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Shades of Violence
Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture

0. General Introduction[1]

The present volume of Cracow Indological Studies comes out as yet another fruitful product of a long-standing collaboration between several researchers, a collaboration which has ultimately developed into a close-knit league of five Indological centres based at the universities of Cagliari, Kraków, Milan, Prague and Warsaw. For years,

[1] This introductory essay is the result of cooperation of its three authors within the frames of the project *Violence: Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture* supported by grant from the Priority Research Area (Heritage) under the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University. Hermina Cielas Leão is responsible for § 2, Tiziana Pontillo for § 1 and Lidia Sudyka for § 0.

we have met regularly to discuss topics that we consider relevant for present-day Indology, also inviting to our colloquies colleagues from centres all over the world. These meetings have resulted in formation of yet smaller teams with the aim of undertaking specific research tasks, each team undertaking their own scientific projects which again resulted in numerous publications. Thanks to the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at the Jagiellonian University (EI.JU) and a generous grant obtained in the area of heritage research, it was possible to set up a group that is now exploring the subject of violence in Indian culture.[2]

For many reasons, defining violence is not an easy task, that too, despite existence of numerous, relevant entries in various dictionaries. There are different types of violence, and different degrees of violence directed against different members of society as well as the nature around us. Violence is also a cultural matter. Moreover, what some call violence, others describe as a necessary self-defence. As Inga Clendinnen (2005: 190) has rightly said: "Every society is adept at looking past its own forms of violence, and reserving its outrage for the violence of others." Let us also add to this statement a clarification that certain social strata or classes are keen to attribute an innate proclivity for acts of aggression to those situated lower on the social ladder than them. In an 8th century CE treatise on poetics authored by

[2] The members of this international research group, established thanks to grant project obtained in June 2022, are: Initiators: Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University; coordinator), Ewa Dębicka-Borek (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland), Elena Mucciarelli (University of Groningen, Netherlands), David Pierdominici Leão (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland), Tiziana Pontillo (University of Cagliari, Italy); Other members: Monika Browarczyk (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland), Hermina Cielas Leão (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland), Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdzowicz (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland), Edeltraud Harzer (University of Texas at Austin, USA), Martin Hříbek (Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic), Frank Köhler (University of Tübingen, Germany), Cinzia Pieruccini (University of Milan, Italy), Weronika Rokicka (University of Warsaw, Poland), Paola M. Rossi (University of Milan, Italy) and Aleksandra Turek (University of Warsaw, Poland).

Vāmana, we find the following example of violence being attributed to a specific group through a use of a simile:

> *caṇḍālair iva yuṣmābhiḥ sāhasaṃ paramaṃ kṛtaṃ* |[3]
>
> This worst act of aggression has been performed by you, [just] as if you were *caṇḍāla*s.

The above example may be found among the six deficiencies of comparison that are better avoided. In this case deficiency refers to an object of comparison which is defective (*nyūna*) with respect to birth (i.e., caste affinity).[4] We do not know if Vāmana had created this example himself or if he was quoting from an earlier source. Nevertheless, the appearance of such a comparison in the treatise *Kāvyālaṃkārasūtravṛtti* is significant.

When one talks about Indian civilization, often the remarkable ethical principle—the idea of non-violence or *ahiṁsā*—is taken as the hallmark of that culture. However, this does not mean that we should abstain from discussing patterns of violence also present in this very culture and well documented in its literature and art. Violence and the principle of non-violence are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

All papers collected in this and the subsequent volumes of *Cracow Indological Studies* approach the complex issue of violence in Indian culture from a variety of perspectives adopted by the respective authors. Aggressivity, or violence in general, is a feature unavoidably connected to the exercise of royal power and the broadly understood institution of kingship. Naturally, the king articulates his rights to dominance also in his relationship with nature. Suffice to mention here the practice of hunting and its involvement in the sphere of rituals, including the religious. As far as religious rituals are concerned,

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[3] Vāmana's auto-commentary to VKĀ 4.2.9.

[4] More about the six deficiencies of comparison in: Candotti, Pontillo, Sudyka (forthcoming) § 2.6.

their violent features became obfuscated with time, which eventually led to performing sacrifices without resorting to violence, by way of finding substitutes for the sacrificial victims.

There can be no doubt that Indian art, too, recorded scenes of violence that were present in the ritual sphere and community life.

Violence has always meant effectiveness in the preservation of certain order such as the existing social divisions and the status quo desired by those in power. While consideration of various shades of violence and its phenomena, documented in sources pertaining to the early history of the Indian subcontinent, will be the focus of the current volume, the same will be followed, in the next volumes, by reflections on the contemporary Indian society as portrayed in modern Indian literature.

The whole project touches upon important elements of cultural heritage seen both from the local, Indian perspective and a broader, universal one. The growing violence and aggressive behaviour are a global problem nowadays. Its shape in India needs to be considered in the context of historical processes that built up cultural heritage and were recorded over many centuries in literary, artistic, religious and philosophical traditions. This entails an extensive, interdisciplinary research. The project is directed towards seeing certain phenomena as culturally embedded, having a pan-Indian scope and shaping the identity of the inhabitants of the subcontinent. References and links with the past, accompanied by an understanding and remembrance of those facts need to be preserved in today's rapidly changing world. To understand these connections more adequately, the research will employ the prism of modern humanities understood as combining achievements of many disciplines.

Introduction to Part I. Vedic Studies[5]

1. The present volume is devoted to the most ancient literary sources which document history of violence among the speakers of Indo-Aryan languages. Everyone is aware that the *Ṛgveda* hymns are populated by human and divine warriors, exemplary heroes and dreaded demons interfering with life on earth; neither are these protagonists or their deeds absent in both the (*Śaunaka* and *Paippalāda*) *Atharvaveda*--recensions or the Yajurveda Saṃhitās and the Brāhmaṇas. In the later tradition, accounts of fighting, displays of weaponry or strategies of warfare often take place on a mythical level in the intriguing exegetical digressions used to explain the increasing number of extravagant details that characterise the late Vedic ritual performances.

To the most disenchanted reader, it may sometimes seem that in such a gloomy milieu, nothing—not even the most desired and fascinating things in the universe, such as light, life, love—can happen without a bloodshed. Just to give an example: How many times is Vṛtra's murder mentioned in the *Ṛgveda*? Indra's epithet as his killer (*vṛtra-han-*) occurs an astonishing seventy-seven times. And yet, this is the renowned and pivotal cosmogonic enterprise from which life in the highest echelons of the divine sphere triumphantly descends. On the same line, it is truly frightening how much "hatred" flows, for instance, in the *Śaunaka Atharvaveda*. Those who would venture to search this text in the Digital Corpus of Sanskrit for some good examples of the usages of the verb *dviṣ-* "to hate," would perhaps unexpectedly come across no less than one hundred and seventy-three instances of its inflected form. However, this text, which is famous for being imbued with black and white magic, also ranges gracefully into everyday facts and ritual, ascetic, medical, political, and even soteriological speculations.

[5] The volume on Vedic studies edited by Hermina Cielas Leão and Tiziana Pontillo contains the papers discussed during the International Conference in Kraków, 27–29 October 2022, as well as other contributions on this subject.

Indeed, in the most ancient sources, even within a ritual perspective, we know how much violence was exerted by human beings on the non-human world in the sacrificial arena, especially to the harm of animals, although almost suddenly this practice seems to have disappeared and even been openly opposed. In fact, several scholars (see e.g., Heesterman 1984; 2003) have long stressed a dramatic change in the history of sacrifice from a violent, agonistic and unpredictable framework, connected with the semi-nomadic Sabhā-culture (see e.g., Vassilkov 2012; 2015), to a more and more controlled and regulated context related to a new sedentary culture, i.e., the outcome of the so-called Brāhmanical reform.

On the same line of reconstruction of the past, it has also been demonstrated that the earliest occurrences of the term *ahiṃsā*, such as TS 5.6.6.1; 5.7.6.1; AB 1.30, actually depicted the magico-ritual purpose of preventing any possible injury involving any and every dangerous being, *de facto* in order to safeguard the human beings themselves against any retaliation expected from the victim's congeners (see e.g., Schmidt 1968: 649; Schmidt 1997: 215; Schmithausen 2000: 256–258; Houben 2001: 280–286). Only later on, around the middle of the first millennium BCE, the term started to denote an intention of not immolating animals and thus the performance of sacrifices including animal victims was stopped.

As is well known, particularly in the sphere of the élites, and in connection with the adopted vegetarianism, this renewed sacrificial landscape shaped a new social, political, and economic balance that left less and less room for competition and meritocracy. Gradually the hierarchical superiority of the Brahmanical class was distinctly affirmed, while the exercise of power came to be assigned to the warrior class. In this rigid chessboard of party games that mainstream culture created, there was a studied banishment of all forms of violence, even at the cost of denying the past itself. This entailed, for example, a process of *damnatio memoriae* for the aggressiveness of the wandering members of the nomadic and seminomadic past society, as if that past belonged only to a group of Indo-Aryans who were cautiously marginalised, namely to the so-called Vrātyas. This attribution

was more successful since such groups preserved their traditions as epigones for a long time, in an inevitable conflict with the society organised on the basis of the new-born *varṇāśrama* system.

In such an assumed, sophisticated reworking of collective memory, which was often aimed at transforming the old lexicon into a novel one, well-tailored to the needs of the emerging new world, along the steps taken by the complex Śrauta reform programme, it is plausible to recognise another less conspicuous but much more refined side of the history of violence in ancient Indian culture.

Neither do the today's scholars wish to carry out an act of aggression against history of the past and therefore attempt to investigate their sources carefully, well trained by seminal works such as those of Bronkhorst (e.g., 2007; 2016) who provides ample evidence of the fact that not all ancient Indian institutions necessarily descended from the Brahmanical mainstream. For instance, Vrātya rituals were taken up in the classical king's legitimisation rites, appropriately deprived of the traits of concrete violence by means of a substitution mechanism, as pointed out by Heesterman in some of his excellent works from 1962 onward. The distance between groups of hard-line brotherhoods and the peaceful priests involved in Brahmanical rituals has been sharply reduced since Thite (2004: 559) had successfully demonstrated that *Vrātyastoma*s might also be performed by a married person "keeping sacred fires alight" (*āhitāgni*-), a person who wanted to be a Vrātya, in the sense of choosing to lead a Saṃnyāsin life, or even in the sense of becoming "a kind of Ur-monk."

2. The nine articles collected in the present volume of *Cracow Indological Studies* address various aspects related to the topic of violence in Indian culture and look at the presence of aggression and domination in Vedic studies from several different perspectives. The main subject of the contributions is one, but the vastness and diversity of study material show the importance of having a more focused look at the subject. They prove that violence can be understood manifoldly: as a brutal physical act, aggressive practice (sometimes directly connected to the sphere of ritual), verbal abuse, extreme competitiveness,

hostile behaviour as an expression of power, or oppression aimed at appropriating the attacked person's belongings and obtaining a starting economic position for themselves. The contributions included in this issue of *Cracow Indological Studies* examine the occurrence of the motif of violence in extended specimens of primary material which can be categorised under the broad definition of Vedic sources or sources from the comparable period (the last exemplified by Kinga Paraskiewicz's article devoted to the study of Avestan profession of faith). However, despite the variety of evidence that may be linked to a variety of historical, religious, political, ideological, and literary domains, the nine articles show a focused approach to the examined phenomenon, conveying a sense of uniformity and homogeneity regarding this multifaceted and complex issue.

The first article, a study by **Ganesh U. Thite**, focusses on the concepts of violence (*hiṃsā*) and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) in India, from the Vedic period to modern times. The author shows how geographical, social, economic, and political changes influenced the shift from preserving ritualistic aggression and violent religious practices to the completely opposite attitude, characterised by condemning *hiṃsā* in modern day Vedic rituals. Thite examines various violent practices from a historical perspective and undertakes an investigation into the reasons underlaying the described evolution from *hiṃsā* to *ahiṃsā*, such as the influential opposition of Buddhist and Jaina thinkers towards the former. The long-lasting coexistence of violence and non-violence, as well as the Brahmanical attempts at conceptualizing aggressive religious acts as purely symbolic, do not stay unnoticed as, in a concise form, the article overviews the vicissitudes of the opposed concepts in question.

Vedic rituals, especially a particular rite called *mahāvrata* ("The Great Observance"), come to the fore in a case study by **Paola M. Rossi**. The author proposes a philologically cogent survey and etymological reconstruction of the terminology related to the words *abhigara* ("praiser") and *apagara* ("reviler") that denote the key figures of the *mahāvrata* ritual and appear to engage in a verbal duel. Through the study of data excerpted from Vedic sources, Rossi

analyses the nature of agonistic play between *abhigara* and *apagara* inherited from a pre-Brahmanical culture. The contribution offers an interesting juxtaposition of the dichotomous pair and the ritual, specifically the rite known as *sarpasattra* ("the sacrificial session of the serpents"), described, among others, in *Mahābhārata*, and a close relationship between violence, rite, and narration which thus emerges in these sources.

The competitiveness expressed in a form of verbal duels and the *Mahābhārata* study are also the axis of the article by **Diletta Falqui**, showing that confrontations between certain characters described in the Brāhmaṇa literature often reoccur in the best-known Indian epic. The author speaks about *brahmodya*s, sapiential verbal exchanges in the form of riddles, studied, for instance, by Renou (1949) and Thompson (1997), and links them with the competitiveness of the Vrātyas. As the main focus of the analysis, Falqui selects the *Aṣṭāvakrīya-Upākhyāna* (from *Mahābhārata* 3.132–134) which records an example of *brahmodya*. She enriches the study with relevant references to the Upaniṣadic literature, and offers convincing evidence to prove that certain types of verbal duels described in *Aṣṭāvakrīya-Upākhyāna* seem to reflect the Vrātya background and, therefore, can contribute to a better understanding of the Vrātya community in a specific socio-cultural context.

Debates involving Vrātyas are also the main subject of a contribution by **Chiara Neri** and **Tiziana Pontillo**. More specifically, the authors discuss violent debates in the Indo-Aryan culture and the role of Vrātyas in them. Starting from the analysis of the excerpts from the *Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* that records the earliest occurrence of the name *vrātya*, Neri and Pontillo meticulously study sources that refer to the violent character of the described group and investigate how the Brahmanical propaganda contributed to stigmatisation and marginalisation of Vrātyas in the mainstream culture. On the basis of an insightful parallel between the pattern of the Vrātya dialogues on one hand and the Vedic *brahmodya*s and the Buddhist Theravāda verbal exchanges on the other, the study—which also includes a detailed analysis of a particular image of head shattering that reoccurs in all

these texts—assumes that the aggressiveness of this institution was "an inherited common trait of the Indo-Aryan culture."

In an attempt to enrich even further the scholarship on the fascinating topic of the Vrātya culture and identity explored in the papers of Falqui, and Neri and Pontillo, **Anita M. Borghero** analyses a number of passages from Vedic texts that speak of the character and symbolism of the bow carried by the Vrātya leader. The author tries to provide an answer to the question as to what extend could the bow attribute be perceived as evidence of Vrātyas' aggressiveness which is frequently noted as one of the main traits of the group. Based on a scrupulous analysis of the textual material, Borghero argues that the idea of a violent nature of the Vrātyas should not be strengthened by the warlike associations linked with the bow, since the weapon could merely refer to the nonviolent, pacific form of Rudra, one of the central deities of Vrātyas, as noted in studies by Charpentier (1911), Hauer (1927), Falk (1986), and Edholm (2017).

The investigations into the Vrātya culture in the present volume are also represented by an article by **Valentina Ferrero** who takes a closer look at the lexemes *vrātya* and *vrātīna*. A detailed and systematic analysis of the given words shows that traditional grammar can appear useful in the exegesis of Vedic texts and help to solve non-linguistic problems; in this case, Ferrero uses grammatical texts to study the onset of the idea of violence linked to the Vrātya identity. The author conducts her research on the derivation of the two mentioned lexemes through the study of relevant passages from the most canonical work on Sanskrit grammar, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini, and the most representative commentaries, including *Mahābhāṣya*, *Kāśikāvṛttī*, and *Siddhāntakaumudī*. She ultimately shows how in the very name of Vrātyas one can find a strong suggestion to view them as a violent group associated with aggressive behaviour.

In contrast to the previous contributions that focus on particular case studies with references to a variety of sources, the next article, a short essay by **Edeltraud Harzer**, offers a stimulating and wide-ranging overview of violent tendencies and acts documented in the pre-Classical Vedic and Sanskrit texts. The author presents several

examples of ancient India's social and religious practices characterised by violent behavioural traits. By way of textual sources, Harzer recalls the instances of sacrificial killing of animals that young graduates of Vedic education took part in, possibly at the risk of their lives, and the fate of widows forced to face novel, inimical social framework and consequences of disadvantageous interpretations of events independent of them. The essay shows how certain acts in the domain of religious and social life of ancient Indians represent examples of violent behaviours, devoid of compassion and sensitivity.

The next contribution is devoted to the study of practices even more ruthless and drastic; **Kyoko Amano** traces the possible references to human sacrifice and cannibalism in the *Veda*s. Although the topic is already the subject of an ongoing discourse by the academic community, this study is an absolute first in the area of Vedic studies, since the *Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā* of the *Black Yajurveda* is still little studied. Through examining newly discovered descriptions from this text, which she carefully translates and convincingly interprets, Amano demonstrates how the purification of the sacrificer before the *soma* ritual (*dīkṣā*) becomes an arena for human sacrifice and the consumption of a victim's flesh. This study thus proves that the description offered by *Maitrāyaṇī Saṁhitā* has no parallels in *Kāṭhaka Saṁhitā* or *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* that contain references to the same subject and, therefore, represents an important source for the ongoing investigation of the topic of human sacrifice and cannibalism in ancient India.

In the final article of the present volume, **Kinga Paraskiewicz** takes the reader on the journey to a different religious and cultural milieu than the one offered in the previous papers. The author analyses a particular case of verbal aggression present in Avestan profession of faith, conventionally known as *Fravarānē*, dating back to the earliest times of Zoroastrianism. The statement of belief in question, unlike similar examples of prayers from the biggest world religions, begins with a curse, an insult directed at the foes of Zoroastrians, the *daēvas* or ancient Iranian demons. In a systematic study conducted on meticulously analysed original texts and their translations, Paraskiewicz shows how verbal aggression in the Zoroastrian profession of faith is

a devout religious act and not an example of hate speech directed at an innocent victim.

The variety and complexity of topics undertaken by the authors who contributed to the compilation of the present issue of *Cracow Indological Studies* shows beyond doubt that the subject of violence and aggression is a fertile ground for the study of a field often marginalised and omitted in the discourse, namely violence and its manifestations. The nine articles collected here are the first of the series that prove relevance of such a study to the larger field of humanities, but, as we shall see in the forthcoming volumes of the journal, our work does not end here and the motif of violence and its further investigation are of great importance in broadening the field of the Indo-Iranian studies.

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