

SAMBODHI

Indological Research Journal of L.D.I.I.

VOI. XLV

2022

EDITOR

JITENDRA B. SHAH



L. D. INSTITUTE OF INDOLOGY
AHMEDABAD

SAMBODHI

VOI. XLV, 2022

ISSN 2249-6661

Editor

Jitendra B. Shah

Published by

L. D. Institute of Indology Ahmedabad 380 009 (India)

editorsambodhi.ugcjournal@gmail.com

Printed by

Navprabhat Printing Press Ahmedabad

Sañjaya Belatthiputta and the Ancient Śramaṇa Tradition

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Abstract

During the Post Vedic period, the ascetic tradition of the Śramaṇa which composed of various sects and their particular philosophies emerged as a form of a movement against orthodoxy in ancient India. Śramaṇas were wanderers who lived a retired life and focussed in seeking truth and emancipation if there was any. The paper explores the tradition and discusses the orientation of the various denominations that existed at the time within the Śramaṇa movement. The paper attempts to compare and show relationship between the Śramaṇa and the Brāhmanas. Brāhmanas were people who adhered to the Vedic knowledge and paid importance in performing social, monetary and everyday life duties. The major concern of the paper is to present Ajñānavāda as a unique school within the Śramaṇa tradition in terms of their philosophical approach. The paper focusses on the Ajñāna thinker Sañjaya Belatthiputta, and shows how the approach taken by him went at that time beyond the philosophies of the Śramaṇas and the Brāhmanas.

Keywords: Sañjaya Belatthiputta, Śramaṇa, Indian Agnosticism, Ajñānavāda, Indian Philosophy

Introduction

Seventh-Sixth century BCE historically was a significant and a turning point in India, and there was a boon and upliftment in various fields such as economics, trade, science, logic, et cetera. and philosophy was not an exception to this. Philosophical discourses, spiritual and intellectual debates were a part and parcel of people's life, irrespective of whether the debates were within the framework of Vedas or not. The Śramaṇa movement which emerged before was at its peak during this time and later. Śramaṇa were truth seekers who had gave away the duties done by the laypeople and sought themselves to the path of resolving deepest questions of truth and existence, and in obtaining the right knowledge. Brāhmanas unlike the Śramaṇas participated in the social activities and performed their domestic, social and monetary duties of life and also sought the knowledge of an ultimate Reality through the Vedas. We find various kinds of Śramaṇas and Brāhmanas that existed at the time of Sañjaya. Brāhmanas were divided into Vānaprasthins and Sannyāsins the last two stages of the Brāhmanical practice of Varṇāśrama Dharma, the four stages being brahmacarya, grahastha, vānaprastha and the stage of sannyāsa. Most of the Brāhmaṇas belonged to at least one of the Vedic systems of philosophy viz. Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, Uttara Mīmāṃsā or Vedānta, Saṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika. They principally officiated the performances of vedic rituals and sacrifices and were guided by the life of varṇāśrama dharma and puruṣārtha. Śramaṇas on the other hand had no particular time or stage to become a monk and generally liberated themselves from social and domestic duties. They generally led a life of wandering, survived through alms given by others and worked on limiting their desires.¹ Among the Śramaṇa tradition, we find sects such as of Tāvāsa, and Parivājaka. The known sects belonging to Śramaṇa movement were chiefly oriented with resolving questions of truth, ethics and knowledge were Lokāyata, Jaina, Ajñānika, Bauddha, and Ājīvikas. Before I elaborate and present the philosophies of the sects, I aim to briefly discuss about the sect of Ajñānavāda, which I believe epistemologically stands out from all other sects. The paper aims to situate the Ajñāna thinker Sañjaya Belatthiputta, the chief advocant of the sect/school within the Śramaṇa tradition historically and philosophically.

Sañjaya Belatthiputta and Ajñānavāda

Sañjaya Belatthiputta most probably lived around seventh-sixth century BCE² in the region of Magadha during the iron age in India. Sañjaya happen to be an elder contemporary of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Bauddha philosophy and religion³ and of Vardhamāna

Mahāvīra, the last Tirthankara or the final leader in Jaina philosophy and religion.⁴ Sañjaya is described by ancient Bauddha and Jaina to have belonged roughly to the philosophical school of what is roughly or vaguely translated in English as Agnosticism and Scepticism, where it is important to note that there were other agnostic/sceptic schools also belonging to this tradition and all of them collectively were labelled by them as Ajñāna or Ajñānika and their philosophy as Ajñānavāda. They held similar views, though not the same standpoint, and existed as one of the major schools of thought during the Vedic period. They questioned the beliefs and knowledge of all other orthodox (Brāhmaṇa) and heterodox (Śramaṇa) schools existing at that time in India without holding any view of their own.⁵ They consistently suspended judgements on any conceived philosophical position or meta-position. I have explained in detail the method used to consistently suspend judgements elsewhere.⁶ It is quite likely that the label Ajñāna or Ajñānika was given to them by the rival schools in their works. Anthony Kennedy Warder quotes in this context, "Their scepticism is shared to some degree by all the Śramaṇa schools, and is an important element in the development of a critical philosophy, though of course they carried it to an extreme degree according to their opponents."⁷

During that time in fact the philosophical schools of Jaina, Bauddha, Ājīvika, Ajñānika et cetera. all belonged to the Śramaṇa tradition as against the Brāhmin tradition followed by the Vedic or orthodox schools of thought. Śramaṇa tradition of asceticism was an ancient tradition in Indian subcontinent which came into prominence in the seventh century BCE or even before that. Śramaṇas were wandering monks who were free from traditions, culture and customs and preferred to dwell in forests in search of truth. It is known to us however, that the tradition even existed within the orthodox or the Brāhmin tradition since the Vedic period, where a section of Brāhmaṇas were home dwellers and fulfilled all the responsibilities of a layman along with philosophising from the Vedic point of view, and other were Śramaṇas dwelling in forests and wanderers whose discourses surrounded around the Vedas. Sañjaya was one such unorthodox thinker and philosopher of the time among many other Śramaṇas. Sañjaya among others was considered to be an influential thinker of his time. Hajime Nakamura writes, "The first skeptic in India appears to have been Sañjaya, according to available records. Whenever he was questioned on a metaphysical doctrine, he was elusive."⁸ He is mentioned as a leader of number of disciples (ganacariyo), well known, famous in his time, the founder of a philosophy sect (titthakano), respected as a saint by many people (sadhusammato) and as a homeless wandering ascetic (Parivājaka or Paribbājaka) of high standing and advanced in years than Buddha according to Buddhist scriptures.⁹

Rahul Sanskritayan thinks that rise of sceptical tradition in the sense of doubting and questioning the orthodox philosophical systems at the time of Buddha was so much in practice that the sceptics were then started to be considered as great sages in India.¹⁰ Kulatissa Nanda Jayatilleke also suggests that from the Vedic and Upanisadic period trends of agnostic and sceptical thinking arose and with the presence of diverse, opposite and irreconcilable positions on metaphysical and moral matters, led to a further development of sceptical traditions like that of Ajñānika.¹¹ For instance the concept of Self (Ātman) was a heated debate and much discussed topic of the time. Where Upanisadic and Vedāntic views advocated the idea of eternal soul, Materialists like Cārvāka denied the idea of eternal soul. One considered death only as a small stage, another saw it as the end of survival, and it is in this conflicting sense that the Ajñāna thinkers, like Jaina and Bauddha, showed a way out of this dilemma for truth seekers regarding all sorts of conflicting metaphysical, moral and religious views.¹² However, Ajñāna thinkers went even beyond the Bauddha and the Jaina, who minimally held some defined position. Esther A Solomon on arising of sceptical tendencies in ancient India said:

In India about the end of the Upanisadic period (-though the sceptical tendency is evident even earlier-) with the upsurge of philosophical and critical thought there arose thinkers who were sceptical- though not necessarily so in actual life -about virtue and vice (-Pūraṇa Kassapa and others) and the attainment of knowledge or the possibility of the description of reality in words (-Sañjaya Belatthaputta).¹³

From what has been quoted and said above, it becomes evident that doubting and sceptical tendencies existed at that time and not just that but there were many varieties of sceptical approaches within the existing Upanisadic tradition. The emergence of agnostic schools with the rise of sceptical traditions at the time is elaborated by Warder. He explains,

The Agnostics maintained that no conclusive knowledge about any of the matters debated by the philosophers is possible. For purposes of argument they developed a technique of systematic evasion, but generally they appear to have deprecated argument as leading to bad tempers and loss of peace of mind. Instead they seem to have advocated friendship. They pointed out that the various speculative doctrines, especially about the nature of the soul, were mutually contradictory. Such speculation could only be confusing and harmful or lead to harmful actions (such as disputes) and ultimately remorse and consequent obstruction (to peace of mind) and should therefore be avoided. In the time of the Buddha the teacher Sanjaya was wellknown as the leader of this school.¹⁴

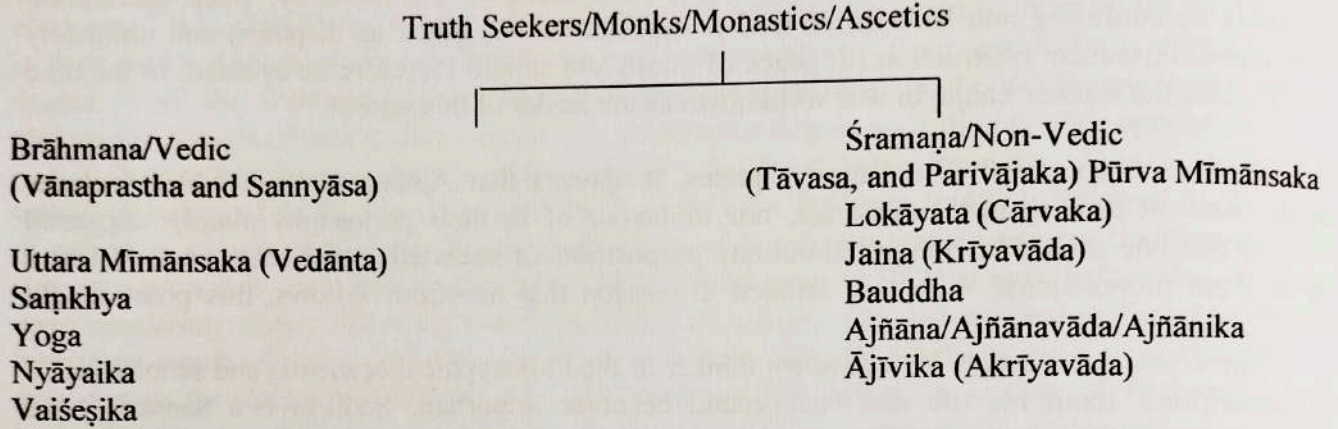
From what has been stated in the above quotes, it appears that Ajñāna thinkers which includes Sañjaya were neither against knowledge, nor in favour of it, their philosophy simply suggested indirectly that one should be tranquil about any proposition of knowledge and continue to just be a seer of these propositions. With the detailed discussion that herefrom follows, this point should become clearer to us.

Since Sañjaya is a very lesser known thinker in the Philosophical academia and scholarship, a brief description about his life and background becomes important. Sañjaya is a Sanskrit word meaning "victory or victorious". Sañjaya's full name has been variously written by scholars and had been mentioned in ancient Bauddha texts. Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta (Sañjaya of the Belaṭṭha clan) in Pāli as his name is the most common. Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta (Sañjaya Velatthaputra or Vairātiputra in Sanskrit) is with a bit of spelling difference and perhaps was the paternal or maternal name. Buddha in the similar way was called Gautama Sakyaputta (Gautama of Sakya clan), Vardhamana Mahāvīra as Nigantha Nataputta (literally of Nata clan). He is also known as Sañjaya, the Paribbajaka (in Pāli) and as Sañjaya Parivājakas (in Sanskrit) by many scholars, though that is inferred rather than being known directly. In Greek, he is referred as Sangaeus, and as Sañjaya Birateishi in Japanese, and as Jiā yà, Shen-she-ye or Sen-hi-ro-ji in Traditional Chinese languages. Belaṭṭhiputta in Pāli literally means 'Sañjaya son of Belaṭṭhi' or 'Sañjaya of Belaṭṭhi clan', where 'putta' means either 'son' or 'clan'. In Sanskrit the word 'Belaṭṭhi' is translated as Vairāṭi, a female name for the word Vairāṭa, meaning 'cosmic'. Likewise, Belaṭṭhiputta from Pāli becomes Vairāṭiputra in Sanskrit.

About the life of Sañjaya, almost nothing is known to us, except a bit of it, especially when he is compared with Buddha and Mahāvīra as described by their respective followers.¹⁵ The discussion about his life and legacy from the Jaina and Buddhist sources is done from what follows. As said above, we only know that he was probably from a Brāhmin lineage.¹⁶ Or perhaps he was a non Brāhmin.¹⁷ Some claim that he was born as a slave or as a son of a slave.¹⁸ He lived in the kingdom of Magadha (Mostly at Rajgriha) at the time of the reign of king Bimbisāra and his son Ajātasātru, and that he was the son of Belaṭṭha (Belaṭṭhaputta), literally Sañjaya of the Belaṭṭha clan and/or Vairāti, Vittali or Vilethi (hence Vairātiputta or Vilethiputta). Or perhaps his name was derived from the ancient small town of Bela of the region Magadha, in present day Bihar in Belaganj district. Bela is situated between prominent ancient Jaina and Buddhist pilgrimage places like Rajgir, Barabara Caves, Pawapuri, Vaishali, Nalanda and Bodh Gaya, where he might have been born (hence the surname Belaṭṭhaputta, literally meaning son of Bela or a person from Bela). Regarding the followers, Sañjaya, as we shall argue had at least five known disciples about whom we are aware from the Bauddha scriptures; first two being Suppiya Paribajjaka and his disciple Brahmadata who are mentioned in the Brahmajāla Sutta; the other being Tattvalabdha, one of the ministers at King Ajātasātru's court as mentioned in Mahāparinirvaṇa Sutta. And the last two were Sāriputta and Maudgalyayana, who after initially being the pupils of Sañjaya, ultimately became two most important disciples of the Buddha. With the background about Sañjaya, I proceed in the next section to relate the school of Ajñāna and Sañjaya with that of the Śramaṇa tradition.

The Śramaṇa Movement

The Śramaṇa tradition emerged as a movement which as said above questioned the beliefs and knowledge of all other orthodox (Brāhmaṇa) and heterodox (Śramaṇa) schools existing at that time in India without holding any view of their own.¹⁹ Let me mention and discuss about these sects so as to know the time and the nature of intellectual and spiritual ambience and what sort of life the Śramaṇas generally led when Sañjaya lived and propagated his philosophy.



After coming to know about various sects of the monks, renunciators, recluses, mendicants, hermits, ascetics and truth seekers, whether belonging to Brāhmaṇas or Śramaṇas, we can broadly categorise them as firstly, the seekers who were involved more with doing actions (Karma) and focussing primarily in the ways of living their life in a set way, rather than only focussing only on intellectual and spiritual upheaval and purification. And then secondly, there were seekers who on the contrary to the first category focussed their meditation more on understanding the truths (Jñāna) that they ought to seek and believed in going into depth of it for spiritual upliftment rather than only doing actions of a certain kind and living their life in a particular manner so as to seek the truth that they sought. Say for instance, the sect of Tāvasa was based on the first category of Śramaṇas and the sect of Parivājaka are identified more with the second category; Lokāyatas with both but primarily with performing actions and emphasising on living the life in a certain manner based on their philosophy. However, Vedāntins on the other hand primarily concerned themselves with the correction or rectification of wrong understanding to possess the right one and kept actions secondary as a means to arrive at the truth that they sought. Sañjaya does not strictly fall into either of these categories.

Tāvasas we find recorded to be the forest dwellers, devoting themselves with meditation, penance, sacrifice, and reading their scriptures to gain knowledge. They survived mainly on fruits and roots of plants and visited villages for alms. It is possible that there were many other such sects however, we may have no existing records of them. By listing them here the reader can get an insight as to their philosophical beliefs and the actions that they performed. The information that we have about them is so scattered and feeble that a little information about them is extremely significant to understand the philosophical tradition that existed at the time in ancient India.

The Parivājaka Śramaṇa were distinct from Tāvasas. They were wanderers who in groups of disciples and teachers wandering from places to places for eight to nine months and halted and paid emphasis on debates on philosophical and religious issues. They unlike the Tāvasas did not stress too much on living a life with certain rituals and actions. Both Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas were Parivājakas. They generally covered themselves with one piece of cloth. Perhaps Brāhmaṇas kept their head shaved, however, Śramaṇas necessarily did not shave their heads. Like Kottiyas they slept in bare ground. Most of the Parivājakas sustained their monasteries and wandered from place to place to promote their teachings and to seek the truth before returning to their monasteries. Brāhmaṇas wanderers were well versed in the Vedas. Both Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas in their own distinct way

preached charity and purity. They only walked on foot and avoided indulging in talks regarding women, money, kings, thieves, country, food etc. They never wore colourful clothes, only white or clay dyed clothes and never accepted any ornaments except a flower garland. Kailash Chand Jain states that Sañjaya was a very well known Parivājaka of the time and scholars of history and philosophy identify Sañjaya Parivājaka with Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta.²⁰ There were many other well known Parivājaka at the time.

The fact that there existed so many traditions and out of which we have listed few above, shows that there was an intellectual and spiritual revolution at the time in ancient India. The philosophical environment of the time must have been secular and liberal. Yashpal states that this freedom of thought and expression prevailing in India then is the most important achievement by the ancient Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas. No king persecuted these ideologies, even if he himself did not believe in them. It is evident from the Samaññaphala Sutta that the association of kings were not restricted to one sect only (Ajātsatru of Magadha and king Pasenadi of Kosala asked questions and listened to other sects as well, even though they had a personal adherence to one sect).²¹ Sañjaya as a thinker lived at this turbulent dynamic time when the lives of humans were flourishing with numerous new and conflicting ideas. In a discussion elsewhere I have stated:

The school of Ajñāna of Sañjaya Belaṭṭhiputta dealt with the clash of ideas and disputes by consistently suspending judgements (which in Sanskrit is termed as “amarakathananilambana”) at least on metaphysical and ethical debates. He formulated a fivefold response (pañcakoti) to escape taking positions on any philosophical view.²²

From the above statement by me I have mentioned that Sañjaya used a systematic technique to respond to the philosophical challenges he faced and he can just not be seen among the ones who paved the movement to question the orthodoxy, but also as the one who went beyond the views of the Śramaṇas and the row between the ideas between the Brāhmaṇas and the Śramaṇas.

Conclusion

Sañjaya existed at this time and is considered by Indian philosophy scholars as a well known Parivājaka, Ajñānika and Aviruddhaka. Ajñānavādins or to be precise Sañjaya in terms of knowledge was a Parivājaka, a wandering ascetic, Ajñānika, for his epistemic attitude towards various knowledge positions and Aviruddhaka or a non-rival in terms of being not in favour or against any possible view or philosophical position. Sañjaya belonged to a time when there were boom in the number of beliefs and philosophical views that were preached and practised by the people whether they belonged to the category of the Brāhmaṇas or the Śramaṇas, and he must have devised his philosophy as response towards these views. He had a unique way to participate in this movement and to seek a way out from the innumerable ideological beliefs and their conflicts. However, the approach taken by him neither holds that explicitly nor denies it. I presume Sañjaya's approach could be expressed as a way to unlearn these philosophical constructs that existed since the time he lived and even before that. In so far he went beyond holding any position either in favour of Brāhmaṇas and the Śramaṇas, or against them, he stands out within the popular traditions of ancient Indian philosophy.

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