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Adhikāra



Alberto Pelissero
Dipartimento di Studi umanistici StudiUm,
Università degli studi di Torino, Torino, Italy

Definition

“Competence” or “jurisdiction” or even “authority” to accomplish a certain ritual act, to study a specific subject matter, to exercise a particular activity, to enjoy the fruits of moral acts.

Adhikāra

The Sanskrit term *adhikāra* derives from the root *kr* “to make” with the preverb *adhi* “over, above, concerning.” The general meaning of the root modified by the preverb is “to superintend, be at the head of,” “to be entitled to.” Terms connected with *adhikāra* from the semantic point of view are *adhikaraṇa* (originally and from the grammatical point of view, “location,” subsequently and from the juridical point of view, “court of justice”), meaning a topic in a treatise; *adhikārin* “possessing competence or authority, entitled to, fit for,” and in the juridical acceptation “superintendent.” The term *adhikāra* has different fields of use: in the ritual sphere it indicates the competence to accomplish a certain ritual or sacrificial act; in the domain of law it denotes the jurisdiction

or even authority to exercise a particular activity; in education and epistemology, the competence (the right, but more than this, the obligation) to study a specific subject matter; and finally in the moral field, both the right and the obligation to enjoy the fruits (*phala*) of one’s own moral acts.

In the ritual context, from the point of view of the philosophical school of the “first exegesis,” *pūrvamīmāṃsā*, *adhikāra* indicates the range of application, the scope of a statement, reduced to a single significant word. As such, *adhikāra* is one of the six kinds of propositions: definition (*saṃjñā*), metarule (*paribhāṣā*), general injunction (*vidhi*), restricted injunction or prohibition (*niṣedha*), topic assessment (*adhikāra*), and adaptation or extended application (*ūha*). We may call *adhikāra* the eligibility to sacrifice and *adhikārin* the person entitled to enjoy the fruit (*phala*) of the sacrificial act. The famous sentence “he who desires heaven should perform the sacrifice” (*svargakāmo yajeta*) denotes in its first word at the same time the *adhikārin* and the fruit he is aspiring to reach through the sacrifice. The same sentence, being a prescription related to a topic, *adhikāra**vidhi*, can explain the difference between the prior goal (heaven, *svarga*) and the bliss of the sacrificer (being a human goal, *puruṣārtha*), in force of the practice of the technical “splitting of the sentence,” *vākyabheda*, into its constituent parts ([1]: 11, 15; [2]). In this context, *adhikāra* may be even translated with “qualification” [3] as a distinct attribute of the person whom some injunction concerns.

The juridical use of *adhikāra*, strictly bound to its ritual meaning, has to do with both entitlement and obligation to act in the legal sphere, a legal status conferring responsibility, bound to a specific social position. The possession of specific social attributes may, for example, exclude a subject from the range of legal witness in a legal trial: a palmist, a dishonest merchant, a bird hunter, a physician, an enemy, a friend, and an actor cannot be heard as witnesses (*Mahābhārata* 5, 35, 37). The eligibility to act in the name of the sovereign may be conferred temporarily or definitely by the king to some appointed officers, and a specific figure of “law officer,” *dharmādhikārin*, is deputed to judge in matter of *dharma*. In this juridical acceptation, *adhikāra* has to do even with the right to transfer properties ([4], 70; [5], Vol. 2, 86–91; [6]). The absence of a juridical *adhikāra* has the effect to undermine and to almost annihilate moral responsibility, as is the case with *sūdras*, due to the fact that they have no access to the *Veda*, the only effective source of *dharma* (*Manu Smṛti* 10, 126; for details of the debate see [7–15]).

From the point of view of the best way to structure knowledge into a philosophical treatise (epistemology), and to communicate this knowledge to disciples (pedagogy), *adhikāra* [16] means a topic needing an explanation. The most used method to introduce this explanation is the indeclinable word *atha*, an auspicious and inceptive particle corresponding to something like “now” and “then” at the same time, and indicating, at the very *incipit* of a treatise, the will to explain the topic indicated by the immediately following word. The most celebrated example of this methodology is the *incipit* (*śāstrārambha*) of two works attributed to Patañjali (and it is even considered as a sort of stylistic fingerprint of the author by those who consider these two authors being one and the same Patañjali, not two homonymous authors): the *Yogasūtra* begins with *atha yogānuśāsanam* “and now the teaching of yoga,” and the *Great Comment* (*Mahābhāṣya*) to Pāṇini’s *Eight day Grammar* (*Aṣṭādhyāyī*) begins with *atha śabdānuśāsanam* “and now the teaching of word” [17]. In this case, *atha* works as a sort of illocutionary act, being able to begin a teaching

and to validate its content [18]. It is to be noted that in traditional grammar (*vyākaraṇa*) properly, *adhikāra* is practically synonymous with *anuvṛtti* “continuation”: an *adhikārasūtra* does not prescribe an independent grammatical operation like a *vidhisūtra*, it merely introduces a word which is to be continued in the section concerned (as in *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 7,3,10; [19]).

Within the moral field, *adhikāra* in the sense of the competence or eligibility to reap the fruit of virtuous and vicious acts, being the basis of the system of retribution of action (*karman*) and of the consequent belief in transmigration (*saṃsāra*), is put in doubt by the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the celebrated devotional poem inserted into the *Mahābhārata*, where Kṛṣṇa suggest to Arjuna that he has *adhikāra* to act, but not to reap the fruits of his own acts (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2, 47). Being entitled to accomplish (no more ritual, but moral) acts does not mean that one is entitled to reap the fruits of these acts. If these fruits are dedicated to God, it is possible to avoid moral consequences at all, be them good or bad. Finally, for Śaṅkara ([20]: 11) the *adhikārin*, one who possesses *adhikāra*, is the qualified aspirant for liberation, the eligible person to go beyond *saṃsāra*. In order to fulfill this qualification, he must satisfy four moral prerequisites (*sādhana* *ca* *tuṣṭaya*): the ability to discriminate between eternal and not eternal (*nityānityavastuviveka*); the absence of greed to obtain desire and to avoid pain in this world or in the other world beyond (*ihāmutrāthaphalavairāgya*); the obtainment of calm, temperance, spirit of renouncement, strengthness, concentration, and faith (*śamadamaḍisādhana* *sampatti*); and a strong longing for liberation (*mumukṣutva*).

Cross References

- ▶ [Arjuna](#)
- ▶ [Bhagavad Gītā](#)
- ▶ [Karman](#)
- ▶ [Kṛṣṇa](#)
- ▶ [Mahābhārata](#)
- ▶ [Manu Smṛti](#)
- ▶ [Yogasūtra](#)

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