

# Voices From the Stone, Figures on the Stage. The Development of *Avadhāna* and *Avadhānī*'s Identity

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## *Abstract*

The paper aims to present and examine the Indian art of *avadhāna* ('attention', 'attentiveness') through the analysis of selected epigraphic and literary sources, fragments of practitioner's memoirs, congratulation letters and press reports, etc. which help to trace possible sources of the practice, determine its historical background and investigate the patterns of its continuity and modifications up to the present day. Special attention will be paid to the figure of the practitioner (*avadhānī* or *avadhānīnī*), the transition from the courts or private scholarly meetings into the public space and to the commercial character of modern-day *avadhāna* which deeply influenced changes within the practice and its perception. The analysis will lead to a methodological investigation placing the art in the conglomerate of such phenomena as routine, ritual, tradition and cultural performance.

*Keywords:* *avadhāna*, performance, ritual, liminality.

## 1. *Introduction*\*

The aim of the present paper is to examine the Indian art of *avadhāna* and to investigate its patterns of continuity and modifications against the background of its affiliation to such categories as routine, ritual, tradition and performance.

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What is *avadhāna*? The literal meaning of the term is ‘attention’, ‘attentiveness’ – the quality which is the focal point of described activity. As a starting point I propose to describe *avadhāna* as the act of showcasing highly developed cognitive capacities examined in the form of miscellaneous tasks accomplished in the presence of other people. This general working definition is by no means comprehensive since it omits important aspects of *avadhāna*. It does not take into account features that were characteristic for certain stages of the development of *avadhāna* as well as its systematisation and manifold divisions. Moreover, it only focuses on the culminative point – showcasing the skills – while the term *avadhāna* also encompasses everything that leads a practitioner (denoted as the *avadhānī* in the case of men or *avadhāninī* in the case of women) to this moment, *e.g.* the preparation, studies, etc. Nonetheless, it can serve as a frame comprising its varieties which differ from each other. To describe *avadhāna*’s development in a more detailed way and to draw its picture formed through the centuries it is important to focus on answering a few auxiliary questions: when?; where?; why? and, finally, who?<sup>1</sup> The first two queries address the matters of time and space. They can be analysed both on a micro- and macroscale, where the former is connected to the timing and placing of single *avadhānas* and the latter to the art’s origin. However, the second perspective does not influence the art’s categorisation and requires a closer study which, for the clarity of my argument, will not be taken into consideration<sup>2</sup>. Since the matter of *avadhāna*’s temporal limitation is closely connected to the spatial aspect, they will be analysed in parallel.

## 2. The Time and Place of *avadhāna*

The earliest attestations of the art which are included in the epigraphic sources do not contain any direct data indicating the time and occasions on which *avadhānas*

1. I have not included the question ‘what?’ on this list. First of all, because the detailed systematisation of the types of *avadhāna* and the description of the consecutive tasks which can be completed during the events are not crucial for the main part of this study. My main focus is to determine whether *avadhāna* can be perceived as a routine, a tradition or a form of ritual or performance and to analyse the transformations of the figure of *avadhānī*. Secondly, because the various types of *avadhāna* and their possible challenges have already been described. See *e.g.* Sudyka–Galewicz 2012, Cielas 2017 or Cielas 2020.

2. The interested reader may refer to Sudyka–Galewicz 2012 where, based on the analysis of epigraphic, historical and literary sources, the authors tentatively date the beginnings of *avadhāna* to at least the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century CE and advance hypotheses regarding the place of origin of the art.



were held or the places in which they were organised. Nevertheless, they inform the reader about practitioners who were closely related to the court, mostly poets who composed under the ruler's patronage, members of the highly educated *milieus*. The examples include for instance two inscriptions with direct references to the practice of *avadhāna* which come from the Western part of the Indian subcontinent. Both epigraphs are to be assigned to the king Vīra Narasiṃha II of the Hoysāḷa dynasty. The first one, from 1223 CE, is located in Kembālu (= Kembāla, Karnataka's Hassan District) on a stone in the *navaraṅgamaṇṇṭapa* of the temple of Narasiṃhadeva. The inscription contains a detailed record of the boons bestowed upon the king's chief accountant, Viśvanātha from Beḷvoḷa. The official was granted Kembāla, which was made the village of Vīralakṣmīnaraṣiṃha. Viśvanātha, who «could write letters with both hands, and go through a hundred *avadhānas* (or mnemonic feats)», not only built the Vīralakṣmīnaraṣiṃha temple but also constructed large tanks in the *agrahāra*<sup>3</sup>. The same *avadhānī*'s skills and achievements were also recalled in another record of Vīra Narasiṃha II: the inscription from 1237 CE, inscribed on a stone near the Keśava temple at Hāranahalli, Karnataka<sup>4</sup>.

Another intellectually stimulating *milieu* which nurtured the practice of *avadhāna* was presumably the court of the king of the Vāghela dynasty, Viśaladeva. Two Sanskrit records from the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, originally placed on a wall of the Koṭiśvara temple at Koḍiṇār (Amreli District of Gujarat), describe various figures residing at the court and their relatives. The epigraphs, the so-called Nānāka *praśastī*s, are devoted to a man named Viśalanagarīya Nānāka and record the inauguration of the *sārasvatākṛīḍāketana* or 'the play-ground of the learned' (*praśastī* I, not dated but probably older than the second one since it describes Viśaladeva as *tridaśasuhṛd*, 'the friend of the thirty gods', suggesting that the king was already dead. It must have been composed between 1262 and 1271 CE) and the *sārasvatāsadaśa* or 'the abode of the learned' (*praśastī* II, dated to 1271 CE). The autograph left by Kṛṣṇa, the author of the first inscription, identifies him as a practitioner of the *aṣṭāvadhāna*, 'the eightfold attention'<sup>5</sup>, who belonged to the family

3. Rice 1902, 211.

4. *Ibid.*, 384.

5. The numeral in the name of the art denotes the number of tasks completed during the *avadhāna*. The *aṣṭāvadhāna* with eight challenges is the most common type of the art. Analogically, in the *śatāvadhāna*, 'the one-hundred-fold attention', there are one hundred tasks, in the *śaḥsṛāvadhāna*, 'the one-thousand-fold attention', one thousand, etc.

of professional *literatī*; his grandfather was characterised as the author of the work called *Kuvalayāśvacarita*<sup>6</sup>.

These and similar records may suggest that the art of *avadhāna* was closely related to the court. The fact of undergoing trials before kings and courtly assemblies is especially well documented also in the literary sources. Suffice it to mention Siddhicandra and other Jain poets, such as for instance Vijayasenasūri or Nandivijaya, who showcased their skills at Akbar's and Jahāngir's courts in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> century. In the colophon to Siddhicandra's *Ṛṭuvarṇana*, 'The Description of Seasons', an anthology of *muktakas* (*sūktisañcaya*) composed by various poets and by the author of the compilation, Siddhicandra is described as the one who managed to meet one hundred and eight challenges during a single meeting that dazzled Akbar. The episode was also mentioned in Siddhicandra's *Bhānucandracarita* (BhCC). In the fourth chapter the author recalled his *avadhāna* held at the court (BhCC 4. 81-86) and Nandivijaya's activity in the described art (BhCC 4. 17-18).

Other notable examples of literary sources pointing to the *avadhāna*'s association with the court are the works describing the achievements of Madhuravāṇī, the renowned poetess active at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century at the court of Raghunātha Nāyaka. Her attainments were attested for instance in her own work, the *Śrīrāmāyaṇasārākāvyaṭilaka* (e.g. ŚRSKT 1. 93; 5.111) or in Vijayarāghava Nāyaka's *yakṣagāna* titled *Raghunāthābhyudaya*, where the poetess is characterised as *āśukavitāvāṇī* – 'the voice of fast poetry'.

Unfortunately, none of the aforementioned sources refer to the time and occasions on which the *avadhānas* were held. It can only be assumed that since the practice was related to the court, the events did not have to be directly connected to particular celebrations but played the role of an element of courtly cultural life, not limited in terms of timing. Such an assumption seems to be justified in the light of later sources. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, royal premises were no longer the most common primary venue for the *avadhānas*. Nevertheless, even then, from time to time *avadhānīs* showcased their skills before the rulers. Vasiṣṭha Gaṇapati Muni (1878–1936), for instance, recalled accomplishing the *aṣṭāvadhāna* in front of the king of Mandāsa (Andhra Pradesh) who «had a huge assembly of scholars, poets and connoisseurs»<sup>7</sup>. The *avadhānas* completed in the

6. Unfortunately, I could not find any additional information about this work or trace its author. In the *praśasti* I, Kṛṣṇa did not give the name of his grandfather which makes identification even more difficult since the title *Kuvalayāśvacarita* is not unique.

7. Leela 1999, 41. Since the *avadhānī*'s memoirs place this event ca. the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century the mentioned *rāja* was probably Meherban-i-Dostan Vasudev Rajmani Raj Deo who ruled between 1890-1914.

presence of a ruler were also mentioned by Sitapati. The author recalled *avadhānas* by Māḍabhūṣi Veṅkaṭācārya (1835–1895) and the Dēvulapalli brothers (Subbarāya Śāstrī, 1853–1909 and Veṅkaṭa Kṛṣṇa Śāstrī, 1856–1912) which took place at the court of Gangadhara Rama Rao, the *rāja* of Piṭhāpuram between 1877–1890, in November 1879<sup>8</sup>.

The sources from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century generally contain more data concerning the timing and placing of *avadhāna*. It is also worth noticing that very often they speak of private meetings in closed circles of connoisseurs. According to these records the *avadhānas* held at home were especially characteristic for new practitioners taking their first steps in undergoing the described challenges. Vasiṣṭha Gaṇapati Muni's first *avadhāna* took place in the house of a doctor who «was taking care of his needs and in whose house an evening congregation of scholars was a daily routine»<sup>9</sup>. Another famous *avadhānī*, Kandukūri Vireśalingam (1848–1919), recalled the similar circumstances of his first trial in his autobiography: «In those days I could compose verses extempore, with the same facility with which I delivered talks in prose. So some friends [...] desired that I should hold a session in *Aṣṭāvadhānam*, and I held one shortly afterwards, in a private house, before a few friends. [...] it was my first effort [...]»<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, experienced *avadhānīs* also performed at home, for example, to mention but a few, the account describing how Vasiṣṭha Gaṇapati Muni underwent the trial in the residence of Dr. Krishnaswami Iyer in Madras<sup>11</sup> or the record by Telang speaking of Raṅgācārya Śāstrī's spontaneous *avadhāna* which took place on the veranda of his house in Mēṭṭupālayam (Tamil Nadu)<sup>12</sup>. Such impromptu private meetings, often organised without any previous arrangements or only with a basic preparation, on the request of guests visiting *avadhānī* and not for any particular occasion, are frequently mentioned in the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup>-century sources. But the same memoirs, biographies, press reports or congratulation letters also confirm the fact that it was the time when the *avadhāna* gradually started to be commercialised and move from sequestered or closed spaces to the public sphere<sup>13</sup>. More and more often *avadhānīs* showcased their skills during certain festivities or on such occasions as for example

8. Sitapati 1968, 116–117.

9. *Ibid.*, 31.

10. Viresalingam 1970, 77.

11. Leela 1999, 72.

12. Telang 1944, 157.

13. See for instance Leela 1999, 71, Tirupati Vēṅkaṭakavulu 1956, 153, 158 or Viresalingam 1970, 77.

the meetings of clubs or scholarly milieu, weddings, etc.<sup>14</sup>. Nowadays, *avadhānas*, to mention but a few possibilities, take place on religious holidays (like the festival of *vasanta pañcamī*, Spring Festival), secular celebrations (e.g. on *ugādi*, New Year's Day for the Hindus of Andhra Pradesh) or at the annual galas of particular institutions, including schools, colleges, etc. On the other hand, even today *avadhāna* can be unconnected to any other event. It then becomes a festival itself, even lasting up to over a month<sup>15</sup>. It can be organised on a big scale (at the stadium or in a conference hall, with the presence of media and thousands of spectators) as in the case of Munishri Ajitchandrasagarji's *avadhāna* which took place on 16 November 2014 at The National Sports Club of India's Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Stadium in Worli, Mumbai, with an audience of almost six thousand people<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, now and again contemporary *avadhānīs* still meet and go through the trial in private. In contradiction to Lisa Mitchell's statement that «[...] the

14. See e.g. Telang (1944, 155) recalling Ātmārāmapant Sukhātme's performance held in 1890 on the occasion of the Hindu Union Club's meeting in Bombay or the account of Parasurama Rao mentioning that the Telugu poet duo known as Tirupati Vēṅkaṭa Kavulu (Divākarla Tirupati Śāstrī, 1872–1920, and Cēllapilla Vēṅkaṭa Śāstrī, 1870–1950) went through the *avadhāna* on 29 August 1921 in Kuḍḍāpāh (= Kaḍapā), Andhra Pradesh, to celebrate his niece's marriage (Rājāśekharaṇkaṭaśeṣakavulu 1932, 55–57).

15. The duration of the *avadhāna* depends on the number of challenges completed during a trial. Theoretically, the *aṣṭāvadhāna* can be performed in about thirty minutes. But then, as emphasised by *avadhānīs*, it contradicts the goals of an intellectual feast. According to the practitioners, to bring value an *aṣṭāvadhāna* should last for about two and a half to three hours. Long enough to fulfil individual challenges, entertain spectators and provide them with an explanation of subsequent stages, but no longer, in order to keep the audience focused. The *śatāvadhāna* takes about twenty-four to thirty hours divided into six parts – morning and evening sessions lasting for three days in total. The *sahasrāvadhāna* takes twenty-five to thirty days. Duration is one of the main reasons for considering the *aṣṭāvadhāna* the most perfect form of the art. The others are believed to mainly satisfy the ambitions of *avadhānīs*. All the practitioners' statements presented in the article are based on the interview with a *śatāvadhānī* Dr. R. Ganesh conducted on 11 August 2016 in Bangalore and the interview with an *avadhānī* Dr. Shankar Rajaraman conducted on 13 August 2015.

16. The event was widely commented upon in the local, national and international media. See e.g. Bella Jaisinghani's article titled *Jain monk brings the house down with his memory skills in Mumbai* (*The Times of India*, Nov. 17, 2014: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Jain-monk-brings-the-house-down-with-his-memory-skills-in-Mumbai/articleshow/45170823.cms>), *A Master of Memory in India Credits Meditation for His Brainy Feats* by Max Bearak (*The New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2014: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/18/world/asia/prodigy-in-india-credits-feats-of-memory-to-meditation-and-jainism.html>) or *Jain Munishri Ajitchandra Sagarji Created World Record By Performing 500 Avdhan Successfully* (Business Wire India, Nov. 18, 2014: <https://www.businesswireindia.com/jain-munishri-ajitchandra-sagarji-created-world-record-by-performing-500-avdhan-successfully-41561.html>).

practice of *avadhānam* today is unthinkable in a small group made up only of participants, not because it has “gone out of fashion”, but because today *avadhānam* cannot exist without a stage and an audience»<sup>17</sup> contemporary *avadhānīs* declare that private performances have always been a part of the art and that they still take place – amongst close friend and acquaintances, for their own entertainment and satisfaction, far from the media hype.

### 3. *The Purpose of Avadhāna and an Apparent End of the Art*

As described above, *avadhānas* took and take place on various occasions, in manifold places. But what is their purpose? Why did *avadhāna* originate? Sudyka and Galewicz enumerated three factors which according to them are responsible for the continuation of the *avadhāna* tradition:

1. Cementing regional identity – the *avadhānas* performed in Telugu, Kannada and Tamil; the appearance of Sanskrit can stress the link with the glorious past.
2. Collective participation in the social and cultural event valued as educative and intellectual entertainment – a proof of good education of participants, who gain the sense of nobilitation besides amusement and interactions with other viewers.
3. Individual needs of a performer, both emotional and intellectual ones<sup>18</sup>.

These elements can be perceived as a starting point for the investigation on the aim of the *avadhāna* and on the characteristics of its practitioner. The art was modified and evolved over the centuries, mirroring the cultural changes that also came about. The *avadhāna*'s transition from the courts or private scholarly meetings into the public space is one of the pieces of evidence that attest the cultural transformations. It seems that originally, especially in the case of the literary form of the practice, the art originated and prevailed as one of the extensions of the so-called *kavigoṣṭhī* (‘assembly of poets’) which nurtured the idea of intellectual games and competitions among *literatī*. But *avadhānas* were not only a pastime of educated people. They were (and still are) a way to show the practitioner's prowess in a certain field, to perpetuate tradition and cultural unity and, to quote Sudyka and Galewicz, «to gain the sense of nobilitation». In the past, *avadhānīs*, like other

17. Mitchell 2009, 153.

18. Sudyka–Galewicz 2012, 189.

poets, sought the kings' patronage. The traces of this practice lasted until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Ramalakshmi, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *avadhānīs* still «used to move from one place to another place receiving honours from various Zamindars [...]»<sup>19</sup>. Even later, Vasiṣṭha Gaṇapati Muni described how he «went to find some financial help from the King of Gadwal»<sup>20</sup>. The skills of being able to successfully complete the *avadhāna* were the subject of mutual agreement between the poets and the rulers. *Avadhānīs* provided virtuosity and talent which were the source of entertainment but also the factor enhancing the king's reputation as the one who had created a cultured milieu of the best among the best poets. In return, *avadhānīs* gained prestige and a high position at the court. In this way they nourished their individual needs, but not only their emotional and intellectual ones; the economic factor also played an important role here.

This *status quo* started to change around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *avadhāna* started to become less and less popular until the point when it almost ceased to exist. What was the reason behind such a sudden change? A possible explanation can be deduced from the testimonies of *avadhānīs* active at that time. In his autobiography titled *Svīya Charitramu*, Kandukūri Vireśalingam, already mentioned as the *avadhāna* practitioner considered as the father of the renaissance movement in Telugu, referring to the art, writes:

It was a mighty feat of concentration, but lay people and ignorant people attributed it to black magic and thought, in spite of my friend's assurances to the contrary, that I was a devotee of some dark spirits [...]. I realized then that it was only entertainment to fill idle moments and brought no real benefit either to the world or to me. So however much people begged of me afterwards, I refused to repeat a performance which entailed so much strain on my intellect and at the same time benefitted no one<sup>21</sup>.

At that time *avadhāna* had already become public – anyone could attend, take part as a spectator. *Avadhānīs*, although still respected as *literatī* and educated men, no longer – or at least to a lesser degree – occupied high positions at court. The rulers' support and patronage were transforming due to the political situation. Narayana Rao and Shulman suggest that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'patterns of patronage, composition, and circulation were essentially no different from those

19. Ramalakshmi 1977, 80.

20. Leela 1999, 60.

21. Viresalingam 1970, 79.

in Śrīnātha's time – even though the poets now travelled by train, and their verses came to be printed»<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, during the time of British rule, the consolidation and demarcation of sovereignty, freedom movements and the rise of pan-Indian and local nationalism with the formation of governments, kings were more worried about keeping their power than investing in poets. This tendency was even more visible in the 1930s–1960s. The modes of patronage – even if not entirely changed – were adapting. The poets, including *avadhānīs*, sought the support of not only rulers but also merchants or other wealthy members of the community. Referring to the statements of Narayana Rao and Shulman and to the aforementioned words of Vireśaliṅgam, Mitchell assumed that

With printing suddenly easily available [...] memory no longer played the crucial role it once had. The fact that Viresalingam included this unusual passage in the midst of his account of the establishment of his own printing press and first periodical suggests that at some point – even if only subconsciously – he had been influenced by the role of printing in his own disavowal of the celebration of memory<sup>23</sup>.

In my opinion, the source of the *avadhānī*'s pique expressed in his autobiography is clearly articulated and does not require further explanation. It results from a common trend of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely that of seeking attention and recognition beyond the court. The scope and the accessibility of the royal patronage were transforming. Other *avadhānīs* also encountered this problem. Tirupati Vēṅkaṭa Kavulu, for example «had to face jealous politics of court officials and local scholars which made them wait [for being granted an audience with the ruler] for weeks, sending petition after petition»<sup>24</sup>. That is why the practitioners of *avadhāna* started to search for support elsewhere. But it was not as beneficial. As Vireśaliṅgam noticed, common people who were not familiar with the *avadhāna*, who did not fully understand the capacity of the human mind and who did not possess any knowledge of poetics, attributed it to black magic. *Avadhānīs* specialising in various forms of the art were also being accused of fraud<sup>25</sup>.

22. Narayana Rao–Shulman 1998, 195.

23. Mitchell 2009, 149.

24. Krishnamurthi 1985, 36.

25. See for example Ernest Wood's account in which he quoted the article by Henry Steel Olcott, an American officer, journalist and the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, who witnessed an *avadhāna* and stated that «the pandit remembered no less than one hundred things given to him

Moreover, there were other reasons which contributed to the *avadhāna* crisis. The practitioners often engaged in frequent squabbles and personal fights. They used to attend rivals' *avadhānas* only to point out mistakes and inaccuracies, getting involved in public quarrels prompted by, for example, caste feelings or mutual hatred. More and more often they refused to continue their activity in the field of literary *avadhāna*, claiming that it did not result in good poetical composition. This opinion was shared by such *avadhānīs* as, for instance, Umākānta Vidyāśekhara (1889–1942) or Rāyaprolu Subbārāv (1892–1984). All of these reasons led to the nearly complete decline of the described art. It was only revived in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and adapted to fit the new reality governed by the mass media. Contemporary *avadhānīs* present their skills on television and on the radio, they advertise themselves on the Internet. The mass media play the role of a new patron: they give opportunity, time and a place to show off skills, they spread practitioners' glory and, most importantly, they provide financial support. The *avadhāna* is still intellectual entertainment but access to it is easier. The *avadhānīs* enrich their presentations with additional explanations for those who are not familiar with the art and the events often start with a detailed introduction bringing the character of *avadhāna* closer. Nowadays, practitioners come up with new challenges to be incorporated into the art to make it vivid, even more varied and modernised. They showcase their skills not only in Sanskrit but also in other Indian languages, like Telugu, Kannada or Tamil. In this way *avadhānīs* contribute to cementing regional identity and constituting / nurturing community. Not coincidentally, *avadhānas* organised during such events as the annual meetings of the Telugu Association of North America (TANA) are one of the most watched parts of the programme. The art fosters communities, groups of like-minded people who often share a linguistic identity. It also reveals the extraordinary cognitive skills of the practitioners who become recognised and praised for their proficiency and talents. In the past *avadhānīs* were mostly men of high positions, from educated families, very often from the families of professional poets, people who held high positions at the courts. Nowadays, they are respected people who have gained prestige in many cases thanks to their *avadhānas*. Very often they are not only poets and *avadhānīs* but have other jobs and occupations to secure their financial needs. To some degree, *avadhāna* and *avadhānīs*' abilities have become a product which, as we will see, corresponds to its classification within liminoid phenomena.

at the one sitting [...]» but «twenty-four was about the maximum of new items that could be retained and the remainder must have been already known to the pandit» (Wood 1945, 129).



#### 4. *Avadhāna* as a Liminoid Practice

The above description of *avadhāna* and its practitioners helps to place the art in the conglomerate of such categories as performance, ritual, routine and tradition. Lewis noted that «one problem with the term *performance* [...] is that it can be too open – that is, it is difficult to exclude any kinds of events, since almost anything can be seen as a performance»<sup>26</sup>. To address this problem and to determine whether *avadhāna* should be placed within the category in question, one can refer to the study by Landis and MacAulay. The authors formulated three basic tenets characterising formalised performance: 1) location, 2) the presence of an audience / performer, 3) the role of skills / products (presented, shown, experienced or heard during a performance)<sup>27</sup>. Landis and MacAulay meticulously analysed these principles and pointed out the difficulties brought by the various interpretations of their application. In the case of *avadhāna* these three axioms seem to be easily definable. As was shown before, along with the development of the art, the location of *avadhānas* changed, but the events always took and still take place in a defined space, not one chosen at random. *Avadhānīs*, being the centre of attention, demonstrate skills which, depending on the kind of tasks, may lead to the creation of a product (a poem, painting, theatrical *étude*, etc.). All of these happen in the presence of an audience. Although in the past the *avadhānas* were not held in a public space, spectators were always involved. Even in the case of private literary meetings organised for the benefit and entertainment of selected people, for example for a closed circle of poets, the very character of *avadhāna* required the presence of questioners (*prcchakas*) who played a double role – that of spectator and examiner.

This preliminary scrutiny places the *avadhāna* in the domain of performance. But what about the other previously mentioned categories? As observed by Bell «categorization develops a dizzying momentum of its own. The plethora of “ritual spaces”, as Grimes points out, demonstrates how little certainty there is “in identifying either ritual’s center or boundaries”»<sup>28</sup>. The classic Turnerian definition of ritual presupposes the presence of preternatural entities or forces<sup>29</sup> but it does not exclude *avadhāna* from the domain of rite. Similarly to the views presented by other scholars of religious studies, Turner’s assumption does not negate the fact

26. Lewis 2013, 4.

27. Landis–MacAulay 2017, 6.

28. Bell 1992, 69.

29. Turner 1973, 1100.

that this occurrence can be limited, *e.g.* to the usage of sacral symbolism in a secular activity<sup>30</sup>. To answer the question as to whether the *avadhāna* can be defined as a form of rite, suffice it to consult the formal properties of collective rites proposed by Moore and Myerhoff:

1. *repetition* – of occasion and / or content, form;
2. *acting* – self-consciousness of action;
3. *special behaviour or stylization* – the occurrence of extra-ordinary actions and symbols or the extra-ordinary usage of the common ones;
4. *order* – the organization, marking a beginning and an end, the presence of spontaneous elements only in prescribed times;
5. *evocative presentational style* – producing an attentive state of mind;
6. *the collective dimension*<sup>31</sup>.

All of these factors play an important role in the *avadhāna*. The *avadhānīs* show their skills during the events built upon certain schemes governed by a set of rules. Challenges are completed in a certain order, allowing improvisation only in prescribed moments. The «attentive state of mind» and «the collective dimension» are the basis of *avadhāna*. The successful execution of challenges depends on the practitioner's ability to focus, and the questioners and spectators are involved in the process. The presence of *pr̥cchakas* is one of the requirements of the *avadhāna*. The audience, although it may play the role of passive onlookers, often takes an active part in the event by asking questions, reacting in a lively way to the *avadhānī's* words or actions and even participating in the course of formulating tasks. However, it is important to emphasise that the presence of the aforementioned formal properties of collective rites in the *avadhāna* may partially result from the numerous similarities between a performance and a ritual. Both phenomena are characterised by framing, limitation of space and plural reflexivity. Other features they have in common are formalism, traditionalism, invariance or rule-governance<sup>32</sup>.

The *avadhāna* belongs, therefore, to the complex groups of performance and ritual. Or, as a more detailed analysis of this subject reveals, to the space between

30. For example, Bell (1992 and 1997), Alexander (1991), Moore and Myerhoff (1977) referred to the possible usage of sacral elements in the secular activity. Dealing with the sacred and demonic was also one of the functions of performance proposed by Schechner and Appel. Other 'overlapping spheres' they mentioned were entertaining, making something beautiful, marking or changing reality, fostering community, healing and teaching / persuading (Schechner–Appel 2006, 46).

31. Moore–Myerhoff 1977, 7-8.

32. Bell 1997, 138-169.

them<sup>33</sup>. It is not a routine, since only activities devoid of ideological importance, lacking in significant (both symbolic and ritualistic) function, fall into this category. The *avadhāna*, as has been shown, symbolically affirms and reaffirms the identity of its practitioners and the culture of the social groups they belong to; it perpetuates cultural unity and has a repetitive nature which justifies calling it tradition. The art's longevity and the fact that it is invested with the need for repetition endow it with the power that influences society's perception of the described practice. They also reveal the cultural necessity of *avadhāna* and bring us back to the previously mentioned performance aims elucidated by Schechner and Appel<sup>34</sup>.

The process of classification of *avadhāna* discloses the liminoid status of the art. We speak of a rite of passage when an individual leaves one group to enter another. It happens in the course of a ceremony or ritual. The original concept of a rite of passage, as outlined by van Gennep (1977 [1960]), assumes three stages: separation, liminality, and incorporation<sup>35</sup>. In the first stage, an individual prepares for what comes next, symbolically or physically separates from the group that he or she belonged insofar. The liminal or transition stage occurs when a person who withdrew from the previous status is in the process of entering the new one but has not obtained this goal yet. The incorporation marks the moment when a rite of passage concludes and an individual assumes a new identity and re-enters the society with a new status. Is it possible to perceive *avadhāna* as a form of secular rite of passage? In my opinion it is. A person who wishes to become an *avadhānī* or *avadhānīnī* has to prepare for this challenge. It involves studies, training of memory and concentration, and — in the case of artistic *avadhānas* — the improvement of artistic skills. The people who wish to perform *avadhāna* have to devote a lot of time to developing their knowledge, doing various exercises (depending on the type of *avadhāna* and kinds of tasks they want to execute; for example, solving manifold literary puzzles to improve their skills in versification in the case of preparation for literary *avadhāna*), enhancing their concentration and memory through the practice of *yoga*, meditation, following a particular diet, and alike. They do not go through any particular pre-liminal rites to mark the process of separating from the current state, like in the rites of passage described by van Gennep. Nevertheless, eventually, the pretenders to the *avadhānī* or *avadhānīnī* title reach the transitional moment of the first performance. It corresponds to the

33. For more information, readers can consult Cielas 2017, which focuses exclusively on the idea of placing *avadhāna* between the categories of performance and secular ritual.

34. See fn. 30.

35. Van Gennep 1977, 21.

liminal stage of a rite of passage. The person who enters the stage no longer holds a pre-performance status. The process of studies and preparation for *avadhāna*, the announcements of the trial, the appointment of an organizing committee, inviting the audience and the guests of honour — all these are to announce that the person who is about to perform is no longer a common member of society. The person on the stage is not yet an *avadhānī* but in the process of passing over the threshold; the fact that he or she is there, claims to be ready, is elevating. The claimant to the title is already “more” than the non-*avadhānī*. The performance is a proper transitional stage, no matter the kind of *avadhāna*. The execution of challenges proves the acquired and innate skills of an individual. With every completed task, the performer is one step closer to becoming an *avadhānī* or *avadhānini*, slowly moves on the other side of the threshold. The whole process is overlooked by the organizing committee, host, and questioners who play the role of masters of ceremony. Slowly, the people witnessing the *avadhāna* change their perception of the performer and start to perceive him or her as the *avadhānī* / *avadhānini*. The transitional stage of *avadhāna* culminates at the end of the event. Then, a designated person announces the completion of performance and grants the performer with the title of *avadhānī* or *avadhānini*<sup>36</sup>. There is no one prescribed formula for the announcement of the title. Nevertheless, this moment is a boundary marking the end of the stage in between and symbolically changes the social status and officially recognized identity of the performer. The announcement of the title is efficacious and ritual-like, it has the power of the performative utterance stating that the person has become someone that they were not before. This transition is one of the indicators of liminality and shows why the *avadhāna* cannot be denied the liminal-like character. On the other hand, the practice is optional, it belongs to the sphere of play. The need to separate phenomena marked with the trace of liminality but not entirely embodying it (*e.g.* stage dramas) brought Turner to coin the term ‘liminoid’<sup>37</sup> which helped to establish a relation between performance (liminoid) and ritual (liminal). Since *avadhāna* bears distinctive traits of both, it is situated somewhere on the borderline; although, in my opinion, its character is more liminoid than liminal. In fact, as Turner noticed, liminoid phenomena «are not cyclical but intermittent, generated often in times and places assigned to the leisure sphere»<sup>38</sup>. *Avadhānas* can be cyclical but this is merely a result of the periodical nature of

36. The performers may be granted also the other titles, depending on particular skills showcased during the *avadhāna*.

37. Turner 1979, 491.

38. *Ibid.*, 492.

events which such performances may, but are not obliged to accompany. It cannot be ruled out that in the past, when performances were being organised mostly at courts, they had a much more cyclical character, closer to liminal than liminoid. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, no data supports this view. Moreover, it seems that the decision of putting oneself to the test and stepping into the world of *avadhāna* was always a matter of personal choice. As Turner pointed out, liminoid phenomena «are bonded more by optation, by choice than by obligation – in the liminal case, persons *have* to undergo ritual by virtue of their natal status. Competition emerges in the later liminoid domain; individuals and schools compete for the recognition of a “public” and are regarded as ludic offerings placed for sale on a free market»<sup>39</sup>.

### 5. Conclusions

To sum up the above analysis, *avadhāna* can be described and categorised as a tradition situated in the domain of liminoid cultural performances bearing the features of a secular ritual. The performance of the art, especially the first one, is a moment of transition for a practitioner. The event as a whole is secular but its parts and stages are ritualised which, in my opinion, justifies classifying the *avadhāna* as a kind of secular rite of passage. Furthermore, the described tradition evolved over time and in the course of its existence faced its own interim moment. Because of the manifold changes which *avadhāna* underwent at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century I suggest that this period be considered as a key moment in the art’s transition. It moved from the private into the public sphere and from the domain of actively participated scholarly entertainment into a passively consumed element of popular culture. These transformations did not result in a complete change of the art’s status since they did not entirely exclude the parallel occurrence of events conducted in the former way. Nevertheless, they influenced the modern face of *avadhāna*. Stepping into the commercialised public sphere was a way of securing the longevity of the tradition and responding to the expectations of society. Their necessity and the rightfulness of the process are attested by the revival of *avadhāna* in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by the growing popularity of the art creating new paths and further possibilities for its development.

39. *Ibid.*, 493.

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