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The Issue of Magic in the Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas. Mantra as a Magical Tool Exemplified by Nārāyaṇa Mantra of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

ABSTRACT

The huge body of texts known as Purāṇas, besides the general information about religious life in ancient India, provides us with rich material concerning religion, philosophy, mysticism and also magical practices in the late ancient and medieval period. Among the Purāṇas there are texts known as Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas which support the *Vaiṣṇava* doctrine and practice. They contain a very wide spectrum of practices embracing bhakti, yoga and tantric modes of worship. The most popular and widely known of Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas is the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

This text (book VI, chapter 8) contains a very interesting description of the ritual which might be understood as magical ritual protecting the body of a warrior in battle. The story is based on an ancient mythical fight between the god Indra and demon Viśvarūpa. It is an example of a typical fusion of ritual and mantra known in India since the Vedic period. The body of a worshiper is protected by a mantra known as a *Nārāyaṇakāvaca* which functions as a magical armour. The ritual sequence would be analysed as a common fusion of rite and mantra concerning bodily, verbal and mental activity. The methodology is inspired by the concepts of Frits Staal – one of the most acclaimed and also controversial figures in the field of Ritual Studies. According to Staal, formal and structural analysis of ritual and mantric complex is necessary for understanding and describing this phenomenon. This perspective views ritual as a universal human activity – its main innovation is separating the structure of ritual from the symbolic level which might be rather unstable in opposition to the fixed structural level. Moreover, the protecting ritual will be compared to some late Tantric rituals which use mantras in an analogical way (nyāsa). The human body is the field where the ritual and magical formulas meet.

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In my paper I would like to throw some light on the issue of the particular magico-religious ritual described in one of the most prominent Purāṇas – the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (BhP) which is the famous Vaiṣṇava Purāṇa.¹ The Purāṇas are the huge body of texts which were composed in late ancient times until the medieval period. The increase in devotional traditions (bhakti) in the Gupta period (III–V CE) is reflected in the development of literature encompassing the elements of the bhakti cult and remaining religions of Indian subcontinent. Whole first millennium of Common Era is signed with the eruption of Puranic literature.² The Purāṇas are a very interesting and informative sort of literature because they reflect the rich landscape of religious groups in the developing and in the mature Hinduism phase. The Purāṇas contain the elements of many different traditions including bhakti, yoga, saṃkhya, tantra and also some general Indian cosmological concepts (hence: popular “Puranic cosmology”). In traditional classification, the whole body of Puranic texts might be divided into Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva and Śākta Purāṇas which corresponds loosely to the three dominant religions of Hinduism. In many cases, the authors of Purāṇas try to synthesise the various streams of religious and philosophical thought – and this is the case of the BhP. The surprising theme of this text is the fusion of the theistic bhakti and Advaita tradition (some scholars have created the term “nondual theism”³) and also ritualistic traditions: the old Vedic and Tantric tradition. Within this illustrative approach, research on the particular aspects of material contained in the BhP might be fruitful. Therefore as I believe, because of its wide scope, the situation depicted in the Purāṇas is closer to the living traditions of medieval India than a postulated picture of some normative or ritualistic texts. In this way they probably reflect the more or less real landscape of the late ancient and medieval period. A similar synthesis (or co-occurrence) of religious and magical elements can be traced also in other literature from this period (for instance in Hindu and Buddhist Tantric works like *Kaulajñānirṇāya* or

¹ [The] *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, transl. and introduction G. V. Tagare, Delhi 1997 [BhP], [Śrīmad] *Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, transl. C. L. Goswami, Gorakhpur 2001.

² See L. Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, Wiesbaden 1986.

³ D. P. Sheridan, *Advaitic Theism of the Bhagawata Purāṇa*, New Delhi 1986.

Hevajratantra, for instance).⁴ Obviously the material in the Purāṇas has to be approached critically, especially in recognising its value as a historical source, in which case the material is generally regarded as doubtful.⁵

BhP is traditionally recognised as one of the eighteen of the mahāpurāṇas or Great Purāṇas. Undoubtedly BhP is the most famous and influential Purāṇa both for ancient and contemporary Indians. This position is confirmed by contemporary research. According to the Indian scholar, Vopadeva (XIII CE), BhP fulfilled the role of Veda, Purāṇa and poetry (kāvyā), acting as master, friend and beloved respectively. In this way, BhP creates a synthesis of all these scriptures and leads a human being towards perfection.⁶ Doctrinally, BhP belongs to the theistic bhakti tradition. The text's date of composition is a matter of discussion, but there is a scholarly consensus that places this text somewhere between the VIII and X century AD. BhP was composed the most probably in South India given that the concept of the emotional bhakti and remarks about Tamil saints and mystic Alvars point to this area.⁷ BhP is permeated with the concept of bhakti directed at the god Vishnu, especially in form of Kṛṣṇa.

The main plot of the text are the mythical acts (līlā) of Viṣṇu, its avatāras, but special importance is placed on the prominent god Kṛṣṇa. These mythical stories and also some ancient Vedic myths form the basis of Vaiṣṇava theology which tries to fuse the religion of the ancient Bhāgavatas, the South Indian emotional Kṛṣṇa-bhakti with the upaniṣadic path of jñāna, the cosmology of the Pañcarātra school, yogic techniques and sankhya philosophy (in some aspects different from the classical saṃkhya system). G. V. Tagare notes that BhP explicitly includes elements of the early Vaiṣṇava sects: Bhāgavatas and Pañcaratras with the dominance of the former.⁸ Similarly to the case of sankhya, the jñāna and yoga proposed by BhP are surrendered to the highest goal of the text which is establishing the supremacy of the bhakti-mārga and

⁴ *Kaulajñānanirṇaya and some minor texts of the school of Matsyendrānātha*, (Texts from Nepal I), ed. P. C. Bagchi, Calcutta 1934; *Kaulajñāna-nirṇaya of the School of Matsyendranatha*, introduction P. C. Bagchi, trans. into English M. Magee, Varanasi 1986; D. L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*. (London Oriental Series, Vol. 6) London 1959; *Hevajra tantra. The Concealed Essence of the Hevajra Tantra with the Commentary Yogaratnamālā*, trans. G. W. Farrow, I. Menon, New Delhi 2001.

⁵ L. Rocher, op. cit.

⁶ G. V. Tagare, introduction [in:] BhP, op. cit.

⁷ F. Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (Oxford University South Asian Studies Series), Delhi 2001.

⁸ G. V. Tagare, op. cit., s. xli-xlv.

Vaiṣṇava religion in the Kṛṣṇaite mode. The one and the supreme being is Bhagavan Hari (Hari, Kṛṣṇa or Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa) – nothing which exists is different from him and everything derives its existence from him. Apart of this and other theological concepts, BhP contains some examples of ritualistic and magical material which is usually a synthesis of Vedic and Tantric elements.⁹ One such ritual will be the subject of the following brief analysis.

Here I wish to render a small fragment of the BhP. Similarly to other Purāṇas, BhP contains many different concepts and modes of worship also in a magical fashion. First of all, it is very difficult to differentiate magical and religious elements in such texts. Moreover, the differentiation between religion and magic is generally a very problematic task and the following text is a confirmation of this assumption. My goal is to depict such a fusion of magic and theistic elements in one particular ritual. This ritual, focused on Nārāyaṇa mantras, has a protective function and its components partially belong to the archaic magical traditions where particular parts of the body are inhabited by a deity. Partially it has characteristic of a devotional hymn (bhakti) in the sense that it calls the worshipper to the deity for protection. But in the core this ritual has a magical, Tantric character and its goal is to ensure the worshipper the magical armour built with mystical incantations, a motif quite popular in later Tantric texts. As the texts relates, this sonic armour served the leader of devas, Indra to conquer his enemies, but it may be used by anyone in the case of danger.

The methodology proposed here combines the hermeneutical approach with some elements of Ritual Studies. Primarily, I would like to see this ritual in the hermeneutical manner, correlate the sonic elements with the somatic actions, and finally move to some conclusions based on the concepts of Frits Staal. The whole passage concerning Nārāyaṇa armour will be described with special attention to the correlation of particular mystic formulas (mantras) and bodily gestures. The following brief analysis is aimed at outlining the general structure of the ritual.

The plot of the story which serves as a point of departure for describing the Nārāyaṇa protective ritual is the ancient Vedic myth about Indra and Viśvarūpa. The Thousand-eyed (sahasrākṣa) Indra, who offended the priest of the devas Bṛhaspati, is forced to find another priest. Without a proper priest and therefore devoid of power, devas are in real danger of being conquered by the asuras,

⁹ Which may be complementary to each other – both Vedic and Tantric ritual contain manual activities and mantras as well. Purāṇas join these two modes of ritualism, see BhP, XII. 11, passim.

their main enemies, which in the Purāṇas have a demonic character. The lack of a priest causes a real problem for the devas: nobody can perform the soma ritual for the sake of the gods. Therefore, one of the asuras, Viśvarūpa, becomes the purohita (the home priest) of the devas and teaches Indra the ritual of the Nārāyaṇa mantra which is for the purpose of creating magical body armour. The text is part of the sixths Skandha of the BhP and embraces the whole eight chapter (adhyaīya). The preliminary part includes the purification of the body with water – ablution. In the case of fear or danger, the worshipper should use the *Nārāyaṇa varma* – which has a double meaning – body armour or mystical sound or incantation (*varma nārāyaṇātmakam*). The quotations below contain just a few ślokaś from the eighth adhyaya, crucial for the described ritual.

Text:¹⁰

BhP VI.8.5-12

śrī-viśvarūpa uvāca—

dhautāṅghri-pāṇir ācamya sapavitra udañ-mukhaḥ |
kṛta-svāṅga-kara-nyāso mantrābhyāṁ vāg-yataḥ śuciḥ ||

Śrī Viśvarupa said:

4. Purified one who keeps the silence, washed his hands and feet, wearing the kuśa grass on his fingers [sapavitra], facing the north, make the ritual of applying [nyāsa] both the mantra on the parts of his body.

|| VI.8.5 ||

nārāyaṇa-param varma sannahyed bhaya āgate |
pādayor jānunor ūrvor udare ḥṛdy athorasi ||

|| 6.8.6 ||

mukhe śirasya ānupūrvyād omkāradīni vinyaset |
om namo nārāyaṇāyeti viparyayam athāpi vā ||

¹⁰ The text is based on quotation from BhP with the commentary of Śrīdhara Svamin, *Bhagavata-bhavartha-dīpikā*, ed. Ramateja Pandeya, Benares 1996, transliteration J. Brzeziński: www.gaudiyaग्रन्थामंदिरा.com. Translation is based on the C. L. Goswami edition of the BhP (Gita Press [Śrīmad] *Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*, transl. C. L. Goswami, Gorakhpur 2001) with some my own changes and modifications.

5–6. When the fear has come, he should put the body armour of the Supreme Nārāyaṇa. starting from omkara one after another on the legs, knees, thighs, belly, hare, chest, face and head Om namo Nārāyaṇāya in the described way and in reversed order.

Mantra: *oṃ namo nārāyaṇāya*

- the worshipper put one after another the syllable of the mantra on:
legs, knees, thighs, belly, heart, chest, face and head
- and in opposite direction

the commentary of Śrīdhara Svamin: text describe eight and twelve syllable mantras.

|| 6.8.7 ||

kara-nyāsaṃ tataḥ kuryād dvādaśākṣara-vidyayā |
praṇavādi-ya-kārāntam aṅguly-aṅguṣṭha-parvasu ||

7. Thereafter one should assign the syllables of the mantra to the fingers with twelve syllables mantra starting with omkāra, and finishing on the “ya” syllable to the joints of the thumbs.

The text describes the so called Kara-nyāsa, the order of “putting” the sounds on the particular places of the body:

mantra: *oṃ namo bhāgavate vāsudevāya*:

- the index fingers – from the tips of the fingers through the joints
- the next four syllables on the joints of the thumbs

The next worshipper should continue the nyāsa ritual using another Vaiṣṇava mantra – *oṃ viṣṇave namaḥ*:

|| 6.8.8 ||

nyased hṛdaya omkāraṃ vi-kāraṃ anu mūrdhani |
ṣa-kāraṃ tu bhruvor madhye ṇa-kāraṃ śikhayā nyaset ||

|| 6.8.9 ||

ve-kāraṃ netrayor yuñjyān na-kāraṃ sarva-sandhiṣu |
ma-kāraṃ astram uddīśya mantra-mūrtir bhaved budhaḥ ||

8–9. Then he should place the syllable Om in his heart, the syllable “vi” on the top of his head, “ṣa” between the brows, “ṇa” on the

place of the śikha. The syllable “ve” on the eyes, the syllable “na” on all the joints, meditate on the “ma” syllable as a weapon, the wise one takes the mantric body.

Mantra – om viṣṇave namaḥ:

- om – in the heart (in wide sense)
- vi – the top of the head
- ṣa – in the middle of the eyebrows
- ṇa – in the śikha (the tuff of the hair on the top of the head)
- ve – on the eyes
- na – with all the joints of the body
- ma – used as the weapon

|| 6.8.10 ||

savisargaṃ phaḍ-antaṃ tat sarva-dikṣu vinirdīset |
om viṣṇave nama iti ||

Mantra: maḥ astrāya phaḍ

10. The putting of the visarga finishing with “phaḍ”, he should assign the om viṣṇave namaḥ to all directions.

|| 6.8.11 ||

ātmānaṃ paramaṃ dhyāyed dhyeyaṃ ṣaḍ-śaktibhir yutam |
vidyā-tejas-tapo-mūrtim imaṃ mantraṃ udāharet ||

11. Meditating about himself as the Supreme possessing of six śaktis [starting with knowledge and so on...] one should repeat the mantra.

|| 6.8.12 ||

om harir vidadhyān mama sarva-rakṣāṃ...

12. Om may Hari protect me on all sides and from... [here follows the hymn to Nārāyaṇa]

Analysis: In the material presented above, the ritualistic goal is not purely soteriological and some elements have characteristics which are more magical than theistic. The key concept is that mantras are sonic manifestations of

a deity.¹¹ This is a typical Tantric motif and common in contemporary Tantric literature.¹² The depictions of the *nyāsa* ritual in BhP are relatively old. According to the fundamental Tantric ritual rule, it is necessary to become like a god to worship the god and obtain the full magical benefit of ritual through the divinising of one's own body. This is expressed in the well known Tantric formula *yathā dehe tathā deve*, which probably has Vedic origin.¹³

We are dealing here with the concept of the sonic manifestation of god. The main sequence is the correlation of the mystical sounds with particular places around the human body. The ritualist sits here facing the north which is not in agreement with Vedic ritualism, where generally the east is the auspicious direction. The north appears in Indian traditions as generally non-Vedic, but in some medieval Vaiṣṇava circles and Yogic tradition, the north is considered to be a direction of immortality (but not bhakti). Moreover, using the seed sound mantra, or *bīja phat*, is very popular in Tantric groups whether Hindu or Buddhist.¹⁴ The bijas *hum phat* appears in Tantric texts and also in magical texts where *phat bīja* is correlated with destructive magic (*abhicāra*). Additionally, it is worth adding that the mantras used here are probably chants in silence, in the mind: (*manas*) and such mode of worship is quite common in Tantric ritualism.

Analysing the present material ritual sequence we can divide it into three general parts: firstly – body purification. The next part has a Tantric, magical characteristic and relies on the application of the technique of creating the mantric or sonic body. The last part contains the devotional bhakti hymn and reflects the concept of Viṣṇu avatāras. The texts try to connect the old myth with the now growing and dominant Vaiṣṇava concepts and Pañcaratra's god Nārāyaṇa. The soteriological goal of the bhakti tradition is here overlapped by the pragmatic achievement of the protection of the worshipper which is accomplished by building some specific immaterial body armour. The protection is achieved not just by the sacral power (by the god's grace), but must be preceded by a strict ritual sequence. The ritual of Nārāyaṇa's protective mantra is a fine example of a mutual osmosis of the various tra-

¹¹ See, A. Padoux, *Vāc: the concept of the Word in selected Hindu tantras*, trans. J. Gontier, SUNY Series in the Shaiva traditions of Kashmir, p. XV, Albany, N. Y. 1990.

¹² N. N. Bhattacharya, *History of the Tantric Religion*, Manohar, Delhi 1992, G. L. Beck, *Sonic Theology. Hinduism and Sacred Sound*, Delhi 1995.

¹³ See for example: M. S. Bhat, *Vedic Tantrism: A Study of R̥gvidhāna of Śaunaka with Text and Translation*, Delhi 1998, p. 194.

¹⁴ G. Bühnenmann, *Six Rites of Magic*, in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. D. G. White, Princeton 2000, p. 452.

ditions – we have here ancient myth (though transformed in comparison to the older versions), magical protective ritual and finally a component of the theistic, devotional tradition or bhakti. Perhaps in the beginning this protective ritual did not have a Vaiṣṇava character yet gained this feature in the course of its development.

Late Fritz Staal, one of the most prominent scholars in the field of Ritual Studies proposed a formal analysis of the ritual and mantras. He suggested that such a study is a necessary step in explaining this primordial field of human activity. His contribution might be used to deal with different kinds of ritual, also magical. His main thesis was that ritual and the mantras associated with it are meaningless and basically they do not refer to any other realities external to them.¹⁵ So studies on the meaning and symbolism are just the surface of the research and cannot fully explain what the ritual really is. Staal's general assumption is that the ritual sequence and structure of the incantations (mantras) are a stable element but their meaning is flexible. What is important is the syntax rather than the semantics. The ritual must be studied by using linguistic, structural methods.¹⁶ In this manner we can look at the ritual presented here as a expression of a continued tradition and conservative ritual structure which might be used in other traditions in a similar way but with a different meaning. This assumption seems to be confirmed while confronted with different traditions – the nyāsa ritual and use of mantras in a similar manner is widely practiced in almost all Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions. Such a ritual sequence is homogenous but the meaning and symbols attached to them are flexible and prone to change.

Following Staal we can formulate the following theoretical remarks concerning the mantras.

- the sound of the mantras may not be changed;
- the order of elements within the mantras may not be changed (the special structure: the bija sound usually at the beginning but in Tantric mantras also at the end of incantation);
- mantras are not meaningful sentences – they do not contain meaningful expressions, and they don't create language but they obviously follow grammatical rules (syntax dominates over semantics);

¹⁵ F. Staal, with C. V. Somayajipad and Itti Ravi Nambudiri, *AGNI: The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, Vols. I–II, Berkeley 1983; idem, *The Rules Without Meaning. Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences*, New York–Bern–Frankfurt am Main–Paris 1989, Indian edition: *Ritual and Mantras. Rules without Meaning*, Delhi 1996.

¹⁶ F. Staal, *The Rules Without Meaning...*, op. cit., p. 113.

- the circulation and transmission of the mantras is often without a tradition of explaining the meaning of these formulas.

This assumption leads us to the conclusion that mantras are not typical language expressions. It means that mantras are rather not means of communication, at least not the modes of communication of humans. These special incantations are supposed to achieve another goal completely. The expression which appears in the text *vāg-yatah* may not only mean the order to keep the silence but to suppress language (*vāc*) completely. It might be concluded that the chanting of the mantras is considered here not as a use of language and the author (or authors) of the presented fragments differentiate mantras primarily by using structural rather than semantic tools. We hear only about the number of syllables rather than about meaning of the particular mantra or to whom it is directed (eight syllable or twelve syllable). Again, the form of the mantra is more important than its meaning, which generally confirms Staal's theory, but obviously more detailed research is needed.¹⁷

In conclusion, we may also look at the more empirical aspect of the whole ritual – the psychosomatic effects of chanting the mantras. Mantras were traditionally recognised as transformative tools and we can assume that this has some empirical basis. Since Vedic times the effective use of mantras required breath control.¹⁸ The mantra should be recited on one exhale and this means that in the case of long formulas and continuous repetition it was not an easy task. Chanting the mantras, combined with such techniques as visualisation, sensory deprivation and Yogic methods (widely used in Tantric Hinduism) may effectively lead to the so called Altered States of Consciousness (ASC). In this way, in Indian tradition mantras are part of the archaic somatocentric ritual techniques which were supposed to change the human condition primarily by transforming human cognitive qualities, to provoke various ecstatic, enstatic and generally unusual “states of consciousness.” As such effective tools, mantras are a crucial and relatively stable part of the initiating ritual systems of both the Vedic and later Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions. Therefore, mantras, their source, structure, methods of chanting, effects on humans and cultural impact in

¹⁷ The Staal's theory is only one research proposition in analyzing the phenomena of mantras, for wider perspective, see *Understanding Mantras*, ed. H. P. Alper, New York 1989.

¹⁸ F. Staal, with C. V. Somayajipad and Itti Ravi Nambudiri, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 382–283.

Asia, are all subjects which are undoubtedly worth studying with the use of the wide interdisciplinary methods.

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