



National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research

ISSN: 2454-9177

NJHSR 2026; 1(65): 319-321

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www.sanskritarticle.com

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Mīmāṃsā: The Ancient Indian Science of Interpretation and its Enduring Relevance to Modern Jurisprudence

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1. Introduction: Mīmāṃsā as a Disciplined Method of Inquiry

The term *Mīmāṃsā*, derived from the Sanskrit root *man* (to think), denotes "deep inquiry" or "systematic investigation." Within our intellectual tradition, it is venerated as *pūjanīya-vicārah*—a respectful, careful, and disciplined inquiry. Far from casual speculation, *Mīmāṃsā* is professionally classified as *vākya-śāstra*, the science of sentences. It is the rigorous study of how linguistic structures, context, and intent converge to convey authoritative meaning.

While its origins lie in the interpretation of Vedic ritual duties (*dharma*), *Mīmāṃsā* evolved into a comprehensive system of legal hermeneutics. This transition from liturgy to law represents one of the most significant developments in Indian jurisprudence. As we preserve this heritage at institutions like **The Madras Sanskrit College in Chennai-4**, we recognize that these principles are not historical relics. Rather, they are sophisticated analytical tools that mirror and inform modern statutory interpretation. In the spirit of the SASTRA motto—*Think Merit | Think Transparency | Think Sastra*—we must approach these ancient texts with the same rigor we apply to modern constitutional law.

2. The Structural Foundation: Adhikaraṇa and the Logic of Investigation

The primary unit of analysis in *Mīmāṃsā* is the *adhikaraṇa*, a structured unit of discussion designed to resolve interpretative ambiguities. This five-fold logical progression ensures that every inquiry is exhaustive. The synergy between this ancient method and modern judicial reasoning is evidenced in the following comparison:

<i>Mīmāṃsā Adhikaraṇa</i> Structure	Modern Judicial Judgment Structure
Topic (<i>Visaya</i>): The specific subject or passage under inquiry.	Issue: Identification of the core legal question or dispute.
Doubt (<i>Samsāya</i>): The ambiguity or conflict requiring resolution.	Arguments: The presentation of conflicting interpretations of the law.
Preliminary View (<i>Pūrvapakṣa</i>): The initial counter-argument or prima facie view.	Analysis: The critical examination of the law, facts, and precedents.
Reasoning (<i>Saṅgati/Ūha</i>): The logical analysis and application of evidence.	Analysis: The synthesis of legal principles to resolve the dispute.
Final Conclusion (<i>Siddhānta</i>): The resolved meaning and final verdict.	Judgment: The final ruling or decree of the court.

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3 The Evolution of Interpretative Principles: From Everyday Reasoning to Systematic Science

Mīmāṃsā is deeply rooted in *Laukika Nyāya* (everyday reasoning). In the *Tantravārttika*, the eminent scholar **Kumārila Bhaṭṭa** asserts that the science of interpretation is an extension of natural human cognition:

“मीमांसा तु लोकादेव प्रत्यक्षानुमानादिभिरविच्छिन्नसंप्रदायपण्डितव्यवहारैः प्रवृत्ता। न हि कश्चिदपि प्रथमम् एतावन्तं युक्तिकलापम् उपसंहर्तुं क्षमः।” (*Mīmāṃsā proceeded from the world itself, through direct perception, inference, and the unbroken tradition of the conduct of learned people. Indeed, no single person could have initially synthesized such a vast collection of reasoning principles.*)

To transform these intuitive patterns into a systematic science, *Mīmāṃsā* scholars performed three transformative intellectual operations:

1. **Krōḍhikāra (Systematic Collection)**: The gathering of scattered and informal interpretative practices—such as context and purpose—into a unified, structured framework.

2. **Parīṣkāra (Refinement)**: The critical examination of these principles to define their limitations and resolve potential conflicts between rules, much like the refinement of legal doctrines.

3. **Viśayā-Viśaya Cintanam (Determining Scope)**: The rigorous analysis of a rule's jurisdiction to determine exactly where it applies and where it must yield, ensuring consistency in application.

4. Core Analytical Principles in *Mīmāṃsā* Jurisprudence

Disciplined reasoning is the prerequisite for understanding authority. This is captured in the foundational verse:

“Ārṣam dharmopadeśam ca vedaśāstrāvirodhinā Yaḥ tarkeṇānusandhatte sa dharmam veda netarah.” (*He alone understands dharma who investigates the teachings of the sages and the scriptures through reasoning that is consistent with the śāstras.*)

Key advanced concepts include:

● **Arthāpatti (Postulation)**: A "necessary explanatory assumption" required when a fact cannot be explained by direct perception or ordinary inference. For instance, if a man gains weight but does not eat by day, one must postulate he eats at night to resolve the contradiction. In law, this is the cognitive basis for legal presumptions.

● **Bādhyabādhaka-Bhāva**: The hierarchy between the overriding statement (*bādhakam*) and the overridden statement (*bādhyam*), used to resolve conflicts between seemingly incompatible provisions.

● **Vākya-Bheda**: The principle of avoiding the unnecessary splitting of a sentence into independent statements. Interpreters must preserve textual unity, as splitting sentences often creates "new law" or unintended obligations not found in the original text.

● **Vidhi-Gaurava**: The primacy of injunctions. This principle prioritizes statements that prescribe action, reflecting the law's primary purpose: the regulation of conduct.

5. Case Studies: Modern Judicial Application of *Mīmāṃsā* Nyāyas

5.1 *Atideśa* (The Principle of Extension)

Logic: This principle involves applying rules prescribed for an original situation (*prakṛti*) to a modified situation (*vikṛti*) that lacks explicit rules. It is guided by the maxim “*Prakṛtivad vikṛtiḥ kartavyā*” (the modified should be treated like the original).

Modern Application: In *Sardar Mohammad Ansar Khan v. State of U.P.*, the court addressed a seniority dispute between clerks appointed on the same day. While regulations existed for teachers (seniority favoring the elder), the rules were silent regarding clerks. Justice Markandey Katju invoked *Atideśa*, extending the teacher's rule to the clerks because the underlying structural problem—determining seniority between simultaneous appointees—was identical.

5.2 *Naṣṭāśva-Dagdharatha Nyāya* (The Maxim of the Lost Horse and Burnt Chariot)

Logic: This maxim stems from a parable of two travelers: one whose horses were lost and another whose chariot was burnt. Neither could proceed alone—one had a useless vehicle, the other had unattached power. By attaching the surviving horses to the surviving chariot, both continued their journey. This is the logic of **functional survival** and harmonization. **Modern Application**: In *Tribhuvan Misra v. D.I.O.S.*, the court faced two seemingly conflicting High Court precedents. Rather than discarding one, the judge used this *nyāya* to limit the scope of each, allowing both to remain functional within their respective fields. This mirrors the modern doctrine of "harmonious construction," where interpretation aims to preserve rather than destroy.

5.3 *Lāghava Nyāya* (The Principle of Simplicity/Economy)

Logic: This principle dictates that when two interpretations are possible, the one that is simpler, more objective, and requires fewer assumptions should be preferred to reduce arbitrariness. **Modern Application:** In *Vinay Khare v. State of U.P.*, the court had to break a tie between candidates with identical marks. It weighed using interview scores (subjective, prone to favoritism) against written marks (objective, structured evaluation). Applying *Lāghava*, the court chose the written marks as the clearer, more straightforward criterion for determining merit.

5.4 *Upalakṣaṇa Nyāya* (Interpretation by Indicative Inclusion)

Logic: Derived from the *Tantravārttika*'s "crows and food" analogy, where the command "Protect the food from crows" implies protection from dogs or any harm. The specific mention is illustrative of a broader category of purpose. **Modern Application:** In *Udai Shankar Singh vs Branch Manager (LIC)*, an insurance policy listed specific examples of "permanent disability" (e.g., loss of both legs). The petitioner had lost only one leg. The court rejected a rigid, literal interpretation (*abhidhā*) and applied a purposive approach akin to *Upalakṣaṇa*, ruling that the listed limbs were indicative of a general class of "severe disability," thereby granting compensation.

5.5 *Pratinidhi Nyāya* (The Principle of Substitution)

Logic: This principle guards against legal paralysis. It holds that if a specific authority or instrument required by law is unavailable, a functional equivalent may act as a substitute to ensure the law's purpose is fulfilled. **Modern Application:** In *re: Application of the TADA Act (Bail Substitution)*, the statute required a District Judge to hear bail applications. In a district where no such judge was posted, an accused was detained for months. The court invoked *Pratinidhi Nyāya*, allowing an Additional District Judge to act as a functional substitute, ensuring the right to seek bail was not extinguished by administrative absence.

6. Comparative Synthesis: *Mīmāṃsā* vs. Modern Statutory Interpretation

The tools of *Mīmāṃsā* are the precursors to modern hermeneutical doctrines. *Vākya-Bheda* aligns with the preference for cohesive statutory reading; *Naṣṭāśva-Dagdhara* provides the foundation for harmonious

construction; and *Upalakṣaṇa* is the quintessence of the purposive approach.

Critical Takeaways for the Jurisprudential Scholar:

1. **The Mandate of Harmonization:** Interpretation must prioritize the preservation of conflicting authorities by adjusting their scope, rather than resorting to the destruction of one.

2. **The Sovereignty of Reason (*Tarka*):** No authority—statutory or scriptural—is self-executing. It requires the gateway of disciplined reasoning to be rendered effective.

3. **Functional Equivalence and Utility:** Principles like *Pratinidhi* and *Atideśa* prove that the law is a practical instrument. It must remain flexible enough to prevent "legal paralysis" when textual gaps or procedural absences arise.

7. Conclusion: *Mīmāṃsā* as a Living Tradition of Reasoning

Mīmāṃsā is far more than a "ritualistic discipline"; it is a sophisticated theory of logic, language, and authority. It provides a methodical framework for analyzing the very architecture of rules. By studying *Mīmāṃsā*, law students engage with a method of reasoning that bridges ancient wisdom and modern statutory application.

As we continue our work at **The Madras Sanskrit College (Chennai-4)** and **SASTRA Deemed to be University**, we uphold this intellectual heritage. In an era where "Think Merit" is our guiding philosophy, *Mīmāṃsā* offers the ultimate meritocratic tool: a system of interpretation that is transparent, logical, and universally applicable to the pursuit of justice.

8. References

● Primary Source Texts:

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- *Udai Shankar Singh vs Branch Manager (LIC)*, (1995) 2 UPLBEC 1238.
- *In re: Application of the TADA Act (Bail Substitution)* regarding functional equivalence of authorities.