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Naresh Keerthi
naresh.keerthi@ashoka.edu.in
(Ashoka University, India)

Elena Mucciarelli
e.mucciarelli@rug.nl
(University of Groningen, Netherlands)

Split in *bhakti*, United in *bhakti*
Violence as Devotion in the Jaimini Cycle of Tales*

ABSTRACT: *Jaimini's Book of the Horse Sacrifice* (*Jaiminīya Āśvamēdhikaparvan*) is a late mediaeval Vaiṣṇava text that is unusual for several reasons. In this article we examine the interplay of violence, devotion and ritual in the Sanskrit *vorlage* and its Kannada transfiguration—the *Jaiminibhārata* of Lakṣmīśa (ca. 1500 CE). Violent emotions or extreme feelings are deeply imbricated in South Asia religious discourse. Extreme feeling is entangled with the history of texts that emerged as a result of interreligious and intra-religious debate. Our article puts forth the idea of violence as a mode of *bhakti* devotion, and we historicize the emergence of violence-as-*bhakti* in the Vaiṣṇava context, using the tale of Mayūradhvaja from Jaimini's Book.

KEYWORDS: violence, *bhakti*, devotion, *Jaiminibhārata*, Kannada

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Don't you take on
this thing called bhakti:
like a saw
it cuts when it goes
and it cuts again
when it comes.
If you risk your hand
with a cobra in a pitcher
will it let you
pass?

Basavaṇṇa, ca. 1175 CE[1]

Introduction

The Jaimini cycle of tales, at first glance appears to be a late mediaeval sequel to the *Mahābhārata* epic. Set after the great war of Kurukṣētra,[2] it narrates the victorious conquest of the Pāṇḍavas over a set of fictitious kingdoms, set in the frame of a horse sacrifice (*aśvamēdha*).[3] Starting from a (ca.) 12th-century Sanskrit version most commonly known as the *Jaiminīya Āśvamēdhikaparvan* (*Jaimini's Book of the Horse Sacrifice*, hereafter Jaimini's Book), this cycle of stories has taken different forms and lives[4,5]. Whereas the Sanskrit text has been

1 Ramanujan 1973: 79.
bhaktiyeṁbuda māḍabāradu,
karagasadaṁte hōgutta koredu, barutta koyvudu.
ghaṭasarpanalli kaiduḍukidaḍe hiḍivuda mābude kūḍalasaṁgamadēvā.
Samagra Vacana Saṁpuṭa Volume 1 Vacana number: 212
from https://vachana.sanchaya.net/ accessed 10.02.2024.

2 All translations if not indicated otherwise are by the authors. For the transliteration of Indic materials in this article, we use the modified Roman (ISO 15919) scheme recommended by Andrew Ollett and Sarah Pierce Taylor.

3 For a study of the Sanskrit Jaimini's Book and its vernacular renditions, see Koskikallio and Vielle 2001.

4 Derrett 1970 sets the date of Jaimini's Epic at the 12th century CE, we agree with this date. See section "*bhakti* as cooking" of our article for some concrete clues towards the date.

5 For a detailed account of the Epic of Jaimini and its many regional retellings., see Pillai 2024.

studied to some extent in relation to its *Mahābhārata* counterpart and its transmission history, the 15th-century Kannada version—the *Jaiminibhārata* of Lakṣmīśa (*Lakṣmīśa's Epic of Jaimini*, hereafter Lakṣmīśa's Epic)—has not yet received proper attention.[6] And this in spite of the central role of Lakṣmīśa's Epic in the religious and cultural life of early modern Karnataka.

Lakṣmīśa's Epic closely follows the Sanskrit Jaimini's Book in its structure and arrangement of episodes, but it is anything but a provincial reproduction. Composed in the hexadic *ṣaṭpadī* meter, Lakṣmīśa's Epic combines the *prabandha* (*mahākāvya*) format of high literary "middle-Kannada" with *purāṇa*-epic style stories adapted and localized from a Sanskrit archetype. Ever since it was written, Lakṣmīśa's Epic was and is one of the most popular texts in premodern Kannada, with an impressive intermedial afterlife in the history of Kannada literature and theatre.[7] Lakṣmīśa's Epic is one of the major sources for the Kannada *yakṣagāna* plays, matching the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.[8] The tales of the Jaimini cycle[9] mark a salient turn in the Vaiṣṇava narrative texts, and capture some important dynamics between communities of religion and religious emotion.

Across the medieval period (12th–16th cent.) in South India we see a congeries of religious groups competing for space, authority, prestige and not the least, patronage. These rival groups were closely aware of each other's textual corpora, narrative, ritual and aesthetic practices; and they responded to each other in complex and interesting

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6 See Koskikallio and Vielle 2001 and Koskikallio 1993.

7 On the influence and significance of Lakṣmīśa's Epic in the Kannada literary ecumene, see Bronner and Keerthi 2023. The *locus classicus* on the date and the literary craft of Lakṣmīśa is Bendre 1979.

8 Some of the episodes from the Jaimini cycle that have been turned into *yakṣagāna* plays include the tales of *Yauvanāśva, Sudhanva-Haṁsadhvaja, Pramīla-Arjuna, Nīladhvaja, Candrahāsa, Tāmradhvaja-Mayūradhvaja, Babhruvāhana, Lava-Kuśa*.

9 While referring to particular aspects of the Sanskrit or Kannada texts, we refer to them as Jaimini's Book and Lakṣmīśa's Epic respectively. When we speak of the narrative materials shared by both, we refer to them collectively as the Jaimini cycle of tales.

ways.[10] Thus the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Jaina traditions in late medieval South India, can best be understood as being intertexts—the different groups were each crafting their own narratives, practises and identities in response or reaction to that of the others.

The Sanskrit and the Kannada versions of Jaimini's cycle are both instantiations of this sort of dialogically produced text. Herein we see various shades of 'emotional *bhakti*' being manifested. This spectrum of devotion both aggregates and segregates, thereby forging novel community and sectarian identities. The communities of particular forms of emotional *bhakti* may escape textualized typologies, but are *as* real, sometimes more real. The episode of Mayūradhvaja which is the focus of our article, is a case in point. In this article we try to tease out the immanent religious tensions in the Sanskrit version and its developments in the Kannada retelling. Secondly, focusing on Mayūradhvaja's gory sacrifice we want to reflect on the place of emotion and violence in a world of *bhakti*.

This tale, like the others from the Jaimini cycle, uses a brand-new set of narratives and characters—the majority of which are hitherto unheard of. Furthermore, the narratives are constantly undergirt by a mesh of emotion, which needs careful attention.[11] More importantly, the Mayūradhvaja story presents a very early attestation (perhaps the earliest) of militant *bhakti* which is previously unseen in Vaiṣṇava literature.

Through our analysis of the Mayūradhvaja episode, we argue that the Jaimini cycle of tales inaugurates a new mode of militant devotion within the Vaiṣṇava literary universe. A mode wherein violence is a way to express devotional love and possibly grasp a glimpse of the god. This new understanding of *bhakti* relates to the idea of intense emotion of the devotee. We propose that the text does not merely provide a representation of *bhakti*, but rather an instantiation of it. Seen from the

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[10] For an instance of an interesting juxtaposition of Śiva and Viṣṇu from a 12th-century inscription, see Mucciarelli 2021: 75–76.

[11] One of the rare studies that analyses the particularities of emotion in sectarian texts is Anne Monius' (2004) work on the *Periyapurāṇam-Cīvakacintāmaṇi* dialogue, wherein she argues for a study of emotions, not as merely 'generic' aesthetic expressions, but as indicators of community-specific phenomenological experiences.

perspective of Aesthetics of Religion, the narrative is itself an act of *bhakti*.[12] Whereas previous scholarship recognises that *bhakti* is characterized by intense, even violent feelings, we aver that *bhakti is* that intense affective experience of cooking, melting, plunging, drowning.[13]

There are several valencies of violence in the *bhakti* of this text, operating at different levels. To elaborate, one level of violence is synchronic and centrifugal, and the author is asserting a militant Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*, as a counterpart to the already well-known Jaina and Śaiva models of violent *bhakti*.[14] While a prominent feature of Śiva-Rudra (also shared by his minions and devotees) is violence, the case of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa is different.[15] Viṣṇu may get violent for the welfare of his devotees, but there are hardly any instances of his devotees doing violent acts of devotion.[16]

There is another diachronic and internal component, wherein the puranic Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* is challenging and controverting older Vedic models of contact with the divine. Using the Mayūradhvaja episode from the Sanskrit and Kannada accounts of the Jaimini cycle, we will illustrate both these registers of violence.

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[12] Building on phenomenology and material culture, scholars have advocated for a novel approach to the study of religion whereby the sensorial and aesthetic experience play a central role. For an accessible introduction to Aesthetics of Religion, see Grieser and Johnston 2017.

[13] For the metaphor of melting in the emotional *bhakti* of the Tamil songs of the Vaiṣṇava Āḻvārs, see Hardy 1983: 294, 333 etc. The same notion is translated by the *Bhāgavatapurāṇam*, through frequent references to the mind-heart melting (*dravate* BMP 11.14.24, (*vi*)*drutacitta, anudruta-cetasas* BMP 10.41.28) and the mind-heart turning moist and liquid (*viklinna-hṛdaya* BMP 4.12.18, *klinnadhiyaḥ* etc.).

[14] Similarly, accounts of the "interventionist" adventures (*līlā*s) of Śiva in the Sanskrit *Śivapurāṇa* and the Tamil *Tiruvilaiyāṭal purāṇam* (see Harman 1981 for an account of the textual history of the Tamil text) may be seen as response texts to the very popular accounts of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa's many *avatāra*s—which are usually interventions made to save a devotee.

[15] Śiva's familiars include the sacrifice-destroying Vīrabhadra and the wild, antinomian Bhairava, and the belligerent demons Bāṇa and Rāvaṇa are his favored devotees. See Doniger 1981.

[16] We haven't been able to identify any instances of violent Vaiṣṇava devotees in the earlier sources such as the epics, the *Harivaṁśa* and the *Viṣṇu-* and *Bhāgavata- Purāṇa*s.

By considering both the Sanskrit and Kannada versions of the Mayūradhvaja episode, we aim at highlighting the gradual transformation of the dialogue between Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva narratives as well as the intensification of the emotional aesthetics within the narrative. Furthermore, this comparison is part of our larger collaborative investigation into the literary trends in Early Modern South India. It appears that literary works of this period demonstrate dramatic shifts in emotional articulacy and introspection.[17] Further, the choice of genre in both versions is significant: the Sanskrit text is in a rather plain epic-purāṇic style, whereas Lakṣmīśa's Epic is in the highest literary register, abounding in poetic *tours de force*.

Jaimini's Book of the Horse Sacrifice

As the name *Jaiminīya Āśvamēdhikaparvan* suggests, Jaimini's Book has a horse sacrifice (*aśvamēdha*) as its context and as the frame story. The events of this text are set after the great battle in the *Mahābhārata* epic. Yudhiṣṭhira, ridden with guilt at the large-scale carnage that he participated in, wants to do something in atonement. The author-cum-ancestor Vyāsa suggests that he perform a horse sacrifice. Yudhiṣṭhira is diffident about managing such a major sacrifice, but Vyāsa convinces him that with Kṛṣṇa's favor the whole endeavor will be successful. One of Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers—Arjuna or Bhīma—shall accompany the ritual horse as it goes from kingdom to kingdom. The condition of the horse sacrifice is that the rulers of these kingdoms either accept the sovereignty of Yudhiṣṭhira, or tie up the horse if they wish to challenge it. Most kings, out of fear or respect, would accept Yudhiṣṭhira as their overlord. Some confident ones would challenge his authority and tie up the horse.

[17] For some of the results of this research project, see Shulman 2023 and the articles in the special issue of "Cracow Indological Studies" focused on the self (Shulman and Sudyka 2022).

Each subplot within the Jaimini cycle of tales is usually the tale of one such intrepid ruler that challenged the authority of the Pāṇḍava emperor. As it turns out, all these challengers are devotees of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, and are usually able to defeat Arjuna (or Bhīma, as the case may be), until the latter appeals to Kṛṣṇa for help. With his help, the Pāṇḍava is able to overcome the challenger, who accepts the suzerainty of Yudhiṣṭhira. The challenger-turned-ally king then joins the Pāṇḍava entourage as it sets out to the next kingdom, following the sacrificial horse.

Previous scholarship has interpreted this anthology of tales as being a "Bhāgavata" text—one that serves to glorify Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. We read it somewhat differently, seeing it as a text that highlights the agency and potency of the devotee (*bhakta*)—and a particular kind of devotee—the fierce devotee, at that. This celebration of "fierce" devotion and fierce devotees, is in our opinion, a singular feature of the Jaimini cycle.

Fig. 1. Frame 1. Mayūradhvaja begins the *aśvamēdha* sacrifice. Frame 2. The two sacrificial horses clash. Frame 3. The armies led by Arjuna and Tāmradhvaja confront each other[18]

[18] https://archive.org/details/hIvG_m-2990-jaimini-adhmedh-jaimini-ashvamedhik-nirnay-sagar-press-1911-kavikulguru-k/page/n314/mode/2up (accessed on 26.06.2024).

The tale of Mayūradhvaja

One such fierce and weird tale in the Jaimini cycle, is the story of the devout king Mayūradhvaja. This episode perfectly illustrates the late-mediaeval militant strand of *bhakti* that we are interested in. When Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa reach the city of Ratnanagara, their sacrificial horse gets into a fight with another—one that belongs to the king Mayūradhvaja. Prince Tāmradhvaja, who is guarding his father's sacrificial horse, engages in a fight with Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. After a long battle, Tāmradhvaja defeats them. He then reports this victory to his father, hoping to win his approbation. However, Mayūradhvaja is horrified at his son's misplaced priorities. In a pattern that recurs throughout this tale, we will see that king Mayūradhvaja berates his son for turning away Kṛṣṇa—the supreme god for the sake of an empty ritual such as a horse sacrifice. Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, meanwhile retreat to plan their next strategy. Kṛṣṇa's larger scheme of course, is to teach Arjuna modesty and devotional *bhakti*, through the example of the devout king Mayūradhvaja. Kṛṣṇa subjects the latter to a bizarre and extreme ordeal to make this point.

The following verse from Jaimini's Epic is king Mayūradhvaja's reprimand to his son Tāmradhvaja. The prince has captured the Pāṇḍavas' sacrificial horse, and thereby challenged their sovereignty. But the verses signal more than one rivalry.

Jaimini's Epic 44.30cd–31cd[19]
vētsi tvam ātmanō buddhiṃ dhanyāṃ turagasaṃgrahāt ||
tulasīkānanaṃ tyaktvā vijayā hi samāśritā |
varāṃ campakajāṃ mālām adhaḥ kṛtvā sumōhitaḥ ||
kas tu gṛhṇāti sarasō dhattūrakusumasrajam |

[Mayūradhvaja said]
"You consider yourself to be gloriously clever because you captured a horse? You rejected the [holy] tulasi grove and

[19] This numbering follows the Gita Press edition. Obviously, 44.30cd and 44.31ab should be read as one verse, and so on.

> resorted to cannabis (*vijayā*). Who, disenchanted, would cast off
> an excellent wreath of *campaka* flowers and eagerly accept
> a garland of Devils' weed?

This sarcastic verse invokes several aspects of mediaeval *bhakti,* all of interest to us.

Firstly, the ultimate royal ritual—the prestigious horse sacrifice—is rejected in exchange for a sighting (*darśana*) of Kṛṣṇa. King Mayūradhvaja reproaches his son that he has made a poor bargain. The unsuitability of this exchange is elaborated with two botanical images. One, it is as if Tāmradhvaja was offered a garland of holy tulasi leaves—the Vaiṣṇava plant *par excellence*—and he rejected it and accepted *vijayā* instead. Now *vijayā* is the marijuana plant (*Cannabis sativa*), which is disreputable for two reasons: one because it is an addictive drug, and, two more interestingly, because it is historically associated with Śiva.[20] In the subsequent verse, the horticultural harangue is repeated; this time by scolding Tāmradhvaja for exchanging a chaplet of beautiful, fragrant *campaka* flowers for the flowers of the thorny poisonous, psychotropic *datura*—another typical "Śaiva" plant.[21]

If the narrative purpose of the verse is to signal the rivalry between Tāmradhvaja and the Pāṇḍavas, the deliberately chosen image suggests to the audience the religious rivalry between the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sects that must have been very topical to the text's immediate audience. This passage also gives a hint to the possible southern

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[20] For a detailed if somewhat ahistorical account of Śiva and cannabis in purāṇic literature, see Chapter III 'Śiva as a Hemp-smoker' in Sarkar 1974. Also, Aldrich 1977. For the most updated account of cannabis in South Asian medicine and history, see Wujastyk 2002, in spite of which, older, inaccurate histories e.g. Russo (2005) prevail.

[21] The Datura (*ummatam* in Tamil; from Sanskrit *unmatta* intoxicated) is a hallucinogenic plant associated with Śiva at least since the 8th century CE, as seen from Sanskrit and Tamil sources (Geeta and Gharaibeh 2007). The widely held view that it was introduced to South Asia from the New World by 16th-century European travellers, is of course wrong. As McHugh notes (2022: 184), a detailed cultural history of *dhattūra* in South Asia "[has] yet to be written."

provenance of the Sanskrit Jaimini's Epic. M. W. Carr's anthology of Telugu proverbs attests one that is strikingly similar to our verse in content as well as (potential) context: "It is as if a marijuana plant has sprung up in a bed of tulasi plants."[22] The proverb is invoked when someone is a black sheep, i.e. when their behavior or choices are entirely incongruent with the image of their family.

Turning to the treatment of this episode in the Kannada version, we see that Lakṣmīśa's Epic is in the ornate *mahākāvya* literary mode. He repeats many elements from the Sanskrit source and does more. He resorts to wordplay, and has Mayūradhvaja berating his son's bad judgement: Tāmradhvaja picked the equine *hari* over the divine Hari (*hari* being a synonym for a horse as well as for Kṛṣṇa).

akaṭa keḍisidan'alā kāryamaṁ namag'id'ē~
take yajñam innu namag'ī magaṁ pagey'alte
svakarasthanāda hariyaṁ biṭṭu kaṭṭidaṁ gardabhākṛti-hariyanu |
vikaḷamatiy'āgirdan'ītan' ēvēḷven'u~
tsukadiṁdam oḍagūḍi maṁcadoḷ prāṇanā~
yakan iral mared'oragid'adhamāṁganeya vol eṁd'avanipaṁ bisusuydanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 25.60

matte sutanaṁ nōḍi baidan elavo pōg~
'atta ninnaṁ māḷpud'ēn'amala-tulasiyaṁ
duttiviḍid'abjamaṁ māṇḍu datturada kusumada toḍavu gaṭṭuv'aṁte |
uttamav'ideṁdu kṛṣṇārjunara biṭṭu taṁ
~ditte turaṁgaṁgaḷaṁ sāk'innu yajña mava
~r'ettal'irdapar'eṁbudaṁ pēḷdoḍ'uḷuhidavan'eṁdu bhūpati suydanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 25.61.[23]

[22] 1102: *tulasi vanamulō gaṁjāyi mokka molicinaṭṭu*.
Like a hemp plant grown in a *tulasī* garden. Carr 1868: 197.

[23] Verse 25.61 presents great variation across the editions we consulted, line c in particular. We've followed the edition of Karibasavaśāstri (1917) for this verse. For a text-critical discussion of this verse, see Keerthi (forthcoming).

"Damn! My son has dashed my hopes.
Of what use is this sacrifice now? A son? He is an enemy.
He let go Hari who was in hand, and instead
captured an ass-shaped *hari*.
His mind is befuddled, what can I say?
This is like an ill-fated woman who snoozed away
when her lover came to bed
all passionate." the king sighed.

Further, he glared at his son and yelled
"Get out! What do I do with you? This is like
casting away a garland of lotuses entwined with spotless tulasi,
only to string together a wreath of venomous devil's weed.
I have had enough of this sacrifice.
You thought it was wise to leave behind
Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna and brought these colts instead?
Tell me where they are, and I will spare you!" the king sighed.

There are minor changes between the Sanskrit text Jaimini's Book and the Kannada text Lakṣmīśa's Epic. Instead of the inelegant repetition of the rebuke, with two separate plant images of 'bad bargains,' Lakṣmīśa's Epic has a mixed garland of tulasi and lotuses being rejected in favor of devil's weed. The lotus is a cosmopolitan flower that was used in the worship of all South Asian deities, and arguably, doesn't index any particular sectarian group. However, it takes special significance when mentioned in conjunction with tulasi. We increasingly see instances of bead-necklaces of lotus seeds and tulasi wood being used as markers of Vaiṣṇava affiliation after the 12th–13th centuries.[24]

The choice of the horse over Kṛṣṇa is framed by an analogy to picking the poisonous datura weed over the exalted and sacred garland of tulasi and lotus. The poem elaborates further on the bad bargain by introducing an interpersonal metaphor: the text stacks a domestic

[24] Kulkarni 2010–2011: 419–428. See also the section '*bhakti* as cooking' of this article.

analogy alongside the botanical ones—the errant son is compared to an imprudent woman who chose the pleasure of sleep over sex.

Fig. 2. Frame 1. Tāmradhvaja defeats the Pāṇḍava army, makes Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna faint, and takes away both horses. Frame 2. Prince Tāmradhvaja reports the events to Mayūradhvaja at the sacrificial pavilion[25]

This passage and the third analogy in particular, illustrate one hard-to-describe quality of literature inflected within a cosmos of *bhakti*. The Sanskrit Jaimini's Epic makes an understandable comparison of the bad choice with bad bargains in the plant world. This extra comparandum for the bad bargain is striking, even strange—dozing off instead of making love—and thus missing an opportunity for the highest physical pleasure, is the *upamēya* (comparandum) for missing an opportunity for the highest spiritual pleasure—meeting Kṛṣṇa.[26]

[25] https://archive.org/details/hIvG_m-2990-jaimini-adhmedh-jaimini-ashvamedhik-nirnay-sagar-press-1911-kavikulguru-k/page/n332/mode/2up (accessed on 26.06.2024).

[26] The conceptual overlap between sexual ecstasy and spiritual bliss is discussed in Olivelle 1997.

An older, more scholarly image, which may undergird this simile of the "missed chance" as well as other conceptual blends of sensuality and *bhakti*, comes from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Describing the nature of liberation, the *Upaniṣad* says:

> It is like this. As a man embraced by a woman he loves, is oblivious to everything within or without, so this person embraced by the *prājña* (conscious, aware, self) consisting of knowledge is oblivious to everything within or without. Clearly, this is the aspect of his where all desires are fulfilled, where the self is the only desire, and which is free from desires and far from sorrows.[27]

While the similes in the two texts aren't quite identical, they draw upon the same conceptual metaphor. In the *Upaniṣad*, liberation which is the ultimate pleasure, is likened to sexual ecstasy—a person who is in unison with the conscious supreme Atman is no longer mindful of phenomena within or without themself, just as a person experiences sexual bliss in the company of their lover is oblivious to everything else.

A different aspect of the same image is mustered by Jaimini's cycle. Prince Tāmradhvaja has made the wrong choice: he chose to capture the Pāṇḍavas' sacrificial horse after defeating Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in a battle; presumably the correct choice would have been to submit to Kṛṣṇa, and then to bring him to Mayūradhvaja. The image Mayūradhvaja uses—of an ill-fated woman who chooses the inert dormancy of sleep over the heightened awareness of sexual pleasure—takes on newer significance when seen in light of the Upaniṣadic passage.

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[27] Olivelle 1998: 115.
tad yathā priyayā striyā saṃpariṣvaktō na bāhyaṃ kiṃcana vēda nāntaram |
ēvam ēvāyaṃ puruṣaḥ prājñēnātmanā saṃpariṣvaktō na bāhyaṃ kiṃcana vēda nāntaram |
tad vā asyaitad āptakāmam ātmakāmam akāmaṃ rūpam śōkāntaram ||
Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 4.3.21 ||

The mechanisms of resemanticization and adaptation of the multiform *bhakti* that we see in this verse recur in the episode of Mayūradhvaja, and the rest of Jaimini's book. They spotlight the discursive strategies at play in the crosstalk across religious sects in medieval South India.

Three readings of *bhakti*

The entire Mayūradhvaja episode, as with most *bhakti* narratives, is polyvalent, and operating within nested frames: In the innermost frame, Kṛṣṇa is playing a trick to teach Arjuna about the merits of *bhakti*—through the illustration of Mayūradhvaja's sacrifice. In the next frame, it is Jaimini teaching Janamejaya about the importance of *bhakti*, through this and other stories. The outermost frame of course consists of readers, viewers and other audiences of the *Jaiminibhārata* tales—in part or whole, through any medium.[28]

In relation to the concept of knowledge transmission, the term *bhakti* has been "diffracted" into various semantic planes that partially overlap. Thus, the term *bhakti* sometimes conceals more than it illuminates. In order to disentangle the many semiotic threads, we conceptualize *bhakti* along three interpretative lines: *bhakti* as cooking, *bhakti* as division, and *bhakti* as indivisibility. Each of these interpretations correspond (more or less) to a section in the Mayūradhvaja episode. And it is along these themes that the next three subsections are framed. As our analysis will show, many other themes—the tension between ritual sacrifice and personal sacrifice, sarcasm as subversion, community and subjectivity—are constellated[29] around these notions of *bhakti*.

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[28] For Norman Cutler's conceptualisation of *bhakti* literature as communion, see Cutler 1987: 51.

[29] Benjamin 1985: 34 "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars."

***bhakti* as cooking**

Humiliated by his defeat at the hands of prince Tāmradhvaja, Arjuna appeals to Kṛṣṇa for help. Kṛṣṇa devises a stratagem that will test the limits of Mayūradhvaja's adherence to duty and justice (*dharma*) as well as his devotion (*bhakti*), by asking for an extreme, unconditional sacrifice. However, the sacrifice that Kṛṣṇa demands is not a gift of an animal, or of gold or some such everyday gift that is usually sought from a king.[30]

Kṛṣṇa disguises himself as a Brahmin and Arjuna as his young apprentice. He seeks an audience with king Mayūradhvaja and narrates a tear-jerking story—The 'Brahmin' and his youthful son (and an apprentice) were going through Mayūradhvaja's kingdom, and were waylaid by a lion that took hold of the son. The 'Brahmin' appeals to the lion to let his young son go. It offers to release his son in exchange for half of the body of king Mayūradhvaja. Having told this tale, Kṛṣṇa, in the guise of the Brahmin, appears deeply embarrassed to ask for such a sacrifice of king Mayūradhvaja. The courtiers are horrified and protest the claim. The king however agrees without demur, and prepares himself for the ablation:

ēvam uktvā vacō rājā putraṃ rājyē nyavēśayat |
susnātō jāhnavītōyaiḥ śālagrāmaśilājalaiḥ ||
tulasīdalajāṃ mālāṃ kaṇṭhē kṛtvā hasann iva |
śaṅkhacakrāṅkitaṃ gātraṃ kṛtvā rājā mudānvitaḥ ||

Jaimini's Epic 45.44–45

[30] The whole episode of Kṛṣṇa appearing in disguise, making an extraordinary demand of the king (who by the way, is in the midst of his own horse sacrifice) harks back to an old pair of motifs. The first is that of the 'sacrifice interrupted.' See Heesterman 1993 and Minkowski 2001. The second, related motif is that of the sacrificer being subjected to a test or ordeal of sorts. The stories of Hariścandra and Śunaḥśēpha, of Śibi's ordeal with Indra and Agni, and Indra's demand of Karṇa come to mind. For overlaps of sacrifice and ordeal, see Yelle 2002, Brown 1972 and Brighenti 2012.

> The king (Mayūradhvaja) said this, and appointed his son (Tāmradhvaja) king; he then took a bath in the waters of the Ganga, and in the washings of the *śālagrāma* stones. Smiling as it were, he put a necklace of tulasi leaves around his neck and joyously marked his body with the marks of [Viṣṇu's] conch and disc.

This passage is interesting from the perspective of historicising Jaimini's Epic, as we have a reasonable sense of when these ritual practices became a part of the Vaiṣṇava personal liturgy. The Kannada rendition of this passage illustrates Lakṣmīśa's exercise of translation as commentary. He adds minor, but significant details, making the passage clearer to his audience, evoking a ritual that must have been very familiar to them.

kēḷdan avanīśvaraṁ pracchanna-bhūsuraṁ
pēḷda vṛttāṁtamaṁ kīrti nildudu narara
bāḷ diṭam'id'all'eṁdu niścaisi vipranaṁ karedu ninag'ī tanuvanu |
sīḷdu koṭṭapen eṁd'abhayav'ittu baḷika tā~
n'āḷd'iḷeyan ātmajaṁg'appaisi harṣamaṁ
tāḷd'anibar'ellaraṁ maṁṭapadoḷ'ihud'eṁdu kuḷḷirisi poramaṭṭanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.45

tarisi gaṁgā-tōyamaṁ majjanaṁgaidu
parama-sālagrāma-tīrthamaṁ kaikoṁḍu
taruṇa-tuḷasī-daḷada māleyaṁ kaṁdharadoḷ āṁtu maṁṭapake baṁdu |
nereda bhūsura-sabhege sāṣṭāṁgadiṁd'eragi
karayugaḷamaṁ mugidu niṁdu binnaisidaṁ
dharaṇīśvarāgraṇi mayūradhvajaṁ janādhīśa kēḷ kautukavanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.46

> The king (Mayūradhvaja) listened to the false Brahmin's account,
> and decided "The life of a human is uncertain, fame will last forever."
> He beckoned the Brahmin and assured him, "I will split this body
> in half and give it to you."
> He then entrusted his kingdom to his son and was pleased. He
> ordered that everyone be seated in the sacrificial chamber, and set out.

King [Janamejaya] listen to this wonder—
"The emperor Mayūradhvaja asked for waters of the Ganga and bathed,
he took the holy washings of the *sālagrāma* in his palm,*
he adorned a garland of fresh tulasi leaves round his neck, and came to the chamber;
he bowed down prostrate to the council of Brahmins;
he stood, hands joined in prayer, and entreated…"

Lakṣmīśa's craft in elaborating or condensing the narrative as he deems suitable, is evident in this passage. The Sanskrit text of Jaimini's Epic 45.44cd seems corrupt (or oblique in the very least)—when it says that Mayūradhvaja bathed in the waters of the Ganga and in the washings of the *sālagrāma* stone. A devout Vaiṣṇava is unlikely to bathe (in the literal sense of the term) with the waters sanctified by the *sālagrāma*—an aniconic form of Viṣṇu. They would receive such water reverentially in the right palm, and either sip it or sprinkle it over their head—in an act of ritual purification. Now the text of Jaimini's Epic 45.44cd may have intended to say this in a laconic style, but it is not immediately apparent. The Kannada author must have noted this textual difficulty, which is why he renders the passage as follows: Mayūradhvaja bathed in the waters of the Ganga (*majjanaṁgaidu*) and received the hallowed washings of the *sālagrāma* in his palm (*parama-sālagrāma-tīrthamaṁ kaikoṁḍu*).

One could say that Lakṣmīśa is being a good commentator, or even a good philologist here. He has noted a textual discrepancy, and while recasting it in his text, he 'silently' corrects and paraphrases it in a way that will make better sense for his audience.

Another small but significant change that Lakṣmīśa incorporates, is in his characterisation of Kṛṣṇa as he appears in this scene. The poet says that Mayūradhvaja listened to the words of the imposter Brahmin (*pracchanna bhūsuraṁ*). Later, in the same verse, he is described simply as a brahmin (*vipran*). But it is a discursive choice of Lakṣmīśa, whereby he reminds his audience of the divine mischief (*līlā*) that will serve a higher purpose. Kṛṣṇa's duplicity and the false tale he spins

will serve to shed light on the truth in Mayūradhvaja's enduring devotion (*bhakti*) and adherence to justice (*dharma*).

These variations, one may argue, are part of a larger poetic strategy. In these verses the poet brings his own (Vaiṣṇava) ritual experiences into the narrative, by referring to familiar objects and acts of the everyday personal ritual. By giving a dynamic 'action-centered' account of the moment, he activates a performative mode, and thereby invites the audience into an intimate, emotional way of listening to the story. This narrative device—of having a mythical character such as Mayūradhvaja perform rituals that must have been very familiar to the audience, is a narrative strategy that makes the epic narrative instantly relatable, even if in patches[31]: *bhakti*, as an emotion, acts not only on the king, in the narrative, but also on the audience in the metanarrative frame.

In both the Sanskrit and the Kannada versions, the king prepares himself through a series of actions. And this idea of a procedure, of an established and ordered set of actions, is strongly reminiscent of the process of cooking, which also involves an immersive, transformative and sensorial experience. The listeners have to have this emotional

[31] Mayūradhvaja prepares himself in exact conformity with the ritual 'dress code' prescribed for Vaiṣṇavas. As described in this popular verse from the *Padmapurāṇa:*

> *yē kaṇṭha-lagna-tulasī-nalināk̲samālā yē bāhumūla-paricihnita-śaṅkha-cakrāḥ |*
> *yē vā lalāṭa-phalakē lasad-ūrdhvapuṇḍrās tē vaiṣṇavā bhuvanam āśu pavitrayanti ||*
> *Padmapurāṇam* 6.253.69
>
> Those with strings of Tulasi and lotus beads round their necks,
> with their shoulders branded with the conch and the wheel,
> and with their foreheads blazoned with the vertical mark—
> they are Vaiṣṇavas, and they sanctify the world instantly.

We find intertexts of this verse from the 12th century onwards, giving us a rough *terminus ad quem* for Jaimini's Book. On Śrīvaiṣṇava markings, see Akepiyapornchai 2023: 206–231.

attachment baked into them, so to speak.[32] Like the hard, inedible rice grains are transformed through cooking into soft, nourishing food (*anna, bhakta*); the devotees are subject to great emotional transformations: they are immersed, soaked, steeped, even boiled in the *rasa* of *bhakti*, and emerge cooked, ripened, tempered and seasoned.

The culinary metaphor is very productive in the world of affective devotion: the vocabulary of ripening, steeping, soaking, melting, scorching, searing and so on, is very much part of the *bhakti* landscape.[33] In the Jaimini cycle too, the phenomena of cooking, as well as the adjacent domains of tasting/savouring and devouring/consumption are conspicuously present—in literal as well as metaphorical functions. And a coextensive theme is that of craving, desire, and even more of need. The cooked food (and the seasoned *bhakta*) evokes the act of eating, and thus the archetypical need for nourishment: alimentary, spiritual, and otherwise.

bhakti as division

The second 'etymological' strand we explore is one of *bhakti* as 'division.' If passionate devotion to one god and an intense fellowship with other votaries of the same god are hallmarks of *bhakti,* the natural consequence of this is hostility towards other gods and their followers. In this sense, one instantiation of *bhakti*-as-division that is plain for everyone to see, is the emergence of a finer-grained stratification of religious identities.[34]

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[32] Charles Malamoud (1989) has thoroughly explored the strong connection between cooking and Vedic ritual, where he highlights the transformative aspect of both domains by stressing the conceptual similarity between being "baked" (*pakva*) as ready to be eaten and ritually cooked as being fit for the sacrifice. Along with the image of *tapa/tāpa* (heat, *askesis*), this analogy is continued and extended in the post-Vedic world of *bhakti*.

[33] See footnote 13.

[34] In the early stages of its development, Śaivism split into two major traditions: Atimārga and Mantramārga. The Atimārga stream, epitomized by the Pāśupatas, initially manifested in two distinctive groups: the Atyāśramins and the

In relation to the idea of division as a violent act, one salient feature of the medieval articulation of *bhakti* seems to be the violence inflicted towards oneself or a dear one. Readers of Jaimini's Book are sure to be struck by the frequency of violent forms of devotion in this Vaiṣṇava text. The Śaiva sources, on the other hand, present many such tales wherein devotees offer up parts of their self to Śiva (e.g. Rāvaṇa offers his heads, Kaṇṇappaṉ-Tiṉṉaṉ offers both his eyes), or even the life of a dear one (Ciṟutoṇḍaṉ-Siriyāḷa kills and cooks his son).[35] Put differently, the Jaimini cycle inaugurates the emergence of extreme love or rough devotion in the universe of Vaiṣṇava devotion.

And this is how it unfolds in the episode of Mayūradhvaja. Once Mayūradhvaja declares that he has made up his mind to sacrifice half of his body to the lion, to subject himself to a sort of vivisection, everybody is shocked. His courtiers and the council of brahmins protest that such a demand is unheard of, and that the life of the king is too precious to be sacrificed for the sake of a stranger. Mayūradhvaja's wife and son, meanwhile, take a different tack. In a passage reminiscent of the (Dharma)śāstric discourse of rules, exceptions and loopholes, they each try to reinterpret the "lion's" demand to their convenience.

In the following verses we see how both the wife and the son of Mayūradhvaja try to intervene and modify the course of the story by

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Mahāvratas (Sanderson 2006: 158). Conversely, the Mantramārgins represented a broader spectrum of Śaiva adherents, including worshippers of Śakti as well. From the 2nd to the 6th centuries, the doctrinal landscape featured a limited number of sects, notably including the Pāśupatas, Lākulas (also identified as Māhāvratas), and Kālamukhas, alongside other sects such as Śaivas and Kāpālikas (Sanderson 2006: 151). However, by the 12th century, the taxonomy of Śaiva sects had undergone significant expansion, as evidenced by the emergence of diverse categories, including but not limited to Kālāmukha, Trika, Kaula, Kāli, Pratyabhijñā, and Spanda (Sanderson 1988), in addition to the Vīra Śaivas (Sanderson 2014: 83). On the topic of Śaiva pluralism and sectarian identities, see, among others, Fisher 2017, and Cecil 2020.

[35] See, e.g. Shulman 1993 and Lorenzetti 2023. For *vaṉ-pakti* in Tamil Śaiva texts, see Vamadeva 1995. The violent nature of Śaiva *bhakti* may have to do with Śiva's own history as a wild, militant, even antinomian deity, for more on this see Ariav and Keerthi 2022.

offering themselves as surrogate victims (scapegoat in the original sense of the term) for the king.[36] Both try to defuse the violent demand of the pseudo-Brahmin-who-is-god with an intellectual response that relies on another form of violence, the cold violence of logic. But their attempts are nullified by Kṛṣṇa, who can speak the same authoritative language, and better.

tasyās tad vacanaṃ śrutvā vipraḥ prōvāca satvaraḥ ||
ēkāgramanasaṃ jñātvā rājānaṃ vākyakōvidaḥ |
vipra uvāca
siṃhēna kathitaṃ rājan vāmāṅgaṃ strī mahīpatēḥ ||
dakṣiṇāṅgaṃ pradēyaṃ mē vāmāṅgaṃ nīyatē katham |
śarīraṃ dakṣiṇāṅgaṃ mē dātuṃ siṃhāya cārhasi ||

Jaimini's Book 46.23cd–25

Realizing that the king was musing over the Queen's words
seriously, the eloquent Brahmin quipped. The Brahmin:
"The lion had said 'The wife is the left half of the king ['s body];
you should offer me the right half,' So, how can I take the left?
Please give me the right half for the lion."

brāhmaṇa uvāca
satyaṃ tvaṃ bhāṣasē putra vacaḥ kēsariṇaḥ śṛṇu ||
putrēṇa bhāryayā bhinnaṃ mayūradhvajamastakam |
dvidhā jātaṃ śarīrāddhi dakṣiṇāṅgaṃ tvam ānaya ||
kathaṃ tad anyathā kartuṃ śakyatē madvidhēna tu |

Jaimini's Book 46.32b–34a

The Brahmin: "Son, you are right. Listen to these words
of the lion, though. 'The head of Mayūradhvaja should be
cut in two by his son and wife. You should bring me the
right part of his body'. How can someone like me change this?"

[36] On substitution and stand-ins in sacrifice, see Doniger and Smith 1989: 189–224.

When the queen and prince Tāmradhvaja offer themselves as sacrificial surrogates, the Brahmin's plan is upset. He is desperate and grasps at hermeneutical straws, making up explanations or rules. He comes up with an emergency solution and pretends that the lion has given certain conditions as if he anticipated the queen's and son's offers. This narrative strategy works very well in the case of a pseudo-Brahmin as it evokes the śāstric logic by way of stretching it to the point of absurdity. The repetition of an absurd excuse in the case of the son is even more blatant in its *ad hoc* creation. Let us look at Lakṣmīśa's Kannada version.

nīṁ tiḷidud'ill'arasa viprēṁdran ariyaṉ̲ va~
nāṁtaradoḷ'ā siṁham eṁda nuḍi śāstra-si~
ddhāṁtam aṁgane puruṣan'ardhāṁgam eṁbudake ninna vāmāṁgiy'āda |
kāṁteyaṁ bēḍid'oḍe koydu kāyavan'īva
bhrāṁtiy'ētake nannan'asuverasi koṭṭu kaḷe
tāṁ taḷeven aidetanadiṁde sadgatiyan'eṁd'ā kumudvati nuḍidaḷu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.56

"King, both you and the Brahmin have misunderstood
the words of that lion in the woods. The scriptures say
that a wife is half of her husband's body. So, when someone
asks for the woman who is the left half of your body, what is this madness about slashing
your body? Give my living breathing self and be done with it.
I will attain a good release by dying while my husband is alive."
So did Queen Kumudvati speak.

sammatam id'ahud'eṁdar'ellaruṁ bhūvaraṁ
summanire kaṁḍan'ī teranaṁ dvijatvamaṁ
nemmida mukuṁdan ele rāya ninn'arasi nuḍid'uttaravan oppabahudu |
summānadiṁ janēśvarana dakṣiṇabhāga~
mam melven eṁdā okkaṇisit'allade siṁha~
v'emm'oḍane vāmāṁgam eṁd'āḍit'ill'enal nṛpana sutan iṁt'eṁdanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.57

> Everyone [in the assembly] said "This is acceptable," but the king
> was silent. Krishna in the Brahmin's guise saw this
> and said "King! I may agree with your queen's solution.
> However, the lion told me that it would munch
> on the king's right half with relish, not the left."
> Then the king's son said the following.

In this passage, we see the role of the wife as a partner not only in royal functions, but also in ritual functions. As Stephanie Jamison has shown, the Vedic wife was an all-important agent and instrument of hospitality in ritual as well as quotidian settings.[37] It is because of this 'status,' that the queen intervenes, and challenges the pseudo-Brahmin's demand—not with tearful sentiment, but with intellectual rationalizations. She tries, so to say, to beat Kṛṣṇa on his own terms. Queen Kumudvati challenges the 'literal' interpretation of the lion's demand—which would entail her husband's death, and gives a hermeneutical twist to the tale. She does this by resorting to the scriptural doctrine (*śāstra-siddhāṁtam*) that a wife is one half of her husband's body (*aṁgane puruṣan'ardhāṁgam*). By offering up herself as a substitute, Kumudvati is hoping to hit three birds with one stone here—one, she can avert the death of her husband; two she can fulfil her role as the ritual wife (*patni*) par excellence. Finally, by dying before her husband, she will have the exalted status of the *aide* or *muttaide*.[38] Such an argumentative strategy is reminiscent of the long ritual and legal commentarial tradition. To that Kṛṣṇa is then forced to scrabble for an answer within the same framework; highlighting the

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[37] The wife, Jamison asserts, "in some sense embodies exchange relations. She is a mediating figure between different realms, and whenever ancient Indian ritual or mythology requires or depicts the perilous contact between realms, a woman is often the central figure" (Jamison 1996: 25).

[38] According to the Brahmanical tradition, the hallmark of a chaste (and hence fortunate) wife is that she will either predecease her husband or die at the same time as him. The terms used for such an auspicious woman are *aide*, *muttaide* (Kannada) and *sumaṅkali* (Tamil). See Narayanan 1990.

impromptu character of his rebuttal. After the wife's attempt is rejected, it is the turn of the son.

karuṇis'ele vipra ninnaṁ bēḍikoṁbe nāṁ
taruṇaṁ supuṣṭa-vapu tuṣṭi mṛgapatig'āga~
d'iradu tātana ṛṇa-trayake hariv'ahudu rāghava-bhīṣmar'aṁte kīrti |
sthirav'ahudu pitana bhāṣege nilal janakan ava~
taripan ātmajan'āgi taṁde makkaḷ ivar'oḷa~
g'erav'illa tann'aṁgamaṁ tegedukoḷḷ'eṁdu tāmradhvajaṁ nuḍidanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.58

Tāmradhvaja said "Brahmin, kindly heed my request. I am young, my healthy body will surely satisfy the lion. I will be able to repay the triple debts to my father. Fulfilling the promise of one's father will bring everlasting fame as it did for Rāma and Bhīṣma. The father is reborn as the son. There is no difference between a father and his sons. Please take my body."

bhūpāla kēḷ avana mātige mahīsuraṁ
kāpaṭyam ill'ele kumāra nīn'eṁda nuḍi
pāpi kēsari tannoḷ avanipana satiy'eṁdu sutan eṁdu pēḷdud'illa |
āpoḍe mayūradhvajana dakṣiṇāṁgamaṁ
tā putranaṁ biḍuven eṁdoḍ'illige baṁden
ī pariyoḷ'aḷukuvare kuḍabēḍa pōpen'ene naranāthan int'eṁdanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's epic 26.59

[Jaimini said] King, listen:
The Brahmin responded to his idea "Prince, what you say is reasonable. But the damned lion didn't ask me for the king's wife or son. I came here because it promised to release my son if I brought the right half of Mayūradhvaja's self. But if you are unwilling at this time, don't give it to me. I will leave." The king then responded […]

Prince Tāmradhvaja gets on the same hermeneutical bandwagon as his mother. He does one better, and resorts to the ultimate exegetic

strategy of citing from irrefutable sources. Tāmradhvaja first refers to how he will repay the "three debts" (*ṛṇa-traya*) that he owes his father by offering himself as a substitute. This is an allusion to the Dharmaśāstric "doctrine of debt."[39] Not content, Tāmradhvaja adduces a notion found in the Upaniṣads—that the son is identical or coeval with the father. The Kannada passage "the father is born as the son" (*janakan avataripan ātmajan'āgi*) unmistakably mirrors passages such as *ātmā vai putra nāmā 'si*.[40]

Readers of the *Mahābhārata* will find nothing incongruous in Kṣatriya princes and queens engaging in such exegetical duels with "officially" scholarly characters. We can safely assume that the audiences of the Kannada and Sanskrit Epic of Jaimini too, would have been amused and entertained by these clever arguments wherein a Brahmin is outsmarted (if only momentarily) by the arguments of Kumudvati and Tāmradhvaja. Amusement aside, their attempts at hermeneutic fancy footwork is not for a pedantic showdown. Rather it is a serious matter—one of saving Mayūradhvaja's life. At the same time, they have to find a means to uphold the principles of a king's Dharma of extending protection and hospitality to whoever seeks it.

The "Brahmin," cornered by Tāmradhvaja's eloquence and śāstric expertise, is at his wits end. We can see a hint of impatience in his response—he passes the blame on to the damned lion (*pāpi kēsari*), and says that it will only release the Brahmin's son if it is given (the right) half of Mayūradhvaja's body (*mayūradhvajana dakṣiṇāṁgamaṁ tā putranaṁ biḍuven*); and not any other hermeneutically defensible substitutes. The pseudo-Brahmin pretends to be offended at these attempts at backing out from the original promise, and offers to leave empty-handed. Of course this is a psychological tactic to force the king's hand.

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[39] For the "doctrine of debt," see Olivelle 1993: 46–53.

[40] See *Jaiminiya Gṛhyasūtra* 1.8.i–j: *ātmā vai putranāmāsi / sa jīva śaradaḥ śataṃ paśyāhi śaradaḥ śatam iti.* A slightly different version is found in *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 2.10: *aṅgāt sambhavasi hṛdayād abhijāyasē ātmā vai putra-nāmāsi sa jīva śaradaḥ śatam.*

This section illustrates a particular narrative strategy employed often in Jaimini's cycle. The individual exchanges of the pseudo-Brahmin with each character turn by turn—the queen, the prince and finally king Mayūradhvaja, are not merely devices to pad out the storyline. The repetitions and intensifications of the arguments on both sides are used to decelerate the unfolding of the plot, thereby building up an unbearable tension, as the audience anticipates the inevitable. The narrative and poetic rhythm–marked by an oscillation between the danger of being beheaded and the delay of the climax—creates a *controtempo* mode, a syncopated movement.

The speaking head

All the sophistry of the queen and the prince are in vain. The pseudo-Brahmin's ploy works, and king Mayūradhvaja agrees to his macabre request and all its strange conditions: Mayūradhvaja has to give the right half of his body. He has to do this willingly, without shedding a tear or crying out in pain. Further, his wife and son have to personally cut his head in two with the saw.

This pair of prints depict the climactic scene from the episode of Mayūradhvaja. The first, simply titled "Mayūradhvaja," is from the famous studio of Raja Ravi Varma, and the latter—obviously an epigone, is from a few years after. In both versions, Mayūradhvaja is in a resolute and prayerful pose, while the queen and prince are slicing open his head. The Brahmins witnessing this ordeal are Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in disguise. The pictures are interesting as they illustrate a double exposure of sorts. We can see Kṛṣṇa in the guise of the Brahmin witnessing the sacrifice, as well as in his true form as Viṣṇu who appeared in the last moment, to prevent the carnage. The inclusion of this scene in the Ravi Varma press' influential gallery of images from Hindu mythical narratives, attests to the continued popularity of this tale.[41]

[41] For the influence of Ravi Varma's prints on Indian society and culture, see Pinney 2004 and Neumayer and Schelberger 2003.

Fig. 3. *Mayūradhvaja*, 19th century, oleograph[42]

[42] Ravi Varma Press, Ghatkopar, Published by Anant Shivaji Desai, Moti Bazar, Mumbai, Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 4. *Mayuradhvaja-satyaparīkṣā* (Mayūradhvaja's Ordeal), 1931, oleograph[43]

[43] Published by A. K. Joshi and Company, Mumbai. https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/5a608e4e017db2e8dedb242b/1601377136505-SXW80AE91IX-MH3X59DTE/IMG_9162.JPG?format=500w (accessed on 26.06.2024).

But the pictures do not give us the full picture. In the Kannada text, as Mayūradhvaja prepares himself for the "sacrifice," all his courtiers cry out in outrage "roaring like an ocean" (*aṁbōdhi-ghōṣadiṁd*), but to no avail.

staṁbha-dvayada naḍuve niṁda nṛpanaṁ tanna
saṁbhavanum arasiyuṁ piḍid'obbar'oṁdu kaḍe
~yiṁ bhāḷa-madhyamaṁ tīkṣṇa-karapatradiṁ gharagharane sīḷutiralu |
jaṁbharipunaṁdana-murārigaḷ beragādar
aṁbōdhi-ghōṣadiṁd'eddu hāhākāra
~diṁ bhayaṁgoṁḍ'oralutirdud'āsthānam ele bhūpa kēḷ kautukavanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.63

[Jaimini said] king, listen to this wonder: As the king
(Mayūradhvaja) stood between the two columns,
his wife and son each held one side and hacked the middle of his forehead
with a sharp saw that went "*gharaghara*."
Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa were stunned and
the assembly panicked, surging and roaring like an ocean.

To turn to the corresponding passage in the Sanskrit source, the queen and the prince hack the king's head in half, and a tear flows down Mayūradhvaja's left eye. The pseudo-Brahmin immediately interjects—"Ha! You seem to be unwilling for the sacrifice, and are shedding tears of grief" and makes as if to go. Meanwhile, Mayūradhvaja, whose head has already been cleaved, requests his wife to join the two halves together, so that he may speak to the Brahmin.

nṛpa uvāca
bhinnaṃ tvayā dhṛtaṃ bhadrē mastakaṃ māmakaṃ punaḥ |
tatō bravīmi viprēndraṃ vrajantaṃ kānanaṃ gṛhāt ||
mā gaccha muniśārdūla śrutvā yāhi vacō mama |

Jaimini's Book 46.52–53c

> The king: "Dear, you put together my skull that is sliced.
> And then I will address the Brahmin who is leaving
> our home to go to the forest." "Honored sage, do not go,
> listen to my words and you can then go."

The suspense that has built up in the audience is finally released and the crescendo of the syncopated movement gives in into the violence of the severing of the head which is portrayed in its full goriness. A split head is now speaking! What does this goriness entail when put in dialogue with the historical context of the religious rivalry between different sectarian communities? Going back to the idea of mapping the emergence and development of violence as religious emotion, we are tempted to see in the narrative structure and in the final episode of full-fledged goriness an answer to the display of violence that was a central feature of the immersive Śaiva experience.

Moreover, in this immersive and physical experience of the divine, the sensorial world comes to the foreground in its sonic instantiation. The materiality of the saw manifests its agency and in the screeching sound of the saw we might hear *bhakti* itself speaking.[44] If we keep our reading of the verse close to its material and phenomenological dimension, the cutting of the body in half offers more than a narrative about *bhakti*—an account that upon recitation will engender more *bhakti* in devout listeners. In this sense, we propose to think of the "vivisection of Mayūradhvaja" not as a second order, mediated experience of *bhakti*, but rather as an *immediate* one: the episode instantiates a certain form of being a *bhakta*, of "doing" or "performing" *bhakti*.

[44] Drawing on the new-materialist turn, a series of Religious Studies scholars have stressed the importance and the heuristic value of the experiential and material dimension in the study of religious phenomena. See, e.g. Meyer et al. 2010.

Fig. 5. Frame 1: The queen (named Śuddhamatī here) and prince Tāmradhvaja cleave king Mayūradhvaja in half, while Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna look on, disguised as Brahmins. Frame 2: Kṛṣṇa blesses the restored Mayūradhvaja, and offers both sacrificial horses to him[45]

bhakti as indivisibility

Mayūradhvaja's explanation for his tears is rather bland. He justifies them to the pseudo-Brahmin as follows: his left half is grieving because it will remain unused, whereas the right half is of use for a noble task. This display of superhuman generosity and piety is meant to move all audiences—the synchronic Arjuna, as well the many generations of diachronic readers and auditors. This is the grand finale, so to speak, even more charged than the moment of the cutting, since Mayūradhvaja's devotion has been subjected to an acid test, and he has proven worthy. Now Kṛṣṇa will shed the ploy and reveal his true self.

[45] https://archive.org/details/hIvG_m-2990-jaimini-adhmedh-jaimini-ashvamedhik-nirnay-sagar-press-1911-kavikulguru-k/page/n346/mode/1up (accessed on 26.06.2024).

One of the apparent paradoxes that *bhakti* accommodates is that of division and indivisibility at the same time. As a unifying force *bhakti* unites the community of devotees which in turn has a status of power that even surpasses the power of the deity. Indeed this power, emotional in nature, is activated by Mayūradhvaja's act. And to this Kṛṣṇa reacts by re-uniting the two halves thus manifesting the cohesive force of *bhakti*. As Wendy Doniger reminds us, "Beheading is seldom fatal in a Hindu myth" (Doniger 1995: 17). The power of the devotee and of devotion, Kṛṣṇa declares, is stronger than himself:

dēhārdhaṃ hi tvayā dattaṃ madvākyēna mahātmanā |
tava yajñē bhāviṣyāmi karmakartā mahāmatē ||
yasmād bhaktaparādhīnō jitō 'smi tava sūnunā |
yudhiṣṭhirasya turagaṃ gṛhāṇa tvam api sphuṭam ||
dvau hayau samayē hutvā kīrtiṃ prāpnuhi śōbhanām |
kidṛśas tava gātrasya bhedō 'yaṃ mama paśyataḥ ||

Jaimini's Book 45.61–62

[Kṛṣṇa said:] Noble man! at my request, you gave half your body.
Since I am beholden to my devotees and I was defeated by your son,
I will assist at your sacrifice. So take the horse of Yudhiṣṭhira as well,
and boldly sacrifice both horses, you will get splendid glory.
This (ordeal of) your body being halved—
how could it ever happen before my eyes?

In this final passage we see how it is only the violence of Mayūradhvaja's faith (*vīra-bhakti*) that can subvert the divine violence of the ordeal and turn it into compassion. As the body of Mayūradhvaja is being annealed, his unconditional love activates and reveals to the audiences (internal and external) *bhakti* to be the real agent of the story. In this sense, *bhakti* is more powerful than the gods themselves. Kṛṣna declares himself as enslaved to the *bhakta* (*bhaktaparādhīno*).[46]

[46] This expression clearly points out that Kṛṣṇa characterizes the king's sacrifice as not merely being done out of a sense of duty (*rājadharma*), but rather out of his *bhakti*.

The unmediated, unconditional offering of the devotee, demands an immediate, unconditional response from the deity.

This kind of *bhakti* does not allow for substitutions, as the very mechanism of substitution implies differentiation. Once again it is Mayūradhvaja who explains it through the iconic ritual of the horse sacrifice. Whereas at the beginning of our article the *aśvamēdha* constituted the reason for the king to scold his son by questioning his system of values and his logic of actions; here Mayūradhvaja goes back to the same context but in order to challenge Kṛṣṇa and the very idea of substitution in itself.

viśvēśa ninna śāśvata mūrtiyaṁ taḷeva
viśvāsadiṁde ninag'oppisiden'īgaḷ'ī
naśvara-śarīramaṁ sāk'ad'aṁtiral'innu tāṁ karmakartṛvāgi |
aśvamēdhaṁgaḷaṁ māḍidoḍ'enag'ave ni~
nn'ucchvāsadiṁd'ogeda maṁtrāḷigaḷ māta~
riśvamitra-jvāle poreyoḷ'ire bhēṣajavan'arasuvare himak'eṁdanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.74

Lord of the World! With the trust that I would
attain your eternal form, I now submit my temporary
body to you, I've had enough of it. If I ought to perform
Ashvamedha sacrifices as the main officiant,
for me they lie in the mantras that emerge from your breath.
With a blazing fire at hand, would one search for a remedy for the frosty cold?

suranadiya tōyam'ire nīr'aḍisi himajalake
parivaṁte ninna darśanam'irdumī mahā~
dhvarak'eḷasuvavan'alla tannumaṁ tanna satisutarumaṁ tannoḷirda |
turagaṁgaḷaṁ tanna yajñamaṁ yajñōpa~
karaṇaṁgaḷaṁ tanna rājyamaṁ tanna maṁ~
dirada sarvasvamaṁ ninna padak'arpisiden'eṁd'avaṁ kaimugidanu ||

Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.76

> Mayūradhvaja joined his hands in prayer: "Would
> a thirsty person seek for dewdrops when the waters
> of the divine river Ganga are available? Similarly, having gotten your *darshan,*
> I am not going to exert myself on this sacrifice.
> My self, my wife and son, my sacrificial horse, my sacrifice
> and its provisions, my kingdom, and everything in my palace—I submit at your feet."

The placement of this episode of self-sacrifice in the context of the horse sacrifice (*aśvamēdha*) illustrates how the ritual logic can no longer be built around the sacrificial offerings, as that of the horse: it is now centred around the axis of the shared loving intention. We could read a historical statement of sorts—a declaration that śāstric ritual discourse is always trumped by emotion (Strength and Intellect are always conquered by surrender). The loving, feeling body is much more central as the agent-cum-instrument of *bhakti*, rather than the purely mentating intellectual head. And the tribute that Kṛṣṇa demands through the *personae* of the Brahmin and the tiger is precisely this: the splitting of the head. In some sense, the head has indeed been split. And being put back together, it has been rewired, so to speak. The conventional modes of cognition (of the brain) have been severed so that a new mode of understanding can emerge: feeling over argument.

We suggest then that the dialogue with Kṛṣṇa offers a way to re-conceptualize and re-appropriate the idea of sacrifice. The sacrificial act does not result from the application of a series of śāstric rules, but rather emerges as a form of unconditional love that dissolves/effaces the apparent differences: as the body of the king is reunited, so the rivalry among chieftains is transformed into devotion. Here the ultimate sovereign is *bhakti* itself. And in this sense, even more than Kṛṣṇa, it is the community of devotees that embodies the *bhakti* which in turn represents an agent of power. We might see how within such a configuration the aesthetic experience of violent *bhakti* can provide a medium of identity construction.

Conclusions

Violent emotions or extreme feelings are and have been part of South Asian religious discourse to various degrees. They are entangled with the history of genres and texts that emerged as a result of interreligious and intra-religious debates. In this article we focused on some early attestations of the relationship between violence and *bhakti* as a form of intense devotion in the Vaiṣṇava cultural sphere.

The Jaimini cycle has had a rich afterlife as it is attested by the efflorescence in the 15th–17th centuries of Jaimini stories translated in and adapted to different literary and performative genres.[47] Many of them present a modular nature, but the Kannada retelling of Lakṣmīśa's Epic retains the unity of whole text, as well as sharing several elements with the Sanskrit Jaimini's Book: its habitat in the Deccan region, and the socio-religious milieu of the Dvaita-Bhāgavata Vaiṣṇava community. Throughout the article we have put the Sanskrit and Kannada texts in dialogue to highlight the several nuances of religious stances and regional practices. In particular the analysis of the Lakṣmīśa's Epic, shows a further intensified emotional dimension, as exemplified by the roaring audience at the apical moment of severing of the head.

Lakṣmīśa's Epic is replete with all kinds of literary and scholarly games, in contrast to the workmanlike style of the Sanskrit source. This is quite deliberate, and Lakṣmīśa is using the figural and rhetorical toolkit of *kāvya* in synthesis with the narrative of Jaimini to bring about the textured psycho-aesthetic effects that we see in this poem.

One may be sceptical of the three interpretative lines that we parse *bhakti* along. How can it be about division *and* indivisibility (and about cooking!). But this is the nature of religion, and this is the nature of emotion—that they contain seemingly paradoxical things. The world of *bhakti* is indeed filled with several paradoxes, and we only draw upon that pool—it is at once deeply personal, and profoundly social. It can be intensely eirenic and extremely hostile at the same time.

[47] See Smith 1997 and Pillai 2024.

bhakti can indeed contain dichotomies as well as (seemingly) disparate values that come together in an assemblage.[48] By coming to terms with the textu(r)al variety of this assemblage, we can attend to how *bhakti* operates at different levels of the story.

Firstly, the story of Mayūradhavaja, both in its Sanskrit and Kannada versions, gives us a new way to bring emotion into the study of cultural and religious history. By conceiving violence as an emotion itself expressly in terms of an enactive, embodied agent. In our analysis of the imagery of violence in this text, we understand the violent request of the disguised Kṛṣṇa, and the violent self-sacrifice of Mayūradhavaja not as socio-political practices; or as didactic modes for explicating justice (*dharma*) or subverting hierarchy. Nor do we see this violence as a psychological state alone. As we have tried to demonstrate, violent action is performative of, but also formative of *bhakti*. If emotions represent not a state but rather a practice, then a gory head that is split open and then speaks, is not meant to refer to something else outside the text (as a metaphor would do), but instead serves as a performance. It enacts the willing self-sacrifice of the devotee, the internal split "dilemma" that the reader is experiencing. At the apical moment, while the king's head is being cut by the saw (*karapatra*), violence becomes throughout the trial of Mayūradhvaja something that is somaesthetic, tangible, embodied.[49] In this instance, the attention of the audience is stimulated by inserting the rasping sound of the fatal saw (*gharaghara*) in the poem. The iconic quality of the sacrifice scene is attested by its popularity in visual renditions of the Mayūradhvajas's story—this graphic scene seems to turn into a visual metonym for the whole narrative (see section "The speaking head").

Further, the Jaimini cycle not only represents a core narrative reservoir for the Vaiṣṇava religious discourse, but it also shows early traces of the emergence of violence as a discursive element in religious materials, in dialogue with Śaiva and Jaina discourses. In particular the episode of king Mayūradhvaja where a *bhakta* has to be subject

[48] On the concept of assemblage, see Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

[49] For a detailed history of self-sacrifice, see Storm 2015.

(voluntarily) to extreme violence as a form of devotion constitutes—as far as we know—is a novelty in the Vaiṣṇava narrative. As a striking case of extreme goriness within the Vaiṣṇava repertoire, the story offers a perfect locus to understand how the mechanisms of adaptation, re-use and intertextuality function as devices of self-demarcation and further as means to adumbrate religious or sectarian identities.

If we wish to historicize the emergence of violence as a religious marker, we have to frame it against the network of religious groups competing for patronage, authority and prestige. As we saw in the text, sectarian jibes are subtly encoded in Mayūradhvaja's scolding to his son. The king uses botanical comparisons to highlight the bad choice of his son. But the botanical he names are in turn charged with the religious semiotics of the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva groups. In particular, the rivalry between Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sects seems to orient this whole episode. The adoption of violence as a mode of *bhakti*—exemplified by the Mayūradhvaja's tale, but also several others in this text—then, can be interpreted as a Vaiṣṇava response to, and adaptation of, the Śaiva themes of harsh devotion (*vaṉ-toṉru, vīra-bhakti*).

The tale of Mayūradhvaja and his son Tāmradhvaja also illustrates effectively, how the esoteric mode of affective *bhakti* offered an alternative to the exoteric mode of Vedic ritual. The violent act of dismembering Mayūradhvaja represents an apotheosis of sorts. The controlled, acceptable ritual of offering an animal in the *yajña* (*paśumēdha,* in this case *aśvamēdha*) is replaced by a demand for another kind of sacrifice which momentarily regresses to an older form, with a human offering (*puruṣamēdha*). The litany of absurd, *ad hoc* conditions imposed by the pseudo-Brahmin, in rebuttal to the queen's and prince's offers further throw in relief, even satirise the tightly encoded ritual cosmos of Vedic sacrifice. It has to be half of the king's body. No wait, it has to be the right half. No wait, it has to be sawn in half by the queen and the prince themselves.

The queen's and prince's attempts to out-Brahmin the Brahmin fail. Kṛṣṇa offers a deliberate misreading of the tear shed by Mayūradhvaja as his wife and son saw him in half: Kṛṣṇa interprets it as a sign of the

latter's unwillingness; as a sign that it is not a gift given wholeheartedly, with enthusiastic consent, but rather out of some grudging sense of obligation. However, while Mayūradhvaja's head (and therefore brain) has been split in half, he is not in two minds. He isn't like Calvino's Cloven Viscount, who is ruptured into the malevolent Gramo and the kindly Buono, who confront each other in a duel, and are then put together again by a surgeon (Calvino 1998). Mayūradhvaja is whole in his *bhakti*-inflected resolve, and his eirenic submission neutralises the violence of Kṛṣṇa's ordeal.

But the story doesn't end here. After Kṛṣṇa appears in his true form, and makes Mayūradhvaja whole, there is one further test which completes the ring structure of this tale. As we see in Jaimini's Book 45.61–62 (see above), Kṛṣṇa offers Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrificial horse to Mayūradhvaja, and tells him to continue the horse sacrifice—this time with both horses. Kṛṣṇa even offers to assist him in this project. Mayūradhvaja however, is very clear that his purpose in life was to get *darśana* of Kṛṣṇa, and that the ritual sacrifice has little value for him. This section at the end dovetails nicely with the passage we saw at the beginning of this paper (see section "The tale of Mayūradhvaja"), wherein Mayūradhvaja rebukes Tāmradhvaja for his asinine judgement, that made him abandon the supreme Hari for an equine *hari*.

The legitimising function of the *aśvamēdha* which constitutes the frame of the whole Jaimini cycle is subtly challenged here. As a consequence, Mayūradhvaja does not accept Yudhiṣṭhira's sovereignty on the basis of having been defeated. Rather, he concedes the horse in recognition of their fellowship in the community of affective devotion to Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa.

Previous scholarship describes Jaimini's Book as "above all a theological or ideological apologia for ideas of bhakti and for the cult of Kṛṣṇa"(Koskikallio 1992) and as being "full of emotional Vaishnava bhakti" (Pillai 2024: 75). One could, though, see it differently. As Kṛṣṇa says at the end of the Mayūradhvaja episode, god is subordinate to his devotees (*bhaktaparādhīna*). Now, this is an important trend in the development of *bhakti* devotionalism highlighted by our episode—the increasing salience of the human in a *bhakti* world—as

individual (*toṇṭar*, *aṭiyār*, *śaraṇa*, *bhakta*, *bhāgavata*, *guru* etc.) and as a community. The hagiography seems to be a dominant literary genre of the 12–13th centuries in South Asia.[50] We are now able to situate Jaimini's epic as a congener of the Jaina and Śaiva hagiographies that canonizes a pantheon of teachers or saints. The Jaimini cycle presents a gallery of hitherto unknown devotees, who are soon incorporated into the pantheon of exemplary Vaiṣṇava devotees described in the early modern *Bhaktamāla* (circa 16th cent.).[51] This gives a literary-historical insight into the genre of the late-medieval hagiography: we can see these collections of tales as representing the contestation and competition of sectarian groups being reified in their narrative repertoires.

To conclude, let us look at the very end of the story where *bhakti* leaps on the scene as an all-encompassing force. The potency of *bhakti* is rooted in its emotional nature. Just as emotion trumps reason, indivisibility trumps separation. This ideology of emotion that contrasts with and conquers an excess of reasoning implies a new understanding of sacrifice. One that is based not on finding boundaries between things; but on identifying the overlap. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa too, is subject to the gravitational force of *bhakti* and the *bhakta*.

Within the discourse of indivisibility, Mayūradhvaja's tale brings up a familiar tension—that between Sacrifice with capital 'S' (sacrifice as *yāga*) and sacrifice with lower case 's' (sacrifice as *tyāga*). The difference between these two is thrown in sharp relief in the tale of Mayūradhvaja. The king almost entirely denies the older ritualistic model of *yāga*, which is mostly about mediacy, about finding ritually acceptable substituents that are conveyed to the gods through the intermediacy of priests, in a tightly regulated choreography of ritual. The ritual practice is framed in an intellectual space, and the hermeneutics of ritual performance and acceptable substitutions are all the remit of the learned priests.

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50 We have in mind, the Jaina hagiographies such as the Sanskrit *Triṣaṣṭhiśalākāpuruṣacaritra* of Hēmacandra (12th cent.), the Śaiva hagiographies such as the Tamil *Periyapurāṇam* of Cēkkiḻār (ca. 12th cent.), and Kannaḍa *ragaḷe*s of Harihara (13th cent.).

51 For an account of the *Bhaktamāla,* see Hare 2011.

The *bhakti* model of *tyāga* is in direct opposition to this. The devotee has a deeply personal, emotional relation with their god, and engages with their deity through distinct experiential, somatic and expressive modes. It is unthinkable that this would be mediated by a third person, and the paradigm of substitutes is not possible.

Throughout this tale, the leitmotif of Mayūradhvaja's discursive style has been about the *bhakta*'s discernment or wisdom in making the right choice, or to paraphrase, to choose the 'better' option. A higher register of this wisdom is the ability to know when a presented option is not a true option. So, at the beginning of the tale, he rebukes his son for fetching the horse instead of Kṛṣṇa, with a couple of charged analogies. In section "*bhakti* as division" and "*bhakti* as indivisibility" we saw how the queen and son attempt to offer themselves as substitutes instead of king Mayūradhvaja, only to be thwarted by Kṛṣṇa's śāstric logic: Mayūradhvaja would anyway not have let them stand in for him. Finally, when Kṛṣṇa puts Mayūradhvaja together, and offers that he should take both horses, and conduct two *aśvamēdha* sacrifices, we see Mayūradhvaja turning down the offer. And in a pair of verses that are remarkably similar to the scolding he gave his son. Using the now familiar device of weighing options, Mayūradhvaja says he has no use for sacrifices when he has seen Kṛṣṇa—whose every breath brings Vedic mantras into existence. He expands with analogies: when one has a warm fire by their side, is there any need to look for a remedy for the cold; when a thirsty person has the river Ganga at hand, why would they struggle to melt snow? These two verses complete the ring structure of the narrative, as it were.

If the episode began with a rebuke to prince Tāmradhvaja, who is raw and uncooked in his devotions (hence not fully *bhakta*), it comes to an end with a rebuke to god himself (section "*bhakti* as indivisibility", Lakṣmīśa's Epic 26.74). Mayūradhvaja schools Kṛṣṇa with impunity in the new paradigm of *bhakti* sacrifice, which has superseded the older one of Yajña Sacrifice. And God, who is no longer autonomous, but under the rule of his devotees (*bhaktaparādhīna*), has no choice, but to agree.

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