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THE YOGA INSTITUTE, Santa Cruz, Bombay 400 055.

©1980

Owner: The Yoga Institute, Bombay-400 055.

Edited and Published by Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra for The Yoga Institute, The Yoga Institute, Santa Cruz, Bombay-400 055 and printed by him at The Examiner Press, Dalal St., Bombay 400 023.

VOLUME XXVI

MARCH 1981

NUMBER 8

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ISSN 0044-0493

THE YOGA INSTITUTE
SANTA CRUZ, BOMBAY-400 055
ASURI—A SAMKHYA YOGIN

Having come to realise the defects of ritualistic actions, this great exponent of Sānkhya—took to the Jñāna-mārga, wrote no books and remained a legend.

It is well-known that Āsuri was the only disciple of Kapila, the earliest expounder of Sānkhya. This is stated not only in the works on Sānkhya-yoga but also in the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas (vide Bhāgavata 1-3-10). In referring to Āsuri the Māṭhara and Jayamaṅgalā commentaries of the Sāmkhyakārikā have used the expression ‘Āsurisagotra’ which shows that the word Āsuri is the name of the gotra of this teacher. The personal name of this teacher has not been mentioned by any of the later teachers.

The author of the Māṭharaśiti (on Sāmkhyakārikā 1) and of the Jayamaṅgalā (on Sām. Kā. 70) inform us that in the first part of his life Āsuri was a great householder and he followed the path of Vedic karmakāṇḍa devoutly. The information supplied by these commentators must be taken as valid, for we find as many as nine views of Āsuri about the Vedic rituals in the Satapatha-brahmana of the Sūkla-yajurveda. The Kalpasūtra Āsuriya (a work on Vedic rituals) named after its author Āsuri evidently shows that Āsuri was a staunch follower of the Vedic karmakāṇḍa.

The commentators of the Sāmkhyakārikā inform us that being influenced by the teachings of the sage Kapila, Āsuri left the path of karm and accepted the path of jñāna. This is corroborated by some of the passages in the Sāntiparvan of the Mahābhārata. It appears that on account of performing Vedic sacrifices Āsuri’s heart was purified and Kapila considered him the most competent person to be taught the doctrines of Sānkhya. Āsuri seems to have embraced the path of jñāna as he came to realize the defects of karmans and the non-eternity of the results of sacrificial acts.

The exalted character of Āsuri may be known from the fact that Kapila instructed to the enquiring Āsuri with the help of a nirmāṇacitta as has been expressly stated by Pañcaśikha (विविधान निर्माणितसत्ताविद्या कार्यवर्त्तिः प्रदेशिकान्तेऽव...) quoted in the Vyāsabhāṣya on YS. 1.25). The creation of the nirmāṇacitta shows that Āsuri was not taught through the worldly process of teaching.

The following two verses of the Mahābhārata depict the spiritual activities of Āsuri: Śānti—p. 2 of 18.13 says that Āsuri approached his preceptor Kapila with a view to knowing the nature of the Self and he came to comprehend the distinction between the body and the Self and consequently acquired divine vision. Similarly Śānti—p. 2 of 18.14 says that in the assembly of sages Āsuri made an exposition of the immutable and indestructible Brahman which sometimes assumes diverse forms.

In the Kumbhakona edition of the Mahābhārata there are three chapters in the Śānti-parvan (Chaps. 326-328) in the dialogue of Kapila and Āsuri. These Chapters (partly in prose) deal with all the essential Sāmkhya doctrines precisely.

It is a matter of great regret that we do not hear from any source about any literary composition of Āsuri. No teacher of the philosophical systems based on the Vedic tradition quotes any actual sentence or view of Āsuri. Guṇaratna, a Jaina scholar, in his Saḍḍarśanasamuccaya quotes a couplet and ascribes it to Āsuri. There is ample doubt about this ascription. It appears that Āsuri did not compose any formal treatise; he simply taught Pañcāśikha, who actually composed a treatise, from which a few sentences have been quoted by later teachers.

R. S. BHATTACHARYA