पूर्वपक्षः

The Opponent First: the Research Gap

डॉ. मन्था-श्रीनिवासुः · Dr. Mantha Srinivasu · 16 Nov 2026 · AŚ 15.1.53–54; Su. Utt. 65.25

Abstract

Pūrvapakṣa, "the prior view", is the opposing position that a śāstra states in order to answer it. Kauṭilya defines it as "a statement to be refuted", with the thesis of Bhāradvāja that he goes on to reject: "of a calamity of the king and a calamity of the minister, the minister's calamity is the graver." Suśruta defines it as "a question preceded by an objection": "how can the four kinds of prameha caused by vāta be incurable?" Cakrapāṇi defines it as "a statement that damages an asserted matter", and points to a debate in Caraka's symposium on incompatible foods, where Ātreya's rule that fish should not be eaten with milk is challenged by Bhadrakāpya: all fish may be eaten with milk except the *cilicima*. The same word names the plaint in legal procedure, and the second member of the Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta topic. This article shows that the three definitions describe three forms of opposition — a rival thesis, an objecting question, and a counter-statement from a peer — and argues that the strength of a śāstra depends on the strength of its pūrvapakṣa. It answers three objections: that stating a view only to refute it is wasteful, that a pūrvapakṣa invites the setting up of a weak opponent, and that Suśruta's "question" is not a statement to be refuted. It concludes that pūrvapakṣa is the device by which a śāstra earns its conclusions, and that its modern forms are the research gap, the rival hypothesis and the reviewer's objection.

Keywords: pūrvapakṣa; tantrayukti; objection; prior view; counter-position; rival hypothesis; research gap; steelmanning; debate; sambhāṣā; Arthaśāstra; Suśruta; prameha; Caraka; viruddhāhāra; legal procedure

1. प्रवेशः · Place in the lists

Pūrvapakṣa is twenty-fourth in Kauṭilya's list, eighteenth in Suśruta's and twentieth in Caraka's. In all three it is paired with the reply — Kauṭilya's *uttarapakṣa*, Suśruta's and Caraka's *nirṇaya* (TY-26). The pair is the core of argument in every śāstra. *Pūrva-pakṣa* is "the first side": the position that comes first in the order of discussion, not because it is preferred but because the reply must answer it.

2. लक्षणानि · The definitions

> प्रतिषेद्धव्यं वाक्यं पूर्वपक्षः
> स्वाम्यमात्यव्यसनयोरमात्यव्यसनं गरीय इति

> "A statement to be refuted is pūrvapakṣa." — Example: "Of a calamity of the king and a calamity of the minister, the minister's calamity is the graver."
>
> Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra* 15.1.53–54

> आक्षेपपूर्वकः प्रश्नः पूर्वपक्षः। यथा कथं वातनिमित्ताश्चत्वारः प्रमेहा असाध्या भवन्तीति ॥
>
> "A question preceded by an objection is pūrvapakṣa. For example: how can the four kinds of prameha caused by vāta be incurable?"
>
> Suśruta, *Uttaratantra* 65.25

> पूर्वपक्षो नाम प्रतिज्ञातार्थसन्दूषकं वाक्यं; यथा- "मत्स्यान्न पयसाभ्यवहरेत्" इति प्रतिज्ञातस्यार्थस्य "सर्वानेव मत्स्यान्न पयसाभ्यवहरेदन्यत्र चिलिचिमात्" (सू.अ.२६) इति।
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> "Pūrvapakṣa is a statement that damages an asserted matter. For example: against the asserted matter 'one should not eat fish with milk', the statement 'one should not eat any fish with milk except the cilicima' (Sūtrasthāna 26)."
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> Cakrapāṇidatta, *Āyurvedadīpikā* on Caraka, *Siddhisthāna* 12.41–44

3. लक्षणपरीक्षा · Testing the definitions

3.1 Three forms of opposition

Authority	Form	Source	Example
Kauṭilya	A **rival thesis**	An earlier teacher (Bhāradvāja), against the teachers' general view	The minister's calamity is graver than the king's
Suśruta	An **objecting question**	A questioner (pupil or opponent)	How can vātaja prameha be incurable?
Caraka (Cakrapāṇi)	A **counter-statement**	A fellow sage in a symposium	Bhadrakāpya against Ātreya on fish and milk

3.2 Kauṭilya's pūrvapakṣa in context

Kauṭilya's example comes from the opening of the eighth book, on calamities. The teachers in general hold that, of the seven constituents of the state, the calamity of each is graver than that of the one after it, so that the king's calamity is the gravest. Bhāradvāja disagrees, and gives his reasons:

"स्वाम्यमात्यजनपददुर्गकोशदण्डमित्रव्यसनानां पूर्वं पूर्वं गरीयः" इत्याचार्याः ॥

नेति भरद्वाजः ॥

"स्वाम्यमात्यव्यसनयोरमात्यव्यसनं गरीयः ॥

मन्त्रो मन्त्रफलावाप्तिः कर्मानुष्ठानमायव्ययकर्म दण्डप्रणयनममित्राटवीप्रतिषेधो राज्यरक्षणं व्यसनप्रतीकारः कुमाररक्षणमभिषेकश्च कुमाराणामायत्तममात्येषु ॥

तेषामभावे तदभावः, छिन्नपक्षस्येव राज्ञश्चेष्टानाशश्च ॥

व्यसनेषु चासन्नः परोपजापः ॥

वैगुण्ये च प्राणाबाधः प्राणान्तिकचरत्वाद्राज्ञः" इति ॥

"'Of the calamities of the king, minister, country, fort, treasury, army and ally, each earlier one is graver,' say the teachers. 'No,' says Bhāradvāja. 'Of the calamities of king and minister, the minister's calamity is graver. Counsel, the attainment of the fruits of counsel, the carrying out of works, the work of income and expenditure, the use of the army, the warding off of enemies and forest tribes, the protection of the kingdom, the remedying of calamities, the protection of the princes and their consecration — these depend on the ministers. In their absence these are absent, and there is loss of activity for the king, as for one whose wings are cut. In calamities, the enemy's intrigue is close at hand. And in their failure, the king's life is endangered, since they move close to his life.'"

Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra* 8.1.5–11

This is the pūrvapakṣa that Kauṭilya then refutes with "No, says Kauṭilya" (TY-26). It is not a straw man: it is stated with ten functions and three dangers, and it is a view a reasonable person might hold. That is what makes the refutation worth reading. (The same passage supplies Kauṭilya's example of vākyaśeṣa, TY-18: in "as for one whose wings are cut", "of a bird" is to be supplied.)

3.3 Caraka's symposium

Caraka's example comes from a discussion among sages on foods that are incompatible when combined. Ātreya states the rule and its reason:

तत्र यान्याहारमधिकृत्य भूयिष्ठमुपयुज्यन्ते तेषामेकदेशं वैरोधिकमधिकृत्योपदेक्ष्यामः न मत्स्यान् पयसा सहाभ्यवहरेत्तुभयं ह्येतन्मधुरं मधुरविपाकं महाभिष्यन्दि शीतोष्णत्वाद्विरुद्धवीर्या विरुद्धवीर्यत्वाच्छोणितप्रदूषणाय महाभिष्यन्दित्वान्मार्गोपरोधाय च ॥

"Of those (substances) which are most used as food, we shall teach a part, with reference to incompatibility. One should not eat fish together with milk: for both are sweet, sweet in post-digestive effect and greatly obstructive of channels; because one is cold and the other hot, they are of opposed potency; and because of opposed potency they vitiate the blood, and because they are greatly obstructive, they block the channels."

Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna* 26.82

Bhadrakāpya then challenges the rule:

> तन्निशम्यात्रेयवचनमनु भद्रकाप्यो ऽग्निवेशमुवाच सर्वानेव मत्स्यान् पयसा सहाभ्यवहरेदन्यत्रैकस्माच्छिलिचिमात् स पुनः शकली लोहितनयनः सर्वतो लोहितराजी रोहिताकारः प्रायो भूमौ चरति तं चेत् पयसा सहाभ्यवहरेन्निःसंशयं शोणितजानां विबन्धजानां च व्याधीनामन्यतममथवा मरणं प्राप्नुयादिति ॥
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> "Having heard Ātreya's words, Bhadrakāpya said to Agniveśa: 'One may eat all fish together with milk, except the one cilicima. That fish is scaly, red-eyed, with red lines all over, shaped like a rohita, and moves mostly on land. If one eats it together with milk, one will without doubt get one of the diseases born of the blood or of obstruction, or else die.'"
>
> Caraka, *Sūtrasthāna* 26.83

This is a pūrvapakṣa in Cakrapāṇi's exact sense: "a statement that damages an asserted matter". It narrows Ātreya's rule to a single exception, and it is supported by a precise description of the fish and its effects. Ātreya's reply, "No", follows (TY-26).

In the Caraka e-text Bhadrakāpya's words are a permission ("one may eat all fish with milk except the cilicima"). The reading of Cakrapāṇi's citation in the commentary e-text, with a negative ("one should not eat any fish with milk except the cilicima"), appears to be corrupt, since the negative turns Bhadrakāpya's objection into a statement close to Ātreya's reply.

3.4 Suśruta's objecting question

Suśruta's pūrvapakṣa is a question, but not an innocent one: it is "preceded by an objection" (*ākṣepa-pūrvaka*). The questioner does not merely ask why the vāta types of prameha are incurable; he implies that they should not be — perhaps because vāta disorders are elsewhere treatable, or because the vāta types might be expected to be milder than the others. The question carries a counter-thesis in interrogative form. The answer that settles it is Suśruta's example of *nirṇaya* (TY-26).

3.5 The legal and Mīmāṃsā senses

In legal procedure the same word names the plaint, the statement of the party who comes first:

> साक्षिषूभयतः सत्सु साक्षिणः पूर्ववादिनः । पूर्वपक्षे ऽधरीभूते भवन्त्युत्तरवादिनः ॥
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> "When there are witnesses on both sides, the witnesses of the first party (are heard first); when the first party's case (*pūrvapakṣa*) has been defeated, the witnesses of the respondent become (relevant)."
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> *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 2.17

In Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta every topic (*adhikaraṇa*) is set out in five parts — subject, doubt, prior view, conclusion, connection — with the pūrvapakṣa stated at length before the conclusion. Across law, exegesis and science, the pattern is the same: the opposing case is given its full hearing first.

4. पूर्वपक्षः खण्डनं मण्डनं च · Objections and replies

4.1 Why state a view only to refute it?

> ननु यत् मतं मिथ्या तस्य उपन्यासः व्यर्थः, अपि च हानिकरः — श्रोता तत् एव गृह्णीयात्, खण्डनं विस्मरेत्। अतः सिद्धान्तः एव वक्तव्यः, न पूर्वपक्षः इति चेत्, न। सिद्धान्तस्य स्वरूपं तस्य प्रतियोगिना एव स्फुटं भवति — "न मत्स्यान् पयसा सह" इति नियमस्य सीमा भद्रकाप्यस्य आक्षेपेण ज्ञायते: किं सर्वे मत्स्याः, उत चिलिचिमः एव? पूर्वपक्षं विना श्रोता न जानाति कस्मात् सिद्धान्तः भिद्यते, कस्य निवारणाय उच्यते। किञ्च लोके पूर्वपक्षः स्वयम् एव उत्पद्यते — यदि शास्त्रं तं न उपन्यस्येत्, शिष्यः तं प्रथमं श्रुत्वा मुह्येत्। शास्त्रेण पूर्वपक्षस्य उपन्यासः तस्य विषस्य औषधम्।
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> **Objection:** to set forth a view that is false is pointless, and even harmful — the hearer may take it up and forget the refutation. So only the conclusion should be stated, not the prior view. **Reply:** No. The shape of a conclusion becomes clear only through its opposite. The scope of the rule "not fish with milk" is learnt through Bhadrakāpya's challenge: all fish, or only the cilicima? Without the prior view the hearer does not know from what the conclusion differs, or what it is meant to prevent. Moreover, prior views arise in the world of themselves; if a śāstra did not set them forth, the pupil would hear one first and be confused. The śāstra's statement of the prior view is the antidote to its poison.
>
> Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.2 Does pūrvapakṣa not invite a weak opponent?

> ननु शास्त्रकारः स्वयम् एव पूर्वपक्षं रचयति। सः दुर्बलं पूर्वपक्षं रचयित्वा सुखेन खण्डयेत्। अतः पूर्वपक्षः छलस्य अवकाशः इति चेत्, न। दुर्बलः पूर्वपक्षः शास्त्रस्य एव दुर्बलतां सूचयति — तस्य खण्डनेन सिद्धान्तः न दृढः भवति, यतः प्रबलः पूर्वपक्षः अनुक्तः तिष्ठति। अतः शास्त्रकाराः पूर्वपक्षं सहेतुकं वदन्ति — भारद्वाजः अमात्यव्यसनस्य गौरवे मन्त्रकर्मफलावाप्त्यादीन् हेतून् वदति; भद्रकाप्यः चिलिचिमस्य लक्षणं व्याधिं च सविस्तरं वदति। "प्रतिषेद्धव्यं वाक्यम्" इति लक्षणे "वाक्यम्" — पूर्णं साकाङ्क्षं सहेतुकं वचनम्, न पदमात्रम्। यः पूर्वपक्षः तस्य वादिना स्वयं स्वीक्रियेत, सः एव योग्यः पूर्वपक्षः।

Objection: the author himself composes the prior view. He can compose a weak one and refute it easily. So pūrvapakṣa is an opening for deceit. **Reply:** No. A weak prior view shows the weakness of the śāstra itself: its refutation does not make the conclusion firm, since the strong prior view remains unstated. So authors of śāstras state the prior view with its reasons — Bhāradvāja supports the gravity of the minister's calamity with counsel, the attainment of its fruits and the rest; Bhadrakāpya describes the cilicima and its effects in detail. In the definition "a statement to be refuted", the word is *vākya* — a complete statement with its reasons, not a mere word. The proper prior view is one that its own holder would accept as his.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

4.3 Is Suśruta's question a statement to be refuted?

ननु कौटिल्यः "प्रतिषेद्धव्यं वाक्यम्" इति वदति; सुश्रुतः "प्रश्नः" इति। प्रश्नः न प्रतिषिध्यते, किन्तु उत्तर्यते। अतः द्वयोः लक्षणयोः विरोधः इति चेत्, न। "आक्षेपपूर्वकः" इति विशेषणं प्रश्नस्य अन्तः प्रतिपक्षं दर्शयति — "कथम् असाध्याः" इति पृच्छन् "साध्याः भवितुम् अर्हन्ति" इति गूढं वदति। तस्य निर्णयेन स गूढः पक्षः निराक्रियते। अतः सुश्रुतस्य प्रश्नः कौटिल्यस्य वाक्यम् एव प्रश्नरूपेण। चक्रपाणेः "प्रतिज्ञातार्थसन्दूषकम्" इति लक्षणं द्वयोः साधारणम् — वाक्यरूपेण प्रश्नरूपेण वा यत् प्रतिज्ञां दूषयति, सः पूर्वपक्षः।

Objection: Kauṭilya says "a statement to be refuted"; Suśruta says "a question". A question is not refuted but answered. So the two definitions conflict. **Reply:** No. The qualifier "preceded by an objection" shows a counter-position within the question: asking "how can they be incurable?", the questioner implies "they ought to be curable". That implied position is set aside by the settlement. So Suśruta's question is Kauṭilya's statement in the form of a question. Cakrapāṇi's definition, "what damages an asserted matter", is common to both: whatever damages a thesis, as statement or as question, is pūrvapakṣa.

Śaṅkā–samādhāna composed for this article.

5. सिद्धान्तः · The settled view

प्रतिज्ञातस्य अर्थस्य दूषकं, सहेतुकं, तस्य वादिना स्वीकार्यरूपेण उपन्यस्तं वचनं — परपक्षरूपं, आक्षेपगर्भप्रश्नरूपं, सहाध्यायिनः प्रतिवचनरूपं वा — यत् उत्तरेण निराकर्तव्यं, सः पूर्वपक्षः।

"Pūrvapakṣa is a statement that damages an asserted matter — given with its reasons, in a form its own holder would accept — whether as a rival thesis, as a question containing an objection, or as a peer's counter-statement, which is to be answered by the reply."

Definition composed for this article.

The definition takes Cakrapāṇi's "damaging an asserted matter" as the core, adds the three forms seen in the examples, and adds the standard implicit in all three: a pūrvapakṣa must be stated with its reasons and fairly — as its holder would state it.

6. आधुनिकसंवादः · The modern counterpart

Classical form	Modern counterpart
Kauṭilya: the view of an earlier teacher	The **prevailing view** in the literature that a study challenges; the starting point of a **research gap**
Suśruta: the objecting question	The **reviewer's objection**; the question from the audience after a talk
Caraka: a peer's counter-statement	**Rival hypotheses**; scholarly debate and commentaries-and-replies in journals
Stated fairly, with reasons	**Steelmanning**: presenting the opposing view in its strongest form
The plaint in law; the Mīmāṃsā topic	The structure of argument in law reports and in philosophical papers

A literature review that presents only views the author agrees with has no pūrvapakṣa, and its conclusion has not been earned. The best papers state the strongest objection to their own thesis — the one a critical reader would raise — and answer it.

7. प्रयोगाः · Uses

7.1 In research

For every thesis, write its pūrvapakṣa in the three forms: the rival view in the literature, the objection a reviewer would raise, and the counter-statement of a colleague who disagrees. State each with its reasons, in words its holder would accept. Then answer each. If one cannot be answered, revise the thesis.

7.2 In teaching

Before teaching a conclusion, present the strongest case against it and let students try to answer it. Use Caraka's symposium as a model: the sages disagree, give reasons, and are answered. Students learn that a śāstra is an argument, not a list of rules.

7.3 In daily life

Before deciding, state the opposite case as its best advocate would. Decisions that have faced their pūrvapakṣa are more often right, and are easier to defend when challenged.

8. अभ्यासः · Exercise

1. Read AŚ 8.1, on the relative gravity of the calamities of king and minister. Write out Bhāradvāja's pūrvapakṣa with all its reasons, and compare it with the teachers' general view in 8.1.5.
2. Read Caraka, Sūtrasthāna 26.81–84. Identify the asserted matter, the pūrvapakṣa and the reply, and state the reasons offered by each side.
3. Write the strongest objection to the thesis of your current research, in a form its holder would accept.

9. उपसंहारः · Conclusion

Pūrvapakṣa is the opposing view stated in order to be answered. Kauṭilya states the rival thesis of an earlier teacher, Suśruta an objecting question, Caraka a peer's counter-statement in a symposium; the same structure governs legal procedure and Mīmāṃsā exegesis. Stating a view to refute it is not wasteful but necessary, because a conclusion is defined by what it opposes; a pūrvapakṣa must be stated fairly and with its reasons, or the refutation proves nothing; and Suśruta's question is a statement in interrogative form. The strength of a śāstra is measured by the strength of its pūrvapakṣa — and so is the strength of a modern paper.

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