

Shades of Violence: Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture

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Abstracts

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Ritual: Violence and Non-violence

In this paper vicissitudes of the thoughts on Violence and Non-violence, from Vedic period up-to-now in India are detailed. While Vedic people started with violent life, they practiced a lot of animal-sacrifices. Slowly, however, they started using euphemisms in connection with the ritualistic violence. Subsequently they started non-violent rituals. There was a lot of opposition to the ritualistic violence mainly from Buddhist and Jaina Thinkers. Even later Hinduism accepted the principle of Ahimsaa (non-violence). Even though now some followers of Vedic ritual do not practice violence in the Vedic ritual, some do partly accept it and perform accordingly. Outside Vedic ritual also there is some ritualistic violence. But definitely there is some change.

Anita Maria Borghero, Diletta Falqui, Valentina Ferrero, Chiara Neri, and Tiziana Pontillo

How the competitive institutions of the Vrātyas were interpreted as evidence of their aggressiveness

1. Chiara Neri and Tiziana Pontillo (University of Cagliari)

Vrātya or ancient Indo-Aryan violence? Challenge and defeat within the patterns of Vedic and Buddhist dialogues

A couple of Sāmavedic passages, namely JB 2.225 (*ahimsyaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ hiṃsanti śrotriyam vā grhamedhinaṃ vā*) and PB 17.1.9 (*adaṇḍyaṃ daṇḍena ghnantaḥ*), have been authoritatively interpreted by H. Falk (1986: 29-30) as evidence that the behaviour of *Vrātyas* was peculiarly aggressive.

The present paper will try to show how their violence might simply have been part of the ancient Indo-Aryan competitive social pattern. In fact, there is plenty of evidence in the earliest sources of the dialogue challenges, that is the agonistic sapiential debate (the so-called *brahmodya*), in which the loser is forced to submit to the winner or even undergo worse punishment.

The two authors of this paper here will try to survey all the passages dealing with Vrātya dialogues, comparing them with the ancient Indo-Aryan “verbal contests” (Kuiper’s definition 1960). The comparison will be based especially on some Vedic and Pāli texts, since some specific schemes and formulas have already been singled out by Witzel (1987) and Manné (1990) in both Brāhmanical and Buddhist sources.

Furthermore, the fact that the Vrātyas chose their leader according to his merits regardless of his birth status will also be useful in the reconstruction of their assumed competitiveness (see e.g. BŚS 18.24; LŚS 8.6.1; KŚS 22.4.7-8), a detail that could help in reading some other questioned Vedic passage on the Vrātya phenomenon.

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2. Diletta Falqui (Sapienza – University of Rome)

Competitiveness in Sacred Knowledge: evidence of Indo-Aryan verbal rivalry in the Aṣṭāvakra-Ūpākhyāna (MBh 3.132-134)

The prevailing idea of the violence of the Vrātya seems to depend largely on some Vedic texts that document a distorted history of the Vrātyas. Such violence seems instead to concern their epigones, even after the alleged second wave of Indo-Aryans and Brahmanical culture (FALK 1986, PONTILLO-SUDYKA 2016). In this regard, scholars have tried to show how the violence attributed to the Vrātya is largely dependent on the anti-Vrātya propaganda carried out in Brahmanical texts (PONTILLO, 2007, 2013, 2015, 2016; PONTILLO et alii 2015, CANDOTTI-PONTILLO 2015; PONTILLO-DORE-HOCK 2016; PONTILLO-DORE 2016; BINDI-MUCCIARELLI-PONTILLO 2016). It is assumed that some passages allude to the aggression used by the Vrātyas in verbal confrontations with their opponents, in deciding what was right and wrong in any discussion concerning ritual. Nevertheless, even outside the Vrātya context, there is evidence of competitive hospitality and violent verbal exchanges in the sapiential sphere, often in the form of riddles – the so-called *brahmodya* (RENOU 1949, Thompson 1997) that end with the loser’s head being cut off or the aggressor being cursed (WITZEL 1987; INSLER 1989-90.). In this regard, this paper will focus on passages in the *Mahābhārata* that constitute epic traces of competitiveness in sacred knowledge. In particular, the Aṣṭāvakra-Ūpākhyāna (MBh 3.132-134), narrated by Lomaśa to Yudhiṣṭhira during the ‘Tour of the Sacred Fords’ (HILTEBEITEL

2005), contains the only *Mahābhārata* occurrence of the term *brahmodya*-. Other textual evidence of competitiveness in sacred knowledge can also be found in books II-V and XII-XIV.

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3. A.M. Borghero (University of Naples 'L'Orientale'/ University of Cagliari)

Some observations about warrior-gods in the imagery of Vrātyas

Heesterman (1962) moved away from the hypothesis of a non-Aryan background for the *vrātyas*, stressing the link between this group and the origin of the brahmanical sacrifice, and thus going beyond the merely heterodox interpretation of their culture (in this perspective, see also, e.g., Candotti-Pontillo 2015, Dore-Pontillo 2016, Vassilkov 2016). The *vrātyas* are usually associated with the cult of Rudra (see, e.g., Charpentier 1911, Hauer 1927, Falk 1986) who, as Edholm recalls (2017: 2), is considered the "Vedic outsider god". However, based on an analysis of some crucial sections of the *Vrātyakāṇḍa*, Dore (2015: 55) remarks (ŚS XV) that there is no reason to "consider the relationship between the Vrātya and Rudra as being more important or more revelatory compared to the relationship with Indra" (see also Dore 2016). BŚS XVIII 25 explicitly mentions the consecration of the *Vrātya* to Indra. In the light of Falk 1986: 193, Edholm (2021: 20) underlines the parallelism between "the *vrātya* leader and his group" and "Rudra/Indra and the Rudras/Maruts". With this general frame in mind, and with a special focus on the element of the bow (the so-called *jyāhroḍa*), the aim of the present paper is to deepen the analysis of the role of the god Indra in relevant passages of the later Vedic literature. Despite the importance of Indraic features in these sources, the prominence of Rudraic elements even in the most ancient texts might reveal the brahmanical influence in emphasising the most wild, violent traits of the *vrātya* culture.

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4. Valentina Ferrero (University of Cagliari)

Vrātya and vrātina in Sanskrit grammatical sources

The etymology of *vrātya* ‘member of a group’ has already been investigated by Falk (1986: 17) who showed it to be derived from *vrāta* ‘group’, so called because its leader adopts a certain ‘observational’ behaviour, i.e., one or more *vratas*. Candotti, Pontillo (2015: 165-166), in accordance with Mayrhofer (1986-2001: II, 575-576), believe that *vrātya* might have derived from *vrāta* ‘multitude, troop, group, association’. One therefore wonders what the correct derivation of *vrātya* according to *vyākaraṇa* science is.

There are five occurrences of *vrata-* and two of *vrāta-* in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini: for instance, *vrata-* is used in the locative to denote the meaning of ‘vow’ (tr. Katre) in A 3.2.40, A 3.2.80

and A 4.2.15, but also as a nominal base which optionally requires the affix *ṆiC* to form derivative verbal forms (such as *vrāyati*) according to A 3.1.21 and, finally, as a negative nominal base to show the sandhi peculiarity of the Veda in A 6.1.116. Furthermore, *vrāta-* appears in two rules that are particularly interesting in this context. The first, A 5.2.21 *vrātena jīvati [khañ 18]*, teaches the affix *khañ* (= *-īna*) after the nominal stem *vrāta-* ending in the instrumental (*vrātena*) as denoting ‘lives by’ (*jīvati*). Thus, *vrāta-* + *khañ* (*-īna*) > *vrātīna-* ‘living by itinerant labor’. The *Mahābhāṣya* of Patañjali (Kielhorn: 1880-188: II, 374) is even more specific, defining *vrātīnas* as those people coming from different castes who do not have any fixed occupation and who subsist on their *sorties* as groups (*vrātas*). *vrātya-* might have also had this meaning, but the *taddhita* affix applied here to *vrāta-* is *-īna* and not *-ya*. Instead, the second occurrence of *vrāta-* is in A 5.3.113 *vrātacphañor astriyām [Ṇya 112]*, which teaches the affix *Ṇya* (= *-ya*) after nominal stems that convey the sense of *vrāta-*, or after those ending with the affix *Cphañ* (*-āyana*), but not in the feminine gender (*astriyām*). Thus, *kapotapāka-* + *Ṇya* (*-ya*) > *kapotapākya-* is a ‘proper name’ used to indicate a wild tribe who used to eat doves.

This is the starting point for the new proposal. Is it really possible to form the noun *vrātya-* on the basis of rule A 5.3.113? Is there any semantic nuance in the grammatical sources that may allow us to attribute violent behaviour to *vrātyas* or to *vrātīnas*? The *Kāśīkāvṛttī* seems to document at least how the definition of the latter has changed over the centuries.

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Paola M. Rossi, University of Milan, Italy

Agonistic scenes of the *mahāvratā* rite: the praiser-*abhigara* and the reviler-*apagara*

The present paper would concentrate on the peculiarity of the Vedic classical *mahāvratā* rite, which is considered as an annual festival, marking the winter solstice, (Keith 1909 versus Hillebrandt 1890; Rolland 1972; Parpola 1999; Witzel 2005). Characterized by *sattra*-features (Falk 1986: 31-36; Malamoud 2002: 94-95), and non-standard *śrauta* ritual elements, the classical *mahāvratā* rite entails several scenes of contests (e.g. *ārya* vs. *śūdra*, *brahmacārin* vs. *pum̐scalī*, *māgadha* vs. *pum̐scalī*). Among them, the paper will be focused on a verbal contest,

occurring both in PB 5.5.13 and related ancillary literature (LŚS 4.3.1-8 ~ DŚS XI 3.1-2), where the two protagonists are defined ‘praiser’ (*abhigara*) and ‘reviler’ (*apagara*). The hypothesis that these competitive scenes, and in particular the verbal contest between *abhigara* and *apagara*, are remnants of the pre-*śrauta* competitive clan-based society, will be advanced. In actual fact, the Vedic *mahāvrata* rite is the evidence of the cultural transformation in act, toward a more settled and ‘ecumenical’ society, beyond the clan competitive tendencies, combined with the new paradigm of ‘transcendent’ and ‘universal’ sovereignty, promoted by the Kuru hegemony. However, the same Kuru hegemony is rooted into that tribal warrior culture, which is especially expressed by the so-called *vrātya* culture: it must have implied also an initiation training for the warrior-novices, and the verbal contest of the classical *mahāvrata* rite may be a remnant of that initiation practices, as well.

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Danielle Feller, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

Adding Insult to Injury: Whipping Stories in the Mahābhārata

Stories about whipping are not very common in the Great Epic. Mostly, whips or goads (*kaśā* or *pratoda*) are used by charioteers to drive their horses, and most occurrences of these terms are found in the war-books, without any specific negative connotation.

Yet a few “whipping stories” stand out. Either because certain draught-animals are flogged with special cruelty (cf. MBh 3.10 & 13.28-30) or because humans are struck with whips with an intention to insult and provoke them. Such offensive behavior is usually seen as typical of the lower orders of society or condemned as demonic. The whippers are swiftly cursed, or otherwise punished for their deed – especially if the victim happens to be a Brahmin and his tormentor is a king – for Brahmins are wont to lose their characteristic restraint when thus insulted by a *kṣatriya* (cf. MBh 1.166 and MBh 13.102-103).

In two instances, however, Brahmin sages are the ones who yoke kings and their wives to a chariot and whip them like horses. It is remarkable, if not entirely surprising, that these Brahmin tormentors get away with it scot-free, even though their motives may at times seem somewhat flimsy, whereas their *kṣatriya* victims are extolled and rewarded because they bear the pain and the insult with uncharacteristic meekness (cf. MBh 13.52-56 & 13.144).

Zuzana Špicová, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

“I Cannot Bear Killing a Woman”: Kṣatriyadharma and Killing Women in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa

Women are one of the most explicitly protected groups in ancient Indian military laws as they universally appear in the lists of people a warrior should never kill (*Mānavadharmasāstra* 4.162; *Mahābhārata* 12.99.47, *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* 1.18.11, Vasiṣṭha's *Dhanurveda* 3.65). In narrative literature, we can find situations in which a warrior needs to fight against, injure or even kill a woman. As with other protected groups (such as the *brāhmaṇas* or teachers), these situations usually need extensive reasoning showing why in this specific case, injuring/killing a member of a protected group is actually necessary, or even morally good. In case of fighting against women, this reasoning on the level of characters is also enhanced by certain defeminisation of the woman in question, usually on the level of the narrator or the implied author of the text. In this paper, I will introduce the rules of the *kṣatriyadharma* as laid

in the *Mānavadharmasāstra* and the prescriptive parts of the *Mahābhārata*, and analyse a few examples from the narrative parts of the epics, especially the cases of Śikhaṇḍin(ī) and Reṇukā from the *Mahābhārata*, and of Tātakā and Śūrpaṇakhā from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to show the defeminising techniques used by the characters and of the implied authors of the texts. Through these techniques, such as giving her masculine or generally aggressive traits, presenting her as a demon(ess), or simply as hideous or otherwise unfeminine, the woman is effectively excluded from the protected group. I will show that in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, killing or injuring such a woman therefore becomes morally acceptable, but in the *Mahābhārata*, the defeminising techniques are not as successful, and the morality of killing a woman remains questionable .

Frank Köhler, University of Tübingen, Germany

Another Case of Brahmanical Violence: Kṛpa in the Mahābhārata

It has long been known that the concept of varṇa as a fundamental principle for establishing the norms of behavior for members of ancient Indo-Aryan society in the *Mahābhārata* is not unqualified. On the contrary, there are a number of characters in this text who violate the norms governing their particular varṇa, and the most conspicuous cases are certainly those of brahmins who act as fighters. Droṇa, the teacher of the martial arts of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, is a well-known example, as is his son Aśvatthaman, because of their importance in the development of the epic story. Another fighting brahmin, Kṛpa, Droṇa's brother-in-law and also known as a superior warrior, has been somewhat neglected in research, although he has some remarkable traits (e.g., he is one of the few survivors of the war on the side of the Kauravas). This presentation will contrast his character with Droṇa and Bhīṣma in order to explain Kṛpa's narrative function in the epic. In particular, it will be examined whether it can be understood on the basis of the Vrātya model, as has already been attempted for Droṇa and Bhīṣma in Pontillo 2016.

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Zdeněk Štipl, Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic

Violent Krishna in the 10th Skandha of the Bhagavata Purana

Krishna's life story in the 10th book of the *Bhagavata Purana* offers several different roles that God plays for people and in which he appears on earth. Krishna is a divine child, a seductive youth, a spiritual advisor, a wise teacher, a faithful friend, a loving husband, a caring father,

and last but not least, a brave warrior. During his childhood among the cowherds of Braj, Krishna kills the demons who seek his life, and in his adult life, after his departure for Dvaraka, he similarly deals with many human enemies who come in his way for one reason or another. This paper explores the reasons that lead Krishna to display violence, trying to understand what the various acts of violence represent in his life story and whether at least some of them carry hidden symbolism. The search for answers to these and other questions may perhaps shed new light on the personality of the god born on earth as presented to us by the anonymous authors of the *BhP*. An analysis of the various faces, forms or character traits that the authors attribute to violent Krishna will perhaps also reveal their authorial intent and motivation.

Elena Mucciarelli, University of Groningen, Netherlands and Naresh Keerthi, Ashoka University, India

Split in Bhakti, United in Bhakti : The Valence of Violence in Jaimini's Cycle of Tales

Religious and sectarian groups were in great flux in medieval India. These rival groups were closely aware of each other's textual corpus and ritual practices, and they responded in complex and interesting ways. In light of the religious debate, we attempt to historicise the thematisation of emotions such as violence and valour in Vaishnava literature of the second millennium. By examining the *Jaiminiya* apocrypha of the *Mahabharata* epos we want to draw attention to the paradoxical tension and kinship between priestless bhakti and ritualistic sacrifice. We analyse three versions of the gory *Mayuradhvaja* episode in Sanskrit and Kannada to reflect on the changing power relations between god and devotee. These many retellings each harness the violence inherent to religious life, to subserve their various soteriological purposes.

Cristina Bignami, independent scholar

Fractal Dependency: Devotion and Violence, Slavery and Love in the Temples of Medieval Karnataka

Especially during the 12th to the 16th centuries, Śaiva religious discourses and narratives articulate a violent form of *bhakti* that takes on the form of love and slavery. The devotee is often represented as enslaved but also enthralled by Śiva, who is, in turn, reciprocally dependent on the devotee. Through the conceptual metaphor of love as slavery, the dichotomy master-slave as representation of an antinomic power-relationship is thus broken. It would be then highly misleading to conceive of violent devotion within the theoretical framework of a linear structure representing the hierarchical relationships between the god and the devotee. We should rather work with a kind of fractal image, where the two axes of love and slavery form recursive patterns in the network that connects the god and the devotee.

Such a dynamic has not been analysed thoroughly as far as the material culture is concerned. Yet, sacred area as locus of devotion and social practice represents a body of dependency of crucial value. This contribution seeks to present the development of the iconography representing a goddess and her devotee as a negotiation of "fractal-dependency" in the Śaiva temples of 12th century Karnataka. The sculptures present a goddess with snakes holding a stick and a male subject wearing a long robe, a headdress and holding a cane. The male

iconography was initially portrayed in small sizes showing devotion. However, starting from the second half of the 12th century it was represented in bigger sizes with devotees wearing a long robe. In the later development of these iconographies the goddess disappears, and the male figure becomes a form of Śiva.

The investigation of temples as a form of interagency will give a whole new understanding of the relation between the god and its devotee and thus contribute to the broader quest for a different semantic of *bhakti* as violent devotion or as form of extreme love that is not only based on textual sources.

Ewa Dębicka-Borek, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland

On quarrel and gender in the ritual context of South Indian Vaishnava temples

The paper discusses how the literary theme of the beloveds' quarrel that eventually ends in reconciliation has been translated into the ritual context of the South Indian Vaiṣṇava temples dedicated to Viṣṇu and his wife, Lakṣmī/Śrī. For this purpose, besides remarks on the current reenactment of the Festival of the Romantic Quarrel (*praṇayakalahotsava*), it also explores its rare treatments found in the Pāñcarātra saṃhitās, namely the texts which serve as a prescriptive base for a ritual order in many of these temples. The analysis shows that the account of this particular festival might have served to express ideas connected to a soteriological doctrine of self-surrender to Viṣṇu (*prapatti*).