**Cracow Indological Studies**
**Vol. XXIV, No. 1 (2022), pp. 29–60**
**https://doi.org/10.12797/CIS.24.2022.01.03**

**Talia Ariav**
**talia.ariav@gmail.com**
**(University of Chicago, USA)**

**Naresh Keerthi**
**nakeerthi@gmail.com**
**(Ashoka University, Delhi, India)**

# Churning Selves: Intersecting Biographies in the *Nīlakaṇṭhavijaya*

ABSTRACT: The Sanskrit *campū Nīlakaṇṭhavijaya* is arguably the most popular literary work of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita. It narrates the mythical story of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, with an emphasis on the part played by Dīkṣita's personal god—Śiva. A close reading reveals that this text is preoccupied with themes of agency and subjectivity. The multiple characters of the story are not conventional archetypes. Rather, they inhabit shared worlds and come across as having distinct yet intersecting identities. Gods, demons, snakes and even Venom are given very human biographies and social milieux. And all these biographies flow into that of the titular Nīlakaṇṭha, presenting an implicit model of the self. But who is the Nīlakaṇṭha of the title?

KEYWORDS: self, sharedness, Sanskrit *kāvya*, Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita, early modern South India

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 786083–NEEM).

## 1. Churning Butter and Drinking Poison

Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita is one of the best-known authors of 17th-century South India. Operating from the Kāverī delta, he was a specialist of Sanskrit grammar, a Śaiva devotee, an initiate of the tantric Śrīvidyā sect, and an influential teacher.[1] However, he primarily saw himself—to judge by his writings—as a Sanskrit poet. The *Nīlakaṇṭhavijaya* (henceforth *Vijaya*) is probably Nīlakaṇṭha's most read composition.[2] A long *campū* set in five cantos, it narrates the story of the churning of the Ocean of Milk, starting with Indra's fatal mistake that cost him his divine kingdom, to the subsequent journey of the exiled gods that leads to a detailed description of the churning of the ocean and its aftermath. The following verse—Viṣṇu's advice to the gods—helpfully lists some of the *dramatis personae* of the churning episode and highlights the salient points of the story. It comes with a spoiler alert—but then, readers of *kāvya* are hardly put off by spoilers.

> *sandhānaṃ kurutāsuraiḥ prathamato manthānam urvīdharaṃ*
> *kṛtvā mandaram arṇave kṣipata te yūyaṃ sametās tataḥ |*
> *baddhvā vāsukināṭha manthata tatas sampatsyate yā sudhā*
> *tām āsvādya gamiṣyathāpy amaratāṃ yūyaṃ na vaś śatravaḥ ||*
> (*Vijaya* 2.46)[3]

[1] See Fisher 2017, for an elaborate survey of Nīlakaṇṭha's sectarian identity and work. See Ariav (forthcoming) wherein it is argued that the accounts of his position as a minister in Tirumalai Nāyaka's court in Madurai are a later invention, and that he was an independent poet from the Kaveri delta.

[2] In close competition with his short *Kaliviḍambaṇa*. We know this on the basis of the relatively large numbers and spread of manuscripts of this work; four printed editions starting from the late 19th century, and notably four surviving commentaries from before the 20th century, one of them by the infamous Ghanaśyāma of Thanjavur, working a generation or two after Nīlakaṇṭha. See Raja, K. K. et. al (eds) 1978, X: 176. For some extracts from the commentaries, see Sastri 1929, VII: 3060–3073 (n. 4052–4060). The commentary we are consulting is by Mahādevasūri, a scholar with the family name Vellāla—most likely a Telugu speaker.

[3] All references are to the edition of the *Nīlakaṇṭhavijayacampū* published by the Sanskrit Education Society (*Vijaya* 1972). Note on transliteration: We have used

> Call a truce with the Asuras, make Mount Meru—that pillar of the earth—your churning rod and place it in the ocean.
> Together with the Asuras,wind the snake Vāsuki around the Mountain and churn away.You, not your enemies, will drink the Nectar that emerges, and turn immortal.

In this paper, we argue that this *campū* implicitly but quite pointedly explores themes of human agency and authority. We point to the related notions of self and subjectivity that present themselves at key instances of the text, and which, to our mind, are directly linked to the author's relationship with his god, his interpretation of tradition, and his playful aesthetic sensibilities.

Here is one of the prefatory verses—the *granthakāra pratijñā*—that states Nīlakaṇṭha's views on his poem and the 'gap in the research' that he aims to fill by writing it:

> *cauryeṇa praṇayena cāpaharataḥ pallīṣu gavyāny api*
> *styāyante caritāni cet kavi-kulodgītāni gāthā-śataiḥ |*
> *trailokyodbhaṭa-kālakūṭa-kabalīkāra-prakāraṃ punaḥ*
> *stotuṃ ke prathame'pi nāma kavayo dūre'dhikāras tu naḥ* || *Vijaya* 1.9

> One, going from home to home, took away butter by theft or sweet talk and poets reel out compositions, hundreds of verses long. Another gobbled down the venom that plagued the three worlds, yet no past master ever described it. I am far from being qualified.

In keeping with convention, the verse states the reason for taking up the theme of the composition. In this case, it is the task of narrating the story of the great churning, with a special emphasis on Śiva's role in it. This short verse encapsulates (at least) three reasons for this endeavor. The first and most explicit is a corrective to the literary neglect

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a slightly modified version of the IAST scheme with the following difference—members of a compound are separated by hyphens.

that the theme of the churning has suffered. Nīlakaṇṭha turns the conventional *topos* of the apology-cum-boast (Tam. *avaiy-aṭakkam*) into a harsh complaint about previous poets, who neglected Śiva's heroic role in the mythic churn. This is a role that is literally breathtaking—*trailokyodbhaṭa-kālakūṭa-kabalīkāra-prakāraṃ*—and yet it was, to follow the logic of this verse, overshadowed by Kṛṣṇa's mere fondness for butter. This humble brag also signals Nīlakaṇṭha's awareness of the literary history of Sanskrit poetry, gaps included. It is historically true that literary retellings of this major episode involving Śiva are sparse, especially in comparison to the innumerable Kṛṣṇa-centric *kāvya*s.[4]

As an aside, it is noteworthy that Nīlakaṇṭha has also written a poem on the well-worn Kṛṣṇa theme—the *Mukundavilāsa*. If this text was written before the *Vijaya*, which is certainly possible, then Nīlakaṇṭha's complaint is also a joke at his own expense, one that his immediate audience would well recognize.[5] In any case, Nīlakaṇṭha is not afraid of teasing his colleagues or making fun of the long tradition of Sanskrit poetry—quite the contrary. There is no anxiety that his 'sectarian' humor might be taken amiss.[6]

The second reason, strongly implied in this verse and throughout the composition, has to do with our author's name. Nīlakaṇṭha, or Dark

[4] The first artistic representation of the churning episode is recorded in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In keeping with the nature of the story with its profusion of characters, Bharata 'choreographed' it as a *samavakāra*—an operatic performance with a large number of actors. And yet, it was sparsely taken up as a theme by later poets, in stark contrast with the proliferation of the Kṛṣṇa stories, probably under the influence of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. See Venkatkrishnan 2015.

[5] The *Vijaya* is the only composition that Nīlakaṇṭha dated, the year translating to 1638 CE. Based on what we know of his later activities through his students, this text was probably written between his early to mid-career. The *Mukundavilāsa* is mentioned in Nīlakaṇṭha's *Nalacaritra*, but we do not have further evidence on the relationship of these two works. It is very much in line with Nīlakaṇṭha's character to include himself in his criticism of the butter-eating poets.

[6] Nīlakaṇṭha's grand uncle and great influence, Appayya Dīkṣita, demonstrates a similar sectarian broad-mindedness and comfort in engaging with Vaiṣṇava authors and texts; see Rao 2014, Bronner 2016: 15–16, and Duquette 2021.

Throat, bears Śiva's name, earned in the famous episode of the churning, in which he drank the poison. When the poet Nīlakaṇṭha sings, "Another gobbled down the venom that plagued the three worlds/Yet no past master ever described it. I am far from being qualified"—(see verse *Vijaya* 1.9 cited above), he is very deliberately positioning himself next to the very action that gave his god *his* name, which is also the poet's own. Keep in mind this near-explicit comparison between the two Nīlakaṇṭhas, as the author comes back to this juxtaposition several times in the text. Nīlakaṇṭha is writing his own *vijaya* through the story of his god and this hands us significant clues about his model of the self. This is a self that inscribes and expresses itself in relation to its personal god. A deft telling of Śiva's well-known story is, somehow, also the author's private story. Thus, this interplay of outer and inner churnings is central to the models of subjectivity that inform the *Vijaya.*

The third reason, implicit in the verse, is that the churning is a composite and rich analogy for the act of writing poetry. Nīlakaṇṭha's statement forms a basic metaphor of churning *as* writing, which frames the entire composition with a self-reflexive flavor.[7] To follow the above image closely, the imagery of churning butter is very domestic. It involves an intense activity within a rather closed interior space—a narrow vessel—and separates matters and creates clarity, until finally the concentrated goodness floats into sight. But this is the popular

[7] Nīlakaṇṭha is drawing on an existing theme. See these verses from the anthologies:

*kiṃ tena kila kāvyena mṛdyamānasya yasya tāḥ |*
*udadher iva nāyānti rasāmṛta-paramparāḥ ||*
(*Subhāṣitāvali* 133 by Jayamādhava)
What is the point of a poem that doesn't stream torrents of beauty when squeezed, like the ocean that gushes nectar when churned?

*satkāvya-pīyūṣa-samudra-madhye na vāḍavāgnir na ca kālakūṭaḥ |*
*tasyāvagāhena tathāpi citraṃ khalasya tāpaḥ paramo'bhyudeti ||*
(*Sūktimuktāvalī* 4.26)
There is neither the submarine volcano nor the *kālakūṭa* poison in the ocean of nectarine poetry. But when the wicked dip into it, they get all hot and bothered. Strange, isn't it?

churning that some gods (and many poets) have already explored *ad nauseam*. There are other forms of churning—ones that involve agitation and upheaval, and there, many bitter things emerge as well. This is the kind of tough churning that Nīlakaṇṭha speaks of, repeatedly. At another instance in the text, he restates this contrast as he describes the crucial moment when Śiva drinks the *kālakūṭa* poison:

> ***mādhava*** *iva navanītam* ***umādhavaḥ*** *garalam upayuyuje |Vijaya:* prose after 4.30.[8]
>
> Umā's husband, Śiva, gulped down the poison like Kṛṣṇa would butter.

Viewed in light of the writing-is-churning metaphor, these two instances suggest that authors who focus on Kṛṣṇa do not face challenges that Nīlakaṇṭha does—as an author who takes it upon himself to deal with the *kālakūṭa* venom. What might the parallel between Śiva's epic swallowing of the poison and the author's writerly endeavor imply? The authors of Kṛṣṇa's stories cannot, to complete the metaphor, save the three worlds. For Nīlakaṇṭha, the only other thing that can save the world, besides Śiva's intervention, or alongside it, is good poetry. He uses the medium of poetry as a platform for the clearest articulation of his views—on the nature of humanity, godhood and everything in between. We suggest that it is for this purpose above all else that he takes up the theme of cosmic churning in the *Vijaya*.

Consider this verse, describing how the world presents itself to view, once Śiva swallows the poison and the smoke settles, so to speak:

[8] Note the alliterative similarity in the epithets of Śiva and Viṣṇu—Mādhava and Umādhava, which serves to strengthen, but also to question their contrastive comparison. For other instances of the clever juxtaposition of names, see section 2c for a discussion of Nārāyaṇī and Nārāyaṇa, Om and Umā, the two *jaganmātā*s and finally the two Nīlakaṇṭhas.

*ajani śanair viśadaṃ jagad apasarpati kālakūṭa-santamase|*
*tātparyam iva kavīnāṃ tārkika-kolāhaloparame || Vijaya* 4.30

As the dark *kālakūṭa* cleared,
the world—slowly—came into focus,
like the poets' wisdom, made audible
when the philosophers take a break from quibbling.

In general, the enduring metaphor of writing-as-churning is open and productive.[9] It allows for expansion and experimentation, and does not require strict analogies between components. This motif runs through the *Vijaya*, and simultaneously indexes the processes of poetic expression and introspection. And, it is the many selves involved in this expression and introspection that we are interested in.

## 2. Intersecting Biographies in the *Vijaya*

One of the most striking features of the Purāṇic story of the churning is the multiplicity of players involved. In Nīlakaṇṭha's hands, they all—sentient and insentient—come to life as living, breathing subjects, along with their worlds, motivations, and emotions. While the title of the poem is *Nīlakaṇṭha's Victory*, the central figure, Nīlakaṇṭha-Śiva makes his appearance only in the fourth canto. Nīlakaṇṭha the author presents the complex story of the churning by focusing spotlights on the many secondary heroes. And there are a lot of them—Viṣṇu playing a tortoise, a woman and himself, a snake, a mountain, gods and demons, and a poison— all of whom come across as being extremely human. In the *Vijaya*, there are no small parts, not even small actors.[10]

[9] This is very much in line with Nīlakaṇṭha's statements about Sanskrit poetry, in the openings of his *Śivalīlārṇava* and *Gaṅgāvatāraṇa*.

[10] For an insightful discussion of the treatment of 'minor characters' vis-à-vis the protagonist in Greek literature and the 19th-century English novel, see Woloch 2003.

What are the ramifications of this plurality in terms of the frame metaphor of churning-as-writing? We propose that the biographies of the eponymous god and the poet are multi-participatory and multi-perspectival.[11] The rest of this paper examines the churn of biographies that constitute Nīlakaṇṭha's *vijaya*.

## 2a. Subterranean Selves: A View from Below

In preparation for the churning, the Mandara mountain is uprooted and placed in the ocean. And if the churning stick is Mandara, the king of the mountains, then only a kingly churning rope will do. The gods and demons decide to ask the king of snakes—Vāsuki—to do the honors. According to the Nilakanthian logic, the demons live in one of the dark underworlds, and are neighbors of the snakes who live in *Pātāla,* another subterranean realm. They are therefore sent to coax Vāsuki to collaborate in the Great Churning. Nīlakaṇṭha's demons and snakes are very eloquent, and their persuasive skills remind one of say, a certain Sanskrit intellectual from 17th century Tamil Nadu:

> *"tad adya kiñcid anugṛhya māṃ, nayantu bhavantas takṣaka-kārkoṭaka-śaṅkhacūḍa-gulikairāvata-padma-mukhān mahātmanas taruṇān phaṇādharān. Antato nayata jita-śramaṃ vā śeṣam" ity abhidadhāno vāsukiḥ* […]
>
> "And so, friends, do me a favor now: go to one of the promising young snakes like Takṣaka, Kārkoṭaka, Śaṅkhacūḍa, Gulika, Airāvata or Padma… Or rather, why don't you all go convince the tireless Śeṣa?" said Vāsuki.

[11] By multi-participatory, we mean that the identities of Nīlakaṇṭha and the characters of his *Vijaya* are overlapping and mutually constitutive. By multiperspectival, we mean that the biographical narratives are always mosaics of narratives from the viewpoints of different participants. This could well be a marker of the early modern 'NEEM' period in South India. See especially Shulman (forthcoming), for a discussion of Sanskrit ornaments such as *ullekha* which contribute to similar effects of perspectivalism.

[…] *punar ittham abhidadhe dānavaiḥ:*
*kṣudraiḥ kiṃ karaṇīyam ebhir uragaiḥ kṣīṇāyuṣām antakaiḥ*
*yā śeṣaṃ nayateti vāg ajani te saivāstu satyādhunā |*
*bhūbhāre hy upayukta eṣa viditaḥ sarvais tato'nyaḥ punas*
*tvaṃ śeṣo bhavasīti niścita-dhiyas tvām eva yācāmahe || Vijaya* 3.61

And the demons replied:
What can we do with these minor snakes? They only cause untimely death.
But when you tell us to "get Śeṣa"—let that come true here and now!
Śeṣa, as everyone knows, is busy carrying the earth.
This means that *you* are the *only one remaining—śeṣa*, and so, we ask you, and you alone!

*api ślakṣṇīkurmo maṇivad acalaṃ pāṇikaṣaṇair*
*api tvāṃ voḍhā smaḥ sukha-śayitam ādugdha-jaladheḥ |*
*sukhaṃ cākarṣāmas tad-upari yathā tuṣyati bhavān*
*prasīdāyacchasva pracala śanakaiḥ prāpnuhi yaśaḥ || Vijaya* 3.62

Should we hand-polish the mountain like a jewel
and carry you, well cushioned, all the way to the Ocean of Milk?
Then, we can wrap you gently around the mountain, and pull
so that you're comfortable; do us this favor—get going and win some fame.

*kim bahunā, prātiveśikā vayaṃ bhavataḥ paricita-hṛdayāś ca cira-saṃvāsena, tatas tattvam etad avādhāryatām.*

*mahadbhir grathnīmaḥ srajam ajagarair mandara-carair*
*marudbhir vā pāśair bhramayitum alaṃ stabdham acalam |*
*karāgrair mathnīmo jaladhim atha vā kiṃ kṣarati no*
*yaśas tūdgātuṃ te punar api vadāmaḥ punar api || Vijaya* 3.63

Look—we are neighbors. We've lived together for a long time,
and know each other intimately.
We could string together a chain of pythons living on Mandara mountain anytime,
or, the gods could just turn the mountain around with ropes—
or, we could churn the ocean with our own bare hands. What do we have to lose?
But it's for your own glory that we ask *you*—over and over again.

This extract illustrates Nīlakaṇṭha's project of bringing the well-known story to life. Let us take a closer look at the demons' persuasive rhetoric. While Vāsuki is quite reticent and speaks in clipped prose sentences, the demons wax lyrical and address him in a string of verses. Moreover, we get to see what the demons think Vāsuki would appreciate—such as a polished mountain to rub against. Vāsuki enumerates possible substitutes for the task. It is a who's who of high-achieving snakes from every corner of the epic and Purāṇic corpus, well known with such immediacy only to fellow snakes, their neighbors—the demons, the well-versed pandit writer and his audience. Vāsuki's suggestion to ask the *other* great snake, Śeṣa, leads the demons to a reply with a twist reminiscent of the creative misreadings often performed by *śāstra* commentators. We witness a kind of lively argumentative game that Nīlakaṇṭha's protagonists of the moment are playing as well as Nīlakaṇṭha's own amusement at a pun that he could not resist.

This detailed dialogue invites the audience to think of the psychological implications of the demons' statement to Vāsuki: if Śeṣa is not chosen because he is busy carrying the weight of the world, and Vāsuki is the only candidate remaining (*śeṣa*), where does this put him?[12] We go on to encounter the demons' unapologetic reverse psychology (v 3. 63) when they tell Vāsuki that, in fact, they could have easily done the churning themselves, but they want to share the credit with him. Being his neighbors, they know his weak spots well. Note also the fittingly semi-colloquial quality of this dialogue; *kim kṣarati naḥ,* the demons say in their versified request, 'What do *we* have to lose?'

Nīlakaṇṭha is a master of contrasting registers, and he even has a name for this aesthetic. He invokes the principle of *uccāvaca*, or *high-and-low* registers, and his students to associate this key term with him.[13] To get a taste of the dialogic range of registers, here is an instance from

[12] There is another clever game that Nīlakaṇṭha is invoking here; it has to do with the poetic convention that allows one to interchange Vāsuki and Śeṣa, which thus grants further meaning to the demon's statement to Vāsuki that he is Śeṣa.

[13] See Ariav, forthcoming dissertation.

Vāsuki's address to Viṣṇu, after the former has agreed to the task and has traveled all the way to the scene of the churn:

> *praṇipatann atha vāsukiḥ phaṇā-maṇi-prakāśa-dhārā-nīrājanair ārādhayām āsa caraṇāravindam aravindanābhasya, āha cedam bhagavan, aśikṣito'smi śeṣa iva vyākaraṇe, anabhiyukto'smi padma iva pāñcarātre, akṛta-śramo'smi kambalāśvatarāv iva gāndharve, kevalam ahaṃ bhagavato merudhanvanaḥ sāyaka-sandhānāvasara-sampannaṃ bhavataś caraṇāravinda-vinyāsa-bhāgyaṃ pariśīlayann āntareṇa karaṇena, paripālayan bhavacchāsanaṃ, ākāṅkṣan bhavato niyogānugraham āse bhavad-adhīnaḥ'iti* (*Vijaya*: prose after 3.70)

> Vāsuki now bowed down in prayer, flashing the lamp-like jewels on his hood to worship Viṣṇu's feet, and said:
>
> "Sir, I am not learned in grammar like Śeṣa, I am not an expert of the *Pāñcarātra* doctrine as Padma is; I am not a musical maestro like Kambala and Aśvatara are; all I do, sir, is to contemplate on the great fortune I once had of touching your lotus feet—when you were the arrow, mount Meru the bow, and I the bowstring, while Śiva destroyed Tripura. Awaiting your command, I remain your humble servant."

Here, we see Vāsuki speaking in a completely different tone: it is not a conversation with his underworld neighbors, but rather with a god, a boss-like figure. He is using the *apahnuti*—heavy tropic language of humility. He contrasts himself with other legendary snakes, and in the same breath reminisces about the cosmic adventure of the siege of Tripura, when he collaborated with Viṣṇu. Nīlakaṇṭha portrays the serpentine paradigms of history that one would expect of a figure like Vāsuki, such as Śeṣa's expertise in grammar. This is all narrated with a richness of allusive language that feels all too real: the end of this passage especially resorts to a kind of courtly politesse, using highly stylized and formal speech.

In the *Vijaya*, every character is envisioned to the most nuanced details of the social hierarchies that affect their communication, along with the psychological motives behind their actions, and all their biographical historical baggage. The churning, the *Vijaya* stresses again and

again, is a radically collective effort. Let us further explore this feature with some vignettes from Nīlakaṇṭha's world of the gods.

**2b. Indra, Other Gods and Other Indras**

The gods with Indra at their helm are, predictably, the major characters in Nīlakaṇṭha's account of the churning. Also predictable is Nīlakaṇṭha's unpredictable treatment of the gods—one may say the churning is their 'coming of age' story. Defeated by the demons, the gods are ousted from Heaven [*Vijaya*: *aśvāsa* 1]. Utterly lacking self-awareness at first, they wallow in self-pity and nurse bruised egos. Guided by Bṛhaspati, they go on an introspective journey with quite a cosmic itinerary—first a meditation retreat on Earth, followed by some not-so-mild humiliation in Brahmā's Realm of Reality (*Satyaloka*), and finally a constructive intervention by Viṣṇu, who suggests the churning as an exercise in transformative therapy. Nīlakaṇṭha offers a range of descriptions of the gods—from their own perspective, from that of their interlocutors, and also some from the all-seeing narrator's wry viewpoint.

> *asti svādayituṃ sudhāsti vasituṃ vāso nabhaścāriṇāṃ*
> *dhartuṃ santi ca bhūṣaṇāni śataśo na tv asti dhīr jīvitum |*
> *yenānyānupajīvya-sarva-vibhave karmaika-labhye pade'*
> *py āyasyanti vṛthaiva sevaka iti svāmīti durmedhasaḥ || Vijaya* 1.12
>
> Here is *amṛta* to eat, the mansion of the gods to live in, countless
> jewels to wear; but these fools just don't know how to live.
> There is no playing favorites—only ritual merit works here,
> yet they quibble in vain over labels like 'master' and 'servant.'

In this verse, Nīlakaṇṭha asserts that gods aren't too different from people— humans can turn into gods through a simple bureaucratic alchemy. The poet is repeating the old Mīmāṃsaka view in which mortals can attain the world of the gods by earning enough karma points. The world of the gods is supposed to be an egalitarian world—all *deva*s are equal.

However, the inherent tendencies of *homo hierarchicus* outlive their terrestrial bodies. These human-esque inclinations of super-human and non-human characters are a recurrent feature in this text and constitute Nīlakaṇṭha's social commentary folded into his poem.

Here is a passage from Nīlakaṇṭha's account of the gods' journey from earth to Brahmā's Realm of Reality, in the second canto. *En route*, the fallen gods encounter several communities of heavenly residents. Like the citizens of heaven in the above verse, most of the gods' interlocutors are humans who have made the grade, so to speak.

> *api ca punar ātma-vijñāna-nirastāvaraṇatayā nissīma-vikasad-akṛtrima-jyotiṣām adhikāra-mala-kṣapaṇāya kevalam anuttaraṃ yogaiśvaryam anubhavatām atrabhavatāṃ sanaka-sanandana-sanatkumārādi-mahāyogināṃ, mūkeṣv iva vāgmināṃ, murkheṣv iva buddhimatām, andheṣv iva cakṣuṣmatām, adhaneṣv iva maheśvarāṇāṃ, kīṭeṣv iva sarīsṛpāṇāṃ, sarīsṛpeṣv iva catuṣpadāṃ, catuṣpātsv iva mānavānāṃ, mānaveṣv iva mahībhṛtāṃ, mahībhṛtsv iva marutāṃ, marutsv iva marutvato marutvaty api patantīm avajñā-mukulitāṃ dṛśam avalokayantaḥ…* (*Vijaya*: prose after 2.4)

> And then, practicing ultimate matchless yogic techniques so as to cleanse themselves of the impurities of status;[14] their inner light endlessly blazing as their mental veils were removed thanks to their knowledge of the Self, those great yogis like Sanaka, Sanandana, and Sanatkumara turned their gaze—
>
> like orators at dumb men, like the wise at the stupid, like the sighted at the blind, like the rich at the poor, like snakes at worms, like beasts at snakes, like men at beasts, like kings at men, like gods at kings, like Indra at gods—
>
> at Indra, their glances half-shut with scorn. The gods saw that glance.

[14] *Adhikāra-mala* refers to the 'taint of office'—the impurity that attaches to a soul by merit of its status, capacity or activity. For a technical explanation, see 'Adhikāramala' in *Tantrikābhidhānakośa*, Vol. 1: 106.

In this extract, the gods are undergoing a process of realization, as they observe the yogis' *seeing* of them. Once the yogis' glance is revealed as the object of the gods' gaze, it is described as "half-shut with scorn." This immediately lends the former description of the yogis an ironic flavor, as the gods (or is it the narrator?) see the yogis in the most flattering light (their inner light is endlessly blazing, *nissīma-vikasad-akṛtima-jyotiṣām*). The juxtaposition of glances is a crucial element in this passage. The yogis' gaze is the kind of contemptuous glance the gods themselves reserve for their mortal inferiors, and the kind that *they* in turn receive from their master Indra. Now, (possibly for the first time), they see their supremo Indra being subjected to such a gaze. The contempt is intensified by stacking a series of linked comparata, and the realization that even Indra is not free of this hierarchy, is a rude awakening for the gods.

Moreover, the transition between the merit of the sages and the disrespect to the gods deserves some attention. This occurs through an unmarked shift of perspective in the middle of the passage that we have tried to preserve in the translation. In the Sanskrit passage, Indra as the head of the "food-chain" is immediately followed by the second and "actual" Indra, as he is seen by the sages (*marutsv iva* ***marutvato marutvaty*** *api patantīm avajñā-mukulitāṃ dṛśam*). It is as if Indra's name, invoked in the gods' minds, led to the second "Indra" invoked through the yogis' gaze. And the yogis' gaze is, in turn, the object of the gaze of the gods: this game of perspectives artfully describes the painful process of the gods' self-perception through the yogis' eyes. This account of the gods' final metaperceptive gaze portrays them as being vulnerable, and rather human. It signals the transformative process that the gods undergo as they gradually internalize the yogis' stare.

This new self-awareness of the gods is an excellent example of Nīlakaṇṭha's light-handed yet pointed use of scholarly allusions. In the Śaiva doctrine, one of the means of initiating a disciple is when the guru 'turns on' his grace through a glance directed at the student (*dṛk-dīkṣā, dṛṣṭi-dīkṣā*).[15]

[15] The *Kulārṇava* defines *dṛgdīkṣā* as follows—*nimīlya nayane dhyātvā para-tattva-prasanna-dhīḥ | samyak paśyed guruḥ śiṣyaṃ dṛgdīkṣā ca bhavet priye ||*

If an ordinary seeker is steered on the path towards spiritual self-discovery by the guru's compassionate and affectionate glance, here it is the yogis' contemptuous half-glance (*avajñā-mukulitāṃ dṛśaṃ…*) that shakes the gods out of their complacency, self-pity and lack of introspection.

The humiliation continues throughout this canto: as the gods are about to enter the last gate of Brahmā's Realm of Reality, they are challenged by the gatekeepers:

> *"nanu prātar-āgatasya puruhūta-nāmno divaspateḥ katitamaḥ purandaro nāmāyam" iti pṛcchayamānā dauvārikair nirjarā balavad antarlalajjire.* (*Vijaya*: prose after 2.10)
>
> "Several Indras, all called Puruhuta and Purandara, have been here since this morning. Which one is *this* one?"—the gatekeepers asked the gods, who were humiliated to the bone.

If Indra's self-image has been bruised and worn down gradually through the gods' sojourn in the Realm of the Real, now it suffers ontological dilemmas. Indra's singularity and individuality are brought into question, as Brahmā's doorkeepers ask nonchalantly, "So, which Indra are you?"[16] This belittling comment also reminds the gods of their relative dispensability. In comparison to the scale of Brahmā's calendar the gods' own time cycles appear insignificant to the point of effacing their identities. The last phrase—*nirjarā antarlalajjire* is a masterstroke of allusive poetry—the gods are addressed as the ageless ones (*nirjara*) and this heightens the ontological crisis that confronts them as their core characteristics of being timeless and immortal are now challenged. The choice of words in *nirjarā antarlalajjire* is not merely for

(*Kulārṇava*: 14.55) "His mind made placid by the absolute principle, the Guru should close his eyes, meditate, and then gaze intently at the disciple. My dear, that is *dṛg-dīkṣā*—initiation by sight."

[16] This story could very well be an intertext of the Purāṇic episode of Indra and the *brahmacārin* boy (*Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, 4.47: 95–112).

the alliterative effect—rather the resonant intensity of the words serves to emphasize the gods' awareness of the hollowness of this label.[17] In Nīlakaṇṭha's hands, Indra *et al* gradually come to terms with their place in the world and its cosmic order. Being one among countless Indras is humiliating, but this humiliation, in turn, highlights the singularity of *this* Indra.

### 2c. Nārāyaṇa and Nārāyaṇī, or the Possibility of Shared Selves

Of the multiple characters in the story of the churn, Viṣṇu is no less than three: he is god Viṣṇu who acts as decision-maker and also as participant in the churning; he is the tortoise on whose back the churning is performed; and he is the illusionist Goddess Mohinī who emerges as part of the gods' ploy to cheat the demons of their share of nectar. Nīlakaṇṭha's telling of the story makes full use of this given multiplicity of Viṣṇu's identities. We bring here one representative example which illustrates Viṣṇu's multi-agency and provides a model for Nīlakaṇṭha's construction of multi-agentive selves.

The context of the below verse is as follows. The *kālakūṭa* poison emerges and burns everything it runs into, and the whole universe is under threat. Viṣṇu too is a victim of the deadly heatwave, and as his conch and discus wither, he despairs and expects to die. Then, he sees something:

> *siñcantīṃ paramāmṛtāni diśi diśy aprākṛtair aṃśubhiḥ*
> *khelantīm amṛtārṇave maṇimayīm āruhya naukāṃ navām |*
> *snigdhāpāṅga-taraṅga-śikṣita-bhava-kṣvelāṃ mukundaś cirāt*
> *asmārṣīd amṛteśvarīṃ bhagavatīm ambām ahambhāvataḥ || Vijaya* 4.12

[17] The use of the lexeme *nirjara* for the gods is an illustration of the figure *parikara*, wherein the choice of an epithet contributes to the overall poetic quality. The title of the *Vijaya* is another dazzling example of *parikara*: see Conclusions below.

> Sprinkling divine nectar in all directions with her supernatural rays,
> floating on the ocean of nectar,
> in a novel boat made of gems,
> she counteracts the poison of existence with her wavy, loving side-glances.
> Viṣṇu deeply meditated
> on the mother Goddess Amṛteśvarī:
> 'She is, in fact, me!'

Viṣṇu's experience is reminiscent of that of a worshiper of the Goddess, one that Nīlakaṇṭha is all too familiar with.[18] Amṛteśvarī holds the promise of the nectar that is hidden underneath the poison, and her glances have such a strong impact that they counter the other (possibly deadlier) poison that is worldly existence (*bhava-kṣvela).* This *other* poison is a constant pulse in the entire *Vijaya*: the story of the churn, amongst other things, is the story of putting in order life itself. Moving from Viṣṇu's existential panic over surviving the poison, the verse culminates in Viṣṇu's tantric realization of his own identification with the Goddess of immortality: *Viṣṇu deeply meditated on the mother Goddess Amṛteśvarī:* "*She is, in fact, me!*" Viṣṇu's life-affirming epiphany occurs when he perceives the Goddess as the core of his deathless I-ness (*ahambhāva*). They are, so to speak, in the same boat. The themes of self-identification and self-formation recur frequently in the *Vijaya*. In this verse and elsewhere, the text offers them as a mechanism to explore the world as we know it. Before we say something more of this, we should note that this vision proves quite effective, but it also has its limits:

[18] Other versions of the story that Nīlakaṇṭha probably had in mind, such as the *Devībhāgavata*, have Viṣṇu meditate on Śiva (see Mahādevasuri's commentary on *Vijaya*, p. 279). This vision of the Goddess is therefore very probably Nīlakaṇṭha's addition, relating to his Śrīvidyā affiliation, and this subject merits a paper of its own. See Fisher 2017, for a parallel discussion of the *Śaṅkarābhyudaya* and its sectarian angles written by Rājacūḍamaṇi—Nīlakaṇṭha's co-student.

*atha svastho yathāpuram ambujekṣaṇas tāvatāpi saṃrambheṇa tanu-mātra-trāṇa-paryavasannena nirāśo hālāhala-nigrahe, niścinvann anitara-sādhya-sādhana-dhaurandharyam antakāntakasya bhāga iti, nirdhārayann āntareṇa paradevatā-prasādam alabhyatāṃ śiva--sākṣātkārasya, cintayann api cicchakti-vibhūti-rūpatām ātmanaḥ, parameṇa samādhinā samārādhya nārāyaṇīm ittham astāvīt*… (*Vijaya:* prose before 4.14)

Now, with this great effort that ensured the protection of his own body, lotus-eyed Viṣṇu recovered. It then dawned on him that there was little hope of his stopping the poison. He was certain that the only one equal to this impossible task was Śiva—the killer of Death; Śiva could not be directly accessed without the Goddess's favor; the Goddess is pure consciousness and the true nature of his own self.

Entirely absorbed, meditating on Nārāyaṇī, Viṣṇu praised her: …

The temples of Tamil Nadu have more than one circumambulatory path around the temple, all leading to the same sanctum, in closer and closer circles. Viṣṇu's reflections, too, traverse two such arcs—the first (verse 4.12) is a more immediate trajectory of his self-identification with the Goddess who is the essence of immortality—and we could read this as Viṣṇu's epiphany of non-duality. This is the moment when one realizes the true (i.e., imperishable, permanent) nature of the Self, and thereby overcomes death, or at least, the fear of it. There is another, larger circle of concern for Viṣṇu as he has souls and lives to save other than his own. He must appeal to Śiva, here appropriately called *Kālāntaka* or the killer of death, the only one capable of achieving the oxymoronic impossible. Viṣṇu's efforts to counteract Venom travel in his mind towards the inaccessible Śiva and through the Goddess, whom he finds within himself. He has come full circle—a cognitive *pradakṣiṇa* of himself, so to speak, and thus arrives at the panacea for the raging all-consuming Venom.

It is not by chance that the Goddess is named Nārāyaṇī here, the mirror image of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. There is a constant movement toward the advaitic unity that governs all existence—but this movement

all but cancels out the plurality of participants.[19] While he knows that all are essentially one, Viṣṇu does not simply recognize Śiva in himself. He needs the process and the mediation of the Goddess for that to happen. Nīlakaṇṭha's combination of a pantheistic Śrīvidyā tantra with Śaivite advaitic devotion forms a model of unity that builds on multiplicity, a unity that allows for selves to become who they are. And contemplative devotion is a crucial part of this process of becoming.

Elsewhere in the text, Nīlakaṇṭha adumbrates his map of the imbricated selves of Śiva, Viṣṇu and the Goddess:

> *nārāyaṇī-prasāda-tiraskārajo'yam aparādho nārāyaṇīya-prasāda-puraskāreṇa samādheya iti. tathā hi—*
>
> *yad etad vāmāṅgaṃ ghana-jaghana-keśa-stana-bharaṃ*
> *kadācit tac chambhor bhavati kamalā-kaustubha-dharam |*
> *jagan-mātary evaṃ yad apacaritaṃ tan maghavatā*
> *jagan-mātā devaḥ prabhavati sa eva kṣapayitum || Vijaya* 2.20
>
> (Brahmā said)—This calamity, born of the offense toward the gift of Goddess Nārāyaṇī, can only be rectified through Nārāyaṇa's favor. For—
> Sometimes Śiva's left half
> is all shapely hip, braid and breast,
> at other times it houses Lakṣmī and the Kaustubha gem.
> Indra's grave offense to Jaganmātā—the Mother of the universe
> can only be undone by Jaganmātā—Viṣṇu—who spanned the universe.

This verse illustrates Nīlakaṇṭha's theorem of selves alternating between statements of similarity and difference. In the first line, we see that the Goddess and Viṣṇu are equivalent by sharing the same syntagmatic relation with Śiva. However, they are different in form. The next two lines build another equation as Brahmā alludes to both

[19] This notion echoes early modern formulations of Advaita philosophy in the South: See Shulman (forthcoming), and Shevchenko 2022.

with the same epithet—*Jaganmātā*. The twinning (*yamaka*) between the two *Jaganmātā*s is telling—their form is identical, but each twin has a distinct persona. That there are *two* parallel equations in the verse creates an overall notion of a plurality of *samenesses*: there are several ways of being one and the same.

In light of this verse and the previous examples, what then is Nīlakaṇṭha's model of the self? It appears that it is not built so much on assertions of non-difference, but of *sharedness*. A shared self offers relief from the binary of sameness and difference. It entails a grammar of compulsory multiplicity—a *nitya-bahuvacana*-ness, a sense of being and feeling that can only be in the plural. The motivation to know the self and to be one with it is the potent driving force of this sharedness, which strikes a paradoxical balance between the unified *Atman* and unitary *atman*s.

Nīlakaṇṭha repeats this theorem throughout the text. As one final example, here is Viṣṇu's take on sharedness as he praises Śiva and his inseparable Śakti:

> *om ity umeti yuvayor abhidhānam ekaṃ*
> *sṛṣṭyādi-sṛṣṭyavadhitā-guṇa-mātra-bhinnam |*
> *ekaṃ ca tāvad abhidheyam apīha rūpaṃ*
> *veṇī-jaṭeti kaca-saṃhati-bheda-bhinnam || Vijaya* 4. 24
>
> Om and Uma—your names are the same thing.
> The only difference: one is the beginning of creation and the other its end;
> your forms, too, are quite the same,
> told apart by hairdos—braid and dreadlocks.

Viṣṇu's exaltation of the non-difference between Śiva and his partner Śakti is an example of Nīlakaṇṭha's sophisticated skill in packing allusions and inter-braiding arcane philosophical topics in poetry while maintaining a lucid, witty register. If Brahmā alluded to the equivalence of Nārāyaṇa and Nārāyaṇī—the two *jaganmātā*s, by merit of their locus

and their abilities, Viṣṇu sees Śiva and Śakti as allotropic versions of each other. Not only in their physical manifestation—distinguished by their tastes in hairstyles—but in their names too, which involve a rearrangement of the same phonemic raw material: A-u-m and U-m-a.[20] The sharedness of the world is animated by constant, creative identifications and exhorts the reader to observe closely; to observe and savor the intricate snowflake singularity of each entity—be it a hairdo or a personality. It all comes down to this craft of rearrangement. In fact, this is precisely what poetry does, as Nīlakaṇṭha writes in another of his compositions:

> *yān eva śabdān vayam ālapāmo*
> *yān eva cārthān vayam ullikhāmaḥ |*
> *tair eva vinyāsa-viśeṣa-bhavyaiḥ*
> *saṃmohayante kavayo jaganti || Śivalīlārṇava* 1.13
>
> They use the same words that we do,
> and in the same senses that we do,
> yet, reconfiguring them in clever patterns,
> Poets mesmerize all the world.

## 2d. The Biography of Venom

The Spider-Man comic series features a character called Venom. It is a gloopy, dark 'ectoplasm' with a mind of its own that attaches itself to a host transforming the persona and messing with the agency of the latter. The *kālakūṭa* venom that surged forth from the Ocean of Milk receives similar treatment in Nīlakaṇṭha's hands—it is portrayed

[20] Śiva is the agent and solitary witness of the end of the universe. *Yogasūtra* 1.27 *tasya vācakaḥ praṇavaḥ*, "Om is the name of God" has something similar. Umā is Prakṛti, the beginning of creation. The second *pāda* offers a rationale for this differential configuration of names— the phoneme 'a' is not only the first in the alphabet, it also signifies the (beginning of) creation.

as a hissing, spitting personality that terrifies all the worlds, including the demons, gods, Brahmā, and even Viṣṇu. Venom is a crucial player in the *Vijaya* for several reasons. It is the starkest antithesis of the *amṛta* nectar—the vivifying, immortalizing elixir that the gods hanker after. It has a 'lead role' in the core episode of the narrative—the episode that our poem, its poet and the hero, Śiva, are named after (not necessarily in that order).

Here are the highlights of Venom's criminal record, seen through the eyes of Nīlakaṇṭha. Consider how Brahmā describes Venom to Viṣṇu:

*na saṃvartaḥ prāpto na ca vahati saṃvarta-pavanaḥ*
*śatenābdaiḥ śoṣaṃ nayati sa paran tu tribhuvanam |*
*na ca vyāpadyante tadupari carantas tanubhṛtaḥ*
*ka eṣa brahmāṇḍaṃ kabalayati niḥśeṣayati ca ||*
*api ca*
*nāsau vahnir na hi khalu bhavaty agnināgneḥ praṇāśo*
*nāpi kṣvelo na hi garalato hānir āśīviṣāṇām |*
*nedaṃ sṛṣṭaṃ sakṛd api mayā nopadiṣṭaṃ tvayā vā*
*kiṃ vyāhārair mama ca kim api kṣubhyatīvāntarātmā || Vijaya* 4.9–10

It can't be the end of days, the doomsday hurricane isn't storming
*that* one takes a hundred years to scorch the three worlds;
*that* one doesn't affect those hovering above it.
What then, is *this* one—devouring the Universe without a trace?
Also,
it is not fire—surely fire doesn't burn Fire,
nor is it snake venom—*that* cannot poison snakes
not once did I create something like this, nor did you order me to do so…
What can I say? My insides tremble.

Nīlakaṇṭha has Brahmā using the apophatic *neti neti* technique favored by philosophers, to describe this unfamiliar entity. Being the Creator, encountering a new 'creation' is an unfamiliar experience for Brahmā, and his mystification over this alien substance is the force of these verses. The devastating toxicity of Venom is overshadowed by its

psychological effect. It allows Nīlakaṇṭha's Brahmā, much like Indra earlier in the text, to discover his vulnerability, his fallibility.

Venom makes a dramatic entry:

> *ity abhidadhāna eva vidhau, aśaṅkitopanata-rasātalātaṅka-saṅghaṭita-samādhi-kṣobha- kopa-durdarśa-kālarudra-samunnidrita-phāla-netra-samutthita iva mahāpralaya-pāvakaḥ, pratisarga-nirgalad-anargala-śeṣa-viṣa-niḥśvāsa-dhūma-samāśleṣa-janita-viṣa-maṣī-piṇḍa iva mathana-saṃkṣobha-calita-vaḍavānala-saṃvalitaḥ, sundaratara-mandaragiri-kandaraśaya-svāyambhuva*[21]*-śāmbhava-liṅga-calana-sam-bhāvita-pratyavāya iva parama-dāruṇaḥ, kalpānala-dagdha-jaga-daṇḍa-piṇḍīkaraṇa-prasakta-kālacaṇḍī-kara-kṣālanodakam iva kṣīrodam ākalayan, prathama-niḥsṛta-pavana-parispanda-mātra-niḥśeṣiteṣu bhuvaneṣu, dagdhavyānupalambha-sambhava-kṣudhā-prasārita-rasanā-sahasra-bhīṣaṇena jvālā-kalāpena lelihāna iva vairiñcam api prapañcam, avasādita-bhuvana-kolāhalo hālā-halo nirgatya, vāraṇa iva vāraṇam abhidudrāva ramāramaṇam.* (*Vijaya*: prose after 4.10)

> As Brahmā was musing so—
> like a doomsday fire blazing forth from the glaring third eye of the indomitable Kālarudra[22]—furious at his meditation being disrupted, even in the depths of the fifth underworld,
> surrounded by deep-sea volcanoes stirred up by the churning, like the copious toxic fumes exhaled by Śeṣa at the End of Days congealing into an inky glob of poison,
> terrible as the calamities caused by the offense of unsettling the natural Śiva-*liṅga*s found in the caverns of the lovely Mandara mountain, reducing the Ocean of Milk to a mugful of water for Kālacaṇḍī to wash her hands in, after she gathered the ashes of the universe burnt in the apocalyptic inferno,

[21] Emended from *svāyambhava* in the printed edition.

[22] Kālarudra and Kālacaṇḍī are the apocalyptic janitors who dispose of the remains of the Universe after the cosmic destruction—*mahāpralaya*.

> rendering the worlds airless—with just enough breath for one collective sigh,
> hungry since there was nothing left to burn, it appeared to stretch out a thousand tongues of flame to lick up all of Brahma's creation,
> —thus Venom emerged, creating chaos in all the worlds,
> and stalked Viṣṇu, like one bull-elephant chasing another.

Nīlakaṇṭha's staging of Venom's appearance brings to mind the entry of a character in the Kathakali theatre. As the musicians drum up a crescendo, an actor enters the stage, concealed by a curtain held up by two stage aides. The aesthetic suspense is relieved only when the curtain drops. Nīlakaṇṭha does something similar with this passage and its syntax of suspense. The subject—Venom—appears at the very end of a cascading cloud of clauses describing its effects on other entities through a series of imaginative possibilities. The poison is characterized through its interaction with different victims—sentient and insentient. Nīlakaṇṭha masterfully describes Venom from different angles that involve a tangled scheme of causes and effects. Brahma's account of what-Venom-is-not sets the stage for the narrator's biography-through-possibilities of Venom seen in this passage. Let us take a look at one of the imaginative interpretations of Venom's actions closely:

> Reducing the Ocean of Milk to a mugful of water for Kālacaṇḍī to wash her hands in, after she gathered the ashes of the universe burnt in the apocalyptic inferno…

As the Venom emerges it boils the Ocean of Milk down to a puddle. Nīlakaṇṭha, however, is not one to rest content with such a characterization. He effects a chain of *hetūtprekṣā*, or 'justified seeing-as.' The ocean is reduced to a little pool—but what pool? And why? This is the pool that Kālī could possibly use to wash her hands clean after she sweeps up the debris of the universe burnt in a would-be apocalypse.

This is a truly remarkable example of narrating things as they may-have-been. We could call it a poetic counterpart of the irrealis

grammatical mood (*lṛṅ*). Through the 'as-if' mechanism, Venom's story becomes one involving have-been mythical pasts and could-be futures of the apocalypse. Brahmā has already established through his deductive skills that this is **not** the apocalypse—and he has seen quite a few of those. However, the apocalypse is also a neighboring standard of comparison, a creative cause of Venom's effect on the ocean. One could argue that the 'irreal' is the only possible mode of recounting the biography of an entirely alien phenomenon. This creates the sense of a three-dimensional biography, one that plays with infinite possibilities that escape the binary *neti neti*.

With this rather unlikely example, Nīlakaṇṭha puts forth modes of biography other than the reportage style of *svabhāvokti*, or things 'as-they-are.' Through his imaginative transposition of Venom against the paradigm of the apocalypse-that-it-is-not, Nīlakaṇṭha invites us to appreciate the many ways of narration that *kāvya* offers. These include narration through the thought experiments of *utprekṣā*, and narration through the excursus to the 'side-plots' of the victims of Venom, so that we are left with a far richer account of Venom's career. One element that this example demonstrates well, and that is significant throughout all biographies we have seen thus far, is the way one character is always deeply connected with other characters. Any biography is made of intersecting identities and involves several agents whose relations are dynamic and complex. Venom comes alive through Brahmā's thought process and through the active participation of Kālacaṇḍī. This is one way to explain Nīlakaṇṭha's use of the paradox we began with—of the single *vijaya* in the title and the multiple participants of the churning story.

### 2e. Śiva, Self among Selves

> *…nirupaplavāpavarga-dāna-satra-dīkṣite jayaty abhayaṅkare kare, niḥsāra-bhoga-vadānyena kim mayeti hriyevāvāṅmukhena varāṅkitena karāravindena paripūrayantam abhimatāny abhisandhimatām…*

*...nātipacelima-bhāgya-yoga-nirmalair antaḥkaraṇair iva caraṇa-lagnaiḥ samādhiṣu yoginām pañcabhir akṣaraiḥ śiva-sūtrasya paryavasitair iva savyāpasavyayoḥ pādayor atisundarair nakhair avataṃsayantam ādi-bhāratī-cikura-bandham...*
*...sākṣāc cakāra dākṣāyaṇīramaṇam* (*Vijaya:* prose after 4.19)

He envisioned Śiva, the lover of Dākṣāyaṇī—
who has one hand proud in the 'don't fear' gesture—committed to the ritual of conferring everlasting release,
who fulfills the wishes of supplicants with his other hand in the 'boon giving' pose— downcast with shame—as if thinking 'I am only good for giving inconsequential worldly pleasures…'
who adorns the braid of Goddess Veda with the garland of his lovely toenails[23]
that are like the five syllables of the Śiva mantra—
doubled by being reflected in the spotless, ripe hearts of yogis meditating on his feet…

This extract is taken from Viṣṇu's kaleidoscopic vision of Śiva, a crescendo of the multiple biographies we have presented thus far. It is part of a long complex prose passage that follows the standard map of the head-to-toe description. Within it, everything around Śiva—the Goddess, Śiva's seat, the moon in his hair, the deer in his hand, toenails, etc.—become subjects that participate in the making of Śiva. Much like Muttusvāmi Dīkṣita's striking creation of the Goddess out of melodies and rhythm,[24] all ingredients assemble in Nīlakaṇṭha's tantric evocation of Śiva.

[23] This image is for certain an intertext of *pada* d from Vedānta Deśika's verse—
*idaṃ-prathama-saṃbhavat-kumati-jāla-kūlaṅkaṣāḥ*
*mṛṣā-mata-viṣānala-jvalita-jīva-jīvātavaḥ |*
*kṣaranty amṛtam akṣaraṃ yati-purandarasyoktayaḥ*
*cirantana-sarasvatī-cikura-bandha-sairandhikāḥ || Yatirājasaptati* 36

[24] Shulman 2007: 305–341; Nijenhuis and Gupta 1987.

The god is not the arithmetic sum of his parts; he is rather made of interlaced subjectivities. It is only at the very end of a long description that Nīlakaṇṭha explicitly names Śiva as the object of Viṣṇu's gaze, but the reader is made to know what is coming. We glimpse the dreadlocks—that contain the moon—that is in turn gazed at by the deer, which is held back by a hand, and the other hands—the proud upright one and the embarrassed downcast one. Throughout this passage, Śiva is presented as an active participant *alongside* Goddess, seat, toenails *et al*. He is crowning (*avataṃsayantam*) the Goddess-Veda's head and fulfilling (*paripūrayantam*) wishes. At the same time, it is the yogis' minds that transform Śiva's toenails into mantric syllables.[25] Thus Śiva emerges as a gestalt of these elements and attributes, and the same goes for his biography. Through a technique similar to the *utprekṣā*-biography of Venom, Nīlakaṇṭha builds an ultimate subject who isn't an atomized individual, but is necessarily, actively and constantly constituted by and alongside others.

Śiva as the ultimate Subject, and the ways in which he lives and acts in the world, open many questions: questions regarding Nīlakaṇṭha's views on the ontological status of God, on the relationship between gods and God(s), on the role of the devotee in the making of God, and much more. In this article, we have focused on the personal implications of the specific subjectivity that Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita builds for Nīlakaṇṭha-Śiva. What can one make of this architecture of the intersecting Selves in light of our author's eponymy with his God?

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[25] The comparison of the yogis' souls and the radiant toe-nails seems to be a trope that Nīlakaṇṭha also uses elsewhere:

> *asmin mahaty anavadhau kila kālacakre dhanyāstu ye katipaye śukayogimukhyāḥ |*
> *līnās tvad-aṅghri-yugale pariśuddha-sattvās tān ātmanas tava nakhān avadhārayāmaḥ || Ānandasāgarastava* 63
> "In the endless course of time, a few pure beings like Śuka are absorbed in your feet. We see them as your toe-nails."

## 3. Concluding Remarks: Love Thy Selves

Nīlakaṇṭha's immediate readers would have been familiar with several philosophical blueprints of the Self. They would have had the intellectual tools to engage with the model that this text builds so lyrically—and we know that this text was well received. One can say that the *Vijaya* signals an audience of informed and complex selves. Nīlakaṇṭha is not afraid of ruffling sectarian feathers, nor is he anxious about his audience's ability to enjoy his subtle language and allusions. The tenor of the *Vijaya* sits well with the picture we have of Nīlakaṇṭha as an influential figure from early modern South India.

So what is the *Vijaya* about? The adventures of gods and demons? Or something more immediate to the human condition? The biographies we surveyed deal with very human experiences of being in the world. All the figures—the snake Vāsuki and the demons, Indra, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Venom, Śiva—and many more along the way— are three-dimensional personalities. Despite the profusion of non-human characters in the *Vijaya*, we trust that the excerpts quoted in this paper signal humans as present absents. The characters are quite this-worldly, and Nīlakaṇṭha's hand is evident in their personalities and actions.

Running through the *Vijaya* is a persistent concern with the architecture of the Self. This text can be read as a prosopography of interbraided selves connected by shared subjectivities and experiences. It is a poetic charter for Nīlakaṇṭha's vision of *advaita*. Not as a metaphysical calculus involving the binary of the imperfect human self and the ultimate transcendental Self, but as a vision of the sharedness of selves. There is no better way to say this than in Nīlakaṇṭha's words, put here in the mouth of Nīlakaṇṭha-Śiva who tells Viṣṇu:

> *bhagavan kamalalocana bhavaddarśanena paramām asmi nirvṛtim prāptaḥ, ātmano 'pi kim adhikaṃ premapadam.* (*Vijaya*: prose before 4.26)
>
> Viṣṇu, I am delighted to see you. What can one love more than one's own self?'

This declaration of shared selves is articulated in the language of empathy and affection.[26] Sharedness is a philosophical way of accounting for the ratio of one and many, but it is also a mode of being in the world. It can be similarly applied to the identification we began with, of Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita and Nīlakaṇṭha-Śiva. The author is the real protagonist of this work. The triumphant adventure of god Nīlakaṇṭha coincides with the literary adventure of our eponymous author in the *Nīlakaṇṭhavijaya*. This parallelism is signaled not only in the title, but in several allusive moments throughout the text, quite transparent to an attentive audience. For instance, in the crucial moment before the swallowing of the poison, the gods sing a hymn of praise to Śiva.[27] It is a prayer built in paired vocative expressions remarkable in their balance of rhythm and rhyme. Toward the end of the *stuti*, we have:

> *kālakaṇṭha-ruci-ghaṭita-lāvaṇya nīlakaṇṭhamakhi-nihita-kāruṇya* | *Vijaya* 321
>
> Beautiful with the dark lustre of your throat, you favor Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita

The first vocative refers to the very moment that Śiva earned this epithet of Blue Throat— *kālakaṇṭha.* In its pair, our author writes himself into the poem. This is a small but significant self-insertion, a poetic signature that reminds the reader at the most critical moment of the text of the person behind the pen. Through radical internalization of his god, a metaphorical swallowing of sorts, Nīlakaṇṭha becomes himself. In the *Vijaya*, Nīlakaṇṭha presents us with a striking model of doing biography—one that outlines individuals not by demarcating them from each

[26] The most salient attestation for loving one's own self is *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaṇiṣad* 2.4.5: *…ātmanas tu kāmāya sarvaṃ priyaṃ bhavati…*

[27] This hymn (and its twin in the *Tripuravijaya Campū* composed by Nīlakaṇṭha's younger brother Atirātra) ) seem to be inspired by the *stuti* inserts seen in Telugu *prabandhas*. e.g., the Ragaḍa hymn in Dhūrjaṭi's *Śrīkālahastimāhātmyamu* pp. 82–85.

other, but by situating them with the lens of sharedness. The mutualism of the author and his personal god—his *iṣṭadevatā*—is one example of the empathy engendered by this mode of literary imagination. *What can one love more than their own Self?*

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