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### **Avadhāna: Between Art of Attentiveness and Ritual of Memory\***

**SUMMARY:** The Indian performative art of Avadhāna (attention, attentiveness) is based on the showcasing of the mastery of memory, creativity, retention, multi-tasking and task-switching as well as other cognitive abilities. It examines not only a person's capacity to focus and respond simultaneously to multiple task demands given by questioners (*prachakas*) and demonstrate outstanding memory skills, but also specialized knowledge. The Avadhāna event, which involves partial improvisation, takes the form of an entertaining spectacle based on the set of rules assigned to its particular type. It becomes the 'ritual of memory', the celebration of innate and developed mental techniques performed by the *avadhāni* in front of an audience. The present paper aims at presenting the centuries-old tradition of Avadhāna from the point of view of its relation to ritual and other performative arts, as well as its performers and its contemporary components, such as the inclusion of painting, stage drama or elements of visual poetry. It stems from a field study conducted in 2015–2016 in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh and from interviews with practitioners of the art of attention, Dr. R. Ganesh, Dr. Shankar Rajaraman and Dr. Medasani Mohan.

**KEYWORDS:** performing arts, Avadhāna, *nāṭyāvadhāna*, literary games, *citrakāvya*, visual poetry, cognitive skills.

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## 1. Introduction

According to Bell, an American religious studies scholar, formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance are the factors which characterize ritual (Bell 1997: 138–169). Defining the scope of such a multifold phenomenon is not an easy task, since it should cover rites of passage or affliction, calendrical and commemorative rites, rites of exchange and communion or those of feasting, fasting, festivals, etc. Turner, ethnographer and cultural anthropologist, suggested describing ritual as

[...] a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests. (Turner 1973: 1100)

The occurrence of supernatural powers in the definition proposed by Turner seems to connect rites directly to religion. On the other hand, adduced features bring to mind theatre and other performative arts. The correlation is not coincidental. According to Alexander, all kinds of rituals, both religious and secular, as well as broadly defined performance create an “indeterminate dimension” (Alexander 1991: 84). Although it is defined by particular time and space, it is also liminal, an intermediate phase symbolizing transition from one state to another.<sup>1</sup> As Turner suggests:

It is a moot point whether plays derive from rituals—as carnivals clearly do—or whether they originated in the retelling of hunting and headhunting adventures, with pantomimic accompaniments. In either case they are liminal phenomena, with a good deal of reflexive commentary interwoven with the descriptive narrative. (Turner 1979: 486)

The author points out important factors joining ritual and carnivals, which are also representative of the performative arts. Both phenomena are

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of liminality was first developed by folklorist van Gennep in his most famous work, *Les rites de passage* (1909), to delineate one of three stages of a rite of passage.

characterized by framing and plural reflexivity. They may be dependent on a specified recurrent moment or contingent, occurring only if certain other circumstances arise. They are limited also in terms of space—whether it is a sacred place or a stage. The plural reflexivity, in Turner’s words, is based on “the ways in which a group or community seeks to portray, understand, and then act on itself” (*ibid.*: 465).

The question of the origin of theatre and its connections with ritual are also the subject of scholarly discourse in relation to Indian culture. Although some theories about the secular sources of Sanskrit drama have been advanced,<sup>2</sup> its links with religion are apparent from many different factors. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the most well-known Sanskrit treatise concerning the performative arts, describes not only a divine origin of theatre (NŚ 1.8–17) but also a performance given in honour of Śiva (NŚ 4.5–18) or presented on the occasion of various rituals. Tracing the origin of Sanskrit drama and answering the question of its basis—whether it had a secular or religious background—lies beyond the scope of the present article.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of theatre-ritual structural closeness cannot be denied.

## 2. The Art of Avadhāna

### 2.1. The power of concentration

The word ‘*avadhāna*’ denotes various kinds of performative arts based on the same characteristics. It means ‘concentration’, ‘attentiveness’, ‘attention’. It refers to the superior qualities required from the one who aspires to the honorable title of *avadhāni*<sup>4</sup>—practitioner of the art of

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<sup>2</sup> More about possible secular theories on the origin of Indian drama in Bhat 1981: 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> More about the connections between the drama and ritual of early Hinduism can be found in Lidova 1996 and Kuiper 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Although the Sanskrit term denoting a practitioner of the art of Avadhāna is *avadhānin*, it had been incorporated also in other Indian languages, such as Telugu or Kannada, where it is present in the form ‘*avadhāni*’. Moreover, the practitioners of the tradition refer to themselves using the same form.

Avadhāna. The tradition is based on the ability to focus to a degree that is almost impossible to achieve without specific exercises. The basic values that characterize the *avadhāni* are: well-developed cognitive abilities, great memory and the ability to multitask that arises from concentration. Depending on the type of art in question it is also necessary to have specific artistic or mathematical skills.

The act of Avadhāna can undoubtedly be called a performance. Contemporary events attract crowds of people wanting to sit in the audience and see those who undergo trials and, by presenting extraordinary skills, gain the title of *avadhāni*. The meticulously prepared show takes place on a stage. It is a place for future *avadhāni* and *ṛcchakas*—those who ask questions and pose tasks in order to verify the knowledge and skills of the main character of the event. According to the rules of Avadhāna, *ṛcchakas* should be recognized scholars in the field of studies they represent. Only in this way are they able to watch over the event and verify the knowledge of the *avadhāni* without any doubts. What is more, questioners (often also *avadhānis*) have a chance to demonstrate their knowledge and skills as well. The number of questioners and their specialization vary according to the type of Avadhāna being showcased.

When the term Avadhāna is not specified, it is understood as Sāhityāvadhāna, a literary variation of the tradition. It is one of the links between poetic art and its transmission in the oral form. It allows one to participate in the process of creation, to watch the poet while composing the verses according to the restrictions given by the questioners. As emphasized by the practitioners of Avadhāna, not every poet is capable of facing such a challenge successfully. In the same way, not every person with natural or well-trained abilities to maintain a high concentration and outstanding memory will be able to respond to the tasks posed by *ṛcchakas*. The secret of Avadhāna is the combination of several factors. The key elements that predict the emergence of an *avadhāni* are not only the ability to focus and outstanding memory or *pratibhā*

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Following the example of previous works concerning Avadhāna, the spelling *avadhāni* is used also in the present article.

(poetic imagination, spark of literary talent) but also creativity, spontaneity and, as often emphasized by the practitioners, *dhairya*—steadiness, self-control and intellectual vigor. Without the ability to merge these components, completing Avadhāna would not be possible.

Sāhityāvadhāna is the long-standing pillar of the art of memory, being mentioned in a number of references in textual sources.<sup>5</sup> It consists of two main parts. In the first of them, called *pūraṇa*, an *avadhāni* creates stanzas according to the instructions and restrictions of questioners. This part consists of four rounds because stanzas are created fragmentarily, one quarter in each round. The number of challenges is also related to the distinction that lies in the several types of Sāhityāvadhāna. In its basic and most popular variety it is in the form of so-called *aṣṭāvadhāna*, ‘eightfold attention’. The number refers to the number of tasks a poet must face. It does not always correspond to the number of questioners participating in the event, as it is possible that two people are asked to pose challenges relating to the same task. In addition to the classical ‘eightfold attention’ we can take part in the event in which sixteen tasks (*ṣoḍaśāvadhāna*), one hundred (*śātāvadhāna*) or even a thousand tasks (*sahasrāvadhāna*) are posed, and these are just some of the possibilities. The different categories of challenges used in the *pūraṇa* part are chosen from a set repertoire of Avadhāna by the organizing committee of the event. These tasks are closely related to the various types of *citrakāvya*—figurative poetry relying on word games that play with sound and meaning.<sup>6</sup> These are all sorts of literary games, finishing verses begun by the questioners, composing new ones according to certain rules etc.

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<sup>5</sup> More about the beginnings of Sāhityāvadhāna as well as epigraphic, historical and literary sources in Sudyka, Galewicz 2012.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Figurative poetry’ is only one of the many meanings of *citrakāvya*, which can be translated also as ‘pictorial poetry’, ‘visual poetry’ or ‘entertaining poetry’ since *citra* means not only an image but also ‘conspicuous’, ‘manifold’, ‘causing surprise’ or simply ‘a riddle’. More about *citrakāvya* and various forms within the scope of this kind of poetry in Cielas 2016; Gerow 1971: 175–190; Jha 1975 and Tubb 2014.

Each of the *prcchakas* is assigned to one category in which he specializes. The same situation takes place also in different kinds of Avadhāna. Questioners for Nāṭyāvadhāna specialize in particular branches of *nāṭyaśāstra*, for Citrāvadhāna in painting, etc. Some of the tasks belong to a so-called ‘set’ repertoire of Sāhityāvadhāna as a fixed part of each event. This is, for example, *niṣedhākṣara*, literally ‘forbidden syllable’—composing a stanza in a given meter, syllable after syllable, in response to the indication of the sound which cannot be used. Others, such as *citrakavitva* which uses elements of visual poetry, occur less often.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the type of task, it is completed in one, three or four rounds of *pūraṇa*.<sup>8</sup> In addition, an *avadhāni* must face a *prcchaka* representing

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<sup>7</sup> Avadhāna has always been closely related to *citrakāvya*. Nevertheless, throughout the centuries, *citra* has been present in the performances only in the form of riddles or literary games, and not in the sense of visual poetry. Although, taking into account the character of Avadhāna, the inclusion of visual poetry seems to be obvious, there are no sources mentioning the use of *bandhas* (proper visual stanzas) as a part of it in the past. It seems that the first Avadhāna in which *bandhas* have been realized in the performance took place in 1986. The credit for the idea of using *citrabandha* goes to Dr. R. Ganesh, who spearheaded the revival of Avadhāna in the Kannada language. Besides him, only one other person decided to try joining Avadhāna and visual poetry. That is Dr. Shankar Rajaraman, a psychiatrist from Bangalore, who is considered to be a specialist in *citrakavitva*. Not even all of practitioners of Avadhāna are aware that such events take place. For instance, Dr. Medasani Mohan, *pañcasahasrāvadhāni*, who performed both in Telugu and in Sanskrit, has minimal knowledge of *citrakāvya* and its use in the tradition he practices (based on an interview with Dr. Medasani Mohan conducted on August 7, 2016, Tirupati).

<sup>8</sup> Some of the tasks, such as *āśukavitva*, ‘fast poetry’, consist in spontaneous composition of an entire stanza on a given subject in a specified time. *Samasyāpūraṇa*, ‘supplementing the part of the given stanza’, consists in adding the rest of the text to a part given by the questioner, according to the rules of grammar, prosody and the subject. The *avadhāni* creates the text gradually, one quarter in each round. The complete stanza is composed in three rounds of *pūraṇa*. Similarly, other tasks which require creating a stanza are completed

*aprastutaprasaṅga*, in this context understood as ‘distracting’, the purpose of which is to divert his attention from fulfilling a given task, by commenting and asking questions unrelated to the subject, often in a funny tone, to the entertainment of the audience. Of course, the *avadhāni* is obliged to answer such questions, refer to the comment in an equally witty manner, all in the given language of Avadhāna.<sup>9</sup> The *prcchaka* designated to this function may interrupt at any time. Similar functions also highlight other types of tasks, such as *saṃkhyābandha*, the ‘combination of numbers’. The questioner is allowed to interrupt an *avadhāni*’s concentration at any moment by asking him to fill in a particular field of the magic square (usually consisting of nine, sixteen or twenty-five parts) in such a way that eventually the sum of all numbers vertically, horizontally and diagonally will be the same and in accordance to the number indicated by the questioner at the beginning of the event.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the ability of an *avadhāni* to keep concentration is additionally tested. When all four rounds of *pūraṇa* are completed, the Avadhāna enters the next stage—*dhāraṇa*, recalling all the compositions created in the previous part.

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in four rounds. This is what happens for example in the case of *citrakavitva*. *Prcchakas* determine the subject of the composition and indicate the *bandha*—the image to be hidden in the text. The *avadhāni* has to explain the rules of composition of a given pattern and clarify its nature. He specifies the meter. Then he starts to compose a text without using paper or pen to take notes, dealing mainly with different types of alliteration. Additionally, the stanza has to make sense and the content is supposed to match the questioner’s indications and correspond to all rules of grammar and prosody.

<sup>9</sup> Sāhityāavadhānas are performed in several Indian languages, including Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi. It also happens that specific tasks require the *avadhāni* to use a double-language register, the *bhāṣāśleṣa* to compose the stanza.

<sup>10</sup> This type of challenge is characteristic especially of Jaina Avadhāna, where such elements appear frequently. Similarly, other types of mathematical puzzles or the elements of the Ghaṇṭāavadhāna, ‘Avadhāna with bells’, or *puṣpatādana*, where the *avadhāni* must recognize ‘the number of flowers’ thrown at his back, are also popular in Jaina and Tamil traditions.

The *avadhāni* recites or sings complete stanzas and explains and comments on their form and content.<sup>11</sup> The next stage allows the questioners to demonstrate their poetic abilities. They present their own compositions according to the requirements set up during the show. When the Avadhāna comes to an end, its main character briefly sums up the event by addressing the questioners and the audience.

## 2.2. Ritualistic and performative aspects of Avadhāna

The methods of recitation of the Vedic texts (*vikṛtipāṭhas*) are closely related to the tradition of Avadhāna. The emergence of *pāṭhas* was connected to the need of preserving literature and knowledge of the ancestors transmitted orally from generation to generation in its original state. According to Filliozat, the body of Vedic texts had survived and been distributed by hundreds or even thousands of years before it was written down (Filliozat 2004: 138). The development of specific mnemonic tools allowed to protect it from oblivion and keep it in an unchanged form for a long time. Various ways of reciting the Vedas have slightly transformed the text, which in its basic version was transmitted in the form called *saṃhitāpāṭha*, or ‘continuous recitation’. The modifications within it consisted mainly in changing the order and repetition of words. Depending on the pattern of modifications, ten (eleven, if one includes the basic form) modes of Vedic recitations can be distinguished. So many possibilities of transmitting the same text allow for a permanent rendering of the original version.

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<sup>11</sup> It means that again and again the *avadhāni* must return to the composition, recollect the task, recall the passages composed previously and put it altogether. In the case of *citrakavitva* the final recitation is supplemented by a pictorial representation of the visual layer hidden in the text. While the *avadhāni* recites the text of the composition, a *pr̥cchaka* draws the picture on a board. Finally, the creator of the stanza approaches the blackboard and once again presents the text while pointing to the corresponding elements of an image. The audience has a chance to witness the moment of creation, hear the composition recited by the poet, see it in the visual form and find out how to construct a particular *bandha*.



In cases of confusion, the remaining versions of the same text are based on a somewhat different scheme, and can be used as comparative material to help in detecting inaccuracies. The various ways of recitation and transmission of the Vedas are therefore a kind of distinction of eleven editions of the same text carried by human memory. These techniques minimized also the risk of an error in the ritual.<sup>12</sup> *Pāṭhas* played, therefore, an important role in the preparation of the rite. As Galewicz says,

[...] the rare art of modified *vikṛti* recitation [...] does not find any direct application within Vedic *śrauta* ritual. It is, however, put on display in the ritualized setting of the competitions, which are appreciated by the connoisseurs as a performing art of sorts. Here, an all-pervading fear of mistake is also present and it is expressive of the ritual character of those events. The sophisticated art of reciting according to patterned changes in the word order of a text is held in high esteem and is sometimes given a religious significance. (*ibid.*: 248–249)

Created as a mnemonic tool helpful to preserve the Vedic texts and support correct execution of the rite, *vikṛtipāṭhas* became also one of the bases of performative art in the Avadhāna. It is impossible to state when exactly these modes of Vedic recitation came into being. However, regardless of dating, one may be tempted to say that the modifications used to memorize and transmit Vedic texts had influenced the development of poetic ornaments such as *yamaka*, contributing also to the development of figurative poetry and various kinds of word plays or riddles. These, on the other hand, are one of the most important elements of the ‘art of attentiveness’. The technique which played an important role in the transmission of the text used in the ritual changed its purpose and was incorporated into the realm of performance. The transformations within the recited Vedic text proceeded

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<sup>12</sup> The only source of such a mistake could be a man, whose inaccurate recall of the text or incorrect articulation could lead not only to the failure of the whole undertaking, but also be the source of far-reaching consequences for him, his family and even the entire community to which he belonged. For more on the possible errors in ritual, their consequences, and the ways of counteracting them, see Michaels 2007.

in accordance with certain patterns and rules. Not everyone could do it—it was based on having specific knowledge, perfect memory and the ability to focus. *Pāṭhins*, those who mastered the *pāṭhas*, were (and still are) responsible for keeping the centuries-old tradition alive and for the successful execution of the ritual. In time, the art of gradual recitation of portions of Vedic texts in various modes started to be called Vedāvadhāna.

Vedāvadhāna is closely related to Anyōnyam (‘mutually’)—a performative art of Keralan Nambudiris based on competition between *vedapāṭhaśālās*, schools of Vedic recitation.<sup>13</sup> The tradition shows a lot of similarities to Avadhāna. It is a competition which takes the form of a performance. In both of them, memory and knowledge play an important role. Similar to Avadhāna, Anyōnyam uses a symbolic metalanguage. For example, a text to be recited is indicated by the rivals through the creation of a particular pattern of twelve stones (Galewicz 2004: 378). One may surmise that the Keralan tradition is basically based on the idea of Vedāvadhāna. What is more, it is infused with religious meaning. As pointed by Galewicz:

Though a direct link with a *śrauta* sacrificial procedure is lost in the contemporary *anyōnyam* (if there ever had been any), there exists an idea of selecting the best virtuoso-reciter and winners in a ritualized recitation contest. (Galewicz 2003: 365)

Anyōnyam events are also, using the words of Galewicz, “[...] inscribed within the horizon of the contemporary Hindu religious calendar” (*ibid.*: 370). They take place in a fixed venue, nowadays in Śrī Rāmasvāmi Kṣetram temple in Kaṭavallūr (central Kerala), and last for ten days (*ibid.*: 371). All the parts of the event are not only combined with the temple proceedings to form rites, but also two of the ten days do not have a competitive character, are omitted for ritual reasons and intended for *Sāmaveda* and *Yajurveda* recitation. According to Galewicz:

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<sup>13</sup> The traces of this tradition can probably be dated back to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, this dating is far from certain (Galewicz 2004: 365). More about Anyōnyam in Galewicz 2002/2003, 2003 and 2004.

Debate and competition seem to have been an important mark of the ancient brahmanic culture of India. Public debating and challenging the rivals' knowledge had been used as a way to prove one's skills [...] and to negotiate one's position in a community. (*ibid.*: 363)

Its public nature is probably one of the reasons for the emergence of so many different kinds of Avadhāna. Among the types of performative art built on the basis of concentration and memory, there are such varieties as Netrāvadhāna, Tṛṇāvadhāna, Ghaṇṭāvadhāna, or the already mentioned Nāṭyāvadhāna and Citrāvadhāna.<sup>14</sup>

The first of these types, as its name implies, is based primarily on the use of eyes (*netra*) as a medium of transmitting information. It requires a minimum of two persons. It is about the ability to convey a particular message (sentences, phrases, or full stanzas of the text) through specific movements of the eye, eyelids and eyebrows in such a way that the partner can read the encrypted message. This art requires specialized knowledge (the individual sounds or their sequences are attributed to the particular motions), focus and perception. Tṛṇāvadhāna is performed in a similar way, yet using a different medium of communication. In this case, blades of grass or straws (*tṛṇa*) convey the message through a specific system of signs. Ghaṇṭāvadhāna, in contrast to the two previous forms, does not require specific motor skills but perfect hearing. The *avadhāni* must recognize the number and type of bells (*ghaṇṭā*) ringing behind a screen. All these types of Avadhāna require specific skills and the ability to solve a problem in a spontaneous way, but they are devoid of the creative factor. The other two are different. Nāṭya, a theatrical variation of Avadhāna, requires the ability to combine four elements: costumes, gesticulation and body movements, evoking emotions, as well as creating dialogues/monologues in a spontaneous and improvised dramatic

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<sup>14</sup> The subsequent types of Avadhāna are described mainly on the basis of an interview with Dr. R. Ganesh, a practitioner of the art of Avadhāna in its literary form and the author of a book on this tradition focused on its realization in the Kannada language (*Kannadadalli Avadhanakale*), conducted on August 11, 2016, Bangalore.

scene. The actor who wishes to obtain the title of *nāṭyāvadhāni* must fulfil the tasks given by *prcchakas*, who challenge him to recreate a particular motif (most often derived from classical literature, and less likely the result of a questioner's imagination) in the limited, given time.<sup>15</sup> He has to play a specific character and emotion in a spontaneous way, using an improvised text and such resources as self-prepared, minimalist costumes and makeup. In this case, the practice of Avadhāna requires not only imitative activities, the recognition of sounds or the communication of something through a certain metalanguage, but the creation of a theatrical etude in a very limited time. The idea of Nāṭyāvadhāna is to create a spectacle within a spectacle. The creation of a theatrical etude becomes the performance itself.

Similar to Nāṭyāvadhāna, the creative element is necessary for the realization of Citrāvadhāna. The *avadhāni* must face eight canvases. On each of them he must create a painting according to the guidelines of *prcchakas*. The first four must reflect particular themes and styles of painting, the fifth—one music which is played in the background. According to its type, specific tools (brushes, spatulas etc.) and painting techniques should be used. The sixth painting is also inspired by the sound—it has to visualize a heard *rāga*, its mood and conveyed emotions. Another canvas is covered by the artist in response to an amusing question, which also plays the role of additional entertainment for the audience. The pictorial riposte should be equally witty. The last task involves inserting given syllables into the composition in such a way that they become a part of the painting—hidden and not decipherable at first glance. Citrāvadhāna is one of the novelties in the centuries-old tradition of 'the art of attentiveness'. It is the result of a collaboration between the *avadhāni* Dr. R. Ganesh and B. K. S. Varma, a Bangalore-born painter. The first spectacle combining

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<sup>15</sup> The level of difficulty is so high that Nāṭyāvadhāna does not have many performers. The most well-known practitioner of this art, Dara Ramanatha Sastry, who performed Nāṭyāvadhāna in Telugu language, died in 2016.

the elements of classical Avadhāna and painting took place in 1990.<sup>16</sup> The event called *kāvyaচিতra* lasted for twenty-four hours.

There are more types of Avadhāna than the very few mentioned above. They use various branches of science and art to combine them with the root of the tradition—an extraordinary ability to concentrate. Although techniques of Vedic chanting were used in the rite, Avadhāna itself does not have a ritualistic character from a religious point of view. Nevertheless, *pāthas* became one of the bases for the whole complex of performative arts characterized by plural or individual reflexivity. Despite the fact that Avadhāna is not connected with the ritual *sensu stricto*, it can be called the ‘ritual of memory’, celebration of innate and developed mental techniques performed by an *avadhāni* in front of the audience. It is not “designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” as stated in the already mentioned definition of rite by Turner. Nevertheless, it is built upon “[...] a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place”. The main goal is to obtain the title of *avadhāni*. It does not involve the presence of miraculous forces but it can be referred to as a secular form of rite. It is an activity that is performed for concrete purposes and loaded with symbolic actions prescribed by specific regulations, and thus partly ritualistic in nature. Formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance and performance—listed by Bell as the characteristics of rite—play an important role in Avadhāna. Although it is a secular art, the performance usually starts with the recitation of Vedic texts and an invocation to Sarasvatī. The Avadhāna performances are conducted in a particular time and space. They are very often part of a bigger festival, serving as one of the events in the program. The occasions on which they take place are various. They can be performed

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<sup>16</sup> To the present day, B.K.S. Varma performed in ca. 1500 *kāvyaচিতras* across the world, as well as other, numerous kinds of Citrāvadhāna (based on the interview with Dr. R. Ganesh conducted on August 11, 2016, Bangalore). He still continues to perform.

during religious holidays, such as the festival of *vasanta pañcamī* (Spring Festival), and secular celebrations—like, for example, *ugādi*, the New Year’s Day for the Hindus of Andhra Pradesh or annual celebrations of particular institutions. On the other hand, Avadhāna can also be unconnected to any other event. Then it becomes a festival itself, lasting even up to over a month. When it comes to the duration of Avadhāna it is always limited. The length of the event is important—it can be neither too short, nor too long. In this sense, it is closer to a theatrical spectacle of a particular duration than a performance for which, in many cases, time is not specified. The same similarity can be observed in relation to space. According to literary sources, in the past Avadhāna took place usually in closed communities, at courts or in monasteries.<sup>17</sup> On particular occasions it was performed also in temples. With time it became more open—it moved from sequestered to public places and started to be performed on stage, at well-prepared venues. This change shows clearly the journey of Avadhāna, the gradual transition of its character, from ritual to performance.

The art of Avadhāna culminates in the event, in the same way as the ritual has its apogee during the celebration of the rite. Moreover, also the process of getting ready shows in both cases many similarities. Some information concerning the preparation for Avadhāna can be found in literary sources. One interesting example are the works of the *viraliṭṭūtu* genre<sup>18</sup> in Tamil literature described by Viswanathan Peterson. The author quotes specific passages from the *Kūlappanāyakkāṅ Viraliṭṭūtu* composed by Kavirāyarin honor of his patron, Nāgama Kūlappa

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<sup>17</sup> Since Avadhāna was very popular among Jaina monks it was performed by them very often at patron’s courts, in monasteries or in a closed circle of connoisseurs (see fn. 21). Also testimonies of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century *avadhānis* support this view (Mitchell 2009: 146–154). Moreover, the art is very strongly related to the tradition of *kaviḡoṣṭhī*, poetical assemblies, where poets-contestants competed in solving literary riddles. Events of this kind usually took place at court, as described *inter alia* in the *Tilakamañjarī* by Dhanapāla (10<sup>th</sup> century) (Sudyka, Galewicz 2012: 171).

<sup>18</sup> Viswanathan Peterson translates the name of the genre as “message borne by *virali* singer” (Viswanathan Peterson 2016: 64).

Nāyakkaṅ, at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and from the *Nanṇāvūr Caṅkamēcuvaracuvāmi Vētanāyaki Ammaṅ Pēril Vīraliviṭutūtu* (19<sup>th</sup> century). In both of these works, the leading motif is the humiliation of the *avadhāni* by a beautiful courtesan and her mother-bawd. In the story some information about the art in question can be found. The main characters, named Aṭṭāvatāni and Cōṭacāvatāni,<sup>19</sup> are described as virtuoso performers of Avadhāna. The authors present not only the extraordinary abilities of the *brāhmaṇas* but also mention various elements of the art. It allows us to compare the tradition in its present form with what it looked like at the time of the creation of the works. The texts include such information as mentioning the four types of poetry/versification (Viswanathan Peterson 2016: 72) mastered by the hero of the *Kūlappanāyakkaṅ Vīraliviṭutūtu*. As pointed out by Viswanathan Peterson, it refers to the ability to create four different forms of composition which in Sanskrit are called: *āśu* (fast, spontaneously created, *ex tempore*), *mṛdu* (delicate, lyrical), *viṣṭāra* (extent, epic poetry) and *citra* (surprising, using forms of figurative poetry). What is important is that, even today, the practitioners of Avadhāna list the knowledge of these as one of the main conditions for performing the art they represent. The *Kūlappanāyakkaṅ Vīraliviṭutūtu* mentions also the elements of Avadhāna which are known from its historical descriptions and contemporary performances. The text not only refers to the literary form of tradition which is based on composing poetry, but also to its other types. As we read in *Kūlappanāyakkaṅ Vīraliviṭutūtu*, the hero has achieved proficiency in challenges such as untangling a tangled chain while answering tricky questions, playing dice and counting pebbles thrown at his back or winning a chess game while explaining the meaning of verses recited by poets (*ibid.*: 73). Other types of tasks that the *avadhāni* had to face are listed in the *Nanṇāvūr Caṅkamēcuvaracuvāmi Vētanāyaki Ammaṅ Pēril Vīraliviṭutūtu*. As we read in the work, these include

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<sup>19</sup> Names of *brāhmaṇas* correspond to Sanskrit terms *aṣṭāvadhānin* and *ṣoḍaśāvadhānin*, which denote performers of the art of eightfold and sixteen-fold attention.

the composition of nine different types of difficult *citrakāvya* figures, mathematical and musical puzzles, chess and dice games, recognizing people by voice and horses by hoof-beat or identifying verses written in various meters (*ibid.*: 73–74). It is clear from both texts that the *avadhāni* must have been able to cope with many forms of challenges. They were not limited to one type, (for example, solving many types of literary puzzles). Works emphasize also very strongly the role of received education, knowledge of languages, as well as proficiency in grammar and prosody at a young age. It is pointed out that such particular preparation, not just an inherent set of predispositions, plays an important role in achieving the knowledge and high social status of an *avadhāni*. Also, nowadays, *avadhānis* are often perceived as local celebrities. Some of them build their image by trying to emphasize the role of natural genius in their art.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, others admit frankly how much work they had to put into achieving the right skills for practicing Avadhāna. In the case of Sāhityāvadhāna, the key element is the excellent knowledge of language in all its aspects and—for all kinds of Avadhāna—exercising memory and concentration. Only these factors allow one to face the challenge and complete it successfully. Mastering them requires time and self-control. Not only in terms of education but also as special activities and exercises repeated continuously, taking the form of a secular ritual.

The Tamil works mentioned above are relatively late. Nevertheless, they provide important information about the form of Avadhāna in the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century. However, in Indian literature we can find more references to the performative art in question. Another example, taken from the Sanskrit *Ṛtumarṇana*, “Description of the seasons” by Siddhichandra, dates back to ca. the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century. The work is an anthology of

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<sup>20</sup> Some practitioners of Avadhāna connect their abilities either to natural skills or to religious activity. They claim to be granted a boon of perfect memory, poetic genius and concentration by the god/goddess of their devotion. In this case they underline the role of meditation, ritual and other religious activities in the preparation for performing Avadhāna.



*muktakas* (*sūktisañcaya*) composed by various poets and the author of the compilation. In the stanzas we do not find information about Avadhāna. However, in the colophon added to Siddhicandra's work, the author is described as one who faced one hundred and eight challenges in the course of a single meeting and dazzled the Mughal Emperor Akbar himself. In this way he achieved the titles of *khusfaham*, 'intelligent', 'sharp-minded man', and *jihāṅgīrapasaṁda*, 'Akbar's favorite' (Vyas 1990: 155). Siddhicandra is only one of many Jainas, among whom the art of Avadhāna was extremely popular at that time. Many others before, including Vijayasenasūri, Śānticaṇḍra and Bhānucandra (Siddhicandra's teacher), performed at Akbar's court showing their skills in Śatāvadhāna.<sup>21</sup>

Interesting evidence of the development of the performative-literary art of Avadhāna are also autobiographies of Kandukura Viresalingam and U. V. Swaminath Iyer—*avadhānis* living at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of their passages were quoted by Mitchell (Mitchell 2009: 146–154). Although these testimonies are almost contemporary, comparing them with older available sources indicates that the essence of Avadhāna has remained unchanged for centuries.<sup>22</sup> Most of the techniques, tasks etc., are almost or completely identical.<sup>23</sup> It is still a living tradition and its continuity and similarity

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<sup>21</sup> Sudyka, Galewicz 2012: 185. More about the Jaina *avadhānis* performing at the Mughal courts in Vyas 1990: 5–6. Information about Siddhicandra and other poets writing under the patronage of Muslim rulers can be found in Pollock 2001: 404–412. For more on the Jaina assemblies of poets and the *citrakāvya* works composed at the Mughal courts, see Vose 2016.

<sup>22</sup> As Galewicz writes, it is believed that “the rules seem not to have changed since their description in a Kannada work by Kāma of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century” (Sudyka, Galewicz 2012: 181).

<sup>23</sup> Mitchell draws attention to the fact that Avadhāna has been transformed. She notes that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century testimony is not a proof of the revival of the old performing-literary tradition but the confirmation of its extension in the new context (Mitchell 2009: 150). The changes involve the usual place of performance, the audience that participate in the event,

to the old forms can be easily verified. The sustainability of Avadhāna, albeit to a small extent, obviously affects minor changes in its scope. Some of the significant novelties are the inclusion of already mentioned elements of visual poetry or stage drama into the scope of given tasks. Moreover, as Mitchell observes, today it is almost impossible to complete Avadhāna in a closed circle of several participants. Nowadays, it cannot exist without the audience and the scene. The tradition moved from the closed world related to the realm of ritual and stepped into the milieu of performance. People sitting in the audience are no longer active participants in the event.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, historical and literary sources describing the past of Avadhāna do not allow the statement that such situations did not occur before.<sup>25</sup> The poets who were challenged at the court, in the presence of their rulers, were not performing only in front of the other connoisseurs of poetry. As such, while trying to gain patrons, it was also possible for them to demonstrate their skills and fulfill their ambitions. As *avadhānis* they were widely known and respected in society. Also, at that time, they played a role of local stars. Today Avadhāna has become one of the objects of mass consumerism and is sold as a product of entertainment in the form of recordings or

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etc. Nevertheless, Avadhāna itself has remained unchanged. The same techniques and the same kinds of tasks were used in the past. The context of the Avadhāna could be changed but not its rules and the most important aspects.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell 2009: 153. This statement is contradicted by the testimonies of contemporary *avadhānis* who say that not all of their performances are public, with an open access. Even nowadays, private Avadhānas are being held—in close circle of friends, connoisseurs and experts of poetry, for their own entertainment and satisfaction, far from the media hype.

<sup>25</sup> A Hoysala inscription of king Vīra Narasiṃha Hoysala II dated to 1223, *Prabandhacaturviṃśati* by Rājaśekhara (Sudyka, Galewicz 2012: 179–180) and works mentioning the art of Avadhāna referred to in the current article describe it usually as a scholarly competition checking the skills of a poet before the ruler, scholars and connoisseurs of poetry. Nevertheless, it is not specified that all of them were active participants in the event.

television programs.<sup>26</sup> This does not change the fact that this kind of performance is addressed mostly to people who already have some knowledge of it, who want to explore it, and who know the language of the show. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine that such a spectacle could be a source of entertainment.

Another important aspect is the preparation for Avadhāna, based on both natural predispositions as well as hard work and dedication. As Dr. R. Ganesh emphasizes, Avadhāna requires a lot of exercises and discipline. His preparations range from daily routines to detailed and specialized activities in the form of a secular ritual. Dr. Ganesh observes, that the role of physical factors such as the maintenance of the body and mind are vital. An *avadhāni* preparing for the performance must be rested so that bodily needs do not distract his attention. The first step on the way to perform is gaining a wide knowledge of the language (in the case of Sāhityāvadhāna) or other skills characteristic of the particular type of Avadhāna. Dr. Ganesh and Dr. Shankar Rajaraman unanimously point out that the knowledge of works created by predecessors is indispensable. It helps to develop one's own style and, in the case of *citrakavitva*, assimilate the patterns that help to avoid errors typical of this kind of compositions. In a similar way, performers of Nāṭyāvadhāna must be familiar with *nāṭyāśāstra* and develop skills required from actors. Nevertheless, probably the biggest and most important challenge for an *avadhāni* is the memory training. For this purpose various mnemonics are used. As Dr. R. Ganesh and Dr. Shankar Rajaraman emphasize, the most important thing is well-developed associative memory. Based on his knowledge, one must be able to create a network of links. Unlike short-term memory,

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<sup>26</sup> The recordings of Avadhāna are available online, for example on Youtube.com. One can find some parts or full performances, in Sanskrit or other Indian languages. One of the examples is the video containing excerpts from a DVD of a Sanskrit Avadhāna by Dr. R. Ganesh recorded in Bangalore, produced by Abhinaya Bharati: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3GnorRNjXE&t=315s>.

the semantic memory system allows to see the relationship between individual elements to deepen their understanding. In this way verses created during previous parts of performance can be recalled and reproduced at any time. Another factor is the possession and improvement of spatial imagination. For instance, a poet composing *citrabandha* in a traditional way can use a piece of paper to draw the patterns of repetitions. This does not detract from the knowledge he possesses but facilitates the task. An *avadhāni* must go through this process by relying only on his memory. The performer of Nāṭyāvadhāna must be able to create the whole theatrical etude in his head and prepare *ex tempore* every move and every word he pronounces. For that reason, Dr. Ganesh says that another important part of his ritual of preparations for Avadhāna is visualization. Before every performance he tries to recreate the event in his mind. He confronts himself with challenges. This exercise allows him to analyze possible scenarios and develop ways to overcome probable difficulties. It is also helpful in focusing and gaining concentration before the performance.

Another factor playing an immense role in preparation is time. As practitioners of Avadhāna state, achieving and improving all the skills require patience. Moreover, the main tool used by an *avadhāni*—his mind—requires constant training and improvement.

#### 4. Conclusion

Giving examples of public liminality, Turner mentions that “calendrical rites in tribal cultures and carnivals in post-feudal and early modern culture” are characterized by framing and plural reflexivity—key features of the ritual and carnival (Turner 1979: 486). As Turner suggests, the feature which distinguishes them from a stage drama is flow, described as “a state in which action follows action according to an inner logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part [...]” (*ibid.*: 486–487). The definition of flow mentioned by Turner is assigned to the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi, who lists its six attributes or distinctive features:

1. Action and awareness are experienced as one.
2. Attention is centered on a limited stimulus field [...]. Rules, motivations, rewards, the will to participate are seen as framing devices, necessary limitations for the centering of attention.
3. Loss of ego [...]. The actor, immersed in the flow, accepts the framing rules as binding [...].
4. The actor finds himself in control of his actions and environment. He may not know it when “flowing,” but reflecting on it “in tranquility” he may realize that his skills were perfectly matched to the demands made upon him by ritual, art, or sport. [...]
5. Flow usually contains coherent, noncontradictory demands for action and provides clear, unambiguous feedback to a person’s actions. [...] Flow differs from everyday activities in that its framing contains explicit rules which make action and the evaluation of action unproblematic. [...]
6. Finally, flow is [...] “autotelic,” that is, it seems to need no goals or rewards outside itself. (*ibid.*: 487–488)

The above-mentioned features can be easily attributed to Avadhāna as a cultural performance. What is interesting is the fact that Avadhāna joins the distinctive features of ritual and performative art. Framing, plural or/and individual reflexivity and flow seem to intertwine in creating a new quality, an original form of performance. Avadhāna and stage drama, different but both belonging to the world of performative arts, have the same relation to ritual. Turner suggests to qualify stage drama as a liminoid, liminal-like genre. According to him, it helps to distinguish the form which is truly liminal (ritual) from the one which is connected to rite and shares some important characteristics with the liminal state (stage drama) (*ibid.*: 491). In my opinion, these terms could be used also to describe the relation between ritual and Avadhāna: they are connected, on the one hand, and completely distinct, on the other. The terms used by Turner help to place Avadhāna among other performative arts, next to carnival and stage drama, with a minor relation with ritual.

The art of attentiveness is not easy to characterize. It is a complex, centuries-old tradition. Depending on the kind of Avadhāna, sometimes it can be described as closer to ritual, at other times—closer to theatrical

forms. In fact, it contains elements of both and can be placed somewhere in between—between ritual and performative art.

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