The Liminality of *Gṛhapati,*
the Leader of an Aggressive Sodality, the *Vrātyas*

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Abstract

The memory of *gṛhapati* or *sthapati,* the leader of sodalities, is preserved in the earliest sources. The *Ṛgveda* presents Budha, the son of Soma, as the first *sthapati* known by name. Neglecting to ask the god Varuṇa for a place of consecration for Budha to become *sthapati,* plunged the subsequent generations of the sodalities into a perpetual struggle to secure their livelihood during the scant season, and likewise cut off their access to heaven. Falk, the foremost contemporary scholar of the *vrātyas,* pondered why people would turn to raiding in order to get provisions. The term *gṛhapati,* with respect to social and economic issues, was probably already rescinded by revision or censure in the *Brāhmaṇas*: the *gṛhapati* was responsible for the family unit and, to be able to provide for all, he was compelled to go on raiding expeditions, which were bracketed by ritual sessions (*sattra*), one before the expedition and one after. Later on, the *sattra* became a conduit for the *śrauta* rituals. The liminality of the *gṛhapati* or *sthapati* lay in the arduous preparations he underwent for the *sattra* and expeditions; both of these major undertakings were fraught with isolation.

Keywords: *vrātya, sthapati, gṛhapati, sattra, vrātyastoma,* wolf / dog, *dīkṣita,* Khaṇḍobā, Rudra, Maruts, Dālbhya, Budha, *keśin,* Ekavrātya, *Śrautasūtra.*

1. *Introduction*

The leader called *gṛhapati* or *sthapati* and his actions and responsibilities have nearly all disappeared from the textual sources, although some relevant living practices still persist in modern times on the central and southern South Asian peninsula. From references to the leader of the *vrātya* sodality as the ritualist at

*sattra*s performed for expeditions, through which they would acquire goods to survive the meagre winter months, we learn that he relinquished all the spoils, as shown below in an example from the *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 10. 6. Although this and other early texts provide evidence of changes within the society and religious practice, there are absences, even lacunae, where we might expect to find more presence and activities of *gṛhapati / sthapati*, together with the *vrātya*s. It is possible to speculate that traces were blurred, or even removed.

This study aims to discuss the previously unexplored position of this *vrātya* leader, the *gṛhapati* or *sthapati*, in ancient times on the South Asian peninsula, and the survival of *vrātya* practices, in great likelihood, to modern times in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Scholars such as Harry Falk[1] have pointed out that some of the practices survived elsewhere not only among other Indo-European groups, as evidenced in Greece and Rome, but also in the steppes of the vast regions of Southwest and Central Asia, as explored by Y. Vassilkov[2].

Other works may provide an additional tool and appreciation for an inquiry of this kind. The work of Bjørn Thomassen, in particular, not only focused on examples from his fieldwork but also delved into how European historical development, particularly from the 15th century to about the mid 17th century CE, was a calamitous experience, forging a path to the French Revolution, industrialisation and such new phenomena as the breaking up of extended family life, eventually leading to the nuclear family, etc. He characterised this as a liminal experience of this time period, full of anxiety and insecurity – what everyone had taken for granted no longer held. He summarised the condition with the phrase «loss of taken-for-granted structures»[3]. Perhaps this would be the most succinct definition of the term 'liminality' in the context of the current study. In other words, all norms, familiarity and customs are challenged. As happened in many times in Europe in the 15th century to about the mid 17th century CE, there have likewise been periods of liminality in South Asia.

The sources for this inquiry are primarily late Vedic textual evidence, such as the *Brāhmaṇa*s and *Sūtra*s, but also the *Upaniṣad*s and their explorations by modern scholars, and then the anthropological work of Sontheimer (1997) and to some extent that of Vassilkov. Hence is it possible to say that the methodology is hybrid: examining late Vedic texts as well as what is available in the life of modern-

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1. Falk 1986.
2. Vassilkov 2009, 50.
3. Thomassen 2016, 113.

day rural religious rituals and performances in a number of locations in Central South Asia[4].

2. Gṛhapati / Sthapati *and the* Vrātya*s in Vedic Sources*

In early references to *gṛhapati / sthapati*, we observe that these were primarily gods, and their position was called "*sthapati*": Budha, son of Soma, Agni, and most prominently Rudra with his sons Maruts[5], as well as the gods Indra, and Savitṛ (Sūrya). Apart from a few scholars in the past century, perhaps only one in this century, Moreno Dore, has inquired into the divine aspect of the *vrātya*. For example, in his article entitled *The Ekavrātya, Indra and the Sun*[6], he offers a comparison between the gods and three particular Vedic figures: the *keśin* (RV 10. 136), the *vrātya* (AVŚ 15), and the *brahmacārin* (AVŚ 11. 5). These figures had a connection to esoteric knowledge. Dore argues that if *keśin* and *brahmacārin* are gods among gods, then *vrātya* should be understood as also having divine status. Furthermore, he proposes that AVŚ 15. 1. 1-6 provides insight into the path of the Vrātya – assuming the role of Indra to become Ekavrātya.

Stephanie Jamison observed that there is a connection between Agni and *gṛhapati*. She paid close attention to the term *gṛhapati* in her recent article (2019), as she considers *gṛhapati* to be a precursor of *gṛhastha* but could not definitively link the two[7]. Jamison focused on the term with great intent but did not imagine

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4. There have been mentions of similar practices in southern Kerala, the most southern state in India. Vassilkov (2015, 233) refers to a communication with Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University of Cracow) about her fieldwork in Kerala regarding a local god, Muthappan, which seems to fit the category of a local Rudra whose companions are dogs. They are ritually fed every day inside the temple.

5. RV 5. 61. 17:
etám me stómam ūrmiye /
dārbhiyā́ya párā vaha /
gíro devi rathī́r iva // 17 //

This praise of mine, O Night, carry off to Dārbhya,
[my] hymns [carry away] like a charioteer, O goddess.

Here the name of Dālbhya is Dārbhya – not unexpected as the semivowel / r / was replaced with / l / with time and relocation eastwards. Text metrically restored by Barend A. van Nooten and Gary B. Holland. Translation by Jamison–Brereton 2014, 742. For Dālbhya, cf. Koskikallio 1999.

6. Dore 2015.

7. Jamison 2019, 7; 8-14; 19.

it referring to anything other than a master of a structure or, another time, a house with a wife. The wife is *grhapatnī*, but *grhapati* does not refer to her husband. Rather, it refers to the domestic sacrificial fire[8]. In her historical examination, she investigated the Indo-Iranian and Indo-European background of the word *grha-* and its Iranian cognates, including the Younger Avestan *garəda*, along with Elamite *kur-da-bat-ti-iš,* Akkadian *ga-ar-du-pa-tu,* and also Middle Iranian[9]. The development of the Sanskrit form of *grha* was not straightforward, but that is truly a different subject[10].

Jamison examines the term *grhapati* in both the *Rgveda* and the *Atharvaveda,* noting that the term occurs in the *Atharvaveda* only four times and in sharp contrast to how the term is used in the *Rgveda.* She also points to the single employment of the referent Agni in both of the texts. Unfortunately, she misinterprets the expression *grhāh* as meaning 'homestead,' because it presumably consisted of several structures. But Rau established the term to mean precisely all the participants, from people to animals, of the family unit, with no mention of solid structures, indeed, no mention of a dwelling place in this very context[11]. Another term, *grhyāh*[12], was used for people who lived on the property (*grhāh*) with some land, which formed the smallest territory; it represented the smallest social unit.

I suppose Jamison's misinterpretation might stem from her not realising that in the *vrātya* context the term *grhapati* is synonymous with *sthapati,* who was the consecrated (*dīkṣita*) and the head of the *sattra* sacrificial ritual as well as the leader of the *vrātyas'* expeditions. Also, sometimes he would not receive any of the spoils that the *vrātyas* collected on their plunder "runs". This head was selected on the grounds of such qualifications as superior knowledge of sacred arts or high moral qualities or great wealth. There was no fee for the performer of the rituals, nor a sponsor. The term *grhapati* overlapped two functions – the first just mentioned, the other that of the head of the family unit encompassing the immediate family, servants, slaves, guests and casual company[13].

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8. *Ibid.,* 10.

9. *Ibid.,* 7.

10. See *ibid,* 8. for the formation of *grha.* Here Jamison also observes that *grhapati* always occurs in the *Rgveda* in the singular, whereas the word *dampati* is used in both the singular and dual. These two words seem to her to be synonymous, even though they often appear next to each other.

11. Rau 1957, 38-39ff.

12. *Ibid.,* paragraph 27. 1.

13. *Ibid.,* 38.

The term *gṛhapati* occurs not only in the *Śrautasūtras* but is also found in the *Gṛhyasūtras*: *Gobhila Gṛhyasūtra* 1. 4. 24, *Khadira Gṛhyasūtra* 1. 5. 36 and 3. 3. 16; 24, *Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra* 2. 9. 14-15, *Śāṅkhāyana Gṛhyasūtra* 1. 1. 2[14]. Outside the brahmanical sources, Oliver Freiberger [15] searched for the equivalent of *gṛhapati* in the Pāli canon with the following results: the Buddha instructs them; *gahapati* can become a member of the Buddhist *saṅgha*; a *gahapati* may belong to the wealthy merchant class; for a monk a ragged robe is like a chest full of garments to a *gahapati*, etc. In the conclusion, the term *gahapati* is described as not being so specifically defined as similar terms are and is the most flexible term. Claire Maes[16] explored similar terminology in the Jain context. She observes that the *ardhamāgadhī* term *gāhāvaī* is equivalent to *gṛhapati* and considers it the most common term for the householder in the early Jain sources.

As Rau observed, the term *gṛhapati* occurs in religious contexts, where it means the head of a longer *sattra* event, not the head of a family unit, although he did find an example where *gṛhapati* is the head of a family unit. As he was aware of the rarity of the instance he had found[17] involving *gṛhapati*, he added *veśmapati* and *jyeṣṭha* – terms that appeared to indicate the head of the household [18]. Unfortunately, Rau misinterpreted these latter terms as only functioning to refer to the family unit leader, rather than considering that they may be synonyms of *gṛhapati*, as he lists them all together. As such they would equal the "dual role". I doubt that *veśmapati* is a term for the head of a household only. Rau quotes as evidence from JB 1. 69: [...] *śūdro 'anuṣṭupchandā veśmapatidevas* [...], '[...] *śūdra* has as his poetic meter the *anuṣṭubh*, as his god *veśmapati* [...]'. It is known that *anuṣṭubh*[19] is the verse form of the *vrātyas*. The term *veśmapati* appears to be a synonym of *gṛhapati*. The same should be considered for *jyeṣṭha*, as this term is one of the fourfold categories of *vrātyas* in *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 17. 4. 1[20].

14. Lubin 2019, 96.
15. Freiberger 2019, 72-73.
16. Maes 2019, 90-91.
17. Rau 1957.
18. *Ibid.*, paragraph 28. 2.a.
19. Interestingly, Mary Carroll Smith focused on what the versification of a particular metre can indicate for a piece of tradition. Her argument in Smith 1992 was that *anuṣṭubh* versification indicated the oldest layers of the *Mahābhārata*. Other explorations of the *vrātya* presence in the *Mahābhārata* (Pontillo, Harzer), as far as I know, have not taken advantage of the *anuṣṭubh* metre as an aid to their research.
20. Falk 1986, 51 discusses the four types of the *vrātyas*, drawing primarily from *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* 17.1-4: reflecting on reasons for joining a *vrātya* sodality, realising that it was economic

Rau bemoaned the lack of examples where the term *gṛhapati* is used to express a domestic head and to indicate that he was also the head of an expedition. Still, he did identify an example, as can be observed in the passage in which the family unit anticipates the return of *gṛhapati* from a raiding expedition (*proṣṭṣa*)[21].

While *sthapatī*[22] is an established term, it is not found very frequently. The term appears to be used as a synonym for *gṛhapati*. Scholars, such as for example Stephanie Jamison[23], have taken great pains to explain *gṛhapati* as an early use of what later became known as *gṛhastha* but have not really proved that the two terms can be understood developmentally. The term *gṛha* in particular had different meanings in different time periods. What seems to be an easier interpretation is the derivation indicating the wife of the «family chieftain» (after the fashion of van Buitenen, 1973, 56 *ad* MBh 1. 4. 11.), that is *gṛhapatnī*, who was the co-participant with her husband the *gṛhastha* in the domestic ritual[24].

The term *gṛha* does not connote a house in the early texts. Rather, it can mean property, for example a wagon that is used as a mobile home in the migrating caravans[25], akin to those used by some of the First Nations in North America. Or, as in the case of acquiring goods in *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* 10. 6[26], when Dālbhya, after he and his *sattrins* returned from an "expedition" in the process of distributing the spoils, approaches Dhṛtarāṣṭra to receive *gṛhān* (masc. acc. pl.) – it can mean goods, equity, or possibly cattle[27]. But Dhṛtarāṣṭra mistakenly thinks that his starved herd

need. Of the four categories, the fourth is *jyeṣṭāḥ śamanīcāmedhrāḥ*, old men who had lost their sexual ability.

21. Rau 1957, 38, paragraph 28. 2. a, see also n. 23 and n. 24, this paper.

22. The term did not refer to a single meaning or function: (a) *sthapati*, leader of the *vrātya*s at *sattra*, etc. (b) The term (with a short / a /) has been used for clan chieftain, overseer, fief sovereign, town councillor, and also driver of a combat vehicle (*ratha*) as well as a minister or ministerial position (*ratna*). There was also another *ratna* (a ministerial position), and last of all, a runner, *pālāgalá* (ŚB 5. 3. 1. 11), whose attire seems to closely resemble that of a *vrātya*. There is a feminine form, *pālāgalī*, which indicates the fourth wife of the head of a family unit. In other texts, the runner position is not mentioned, even though messengers (*dūta*) are quite often referred to.

23. Jamison 2019.

24. Jamison 2019, 9-12, 13-14.

25. Vassilkov 2009, 50.

26. Cf. Harzer 2016.

27. Here *gṛhān* is not houses, as Falk 1986 wrongly translates; rather, it should be 'property,' '*Anwesen*,' which includes land, but also *gṛhyāḥ* (nominative plural masculine), with the meaning 'family or those who live and move together,' as in Rau 1957, 37, paragraph 27. 1ff. Note that the term *gṛhān* in a different context above is also masc., but in the acc. pl., which is a direct object in the syntax of the sentence – Dālbhya was going to ask Dhṛtarāṣṭra for some goods to help him survive.

died because of Dālbhya's black magic. He throws him out, asking him to take the dead beasts along with him.

Rau provides an apt example of *grhāḥ* (this time masc. nom. pl.) referring directly to the people forming the family unit, who are the recipients of whatever *grhapati* brings, be it goods or his mood and behaviour upon his return from an expedition [28]. In that passage, Rau [29] indicates that the term *grhapati* is an expression meaning 'family head (*Haupt*)'[30]. Since he is coming back from an expedition, be it successful or not, we may thus postulate that he may have been the leader of the expedition. Let us consider that the term 'family' comprises not only people related to each other but also servants, slaves, goats and cattle, for whose survival and safety the head is responsible. In this sense, *grhapati* coalesces into both the head as the chieftain of the extended family and the head of the expedition, for which he may have officiated as a priest at a *sattra*. Of course, this is a hypothesis, based on the statement here that *grhapati* returned from *prosūṣa* (from *pra-√vas*), an expedition (employing rather unsavoury methods) to provide food and goods for the family unit. Not only was the main provider away, but also his dependents (*grhāḥ* 'those who form the family unit') were anxious regarding his mood upon his return. These dependents contemplated whether he would speak and act, which induced fear in them. Yet they also contemplated whether he might not speak or act, in which case they would be grateful[31]. See *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2. 4. 1. 14, and possibly also 8. 6. 1. 11. The master of the house is called *grhavat / grhavān* when possession is expressed.

28. Expeditions are for obtaining foodstuff and cattle, etc. See Harzer 2015.

29. Rau 1957, 38, paragraph 28. 2a, in which the term *grhapati* in the literature on rituals did not connote the head of a household but rather the head of a number of participants (*sattrins*) at a *sattra*. The use of this term is specific to sacrificial purposes.

30. It is not very clear whether Rau was aware that if *grhapati* came back from a *prosūṣa*, which is synonymous with the better-known term *pravāsa* (both the terms are derivatives of *pra-√vas* – the former a perfect participle in gen. sg. (*prosūṣaḥ*), the latter a noun, refers to the same activity, meaning that *grhapati* went on an expedition to procure goods.

31. *Ibid.*, 38, paragraph 28. 2a, but see also the passage on 39, in the 2nd and 3rd paragraphs:

áthāto grhāṇām evòpacāráḥ. etád dha vaí grhápateḥ prosúṣa ágatād grhāḥ
samūttrastā iva bhavanti: kím ayám ihá vadiṣyáti kíṃ vā kariṣyatíti. sá yó ha
tátra kíṃcid vádati vā karóti vā tásmād grhāḥ prátrasanti. tásyeśvaráḥ kúlaṃ
víkṣobdhor. átha yó ha tátra ná vádati ná kíṃ caná karóti táṃ grhā
upasáṃśrayante: ná vā ayám ihávādīn ná kíṃ canākarad íti.

117

The later term *gṛhastha* may have been used for someone who stayed and settled in the house and society, no longer in a mobile caravan. Might this also mean that he did not go on expeditions anymore[32]?

3. *The* Gṛhapati *and the* Sattra

Harry Falk, in his article *Zur Ursprung der Sattra-Opfer*[33], gives an overview of *sattra* and provides a comparison with the classical Soma ritual. Falk categorised the Soma ritual according to the number of days of pressing Soma. *Sattra* usually lasted twelve days, occasionally sixty-one days, whereas classical Soma rituals could be one-day events or, when longer than one day, between two and twelve days. *Sattra* did not have a patron (*yajamāna*), although there was a need for a patron after the first day of the *sattra*. A participant from the group took on the role. All the proceeds only went to the other participants. The volunteer lead sacrificer would not be renumerated, as there was no established patron. In other words, there was no fee (*dakṣiṇā*) because there was no patron. In general, a twelve-day ritual is the basis for *sattra*.

Since Falk[34] was unable to find any research comparing the *sattra* and the *vrātyastoma*, he attempted in broad strokes to delve into the similarities. Even though he considered the similarities useful, they did not do much to illuminate the connections between the two. He undertook to examine the *sattra* practices and their appropriation into the *śrauta* ritual[35], but, including the mention of the required seventeen priests in a *śrauta-soma* ritual, he confessed that it may become questionable or dubious.

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32. The Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray employed Bandhopadhay's narrative for the film *Pather Pancali*, where the *brāhmaṇa* officiated at different *pūjā*s during the day, while at night he would turn to robbery to accumulate enough means for his daughter's dowry. Thus, the *brāhmaṇa* led a kind of hyphenated existence. Cf. Harzer 2015.

33. Falk 1985. As it was hard to find references, Falk used the *Vishvabandhu Index*, which mentions *sattra* and *sattrin*s only in passing. Nevertheless, from the mentions in the Index, it was possible to establish that the summary description of a *sattra* was not precise.

34. Falk 1986, 30-31, emphasised that there were no *sattra*s that were not followed by an expedition (*vrātyā*), and also that there were no *vrātya*s who did not start as *sattrin*s. *Sattra* sacrifice and *vrātya*hood parted during the *Brāhmaṇa* period, from which time they began to develop along separate lines.

35. Falk 1986, 31-49. To discuss this in full is unfortunately beyond the scope of the current study.

As always, the seven *ṛṣis* were named as the performers of *sattra*. Texts such as *Maitrayāṇī Saṃhitā* 12. 4 and *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2. 19 mention them, whereas *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 2. 3. 3. 1 and *Aitareya Saṃhitā* 6. 1. 1 often replaced them with the *devas*. Moreover, *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2. 19 contradicts the claim that only Brahmans can bring success to a *sattra*. The example given is of Kavaśa Ailuṣa, son of a non-brahman and a slave woman, who proved to be more successful in the *sattra* than others. *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2. 299 and 2. 387 name the participants of *sattra* (*sattrins*) after their leader (*gṛhapati*). For example, in *Kauśītaki Brāhmaṇa* 23.8 they are called *jābālagṛhapatayaḥ,* after Satyakāma Jābāla[36].

Sacrificial fees (*dakṣiṇā*) were not a custom in the *sattras*. It was said that it was their *ātman* that replaced the fee. It seems that they became a norm for the *vrātyas* when performing the *vrātyastoma*. There it was customary to have a sponsor of the sacrifice (*yajamāna*) who then employed an officiating priest (*adhvaryu*) along with his assistants. Pontillo drew ample evidence from the not-so-early *Śrautasūtra* texts and postulated that *vrātyastoma* required the attending *vrātyas* to provide their *gṛhapati* at the end of the *stoma* with thirty-three cows each. But there seem to be some differences. Pontillo wonders whether the number thirty-three is not according to the traditional number of gods, but it also almost matches up with the syllables in *anuṣṭubh* (which are thirty-two). Still, Pontillo considers it more likely that the required number thirty-three originated much earlier, when it may be better linked to the divine *vrātyas*[37].

A further distinctive detail has been revealed regarding *sthapati*/*gṛhapati* and the *vrātyas*[38] involving Budha, the son of Soma, the great-grandfather of the divine *vrātyas*, and their *sthapati*. In verse 2 of the *Tāṇḍya-Mahā-Brāhmaṇa* XXIV, 18, the crucial point of celebration and loss of privilege is documented. Namely, the divine *vrātyas* arranged for a large sacrificial event (*sattram āsata*) with *sthapati* Budha at the helm. They went ahead with the consecration without asking Varuṇa for a sacrificial spot. Varuṇa cursed them: «I am excluding you from participating in the sacrificial ritual. You should not be able to recognise the path to the gods (*devayāna*)». Therefore, no *havis,* etc., was brought to them. But eventually Budha was consecrated [...] so whoever performs the sixty-one-night *sattra* (*ekaṣaṣṭirātra*) will obtain success.

36. The narrative of Satyakāma shows among other things how he was accepted by a teacher as a Brāhmaṇa – for his speaking the truth when he was asked for his lineage, he just repeated what his mother had told him, namely, that he had not had one. Olivelle 1998, 219-223.

37. Candotti–Pontillo 2015. Cf. also fn. 41.

38. *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* or *Tāṇḍya-Mahā-Brāhmaṇa* XXIV. 18. Cf. Hauer 1927, 85ff.

On account of the *vrātyas'* negligence, the *sthapati* doubly disowned the divine *vrātyas*. Therefore, the *vrātyas* lost their way to heaven. They thus lost both their position and identity. Their state became truly liminal. Their in-between condition was spelled out as their not having their *sthapati*, nor access to heaven. Atonement was essential for *vrātya* practices, although perhaps not initially, as there are instances of killing and of expulsion of sacrificers (cf. games of dice)[39].

An important inquiry into the *vrātyastoma* is a chapter entitled *Aims and Functions of Vrātyastoma Performances*, by Candotti and Pontillo [40]. The *vrātyastoma*s were used as a kind of atonement that allowed the *vrātya*s to return to their societies. It is said that after the *stoma* they were fit to engage in social intercourse. The authors cast light on important aspects of *vrātya* activities and document significant changes in the development of the ritual performances. The *vrātyastoma* examples from the early *śrauta* sources provide information regarding a major change in the ritualistic practices, in particular that there is a sacrificial fee and an officially appointed sponsor of the sacrifice (*yajamāna*). Neither of these features were part of the *vrātya* ritual.

It is difficult to compare the historical events of the transition periods in the South Asian continent to a European experience (cf. Thomassen 2016), yet there is a scholarly effort now in progress to understand the transition from the early migration of the people of Indo-European descent[41], specifically, how elements of *sattra*s (ritual sessions) were adapted into the *śrauta* rituals. It seems likely that a disruptive liminality generally characterises such epochs. Just as Thomassen describes Europe in the Middle Ages, from the second half of the 15th century to the middle of the 17th century, when everything was overturned and there were no customary boundaries, the epoch portrayed by Vedic textual and archaeological evidence is similar.

4. Vrātya *Context and Liminality*

In the *vrātya* context, the issues of liminality are not solely of the *sthapati/gṛhapati*, the *sattra*s, but also occur in other contexts. As we learned in the process of

39. Falk 1986, 73-187.
40. Candotti–Pontillo 2015.
41. 'Aryan' refers to the people who actually migrated together. Some stayed in what is more or less the territory of Iran today. Others continued their migration to the South Asian peninsula; these were known as the Indo-Aryans in the early periods. The name 'Iran' is derived from an earlier form, *Aryānām*. See Witzel 1999.

inquiring into the identity and function of *sthapati* /*grhapati*, the leader of the *sattrin*s (the participants in the ritual of a *sattra*), there are references to expeditions of the *vrātya*s, but also references to the conclusion of Vedic students' studies, to ritual killing, etc.

What is it that makes the *vrātya*s and their leader liminal? From the gleaned examples, we can see that the *vrātya*s led a hyphenated or double life, as some of them belonged to the ruling family, and / or were also professional priests, yet we also learned that there were merchants and landowners who participated in expeditions, described in the text in euphemistic terms in today's view, as *vrātyāṃ caranti* or *vrātyāṃ dhāvayanti*[42]. The *sattra*s bracketed the raiding expeditions, before and after[43] and served as a kind of expiation ritual, allowing the *vrātya*s to re-enter the more ordinary life of their societies.

We understand that the *sthapati* or *grhapati* was in a liminal position, especially at the *sattra*, as he was the leader of the rituals. He would have to be consecrated, prior to which, he had to abstain from his customary life among a tribal community for 3 days. He was in a state inconsistent with leadership which might generally be imagined as active. He was portrayed lying down on a rough-boarded cart, as if dead, his bow unstrung, as a sign of being completely inactive.

The liminality of *grhapati* /*sthapati* lay in the fact that although he underwent arduous preparations for the *sattra* and collateral activities, he would not, in early times, receive any of the plunder. In an adverse case, when he attempted to keep the spoils, the members of the sodality harassed and threatened him until he surrendered the booty. The recorded example is of Dālbhya.

An obvious example would be the framework and the first beginning of the *Mahābhārata*, where Śaunaka, a *vrātya* by any measure, is the officiating *grhapati*.

The *Mahābhārata* has not one beginning, but two, and there might also be a third one. It is commonly known that the *Mahābhārata* was first recited at King Janamejaya's Snake Sacrifice (*sarpasattra*). The king was the sponsor / patron of the sacrifice (*yajamāna*) [44]; the officiating ritual performer (*grhapati*) was Śaunaka[45], and the location was the Naimiṣa Forest. We find at least two pieces of information here, which in the larger context of the Vedic, but mainly late Vedic

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42. Harzer 2015.

43. *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 22. 5. 4.

44. Does the Janamejaya functioning as a patron (*yajamāna*) of the sacrifice at the *sarpasattra* already indicate the transition to the *śrauta* practices?

45. Bowles 2019, 177. Bowles uses the spelling *satra*, which is generally considered an early form of *sattra*. Cf. *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā*, where both forms occur.

text, are *Sattra* and the Naimiṣa Forest. *Sattra* is a 'sitting ritual' lasting one day[46] or twelve days, and sometimes differing lengths of time, such as sixty-one nights. Even though it seems that there were a large number of participants, *sattra*s were secretive performances, and to date no exactly identifiable geographic location has been determined, and perhaps never will be, as they may have been mobile events[47].

I suspect that the *Mahābhārata* still preserved this liminality, as many of the major protagonists exhibited certain features that would fit *vrātya* characteristics. This is also Vassilkov's claim[48]. What comes to mind is Yudhiṣṭhira's dog (which perhaps Tiziana Pontillo inquired into). Wolves, dogs, and even bears were symbolic animals which played an important role in different ancient European sodalities, as Falk (1986, other articles) and others were able to identify. Dogs and wolves in particular featured in other parts of what we might call the Indo-European homelands. Yaroslav Vassilkov was able to show how these animals were part of such sodalities and how these non-subtropical fauna betrayed their locales. At the same time, there was a change from canines and also bears, to more subtropical fauna, such as tigers and lions[49].

Although Petteri Koskikallio discussed Vaka / Baka / Keśin Dālbhya (other forms: Darbhi / Dārbhya) throughout his book-length article, his charts provide a good overview of the collected references. Focusing on Dālbhya (Baka Dālbhya)[50], based on textual evidence from Vedic ritual, Epic, and Purāṇic sources, the charts avail a glimpse of the importance of Dālbhya as a ritualist, king (*yajamāna*), and *gṛhapati* (*sthapati*), as well as *naimiṣīyānām udgātṛ* of *sattra* in the early records[51]. Baka Dālbhya is also identified with Glāva Maitreya; both are mentioned as Vedic students. Koskikallio knows that the form *vaka* is derived from *vṛka*, meaning wolf, and that both Baka Dālbhya / Glāva Maitreya appear with dogs[52].

Dog- and wolf-warriors have existed since the early Bronze age (fourth or third millennium BCE) on the Eurasian steppes[53]. It is quite impressive to find the wolf (*vṛka* / *vaka* / *baka*) representation in India, as the example of *Vaka* / *Baka*

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46. Falk 1985. According to Falk's detailed exposition of the *sattra*, the norm for the *vrātya*s was either a two-day *sattra* or a twelve-day *sattra*.
47. Cf. Hiltebeitel 1998, 170-171, and Hiltebeitel 2001.
48. Vassilkov 2015.
49. Vassilkov 2009; Vassilkov 2015.
50. Koskikallio 1999, 380-387.
51. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1. 2. 14.
52. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1. 12. 1-5, Koskikallio 1999, 380. Also, *Vakajātaka* No. 300 (*vaka* = wolf).
53. Koskikallio 1999.

Dālbhya shows[54]. One may ask why, in the earliest mentions of Dālbhya, he was referred to as *keśin*, 'the hairy one.'

The early form 'Vaka', which became standardised as 'Baka,' as in Baka Dālbhya, is *vr̠ka* in Sanskrit. In the Euro-Asian steppes, sodalities of dog and wolf warriors were widespread[55]. There Vassilkov points to two dog episodes in the *Mahābhārata*. One is the narrative of Trita, in *Mahābhārata* 9. 35[56]. When his brothers (Ekata and Dvita – all three sons of Prajāpati / Brahman) plan to rob him, a wolf appears and Trita runs away. He eventually punishes his brothers by turning them into wolves forced to roam the forest. This leads to the supposition that when the brothers were banished, they were deprived of any economic support and hence had to survive as robbers. The second narrative is the quite well-known episode of Yudhiṣṭhira, who refused to enter heaven without his loyal dog. And then Indra, who is already recognised as being associated with *vrātyas* in studies on the subject[57], appears to solve the question.

Vassilkov suggests that since we do not find any *puruṣavyāghra* in the Vedic texts (*saṃhitās*?), the source for this term may lie at the "basis" of the *Mahābhārata*: cf. 'tiger-man' or also 'lion-man,' with their frequent repetitions accompanying the appellations of heroes or kings[58].

By the way, in his conclusion, Koskikallio unfortunately missed the opportunity to see a clue in the gradual maligning / deprecation of Baka Dālbhya, even though, interestingly, the memory of his practices, as far as we know, lasted over a number of centuries, to over two millennia in Central India,

Chāndogya Upaniṣad 1. 1-10 is about the High Chant as represented by the syllable OM. When Baka Dālbhya learned about it[59], he became the *udgātr̠* priest of the people of Naimiṣa. This put him in a position to fulfil the needs and desires of those people.

In another section, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1. 8., three men mastered the High Chant "OM". One of them was Dālbhya. His full name was Caikitāyana Dālbhya (we know Dālbhya as Keśin and also as Baka / Vaka (Sanskrit *vr̠ka*), who

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54. The form *Vaka* occurs only in the earliest texts; it soon changes, perhaps to reflect some regional pronunciation. See the table in Koskikallio 1999, 300ff.

55. Vassilkov 2015.

56. Vassilkov referred to Lincoln 1976. Vassilkov does not give the precise quotation for Trita chasing away his brothers. He talks about two episodes with dogs but refers to one wolf and one dog.

57. Dore 2015.

58. Vassilkov 2015, 236.

59. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1. 2. 13. Olivelle 1996, 99ff.

sometimes has a double, Glāva Maitreya)[60]. The three men quizzed each other and found that they were not fully knowledgeable, particularly Dālbhya. But they learned from each other; otherwise, there was the threat that their heads would shatter, as they would say to each other. Then they were hired to perform some rituals. A known performer by the name of Uṣasti Cākrāyana appeared as the three were setting up for the performance[61]. Uṣasti repeated the phrase «shattering their heads» in case they did not know to what deity their signing was linked. All three stopped, and Uṣasti took over all their roles, stipulating that they should stay and sing. He (Uṣasti) asked to be given the same fee as the priests, to which the king consented. The three priests asked Uṣasti to teach them the correct links to the deities, so their heads would not shatter. He did this. So, this could be called the education of the novice priests, one of them being Dālbhya.

The next section of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* starts with the High Chant of Dogs, where Dālbhya appears as Baka Dālbhya (or was it Glāva Maitreya, his double?). On his way, he observed some dogs gathered around a white dog, whom they were asking to get them jobs singing praise songs at the rituals because they were very hungry. The white dog asked them to return the next morning. Baka Dālbhya came the next day to find out how he could get a job singing and observed that the dogs were holding on to each other's backs, moving covertly, which was comparable to the priests as they moved into secret places to sing songs of praise, making the sound 'hum' as they sat down. They sang for food and drink, appealing to Varuṇa, Prajāpati and Savitṛ: «Bring food ..., OM!»[62].

This narrative and the similar ones can provide us with some clues as to some of the missing or deleted passages. According to Koskikallio, at times Baka Dālbhya was not a very successful ritualist, while at other times he was. Here we have an example of how one could become successful – by initially practicing with others who were at the same stage, wishing to earn some livelihood by performing ritualistic functions and then eventually having access to someone like Uṣasti Cākrāyana, who could teach them the connection to the deities. And there is a lot to know, seeing how important the High Chant[63] is. And indeed, there is the

60. *Ibid.*, 1. 8. 1.

61. Uṣasti went begging for food and got some groats from a rich man. An interesting discussion occurred when the rich man offered him something to drink. Uṣasti refused, as it would be leftovers. He considered it optional to drink, whereas he would die from lack of food. He took some of the groats to his prepubescent wife (*āṭikī*). Then, he went to look for work. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1. 10. 1-5.

62. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1. 12. 1-5.

63. *Ibid.*, 1. 13, etc.

appearance of Rudras and Maruts, and they figure in the central position in the grouping of threes in the different pressings of Soma[64].

The study of early religious, cultural, and social history is especially important when there is still a very-much-living representation of practices, customs, and historical tradition observable in contemporary times. And this is all the more critical because much of the evidence of the early practices seems to have been removed or obliterated in various ways on account of radical changes in the socio-political realm. Numerous scholars have established that, apart from the Indo-European sodalities, others were traversing large stretches of the Eurasian plains / grasslands and eventually spreading in every direction, following various paths to their final destination, mostly by chance. The *vrātya* narrative is one of these. And their distributed living representation is still evident, as described below.

5. *Khaṇḍobā and the Marginalised* Vrātya *Status*

Regarding the many different types of sodalities, it seems that the formation of such groups preceded the practices in South Asia and were introduced with migration. The evidence of this is still detectable. Sontheimer was able to contribute a great deal to our understanding of this enigma. Kapila Vatsyayan, in her *Foreword* to the essays collected in *King of Hunters, Warriors and Shepherds*, pointed to Sontheimer's understanding of Indian civilisation, both in details and in terms of his approach. His research on the *vrātya*s was conducted in the second half of the 20th century and has been collected in the above-mentioned title. The following material was drawn from this work to substantiate claims that various *vrātya* practices persist in a fairly large part of the Indian subcontinent.

In the section titled the *Social Separateness of Some Followers of Rudra and Khaṇḍobā*, in the chapter on *Rudra and Khaṇḍobā*, Sontheimer recalls *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 4. 5. 3: *taskarāṇām*, [...], *paricarāyāraṇyānāṃ patiḥ*, meaning 'chief of Thiefs and those who roam about in the woodlands'[65]. At the same time, Rudra is

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64. *Ibid., e.g.* 3. 16. 1-7. It should be noted that in this section, which starts with the declaration that the sacrifice is a man. There are three pressings of Soma, in the morning pressing, *gāyatrī* metre is employed. *Gāyatrī* has twenty-four syllables for the man's first twenty-four years. The following forty-four years of the man are represented by the forty-four syllables of the *triṣṭubh* in the midday pressing. It is dedicated to the Rudras. *Triṣṭubh* has twenty-two syllables, so this case seems to involve a doubling. The man's next forty-eight years represent the third pressing, this is performed with the *jagatī* metre, which is said to have forty-eight syllables.

65. Sontheimer 1997, 93.

lord of the forest / trees as well as fields: *kṣetrāṇāṃ patiḥ* in *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 4. 5. 2g[66]. He can be invoked to protect and is a guardian of groups such as Rāmośī's, who have special rights in the Khaṇḍobā practices. Similarly, Khaṇḍobā, lord of robbers, is at the same time a protector of the fields (*kṣetrapāl*). Also close to Rudra are the *niṣādas*, hunters, fishermen, and robbers (*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 4. 5. 4)[67]. The leader of these ethnic groups, Rudra is called "*sthapati*" which incidentally is the title of the *niṣāda* chief[68], an ethnic group which seems to be closely associated with the Kuru–Pañcālas[69].

Sontheimer found the ethnic groups, such as Malhār Koḷīs and Mahādev Koḷīs, were traditional Maharashtrian hunters and fishermen, engaged in predatory activities. These groups were the first to serve Mahādev. Mahādeva (the Sanskrit version)[70] is one of the names for Rudra in *Atharvaveda* 15. 5. 6 and *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 2. 9. 1[71]. Rudra is the best trader (*vāṇija*), for example, *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 4. 5. 2k[72]. As a lord of hunters, Rudra's special weapon is the bow and three arrows, more natural than Indra's *vajra*.

In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, Rudra is asked to loosen the bow (*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 4. 5. 11 and others). The bow (*jyāhnoḍa*) is also the weapon of the *vrātyas* and of the Ekavrātya. The unstrung bow of Mailār (another name for Rudra) plays an important role in the Dasarā festival in Devaraguḍḍa. The height of the bow is eight metres. At the festival, the eldest Vaggaya[73] of the Kuruba caste climbs an eight-metre high pole at the peak of the festival. Vaggaya, the eldest Kuruba communicates with Mailār; the Kuruba personifies the god. Sontheimer proposes a comparison between this Vaggayya and Ekavrātya because of their respective performance of some cosmogonic rituals. Sontheimer then says, «His

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Niṣādas* were an ethnic group in the Chambal river area, which is southwest of the Yamunā river. Cf. Witzel.1999. According to Rau, when combined in a compound such as *niṣādasthapati*, it is a *karmadhāraya* and translates as '*sthapati* who is a *niṣāda*'.

69. For example, not only Dālbhya was closely connected with them, but there was a requirement for an uninitiated (*adīkṣita*) to spend three days among the *niṣādas* before a religious event in order to become initiated.

70. Many of the Sanskrit names have been adopted into modern regional languages with slight modification, as in this case; others have undergone considerably greater modification, resulting in their Sanskrit origin being hardly recognisable.

71. The Sanskrit textual references, which Sontheimer provided, have not been consulted.

72. Sontheimer 1997.

73. The description of the performance of the ritual is repurposed from Sontheimer 1997, 94. Vaggaya is also spelled Vaggayya – variation is often witnessed in renderings of local names.

communion with Mailār at this moment very much reminds us of the activities of the Ekavrātya, or rather, the *sthapati*[74] of the Vrātyas, who becomes the Ekavrātya by performing certain cosmogonic rituals»[75]. He is thereby identified with Mahādeva, Rudra, Īśāna, etc. Then Sontheimer reminds us that in *Atharvaveda* 15. 1, it says, «He became the Ekavrātya, he took to himself a bow, that was Indra's bow».

There are several questions that arise with respect to the topic of the *vrātyas*. Why did they disappear from the textual heritage? Why would anyone want to lead an unstable life when the society had become stabilised by settling or semi-settling (still moving to new pastures, for example)? Why do the early records, for example the early *Upaniṣads*, show them always hungry, often trying to get by with occasional employment doing what is translated as 'singing,' that is, singing praise songs and such. Falk[76] pondered this issue but soon realised that those who were ready to embrace *vrātya*hood were marginalised by their economic and social status[77].

6. *Conclusions*

From the description of the one instance in which *gr̥hapati*, as the head of a family unit comprising blood relatives, slaves, servants, cattle keepers, guests, occasional drop-ins, cattle, sheep, etc., was returning from an expedition, of which most likely he was the head, also head of *sattras*, we might surmise that by engaging in the *vrātya* sodality, it was actually possible to become wealthy enough to be able to care for a large family unit.

Sontheimer's astute research regarding the various ethnic groups in several central states on the Indian peninsula shows that they have continued to preserve a very ancient heritage of festivals, with reverence and dedicated representation of the tradition, to contemporary times. Many elements of the attire and behaviour at these festivals, in which adherents will behave like dogs at certain points, for example, believably point to the heritage going back to the steppes of Western and central areas, as presented by Vassilkov.

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74. I took the liberty of not copying *sthapati* with the long / ā / as it may have crept in surreptitiously.

75. Sontheimer 1997, 94.

76. Falk 1986, 51.

77. *Ibid.* Also, cf. the narrative of Satyakāma Jābāla in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4. 4. 1ff.

It has to be acknowledged that Vassilkov's and Sontheimer's work puts the textual research in a relevant context, which may eventually become the framework for the claim that the *vrātya*s were one of the groups that roamed in ancient times, similarly to a number of other sodalities. Practices resembling those of the *vrātya*s go back to the 4th or 3rd millennium BCE, in the context of sodalities of dog- or wolf-warriors who roamed the Eurasian steppe and surrounding areas up to late medieval times. It can hardly be doubted that the *vrātya*s existed and that they derived from an Indo-European background. Vassilkov provides the external evidence of localisation and Sontheimer corroborates this with internal evidence on the ground in central South Asia. In particular, the bracketing framework of these scholars may lay to rest the nationalistic theory that the original movement was from the South Asian peninsula outward, that is, that the peninsula was the original homeland of South Asian people. The work of Russian archaeologists and ethnographers provides plenty of evidence that the movement was into India, instead of being out from India.

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