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**Why Does the Tradition Approach
the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* the Way It Does?
Some Methodological Reflections about Pāṇinian Studies**

ABSTRACT: This article starts by summarizing my doctoral work in the field of Pāṇinian studies and uses the same as a pivot to ask the following questions: What kinds of methods, approaches, lenses, and loci have the tradition and subsequently modern scholarship been using thus far to examine Pāṇini's grammar? What are the advantages and disadvantages of adopting these practices and perspectives? In particular, it seeks to tease out the cultural factors and intellectual attitudes that underlie the methods employed to study Pāṇini's grammar. It dwells on the role of *paribhāṣā* literature and *jñāpakas*, ideas about respect and hierarchy, especially vis-à-vis Pāṇini, Kātyāyana, and Patañjali, commentators' ways of disagreeing with the author, and the prizing of memorization and complexity in the Indian tradition. It then expounds on the relationship between the past, present, and future of the Pāṇinian tradition. Finally, it outlines the overall outlook of Pāṇinian studies as a discipline and argues that a change in the same will entail better learning outcomes for students.

KEYWORDS: Pāṇini, Sanskrit grammar, tradition, *Mahābhāṣya*, *vyākaraṇa*, *paribhāṣās*

In this article, I try to explicate certain methodological questions that beset Pāṇinian studies as a discipline. Likewise, I explore the cultural and intellectual attitudes that give birth to these methodological challenges. I also attempt to understand how these methods, and the beliefs underlying them might influence the learning experience of students at various levels: right from those who have just begun to study Pāṇini's *saṃjñā sūtras* to those who have already taken a dive into the world of the *Mahābhāṣya* and *paribhāṣā* literature.

Recently, I focused on the problem of rule conflict in Pāṇini's grammar (Rajpopat 2025). What happens when two or more rules become simultaneously applicable at any given step in the derivation of a word? Which of these rules should be applied at that step? Pāṇini has provided only one guideline in his entire *Aṣṭādhyāyī* to tackle the problem of rule conflict: 1.4.2 *vipratishedhe param kāryam* 'In the event of rule conflict, the operation that comes later [should be performed]'. But what exactly does Pāṇini mean by a 'later operation'? Starting with Kātyāyana, who was the first to comment on Pāṇini's grammar, traditional scholars have interpreted 'later' as 'later in the serial order of rules' (see the *Mahābhāṣya* on 1.4.2). However, this interpretation creates several problems, or to put it differently, results in the construction of grammatically incorrect words at the end of so many derivations.

Kātyāyana, the first commentator, was aware of these rule-conflict related problems but assumed the problem was with 1.4.2 itself, rather than with his own interpretation of this rule. So, he started proposing rudimentary tools to overcome this problem: he suggested that 1.4.2 should not apply to cases of conflict wherein one rule is *niravakāśa* 'with no scope to apply elsewhere' and the other *sāvakāśa* 'with scope to apply elsewhere' (for details, see Rajpopat 2025, Ch. 7). The argument was simple: if Pāṇini has composed a rule, it should apply somewhere, and if the present scenario is the only place where it is applicable, then it has to apply, irrespective of what 1.4.2 says. This allowed Kātyāyana to exclude several problematic cases from the ambit of 1.4.2: once one declares an example of conflict to be *anavakāśa-sāvakāśa*, one doesn't have to deal with the undesirable outcome of

the application of 1.4.2. Similarly, Patañjali created tools like *nitya* and *antaraṅga* based on Kātyāyana's *vārttikas* (Rajpopat 2023). These are, unfortunately, not the only instances where ad hoc solutions have been resorted to by the tradition. Such convenient solutions might appear attractive but open a can of worms because they are applicable to a small number of conflict scenarios, thereby requiring other tools to be fashioned for the other conflict types—not to mention the sheer number of derivations one would have to go through to conclusively show a rule is definitely *anavakāśa*. Creating a habit out of this practice is what gave birth to the unnavigable web of rule conflict related *paribhāṣās* 'metarules'. Candotti and Pontillo (2018) provide valuable insights into this process and Bronkhorst (1986) demonstrates how complicated matters have become. In the past, Cardona (1970), Pataskar (1985), and Joshi and Kiparsky (1979, 2005) have sought to simplify complex conflict resolution procedures.

Although I don't agree with these scholars about everything, I too criticize the traditional approach for its complexity. I argue that the problem is not in 1.4.2 itself but in the way in which Kātyāyana and all the commentators that followed have interpreted it. I argue that 'later' in 1.4.2 means that which comes later in the structure of the uttered word. Since we write Sanskrit from left to right, this implies going further from left to right within a written word. So, 1.4.2 means: In the event of a conflict the rule prescribing the right-hand-side operation wins. I have also shown that in every single instance where Pāṇini has used the term *para* 'later' in a technical way, he clearly means Right Hand Side rather than the later rule in the serial order. Moreover, my work (Rajpopat 2023) provides overwhelming derivational and philological evidence supporting my interpretation.

The responses my work elicited from the pundits present a unique opportunity to understand how an ancient tradition looks and behaves in the face of challenges and innovation. Some argued that the news that I had solved a 2500-year-old research problem was fake simply because there was no problem to solve in the first place. One may find this confusing: how is it possible to completely deny the existence of this research problem when over the centuries the tradition

has laboured untiringly to produce all kinds of tortuous *paribhāṣās* to tackle rule conflict?

Let us examine ideas from the tradition that might make it difficult for some traditional scholars to accept my work. Firstly, traditional scholars are taught that it is justified for them to add new *paribhāṣās* ‘metarules’ to the Pāṇinian system so long as they are able to justify doing so using *jñāpakas* ‘hints’ which they claim Pāṇini left behind to indicate that his system should be interpreted in a certain way.¹ But the tradition offers no convincing justification explaining how and why these rather local hints can be converted into more generally applicable metarules (for more on this, see Wujastyk 1983).

A further complication of this extrapolation of ‘hints’ provided by a single *sūtra* to a much broader set of scenarios is that many *paribhāṣās* are *anitya*, i.e., they are not always applicable, or put differently, they are applicable only on some occasions. And how do we know where a certain *paribhāṣā* should or should not be applied? There is no precise instruction given about this; the only way to check if a *paribhāṣā* applies at a certain place is to try applying it and if it helps the derivation, that means it is a *nitya paribhāṣā*, and if it doesn’t, then it is *anitya*. How such *paribhāṣās* help is anyone’s guess. Unfortunately, young traditional scholars are encouraged to—and subsequently do—buy into such convoluted reasoning frameworks—especially if they have not had the opportunity or academic training required to examine this or any other material for that matter from a more distant, detached, or dispassionate perspective. Such conditioning makes it difficult for them to seriously engage with the proposition that the ‘*paribhāṣā* literature’ approach is problematic. The roots of this approach lie in the tradition’s attitudes towards its three oldest thinkers, and its acceptance of the idea that Pāṇini’s grammar can and should be reworked in significant ways.

The mythology, if you will, of the tradition contains two important figures who actively championed the enterprise of ‘improving’

¹ Texts such as *Paribhāṣenduśekhara* contain lists of and commentaries on such *paribhāṣās*.

Pāṇini's grammar, namely Kātyāyana and Patañjali. Students, especially those belonging to traditional Brahmin families, regularly recite verses such as:

*vākyakāraṃ vararuciṃ bhāṣyakāraṃ patañjalim
pāṇiniṃ sūtrakāraṃ ca praṇato 'smi munitrayam*

'I bow to the three *munis*/saints: Vararuci (Kātyāyana) who wrote the *vākyas* (*vārttikas*), Patañjali who wrote the *bhāṣya*, and Pāṇini who wrote the *sūtras*'.

If the two commentators take the liberty to make significant alterations to Pāṇini's system, which they most certainly do, what will young scholars, who essentially worship them, learn from them? That it is fine to make changes to Pāṇini's system as one pleases.

As if this were not already enough to encourage the traditional tendency to interfere with Pāṇini's apparatus, traditional scholars, going as far back as Kaiyaṭa's² time, decided that Kātyāyana's authority supersedes Pāṇini's and Patañjali's effectively overrides both Kātyāyana's and Pāṇini's. This means we must trust Kātyāyana and Patañjali to have known more about Pāṇini's grammar than Pāṇini himself. And all this in turn implies that not only is it fine to pile things onto Pāṇini's system but in fact we must receive what has been piled onto it willingly. For more on this process of deification and the relationships between these three teachers, see Kielhorn (1876), Bhandarkar (1972), Vergiani (2011), and Deshpande (2019). But more broadly, the fact that these three scholars are so venerated has implications for how boldly and openly one is allowed to disagree with them—not to mention the fact that disagreement itself as a traditional practice is a complicated affair. Several things are left unsaid but seem to be true in this regard.

² *yathottaraṃ hi munitrayasya prāmāṇyam | uttarottaraṃ munīnām prāmāṇyam*
'Of the three saints, the one that comes later has greater authority than the one that comes earlier [in time]' (see *Pradīpa* on *Mahābhāṣya* on 1.1.29).

Although the tradition has historically been open to disagreement, it has certain stylistic preferences: firstly, if the person one is disagreeing with is senior or belongs to a preceding generation, then one must disagree very respectfully, which in this context means indirectly. The tradition has had a long and rich history of commentators using their opportunity to comment on the author's writing to introduce their own views into its purport without admitting or explicitly stating that they are presenting a new idea or disagreeing with the author.

The evolution of conflict resolution tools in the tradition is a prime example of this: Patañjali read terms such as *nitya* and *antaraṅga* as conflict resolution tools in Kātyāyana's *vārttikas* even though Kātyāyana had not used them in that way in his writing. I have discussed this in detail in chapter seven of my book (see Rajpopat 2025, Ch. 7). This tendency muddies the waters and poses a significant hurdle for intellectual historians who are interested in understanding who pitched which idea and exactly how ideas have evolved over time and across geographies. But these complications are not necessarily viewed as a negative thing by the tradition. Complexity and convoluted, labyrinthine systems are used as proxies for intellectual sophistication or richness. I could not disagree more with this attitude: I believe the role of the scholar is to find the simplest possible explanation—lending clarity to an elusive concept or resolving a longstanding problem rather than marvelling at and revelling in how unimaginably complex and nightmarishly difficult a certain textual system has become.

Now that we have discussed some methodological problems and the cultural attitudes underlying them, we can proceed to summarize the intellectual journey of a typical traditional student—an important component of which is memorization.

What deserves to be memorized in the Indian grammatical tradition? Of course, traditional texts including Pāṇini's grammar are worthy of committing to memory. But why? One might say because these texts help us better understand Pāṇini's grammar. While this may be true, this answer does not present the complete picture. Both today and historically, these texts have derived their value and prestige from who wrote them and how popular or widely read these texts have been.

And what constitutes knowledge for the Indian grammatical tradition? First and foremost, it is what the giants of the tradition such as Patañjali, Jayāditya and Vāmana, or Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa have said. Their thoughts constitute knowledge by virtue of having been written by them—irrespective of any logical fallacies or internal contradictions that might plague these writings.

For most students, the next step involves subconsciously accepting this knowledge as the truth. The third step involves finding logical arguments that could help prove the verity of these ideas. This appears to be a textbook case of confirmation bias and authority fallacy. There is a cultural expectation of students to demonstrate their brilliance within the bounds of traditional conduct, without being perceived as rebellious, without disrespecting or infuriating someone senior in their traditional learning environment.

The fourth step involves asking questions and disagreeing which some traditional scholars certainly allow and even encourage. But questions must be asked out of curiosity, a desire to dispense with one's ignorance, and a certain awareness that one does not know something. One ought not to sound as though one is challenging authority either textual or personal because that does not bode well for the student. Similarly, one can get into trouble if one presents a firm even if well-developed contrarian opinion on something. On the other hand, if one demonstrates that one has textual authority on their side, that drastically increases the weight of their position. While using logic and rational argumentation is one way to make one's point in a conversation or commentary, an equally legitimate if not more potent route involves invoking scriptural authority. This is considered to be an almost guaranteed way of winning a debate or definitively establishing the correctness of one's claim.

Traditional scholars are trained—and thus value immensely the ability—to quote verbatim the thoughts or verses of this or that scholar. The statement is considered weighty simply because an authority figure has said something in favour of the speaker's opinion. In this scenario, truth ends up becoming a function of authority rather than that of evidence or logical argumentation.

If the authority of a commentator is so valuable, then what does that say about the goals and priorities of the tradition? In other words, what truly matters to the Indian grammatical tradition today? Protecting the honour and reputation of their ancestors is arguably the most important goal of traditional scholars. Equally important perhaps is the goal of passing down traditional knowledge to coming generations so that they might be able to keep the torch of Brahminical knowledge burning. This combination of past and future concerns eclipses all consideration of what the present of the tradition should look like and what kinds of contributions existing scholars can or should make. This is also reflected in the manner in which scholarship operates: traditional scholars are encouraged to pick up themes directly from commentaries and work on them, not to find or discover something new—because that is considered not important—but to improve one’s own understanding, so that one might be able to teach it well to his students. The idea is to perpetuate the past so that a sturdy future may be secured.

In sum, traditional scholarship revolves not around critical scrutiny but instead around getting to know the commentator better, improving one’s knowledge of traditional concepts and categories, and becoming a scholar who is well-versed in existing texts—someone who can recall any excerpt at will in an impressively short period of time. This has little to do with purely truth-seeking or investigative endeavours.

One might wonder at this juncture: Has the tradition always been as conservative or liberal as it is today? It is clear from the writings of Kātyāyana and Patañjali that they were remarkably open-minded in their attitude towards dissenters and disagreement. Their work bears the mark of their flexibility and willingness to adapt: they felt free to contradict their own remarks from a few paragraphs back, simply because they were keen to explore another line of reasoning or a different set of examples. But as we move towards the *Kāśikā*, the *Kaumudī*, and *paribhāṣā* texts, one cannot help but notice that certain ideas have become more firmly embedded and established, and certain approaches and possibilities have come to occupy the centre stage while others have received lesser attention. As time passed, inquiries in certain directions became the norm whereas the remaining directions came to

be overlooked and perhaps forgotten. Such funnelled thinking and directional bias crop up with the passage of time in most intellectual traditions, so there are no grounds to single out the Pāṇinian tradition in this respect.

Ever since the English-language educational model has come to occupy the mainstream—thereby relegating traditional Sanskrit-based learning to the margins—traditional scholarship seems to have become more conservative. This is understandable: the fear of losing precious knowledge and the scary prospect of the tradition dying out makes scholars cling to what remains and resistant to further change. Preservation takes precedence while innovation and discovery take a backseat: when survival itself is not guaranteed one might not want to venture beyond familiar territories—minimizing risk and any further negative outcomes in the face of uncertainty and adversity.

Having understood traditional attitudes and how they impact the methodology of Pāṇinian studies, it is time to examine what I call the “philosophy” of the discipline of Pāṇinian studies itself—just as we have the philosophy of physics, linguistics, or medicine. Here, rather than prescribing specific methodological changes, I argue in favour of a change of perspective which will, if taken seriously, impact the pedagogy of Pāṇini’s grammar. There are two main aspects of such a reconsideration for which I have chosen, admittedly, somewhat peculiar names: one ‘epistemological’ and the other ‘ontological’. However, I think these two labels help lend clarity to the arguments I make below. Because the tradition treats not only Pāṇini’s grammar but also a variety of secondary texts such as Kātyāyana’s *vārttikas*, the *Mahābhāṣya*, the *Kāśikā*, and so on as authoritative sources of knowledge, this creates what I consider an epistemological challenge: What if there is internal contradiction between two statements in the *vārttikas* or between two statements in the *Mahābhāṣya*, as there very often is³? And what if something written in the *Mahābhāṣya* disagrees with something written in the *Kāśikā*? While having an entire literary canon, i.e., traditional texts of the Pāṇinian tradition, as one’s

³ Thieme (1956) discusses similar issues in an engaging way.

knowledge base can be a blessing in that it can give one access to so many different ideas and examples, the internal inconsistencies can leave one without an epistemological compass or touchstone guiding one about what constitutes ‘knowledge’, what is correct, what is incorrect, and how one must proceed to establish the truth.

My proposal is of course to solve this problem by treating Pāṇini’s grammar alone as the epistemological base for conducting any enquiry into Pāṇini’s grammar and to treat everything else, including the secondary sources mentioned above, as mere ideas which one may or may not want to scrutinize. Of course, it can be a rewarding experience to read a commentary or derived text, but such exposure should not be allowed to cloud one’s independent judgement in matters pertaining to the interpretation and functioning of Pāṇini’s rules. This shows how the philosophy of a discipline plays a crucial role in one’s learning experience: rather than viewing Pāṇini’s rules through the lens of Patañjali or Bhaṭṭojī Dīkṣita, if one simply applies one’s own mental faculties to understand Pāṇini, the result is bound to open many an intellectual door. Let me emphasize here that I am not suggesting that we avoid reading Kātyāyana and Patañjali altogether. Rather, I am arguing that we must approach and engage with these two and other commentators only after we have had a chance to examine the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* in and of itself and to make up our own mind and develop our own opinions on certain critical questions and challenges. This ensures that we grow intellectually and gain confidence while also avoiding our judgements becoming clouded by the opinions of revered authors in whose awe we might be. The question is not so much about whether or not we should read Kātyāyana and Patañjali as it is about when and at what stage we access their work, with what mindset, and at what level of intellectual maturity, exposure, and experience we engage with it.

Moving on, the second, somewhat related problem of perspective, involves the contents of these texts and the concepts and categories contained therein. The question is: How does the ‘ontological’ structure of Pāṇini’s grammar look? Firstly, have we accurately understood his concepts and categories and secondly, is it wise to introduce new ones into his system—especially without ensuring that we have

understood it properly? The traditional answer to these questions becomes clear upon examining its writings: take for instance the many new rule-conflict categories and tools such as *nitya*, *antaraṅga*, *anavakāśa*, and *pūrvavipratīṣedha* that the tradition has smuggled into Pāṇini's infrastructure. The problem is aggravated by the fact that the introduction of these categories has led to the overriding of Pāṇini's original algorithm. Had Pāṇini been around, he would have been appalled at how radically later thinkers have overhauled the technical workings of his grammar. How ethical and wise is it to do so centuries after Pāṇini passed away—now that he cannot even consent or object or share his opinion with us? And how sensible is it to hold on to these new categories even after realizing that they are making matters worse rather than better insofar as handling rule conflict is concerned?

I think that we should strive to make sense of Pāṇini's system by focusing purely on the concepts and rules he has given us without adding any metarules or tools to his system. This non-interventionist approach has paid off handsomely in my research and will certainly prove useful in future endeavours too. I have shown that Pāṇini's machine is closed and self-contained and does not require nor benefit from, for that matter, any fiddling with his grammatical apparatus whatsoever. As I have shown through my work, incorporating new concepts, categories, and *paribhāṣās* into Pāṇini's system ends up breeding lazy, band-aid, and easy-escape solutions. Making such changes might seem convenient and tempting and might provide localized, temporary answers but cannot address the larger technical or structural issues plaguing the system. Instead, we can sharpen our intellect by focusing our efforts on finding the solutions that Pāṇini himself, the genius that he was, has devised for his extraordinarily well-oiled machine.

By implementing these changes in the approach of the discipline and consequently its teaching practices, we will be able to help students become more creative and imaginative, test things by themselves, and achieve a level of confidence that commentarial handholding or ontological tampering cannot offer. These enhancements will also sharpen their critical thinking skills which will stand them in good stead well beyond traditional learning—in various areas and endeavours of life itself.

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