Katarzyna Pażucha[*]

Notes Towards Defining 'Theory' (*Śāstra*) in Sanskrit; Systematic Classification Presented in Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*

Abstract

Even though the genre of *śāstra* is one of the most familiar and important constituents of the cultural and intellectual history of South Asia, it did not receive the proper attention and the term itself remains obscure. Also in the tradition of Sanskrit letters itself the scope and nature of *śāstra,* it would seem*,* is not precisely delineated. Using the discussion presented by Rājaśekhara, the tenth century poet and theoretician, in his *Kāvyamīmāṃsā,* this article will try to bring together recent evaluations of the genre with a contextualized discussion of the tradition's selfunderstanding.

Key words

Introduction

The genre of *śāstra* is one of the most familiar and important constituents of the cultural and intellectual history of South Asia. Even though as a genre it looms large in the history of Sanskrit literature, or, rather precisely because of its ubiquity, the term itself remains obscure. Pollock, in his article on the relationship between theory and practice in South Asia notes:

> In light of the major role it appears to play in Indian civilization, it is surprising to discover that the idea and nature of *śāstra* in its own right, as a discrete problem

[*] South Asian Languages and Civilizations Department
University of Chicago, United States of America
Email: kpazucha@uchicago.edu

of intellectual history, seem never to have been the object of sustained scrutiny. Individual *śāstras* have of course received intensive examination, as have certain major sub-genres, such as *sūtra.* But a systematic and synthetic analysis of a phenomenon as a whole, as presenting a specific and unique problematic of its own, has not to my knowledge been undertaken. (Pollock 1985: 500–501)

It is important to note that this last proposition holds true not only of the comparatively recent branch of knowledge, Indology, but is largely accurate even when we take into account the tradition of Sanskrit letters itself: the scope and nature of *śāstra*, it would seem, is not precisely delineated, and attempts to do so today are what one might term 'reconstructions' of the genre. Thus, the word 'theory' and 'knowledge systems' or even, in a recent proposal by Ashok Aklujkar, 'science,' must be seen as attempts to get at the significance of the genre and must require careful attention to the self-understanding of the authors and critics in Sanskrit; otherwise, such reconstructions would only cast a blinding glare in place of an attempt to shed light.[1]

Virtually any kind of human activity could be a subject for a particular *śāstra*: there are *śāstras* belonging to religious, philosophical, literary, and also more practical fields (e.g. there exist *śāstras* on elephants, horses, weapons, and perfumery). By the time of Rājaśekhara (the beginning of tenth century), the concept of *śāstra* as a separate genre of literature was well established. In this article I will attempt to use this particular discussion [the one presented by Rājaśekhara in his *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*[2]] as an opportunity to bring together recent evaluations of the genre with a contextualized discussion of the tradition's self-understanding.

The word itself[3] means 'teaching, instruction' (from the verbal root *śās* – 'teach, instruct' with the suffix *-tra* forming a noun indicating an in-

---

[1] Already Aristotle warned: 'a definition should not be more precise than its subject allows.'

[2] Henceforth *KM.*

[3] Difficulties with defining *śāstra* are also visible in the dictionary definitions. For example, in his Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Monier Monier-Williams defines *śāstra* as follows: '*śāstra* – n. an order, command, precept, rule; teaching, instruction, direction, advice, good counsel; any instrument of teaching, any manual or compendium of rules, any book or treatise, (esp.) any religious or scientific treatise, any sacred book or composition of divine authority (applicable even to the Veda, and said to be of fourteen or even eighteen kinds [see under *vidyā*]; the word *śāstra* is often found ifc. after the word denoting the subject of the book, or if applied collectively to whole department of knowledge, e.g. *vedānta-śāstra*, a work on the *vedānta* philosophy or the whole body

strument or means of the action of the verbal root).[4] In earlier times, especially in the grammatical tradition, it meant 'authoritative rule,' while outside that tradition it had a broader meaning of 'system of ideas,' or 'philosophical system' in general. (Pollock 1985: 501)

We can find one of the first formal definitions of *śāstra* in Kumārilabhaṭṭa, the seventh-century Mīmāṃsaka:

> *śāstra* is that which teaches people what they should and should not do. It does this by means of eternal words or those made by men. Descriptions of the nature [of things/states] can be embraced by the term *śāstra* insofar as they are elements subordinate [to injunctions to action]. (*Ślokavārttika*, p. 288, after: Pollock 1985: 501)

This definition is broad enough to include within the province of *śāstra* any type of human endeavor, as long as the rules for it are put into words (be they human or eternal). It appears that almost everything that seemed worthy of and amenable to systematization (because of its practical importance, its appeal to the universal or common interests of men, etc.) was systematized by the thinkers of pre-Islamic India. Thus not only do we have huge compendia on subjects such as proper conduct and medicine, but also manuals on jewels and perfumery.

Rājaśekhara's Classification

The first fairly systematic list of *śāstras* can be found in Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*, a tenth-century text. In the second chapter of his work, entitled *"Śāstranirdeśa"* (*The Specification of Theories*), Rājaśekhara offers an explanation of the domain and scope of *śāstras*. He divides all literature – *vāṅmaya*, in the broadest sense of the word, into two groups: *kāvya* – poetry, or 'high literature' (which one might term 'literature' in the narrow sense of this word, as per Pollock's argument) (Pollock 2003: 39–41) and *śāstra* – science, theory. Rājaśekhara devotes this chapter only to the field of *śāstra*; *kāvya* is discussed in later parts of the work.

---

of teaching on that subject; *dharma-śāstra,* a law book or whole body of written laws; *kāvya-śāstra*, a poetical work or poetry in general; *śilpi-śāstra*, works on the mechanical arts; *kāma-śāstra*, erotic compositions; *alaṃkāra-śāstra*, rhetorics, etc.' (Monier-Williams 2002 [1899]: 1069)

[4] Buddhists give the following *nirukta*: '*śās'* – 'subdue' [the *kleśas* (afflictions)], and '*tra*' for '*tārayati*,' it carries us across to the other shore. (The definition comes from Vasubandhu' *Vyakhyayukti.*)

Rājaśekhara gives a detailed exposition of *śāstras,* since in the world of literature, it is *śāstra* that preceeds *kāvya*; only after studying theories can a poet can move on to composing poetry.[5]

Rājaśekhara proceeds then to a discussion of the sciences, and divides them into two categories: *apauruṣeya* – transcendent, of non-human origin, and *pauruṣeya* – human. Transcendent *śāstra* consists of fourteen parts: the four Vedas (Ṛg, Yajur, Sāma, and Atharva); the four *upavedas* (history (*itihāsa*), the science of weapons or war generally (*dhanurveda*), music (*gandharvaveda*), medicine (*ayurveda*)); and the six *vedāṅgas* or ancillary disciplines of the Vedas, which are listed as: phonetic observations (*śikṣā*), appropriate conduct or procedure in personal, ritual, and social life (*kalpa*), language analysis, grammar (*vyākaraṇa*), context-sensitive word derivation (*nirukta*), prosody (*chandas*), and astronomy (*jyotiṣa*). To the traditional list of six *vedāṅgas*, Rājaśekhara adds *alaṅkāra* (poetics),[6] promising to discuss it later.[7] He explains the necessity for adding *alaṅkāra* as the seventh *vedāṅga* in the following way:[8]

According to Yayavariya, *alaṅkāraśāstra* is a seventh *vedāṅga* because of its usefulness; without thorough knowledge of its nature there can be no comprehension of the meaning of the Vedas.

As, for example, in the following:

Two birds – friends, companions – cling to the same tree
One of them eats the sweet fruit,
the other one keeps watching continually, not eating at all.[9]

---

[5] *śāstrapūrvakatvāt kāvyānāṃ pūrvaṃ śāstreṣv abhiniviśeta.*
na hy apravarttitapradīpās tamasi tattvārthasārtham adhyakṣayanti. (*Rājaśekhara Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 1934: 2.16–17) (Due to the priority of *śāstra* (science) to poetry one should first resort to sciences. Since those whose lamps are not kindled do not see a caravan of real things in the darkness.) Necessity of studying sciences prior to writing poetry is elaborated upon in later chapters devoted to the training of poets.
[6] Adding *alaṅkāra* as the seventh *vedāṅga* was part of Rājaśekhara's great project of securing a place for *kāvyavidyā* among other respectable *śāstras* (affiliated with and drawing their authority from the Vedas).
[7] From the table of content in the introductory part of the *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* we know that Rājaśekhara intended to discuss *alaṅkāras* in the later nine *adhikaraṇa-s.* (4–12)
[8] Unless stated otherwise all translations from *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* are mine.
[9] *upakārakatvād alaṅkāraḥ saptamam aṅgam iti yāyāvarīyaḥ. ṛte ca tatsvarūpaparijñānad vedārthānavagateḥ. yathā*
dvā suparṇā sayujā sasvāyā samānaṃ vṛkṣaṃ pariṣasvajāte.

The example comes from Ṛgveda I.164.20 and was quoted in many later Upaniṣads. This verse can be understood only after analyzing the poetic figures used in it. According to Rājaśekhara, it is only proper to include *alaṅkāra* in the list of *vedāṅgas,* since without its assistance, uncovering the obsolete meaning of Vedas (which was precisely the function of the other *vedāṅgas*) would be impossible.

Rājaśekhara includes in the category of the human sciences four *śāstras*: ancient stories (*purāṇas*), logic or philosophy in general (*ānvīkṣikī*), hermeneutics or Vedic exegesis (*mīmāṃsā*), and non-Vedic scripture[10] (*smṛtitantra*). There are eighteen *purāṇas*, and for most part they are descriptions of the tales from the Vedas. Some add *itihāsa* (history) as a subdivision of the *purāṇas*. And *itihāsa* is twofold: *parakriyā* (if it has one main hero; the *Rāmāyaṇa* is an example of this type), and *purākalpa* (if it has many heroes; for example, the *Mahābharata*). (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* p. 3) As for *ānvīkṣikī,* it also is divided into two sub-categories: *pūrva* and *uttara*. The first one comprises *jaina*, *bauddha*, and *lokayata*; and the second – *sāṅkhya*, *nyāya,* and *vaiśeṣika*.

These are six *tarkas* (philosophical schools). Here Rājaśekhara gives a detailed description of the types of arguments appropriate for philosophical discussion.[11] *mīmāṃsā* is the exegesis of Vedic passages. It is divided into two groups: *vidhivivecanī* (exegesis of Vedic ritual injunctions) and *brahmanidarśanī* (looking into/investigation of Brahman). There are eighteen *smṛtis* involved in the preservation of the Vedas' meaning.

These four human *śāstras,* together with the four Vedas and six *vedāṅgas*, form fourteen *vidyāsthānas* (abodes of knowledge).[12] They pertain to everything existing in the three worlds – earth, sky, and heaven. Rājaśekhara admits that it would be impossible to discuss all the topics covered by *vidyāsthānas*:

---

tayor anyaḥ pippalaṃ svādvatti anaśnann anyo abhicākaśīti. (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 3.1–4)

Meaning of this particular verse was broadly discussed by various authors. See for example Dalal, Shastri, Notes, p. 133.

[10] According to Pollock *smṛtitantra* refers to *dharmaśāstra-s.* (Pollock 1985: 502)

[11] Discussion on *ānvīkṣikī* is given later in the chapter, where it is listed as one of the four *vidyā-s.*

[12] This was not the only, universally accepted division of *vidyāsthāna-s*. Rājaśekhara himself presents us with the views of other scholars. To the list of fourteen *vidyāsthāna-s*, some added *vārttā* (economics), *kāmasūtra* (erotology)*, śilpiśāstra* (hand craft)*, and *daṇḍanīti* (criminal science), thus counting eighteen *vidyāsthāna-s*.

Even one living for thousand years
Would not be able to reach the end of *vidyāsthānas.*
Therefore, the multitude of topics is presented here briefly;
The expanded version is abandoned for the sake of those fearing long treatises.[13]

After discussing this traditional division of the *vidyāsthānas,* Rāja-śekhara adds a fifteenth one – *kāvya*. He claims that it is the single abode of all other *vidyāsthānas.*[14] He explains how *kāvya* (poetry) follows *śāstras* (theory) because it consists of prose and metrical form; because it is the *dharma* of poets; and because it provides proper instruction.[15]

In addition to the category of *vidyāsthānas*, there is also a group of *vidyās.* There are different opinions regarding the number of *vidyās*[16]*.* Rāja-śekhara, following Kauṭilya, poses four *vidyās*: *ānvīkṣikī* (philosophy)*, trayī* (the Vedas), *vārttā* (economics)*,* and *daṇḍanīti* (law). Only theories through which *dharma* and *artha* can be obtained are considered *vidyās.*[17] Based on that, Rājaśekhara adds *sāhityavidyā* (the theory of literature) as the fifth *vidyā*, because it is the essence (*niṣyanda*) of the traditional four.[18] Here ends his enumeration of the sciences.

---

[13] *vidyāsthānāṃ gantum antaṃ na śakto
jived varṣāṇāṃ yo 'pi sāgraṃ sahasram.*
tasmāt saṅkṣepād arthasandoha ukto
vyāsaḥ saṃtyakto granthabhīrupriyārtham. (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 3.27–4.2)

[14] *sakalavidyāsthānaikāyatanaṃ pañcadaśaṃ kāvyaṃ vidyāsthānam.* (*Kāvyamī-māṃsā* 4.3) Yāyāvarīya says: *kāvya* is the fifteenth *vidyāsthāna* (department of knowledge), being a single abode/culmination of all other *vidyāsthāna*-s.

[15] *gadyapadyamayatvāt kavidharmatvāt hitopadeśakatvāc ca. taddhi śāstrāṇyan-udhāvati.* (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 4.4–5) (Because it consist of prose and metrical forms, because it is a *dharma* of poets, and because it gives a proper instruction, it follows the sciences.)

[16] 'daṇḍanītir evaika vidyā' ity auśanasāḥ. daṇḍabhayād dhi kṛtsno lokaḥ sveṣu sveṣu karmasv avatiṣṭhate. 'vārttā daṇḍanītir dve vidye iti bārhaspatyāḥ. vṛttir vinay-agrahaṇaṃ ca sthitihetur lokayātrāyāḥ. 'trayīvārttādaṇḍanītayas tisro vidyāḥ' iti māna-vāḥ. trayī hi vārttādaṇḍanītyor upadeṣṭrī. (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 4.7–11) (According to the followers of Uśanas *daṇḍanīti* is the only science. Since, fearing a stick, all people obey their own duties. Followers of Bṛhaspati say there are two sciences: *vārttā,* and *daṇḍanīti*, because worldly existence is sustained by livelihood and obedience. For followers of Manu there are 3 sciences: *trayī, vārttā* and *daṇḍanīti,* since *trayī* gives instructions on *vārttā* and *daṇḍanīti*.)

[17] *ābhir dharmārthau yad vidyāt tad vidyānāṃ vidyatvam.* (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 4.15)

[18] *pañcamī sāhityavidyā iti yāyāvarīyaḥ. sā hi catasṛṇām api niṣyandaḥ.* (*Kāvyamī-māṃsā* 4.13–14)

The above-cited examples do not give an exhaustive list of possible divisions of the *śāstras*; Rājaśekhara himself presents us with many other viewpoints. But there is one valuable thing that we can glean from this tenth-century discussion: we can infer that already by the time of Rājaśekhara the idea of *śāstra* as a separate, specific field of human activity was commonly accepted. It also shows us that there existed a notion of some finite number of *śāstras*, and that scholars generally worked towards compiling an exhaustive classification of human practices. After discussing various propositions regarding a definite number of sciences, Rājaśekhara admits that there is no such thing.

The number of *śāstras* is not the only problem we encounter when trying to understand this phenomenon. As is evident from the above discussion, we are dealing with nomenclatural confusion. *Śāstras* in general can be divided into *pauruṣeya* (human) and *apauruṣeya* (transcendent), *laukika* (secular) and *alaukika* (regarding sacred subjects), *dṛṣṭa* (seen, secular) and *adṛṣṭa* (unseen, sacred). But where in this scheme do we fit *vidyāsthānas* (abodes of knowledge), *vidyās,* and *āgamas*?

Aklujkar states:

> The most common and closest indigenous generic name for Brahmanical, Jain, and Buddhist sciences is *śāstra*, 'means of instruction', although it is not the case that all systematized bodies of knowledge are referred to as *śāstra*. Generally, a body of knowledge needs to acquire some respectability – a connotation of mature or age-old, proven wisdom in the minds of a large enough group of society members – before it begins to be referred to as *śāstra*. Sometimes words like *āgama* 'inherited information or knowledge' and *smṛti* 'memory--preserved information or knowledge' take the place of *śāstra*, with the understanding that one tradition's *āgama* or *smṛti* is not authoritative for another. (Aklujkar: 16)

And also:

> The situation is made more complex, as in any vibrant tradition, by the emergence and disappearance and by the convergence and divergence of different ways of sectioning knowledge. These ways, in turn, reflect different points of view and different 'historical' needs. Thus, sometimes a segmenting may be found with *śāstra* as the presiding node and sometimes a segmenting in terms of *vidyā-sthānas* 'stations or abodes of wisdom'.
> Sometimes *śāstra* is distinguished from *śilpa* 'craft, practical or technical skill' or *catuḥṣaṣṭi kalās* 'sixty-four arts (many of which are manifestations of craftsmanship),' while sometimes no such distinction is made. (Aklujkar: 8)

I have been unable thus far to solve this problem. It seems, moreover, that it was never entirely clear even within the tradition itself; oftentimes we find different terms for 'theory' used interchangeably. It is not certain what the relationship was between *śastra* in the broader sense, the *vidyāsyhānas*, and the *vidyā*s.[19]

It seems that Rājaśekhara in his *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* uses these three broad categories to deal with the world of Sanskrit theoretical writing. The main one, encompassing the other two, is *śastra*. It is divided into two types: *apauruṣeya* (the four Vedas, the four *upaveda*-s, and the six *vedāṅgas*), and *pauruṣeya* (the *purāṇas, anvikṣiki, mīmāṃsā, smṛtitantra*). He then introduces two other subdivisions, which are composed of various individual theories belonging either to transcendent or human *śastra*. The first of them are the fourteen *vidyāsthānas:* the four Vedas, the six *aṅgas*, and the four human *śastras*. It comprises some transcendent sciences (the Vedas and *vedāṅgas*) and all human *śastras*.

Clearly the *vidyāsthānas* (sometimes treated as subcategories of the *vidyās)* occupy an important place within the broader field of the *śastras*, although neither the number nor the content of this group is fully agreed upon.[20]

Sūtras and Their Commentaries

Before we return to the case of Rājaśekara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā,* a brief review of the specific works belonging to the providence of *śastra* will help us to better understand the terms under discussion. The earliest examples of works that are included within the field are the *vedāṅgas*, or 'the limbs of the Vedas' (c. 600–300 B.C.E.). They were the six ancillary sciences[21] created to preserve and to help understand the obsolete Vedic texts. At first, the *vedāṅgas* were descriptive in character, concerning themselves with

---

[19] *vidyā* – f. knowledge, science, learning, scholarship, philosophy (according to some there are four *vidyās* or sciences, 1. *trayī,* the triple Veda; 2. *ānvīkṣikī,* logic and metaphysics; 3. *daṇḍa-nīti,* the science of goverment; 4. *vārttā,* practical arts*,* such as agriculture, commerce, medicine, & c. [...] according to others *vidyā* has fourteen divisions, viz. the four Vedas, the six *vedāṅgas*, the *purāṇas*, the *mīmāṃsā*, *nyāya*, and *dharma* or law; or with the four *upavedas*, eighteen divisions; others reckon 33 and even 64 sciences [=*kalās* or arts]. (Monier-Williams 2002: 963–964)

[20] See for example: Pollock 1989: 20.

[21] For the list of *vedāṅgas* see above.

sacred subjects. They were never meant to generate new material; since the Vedas were unchanging and eternal, the only function that *vedāṅgas* could serve was to guide the practical, ritualistic activity required by the Vedas. As Sheldon Pollock puts it: 'The *vedāṅgas,* thus, are in their very nature taxonomical, not stipulative; descriptive, not prescriptive.' (Pollock 1985: 503)

But already among the *vedāṅgas,* i.e. grammar and prosody, we can find traces of *laukika* (secular) material. Gradually, the mode of exposition became injunctive and took on a prescriptive aspect – and those two aspects led to the development of more worldly (*laukika*) *śāstras*.

Not long after the creation of the *vedāṅgas,* the so-called *trivarga* or 'triad' of human activity, namely *dharma* (social/religious laws), *artha* (polity), and *kāma* (erotology), obtained their śāstric or 'scientific,' treatment. The oldest *dharmaśāstra* texts come from around the third and second centuries BCE, while the production of the *artha-* and *kāmaśāstra* texts followed in the next few centuries, with the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautiliya around the first or second century CE and the *Kāmasūtra* of Vatsyayana not long after.

Activity in the field of the philosophical inquiry also dates to the centuries before the common era. From around the second century BCE we have the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtras* of Jaimini – the core text for the school of Vedic exegesis, *mīmāṃsā*. The *sūtra* text for *nyāya*, or reasoning, is available sometime around the second century CE. The texts for the rest of the traditional *darśanas*, or philosophical systems, were also created in the first centuries of the common era.

A prominent *śāstra* within the Sanskrit intellectual circle was *vyākaraṇa*, or grammar. Being traditionally one of the *vedāṅgas*, grammar held very respected position among the other sciences. The *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini (fifth century BCE) is the oldest known text on grammar and one of the first *sūtra* texts, which soon became the template for the genre. Houben, writing about the sciences in South Asia says:

> The earliest traceable roots of sciences in South Asia [...] lie in the works of the Vedic ritualists and the Sanskrit grammarians. Especially the grammarians attained widely acclaimed success in the development of a science, and it was their system that started to play a paradigmatic role in practically all areas of the South Asian scientific an philosophic literary production. (Houben 1997: 271–305)

Looking at the earliest available examples of Sanskrit knowledge systems, Pollock offers the following summary comment:

śāstra was thought of generally as a verbal codification of rules, whether of divine or human provenance, for the positive and negative regulation of particular cultural practices. (Pollock 1989: 18)

One of the indispensable features necessary for a system to be included into the field of *śāstras* was the expression of its rules in some form of text, and, in the case of the *śāstras, sūtra* texts became paradigmatic for the tradition. The term '*sūtra*' literally means 'thread, string.' Houben, citing Renou, gives a few examples of possible interpretations of this term: 'the term stems from the terminology of weavers,' '(guiding) thread,' hence 'rule,' 'the pearls on the string.' (Houben 1997: 274) The first *sūtra* texts can be found in the *vyākaraṇa* (grammar) tradition, as mentioned above, and in *kalpa* (ritual instructions). The oldest examples are the *śrauta-sūtras* (Vedic rituals), then the *gṛhya-sūtras* (domestic rituals) and the *dharma-sūtras* (rules of conduct). Both *kalpa* and *vyākaraṇa* belong to the category of the *vedāṅgas*, which means that they are mainly descriptive in character. With the development of the *śāstra* field and its expansion to *laukika* (secular) topics, the style of the *sūtras* also changed from the descriptive-normative towards the prescriptive-argumentative.

The main characteristic of *sūtra* texts is their brevity and systematicity. They are collections of short aphorisms, and the term itself can refer either to such a collection or to individual aphorisms themselves. Although ideally *sūtras* are free from narrative or versified parts, in practice we find texts, like the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, containing versified passages. (Houben 1997: 275) Since the main goal of the *sūtra* texts was brevity, it was impossible to understand them without some help. And here we come to another important feature of Sanskrit theoretical writing: in addition to the *sūtras*, there is a huge body of commentarial literature, without which many *sūtras* would be entirely opaque and of no use.

With this background in mind, we can now return to the *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*. Rājaśekhara, after discussing the various *śāstras*, continues in the second chapter of his work with a discussion of the literary genres appropriate for theoretical (śāstric) writing. He begins with the definition of *sūtra*[22],

---

[22] *sūtrādibhiś caiṣāṃ praṇayanam. tatra sūtraṇāt sūtram. yad āhuḥ:*
alpākṣaram asandigdhaṃ sāravad viśvato mukham,
astobham anavadyañ ca sūtraṃ sūtrakṛto viduḥ. (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 5.1–3)
(They [*śāstra-s*] are composed in *sūtras* and the-like. It is called *sūtra* because it is [composed of] aphorisms strung together. As is said: 'Composers of *sūtras* regard

and after defining the basic text, he continues with a systematic explana-
tion of the various types of commentary:

> The exposition of the entire essence of the *sūtras* is called *vṛtti*. Discussion of the
> *vṛtti* of the *sūtras* is called *paddhati*. Introducing objections and answering them is
> called *bhāṣya*. Internal *bhāṣya* is *samīkṣā* (a thorough investigation). It is a section
> on subordinate matter (monograph). Appropriate glossing of the meaning is *ṭīkā*.
> Explanation/classification of difficult words is called *pañjikā*. Expository verses
> displaying meaning are *kārikā*. Consideration of *ukta* (what is said, expressed),
> *anukta* (what is not said), and *durukta* (what is badly said) is called *vārttika*. That
> is how the sciences are divided.[23]

He also supplies us with their generic definition, explaining the expansion
of theoretical literature:

> Just as the currents of rivers, thin at first and broad afterwards
> Thus the workings of sciences, which are to be honored in the world.[24]

We learn that the *śāstras*, originally composed as *sūtras*, in the course
of time gathered all the commentaries and sub-commentaries and be-
came more and more extensive – just like rivers, though small at their
origin, become broader by the joining of additional streams.

By the end of the first millennium of the common era, most of the
sciences or systems of knowledge aspiring to the name of *śāstra* each had
their own *sūtra* or other core texts,[25] along with a huge body of corre-
sponding commentarial literature. Every such core or foundational text
was treated as authoritative, and later writings could be construed at
most to be reinterpretations or clarifications of those foundational ideas.
As Houben puts it:

> In the course of time, all self-respecting sciences, disciplines and philosophical-re-
> ligious systems in the South Asia traditions (especially as far as their Sanskrit lit-
> erature is concerned), created basic *sūtra*-texts and accompanying commentaries.

---

sūtra to be [composed of] few syllables, unambiguous, meaningful, comprehensive,
without superfluous words, faultless.' (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 5.1–3)

[23] *sūtrāṇāṃ sakalasāravivaraṇaṃ vṛtti. sūtravṛttivivecanaṃ paddhatiḥ. ākṣipya
bhāṣaṇād bhāṣyam. antarbhāṣyamṃ samīkṣā. avāntarārthavicchedaś ca sā. yathāsam-
bhavam arthasya ṭīkanaṃ ṭīkā. viṣamapadabhañjikā pañjikā. arthapradarśanakārikā
kārikā. uktānuktaduruktacintā vārttikam iti śāstrabhedāḥ.* (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 5.4–8)

[24] *sāritām iva pravāhas tucchāḥ prathamaṃ yathottaram vipulāḥ
ye śāstradamārambhā bhavati lokasya te vandyāḥ.* (*Kāvyamīmāṃsā* 4.25–26)

[25] For example *saṅkhya*, where *kārika* text preceded a superimposed *sūtra*.

It is usually this *sūtra*-text which, at least in name, occupies a central place, while the commentaries and sub-commentaries, being more peripheral, derive their authority to a great extent from their claim to be faithful to the statements and intentions of the *sūtra*-author. (Houben 1997: 272)

Necessity for a Theory and the Source of Its Authority

Now that the nature of *śāstra* (theory) has been discussed, it is time to ask the following questions: Why would one need *śāstras* at all? What was the relationship between theory and practice in Sanskrit culture? In answering these questions an article by Sheldon Pollock (1985) is of great help; in fact, it is a mine of information on the topic. After presenting a short history of the *śāstras*, looking into particular examples, and analyzing the traditional understanding of this phenomenon, Pollock comes to the conclusion that in Indian intellectual history, it is theory that necessarily precedes practice. As was already mentioned, *śāstra* literature had its beginnings in connection with the Vedas. In fact, the Vedas are considered to be *śāstra* par excellence. In the brahmanical tradition it is accepted that the Vedas are eternal, infinite, author-less, and hence infallible. There cannot be any fault or error in something that was not created; error can exist only on the part of a creating agent.

The first theories that acquired the name of *śāstra* can be found among the *vedāṅgas*. As discussed above, they were mainly descriptive in character, but already among them we can find the seed of new, worldly, and prescriptive *śāstras*. The best example of a *śāstra* moving from a purely descriptive to more injunctive mode is *vyākaraṇa*. This *vedāṅga*, which was meant initially to describe the sacred language of the Vedas, could not entirely escape the secular side of linguistic practice. In the first text on Sanskrit grammar, Pāṇini's *Aṣṭadhyayī*, we can find passages that concern themselves with the language as employed in everyday practice.[26] Even if Pāṇini intended his work to be merely a description of language, later authors, commenting on his work, took it to be a collection of normative

---

[26] Pāṇini in his work refers to two types of languages: *chandas,* the language of the Vedas and *bhāṣā*, spoken or common Sanskrit. There is no agreement among Paninian scholars as to the exact meaning of the term *'bhāṣā*, the question being whether Pāṇini in his *Aṣṭādhyāyī* was describing the spoken language of the educated elite or the language as he spoke it, his mother-tongue. For more detailed discussion on the subject see: Meenakshi 2002.

rules for linguistic practice rather than a mere description of it. The transition from descriptive to prescriptive is even more visible in the field of *dharmaśāstra*. The essence of *dharmaśāstra* is a discussion of the rules governing human activity. There are rules appropriate for each human class, and the main goal of *dharmaśāstra* is not to simply describe them, but rather to impel people to follow them. That is why in later *śāstras* the injunctive mode of exposition is not uncommon. Following the development of the *śāstras,* we can observe their transformation from texts intended to describe reality into texts dictating a normative code. As Pollock puts it:

> For here, on a scale probably unparalleled in the premodern world, we find a thorough transformation – adopting now Geertz's well-known dichotomy – of 'models of' human activity into 'models for', whereby texts that had initially shaped themselves to reality as to make it 'graspable', end by asserting the authority to shape reality to themselves. (Pollock 1985: 504)

If *śāstras,* instead of 'describing' reality started to 'prescribe' it, what did it mean in terms of their relationship to practice? With this shift in perception of the role of theory, the idea of practice also had to change. In order to be accepted as indispensible for successful human action, theory had to prove its authority. But where did this authority come from?

Here again we have to go back to the Vedas. If they are infallible (since they are not created), literature describing them (i.e. *vedāṅgas*) should also be authoritative. Since these auxiliary sciences were descriptive, and what they described were the Vedas, they themselves, by extension, were also infallible. The logic behind this argument, if one accepts the infallibility of the Vedas, is admissible. But what about the other *śāstras*, which did not necessarily concern themselves with the Vedas?

In order to acquire the status of infallibility, all the *śāstras* that could not base their authority directly on the Vedas had to prove their primordial existence. If theory was to be unerring, it could not be the creation of a human author. From the earliest times, we find this kind of account of the mythical origin of various *śāstras*. There were two main paradigms for proving the a priori status of *śāstra*:

> Extant *śāstras*, consequently, come to view themselves as either the end-point of a slow process of abridgment from earlier, more complete, and divinely inspired prototypes; or as exact reproductions of the divine prototypes obtained through uncontaminated, unexpurgated descent from the original, whether through faithful intermediaries or by sudden revelation. (Pollock 1985: 512)

A generic story depicting divine origin of all human knowledge can be found in the *Mahābhārata*. It represents the first type of Pollock's division, namely 'the end-point of a slow process of abridgment from earlier, more complete, and divinely inspired prototypes.' Pollock summarizes the story thus: at the beginning of time, when there was no king to protect people, confusion befell them and their *dharma* perished. The gods, worrying about the welfare of the world, sought help with Brahmā. He then 'composed a work of one hundred thousand chapters, arising from his own mind, in which *dharma, artha,* and *kāma* were described; [...] the triple Veda, philosophy [*ānvīkṣikī*], economy, political science, and many other sciences were set forth there. Included in Brahmā's text were all matter of political practices, the *dharmas* of country, sub-caste, and family, *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*; witchcraft, magic, yoga, the application of poisons, history, the *upavedas*, and logic in its entirety were described. In fact, whatever was able to be formulated in language (*vācogatam*) was all contained in it.' (Pollock 1985: 512) After enumerating the sciences created by Brahmā, we also learn about the process of their abridgment. Considering the brevity of human life, Śiva shortened this *śāstra,* then Indra, Bṛhaspati, and finally Śukra did the same (to one thousand verses). The *śāstra,* then, took refuge with the first king.

Eventually, most individual *śāstras* found their own way to present their mythological origin. The fullest and most representative example of the *śāstra* as originating from a god and coming down to humans in its abridged version is one found in the *Kāmasūtra*:

> Prajāpati enunciated the 'means of achieving the three ends of life' (*trivargasādhana*) in one hundred-thousand chapters at the beginning of time, when he created them. Svāyaṃbhuva Manu separated out the one section dealing with *dharma*, Bṛhaspati the one dealing with *artha*, while Nandi, the servant of Śiva, formulated a *kāmasūtra* in one thousand chapers. Śvetaketu, son of Uddālaka, abridged this into five hundred chapters, Bhābravya of Pañcāla into two hundred and fifty chapters, with seven topics. Different people thereupon separately reworked the seven topics. But because these independent treatises were too specialized, and Bhābravya's encyclopedic work too vast to study, Vātsyāyana took up the task of summarizing the whole subject in a single small volume. (Pollock 1985: 513)

Similar stories can be found in many other *śāstras*,[27] for example, in the *dharma-śāstra,* the *artha-śāstra*,[28] texts on astronomy, architecture, medicine, etc.

---

[27] Very similar story can be found in Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* – it was the first, and the only example of this sort in the field of literary theory.

[28] Kauṭilya, at the beginning of his *Arthaśāstra,* states: *pṛthivyā lābhe pālane ca*

The second model of the origination of knowledge presents a perfect, unabridged transmission of the divine prototype, either through an uninterrupted line of teachers (*guruparaṃpāra*) or as a direct revelation. An example of the first subtype can be found in the *Agnipurāṇa*. There, the knowledge is presented as coming from Viṣṇu through an unbroken line of teachers:

> Vyāsa says, 'Hear what Vasiṣṭha told me, when I asked about the essence of *brahma*.' Vasiṣṭha says, 'Hear what Agni told me once...' Agni says, 'The Blessed One is higher and lower knowledge. Lower knowledge consists of the four Vedas, the six *vedāṅgas,* Mīmāṃsā, *dharmaśāstra*, *purāṇa*, Nyāya, the sciences of medicine, music, weapons, statecraft [that is the eighteen *vidyāsthānas*]. The higher knowledge is that whereby one goes to *brahma*. I shall explain to you as it was explained to me by Viṣṇu, to the gods by Brahmā long ago' (*Agnipurāṇa* 1.1–18, after: Pollock 1985: 514)

Here we see a direct channel from the god himself, through intermediary teachers (both divine and human), to the last link – a worldly 'author' of a text. The knowledge itself does not undergo any changes or abridgment; it comes down to us in its full, perfect form.

In the second subtype of this model, a transmission of the *śāstra* from the divine to the human happens directly as a sudden revelation. There are no transitional links; the knowledge is given directly to the worldly author. A good example of this type is the *Bhāratanāṭyaśāstra*, the earliest text known to us concerning dramaturgy. In this case, it is Brahmā who reveals the art of dramaturgy to Bhārata. The text was meant to function as the fifth Veda. When Bhārata was asked by sages about the origin of the *Nāṭyaveda*, he said:

---

yāvantyarthaśāstrāṇi pūrvācaryaiḥ prasthāpitāni prāyaśastāni saṃhṛtyaikam idam arthaśāstraṃ kṛtam. (*The 'Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra'* 1969: 1.1.1) (This single (treatise on the) Science of Politics has been prepared mostly by bringing together (the teachings of) as many treatises on the Science of Politics as have been composed by *ancient teachers* (*ācaryaiḥ*) for the acquisition and protection of the earth.) (Translation after: *The 'Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra'* 1972: 1.1.1.) Based on the fact that this statement is preceded by the benedictory verse to Śukra and Bṛhaspati (*namaḥ śukrabṛhaspaatibhyām*), Pollock concludes that the story is of the same type as one found in *Kāmasūtra*. He understands: 'by the ancient teachers' (*ācaryaiḥ*) as referring to the two gods of political theory, evoked in the *maṅgalācaraṇa*. I am not entirely convinced that this was a case; the term *ācarya* (ancient teacher) is used throughout the text as representing the views of 'others,' usually to be refuted by the author. The same formula is used in *Kāmasūtra* and *Kāvyamīmāṃsā.*

O Brahmins, in the days of yore when the Golden Age (*Kṛtayuga*) passed with the reign of Svāyambhu [Manu], and the Silver Age (*Tretayuga*) commenced with the career of Vaivasvata Manu, and people became addicted to sensual pleasures, were under the sway of desire and greed, became affected with jealousy and anger and [thus] found their happiness mixed with sorrow, and Jambudvīpā protected by the Lokapālas (guardians of the worlds) was full of gods, Dānavas, Gandharvas, Yakṣas, Rākṣasas and great Uragas (Nāgas), the gods with the great Indra as their head, [approached] Brahmā and spoke to him, 'We want an object diversion, which must be audible as well as visible. As the [existing] of Vedas are not to be listened by those born as Śūdras, be pleased to create another Veda which will belong [equally] to all the Colour-groups (*varṇa*).'
'Let it be so,' said he in reply and then having dismissed the king of gods (Indra) he resorted to yoga and recalled to mind the four Vedas.
He then thought: 'I shall make a fifth Veda on the Nāṭya with the Semi-historical Tales (*itihāsa*), which will conduce to duty (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*) as well as fame, will contain good counsel and collection [of traditional maxims], will give guidance to people of the future as well, in all their actions, will be enriched by the teaching of all authoritative works (*śāstra*) and will give a review of all arts and crafts.'
With this resolve the Holy One from his memory of all the Vedas, shaped this Nāṭyaveda compiled from the four of them. (*'The Nāṭyaśāstra'* 2002: 2–4)

Status of *Śāstras*

This self-representation of the *śāstras* may seem to be merely a curiosity; but in reality, it has pervasive implications, and can help us in understanding the traditional perception of knowledge systems and their place within the realm of human activity. What, after all, does it mean for a theory to present itself as having a divine origin? Based on such an assumption, any given theory can claim transcendent status for itself. Just like the Vedas, thought of as eternal, uncreated, preceding any material universe, and considered infallible; thus the *śāstras*, having divine origin, are necessarily transcendent. If all knowledge is preexistent, then the *śāstras* expressing it must be as well. A theory is never created; it is either an abridgment of an always-existing divine prototype too complex for humans, or it is a divine work itself handed faithfully down to to the human world. Just as the Vedas are the preexisting blueprint for all material universe, thus the *śāstras,* theories (existing eternally in the divine realm) have to necessarily precede any human practice corresponding to them.

Such an approach to the *śāstras* has far-reaching consequences. Not only does it claim absolute priority of theory to practice, but it also assures the

indispensability of the *śāstras.* If all human activity is based on the theory that comes before it, then, it is impossible for any practice to exist without theory. As inconceivable as it may seem, that is how the status of the *śāstras* was perceived. A good example here might be from the *Kāmasūtra*, a theoretical text from the field of erotology. It will be all the more compelling, as it comes from one of the least likely fields of human activity in which one would expect to find theory. Yaśodara, commenting on Vātsyāyana's *sūtras* (and explaining the need for a theory of sexual activity), says:

> [...] *Kāma* is a function of the union of man and woman, and this requires some procedure, the knowledge of which comes only from the *kāmaśāstra* [...]
> The procedure must therefore be enunciated, and the purpose of the *Kāmasūtra* is to do just this and so make it known. For how does one come to know anything except by means of a given *śāstra*? Those who who have never studied the *śāstra* cannot on their own attain knowledge of the various procedures enunciated in *śāstra*. This can happen only through the instruction of others. If the instruction of others were itself not admitted to be founded on *śāstra*, then the efficacy of the instrumental knowledge supplied by such people would be as fortuitous a thing as a letter etched into wood by a termite [...] As it is said: 'A man who does not know a given *śāstra* may occasionally achieve his end, but do not think too much of it; it is like a letter etched into wood by a termite.
> That some who know the *kāmaśāstra* are not skilled in practice is entirely their own fault, not the fault of *śāstra*. It is not peculiar to *kāmaśāstra* but universally attested that *śāstra* is rendered useless by faulty comprehension. Note that those skilled in such *śāstras* as medicine do not invariably maintain a healthful dietary regimen. People, therefore, who pursue the precepts of *śāstra* and do so with faith and devotion achieve its purposes. (*Kāmasūtra* 1.1. [Yaśodara's commentary], after: Pollock 1985: 506–507)

It is quite obvious that Vātsyāyana foresaw the objections to his claim; after all, who would seriously think about the necessity for studying the theory of erotics before pursuing its practice? He offers the following answer: one can go straight to practice disregarding theory, but, even if one is successful, it is pure coincidence, just like when a termite accidentally curves a letter in wood.[29] Furthermore, it is not only in the field of erotology where *śāstra* is indispensable; any human activity, in order to be efficient, requires a theory that precedes it.[30]

---

[29] Aristotle had a similar argument regarding the necessity of 'method' in practical reasoning.

[30] According to Pollock, what followed from such self-representation of *śāstras* and from the way they were understood, was an acceptance of the fact that it was

In summary, *śāstras* have their origin in connection with the Vedas, as a body of auxiliary literature meant to help understand and preserve the Vedic texts. At the beginning they were purely descriptive, dealing with the unchanging Vedas. In the course of time, *śāstras* entered into the realm of secular human practices, encompassing all human activity. It also changed its character from descriptive to prescriptive; it became a template and guide for every human activity, becoming the means of instruction. There are innumerable *śāstra* texts aiming at a theoretical explanation of even the most trivial fields of human practice. Since it emerged from some divine source, all knowledge had to be eternal and unerring, and existing prior to any human activity for which it was a blueprint. Whatever practice there is in the world, in order for it to be successful, it has to follow the *śāstras*.

As is clear from this brief presentation of the field of *śāstras*, the Sanskrit world of theoretical writing is vast, entangled, and multifaceted. It is not easily approachable, and even less easily explainable. A good example of the general admission of this difficulty is a title of Prof. Aklujkar's attempt to write about Sanskrit *śāstras*: 'Attacking an amorphous giant: An introduction to science literature and/or *śāstra* literature in Sanskrit.'

Bibliography

List of primary sources (both in Sanskrit and in translation):

1. Apte, V. S. (reprint 2007), *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary.* Revised and Enlarged Edition, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
2. *'Kamasutra' of Vatsyayana Mallanaga*; *with explanatory notes by the translators, Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar* (2002), Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
3. *'Kāmasūtra' of Sri Vatsyayana Muni*, *with the Jayamangala Sanskrit Commentary of Sri Yashodhara* (1997), Varanasi: Krishnadar Academy.
4. *'Kāvyamīmāṃsā' of Rājaśekhara.* Edited by Nārāyaṇa Śāstrī Khiste, Part I (Adhyayas I–V). (1983), Varanasi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Sansthan.
5. *'Kāvyamīmāṃsā' of Rājaśekhara*. Edited by the late C. D. Dalal and Pandit R. A. Sastry, (1934), Gaekwad's Oriental Series, Oriental Institute Baroda.

---

theory that necessarily preceded practice. (Pollock 1985: 516) From Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā* it is obvious that, at least *akaṅkāraśāstra,* literary theory, allowed its theory to be based on practice. Pollock himself refers to Rājaśekhara as a counterexample of this notion. (Pollock 1985: 516)

6. *'Kāvyamīmāṃsā' of Rājaśekhara.* Original Text in Sanskrit and Translation with Explanatory Notes, by Sadhana Parashar. (2000), New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd.

7. Monier-Williams, M. (2002 [1899]), *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass.

8. *'Nāṭyaśāstra' of Bharatamuni, with the Commentary Abhinavabhāratī of Abhinavagupta,* Vol. I–II, Edited by R. S. Nagar and K. L. Joshi. (reprint 2003), Dehli: Parimal Publications.

9. *Rājaśekharaviracitā Kāvyamīmāṃsā.* Edited with his own commentary *Madhusūdanīvivṛti* by Madhusūdanamiśra. (1934), Benares: Jai Krishna Das Gupta Vidya Vilas Press.

10. *The 'Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra'*; *pt. I. A critical edition with a glossary.* Edited R. P. Kangle. (1969), Bombay: University of Bombay.

11. *The 'Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra'*; *pt. II. An English translation with critical and explanatory notes*. Edited R. P. Kangle. (1972), Bombay: University of Bombay.

12. *'The Nāṭyaśāstra.' A treatise on ancient Indian dramaturgy and histrionics.* Vol. I, Translated by Manomohan Ghosh. (2002), Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office.

List of selected secondary sources:

1. Aklujkar, A. (Forthcoming), *Attacking an Amorphous Giant; An Introduction to Science Literature and/or Śāstra Literature in Sanskrit.*

2. De, S. K. (1947), 'Rājaśekhara' in: *Journal of the Ganganatha Jha Research Institute*, vol. V, pp. 1–11.

3. De, S. K. (1960), *History of Sanskrit poetics*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.

4. Ganeri, J. (2008), 'Contextualism in the Study of Indian Intellectual Cultures' in: *Journal of Indian Philosophy,* 36/5–6, pp. 551–562.

5. Halbfass, W. (1988), *India and Europe: an essay in understanding*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

6. Houben, J. E. M. (1996), 'Socio-Linguistic Attitudes Reflected in the Work of Bhartrhari and Later Grammarians' in: *Ideology and status of Sanskrit: contributions to the history of the Sanskrit language*. Edited by J. E. M. Houben. E. J. Brill, Leiden, New York, pp. 157–196.

7. Houben, J. E. M. (1997), 'Sutra and Bhasyasutra in Bhartrhari's Mahabhasya Dipika: On the theory and Practice of a Scientific and Philosophical Genre' in: *India and beyond: aspects of literature, meaning, ritual and thought; essays in honour of Frits Staal.* Edited by Dick van der Meij. New York: Kegan Paul International, pp. 271–305.

8. Meenakshi, K. K. (2002), 'Making of Pāṇini' in *Festschrift in Honor of George Cordona*, Dehli: Motilal Banarsidas.

9. Pollock, S. (1985), 'The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History' in: *Journal of American Oriental Society*, 105/3, pp. 499–519.

10. Pollock, S. (1989), 'The Idea of Śāstra in Traditional India' and 'Playing by the Rules: Śāstra and Sanskrit Literature' in: *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts*. Edited by A. Libera Dallapicola, Steiner, Stuttgart, pp. 17–26 and 301–312.

11. Pollock, S. (2006), *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

12. Venkateswaran, C. S. ([1970?]), *Rājaśekhara and his Kāvya-mīmamsā*. Madras: Kuppuswami Sastri Research Institute.

13. Vijayan, V. K. (1989), 'Rājaśekhara's *Kāvyamīmāṃsā*' in: *Studies in alaṅkāra śāstra: Dr. G. Marulasiddaiah commemoration volume*. Mysore, pp. 35–40.