all residents of Āryāvarta exemplified the highest virtues associated with *śiṣṭa* speakers. By contextualizing Patañjali's linguistic philosophy within broader ethical frameworks, the paper highlights the interplay between grammar, morality, and cultural hierarchy. Furthermore, it reassesses the applicability of these linguistic values in a contemporary setting, probing whether they can be reinterpreted beyond their ancient sociocultural context. The analysis also considers the implications of Manu's legal thought in shaping moral-linguistic norms, albeit with a critical perspective on its historical reception. Through a detailed study of Sanskrit textual sources with precise translations, this paper offers an enriched understanding of how Patañjali's grammatical discourse is not merely technical but also a reflection of ethical and societal ideals.

Keywords: Human Values, Āryāvarta, śiṣṭācāra, Dharma, *Kumbhīdhanyaḥ*, *Alolupaḥ*

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Introduction

The intersection of morality and linguistics has been a subject of inquiry in various philosophical traditions. In ancient India, linguistic correctness was not merely a grammatical concern but was deeply intertwined with moral and ethical considerations. The *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali, one of the foundational texts on Sanskrit grammar, goes beyond a technical exposition of linguistic rules; it also serves as a commentary on the moral dimensions of language and communication. In this study, I examine the moral underpinnings of linguistic standards in the *Mahābhāṣya*, focusing on Patañjali's concept of *śiṣṭa* (the cultured and learned) as the model for linguistic authority.

From the outset, it is crucial to recognize that Patañjali's normative framework assumes a hierarchical structure in which linguistic authority is vested in a specific class of individuals. But are these values truly universal? Were all residents of Āryāvarta (the sacred land of the learned) exemplars of the highest virtues associated with *śiṣṭa*? This paper interrogates such assumptions and critically evaluates the moral foundations of linguistic standardization in the *Mahābhāṣya*.

Patañjali and the Concept of *śiṣṭa*

Patañjali identifies the *śiṣṭa* as the guardians of linguistic purity. According to him, correct language use is determined by the speech of those who are well-versed in the *Vedas*, knowledgeable in grammar, and who lead disciplined lives. The *Mahābhāṣya* states:

“Prāgādarśāt pratyak kalakavanāt dakṣiṇena himavantam, uttarena pāriyātram—etasmin āryāvarte āryanivāse ye brāhmaṇāḥ kumbhīdhānyā alolupā agrhyamāṇakāraṇāḥ kiñcidantarena kasyāścidvidyāyāḥ pāram gatāḥ tatra bhavantaḥ śiṣṭaḥ.” [Mahābhāṣya, Vol. 5, p.261]

(Trans.: *Those Brāhmaṇas who reside in Āryāvarta, who are content with what they have, who are free from greed, who study scriptures not for material gain but for the sake of knowledge alone -these are considered śiṣṭa.*)

The *śiṣṭa* are thus depicted as paragons of self-restraint, discipline, and wisdom. However, the elevation of this group as the arbiters of linguistic correctness raises important questions about inclusivity. Does this criterion exclude those outside the prescribed socio-geographical boundaries? Were all inhabitants of Āryāvarta truly exemplars of virtue?

In the context of linguistic analysis, Acharya Vishwanatha cites a verse while explaining the methods of *śakti-graha* (interpretative understanding):

“*Shaktigrahaṃ vyākaraṇopamāna-koṣāpta-vākyād-vyavahārataśca, |
Vākyasya śeṣād-vivṛteḥ vadanti sānnidhyataḥ siddhapadasya vṛddhāḥ.*”||

[*Muktāvalī, Kārikā - 81 Bhāṣāpariccheda*]

[Trns.: The comprehension of meaning (*śakti-graha*) is derived from grammar (*vyākaraṇa*), analogy (*upamāna*), lexicons (*koṣa*), authoritative statements of trustworthy persons (*āpta-vākya*), and practical usage (*vyavahāra*). Additionally, it is understood from the remaining part of a sentence (*vākyasya śeṣa*), from context (*vivṛti*), and through proximity to established words (*sānnidhyataḥ siddha-pada*), as stated by scholars (*vṛddhāḥ*).]

Though eight methods are mentioned in this verse, the most esteemed is *vyavahāra* (practical usage) or *vṛddha-vyavahāra* (practices of the learned). From a young age, we learn values from our parents or elders in the form of instructions: “Do not do this,” “This is right,” “That is wrong.” This aligns with the Vedic tradition of *śruti* (oral transmission of knowledge), where injunctions and prohibitions coexist. For instance:

- “*Satyam vada, dharmam chara*” (Speak the truth, follow righteousness”) - an injunction that simultaneously implies: “Do not speak falsehood, do not act unrighteously.”
- Similarly, “*Satyan-na-pramaditavyam, dharmān-na-pramaditavyam*” (Do not deviate from truth, do not stray from righteousness) - a prohibition that encourages steadfastness in truth and righteousness.

Beyond *vyavahāra*, another crucial means of inculcating values is through the study of *śāstra* (scripture). Scriptures provide a comprehensive framework for understanding human values. Individuals who are well-versed in scriptures, whose actions are free from malice and selfishness, and whose conduct benefits society, are referred to as *śiṣṭa* (the learned or cultured). Their behavior, termed *śiṣṭacāra*, serves as a model for others to emulate.

The identification of a *śiṣṭa* individual is elaborated in the grammatical treatise *Astādhyāyī* by Pāṇini, specifically in the context of the rule “*Pṛṣodarādīni yathopadiṣṭam*” [*Astādhyāyī*, 6.3.109]. In his commentary (*Mahābhāṣya*), Maharishi Patañjali elucidates:

Statement: “*Upadiṣṭā ime varṇāḥ*” — These letters are instructed.

Question: “*Kaiḥ punaḥ upadiṣṭāni?*” — Who has instructed them?

Answer: “*śiṣṭaiḥ*.” —The learned.

Question: “*Ke punaḥ śiṣṭaḥ?*” — Who are the *śiṣṭa*?

Answer: “*Vaiyākaraṇāḥ*.” — Grammarians are considered *śiṣṭa*.

Question: “*Kuta etat?*” — Why so?

Answer: “*Śāstra-pūrvikā hi śiṣṭiḥ, vaiyākaraṇāśca śāstrajñāḥ*” — Cultured behavior arises from scriptures, and grammarians are well-versed in them.

A potential concern arises here: If *śiṣṭi* is based on scripture, and scripture relies on *śiṣṭi*, does this create mutual dependence (*ītare tara-āśraya-doṣa*)? Patañjali resolves this by stating:

- Statement: “*Evam tarhi nivasataśca ācārataśca*.” — The definition of *śiṣṭa* depends on their place of residence and conduct. Further, he clarifies:
- Statement: “*Sa cācāraḥ āryāvartte eva*.” — The conduct in the region of *Āryāvarta* (the ancient land of noble beings).
- Question: “*Kaḥ punaḥ Āryāvartaḥ?*” — What is *Āryāvarta*?

* In the commentary, the question arises:

“What is *Āryāvarta*?” Is it what is mentioned in *Manusmṛti*:

“*Āsamudrāc ca pūrvasmad asamudrāc ca ca paścimāt,
tayor evāntarā giriḥ āryāvartaṁ pracakṣate*”

(Trns.: *The region between the eastern and western oceans and the mountains within that span is called Āryāvarta.*),

or does it extend further beyond that ?

In Manu’s statement, the term “*tayoh*” refers to the *Himavat* and *Vindhya* mountains, as clarified:

“*Himavadvindhyaḥ madhye yat prāgvīśānād api,
pratyageva prayāgāc ca madhyadeśaḥ prakīrtitaḥ*”

(Trns.: *The region between Himavat and Vindhya, from the east of Vīśānā to the west of Prayāga, is proclaimed as Madhyadeśa.*)

This explanation aligns with what was stated earlier.

[“(Bhāṣye) *Kaḥ punaḥ Āryāvartaḥ iti* | *Kim Āsamudrāc ca pūrvasmād asamudrāc ca ca paścimāt* | *tayor evāntarā giriḥ āryāvartaṁ pracakṣate* | *Iti Manūktāḥ, kimvā tadvyāpṛya iti praśnaḥ* | *Manuvākye ‘tayor’ ity asya Himavadvindhyaḥ ity arthaḥ,*

*‘Himavadvindhyaḥ madhye yat prāgvīśānād api
pratyageva prayāgāc ca madhyadeśaḥ prakīrtitaḥ* |]

Iti pūrvamukteḥ |] — *Mahābhāṣyapradīpodyottikā, Nāgeśabhaṭṭa. pp. 260-261*

(Trans.: *In the Bhāṣya (commentary), the question arises: “What, then, is Āryāvarta?”*

He describes it as the region between the eastern *Adarśa* (mountains of Kurukṣetra), the western *Kālaka-vana* (modern Prayag), the southern *Himavanta* (Himalayas), and the northern *Parīyātra* (Vindhya ranges).

The śīṣṭa of this region are defined as follows:

- They are brahmins with qualities such as *kumbhīdhānya* (self-sufficient), *alolupa* (non-greedy), and dedicated to the study of scriptures purely for the sake of knowledge.
- Their actions are virtuous, devoid of ulterior motives, and guided by wisdom.

Thus, human values are deeply embedded in traditional practices and scriptures. These values, while timeless, require practical exemplification by learned individuals whose lives inspire adherence to moral and ethical principles. By observing and learning from such śīṣṭa individuals, society internalizes these values, fostering a culture of integrity, compassion, and righteousness.

The three qualities mentioned above are explained below:

1. ***Kumbhīdhānyaḥ*:**

A *śīṣṭa* (virtuous) individual is described as someone who lives contentedly with minimal possessions. Imagine visiting the home of such a person and finding just a small jar of rice, sufficient for a few days or a week. This doesn't indicate poverty; rather, it reflects their lack of desire for surplus or excessive preparation. In essence, they are happy with little and maintain minimal desires. Such a person exemplifies the trait of *Kumbhīdhānyaḥ*. This quality urges us to adopt a life free from excessive desires. Human longing and ambition are insatiable, as elucidated by Ācārya Manu in the *Manusmṛiti*. He emphasizes that desires cannot be extinguished by fulfilling them but instead grow, much like pouring ghee into a fire:

Is it defined as the land extending from the eastern ocean to the western ocean, with the region between these two oceans and the intervening mountains being called Āryāvarta?

Manu states: "Āryāvarta is said to be the region between these two mountains." However, the question arises whether it extends beyond this region.

In Manu's statement, the term "these two" refers to the Himālaya and Vindhya mountains. Additionally, as stated earlier:

"The land situated between the Himālaya and Vindhya mountains, from the eastern limit of Vinśanā to the western boundary of Prayāga, is recognized as Madhyadeśa (the central region)."

“*na jātu kāmāḥ kāmānām upabhogena sāmyati |
haviṣa kṛṣṇavartmeva bhūya evābhivardhate*” ||

[*Manusamhitā*. 2/98]

(Trans.: Desires are never satiated through enjoyment. Like fire fed with ghee, they grow ever *stronger*.)

In contemporary society, the consequences of unchecked desires are evident. Many individuals find themselves imprisoned, trapped in the consequences of pursuing insatiable ambitions. Desires, however, can be directed toward liberation or the pursuit of profound knowledge of the *śāstra-s* (scriptures). Such meaningful aspirations not only benefit the individual but also contribute to a more harmonious society.

2. *Alolupah*:

A *śiṣṭa* individual is also free from greed (*alolupah*). This virtue reflects contentment with whatever the divine has provided. Greed for wealth, power, or possessions has historically driven humanity into corruption, theft, and moral degradation. Turn on any modern news channel, and you’ll find countless stories of fraud, theft, and unethical behavior fueled by greed. Greed, however, is not a contemporary issue; it has existed since ancient times. The *Īśopaniṣad* addresses this in its opening mantra:

“*īśavāsyam idaṁ sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyam jagat |
tena tyaktena bhuñjītha mā gṛdhaḥ kasyasvid dhanam*” ||

[*Īśopaniṣad*, 1]

(Trans. by Sitanath Goswami: ‘All this moving in the world is (apt to be known as) enveloped by the Ruler. So foster (Your Self) by renunciation. Do not greedy of anybody’s wealth.’)

This mantra conveys a profound truth: greed cannot bring peace. True contentment arises from leading a simple life rooted in values, fostering peace and tranquility.

3. *Agrhyamānakāraṇaḥ Kiñcidantareṇa Kasyāścidvidyāyāḥ Pāram Gatāḥ*:

This quality refers to someone who studies various *śāstra-s* without any ulterior motive or materialistic expectation. Such a person pursues knowledge purely for the sake of understanding and self-realization. In the *Mahābhāṣya*, Patañjali describes such an ideal individual in the *Prasphāhnikā*:

“*brāhmaṇena niṣkāraṇo dharmah ṣaḍaṅgo vedaḥ adhyeyo jñeyas ca iti*” [*Mahābhāṣya*, Vol. 1, p.26]

(Trans: A Brāhmaṇa must study the Veda along with its six limbs (ṣaḍaṅga) selflessly, simply to know and uphold dharma.)

Importantly, this directive is not exclusive to the *Brāhmaṇa* class; it applies to all individuals, irrespective of their societal classification. The emphasis is on selfless learning and the pursuit of knowledge, which leads to moral and intellectual refinement.

Language, Power, and Social Hierarchy

Patañjali's formulation of linguistic authority reflects the socio-political realities of his time. By linking linguistic correctness to a morally upright and learned class, he reinforces an elite hegemony. This aligns with the broader Brahmanical ideology that sought to regulate knowledge transmission through caste-based exclusivity. Such a perspective, while ensuring linguistic continuity, also marginalized those outside the privileged circles.

A parallel can be drawn with *Manusmṛti*, which also delineates hierarchical structures of purity and propriety in language. However, reliance on *Manusmṛti* as an authority in linguistic matters necessitates caution. The text is often criticized for its rigid caste distinctions, and uncritical citation of its precepts risks reinforcing exclusionary frameworks.

In contrast, Buddhist and Jain linguistic traditions advocated more inclusive approaches to language use. Pāli and Ardhamāgadhī, for instance, emerged as mediums of religious discourse accessible to wider populations, challenging the linguistic elitism upheld by Sanskrit grammar.

The Ethical Dimension of Language Use

Patañjali does not merely prescribe linguistic rules; he embeds them within an ethical framework. Language, according to him, should be a vehicle for truth (*satya*) and non-harm (*ahiṃsā*). This aligns with the broader Indian philosophical tradition where ethical conduct (*dharma*) permeates all aspects of life, including speech.

This principle is evident in Patañjali's discussion on the importance of precise pronunciation and grammatical accuracy.

Mispronunciations or grammatical errors are not merely technical faults but moral failings, as they can distort meaning and lead to miscommunication. Such an approach suggests that ethical responsibility extends to how one speaks, reinforcing the idea that proper linguistic practice is part of one's duty (*dharma*).

However, this perspective assumes a static notion of linguistic purity. Language is inherently dynamic, evolving with socio-cultural shifts. The rigid insistence on a standardized linguistic form, dictated by an elite class, may have contributed to Sanskrit's eventual decline as a spoken language, as it became increasingly inaccessible to common people.

Conclusion

The *Mahābhāṣya* offers valuable insights into the moral dimensions of linguistic practice. Patañjali's concept of *śiṣṭa* establishes an idealized model of linguistic correctness, linking it to ethical virtues and social standing. However, this ideal raises critical questions about inclusivity and power. By privileging the speech of a select group, it risks excluding diverse linguistic expressions and reinforcing social hierarchies.

While Patañjali's ethical emphasis on truth and precision in language remains relevant, a more inclusive approach that acknowledges linguistic diversity is necessary. Language is not only a vehicle of morality but also of social identity and transformation. In reevaluating the *Mahābhāṣya*, we must balance the reverence for linguistic tradition with an appreciation of language as a living, evolving entity.

By critically engaging with these perspectives, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between language, morality, and social order in ancient Indian thought, while also drawing lessons for contemporary linguistic discourse.

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