

A Note on the Sūtra Style and its Influence on Sanskrit Narrative Prose*

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FROM its early beginnings, the prose literature in India developed along two lines, both of which could be traced back to the Yajurveda. One is the prose represented by the Mantras or short passages in the Yajurveda addressed to various ritualistic articles. This prose, it would appear, developed, through the Brāhmaṇas, into the Sūtra style at a later date. The other pattern of prose in the Yajurveda-found also in some parts of the Atharvaveda-was more explanatory and narrative in character.

The Sūtras were primarily composed with a strictly practical purpose in view. Their main aim was to present a particular science-be it grammar, philosophy or metrics-systematically, paying utmost attention to brevity in order to facilitate memorisation. The word Sūtra originally meant 'thread', then a 'short rule', 'a precept condensed in a few words'. It is significant to note similar developments in the words *Tantra*, *Brāhmaṇa* and *Upaniṣad*¹. There are many orthodox definitions of Sūtra, of *alpākṣaramasandigdham-sāravadvīśvatomukham . . . sūtram sitravido viduh*²; *laghūni sūcitarthāni svalpāk-ṣarapadāni ca . . . sūtrānyā-hur maṇiṣiṇaḥ*³. All these definitions of Sūtra stress the importance of brevity (*alpākṣaratva*).

The frequent quotations from the Brāhmaṇas in the oldest Sūtra texts and the many Brāhmaṇa-like passages in the midst of the Sūtras, (such as certain sections of the Sankhāyana Srautasūtra and the Bauddhayāna Kalpasūtra) make it clear that the Sūtra style developed from the prose of the Brāhmaṇas, although its origin is to be found in the Yajurveda. Some parts of the later Brāhmaṇas (i.e. those representing the younger stage of Brāhmaṇa prose,

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¹ Vide M. Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I. University of Calcutta, 1927. p. 268.

² Ascribed to Vararuci; also found in *Viṣṇudharmottara*, *Parasropapurāna Bhagavati Smṛti*.

³ *Brahmasutras* (BS). Ed. by S. Radhakrishnan, London, 1960. p.23.

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according to Oldenberg)⁴, as also some of the Upaniṣads have an affinity to the Sūtra style, particularly in the ritualistic portions⁵. This particular prose of the Brāhmaṇas, where one could see the roots of the Sūtra style, consists almost exclusively of short sentences. A notable feature of this prose-as also of the Sūtras-is the absence of indirect speech. As Winternitz says of this prose, “the sequence of principal sentences is but rarely interrupted by a relative or conditional clause and its monotony is only relieved, to some extent, by participial construction”⁶. It must be noted here that participial forms and constructions played a significant role in the narrative techniques of the later period, particularly in the ‘nominal style’ of composition of the Fable.

The style of all the Sūtras is, however, not uniform. The Dharmasūtras, for instance, are written in a terse, aphoristic style and the same principle of Anuvṛtti, which characterises other branches of Sūtra literature, particularly the grammatical Sūtras of Pāṇini, is found in this class of Sūtras⁷, too. But, the studied brevity of the grammatical Sūtras is not so much in evidence in the Dharmasūtras. “It seems”, says Banerji, “as though the authors of the Dharmasūtras did not take so much delight or pain as the grammarians did to secure brevity of their Sūtras”⁸. Some of the passages of the Dharmasūtras are, therefore, quite extensive.

One of the most significant features of the Sūtra style, that has influenced the prose literature of the subsequent period, is the use of long compounds. Although the use of compounds goes back to an early period in the history of the language, its extensive use in literature is seen only in and after the period of the Sūtras. Furthermore, in the Sūtras, the use of compounds has a more specific purpose than in the works of the earlier period. The authors of the Sūtras, and especially those of the grammatical Sūtras, had as one of their primary aims the economizing of syllables (cf. the statement in the Māhābhāṣya of Patañjali-*ardhamātralāghavena putrotsavam manyante vayyākaraṇāḥ*), and the use of long compounds was a device adopted by them for this purpose. In the Sūtras, therefore, the use of compounds was a necessity, as much as it was a stylistic device in the later prose Kāvya. It must be noted that the compounds found in the Sūtras are much less lengthy and comparatively less intricate than their counterparts in later ornate prose and their purpose is clearly evident from their simple construction as seen in such examples as

⁴ Vide H. Oldenberg, *Zur Geschichte der altindischen Prosa*. Berlin, 1917 p.14.

⁵ Cf. *Aitareya Brahmana*, VIII. 10; VIII. 18; *Bṛhadaranyake Upanisad*, VI.3.1; *Kausitaki Upanisad*. II. 3.

⁶ Winternitz, op. cit., p. 270.

⁷ Cf. *Cautamā Dharmasutra* (GDS), Mysore, 1917, II. 19-26.

⁸ *Dharmasutras* (DS). Ed by S. C. Banerji, 1962. p. 5.

*smṛtyanavakāśadoṣaprasaṅgaḥ ; setūnmānasambandhabaddhavyapadeśebhyaḥ*⁹. There are also to be seen some stereotyped compounds which are often repeated- cf. *jīvamukhyaprāṅalingān*¹⁰.

Another notable feature of the Sūtra style (though totally absent in some classes of Sūtras) which exercised considerable influence on the later narrative prose style is the rhythmic repetition of words. It has to be noted that repetition in manifold ways (anaphora, responsio etc.)¹¹ has been in evidence in the earliest works of Indian literature. The antiquity of this phenomenon is further attested by instances of such repetition in Hittite¹² and other ancient languages. In the Sūtras, too, repetition takes a variety of forms and is particularly seen in prayers and requests to gods, where special emphasis is required. This phenomenon is, therefore, almost wholly restricted to Sūtras dealing with religious or ritualistic matters.

The use of parallel members following the same rhythmic pattern, with the repetition of the same finite verb in identical position, is a distinct feature of some classes of Sūtras, the Gṛhyasūtras-*yet te agne tejasterāhaṃ tejasvī bhūyāsam/yat te agne varcas tenāhaṃ varcasvī bhūyāsam./yat te agne haras tenāhaṃ harasvī bhūyāsam*¹³. The fact that the authors of the Sūtras, like the prose writers of the later period, were conscious of the effect of sound is evident from the occasional use of rhythmic words and repetitive arrangement of words to produce a rhythmic effect- *me'vocah kṛptiṃ, me'vocastṛptiṃ, me'voco bhiktiṃ*¹⁴. *ṛbhumān vibhumān*¹⁵; *dhanadāvā baladāvā paśudāvā*¹⁶. . . . At times, variant forms of the same verbal root are repeated to produce a rhythm-*āpo vṛtāstā varuṇena vṛtāstābhīrvṛtabhīrvṛtribhīryasmād bhāyad bibhemi*¹⁷.

Traces of alliteration and assonance, though not very common, are to be found in some of the philosophical and ritualistic Sūtras-*kṣatriyatvagatescottaratra caitrarathena liṅgāt*¹⁸.

⁹ BS. II. 1. 1; III. 2. 31.

¹⁰ BS. I. 1. 31. This is repeated several times; vide also 1.4.17.

¹¹ For a detailed study of these phenomena see J. Gonda, *Stylistic Repetition in the Veda*, Amsterdam, 1959.

¹² See O. R. Gurney, *Hittite Prayers, Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology*, 27, Liverpool, 1940.

¹³ *Asvalayana Grhyasutra* (AGS), Bombay, 1895. I.22. 4.

¹⁴ ACS. 1.23.9.

¹⁵ *Katyayana Srautasutra*, ed. V. Sarma, Benares, 1936. 10.7.13.

¹⁶ *Kausika Sutra*. Benares, 1936. 7.2.18.

¹⁷ AGS. III. 11. 1.

¹⁸ BS. I. 3. 35.

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Although repetition in the manner found in the Sūtras is not much in evidence in later narrative prose, it could be said that the tendency to create auditory effect has exercised considerable influence on the prose of the later period, particularly on the prose Kāvya. The great importance attached to Śabdālaṅkāras in the prose Kāvya had its beginnings in tendencies of this nature which were seen as far back as the Vedic period and which make their appearance more clearly in the Sūtra literature.

The mixture of verse and prose, which is a striking characteristic of some of the prose works of the subsequent period (notably the works of the fable literature, Buddhist Sanskrit literature and the Campū), had its beginnings in the Vedic texts themselves. This characteristic is shared by most of the Sūtra works too. In some of the Sūtras, the verses are introduced with formulae, which bear a resemblance to those in the Brāhmaṇa texts. Thus, for instance, in the Śrautasūtras and the Gṛhyasūtras of Aśvalāyana the verses are often introduced with a formula similar to that of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa-*tadeṣābhir yajñagāthā gīyate*, and the verse follows : *pākayajñān samāsādya ekajyāneka-barhaṣaḥ| ekaviṣṭakṛtaḥ kuryānnānā'pi sati daivata*¹⁹.

According to Oldenberg,²⁰ the verses of the Sūtras may have been actually sung or 'would have come very close to being sung'. In support of his contention, Oldenberg cites variations of the root *gai* as they appear in some of the old texts.²¹ Buhler's scheme of arrangement of the admixture of verse and prose, according to which, "first comes the prose rule, next the verses which confirm it and finally a Vedic passage on which both the rule and the verses rest", is criticised by Oldenberg as being too general.²²

While most of the verses of the Sūtras would have been composed by the authors themselves, it is also possible that some of them may have been taken from other sources and those belonging to a later period may have had the epics and Purāṇas as their source : cf. Bauddhāyana Dharmasūtra, II.2.4.26. It must be noted that such was also the case with some of the verses of the prose works of the earlier period. Just as the Fable and the Buddhist Sanskrit works represent an intermediate stage between the purely verse and prose works of the subsequent period, so do these works, as Oldenberg says,²³ fall between the Brāhmaṇas and metrical works like the Ṛk Prātiśākhya and the Bṛhaddevatā of the earlier period. In a way, their position is analogous to that of the Jātakas, which also fall between the prose and verse works in Pāli.

¹⁹ AGS. I. 3. 10.

²⁰ Oldenberg, op. cit., p. 39, fn.1.

²¹ Ibid. p. 39.

²² Ibid. p. 36.

²³ Ibid. p. 39.

The language used in some of the Sūtras as, for instance, the Dharmasūtras is classical Sanskrit, although there are sporadic occurrences of un-Pāṇinian forms in them²⁴. It would appear that these Sūtras have, for the most part, been composed at a time when the Sanskrit language had not yet been stereotyped under the influence of Pāṇini. Most of the irregularities are seen in the substitution of *Parasmaipada* for *Ātmanepada* (root *yam* with *upa*)²⁵, singular for plural (*dāra*, *prāṇa*),²⁶ and in Sandhi and conjugation (*sarvatopeta*, *prāśñāti-ñi* for *n* is irregular)²⁷. The language of the Sūtras also represents a transition, in some respects, from the Vedic to the classical. For, while introducing most of the features of the classical language, it still retains a few of the distinct traits of Vedic such as the ending-less locative singular of-*an* stems-*ahan*, *ātman*.²⁸

Syntactically, too, the style of the Sūtras has exercised considerable influence on the narrative prose of the subsequent period. It could be said that the Fable, more than any other branch of narrative literature, bears traces of the syntactical influence of the Sūtras. It is possible that the preponderant use of participial constructions in the Fable, characteristic of its 'nominal style'²⁹ has been the outcome of similar phenomena in the Sūtra texts, though in the latter such tendencies are only sporadic. The elision of the finite verb is also one of the most significant features of the verse Sūtra style. This is clearly a device adopted to maintain brevity and conciseness. This feature is particularly seen in the Sūtras of Pāṇini and the Brahmasūtras and is, generally, in evidence in most of the works of the Sūtra literature-*na bahuvrīthau*,³⁰ *jyotirdarśanāt*³¹ (in both these cases the finite verb is to be inferred from the context. or taken from an earlier Sūtra). Likewise, there are instances in the Sūtras where the finite verb is given and the subject is to be inferred-*darśayati ca*³². This latter characteristic appears to have influenced the syntax of the Fable,³³ for, in it are to be seen variant forms of this phenomenon, which we hope to examine in a future study.

²⁴ T. Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language*, Faber & Faber, London. p. 44.

²⁵ *Vasistha Dharmasutra*, Poona, 1930. XX. 9; vide Panini, I.3.56.

²⁶ DS. I. 7. 27; GDS. XXV. 2.

²⁷ *Apastamba Dharmasutra*, Bombay Sanskrit Series, 1894. I. 2. 21 (cf. also *Panini*, VIII. 3. 17); I.4.1.

²⁸ *Apastamba Srautasutra*. Ed. R. Garbe, Calcutta, 1902. 9.2.1; 6.28.20.

²⁹ Vide Bhandarkar, JBRAS. XVI. 266f; cf. also Juls Blovch, *La phrase nominale en Sanskrit*, Paris. 1906.

³⁰ *Astadhyayi* of Panini. I. 1. 29.

³¹ BS. I. 3. 40.

³² III. 3. 4.

³³ Vide J. S. Speijer, *Sanskrit Synta*, Leydon, 1886. p. 5.