EXPANDING AND MERGING HORIZONS

Contributions to South Asian and Cross-Cultural Studies in Commemoration of Wilhelm Halbfass

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What is Meant by Svabhāvan Bhūtacintakah?*

The hemistich svabhāvan bhūtacintakah occurs twice in the Mahābhārata (Mbh.), first in the Śāntiparvan (224.50d) and again in the Āśvamedhikaparvan (48.24d).¹ The Śāntiparvan verse runs as follows:

\[ \text{kecit puruṣakāraṁ tu prāhuḥ karmavido janāḥ} \]
\[ \text{daivam ity apare viprāḥ svabhāvan bhūtacintakah} \].

Some who know what activity is say that (everything is due to) human effort, other sages say it is destiny; those who think (in terms) of the elements (speak of) svabhāva.

A variant of this verse which is found a litte later in the Śāntiparvan (Śānti) (230.4) does not, however, refer to the bhūtacintakas:

\[ \text{pauruṣaṁ karanāṁ kecid āhuḥ karmasu mānaṇāḥ} \]
\[ \text{daivam eke prāṣaṁsantī svabhāvan cāpary janāḥ} \].

With respect to activity some say that human effort is the cause (of success), others praise destiny; still others (speak of) svabhāva.

The Āśvamedhikaparvan (Āśvamedhika) passage (48.23-24) expresses the bewilderment of the sages confronted with so many contradictory views on what is to be cherished:

\[ \text{yajñam ity apare dhīrāḥ pradāṇam iti cāpary} \]
\[ \text{sarvam eke prāṣaṁsantī na sarvam iti cāpary [23]} \]
\[ \text{tapas tv anye prāṣaṁsantī śvāḥhyām apare janāḥ} \]
\[ \text{jñāṇaṁ saṁvyāsāṁ iti eke svabhāvan bhūtacintakah [24].} \]

Some sober men praise the sacrifice; others praise the gift. Some praise all, some do not praise all. Some others praise asceticism, others praise Vedic studies. Some praise knowledge [and] renunciation; those who think (in terms) of the elements praise svabhāva.

What does svabhāvan bhūtacintakah signify? E. Washburn Hopkins thought that the bhūtacintakas “are perhaps materialists.”² E.H. Johnston also thought so,³ and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya was absolutely convinced of it. “That the word bhūtacintakah here referred to the materialist will not be doubted.”⁴ Torn out of context and considered by itself, the expression may be explained in that way. But there is a problem. A bhūtacintaka is one who is supposed to think (in terms) of the bhūtas, the elements, viz., earth, air, fire, water and ether. Why should he speak of svabhāva which is a rival doctrine of bhūtāni (elements) as the first cause

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¹ All references are to the critical edition of the Mahābhārata, ed. V.S. Sukthankar et al., Poona 1927-1966.


mentioned in the enumerative verse Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad (Ś. U.) 1.27 svabhāva in the Mbh. then must mean something different from what it means in the Ś. U.

The word bhūtacintaka is also found in Śānti 267.4:

\[
yebhyaḥ srjati bhūtānī kālo bhāvapracoditaḥ \mid mahābhūtānī pahecitī tāny āhur bhūtacintakaḥ ||
\]

Those from which Time, moved by the desire to produce physical forms, creates (all) beings, are called “the five great elements” by those who think (in terms) of the elements.

There are also some parallel expressions in the Mbh. itself, such as mukhurtacintaka (12.267.4d) “those who think (in terms) of the moment” (i.e., Time), kālacintaka (12.295.12d) “those who think (in terms) of Time,” jñeya- and jñānacintaka (12.294.33f and 295.12d) “those who think (in terms) of what is to be known” and “... of knowledge.”

The word bhūtacintā also occurs in the Suśrutasamhitā. Vatsyāyana mentions the artha-cintakas, “those who think (in terms of) wealth (alone).” Their views are quoted in Kāmasūtra 1.2. 40-45 and refuted in 1.2.46-47.

Why should then the bhūtacintakas speak in terms of svabhāva, instead of bhūta? In order to unravel this knot, we have to see whether the word svabhāva in these contexts signifies anything other than what it literally means, viz., “own being,” and, if so, in which context or domain it is found in ancient texts. No standard Sanskrit dictionary, whether the monumental Śabdakalpadruma or Vācaspatyam, the Sanskrit-Wörterbuch or the Sanskrit–English lexicons compiled by Wilson, Monier-Williams or Apte, records any special sense of svabhāva, and the word bhūtacintā is merely literally glossed.

As to the commentators on the Mbh., Nilakanṭha, as in many other philosophical contexts, is a poor guide. Failing to understand the implication of the word in Śānti 224.50, he associates karman/puruṣakāra with the Mimāṃsakas, daiva with the astrologers and svabhāva with the svabhāvavādins, without explaining what svabhāva means. He then quotes Sv. U. 1.2ab and, in explaining the words svabhāva, nityati, yadrcchā and bhūtāni, associates them with the doctrines of the transformationist (parināmavādin) Śāṃkhyas, ritualist (karmāvādin) Mimāṃsakas, and the Arhatas (Jains) and Lokāyatas respectively. In his glosses on Śānti 183.5 (176.5 in the critical edition), however, in connection with the same line of the Ś. U., he associates svabhāva with the Buddhists and Laukāyatikas.

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7 Kāmasūtra (KS), n.d. (Chaukhambha Sanskrit Series, Benares). The word kālacintaka also occurs in Gauḍapāda’s commentary on the Sāmkhyakārikā v. 8 (ed. Jivananda Vidyasaraga, Calcutta 1892).

8 There is no entry for bhūtacintā in the major Sanskrit–Sanskrit lexicons; the Sanskrit-Wörterbuch refers to the Suśratasamhitā only (not to the Mbh.), glossing the word as “Untersuchung der Elemente” (examination of the elements) as does Monier Monier-Williams (“investigation into the elements”) in A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, Oxford 1899.

While commenting on Śānti 230.4 (237.4 in the vulgate\(^\text{10}\)), the above-quoted variant of Śānti 224.50, he writes: svabhāva is mere svarūpa, i.e., own form or shape, or character, condition or peculiarity. Then again (in his glosses on Śānti 231.51) he attributes the doctrine of karma and puruṣakāra to the Mīmāṃsaka, of fate, planets and Time to the astrologer (daivajña), and of svabhāva to the sūnyavādin (i.e., a branch of the Buddhists or the Buddhists in general) as well as the Lokāyatas. Ānandapūra Vidyāśāgara (c. 1350), a Vedāntin commentator of the Mokṣadharma section of the Mbh., identifies the bhūtacintakas with the Lokāyatikas.\(^\text{11}\)

What all these commentators and explicators failed to note is that the word svabhāva is also used in a quite different context or domain, other than the determination of the first cause. Take the following verse that is found in some mss. of the Yājñavalkyaṃṣṛti (1.349):

\[
\text{kecid daivāt svabhāvād vā kālāt puruṣakārataḥ} \\
\text{samyoge kecid ichanti phalam kuśalabuddhayah} \] \(^\text{12}\)

Some (say that success is) due to destiny, (some that it is) due to svabhāva, (some that it is) due to Time, (some that it is) due to human effort. But some competent people recognize the result in the combination (of all these).

A variant version of the same verse found in the text followed by Aparārka as well as by Viśvarūpa in his Bālakṛiḍa runs as follows:

\[
\text{kecid daivād dhaṭṭāt kecit kecit puruṣakārataḥ} \\
\text{sidhyanty arthā manoṣvānam teṣām yoniṣu purusam} \] \(^\text{13}\)

Some (expect success) from fate, some from accident, some from human effort. (In whichever way) man’s objects are achieved, their origin is resoluteness.

Here, instead of the four claims, we have three: kāla (Time) is omitted and svabhāva is replaced by haṭha, “accident” or “chance.” Elsewhere in the Mbh. (e.g., Śānti 172.10ab: bhūtānām utpattim animittataḥ), and in Āsvamedhika 50.11cd (which will be discussed below), svabhāva also stands for “accident,” barely distinguishable from yādṛcchā.\(^\text{14}\)

Thus there are two domains in which kāla, svabhāva and niyati are found to appear. The first domain relates to the question of the first cause while the second is concerned with ascertaining what causes success in human life. In the first domain, svabhāva in the course of time came to suggest accidentalism and thereby became synonymous with yādṛcchā.\(^\text{15}\) In the second domain, too, svabhāva came to signify accidentalism and consequently akrīvyāda, inactivity, a philosophy of life that considers all human efforts to be vain. One is reminded of the concept of tācē (chance, fortune) as expressed in Jocasta’s speech in Oedipus Tyrannus vv. 977-979:

No. No, mortals have no need to fear when chance reigns supreme. The knowledge of the future is denied to us. It is better to live as you will, live as you can.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{10}\) Cf. n. 9.

\(^{11}\) Cf. the Critical Notes on Mbh., Śānti 224.50, p. 1257.


\(^{14}\) Cf. V.M. Bedekar, “The Doctrines of Svabhāva and Kāla in the Mahābhārata and Other Old Sanskrit Works,” Journal of the University of Poona (Humanities Section) 13 (1961): 1-16.


In most of its occurrences in the *Mbh.*, the term svabhāva relates to the second domain and appears as a member of a triad or tetrad. The dyad of fate and human effort is well known. Manu and many others (particularly poets and dramatists) normally speak of two contending forces: fate on the one hand and human effort on the other. Those who uphold the former declare all human effort to be utterly futile: what is destined to happen is bound to happen, bhavitavyam bhavaty eva, quē serā serā. It thus leads to inactivism because of the acceptance of predeterminism.

Those who uphold human effort, however, deny the very existence of fate. To them, there is neither any planetary effect nor any divine dispensation. What is called destiny (daiva) is merely the sum total of one’s activities in one’s former births. In the *Yogavāśītha*-Rāmāyana, *Mumukṣuprarakaṇa* 7.22 we read:

\[
na daivam drṣṭre drṣṭyā na ca lokāntare sthitam |
uktaṁ daivābhidānena svarloke karmanāḥ phalam ||,
\]

Of course, true to the Indian tradition, there was also a reconciling approach, in this case of those who declared that both fate and human effort are necessary for achieving success – the typical syncretism (samuccayavāda) also found in connection with knowledge (jñāna) vis-à-vis activity (karman).

What is often overlooked or ignored is that, side by side with this dyad of fate and human effort, there was also a doctrine of svabhāva or haṭha which denied both predeterminism and its opposite (i.e., that man can determine his own fate). This third doctrine preaches inactivism that logically follows from the denial of causality in the affairs of human life (cf. *Mbh.*, Śānti 172.10-11 in which Ajagara speaks of svabhāva and the origin of all beings animittataḥ). It is rather strange that the word svabhāva instead of the more appropriate yadṛcchā was employed to designate this doctrine. But it is in this sense that the Buddhists right from Aśvaghosa (first century CE) and other philosophers used this term. In the Nyāya tradition, too, the example of the sharpness of the thorn suggests nirnimittaṁ, the de-

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18. *Yogavāśītha* (Rāmāyana), ed. with Hindi translation by Mahaprabhumal Goswami, Part 1, Varanasi 1988, p. 133. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Cambridge 1931 (repr. Delhi 1975), p. 256, favourably impressed by such a strong denial of daiva and the exaltation of free will, declares: “This view of puruṣa-kāra and karma seems to be rather unique in Indian literature.” The view, however, is not that unique. One may mention *Mbh.*, *Amūsāsanarvan* 6.12-28 and 7.23; *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.349: *tatra daivam abhivyaktam pauruṣam paurvadehiham; Viśīvaśevara in his commentary on this verse explains daiva as pūrva-dehārījitaṃ pauruṣam (ed. S.S. Setlur, Madras 1912, p. 216); and *Matsyapurāṇa* 220.2. (ed. Brahmadatta Trivedi, Calcutta 1954) Vātsyāyana (KS 1.2) also upholds puruṣākāra and denounces (as his commentator says) daivamātvāvāda (see also *Hitopadeśa* p. 8, v. 33).

19. See, e.g., *Mbh.*, *Saupitikarvan* 2.3: “Our acts do not become successful in consequence of destiny alone, nor of exertion alone, O best of men! Success springs from the union of these two” (translation by K.M. Ganguli, Calcutta 1890, p. 8). Medhātithi in his commentary on *Manu* 7.205 (pp. 159-160) also quotes some similar verses. See also *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.350 which has been quoted in *Hitopadeśa* p. 7, v. 32.

nial of any efficient cause in the world (though not of the material cause), or even denial of any cause whatsoever (ahetu).  

We have spoken of a tetrad. The fourth claim in this domain concerned with ascertaining what determines success and failure in life centers on kāla (Time). Now, svabhāva and kāla are also at the center of two rival doctrines in the first domain (i.e., the debate concerning the first cause). It is possible that the meaning which svabhāva acquired in the second domain, viz., “chance, accident,” came to penetrate the first domain as well (also vice versa, see below), and, pushing yadrcchā out of the ring, svabhāva came to suggest “accident” instead of what it originally stood for, viz., that there is no creator, without the world being lawless: the nature of every object is its own determinant. Such an interpenetration of the two domains is evident in the commentatorial works. Most of the commentators on the Mbh. try to make sense of svabhāva (in whichever context it may have occurred) in relation to its use in the first domain. However, svabhāva in the Mbh. is mostly related to the second domain.

We first come across the triad associated with the second domain not in the Śāntiparvan, but much earlier, in the Āranyakaparvan. In 33.11 (32.19 in the vulgate) Draupadi tells Yudhiṣṭhira:

\[
yā ca diṣṭaparo loke yaś cāyaṃ haṭhvādakah | 
ubhbāv aparāsādav etau karmabuddhiḥ prāśasyate ||.\]

Those in the world who rely on destiny and those who speak of chance are both wretched. He who minds activity is praiseworthy.

In the given context, as also in others, haṭha can mean nothing but “chance.” Strangely enough, Nīlakaṇṭha associates haṭhvādika (his reading in 32.13, vulgate) with cārvāka and repeats this in his comments on 32.32 (33.14 in the critical edition). However, in his glosses on 32.16 (33.4 in the critical edition) he explains haṭha rightly as “suddenly” (akasmāt), gaining anything without premeditation (acintitasātarkitasya ca lābho haṭhaḥ). He provides an apt example of what haṭha means in his gloss on 32.19 (33.17 in the critical edition): gaining a gem while searching for a lost penny (naṣṭakapardikānveṣaṇapraṇātatasya ratnalābhah).

This, and not the earlier interpretation (viz., haṭhvādika referring to the Cārvāka or a person similar to a Cārvāka), truly fits the context. In the light of this Āranyaka verse, svabhāva in Śānti 224.50d may very well be taken to mean “chance.” This meaning of svabhāva, although unnoticed by the lexicographers as well as the commentators on and translators of the Mbh., is encountered in Āśvamedhika 50.11. In one of the many accounts of cosmogony, it is said:

\[
devā manusāyā gandharvāh piśācāṣaurākṣasāh | 
sarve svabhāvatah srṣṭā na kriyābhya na kāraṇāt ||.
\]


22 In this chapter Draupadi refers to Brhaspatini as well (v. 57). But the teachings expounded by her are, as Jacobs, “at any rate as orthodox as one can wish!” (cf. “Zur Frühgeschichte der indischen Philosophie” [1911], in: Kleine Schriften, ed. Bernhard Köver, Wiesbaden 1970, p. 737 [552], n. 1; English translation by V.A. Sukthankar in The Indian Antiquary 47 [1918]: 104, n. 1). Perhaps the very mention of Brhaspati made Nīlakaṇṭha think of Cārvāka, although this Brhaspati must be a different person altogether.

23 Haricarana Vandyopadhyaya in his Bengali–Bengali dictionary Vangīya Sabdakosa (New Delhi 1966, originally published in 1340-1353 Bengali Sāla), records this sense of haṭha (3) and refers to Nīlakaṇṭha.
Gods, men, celestial beings, goblins, demons and monsters—all are produced by svabhāva, not by any actions, nor by any [other] cause.

It is also to be noted that this account of cosmogony begins and ends with five elements (50.10). Apparently there were some elementalists (bhūtavādins, or rather mahābhūtavādins) who were accidentalists as well as inactivists. The word bhūtacintaka most probably refers to them, not to the Cārvākas or their predecessors who were to arrive much later on the philosophical scene and who spoke of only four elements instead of five (as the bhūtacintakas did).  

The question that automatically arises at this juncture is how svabhāva, which was originally quite distinct from yadvacchā, could become synonymous with it. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to offer any definite solution. But it may be suggested that from at least the first century CE, svabhāva had come to refer to both accidentalism and inactivism, distinguishing the doctrine both from theism (iśvaraṇa) and fatalism (niyatiṇaṇa). The concept of svabhāva was employed by the later Buddhist philosophers as well as by the Nyāya–Vaiśeṣikas (although the latter did not employ the term svabhāva but ākasmikatva when they spoke of a doctrine identical with it). This change of meaning in the first domain (related to the first-cause controversy) seems to have penetrated into the second domain (related to what determines success in man’s life) and thus svabhāva became synonymous with haṭha. In any case, in both the domains svabhāva came to stand for the denial of causality. The two passages in the Mbh. in which the hemistich svabhāvaḥ bhūtacintakah occurs belong to the second domain.

svabhāva has other meanings in other contexts in the Mbh. itself as also elsewhere. In the Bhagavadgītā (17.2) and Bhāgavatapurāṇa (10.21.13-30), for instance, svabhāva stands for the traits inherited from former births. A study of these other meanings, however, is better postponed because it will lead us into areas far away from the one under discussion. We propose to conclude with the following observation: svabhāva is a polysemous word, and in the context of Śānti 224.50 and Āśvamedhika 48.24 it means “chance” and nothing else. The word bhūtacintaka, both in these contexts and elsewhere, merely refers to those who thought in terms of the five elements and were inactivists to boot. So, svabhāvaḥ bhūtacintakah should be rendered as “The elementalists (speak in terms of chance).”

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24 Only the Jains speak of the taṭīvāta-taccharāvādins as believing in the existence of five elements. Cf. Sūtraśūtra 1.1.1.7-9 and Śīlākā’s commentary, p. 10ff. (ed. Muni Jambuvijaya, Delhi 1978); Jain Sūtras, Part 2, pp. 236-237 (translated by H. Jacobi, Sacred Books of the East 45, Oxford 1895). See also Śīlākā, p. 185ff. and Jinabhadra Gaṇi, Gaṇadharavāda 3.101-103 (1649-1651) (ed. Muni Ratnaprabha Vijaya, Ahmedabad 1942). An oft-quoted Cārvāka aphorism, however, specifically declares: “Earth, air, fire, and water are the only principles” (for its sources see Mamoru Namai, “A Survey of Bāhrāmputra Philosophy,” Indianological Review [Kyoto] 2 [1976]: 38-39 and n. 12). The opponents of the Cārvākas also refer to them as bhūtacaturāvādins. Gujaratī (Tarkaraśāvādipikā, ed. L. Suvali, Calcutta 1905-1914, p. 300) also admits this but adds that there was another group of Cārvākas who believed in the existence of five elements. This view is not attested by any source known to me. The Maṇḍimēkalai, in fact, makes a distinction between the bhūta (patacaka)vādins and the Lokāyatikas (retold by L. Holmström, Hyderabad 1996, Ch. 20, p. 170).


Any definite association of the doctrine of svabhāva (relating to the first domain) with the Cārvākas or Lokāyata is not encountered before the tenth century CE. However, a hint may be found in an anonymous commentary on the Sāmkhyakārikā translated into Chinese by Paramārtha in the sixth century CE. Vidyāranya (fourteenth century CE), too, associates svabhāva with the Bārhastapyas. But nowhere is the Cārvāka made to deny causality or preach inactivism. To Śāyāna-Mādhava (fourteenth century CE) the Cārvākas are not accidentalists: they rather admit svabhāva, "inherent nature," to be the determinant:

But an opponent will say, if you thus do not allow adṛśa, the various phenomena of the world become destitute of any cause. But we (sc. the Cārvākas) cannot accept this objection as valid, since these phenomena can all be produced spontaneously from the inherent nature of things.

Somadevasūri (tenth century CE) presents the Cārvāka as positively championing human effort against fatalism and inactivism. However, commentators on the Mbh., like Ananda-pūrṇa Vidyāśagara and Nilakanṭha, must have been influenced by the later concept that sought to associate svabhāva (relating to the first domain) with the Cārvākas. Accordingly, they interpreted the verses under discussion in different ways. In short, the bhūtacintakas are not to be identified with the Cārvāka materialists, but with some elementalists who may have preached both accidentalism and inactivism and, due to this, incurred the wrath of Vyāsa in Śānti 229.3-10.

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27 Bhāṭotpala in his commentary on Varāhamihira’s Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad 1.7 (ed. Avadhā Vihari Tripathi, Varanasi 1968, Part I, p. 9) writes: ... laukāyatikāḥ svabhāvam jagatah kāraṇam āhuh, “The Laukāyatikās call svabhāva the first cause (lit. the cause of the world).”

28 J. Takukusu, The Sāmkhya Kārikā: Studied in the Light of the Chinese Version. Translation by S.S. Suryanarayana Sastri, Madras, n.d., p. 36, on v. 27. Referring to the verse “What produces the white colour of the kamsas,” etc., the commentator says: “This verse is found in the work of the Lokāyatas.”

29 Vivaranaprameyasamgraha, pp. 210-211 (ed. R. Tailanga, Benares 1893).


31 Yaśastilakacampū, Ch. 3, vv. 60-66 (ed. Sivadatta and V.L. Panasikar, Part 1, Bombay 1916, p. 382). See also Krishna Kanta Handiqui, Yaśastilaka and Indian Culture, Sholapur 1949, p. 146.