Svabhava: Its Heretical Roots

Narmada Poojari

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of Svabhāva, its historical locatedness in the non-Vedic, atheist traditions of Buddhism, and the materialistic schools of Cārvāka / Lokāyata. Svabhāva as a religio-philosophical concept has been cursorily treated or even completely ignored by contemporary scholars in relation to premodern debates across traditions. Svabhāva has been variedly interpreted as different traditions. The Śāstras of the Vedic tradition which particularly deal with regulation of human conduct and nature presupposes an underlying apriori fixed, determined, changeless human nature (svabhāva) which is opposed to its traditional conception in the non-Vedic traditions. This paper lays out the framework to extend the scope of the notion of svabhāva beyond its non-Vedic origins and laws of nature or causality to understanding the central intent and implicit assumption on human nature in the dominant śāstric texts which caused them to create a hierarchical model of classifying human beings based on certain presupposed inherent characteristics.

Keywords: Svabhāva, Cārvāka, Lokāyata, Causality, Śāstras

Svabhāva

Buddhism has a long history of commentarial tradition which deals with the central metaphysical question of the 'human being' (Pāli *manussa* or Sanskrit *Puruṣa* or *manuṣya*,) and what constitutes the essential human nature (*Svabhāva*). It is this fundamental question that led to the conceptualization of whole new traditions where the human condition was central to any philosophical enterprise. Unlike the cosmic universal man *Puruṣa* of the orthodox Hindu schools, the Buddhist conception of man is the phenomenal this-worldly particular being, who undergoes changes, is born, is sustained and then perishes following the cycles that exist in the natural world. The human being has a special position in Buddhist cosmology even if restrained/ constrained in certain aspects such as complete agency or absolute freedom to attain enlightenment or liberation (*Buddhahood*) by transcending the realm of everyday existence (*saṃsāra*).

✉ Narmada P: narmada.p16@gail.com

PhD (Philosophy) University of Hyderabad, India. This is an invited commentary for PJSE's special issue on 'Brahmin-svabhava—uninterrupted access to surplus, labor, and property over the ages.'

Prabuddha

Svabhāva is the key ontological notion that defines and explains 'existence/non-existence' in Buddhism. It asks, 'what it means to exist?' or 'to not exist (*śūnyatā*)' *Svabhāva* has been variously interpreted in different philosophical contexts across various sects within Buddhism. According to Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, *śūnyatā* or emptiness is linked with the concept of *svabhāva*. *Svabhāva*, often translated as 'inherent existence' or 'inherent essence' has two senses from which it can be understood one from an ontological perspective and second from a cognitive perspective. From an ontological perspective, it can be understood in terms of the way things exist such as 'essence', 'substance' or 'ultimate reality' and from the perspective of cognition it can be understood as the way by which things are conceptualized by the human being. *Śūnyatā* and *Svabhāva* are interconnected in the ontological sense that *Śūnyatā* means lacking inherent essence (*svabhāva*) or 'self-nature', but from a cognitive or phenomenal perspective *svabhāva* means the property or quality (*svalakṣaṇa*) of an object that makes it that object and not some other object, for instance, the *svabhāva* of fire is heat, of water is motion and so on. So according to the doctrine of emptiness, all things including human beings lack an inherent or independent essence because they are all interdependent on something else for their existence.

While the early Madhyamaka texts like the *Prajñāparāmitasūtra*, deny the existence of any *svabhāva* within any being along the lines of the doctrine of emptiness or *Śūnyatā*, the later texts speak of the existence of an inherent self-nature *svabhāva* of all things. The Abhidhamma literature makes a distinction between *svabhāva* as a dependent, irreducible, momentary phenomena (*Dhamma*) which is distinguished from conventional objects which are conceptually constructed. They later go on to explain and elaborate on what constitutes the true Buddha nature or *svabhāva*.

Typically, it is argued that the doctrine of *svabhāva* is responsible for the conception of materialism in Indian thought called *Svabhāvavāda* which is associated with the *Cārvāka/Lokāyata* schools.[1] For the *Cārvāka*, *Svabhāva* meant the 'laws of nature'[2] which is synonymous with causality (*hetu*). *Svabhāva* is the first cause (*jagatkāraṇa*) which is distinct from a creator God or an uncaused entity or thing.

But contrary to this view, the Buddhist philosopher Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* composed in 2nd century A.D, where he equates *Svabhāva* with *yadṛchhā* (*ahetu*) translated as 'accidental' or 'chance'.

---

[1]   According to *Bṛhat saṁhita* (1.7), self-nature (svabhāva) is the cause of the world. Gokhale, P. P. (2015). *Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

[2]   The 'laws of nature' or the 'order of nature' which describes the way in which nature works. The term used in the Rig Veda for 'laws of nature' is *Ṛta*, which is also translated as universal law or cosmic order. The *Ṛta* is not just tied to natural law but also includes moral and sacrificial orders. It is inclusive of the rules and ritual obligations of the individual collectively referred to as the *Dharma*. Buddhism, on the other hand, the 'laws of nature' does not include the individuals moral and sacrificial or ritual orders or the hierarchical ordering of nature, but rather how the human being like all other objects are interdependent on each other for their existence also called *Pratītyasamutpāda* or doctrine of dependent origination. So, therefore there is nothing that exists on its own but has come from earlier circumstances or conditions, everything including man, the world is interwoven. The laws of nature in Vedas is prescriptive while in Buddhism it is descriptive.

When svabhāva is conceived as 'accidental' then it goes against the notion of causality because that which is accidental or determined by chance has no prior or antecedent cause. The first known doxography and poetry, written by the Tamil poet Cāttaṉār's *Maṇimekalai* (3rd century A.D.) speaks about the school of *Bhūtavāda* as one of the atheistic systems that assigns *svabhāva* to accidentalism or *yadṛchhā*.

Svabhāva whether fixed or accidental negates the notion of an ultimate divine determinative principle such as God or Karma because it argues that the diversity in this world is due to the combination of various material elements which come together and determine the property of things. Every entity has its own nature, and there is no agent external or internal which makes things the way they are, for instance, the color of the lotus, the sharpness of its thorn, the heat of the fire, the coolness of water and so on.

While *Svabhāva* means the innate nature or essence of all things animate and inanimate, when applied to human nature it means two things either that on one hand, human nature is fixed and determined by antecedent conditions or causes and on the other, that human nature is constantly changing and cannot be determined by any *a priori* condition or cause (*nisvabhāva*).

The orthodox classical Indian texts speak of three things with regards to human nature which are determined 1) The social location, the bodily and mental composition of a person at the time of birth in a particular *jatī* 2) One's lifespan *āyuḥ,* and 3) Particular experiences that one has during one's lifetime and the direct and indirect causes for those experiences (*bhoga*).[3] The causes for one's action (*karma*) and physiological movements proceed from attachments (*rāga*) and repulsions (*dveṣa*) which are distinct from religious and moral actions which are beyond these causes. What this infers is that one's birth into particular *jatī* one's *āyuḥ*, ordinary experiences and their particular actions are all determined but actions which are of the moral and spiritual kind are indeterminate. It is important at this point to ask why the authors or writers of these works[4] would want to posit a conflicting theory of human self which is at once beginning less, eternal and at the same time determined, fixed and changeless. The idea that human nature is determined by birth, social location and actions (*karma*) is particularly true with regards to how the 'other/s'[5] are constructed as opposed to the 'Self' which has the scope to change, to be

---

[3]   Bhattacharyya, K. (1964). The Status of the Individual in Indian Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West*, *14*(2), 131-144.

[4]   The authors of the *Śāstras* (religious and philosophical texts) which consists of both the revealed (*śruti*) and the remembered (*smṛti*) texts speak in great detail about what constitutes proper human behavior and right and wrong actions. The nature of the *Śāstras* changed from being purely descriptive in the early classical period to becoming normative texts and acquiring authority in the later and early medieval period. Their purpose was not primarily for gaining knowledge or seeking truth but codifying human behavior across areas such as language, social relations, sexuality etc, which is an important aspect of all *Śāstras*. A large number of *Śāstras* are essentially rule books which contain injunctions which regulate human practices and some these texts are said to be of divine origin thereby giving it absolute scriptural authority.

[5]   The Upaniṣads identify four social groups between the Brahmins and others, the Brahmins and the *Kṣatrīyas*, the Brahmins and other Brahmins, the Brahmins and women, and Brahmins and teachers. The 'others' include women, outcastes (*caṇḍalas*) and other Brahmins who have fallen from their social position by marrying outside of their castes. The caste system in the Upaniṣads is not fixed or rigid as in other texts such as the *Manuṣmrti*, where it becomes more formalized and normative. The 'Self 'is defined over and above the static 'other' whose behavior and nature is fixed.

free and eternal or even become God.

The Buddhists position of a no-Self does not deny agency or free will, but rather argues that at the conventional/phenomenal level there is no self which is independent, autonomous apart from within the aggregates or *skhandas*, but at the level of ultimate reality the individual self or person is just one link within the larger interconnectedness of things in the world. Although there is no autonomous self in the world, from a phenomenal perspective we function as autonomous beings who are responsible for their actions, and hence the past is not something which is fixed but something which can be changed by our present actions and so in that sense we are free. Buddhism did not feel the necessity to draw distinctions either conceptual, doctrinal, ontological or behavioral between 'self' and 'others' owing to their notion of no-self doctrine and the theory of dependent origination. When there is no-self there is no essence of the self (*svabhāva*), which implies then that there can also be no essence of the other or *otherness*.[6]

Philosophically, to say that one's own nature or human nature is fixed and determined has several implications because it is incompatible with the notion of human freedom, will, and agency. In the Indian context, for those who believe in eternity there is no change and its contrarian view holds true, that when something changes it cannot be eternal. If self-nature (*svabhāva*) is fixed and determined then there is negation or denial of change, development of human potential and social -progress. Those who are essentialists believe in the immutable, fixed nature of things, a common human reason and a universal moral principle, but those who are anti-essentialist believe in difference, in pluralism, in change and historicity of things and relativism with regards to moral principles. With regards to human nature, anti-essentialism denies that there are any fixed set of traits or markers that define a specific group of people, because its underlying presupposition is that human nature is something which is constantly evolving and can never be fixed.

Like the essentialists and the anti-essentialists, the *Svabhāvavādins* too are divided on what constitutes human nature. There are those who argue that there is a fixed essence of all things and equate *svabhāva* with deterministic principle like causality and then there are those like the Mādhyamaka's who reject any fixed essence of things and deny that *svabhāva* is a result of some *apriori* causal conditions, but that *svabhāva* is something that is a result of its own nature.

Interestingly, this very important concept *svabhāva* which is fundamental to the conception of human nature and existence rooted in the unorthodox Śramaṇic non-Vedic traditions has been largely ignored by contemporary scholars with reference to the epistemological and metaphysical debates of ancient and medieval India in between and across traditions. Understanding and deconstruction of the concept of *svabhāva* are important to decoding texts (*Śāstras*) on human nature which codify and regulate behavior like the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Puruṣasūkta, Dharmaśāstras*, and *Manusmṛti*.

---

[6]   Refer to Poojari, N. (2018).

References

Bhattacharyya, K. (1964). The Status of the Individual in Indian Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West*, *14*(2), 131-144.

Bhattacharya, R. (2012). Svabhāvavāda and the Cārvāka/Lokāyata: A Historical Overview. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 40(6), 595-613.

Gokhale,P. (2015).Lokāyata/Cārvāka: A Philosophical Inquiry. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Nāgārjuna, and Jay L Garfield. (1995). Trans. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Translation and Commentary.* Translated by J L Garfield. New York: Oxford University Press.

Poojari, N. (2018). Philosophical Percepts of 'Self' and 'Others' in Classical Indian Texts, PhD Thesis, ed. University of Hyderabad.