# REASON, ORTHODOXY, AND THE FIGURE OF THE HAITUKA: RECONSIDERING DISSENT IN DHARMAŚĀSTRA TRADITION

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*Abstract: The present study investigates the conceptual history of the term haituka within the Dharmaśāstra tradition and its wider implications for understanding the relationship between rational inquiry and scriptural authority in classical Indian thought. Although the term derives etymologically from hetu (reason, cause), Dharmaśāstric commentators often associated it with nāstika, a category conventionally applied to opponents of Vedic authority. Drawing on textual evidence from the Manusmṛti, Yājñavalkyasmṛti, the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa, and major commentarial traditions, this paper traces the semantic shift of haituka from "reasoner" to "heretic," "skeptic," or "denier." It argues that this transformation reflects broader anxieties concerning the destabilizing potential of critical reasoning when directed against scriptural authority and established social norms. At the same time, the very persistence of debates concerning haituka, nāstika, and tarka reveals the remarkable intellectual plurality of Indian philosophy. Rather than a simple conflict between faith and reason, these discussions reveal sustained engagement between orthodoxy and dissent, authority and criticism, revelation and rational inquiry. The paper concludes that the discourse surrounding the haituka offers an important lens for appreciating both the normative ambitions of Dharmaśāstric thought and the enduring presence of philosophical contestation within the Indian intellectual tradition.*

## Introduction

A continuous interaction between scriptural authority and rational reflection marks the history of Indian philosophy. Although classical systems are conventionally categorized by their acceptance or rejection of Vedic authority, India's intellectual history reveals a far more complex pattern of engagement between orthodoxy and dissent. One of the most revealing illustrations of this dynamic is found in the category of the *haituka*.

The authors of the Dharmaśāstras repeatedly express suspicion toward individuals characterized as freethinkers, skeptics, rationalists, or critics of received doctrine. They use a variety of terms, including *dambhin*, *nāstika*, *pāṣaṇḍin*, and *haituka*. Among these labels, *haituka* deserves particular attention because of its explicit association with *hetu* - reason, cause, or rational justification. However, despite its etymological connection to reasoning, the term gradually acquired strongly pejorative connotations in Dharmaśāstric discourse and became closely associated with heterodoxy and hostility toward Vedic authority.

The present study examines the semantic and philosophical evolution of the concept of *haituka* in Dharmaśāstric, epic, and commentarial literature. It addresses three interconnected questions. First, how did a term denoting a reasoner come to signify a religious dissenter? Second, what conception of the relationship between reason and revelation informed Dharmaśāstric attitudes toward rational inquiry? Third, what does the treatment of the *haituka* reveal about the broader dynamics of intellectual pluralism in classical India?

Through a close reading of primary textual sources and their exegetical traditions,

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this essay argues that the negative portrayal of the haituka emerged from concerns about the potentially disruptive consequences of unrestricted reasoning. Nevertheless, the persistent effort devoted to refuting such figures demonstrates the enduring vitality of skeptical and rationalist tendencies within Indian civilization. The discourse surrounding the *haituka* thus provides a valuable lens for examining the relationship among authority, dissent, and philosophical inquiry in the Indian tradition.

For the sake of clarity nd prfecision, the entire discussion has been divided into six sections as follows:

1. The Semantic Transformation of *Haituka* and the Problem of *Nāstika*
2. Lexicography, Reason, and the Construction of Suspicion
3. Rational Dissent in the Epics: Evidence from the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata
4. The Ambivalent Place of Reason in Dharmaśāstric Thought
5. Orthodoxy, Social Order, and the Fear of Critical Inquiry
6. The Haituka and the Dynamics of Indian Intellectual Pluralism

Let us take them one by one:

## I. The Semantic Transformation of *Haituka* and the Problem of *Nāstika*

The word *haituka* is derived from *hetu* and, in its most literal sense, signifies one who reasons, argues, or seeks causal explanation. However, the term's historical development reveals a striking semantic shift. What originally denoted a reasoner gradually came to designate a skeptic, heretic, or religious dissenter.

A key stage in this transformation appears in the commentary of Medhātithi, the influential ninth-century commentator on the *Manusmṛti*. In explaining the relevant passage, Medhātithi identifies the *haituka* with the *nāstika*. This interpretive move matters because it effectively equates rational inquiry with heterodoxy.

The meaning of *nāstika* itself has been the subject of considerable debate. From a Sanskrit grammatical standpoint, *āstika* derives from *asti* ("it exists"), whereas *nāstika* derives from *nāsti* ("it does not exist"). Classical grammatical authorities explain the distinction primarily in terms of belief in the afterlife (*paraloka*). According to this interpretation, an *āstika* affirms the existence of another world, while a *nāstika* denies it. Under such a definition, Buddhists and Jains would qualify as *āstikas*, since both traditions accept post-mortem existence and karmic continuity. In this sense, the category *nāstika* would apply most appropriately to materialist schools such as the Cārvākas.

The Dharmaśāstra tradition, however, develops a different criterion. Manu defines the *nāstika* as one who reviles or disparages the Vedas. In philosophical discourse, this definition proved highly influential. Consequently, Buddhists, Jains, and Cārvākas alike came to be classified as *nāstikas*, not because they denied the afterlife, but because they refused to acknowledge the Vedas' absolute authority and infallibility.

The term's semantic scope expands further in epic literature. As E. Washburn Hopkins observed, *nāstika* may denote not only a denier of transcendent realities but also anyone who rejects accepted doctrinal beliefs or challenges inherited traditions. The term, therefore, functions less as a precise philosophical category and more as a marker of deviation from established orthodoxy.

In later usage, the pair *āstika–nāstika* was frequently rendered as "theist" and "atheist." Following this interpretive tendency, Ganganath Jha translates Medhātithi's explanation of *haituka* in a way that identifies such individuals with those who deny the efficacy of charity, sacrifice, ritual offerings, and belief in another world. Such descriptions are strikingly reminiscent of the doctrines attributed to Ajita Keśakambala,

one of the earliest known materialist philosophers of India. Ajita explicitly rejected the moral efficacy of sacrificial acts, denied posthumous consequences of action, and ridiculed conventional notions of merit and religious obligation. The same intellectual profile appears in the *Samaññaphala-sutta*, where Ajita denies the value of almsgiving, sacrifice, and ritual observance. Similar formulations are also found in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Mahāpurāṇa*, suggesting that the image of the skeptic had become a recognizable intellectual type within Indian religious discourse.

The tendency to identify the *haituka* with the *nāstika* continued in subsequent commentarial traditions. In the Mitākṣarā, Vijñāneśvara defines the *haituka* as one who raises doubts through argumentation. Other commentators describe the *haituka* as someone who employs reasoning against the Vedas or rejects both scriptural authority and belief in the afterlife. Across these interpretations, a common pattern emerges: reason itself becomes suspect whenever it is directed toward questioning accepted religious doctrines.

However, several passages complicate this identification. In the *Mahābhārata*, the words *haituka* and *nāstika* occasionally occur together in the same context. Their simultaneous occurrence suggests that the two terms were not originally synonymous. Rather, *haituka* appears to have referred primarily to a reasoner, while *nāstika* designated a distinct type of religious dissenter. The later conflation of the two categories, therefore, seems to reflect subsequent exegetical developments rather than an original feature of the texts themselves.

Sanskrit lexicography also supports this conclusion. Monier-Williams records meanings such as "reasoner," "rationalist," and "skeptic" as primary senses of *haituka*. While later meanings include "heretic" and related expressions, these appear to reflect historical reinterpretations rather than the term's literal force. The semantic history of *haituka* thus illustrates a broader process through which rational inquiry came to be viewed as a potential challenge to orthodoxy.

## II. Lexicography, Reason, and the Construction of Suspicion

The semantic transformation of *haituka* becomes even more evident when one examines Sanskrit lexicographical traditions. Dictionaries and commentaries often preserve traces of broader intellectual developments. In the case of *haituka,* they reveal the term's gradual shift from a neutral description of a rational inquirer to a designation with unmistakably pejorative overtones.

Monier-Williams derives *haituka* from *hetu* together with the suffix *ka* (*thak*) and records a range of meanings, including "reasoner," "rationalist," "skeptic," "heretic," and "follower of the Mīmāṃsā doctrine." [13] Significantly, only the first two meanings arise directly from the etymology of the word. The remaining senses appear to reflect later theological and ideological developments. They suggest that commentators and traditional scholars increasingly associated independent reasoning with skepticism and heterodoxy. Consequently, a term originally denoting a rational investigator gradually came to mean one who deviates from accepted religious authority.

An alternative derivation appears in the *Śabdasāra* compiled by Giriśacandra Vidyāratna. There, *haituka* is analyzed as *hetu* combined with the suffix *kan*. In Sanskrit grammatical usage, this suffix often conveys diminution, inferiority, or depreciation. Examples include *aśvaka* ("a poor horse") and *mānavaka* ("a little man" or boy). Through this derivation, the term *haituka* acquires a negative semantic coloring from the outset. Vidyāratna reinforces this interpretation: "He who doubts meritorious actions through reasoning is a *haituka*."

This lexicographical evidence matters because it reveals more than a mere linguistic development. It reflects an intellectual climate in which rational scrutiny itself became suspect whenever it was directed toward inherited beliefs. The issue was not

simply the content of dissenting arguments but the very act of questioning established authority. The *haituka* thus emerges as a symbolic figure defined not by doctrinal deviation alone but by a willingness to submit accepted truths to critical examination.

From this perspective, the term's semantic history mirrors a broader ideological process. Language becomes a mechanism through which orthodoxy defines the limits of acceptable inquiry. A word that once referred to a reasoner gradually becomes a label for one whose reasoning is viewed as socially or religiously dangerous. The evolution of *haituka, therefore, provides a valuable window into the intellectual politics of authority and dissent in* classical Indian thought.

## III. Rational Dissent in the Epics: Evidence from the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata

The distrust of independent reasoning was not confined to Dharmaśāstric literature. Epic texts likewise contain powerful representations of rational dissent and frequently portray excessive reliance upon argumentation as spiritually and socially problematic. These passages illuminate broader cultural attitudes toward skepticism and heterodoxy. One of the most frequently cited examples occurs in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. In the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, Rāma advises Bharata not to associate with *Lokāyatika* Brāhmaṇas. The text describes them as people who, though they consider themselves learned, misuse sophistical reasoning and disregard authoritative teachings. The passage portrays them as intellectually arrogant and morally unreliable. Their fault lies not simply in holding particular doctrines but in privileging dialectical ingenuity over scriptural wisdom.

This episode's significance extends beyond its immediate narrative context. It reflects an underlying tension between inherited authority and autonomous reasoning. Although the term *Lokāyatika* need not necessarily denote a Cārvāka materialist in this passage, it clearly refers to those who rely heavily upon disputation and argumentative skill. As Ramkrishna Bhattacharya has argued, the term may, in some contexts, designate specialists in debate rather than adherents of a specific materialist doctrine; nevertheless, the passage unmistakably associates such intellectual tendencies with potential danger to religious and social order.

A similar attitude appears in the *Mahābhārata*. In a well-known passage from the *Śāntiparvan*, a jackal recounts his previous birth. He confesses that he had been a self-proclaimed scholar, a reasoner, a critic of the Vedas, and an advocate of rationalist doctrines. He describes himself as one who publicly challenged Brahmins, condemned sacrifice, ridiculed sacred teachings, and took pride in his argumentative abilities. As a consequence of these actions, he explains, he was reborn as a jackal.

The narrative serves a clearly didactic purpose. Rationalism, skepticism, and criticism of Vedic authority are represented as causes of spiritual degradation. The story turns philosophical dissent into moral fault and frames opposition to scriptural authority as a source of religious decline. The reasoner is portrayed not merely as mistaken but as socially disruptive and spiritually misguided.

This passage also resonates strongly with Manu’s characterization of the *nāstika* as a reviler of the Veda. Whether the *Mahābhārata* influenced the *Manusmṛti* or vice versa, both texts share a discursive strategy that links rational criticism to heterodoxy. The underlying message is unmistakable: reason becomes problematic when it challenges scriptural foundations.

At the same time, these narratives reveal an important historical reality. The repeated need to criticize skeptics, rationalists, and critics of orthodoxy suggests that such individuals were neither imaginary nor marginal. The energy devoted to refuting

them indicates they represented a genuine intellectual force. Far from demonstrating the absence of dissent, these passages testify to its persistent presence within the philosophical culture of ancient India.

Indeed, the very survival of such polemics indicates the extent to which rationalist and skeptical currents continued to challenge orthodox assumptions. The *haituka* appears not simply as a literary construct but as a reflection of real intellectual tensions within Indian society. The effort to condemn such figures simultaneously acknowledges their influence and confirms their continuing relevance.

## IV. The Ambivalent Place of Reason in Dharmaśāstric Thought

Despite the hostility toward certain forms of rational inquiry, the Dharmaśāstra tradition cannot be accurately characterized as wholly anti-rational. A closer examination reveals a considerably more nuanced position in which reasoning is simultaneously valued and restricted.

An illuminating example occurs in the twelfth chapter of the *Manusmṛti*. Manu advises those seeking knowledge of *dharma* to rely upon perception, inference, and scriptural testimony. More strikingly, he declares that the individual who investigates *dharma* through argument truly understands it. At first glance, this statement appears to endorse rational inquiry. For this reason, several modern scholars have interpreted the passage as evidence that Dharmaśāstric authors recognized the importance of critical reasoning and did not reject argumentation.

However, a closer reading reveals an important qualification. The verse immediately preceding this apparent endorsement specifies that reasoning must remain consistent with the Vedas and Dharmaśāstras. Argument is legitimate only insofar as it operates within boundaries already established by scriptural authority. Reason may clarify revelation, but it cannot legitimately overturn it.

The distinction is crucial. The issue is not whether reasoning should be employed, but rather how and under what conditions it should be employed. Rational inquiry becomes legitimate when it reinforces established doctrine and illegitimate when it challenges foundational assumptions. In this sense, the Dharmaśāstric tradition does not reject *tarka* altogether; rather, it seeks to regulate and circumscribe its scope.

Medhātithi's commentary makes this point particularly clear. He argues that Manu's statement should not be interpreted as an injunction authorizing unrestricted rational inquiry. Instead, it functions as an indirect commendation of the Mīmāṃsā method of scriptural interpretation. According to Medhātithi, reasoning aims to determine the proper meaning of scriptural injunctions and thereby arrive at a correct understanding of *dharma*. Reason thus operates as an interpretive instrument whose authority remains subordinate to revelation.

Kullūka advances a similar interpretation by identifying *tarka* with the hermeneutical procedures of Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā. Medhātithi also records the opinion of other authorities who extend the legitimacy of reasoning to philosophical systems that accept the authority of the Vedas while excluding traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Lokāyata. Once again, the decisive criterion is not the use of reason itself but the acceptance of scriptural supremacy.

This ambivalent attitude toward rational inquiry is one of the most revealing features of Dharmaśāstric thought. On the one hand, reason is indispensable for interpretation, analysis, and determining duty. On the other hand, its operation is carefully constrained so as to prevent challenges to established religious foundations. The resulting position is neither wholly irrational nor fully rationalistic. Rather, it attempts to reconcile intellectual inquiry with scriptural normativity.

The figure of the *haituka* emerges precisely when this equilibrium appears threatened. The term becomes a designation for those whose reasoning exceeds acceptable

limits and thereby calls into question the authority upon which the Dharmaśāstric order rests.

## V. Orthodoxy, Social Order, and the Fear of Critical Inquiry

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the suspicion directed toward the *haituka* cannot be explained solely in theological terms. Beneath the explicit concern for scriptural authority lies a broader anxiety about preserving established social and intellectual structures. The critique of rational dissent in Dharmaśāstric and epic literature, therefore, reflects not merely a defense of sacred texts but also a defense of normative social order.

From the perspective of Dharmaśāstric authors, unrestricted reasoning possessed potentially disruptive consequences. If scriptural injunctions became subject to independent rational scrutiny, then religious practices, sacrificial obligations, social hierarchies, and inherited norms could all become objects of criticism. Such a possibility threatened the authority of institutions whose legitimacy rested on revelation and tradition. Consequently, the figure of the *haituka* often appears not simply as an intellectual opponent but as a challenge to the foundations of social stability itself.

This concern is evident in the repeated association of skepticism with moral decline and social disorder. The *nāstika*, the *haituka*, and the critic of Vedic authority are frequently portrayed as individuals whose reasoning leads them to reject established values. Their intellectual independence is represented as dangerous because it encourages questioning rather than obedience, investigation rather than acceptance, and criticism rather than conformity.

Yet interpreting these representations as evidence of a wholesale rejection of rationality would be historically inaccurate. Classical India produced some of the world's most sophisticated traditions of logic, epistemology, and philosophical debate. The emergence of Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Buddhist *pramāṇa* theory, Jain logic, and other systems testifies to a profound commitment to rational inquiry. The hostility directed toward the *haituka* was therefore selective rather than universal. What was feared was not reason itself but reason employed against accepted sources of authority.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the intellectual climate of classical India. The conflict was not between rationality and irrationality. Rather, it concerned competing conceptions of reason's legitimate scope. Orthodox traditions generally accepted reasoning as an interpretive and justificatory instrument while resisting its use as an independent criterion that could overturn scriptural truth. Heterodox traditions, by contrast, frequently expanded the authority of rational inquiry beyond these limits.

The debate surrounding the *haituka* thus reflects a larger philosophical question that has occupied civilizations across history: whether reason derives its legitimacy from established authority or whether authority itself must ultimately be justified through reason. The Dharmaśāstric response tends toward the former position, whereas skeptical and materialist traditions increasingly move toward the latter.

## VI. The Haituka and the Dynamics of Indian Intellectual Pluralism

Although many Dharmaśāstric texts portray the *haituka* negatively, the category's historical significance extends far beyond its polemical function. Indeed, the very existence of extensive discussions concerning reasoners, skeptics, and dissenters reveals the extraordinary diversity of India’s intellectual culture.

The preservation of debates concerning *āstika* and *nāstika*, revelation and reason, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, demonstrates that Indian philosophy developed through

sustained engagement with competing viewpoints. India's intellectual history was never shaped by a single homogeneous tradition. Rather, it evolved through continuous interaction among multiple schools that differed on fundamental questions concerning knowledge, reality, ethics, and liberation.

Within this broader context, the figure of the *haituka* acquires particular significance. He represents not merely an opponent of orthodoxy but a participant in a larger culture of philosophical contestation. Even when condemned, the *haituka* remains an indispensable interlocutor, compelling orthodox thinkers to refine, defend, and justify their positions. The development of sophisticated hermeneutical and epistemological methodologies within Brahmanical traditions owes much to the challenges posed by rival schools.

The controversy surrounding the *haituka* therefore illuminates a central feature of Indian intellectual history: the coexistence of reverence for tradition and openness to debate. The same civilization that produced strong affirmations of scriptural authority also generated powerful traditions of skepticism, materialism, rationalism, and critical inquiry. Far from eliminating dissent, orthodox traditions were repeatedly required to engage with it.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the treatment of Cārvāka and Lokāyata thought. Although the original literature of these schools has largely been lost, their doctrines survive through citations, critiques, summaries, and refutations preserved by opponents. The extensive attention devoted to these traditions suggests they occupied a significant place in the philosophical landscape. Their continued presence in intellectual discourse ensured that questions concerning perception, inference, scriptural authority, and religious obligation remained subjects of active debate.

The persistence of such debates challenges simplistic portrayals of Indian philosophy as either uniformly orthodox or inherently anti-rational. Instead, the evidence points toward a far more complex reality characterized by ongoing negotiation between authority and criticism. The *haituka* embodies this tension and thus serves as a valuable lens for examining the evolution of Indian philosophical thought.

## Conclusion

This study examined the conceptual history of the term haituka and its relationship to broader debates on reason, authority, and dissent within the Dharmaśāstra tradition. Although the word originally denoted a reasoner or rational inquirer, subsequent commentarial and normative traditions increasingly associated it with the *nāstika*, thereby transforming a neutral intellectual designation into a marker of heterodoxy and suspicion.

The analysis of Dharmaśāstric texts, epic narratives, lexicographical sources, and commentarial traditions reveals a consistent tendency to portray independent reasoning as potentially subversive when directed against scriptural authority. The *haituka* becomes an object of criticism not merely because he reasons but because he employs reason in ways that challenge accepted religious and social norms. Such portrayals show orthodox traditions' efforts to define the limits of legitimate inquiry and preserve the Vedas' normative authority.

At the same time, the evidence discloses a more nuanced picture. Dharmaśāstric authors did not reject reasoning altogether. Rather, they sought to integrate it within a framework governed by scriptural authority. Reason was accepted as an instrument of interpretation and clarification, but denied the status of an autonomous source of truth that could supersede revelation. This tension between rational inquiry and scriptural normativity is one of the tradition's defining characteristics.

More importantly, the discourse surrounding the *haituka* reveals the remarkable vitality of Indian philosophical culture. The repeated attempts to refute skeptics,

materialists, Buddhists, Jains, and other dissenting voices testify not to their absence but to their enduring presence. The history of Indian philosophy cannot, therefore, be understood as a simple narrative of orthodox dominance. Rather, it reflects a continuous dialogue between competing intellectual orientations, each contributing to the development of sophisticated theories of knowledge, argumentation, and interpretation.

The significance of the *haituka* ultimately extends beyond the polemical contexts in which the term frequently appears. As a figure situated at the intersection of reason and authority, he embodies a fundamental philosophical tension that has shaped intellectual traditions across cultures. Within the Indian context, this tension generated a rich and enduring discourse that continues to illuminate the relationship between critical inquiry and inherited belief.

The concluding observations advanced in this study find considerable support in the historical record. The survival of rational and dissenting currents, particularly those associated with the Cārvāka-Lokāyata tradition, is attested by the verses, doctrinal fragments, and polemical references preserved across centuries. Significantly, these perspectives were not entirely excluded from mainstream intellectual life. On the contrary, they were repeatedly discussed, challenged, and accommodated within the exegetical and normative debates of the Dharmaśāstra tradition. The sustained attention paid by commentators, jurists, and epic authors to refuting such views confirms their enduring relevance within the wider sphere of Indian thought.

Accordingly, the discourse concerning the *haituka* should not be interpreted solely as an attempt to suppress rational inquiry. It should also be understood as evidence of a vibrant intellectual culture in which orthodoxy and dissent remained in continuous engagement. Indian philosophy's capacity to preserve, confront, and debate competing conceptions of truth is one of its most distinctive achievements. The figure of the *haituka* thus stands not only as a symbol of resistance to authority but also as a reminder of the plurality, resilience, and philosophical depth that have long characterized the Indian intellectual tradition.