Svabhāvavāda (Naturalism) : 
A Study

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The Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣad\(^1\) gives a list of first causes of the variety of the world according to some thinkers. This list includes Time, Nature, Destiny, Chance (Accident), the Elements and Puruṣa. This paper will confine itself mainly to an investigation of the real nature of the doctrine of Svabhāva (Naturalism as opposed to Accidentalism) by scrutinising available references to it in Sanskrit and Prakrit literature.

In the commentary to the Śvetāsvatara Saṅkarācārya\(^2\) explains svabhāva as inherent nature of a thing, as, for instance, heat of fire. In the Buddhacarita\(^3\) Aśvaghoṣa clearly sets forth the views of the supporters of Svabhāvavāda:

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1 काल: स्वभावो नियतिचौद्दश्च भूतानि भोमि: पुरुष हति जित्या ।
संयोग यन्त्र न त्वात्मसारदारसायनोऽभिनेत: सुखुःकःहेतोऽ ॥
मथिये कब्रो कदन्ति कार्यं तथायं परिस्वर्णमाना: ।
संयोग भयं कु लेये देवेन्द्र भ्राम्ये भ्राम्यकः ॥
—Śvetāsvatara I. 2, VI. 1

2 स्वभावो नाम पदर्थां नरतिनयता शरीर: । अनुभवव्यमविष ।

3 अनुभवश्रीमान देवम्य तद्दृष्ट्रुपत्ति प्रकृति कदन्ति ॥
केवलव्यम्बतिः कार्यन्ति जुनामुः च यत्र भवाभ्यं च ।
स्वभाविको स्वविको च यत्र यत्रादत्तोऽपि सोऽधि भवति भगवत: ॥
“.... They teach that there is an essential force of nature at work in the continuance of activity, like the essential heat of fire and the essential liquidity of water. Some explain that good and evil and existence and non-existence originate by natural development (Swabhāva); and since all this world originates by natural development, again therefore effort is vain. That the action of each sense is limited to its own class of object, that the qualities of being agreeable or disagreeable is to be found in the objects of the senses, and that we are affected by old age and afflictions, in all that what room is there for effort? Is it not purely a natural development? The oblation devouring fire is stilled by water, and the flames cause water to dry up. The elements, separate by nature, group themselves together into bodies and, coalescing, constitute the world. That, when the individual enters the womb, he develops hands, feet, belly, back and head, and that his soul unites with that body, all this the doctors of this school attribute to natural development. Who fashions the sharpness of the thorn or the varied nature of beast and bird? All this takes place by natural development. There is no such thing in this respect as action of our own will, a fortiori no possibility of effort.”

In the Nyāyasūtra Gautama states by way of Pāravapakṣa that things originate without any cause like the sharpness of thorns. Vātsyāyana, in his commentary to the Nyāyasūtra, explains the sūtra by adding a few examples.

In the Māthara-vṛtti to the Śāmkhya-kārikā (v. 61), along with

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Buddhacarita IX. 57(b)-62

4 Translation by E. H. Johnston, Calcutta, 1936
5 अनन्तरोत्तरोपयोपयति: काप्तकतिस्यात्यादिश्रीनात्।
   अनन्तरोत्तरोपयोपयति: कर्मदः। काप्तकतिस्यात्यादिश्रीनात्।
   सत्यतिस्यात्यादिश्रीनात्।
   काप्तकतिस्यात्यादिश्रीनात्।
   पर्यंततःति: सत्यनात्। सत्यतिस्यात्यादिश्रीनात्।

—Nyāyasūtra-Bhāṣya IV. 1. 22

6 अपरे स्वाभावमाधुः। स्वभाव: कारणमिति। तथा हि—
   देव शुद्धिकुटा हंसः: हृदाधिष्ठिताः।
Iśvara and Kāla, Svabhāva is mentioned as the cause of the world, of course, from others’ point of view and dismissed as non-existent.

In his commentary to the Sāmkhya-kārikā (v. 61) Gauḍapāda writes: “Others say, Svabhāva is cause of the world: By what (or whom) the swan is created white, the peacock of many colours?”; that is, they are so naturally . . . for Pradhāna, from its universal creative power, is the cause of even Kāla (time); even Svabhāva merges into it; and, therefore, neither Kāla nor Svabhāva is cause. Prakṛti (= Pradhāna) alone, therefore, is cause.

Thus according to Gauḍapāda Svabhāva merges into the all-embracing cause called Prakṛti.

In the commentary to Brhadāraṇyaka (Bhaṭṭa) Utpala writes: The world with its variety originates and gets destroyed through Svabhāva alone and none else. They (Svabhāvavādins) declare: “What fashions the sharpness of thorns, and the varied nature of beasts and birds, the sweetness of sugar-cane and the bitter taste of nimba? All this comes about by Svabhāva.”

It may be noted, in passing, that this verse bears close resemblance to Āvaghoṣa’s verse cited above.

In the Sarva-Siddhānta Saṅgraha Saṅkarācārya briefly states the doctrine of Svabhāva thus:

—Māthara-Vṛtti to Sk. 61

7 अप्रे स्मावकारणिकं मुख्ते। केन जुक्कंतता इस्य मद्युरा: केन चिन्तिता:। स्वभावेऽवेवेत। ......काल्यापि प्रथमात्मेव कारणमौ। स्वभावोद्ववण्येव हीन:। तत्सार्याश्रायेव कारणं व नापि स्वभाव हऽति। तत्सार्य प्रक्तरिषिद कारणं न प्रक्ते:। कारणाद्वारस्तीति। —Gauḍapādabhāṣya to Sāmkhya-kārikā 61

8 अप्रे अते कौकायतिका: स्मावं वगतं: कारणमाहु:। स्मावादृशं जगन्नकिस्मुत्समते स्मावास्ती विकल्य याति। तथा भ तत्त्वायमूं। क: कस्तन्ताना प्रक्तोति तैहृष्यविभिन्नेव स्मावत्त्वे:॥

——Bhaṭṭotpal’s Commentary to Brhatsamhitā I. 7

9 न कल्य गुखुक्ति-सम्य धम्मायमि परिति। स्मावावें गुखु कुली दुखु नोद्धयस्त्रीव कारणम्।

——Sarvasiddhāntasaṅgraha II. 4-5
“In consequence of the existence of pleasure and pain, merit and demerit should not be here (in this connection) postulated by others. A man feels pleasure or pain by nature and there is no other cause for it. Who colours wonderfully the peacocks, or who makes the cuckoos coo so well? There is in respect of these things no cause other than nature.”

In his commentary\(^\text{10}\) to the Viṣeṣāvaśyaśakabhāṣya Maladhārī Hemacandra quotes three verses giving the views of Svabhāvavādins. “The supporters of the doctrine of Svabhāva (nature, inner nature, natural development) teach that all things originate without any cause. They do not regard even ‘Sva’ (own, itself) as cause. What makes the varied nature of lotuses and of thorns and the like? What has fashioned the variegated plumage of peacocks? Whatever is found in this world is all without cause and due to mere accident. Like the sharpness of thorns human happiness and grief come about by Svabhāva only.”

In the course of his discussion about the Svabhāvavāda (Introduction to Gaṇadharavāda) Malvania quotes two verses\(^\text{11}\) on Svabhāvavāda as well-known.

“It is due to the all-controlling nature (Svabhāva) that some things are ever-existing, some others ever non-existing and still some others varied in nature. Fire is hot, water is cool, wind is neither hot nor cool

—Maladhārī Hemacandra’s Commentary to Gaṇadharavāda II, v. 1963

Note: The text reads ‘स्वरूपश्चादिक्षों बिचित्रः’. Shri Malvania renders it as “The plumage of the peacock is variegated and the moonlight is bright white . . .” (Gaṇadharavāda (p. 45) : Gujarāt Viḍyasāhā, Ahmedabad). It appears to me, however, that the text originally must have read ‘स्वरूपश्चादिक्षों विचित्रः’—which reading eminently suits the context.

—Quoted by Shri Malvania in his Introduction to Gaṇadharavāda, p. 114
(by itself). By whom or what came this variety? We, therefore, conclude that all this came about by nature (Svabhāva).

Of these two verses, the second is quoted in the Sarva-darśana-saṅgraha, which briefly puts the case of Svabhāvavādins thus:

But an opponent will say, if you thus do not allow adṛśta, the various phenomena of the world become destitute of any cause. But we cannot accept this objection as valid, since these phenomena can all be produced spontaneously from the inherent nature of things. Thus it has been said:

“The fire is hot, the water cold, refreshing cool the breeze of morn; By whom came this variety? From their own nature was it born.”

In his commentary to Uttarādhayayana Śūtra (Agaḍadatta, v. 75) Devendra gives a verse in Prakrit hinting at Svabhāvavāda: “Who paints the peacock? Who provides the swans with their graceful gait? Who infuses the sweet fragrance in lotuses and modesty in those who are born in noble families?”

In his commentary to Saḍdarśana-Samuccaya (st. 50), as mentioned by Hiriyanna, Guṇaratna quotes as the view of others:

“Others again say: All the variety of this world is explained by its own nature and there is no karma whatever serving as its basis.”

In the Mahābhārata (Śānti-parvan) there are many references to

12 नन्दन्द्व्यज्ञानी वज्ञानविवेकानी प्रामाणित वेद—न तदौ भदम्। स्वावाच्यदेव तस्यपते।।
   तदुक्तम्—
   अर्धसम्बन्धो जयं शीतं समस्था। राचायं:।
   केनेदं चिन्तितं तस्मात्स्वावाच्यद्विवेकाधिकतम्यति:।
—Sarvadarśana-saṅgraha, Cārvākadārśanam, p. 13
   (BORI, Poona, ed. 1951)

13 को विशेष महर्ष्य गंध च को कुणार राचायण:।
   को कुवल्याण गंधं विचारं च कुल्यपास्य:।।
—Sukhabodhā-Laghuvṛtti to Uttarādhayayana Śūtra
   (Agaḍadatta, v. 75)

14 अन्ये पुराणं:—पुर्वत: क्रमेतिव नासिक: स्वावसिधिः स्वावसिधं अन्तर्गपयो विचार:।
   —Guṇaratna’s Commentary to Saḍdarśanasamuccaya (st. 50)

15 हन्तीति मन्य्येत वक्ष्यते हस्तीत्वव चापर:।
   स्वावाच्यदेव नियमादेव भूतानां भ्रमयथवथी।।
   पद्य ब्रह्म भूतानां न्यवस्थितमानिनमित्वः।
   हर्षे हृदि विचारं च न प्रह्ये न च व्यये।।
   स्वावाच्यदेव संस्कृता चालमानाः: प्रक्षेत:।
   स्वावाच्यदेव: सौव: परितृप्तमेव केनति।।
—
the doctrine of *Svabhāva*; this passage declares how everything comes about by *Svabhāva*.

The next passage\(^{16}\) is from the same source describing the ultimate source of material universe. The *Mahābhārata* records evidence, as pointed out by Hiriyanna\(^{17}\) in support of two opposite views—the ultimate source was conceived as one and as many.

The *Bhagavadgītā*\(^{18}\) contains many passages which lend support to the doctrine of *Svabhāva*. It is pressed into service to explain the difference in the duties of different castes; and its irresistible force is brought to the forefront now and again to persuade Arjuna to fight.

In the commentary\(^{19}\) to the *Śūtrakṛtāṅga* Śilāṅka puts forward by

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**Śāntiparvan**: 25. 16; 179. 10-11; 222. 27, 35

**Bhagavadgītā** XVIII. 59-60; III. 5; III. 33, V. 14

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way of the view of others the Svabhāvavāda to explain the variety of the world; the doctrine of Svabhāva obviously dismisses the conception of puṇya and pāpa for explaining the variety of the universe.

In his commentary\textsuperscript{20} on Praśnavyākaraṇa Sūtra Jñānavimala thus writes about this doctrine: “Some believe that the universe was produced by Svabhāva and that everything comes about by Svabhāva only.”

In his commentary\textsuperscript{21} to Praśnavyākaraṇa Sūtra Abhayadeva attempts to distinguish between Yadṛcchā and Svabhāva. He explains all kinds of happiness and grief and every event taking place in the world as due to accident, mere chance. Svabhāva he explains, after Āsvaghoṣa, as ‘natural development’.

Siddhasena Divākara\textsuperscript{22}, Haribhadra and later Jaina writers hold that

\begin{quote}
अन्यस्यस्यात् प्राणायांस्य पारशुरामनारि किष्ठे, न ज ततोऽविश्वास्यात्: प्राणायांस्यात्।
सुतवंंस्यात्: प्राणायांस्यात्। विषमानात्: प्राणायांस्यात्।

—Silānka’s Commentary to Śutrakṛtāṅga, folio 21 (a)
\end{quote}

20 के किं द्वारा वार्तवर्णित हेतु गुणद्वमति विशिष्टवाचार्य से सांगते।

—Jñānavimala to Praśnavyākaraṇa 7, fol. 29 (cited by Basham)

क: कण्ठवनि कक्षेष्टि तैव भूष्ण सत्वमार्गमयी तु हु: प्रकरण:।

—Guṇaratna: Tarkaraḥasyādipikā to Saddarśana-Samuccaya, p. 13 (cited by Basham)

Note: Referring to this verse Basham writes: “Gunaratna quotes a verse which he attributes to the supporters of this doctrine.” It will be evident by comparing this verse with Āsvaghoṣa’s (which is already quoted above) that barring slightly variant readings, it is the same as that of Āsvaghoṣa.

21 हरिधराविन्यासोदितमयुक्तेऽवचार्यस्य।

कतात्यतपरित्यािवकट जनानां गुणकुट: सातन।।

सत्यका सावधान यथाभावो नु दुध्याकर्षित कत्यामान।।

सत्यऽस्याधिकारस्य विनयाधिकारस्य दुष्टान:।

यो दुष्टाधिकारस्य विनयाधिकारस्य परिताब्यतित।।

—Abhayadeva’s Commentary to Praśnavyākaraṇa Sūtra

22 काले सहाय गिनित्वे पुंक्वर्म वैरयाकर्षिते गिनित्वे।

सत्यऽस्याधिकारस्य दुष्टान:।

—Abhayadeva’s Commentary to Praśnavyākaraṇa Sūtra
to look upon any one out of many causes—Kāla, Svabhāva, Niyati, Karma, Puruṣakāra—as the only cause is wrong and to regard them all as causes—some more important and some less important—is the right belief.

Before we take up passages refuting Svabhāvavāda, it is necessary to examine the interrelation between Yadrccchāvāda and Svabhāvavāda, and Ājīvikism.

YADRCCCHĀVĀDA AND SVABHĀVAVĀDA

Yadrccchāvāda is also known as Ahetu-Animitta-Akasmāt-vāda. Gautama and Vātsyāyana [Nyāyasūtra (iv. 1.22) Bhāṣya] give ‘Kaṇṭakataikṣṇya’ as an illustration of Animittavāda. This illustration has been highly popular with, and very often cited by Svabhāvavādins in support of their doctrine. We would not, therefore, be wrong if we drew the conclusion that Gautama and Vātsyāyana regarded these two doctrines as identical. Svētāsvatara, Siddhasena Haribhadra and many later writers mention these two doctrines separately and distinguish between them. Hiriyanna23 very well brings out the distinction between these two doctrines: “While the one maintains that the world is a chaos and ascribes whatever order is seen in it to mere chance, the other recognizes that ‘things are as their nature makes them’. While the former denies causation altogether, the latter acknowledges its universality, but only traces all changes to the thing itself to which they belong.”

SVABHĀVAVĀDA: A SMALL SUB-SECT OF ĀJĪVIKISM?

In the course of his exposition of the doctrine of Niyati Basham writes: “... Hence it appears that the Svabhāvavādins agreed with the Niyatīvādins on the futility of human efforts. They were classed in the group of Akriyāvādins, or those who did not believe in the utility or effectiveness of puruṣakāra. It would seem that the Svabhāvavādin differed from the Niyatīvādin in that, while the latter views the individual as determined by forces exterior to himself, for the former he was rigidly self-determined by his own somatic and psychic nature. These ideas have much in common and we suggest therefore that Svabhāvavāda was a small sub-sect of Ājīvikism.”24 Granting that “these ideas have much in common” we cannot persuade ourselves to accept Basham’s suggestion for from all the references to Svabhāvavāda culled in this paper we find

23 Outline of Indian Philosophy, pp. 103–104.
24 History and Doctrines of the Ājīvikas, p. 226.
that it was more intimately connected with Materialism or Ćārvāka-
darśana. It is much more allied to Ćārvākadarśana in as much as both
deny a transmigrating soul, whereas Niyatīvāda believes in an immortal
soul. Further, in view of the fact that the Ajivikas ultimately merged
with the Jainas—which indicates that they had much in common—it
would be more proper to regard Svabhāvavāda as part and parcel of
Materialism as has been done by tradition.

SVABHĀVAVĀDA DIALECTIC

That the Svabhāvavāda must once have been well-known is evident
from the numerous references to it in Sanskrit and Prakrit literature.
No detailed exposition of it is to be found in any single treatise. The only
account of this doctrine we have is in the prima facie argument or view
(Puṇvapakṣa) given in the works of its opponents for purposes of refuta-
tion. It is not improbable that the opponents ascribed to the Svabhāva-
vādin’s arguments which were easy of refutation. So we have to be
cautious in judging the Svabhāvavādin’s powers of logical argument and
dialectic skill.

In the course of his commentary to Gaṇadharaṇa25 Jinabhadragani
more than once mentions Svabhāvavāda and refutes it. He explains the
variety of the world on the basis of the doctrine of Karman, which is

25  होज सहायो बद्ध निकाराया व बद्धुपमो वा ।
  जाह कर्म परिच्छ त्योधुवहुधीशो खुपु व ॥
  अवतितमुनुवादो मिव अहतो अविध कर्म स मिव त्रां
  हेशक व त्योधुवहुधीशो पण्य कस्मस्त विसू त्रां ॥
  कस्मस्त वाहन ह्यं हेशक सहायो हिव हेशके को होदे
  निभं व से सहायो सरिस्त तथ्य न की हेशक ॥
  से हुष्टोदुधीशो वा ज्ञान दुश्चियो तो न सब्ज्वह सरिस्ते
  परिणामों पर्यं पिव न देशहेम जाह अनुक्तो त्रां
  उपधरणवावाज न य ज्ञान हुष्टो दुश्चियो वि
  काल्यक सुतिस्तता हुष्टोदुधीशो बेत ॥
  ब्यायकारण बिव्य समावाजो तोहि विस्तिस्ता कोहि
  किस्मातारणों न भविव विस्तिस्ता हिव बिष्टो वि
  अव्य सहायो चाम्मो बद्धुपमो न से वि विस्तिस्तो निम्बों
  तप्याहुद्धत्ता बिहिता जो बद्धुपमो ॥
  कस्मस्त वि परिणामो हुष्टो पमो समाताव्यस्त ॥
  हेशक निम्बो जगाहे हेशक सहायो हिव को होदे ॥

—Gaṇadharavāda vv. 1786-1793
the cornerstone of Jaina philosophy. Śīlāṅka²⁶, writing as an advocate of Niyatīvāda, disposes of Svabhāvavāda as follows:

"Moreover the causing of joy and sorrow cannot be ascribed to inherent character (svabhāva). For is this different from a man or the same as he? If it is different it is not capable of causing the joy and sorrow which befall him, on account of that difference. Nor (if it is) the same (as he). For, if it were, it would be a mere man.

"If happiness is experienced as a result of human activity there should be no difference in the reward (of equal exertion), nor should there be lack of reward when equal effort is exerted, whether by servants, merchants or peasants, etc. Yet it is often seen that even when no means of livelihood such as service, etc., is followed, rich reward is obtained. So nothing is achieved by human effort."

In the Nyāyamañjarī²⁷ Jayanta dismisses this doctrine of Svabhāva and establishes that of Adṛṣṭa or Karman. Jayanta is well-known as a superb writer on Nyāya. This great logician, however, succumbs to the temptation of ascribing a manifestly weak argument to the Svabhāvavādin, who argues: "The opening of a babe's mouth is spontaneous—natural like the blooming of a lotus bud." The Siddhāntin refutes it saying that the blooming of a lotus bud is caused by the touch of the sun's rays and that it is not spontaneous or natural.

That the doctrine of Svabhāva once enjoyed immense popularity and exerted great influence on the thinkers of those times would be patent to any impartial student of the Bhagavadgītā. The Gītā takes recourse to the doctrine of Svabhāva in defending the difference in respective func-

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²⁶ तथा सभाववादिकृतकर्त्ताव्यपयित:। योथलिक तच्छवान् पुरुषाद्रित्रिष्टमित्रोऽथ। शदि मित्रोऽन पुरुषाद्रिते सुवृवत्त्य कर्तव्याधिविधितं। नाय्यविषयः। बोधेद्व पुरुष व पुरुष तत्स्य चार्कवद्वित्वं।

—Śīlāṅka's Commentary to Śūtrakṛtāṅga: folio 31 (a)

यदि पुरुषाद्रिते तद्यथापनुस्थित: तत: सेवकज्ञर्थकारोऽसंतोषे। तत्स्य प्रवतिश्वेतस्य तहस्य स्थायीत्वं। न भवेद्व। कर्तव्य सेवकज्ञर्थकारोऽसंतोषे।

—Śīlāṅka's Commentary to Śūtrakṛtāṅga: folios 30 (b) and 31 (a)

²⁷ नन्दू कर्ममयुक्तिविद्वारासाधारामकिमार्गीय शिष्योऽथशिविकायादिकार्य स्वात, श्वामकिमार्गीय नाम तिमित्यते।

—Jayanta's Nyāyamañjarī (Prameyapprakāraṇa, pp. 41-42, KSS ed. 1936)
tions of the four different castes and emphatically asserts the inherent
and irresistible strength of Svabhāva.

The Jainas, no doubt, criticize this doctrine of Svabhāva in their works
of philosophical nature but this criticism applies to it only when Svabhāva
is presented as the only cause of the variety of the world. The Jainas
find a place for this doctrine under their wide umbrella of Syādvāda or
Anekānta. In this connection we draw the attention of the readers to
Śiśāṅka’s passage 28, quoted below, accepting Svabhāvavāda.

ADDENDUM

In the Tattvasaṅgraha of Śantaraksita with the Pañjikā (commentary)
of Kamalaśīla who flourished in the first half of the eighth century A.D.
we find an exposition as well as refutation of Svabhāvika-jagadvāda
(vv. 110-127). The three verses embodying the Svabhāvavāda, which are
quoted by Maladhārī Hemacandra, very well compare with the correspon-
ding verses in the Tattvasaṅgraha (vv. 110-112) and it is not unlikely that
they are derived from a common source. Hemacandra reads ‘Rājivakaṇṭa-
kādīnāṁ’ in place of ‘Rājivakesarādīnāṁ’; ‘Mayūracandraṇkādir va’ in place
of ‘Mayūracandraṇkādir vā’—it is gratifying that the emendation in the text
of Hemacandra that I have suggested above is supported by the text of
the Tattvasaṅgraha; the third verse although identical in thought-
content differs in its expression. The verse of Hemacandra is already
cited above. Here I quote the verse from the Tattvasaṅgraha:

यथैव कण्ठकार्द्दीनां तेष्यादिकृतः
मेहसेदुक्कम् ||

काण्डाचिक्तय तदवः वादीनामेहसेदुक्कम् ||

The refutation of Svabhāvika-jagadvāda by Śantaraksita may very briefly
be summarised thus:

“The filaments of the lotus, etc., have the seed, mud and water as
the causes. Why then should we search for other causes which are not
to be found? If all things come about by ‘svabhāva’ why should they
appear at particular times and particular places only? It is clear, there-
fore, that they have particular causes for their origin and development.
The Svabhāvika-jagadvāda thus stands refuted by Pratyakṣa-pramāṇa
itself.”

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28 तथाक्षित स्वभावधिविकारणस्मिनविशेषः जगत:, स्वे भावः स्वभाव शति तृत्वा तेन हि जीवाजीवसत्वज्ञानवत्वा-
मुत्तत्वसूचितवान् स्वस्वभाववृत्तज्ञानात् तथा भौमद्यवन्यात्तत्त्वात्तत्त्वार्थप्रत्यत्त्वादानात्तति,
तथा चोक्तम्-हः कण्ठकार्द्दीनामिति।

—Śiśāṅka’s Commentary to Sūtrakṛtāṅga, folio 213 (b)