


## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Embedding sub-stories within a larger narrative framework is a ubiquitous literary device employed by Indian poets of every epoch. In the sixteenth century the celebrated poet-king Kṛṣṇadevarāya of Vijayanagara took the story of the Tamil mystic poetess Āṇḍāl and expanded it into a sweeping Telugu *mahā-kāvya* of epic proportions. Per literary convention, he fleshed out the narrative kernel with sumptuous descriptions of urban landscapes, village life, love, war, and natural beauty. In addition, he incorporated three extended branch stories into his master narrative: (1) a philosophical debate between the cousins Khāṇḍikya and Keśidvaja taken from the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, (2) a reimagination of the life of the Vaiṣṇava philosopher-saint Yāmunācārya, and (3) a lively tale about an untouchable devotee's encounter with a *brahma-rākṣasa*. This last story, sometimes referred to as the *Māladāsari Katha*,<sup>3</sup> is a fast-paced narrative that showcases the poet's richly descriptive and often humorous style of storytelling. Moreover, the story provides us with a fascinating exploration of the evolving nature of pre-modern bhakti as seen through the eyes of a sixteenth-century poet-king.

1 There are several terms used throughout the narrative for a person of low caste that I have universally translated as "untouchable." Examples include *suriyālu* (VI.6), *caṇḍāluḍu* (VI.7), *divākīrti* (VI.10), *plavuḍu* (VI.46), *mātaṅga* (VI.59), *śvapaca* (VI.61) and *gosaṅgi* (VI.64). The caste identity of the devotee is difficult to ascertain and more research needs to be done into what these categories could have referred to at the time of the text's composition. Verse designations follow T. Koteswara Rao, *Āmuktamālyada Saundaryalaharī Vyākhyānam* (Hyderabad, India: T. Koteswara Rao, 2001), hereafter referred to as TKR, and always refer to Canto VI. TKR divides the entire text into six chapters whereas Vedam Venkataraya Sastry in *Āmuktamālyada Āndhra-vyākhyāna sahitamu* (Madras, India: Vedamu Venkatarayasastri and Brothers, 1964), hereafter referred to as VVS, splits this narrative such that the story of "Soma Śarma" (*brahma-rākṣasuni vṛttāntamu*) begins Chapter VII.

2 Standard Telugu diacritic convention is used throughout the text.

3 The *Māladāsari Katha* is the name of this passage as given in VVS. The actual caste identity of the devotee is not verifiable. Cf. note 1.



TALE OF THE  
UNTOUCHABLE  
DEVOTEE<sup>1</sup> FROM  
KṚṢṆADEVARĀYA'S  
ĀMUKTAMĀLYADA<sup>2</sup>

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The narrative is based on an old story found in the *Kaśīka Purāṇa* section of the *Varāha Purāṇa*. In the twelfth century, Śrī Parāśara Bhaṭṭar (the duly appointed successor of Rāmānuja) composed an exposition of the original Sanskrit story in *maṇi-pravālam* and popularized the tale among Śrīvaiṣṇavas. It was most likely this work, rather than the Sanskrit original, that inspired Kṛṣṇadevarāya's retelling.<sup>4</sup> The story describes the humble devotion of a low-caste *bhakta* who sings songs of devotion to the Lord of Kuruḷguḍi. One day he loses his way and is captured by a ferocious man-eating *brahma-rākṣasa* named Kumbhajānu. After a long and entertaining dialogue between the two, the *brahma-rākṣasa* eventually finds salvation at the hands of the untouchable devotee. Like other stories in what maybe called a genre of *bhakti*, class hierarchies are subverted and the ideals of true, heartfelt devotion are elevated. Here the Brahmin is ridiculed, the untouchable is praised, and devotion through song rather than ritual is lauded as the paramount mode of religious worship.

The poet's choice of this particular story is in accordance with the Śrīvaiṣṇava nature of the overall text, but it also reveals aspects of the king's own life and religious sentiment. Kṛṣṇadevarāya was a devout Śrīvaiṣṇava and certainly a mighty king, but he was not a *kṣatriya* in any traditional sense. He was, by all accounts, a newcomer to the Vijayanagara court and exhibited a unique perspective on class, society, and the world around him throughout his life and writings. Chronicles tell us that he was born to the general Narasa Nāyaka and a Tuḷu woman named Nāgāmba. Narayana Rao adds that he "was not born in the

4 There are many parts of the Tamil story that bear a striking resemblance to the Telugu version. Take for example the *dāsari*'s pleas that not returning to the *brahma-rākṣasa* would be a sin equal to comparing Viṣṇu to another god. Cf. *Āmuktamālyada* VI.43, hereafter referred to as AM. In the Tamil version, Lord Viṣṇu comes to the *dāsari* in disguise and tests his devotee. He attempts to convince the *dāsari* to renege on his promise to the *brahma-rākṣasa*. This episode is absent in the Telugu version, the tale of "Soma Śarma," however, seems to be a unique addition made by Kṛṣṇadevarāya. A comparison of the Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu versions would provide interesting insight into how the ideals of *bhakti* evolved over the centuries in various traditions.

Telugu area ... in his own locality, Kṛṣṇadevarāya was only a peasant and, if legends are to be believed, a low-caste peasant at that."<sup>5</sup> Though a proverbial outsider to the customs of court life, Kṛṣṇadevarāya was well educated in mainstream Brāhmaṇical thought<sup>6</sup> and often exhibited conflicting attitudes towards Brahmins, sometimes praising them as gods on earth, while equally reprimanding them for unscrupulous behavior. Here is just one example from the story in which the poet describes the shameless Brahmin Soma Śarma:

For gold, I offered petty atonements to outcaste Brahmins  
and sat alongside them in a row to eat.  
On holy days, I joined with the priests of merchants  
and fought with them for rice.  
During eclipses I performed recitations, took holy baths, and more,  
but gave away all the benefits at the palace gates of minor lords.  
I contracted every town to provide me with sandals  
made from fresh deer hide and buffalo leather.  
Feigning friendship, I went to funerary ceremonies uninvited  
and ate the leftovers from honoring ancestors.  
And when that wasn't enough, I went to the houses of women cooks  
and ate half-eaten food. And on top of that, worse than the rest,  
I took from the great public scale.<sup>7</sup>

The king's ostensibly contradictory views towards Brahmins are a reflection of the often divergent attitudes towards Brāhmaṇical social normativity found in most *bhakti* traditions. The Śrīvaiṣṇavas in par-

5 Velcheru Narayana Rao, "Coconut and Honey: Sanskrit and Telugu in Medieval Andhra," *Social Scientist* 23, 10/12 (Oct.-Dec. 1995): 25.

6 See Srinivas Sistla, *Āmuktamālyada* (Visakhapatnam: Drusya Kala Deepika, 2010), 46 and 414-7 for a hypothesis concerning the king's education at Ahobila *math* and his initiation into the Śrīvaiṣṇava *sampradāya*. Cf. AM VI.66 for more information that intimates this possibility.

7 AM I.69.

ticular had a long history of negotiating this ambivalent attitude as they sought to align the earthy Tamil poems of the Āḷvār saints with a more Sanskritic, Vedic-based theology, appropriately known as *ubhaya* or dual *Vedānta*.<sup>8</sup> This harmonizing process led to perspectives that distinguished *jāti* (birth) from *guṇa* (quality), such that one's character rather than pedigree determined spiritual worth. For Kṛṣṇadevarāya this evaluation based on merit was just as important to his political agenda as it was to his ideals of religiosity. For example, his appointment of Brahmins to positions of power was not solely based on birth-right.<sup>9</sup> As one of his political maxims states:

When promoting Brahmins, discount those who are  
not well born, forest dwellers or unlearned;  
those who can not control their anger  
or those who speak falsely.  
Avoid foreigners, and the unrighteous,  
the villainous, and the cruel.<sup>10</sup>

The antagonistic rhetoric towards corrupt Brahmins was central to most *bhakti* traditions and ultimately led to a limited inversion of class hierarchies to the extent that the most honored devotees were not upper class Brahmins but low class untouchables. The ideal *bhakta* was likened to a servant or *dāsa/dāsari*—for the lower one's position was, the more humble one could be in the service of god. This elevation of status is most evident in the life of Tōṇḍaraḍippōḍi Āḷvār, whose name literally means “the dust at the feet of devotees.” Kumbhajānu

invokes a similar image when he praises the *dāsari* as being “a bee drinking nectar at the lotus feet of Murāri's devotees.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the *brahma-rākṣasa* is so impressed with the *dāsari*'s devotion and noble qualities or *guṇas* that he claims:

I've lived on this earth for a long time now and grown old,  
but I've never seen someone hold to a promise like you...  
You who has this resolve, this knowledge, this honesty;  
this way of standing by what you say,  
and this heart that lives to serve Viṣṇu's feet.<sup>12</sup>

Later he bows down to the untouchable and gently places his feet on his own head as if it was the sacred *śaṭhakopa*, a ritual implement adorned with the image of the god's feet and used to bless the heads of devotees. In this context, the *bhakta* rather than the god is praised, and he or she becomes the object of worship. There is even a sense that the poet equates the *bhakta* to god. This sentiment is well evidenced in the initial physical description of the *dāsari* at the beginning of the narrative, in a depiction strikingly similar to the image of Lord Viṣṇu: “His black body was adorned with a big *tulasi* garland and his brow was marked with sacred white paste.”<sup>13</sup>

Part of this socio-religious transformation was based on the efforts of low-caste devotees to imitate their upper-caste counterparts by educating themselves and by adhering to long established norms of Brāhmaṇical conduct. Although this process may have resulted in an ennoblement of untouchable *bhaktas*, it seems to have done little in terms of elevating their overall social status or subverting the normative social hierarchy. As Ranajit Guha comments,

<sup>11</sup> AM VI.89.

<sup>12</sup> AM VI.48-9.

<sup>13</sup> AM VI.6.

<sup>8</sup> See John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda: Piḷḷāṇ's Interpretation of the Tiruvāymoḷi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) for a detailed exploration of this phenomenon.

<sup>9</sup> The king had a clear policy of appointing Brahmins as commanders of forts (c.f. AM IV.207 and 261). See also Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300-1761: Eight Indian Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 90.

<sup>10</sup> AM IV.209.

It was only by emulating the Brahmin that the Sudra could become an object of Bhakti. In other words, Bhakti could do little to abolish the social distance between the high-born and the low-born, although some of the former's spiritual qualities might, under certain conditions, be acquired by the latter without, however, affecting any change of place.<sup>14</sup>

Kṛṣṇadevarāya seems to echo this sentiment in another political verse about Brahmin commanders when he writes:

Even if warriors, peasants, or others  
imitate the behavior of Brahmins  
or even claim to know the laws of society,  
only a Brahmin will stand his guard in the face of disaster ...<sup>15</sup>

Inversion is certainly one of the key qualifiers of the *bhakti* modality: it questions, rebukes, and reformulates established notions of purity and rank. Part of this process, however, is the concomitant strengthening and reification of well-established socio-cultural norms. As much as Kṛṣṇadevarāya was challenging caste-based ideals, he was equally re-entrenching them. Guha suggests that “whatever promise there was in this of a dynamic social mobility breaking down the barrier of caste and birth came to nothing, if only because the necessity of the caste system and the Brahmin's spiritual superiority within was presumed in the argument.”<sup>16</sup> Here is just one example from the text that vividly exhibits this phenomenon:

As soon as he saw people of the upper castes  
he would step aside.

<sup>14</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony, History And Power In Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 54.

<sup>15</sup> AM IV.217.

<sup>16</sup> Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*, 54.

Bearing the heat and the wind for a very long time  
he would watch and wait as all the *prasādam* was distributed.  
A *sūdra* pitied him and kindly  
placed some *prasādam* on his outstretched lute.  
And then the *dāsari* bowed down with great humility and ate.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to Kṛṣṇadevarāya's commentary on notions of *bhakti*, this episode is an opportunity for the poet to flex his keen skill for narrative composition. Vivid descriptions, colorful characters, witty dialogues, and enchanting story-telling all find their way into this selection. In addition, the poet is able to develop certain poetic *rasas* that are generally absent from the main text, in which the sentiment of *śṛṅgāra* or romanticism predominates. For example, the poet generates the sentiment of *bhayānaka* or fear in a section that describes a deserted courtyard, littered with foreboding signs of abandoned human habitation. The poet then brings his perceptive and highly detailed style of realism to bear on this frightening scene:

As he walked along the stench-filled path  
he saw a heap of skulls with all the brains scooped out  
like a pile of tender coconuts, scraped clean and empty.  
Raw bones were stripped of flesh and lined with tooth marks.  
Swarms of buzzing flies landed on scraps of hides  
that hung on prickly shrubs.  
Hair soiled with dirt lay scattered all around  
like a barber's clippings blown by the wind.  
A pack of wild dogs gnawed at severed human limbs,  
tugging at each other as they ripped away flesh...  
...a rustling in one place would suddenly vanish  
and reappear somewhere else.  
Seeing all this he could tell that somebody was there,

<sup>17</sup> AM VI.9. See also AM VI.52 where the *dāsari* claims that Brahma created untouchables to be food for Brahmins.

and he knew that somebody couldn't be human.  
 The smell of meat was blowing in the air  
 and the only way out was a ways away.  
 And, realizing it wasn't the time for gathering firewood,  
 he got scared and started to wonder.<sup>18</sup>

In another instance the poet evokes the *rasa* of *bībhatsa* or disgust in a graphically worded outcry by the *brahma-rākṣasa*:

I'll feast on your five lifelines until I'm perfectly full,  
 and my hunger is satisfied. Then I'll grab my sword,  
 slice off your head, and happily drink the warm gushing blood!  
 I'll make you into kabobs for my demonesses!  
 And then, in this grove of palm trees, I'll swig liquor brewed in  
 human skulls!<sup>19</sup>

One final aspect of the story that is important to all *bhakti* traditions is the localization of worship in temples. The practice of *bhakti* is therefore intimately connected to specific physical spaces and geographic histories. This very real sense of time and place lends a powerful immediacy to this form of devotion and connects the worshipper to a divinity that is tangible, visible, and knowable. For the *bhakta*, god does not exclusively reside in a faraway heaven; instead, he lives right here on earth in myriad forms and locales. As Rāmānujan comments: "Bhakti poems celebrate god both as local and translocal, and especially as the nexus of the two...[they] celebrate the giving and the receiving, the reciprocity of human and divine."<sup>20</sup>

This remarkable narrative takes place near the temple town of Kuruṅguḍi in the deep south of Tamil country, close to an area that

18 AM VI.17-8.

19 AM VI.25.

20 A. K. Ramanujan, *Hymns for the Drowning* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993), 135-6.

was linked back to a more mythic (and Sanskritic) legend concerning Viṣṇu's *avatāra* as the dwarf Vāmana. Tiru Kuruṅguḍi, as it is known today, is one of the 108 Vaiṣṇava *divya-deśams* or sacred places. Various saints, including Viṣṇucitta in his *Pēriya Tiru Moli*, praised the temple's sanctity for centuries. The significance of this historicity is preserved to this day as worshippers continue to congregate at this important sacred site. Every year on the *Kaiśika ekādaśi*, worshippers gather at the temple and listen to a recitation of the *Kaiśiki Purāṇa*. They take in the story of the untouchable devotee, rejoice at his profound spiritual attainments, and continue to breathe life into a centuries-old tradition.

## TRANSLATION OF THE TEXT<sup>21</sup>

Once there was a man from an unnameable caste<sup>22</sup> who was my devotee.

He lived in a village just twelve miles<sup>23</sup> from the sacred place<sup>24</sup> where I once lived as Vāmana.

And before dawn he would come to me and sing the *Maṅgala Kaiśiki rāga*<sup>25</sup> with devotion. //3//

This the great soul<sup>26</sup> did day after day. //4//

21 Passage from *Āmuktamālyada* VI.3-VI.90.

22 "Unnameable caste" is *perukōṅgāni kulambu* and refers to an untouchable caste, literally a group that is unnamed in the four-fold *varṇa* system.

23 "Mile" is actually *yojana*, a traditional measurement of arguable distance, ranging anywhere from two to nine miles. The text mentions a distance of three *yojanas* (*yojana-trayapu*).

24 This "sacred place" or *puṇya-bhūmi* is one of the 108 *Vaiṣṇava divya-deśams* known today as Tirukuruṅguḍi in southern Tamil Nadu.

25 The phrase here is *maṅgala-nāma kaiśikin*, glossed by TKR as a song (*gānam*), and by VVS as a specific *rāga*. It could also relate to the old Karnatic *rāga* known as *Maṅgala Kaiśiki*.

26 Here the poet refers to the *dāsari* as *mahātmunḍu*. Cf. VI.54 where he uses the term *puṇyātma*.

He lived in accordance with his caste  
 and always kept his heart pure so that he might please me.  
 And though bound to that body  
 he was like a gem wrapped in a dirty rag. //5//  
 He wore a grease-stained leather shirt and cap  
 and brass earrings shaped like a conch and discus.  
 He kept a candlestick and a pair of arrows<sup>27</sup>  
 in a leather bag smeared with turmeric powder  
 slung around his neck, and he carried an umbrella  
 made from screw-pine leaves.  
 He had my footwear, and a lute<sup>28</sup> that was cracked just a bit  
 but held together with long horse hairs.  
 He kept small cymbals in a pouch under his arm  
 that would clang together now and again,  
 sounding with the speed of his stride.  
 His black body was adorned with a big *tulasi* garland  
 and his brow was marked with sacred white paste.  
 With open red eyes and timid glances  
 that untouchable<sup>29</sup> *Vaiṣṇava* cheerfully came to serve me. //6//  
 Streams of joyful tears covered his full cheeks as he sang songs  
 of praise,  
 and in his ecstasy, his lute-playing melted stones.  
 He dropped his heavy belongings nearby  
 and danced wildly with devotion born from within.  
 Until noon he endured the wind, the heat and the pangs of hunger  
 for though he was an untouchable he had the nature of another. //7//

27 “Pair of arrows” is the unclear phrase *joḍu+ammu*, glossed by TKR as an arrow that is thrown rather than used with a bow. VVS corroborates but also reads *boḍu+ammu* for a headless or blunt arrow. Sistla takes the literal meaning as a “pair of arrows.”

28 The instrument mentioned here is a *daṇḍē*, also referred to as *cāṇḍālika* (VI.7) and is most likely a simple fretless drone instrument like the modern-day *ektāra*.

29 “Untouchable” here is *suriyālu*, cf. note 1.

He worshipped me like that for a long time  
 and made full-body prostrations.  
 Turbid water used to wash the inner sanctum  
 filled a stone basin and flowed out of the temple  
 through a channel where a *śūdra* offered him some to drink. //8//  
 As soon as he saw people of the upper castes<sup>30</sup>  
 he would step aside.  
 Bearing the heat and the wind for a very long time  
 he would watch and wait as all the *prasādam* was distributed.  
 A *śūdra*<sup>31</sup> pitied him, and kindly  
 placed some *prasādam* on his outstretched lute.  
 The *dāsari* then bowed down with great humility and ate. //9//  
 In this way he suffered great pains due to his low birth,<sup>32</sup>  
 but his humility made everyone pity him.  
 He would stand at the temple drainage grate,  
 circumambulate the outer enclosure at the peak of day,  
 and then return to his village.<sup>33</sup> He went on like this until one  
 day... //10//  
 At midnight in a neighbor’s house  
 a cat caused a cock to crow.  
 Startled by the sound, and thinking it was morning  
 the devotee set out singing. //11//  
 On the way he stepped on an orris root<sup>34</sup> and got turned around.  
 When he called out to the darkness only darkness echoed back.

30 “Upper castes” is *mukhya-jāti*.

31 “*Śūdra*” is *tri-varṇa-itara-jāti*, literally someone from a group outside the first three *varṇas*. The poet often uses the terms *varṇa* and *jāti* (and even sometimes *kulam*) interchangeably.

32 “Low birth” is *divākīrti-jani*.

33 Cf. the low-caste Tirupān Ālvār who would not enter the Śrīraṅgam temple and sang songs of praise for the Lord from the banks of the Kāveri.

34 “Orris root” is *marulu tīga*. VVS comments that anyone who steps on this vine loses his or her way. C. P. Brown adds that it makes one fall in love. C. P. Brown, *Telugu-English Dictionary* (Vijayawada, India: Victory Publishers, 2004), 582.

He headed east through many fields and at the break of light  
 he entered a grove, deserted and overgrown. //12//  
 There was a crumbling portico surrounded by brambles and  
 prickly shrubs.  
 Grain baskets were tipped over and underneath them packs of  
 bandicoots  
 burrowed down and wasted away in their shaky homes.  
 Wells and grain pits were half-filled with dirt  
 and their openings covered with burr grass.  
 Ants dragged away kernels of wild corn, leaving behind  
 a row of wilted sprouts like a withered hedgerow.  
 Briars inside amaranth bushes growing on dung heaps  
 were caught by the twitching whiskers of aging cats.  
 The field was filled with weeds, and the paddy with wilting rushes.  
 He had entered a wasteland where only a post remained  
 of a broken water pump. //13//  
 On his way through this pathless land  
 he jerked his legs up and down  
 as he plucked out prickly thorns.  
 And as he walked, he carefully pulled  
 and tossed aside thorny creepers. //14//  
 The *Vaiṣṇava* saw a banyan tree that measured half a mile around.  
 Its twisted mass of roots hung down and branches rose from  
 branches.  
 Shiny leaves with holes eaten out by caterpillars were scattered  
 to the distance  
 by the rushing wind, like a written message that cautioned travel-  
 ers not to pass.  
 And for offering such a helpful warning the banyan tree flour-

ished with many fruits.<sup>35</sup> //15//  
 Then he saw a clearing and found a walkway,  
 and thinking it was good luck he quickened his pace  
 but then slowly, slowly approached the banyan tree. //16//  
 As he walked along the stench-filled path  
 he saw a heap of skulls with all the brains scooped out  
 like a pile of tender coconuts, scraped clean and empty.  
 Raw bones were stripped of flesh and lined with tooth marks.  
 Swarms of buzzing flies landed on scraps of hides  
 that hung on prickly shrubs.  
 Hair soiled with dirt lay scattered all around  
 like a barber's clippings blown by the wind.  
 A pack of wild dogs gnawed at severed human limbs,  
 tugging at each other as they ripped away flesh.  
 And while they fought, a foul odor arose  
 as their paws kept pouncing on rotten meat. //17//  
 With their forelegs outstretched, bitches cast furtive glances  
 as they snatched up bones and ran away.  
 As eagles screeched and grabbed onto a string of drying meat,  
 their flapping shook branches, bruising the heads of monkeys  
 who placed their hands at their waist and turned around to cry.  
 A rustling in one place would suddenly vanish  
 and reappear somewhere else.  
 Seeing all this he could tell that somebody was there,  
 and he knew that somebody couldn't be human.

35 This stanza contains one of the longest Sanskrit compounds known in Indian *kāvya*. It encompasses almost the entire verse written in the long nineteen-syllable *śārdulam* meter and makes elegant use of several aspirated gutturals and palatals. Unlike other examples of expansive compounds where poets showcase their compositional acumen, Kṛṣṇadevarāya's artful usage only enhances the description of this grand banyan tree and its long, flowing branches. The compound is as follows: *ardha-yojana-jaṭā-ghaṭā-uttha-śākha-upaśākhā-añcat-jhāṭa-carat-marut-raya-davīyaḥ-preṣita-udyat-chada-udañcat-kīṭa-kṛta-vraṇa-chalana-lipi-āpādita-adhvanya-nissañcāra-ātta-mahā-phala-upama-phala-sphayat-vaṭa-kṣmājamun*.

The smell of meat was blowing in the air  
 and the only way out was a ways away.  
 And realizing it wasn't the time for gathering firewood  
 he got scared and started to wonder. //18//  
 This somebody had a corpse for a loincloth that didn't quite fit,  
 staining his big belly with blood,  
 and he wore a Brahmin's thread tied with muñja grass.  
 His dark body was draped in a crimson cloak  
 like red ants on the curve of a cashew nut.  
 From his mouth came fangs that reached his chin  
 like the tusks of an elephant with a lowered head.  
 His beard was stained brown with dripping saliva  
 like a smoke-colored hive of wild honey bees.  
 In search of food he climbed up branches,  
 and as he looked for passersby, his sacred thread made of intestines  
 would slip, making him curse at it while he put it back in place.  
 His fat stomach hung down. He had one leg that was swollen.  
 His head was shaped like a jug, and even the back of his neck was  
 hairy.  
 He had sores on his eyes and once in a while,  
 out of hunger, he would abuse his demonesses with nasty insults.  
 My devotee saw this night-wandering Brahmin<sup>36</sup>  
 as big as a mountain, with the fitting name of Kumbhajānu, Kettle  
 Knees. //19-20//<sup>37</sup>  
 Kumbhajānu spotted my devotee and yelled "Don't move!"  
 as he jumped to the ground, breaking banyan branches.  
 But the *dāsari* was strong; he remained a man through night and day,

and he had once proved his valor in battle.<sup>38</sup>  
 He stood before the demon with an arrow in his hand and prepared  
 to strike.  
 But the *brahma-rākṣasa* just broke it, and made him angry... //21//  
 Kumbhajānu tried to grab him but the *dāsari* stood his ground  
 and quickly struck the demon's chest as he jumped to another spot.  
 The *brahma-rākṣasa* threw a punch but the *dāsari* dodged it,  
 moved behind him,  
 and stopped to await his next move. But the demon pounced on  
 top of him  
 and landed punches on his chest with his powerful fists. The  
*dāsari* escaped,  
 stood up, and ducked as he tried to penetrate a wall of jabbing fists.  
 He couldn't find an opening so he stepped back, and as the  
*brahma-rākṣasa* groped  
 for a killing weapon the *dāsari* found his chance, punched him,  
 and kicked him.  
 He jumped in front of him, made a fist, moved around him,  
 squarely hit him on his backside, and then hit him again,  
 without ever forgetting to meditate on my holy feet.<sup>39</sup> //22//  
 The *dāsari* kicked him again and ran off but Kumbhajānu called out  
 to his demoness horde who all clambered down to his rescue.  
 My poor devotee was escaping but the *brahma-rākṣasa* yelled  
 "Come on, come on!" as he joined the demonesses and caught  
 him. //23//

38 "Night and day" is *re-pagaṭi veḷaku yaṭa*. The verse makes clear that the *dāsari* had battle experience and TKR adds that he was likely a paid mercenary (*kaijitaḡaḡu*) in a local militia.

39 This fast-paced *sīsa padyam* describes the wrestling match between the *brahma-rākṣasa* and the *dāsari*, almost like a play-by-play fight commentary. One difficulty in this translation is the constant shifting of pronominal markers, which are easily taken care of in the Telugu with *vīḡu* and *vāḡu*, or this one and that one. And though the humble *dāsari* is being violent, the poet ensures us that he acts with the Lord in mind, *mat-pada-smṛti ātma eṃaṛaka*.

36 "Night-wandering Brahmin" is *dvija-nisācaruḡu*.

37 VI.19 and VI.20 both describe the *brahma-rākṣasa* Kumbhajānu and have been combined for ease of translation.



Even then, that devotee, like a bull,  
 resisted with kicks and elbow jabs.  
 He struck on both sides as he struggled to escape  
 but was caught and brought back to the banyan tree.  
 And then Kumbhajānu said... //24//  
 “I’ll feast on your five lifelines<sup>40</sup> until I’m perfectly full,  
 and my hunger is satisfied. Then I’ll grab my sword,  
 slice off your head, and happily drink the warm gushing blood!  
 I’ll make you into kabobs for my demonesses!  
 And then, in this grove of palm trees, I’ll swig liquor brewed in  
 human skulls! //25//  
 “You wretch! You really tired me out!  
 You think I’d kill you so easy?” he yelled.  
 His cries reached the sky and he breathed heavy  
 as he panted and wheezed out words at that lowlife.<sup>41</sup> //26//  
 “Bring me my sword and a dish!” he ordered.  
 And then he lassoed my devotee with a rope made of entrails.  
 He pushed him down and the *dāsari* fell over like a tree.<sup>42</sup>  
 With no hesitation<sup>43</sup> the untouchable spoke to the *brahma-rākṣasa*  
 with kind words that explained moral conduct. He said... //27//  
 “Night-roamer! What’s the hurry? Not even the gods can defeat you.  
 Listen to this one thing. I’m already a meal on a platter,  
 so where can I go? I only fought back because it’s a sin  
 not to protect life.<sup>44</sup> So don’t get mad. I’m not intent  
 on this body; in fact, it’s better if I die. //28//

40 The “five lifelines” are the *prāṇa-pañcakamu*: *prāṇa* (respiration), *apāna* (excretion), *samāna* (digestion), *vyāna* (circulation), and *udāna* (expression). Cf. AM II.28.

41 The *brahma-rākṣasa* addresses the *dāsari* with derogatory terms like *khalu* (wretch) and *nīcuḍu* (lowlife), with no specific reference to caste. Cf. AM VI.9.

42 The actual phrase here is *kujamu-toḍa ōragi*, literally he fell over along with a tree.

43 “With no hesitation” or *dainya-virahitamuga* implies that the untouchable *dāsari* speaks to the Brahmin Kumbhajānu with no reluctance, fear, or sense of social impropriety.

44 “Sin not to protect life” is *prāṇa-rakṣaṇamun upekṣa ōnarcuṭa pāpamu*.

“By ending this lowly birth I can make one soul happy.  
 Isn’t it good that I draw closer to liberation?  
 Isn’t King Śibi<sup>45</sup> the best example?  
 He offered his mortal body and gained the ultimate! //29//  
 “I could die from disease, a devil, a scorpion, or poison;  
 from drowning or assault or a mental illness;  
 from wild animals, fire, ulcers, or cobras;  
 from a very big fight or even a lightning bolt!  
 And then this meager body would perish for nothing.  
 I’m wasting away on this earth. Isn’t it better  
 that I save at least one person? //30//  
 “But let that be, let me give you one more helpful message. And  
 don’t think it’s out of fear for my life, or to escape my duty; take it  
 as an unbiased position and listen. Even if you don’t listen to these  
 words that benefit the world, at least god will appreciate them.  
 “Lions, tigers, boars, wolves, jackals, and others may be car-  
 nivores but you’re not an animal, you’re born from the womb of  
 the goddess.<sup>46</sup> You and I are alike, we have hands and feet, a face,  
 a body, and the ability to speak. We are equals in determining  
 what should and should not be done. Ha! But I forgot something.  
 Your body is far healthier, wiser and stronger than the trees, in-  
 sects, and wild animals, the cattle and birds, even me, or others  
 like you. Someone like you should be aware of things that cause  
 blame and horror. You should know the difference between pun-  
 ishable and unpunishable, proper and improper, edible and ined-  
 ible, potable and impotable.

“This disgusting meal of my body is neither pure nor tasty.

45 The story of King Śibi is an old *Jātaka* tale that exemplifies the notion of *deha-dāna* or giving of the body. A dove hunted by a hawk takes refuge with King Śibi who vows to protect the dove’s life, but in order to appease the hungry hawk the king readily offers a piece of his own flesh equal in weight to the dove.

46 “Womb of the goddess” is the literal *deva-yoni* and implies the divine ancestry of Brahmins.

It is a mark of all the sins attached to being violent.<sup>47</sup> Don't we suffer for that violence in the afterworld? And doesn't the afterworld come after life ends? Don't think that we, with our healthy long lives, won't experience pain or fear. We are human and we are bound to experience it today, tomorrow, the day after, or at the end of time. Whether the wait is short or long it comes when it comes. Is there any relativity in death? It's all awash when drowning in the primordial sea; is there any difference for a mountain or an atom? So shouldn't you consider the future?

"Long ago, great men like Hiranyakaśipu and ten-headed Rāvaṇa performed austerities and humbled the pride of the gods. And though they lived for a hundred thousand countless years, they too fell to the five elements! They may have been conquerors but weren't they conquered by Death? You may be strong here but He is strong there, for all beings are relatively great in their own domain. Even if you could escape the reach of Death, like you evaded me, you'll never escape your suffering. If you consider Death and the other gods to be your brothers than you're great, but you become the tormented and they the tormenters. The difference in your splendor is due to the varying qualities of darkness and purity.<sup>48</sup> The reason for this is that sacred offerings are given to the gods. By having mantras uttered for them and by feeding on burnt oblations of ghee and ground rice, they become purified and gain immortality. That's why they live a lot longer than you.

"Seeing that purity, Soma, the son of four-faced Brahma, who is the moon that shines nectar, wanes and gives chance for all the flavors to be relished as juice and nectar. I can't explain the meaning of this but the Vedas say that in the first phase of the moon,

Fire drinks the Moon.<sup>49</sup> Moreover they say that each phase of the moon is for a different god. Think all this over and do as you like." And as the untouchable devotee finished speaking, that enemy of the gods howled and responded like this ... //31//

"Don't kill us<sup>50</sup> with your erudition!

Are there any texts I haven't read, or Vedas I haven't studied?

But they're not appetizing. Don't you believe me?

'*prathamām pibate vahniḥ*.' Isn't that what you wanted to say? //32//

"Oh, hold on! Didn't you say that the gods are our older brothers? And that they feed on nectar? But food becomes impure in the wrong season.

You said Fire drinks the Moon on the first day of the lunar cycle, so let me ask you one thing. Doesn't Fire consume everything in this world?

That logic is enough for me. So is it a sin for us to emulate our elders? //33//

"Viṣṇu's friend and vehicle Garuḍa found the immortal nectar and gave it to the gods. And in return, didn't he ask and receive the gift of having snakes for his food? Isn't a meal that suits one's nature

just as flavorful as ambrosia? //34//

"I studied without food or sleep, but what did that get me?

Who'd be deceived by your knowledge that's used to make false declarations?

You've displayed your learning before me but that's not enough to earn you a compliment, not even one, not unless you said, 'A curry made from educated man-flesh

has a wonderful flavor. Fetch me some more!'" //35//

47 "Violent" is *himśa*, glossed by TKR, 616, as *ghātuka carya*, cruel or murderous behavior.

48 "Varying qualities of darkness and purity" is *tāratamyambunakun tamas-sattvambulu* and refers to the three constituent *guṇas* of *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*.

49 This passage refers to the purportedly Vedic statement *prathamām pibate vahniḥ* and is quoted by the *brahma-rākṣasa* in the following verse VI.32. VVS, 627, attributes the mantra to the *Devī Purāṇa*.

50 The honorific plural is used reflexively throughout Kumbhajānu's speech.

So said the *brahma-rākṣasa* as he tried to make a mockery of the untouchable's speech by relying on the doctrines of Giṣpati.<sup>51</sup> As he listened to the demon's illogical statements the untouchable repeated the holy name Kṛṣṇa and thought, "In this situation, stirring him up with logical responses will only hurt my mind. How many more lies can I listen to? I have a task to fulfill soon and this is a useless effort. So I'll join him and pretend to go along with his intentions, even though I'm disgusted with his lowly nature. And just to keep that expression of delight on his face I'll use deceptive speech. I'll tell him he's all-knowing but I'll keep Buddha in my heart.<sup>52</sup> I'll say, 'I'm a man from a lowly family with no familiarity with scholarly texts. Am I capable of responding to you? Please understand the errors in my speech and forgive me. Trust me and heed my plea.'" //36// And then the *dāsari* said aloud: "You're already famous among the demons!

Could I brighten your lustrous fame any further?

I won't go back on giving you my body,

but I have one important vow that I've undertaken.

Won't you let me fulfill it?

They say 'Friendship is walking seven steps together'<sup>53</sup>

so think of our relationship as mutually beneficial. //37//

"The vow is like this... //38//

"In nearby Kuruḷguḍi I sing to the Lord of Vaikuṅṭham.

I do this religiously, but luckily today is the last day of the vow.

So after today's service, I'll surrender myself to you," said the *dāsari*. //39//

51 Giṣpati is another name for Vācaspati/Bṛhaspati, the supposed founder of the *Lokāyata* or *Cārvāka* philosophical school of materialism.

52 Buddha is invoked here as *sarva-jñuḍu*, an all-knowing one, but the context is derogatory and reflects the poet's antagonism towards the so-called *nāstika* traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and *Cārvāka*. Cf. AM IV.30.

53 "Friendship is walking seven steps together" is the aphorism *sakhyam sapta-padīnam*.

After he finished talking, the *brahma-rākṣasa* laughed a little and slapped him on the cheek. "O *dāsari*! What a great way to trick me!

Didn't you just become a devotee yesterday out of disgust for building up your body

by beating and robbing travelers in the forest?<sup>54</sup> Are you belittling us?

Then again, I am impressed that you're thinking of ways to break free of those ropes!" //40//

"No matter where he's from, what kind of a man would listen to such reasoning

when there's food at his lips? And furthermore, what kind of a man, regardless of where he's from, would offer his own body to keep a vow?

To make you happy, I could let you go and come back; it would be obvious if you didn't return.

But what's the point of all this trouble, worry and grief?

I'm wasting too many words on a low-born wretch like you!" //41//

As the *brahma-rākṣasa* finished, the *dāsari* covered his ears and called out "Nārayaṇa!" And then he said, "Trust me, you flesh-eater!"

as he went on to make thousands upon thousands of promises in order to convince the *brahma-rākṣasa* to believe just one of them, but he wouldn't listen. //42//

"Who creates the universe with just a wink? In whose body does this world exist?

And who destroys it? Who is this? Only Viṣṇu!

I'd be a sinner if I compared him to any other god,<sup>55</sup>

just like if I didn't find some way to come back to you today," said the *dāsari*.

54 This off-hand comment by Kumbhajānu is an interesting foreshadowing of the details of Soma Śarma's demise.

55 Compare this statement to the Tamil version that is almost identical.

And when Kumbhajānu heard this, he untied the ropes. //43//  
 Then the dāsari set out to pay his dues for some little remnant of sin.  
 He bowed and prostrated before the god with eyes like hundred-  
 petal lotuses  
 and played his lute while singing songs of praise from the *Divya  
 Prabandham* with ecstasy.<sup>56</sup>  
 But bearing the fear of being untruthful, he quickly ran back.  
 His vow now fulfilled and his troubles at ease, he spoke to the  
 night-wanderer like this... //44//  
 “O night-wanderer! After I was released from your captivity,  
 I left to worship that god with a discus and grew closer to liberation.  
 I won’t try to escape from your bindings anymore.  
 The feet, stomach, chest, head, and hands that I had when you  
 let me go  
 are the same feet, stomach, chest, head, and hands that I have now.<sup>57</sup>  
 Just check and see!” he said. //45//  
 Touched by my devotee’s truthfulness, Kumbhajānu started to cry.  
 His body tingled with joy and his big baldhead glistened  
 in the midday sun as he ran towards the *dāsari*. //46//  
 Kumbhajānu, who was as big as a mountain, circumambulated  
 the dāsari  
 and fell at his feet with devotion, like a feverish elephant circling  
 a tree and collapsing.<sup>58</sup>  
 His forehead was at the *dāsari*’s feet and he cried out with such  
 great praise  
 that the sound echoed back from the highest hills. And using his  
 fangs as a lift,

he raised my devotee’s feet, one at a time, and placed them on his  
 head. //47//  
 “On this all-sustaining earth there have been gods, demons,  
 kings, and sages;  
 all of them gained great prosperity through austerities of speech,  
 but your vow isn’t like those other deeds - its fulfillment is  
 frightening!<sup>59</sup>  
 I’ve lived on this earth for a long time now and grown old,  
 but I’ve never seen someone hold to a promise like you. //48//  
 “You received the grace of the Lord of Kurulguḍi with your sweet  
 songs of devotion.  
 It was as if that tied up gourd from your melodious lute became a boat  
 to float across the ocean waves. Are there any others that com-  
 pare to you?  
 You who has this resolve, this knowledge, this honesty,  
 this way of standing by what you say, and this heart that lives to  
 serve Viṣṇu’s feet.” //49//  
 And as he finished, that supreme *bhakta* embraced the *brahma-  
 rākṣasa* and said,  
 “O sinless king of the night-roamers! You’re the one who allowed  
 me to fulfill my vow.  
 It was your great gesture of compassion that made me a noble  
 man. //50//  
 “Vows are like the turns of a wagon wheel.<sup>60</sup> We make thousands  
 of them

59 “Frightening” is *ghoramu* or terrible and resonates with the horrific (*bhīṣma*)  
 vow made by Prince Śāntanu.

60 The phrase *bāsalu baṇḍikaṇḍlu* is unclear. *Kaṇḍlu* could refer to spokes,  
 axels, wheel shaft bearings, or points around the circumference of a wheel.  
 See TKR, 627, VVS, 636, and Brown, 177. All commentators agree that the state-  
 ment implies the transient, fleeting nature of most vows. Sistla translates it as  
 follows: “Promises are pot-like spots on the spokes of a wheel” and adds the ex-  
 planatory phrase “their position changes with the rotation of the wheel!” Sistla,  
*Āmuktamālyada*, 409.

out of fear for our lives. But is it wise of you to forsake this food  
that was so hard won?  
O meritorious one who was born into a family of Brahmins,  
because of your good deeds all demons have gotten a good  
name! //51//  
“Even when you were famished, with a great big hunger in your  
belly,  
you released me and let me to do what I needed to do.  
Brahma created our kind to be food for you, so there’s not a single  
sin against you.  
What else can I say? We’ve become friends, so ease your weariness  
and break your fast with my body. That’s my promise to you! //52//  
O enemy of the gods! There’s no deception in this talk. God is my  
witness.  
My body is full of brains, feed on this arrogant flesh!”<sup>61</sup> he cried.  
And the *brahma-rākṣasa* replied with pain... //53//  
“O no! How could you speak without compassion?  
For many days I filled my belly with this kind of food and sus-  
tained my body,  
only to incur great sins. I thought that someday, somehow,  
a sage or a keeper of vows would come, show me compassion  
and rid me of this life. O pure soul! Now I’ve found you! //54//  
“If devotees<sup>62</sup> like you don’t purify me, then where’s the hope for  
people like me?  
Don’t look at my disgusting past. Show me mercy!” //55//  
“It may be a divine weapon, or a knife used to eat a Brahmin,

61 *Mēyi medo-maya dṛpta āmiṣamulu* appears to be a double entendre where *medo* could refer to *mēdaḍu* meaning brains or *medu* meaning marrow, while *dṛpta* could mean either fat or prideful. The line could be interpreted as a self-deprecating statement about the *dāsari*’s arrogance (as translated), or literally as a body filled with marrow and fatty flesh.

62 “Devotees” is *bhāgavatulu* and refers specifically to *Vaiṣṇava* worshippers.

but both are turned to gold by a philosopher’s stone.<sup>63</sup>  
This uncommon logic should be considered  
when people like you enter situations with people like me.” //56//  
And when he finished, the *dāsari* said, “You didn’t accept the of-  
fering of my body.  
How do you feel about this painful humiliation?”  
To which the Kumbhajānu replied, “Saying I’ll give you my body  
isn’t compassion.  
Ridding me of my sins is compassion! //57//  
“Oh! Are my actions worse than those of Ghaṇṭākarna?<sup>64</sup> Didn’t  
he tear great sages to pieces?  
And didn’t Viṣṇu absolve him and grant him prosperity?  
Can’t a devotee give something better than that? Can’t you grant  
good fortune?  
Isn’t helping another soul a form of worshipping Viṣṇu?” he  
asked. //58//  
The untouchable<sup>65</sup> listened and asked, “How could it be that  
way?” And the *brahma-rākṣasa* replied, “I’m Kumbhajānu, a  
knock-kneed *brahma-rākṣasa*, a perpetrator of gruesome acts  
who took to this banyan tree, tricked human travelers, and ate  
them. Earlier, in my previous life, I was a compassionate Brah-  
min priest named Soma Śarma. It was because of just one sinful  
act that I became like this.

Today you gained merits by singing songs to Viṣṇu. Pass  
them on to me like a gift sanctified with water. Remove my hor-

63 “Divine weapon” can refer to Indra’s thunderbolt (TKR, 629), a sacred knife used by sacrificers (VVS, 639), or simply an axe, Vaman Shivaram Apte, *Revised and Enlarged Edition of Prin. V. S. Apte’s The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 3 vol. (Poona, India: Prasad Prakashan, 1957-1959), 1738. “Philosopher’s stone” is *parusavedi* from the Sanskrit *sparsā-vedhi*, an alchemical stone used to turn metal into gold.

64 The story of the brahman-killing Ghaṇṭākarna’s transformation from demonic to divine form by the grace of Lord Kṛṣṇa is told in the *Uttara Harivaṁśa*.

65 “Untouchable” here is *māṅgaṇḍu*, cf. note 1.

rid guilt and purify this life. After relieving my pain, you can go on doing good deeds endlessly. Your body is a house built on a foundation of great dharma,” he said.

That devotee of Viṣṇu laughed out loud when he heard those words about the body and replied like this ... //59//

“I’ve taken many births. Ones like this, some higher, and some lower. This is just another one of those. How can I give your body even a fraction of my merits from singing, let alone a whole day’s worth? //60//

“How many times were you and I born<sup>66</sup> as guardians<sup>67</sup> and beggars? How many times as lions and caterpillars?

You and I, how many times were we born as elephants and mosquitoes?

As lords of the earth and then as slaves?

As priests of the *soma* sacrifice and then eaters of dog meat?<sup>68</sup>

How many times were we born into a family of birds or a den of snakes?

And yet, not even once, were we born as devotees of Lord Kṛṣṇa. //61//

“The body is like water passing through a fish basket; like a spider’s web, or silk cotton in the breeze.

It’s like turmeric drying in the sun, or a faded letter.

Selling the merits of this precious body is like pawning camphor to buy salt.”<sup>69</sup> //62//

And when he finished, Kumbhajānu responded like this... //63//

“O Untouchable!<sup>70</sup> Be kind and give me just half of the fruits from your singing.

Is the ocean lowered when a fish takes a gulp?

Would Viṣṇu’s glory be any less?” //64//

“Why upset me by asking for things other than my body?

I gave you my word to offer you the meat of my body, not the merits of my praise songs to Vāmana?

Stop these hellish questions and take my body!

Are you thinking of using your devilish, deceptive talk to make me back down?

“They say demons are born when you dig a well!” //65//

And as the *dāsari* finished, that Brahmin who was born in the line of the demoness Sālakaṭaḷkaṭa, felt remorse for having been so intent on his task. He held back his tears and said, “Oh! Aren’t the beloved servants<sup>71</sup> of Viṣṇu supposed to be compassionate? In the past, a great yogi and philosopher named Lakṣmaṇa<sup>72</sup> commented on the *Brahma Sūtras* of Vyāsa and established the *Vaiṣṇava* doctrine of *Viśiṣṭa Advaita*. His guru who was named Pūrṇa<sup>73</sup> was truly pleased with his service. He showered him with waves of grace and bestowed upon him the meaning of the *Bhagavad Gitā*’s ultimate verse.<sup>74</sup> This he did according to tradition and warned him not to reveal it to any others.

Rāmānuja then climbed the golden *gopuram* known as Dāmodara at the abode of Lord Raḷga and spurned his *guru* by crying out, “Master! Is it better to disobey your divine com-

66 In a style characteristic of Kṛṣṇadevarāya’s *sīsa paḍyams*, this verse employs the repeated phrase *yēnni mārlēṭta miyenu nīvu* or “how many times have you and I...” The intensity of the verse is heightened by this repetition and the juxtaposition of high and low births. Cf. AM II.3, II.30, V.51 and VI.105.

67 “Guardians” is *dik-pālu*, a protector of one of the eight cardinal directions.

68 “Eaters of dog meat” is *śvapaca* and refers to an untouchable. See TKR, 632, and VVS, 642, for differing interpretations.

69 This beautiful verse includes images that have been variously interpreted by the commentators, see TKR, 633, and VVS, 642-3. *Ūta* is a basket used to catch fish and “faded letter” is *tōṛri yakkarambu*.

70 “Untouchable” here is *gosaṅgi*, cf. note 1.

71 “Servants” is *ḍiṅgarīlu* and can refer to slaves, students, or devotees.

72 Lakṣmaṇa is another name for Rāmānuja the eleventh-century theologian and founder of the *Śrīvaiṣṇava saṁpradāya*.

73 *Pūrṇa* is the Sanskritized version of Rāmānujan’s *guru*’s name who is better known in Tamil as Pēriya Nambikaḷ.

74 This stanza is held in high esteem by *Śrīvaiṣṇavas* and is considered to be the final verse (*carama śloka*) of the *Bhagavad Gitā*.

mand and condemn just one person to the underworld, or is it better to reveal the highest heaven to this whole congregation of devotees? Think about it. I'm saying exactly what you said." And at this his *guru* was overjoyed. Rāmānuja bestowed the highest heaven upon all the wanting milkmaids and herdsmen who brought dairy products to the quarters of his disciples everyday at dawn without charge.

In another eon, in another incarnation, he was named Sundara Jāmātr<sup>75</sup> and was free of attachments. He explained to people of little knowledge the way that liberated souls cut through the sun's atmosphere<sup>76</sup> so that they might taste the sweetness of heaven. Later, when misguided heretics arrived in the area around Yādavagiri,<sup>77</sup> he was born as the famed Śaṭhakopa<sup>78</sup> to remedy that degradation of faith. In Āndhra<sup>79</sup> and other places he conquered the quarters and fiercely debated with scholars about matters relating to Viṣṇu as if he was distributing alms. And at Ahobalam on Garuḍa Hill, Lord Narasimha came to him disguised as a sannyāsin. The lord gave him a cushion made of grass, saffron robes and a water pot, and then initiated him into the final stage of life.

Śaṭhakopa taught the philosophies of Patañjali, Kaṇāda, Gautama, Bādarāyaṇa, Kapila, and Jaimini, first to the Brahmins who

75 Sundara Jāmātr, literally "beautiful son-in-law," refers to Lord Raṅganātha as Viṣṇucitta's son-in-law. Here it is a Sanskrit back formation of the Tamil name *aḷakīya maṇavālan*, another name for the fifteenth-century Tamil *ācārya* Maṇavāla Māmūnikaḷ.

76 The phrase *arcirādi gati* is unclear. My translation is based on the explanation provided by VVS, 646.

77 Yādavagiri is glossed by VVS, 646, as in the vicinity of Tiru Nārāyaṇapuram.

78 Śaṭhakopa is another name for Nammālvār but here refers to Yatindra or Yatiśvara, an *ācārya* who is believed to have founded the *Śrīvaiṣṇava maṭh* at Ahobalam. The derivation of the term *śaṭhakopa* is unclear but it also refers to a ritual implement used in *Vaiṣṇava* ceremonies.

79 Āndhra is mentioned explicitly by the poet.

worked in the monastery kitchen, and then to his many disciples. He became the ultimate practitioner of the practices of Paramahansa.<sup>80</sup> He entered wastelands and swept away thorns as he purified the earth and taught surrender. The hearts of men found homes at the feet of Lakṣmi and Nārāyaṇa, refuges for the whole world.

And in the future, as a follower of Hayagrīva, yet another scholar named Vedānta Deśika<sup>81</sup> will promote the *Vaiṣṇava* faith. He will write hundreds of treatises and undergo austerities by subsisting on only gleaned corn. He'll even grant *nirvāṇa* to a flax plant for providing him with herbs and ripe leaves.

I've learned of these things yet to come through my divine vision.<sup>82</sup> Isn't my body worthy of respect for having this kind of knowledge of past, present, and future? Even when I say so you'll think it's only due to my birth and not my spiritual attainments, or the control of my inner and outer senses. Even a gypsy fortuneteller tells of the future, but is she pure? Owls, wild fowl, lizards, shrikes, spotted owlets, and other birds of omen can predict the future, but have they performed austerities? My knowledge is like that.

Although I studied and taught in places of learning, I didn't follow or practice the teachings. I distanced myself from the *dharma* due to my disbelief in the self. This is without reason [...] I cannot transcend this existence.<sup>83</sup> Even so, if a body is free of sin, it's not sure to become pure. Therefore, do away with compassion for this deformed body and do something meaningful," he said as he fell to the *dāsari*'s feet.

"Give me just a quarter of your merits," he asked. "If you say

80 Paramahansa is another name for Śaṭhakopa Yatindra.

81 "Follower of Hayagrīva" is from *haya-vadana*. Vedānta Deśika is mentioned here as *veṅkaṭeṣuṇḍu*.

82 This addition by the poet seems to justify his anachronistic, and often chronologically inconsistent, summary of various *Śrīvaiṣṇava ācāryas* and their relation to the Ahobila *maṭh*.

83 Part of this *vacanam* is unclear.

you can't, then forget about that. Give me the merits of just your last song, the one you sang at dawn. Give me refuge. Relieve me of my misfortune," he said without rising.

The *dāsari* was moved with great compassion and said, "So it shall be," as he gestured for the *brahma-rākṣasa* to rise and helped him to his feet. The *dāsari* asked Kumbhajānu to explain in detail how he took that form. And so that sorrowful flesh-eater begged him to listen and started: //66//

[SOMA ŚARMA KATHA]

I was living in a town in Coḷa country. And having studied the fourteen arts,<sup>84</sup>

I won debates against logicians with my sharp wit. I pointed out the mistakes

made by ritual specialists. I laughed when men opened up books on debate.

I ridiculed officials at scholarly gatherings and I questioned their mastery of texts.

And, I blabbered. //67//

I carried on like this. I was blinded by pride like an elephant gone mad with cracked temples. With my little knowledge I was like a *Rēḍḍi* chief easily giving and taking pennies.<sup>85</sup> Those studies were like my ultimate god. I chased elder scholars around until they said, "Okay, we lose!" and when that wasn't enough I made them say, "You're the winner!" I told lies and tricked petty chieftains. And after I watched ritual specialists, I wanted to perform

84 The "fourteen arts" is actually *kaḷal padunāḷgu*, and both commentators agree that this refers to the fourteen types of Vedic knowledge rather any kind of art, of which there are usually sixteen.

85 "*Rēḍḍi*" is glossed by TKR, 638, as *grāmādhikāri* or a village chief. Sistla translates "like a Reddy who twirls up his mustache," taking *visambu* (a fraction of money) for *mīsambu* (mustache). Sistla, *Āmuktamālyada*, 409. Cf. AM IV.134 for another deriding reference to *Rēḍḍis*.

rituals too and become rich, so I went to Madhura to beg for the necessary implements. //68//

For gold, I offered petty atonements to outcaste Brahmins and sat alongside them in a row to eat.

On holy days, I joined with the priests of merchants and fought with them for rice.

During eclipses I performed recitations, took holy baths, and more, but gave away all the benefits at the palace gates of minor lords.

I contracted every town to provide me with sandals made from fresh deer hide and buffalo leather.

Feigning friendship, I went to funerary ceremonies uninvited and ate the leftovers from death ceremonies.

And when that wasn't enough, I went to the houses of women cooks<sup>86</sup> and ate half-eaten food. And on top of that, worse than the rest, I took from the great public scale. //69//

After I acquired things in this way, I pawned them off to a merchant. Then, as I was leaving, I went to take everything back. I estimated the interest

to four times what it really was, and pointed out the differences in our calculations.

I riled him up and while he blundered, "I'll pay. No, I won't pay!" I yelled at him, right there in the open. And as we fought, a man stood watching.

After that... //70//

In an outcaste area,<sup>87</sup> I bought fine new shoes and quickly rubbed them with oil and lined them with soft cassia leaves.

I shaved my beard and took my time as I washed my head at a shop that provided hot water.

Instead of going to the houses of cooks every day,

86 "Houses of women cooks" is *akka-vāḍalan*, a street where cook maids live (Brown, *Telugu English Dictionary*, 12), glossed by TKR, 639, as *pūṭa-kūṭiḷlalo*, in boarding houses or inns. cf. AM VI.71.

87 "Outcaste area" is *vēli-vāḍan*.



I sent for milk, yogurt, ghee, and curries as I pleased.  
 Then I would open up my pouch and joyfully  
 pack lots of areca nut into a betel leaf.  
 I brought along with me a Brahmin student  
 who carried a bag of well-cleaned rice on his shoulder.  
 And while I eagerly bought the best saris for my wife,  
 other travelers asked questions about my journey  
 and learned of my travels. //71//  
 The travelers joined us and sent a few of their men ahead  
 to scout out a path. They carried bags like the rest of us.  
 They slept and rose along with us. And before daybreak,  
 one said, “We must head north!” //72//  
 And after he got up and left, his companions grew anxious  
 and set off. I handed my burdensome bag to my student and  
 followed.  
 “Come! This way!” they gestured as they led us on a path through  
 the forest.  
 We climbed down to a mountain stream and then, one of them  
 whistled. //73//  
 And just when I could see the lines on the palm of my hand,<sup>88</sup>  
 an arrow fell. Everyone stood still. Rocks whizzed by.  
 There was no opening in sight, and everyone fell back on each  
 other. //74//  
 Arrows flew and a pack of untouchable mountain hunters,<sup>89</sup>  
 strong enough  
 to defeat a demon army, suddenly appeared from the forest  
 and fell upon us screaming “Attack! Attack!”  
 They were like three-eyed Śiva’s horde of ghosts, causing earth-  
 quakes with their trampling,  
 and rushing with fierce hunger to devour creatures at the end of time.

88 “See the lines on the palm of my hand” is *aṛaceta vrālu kanu* and intimates that the light of day was just breaking.

89 “Untouchable mountain hunters” is *puḷinda plava*.

Even the world-destroying poison was jealous of their array of  
 shining weapons  
 that was like the sun rising up from the streaks of an eclipse. //75//<sup>90</sup>  
 This is how they ambushed us from the trees. They surrounded  
 us and braced their bows.  
 Seeing those dark-skinned men<sup>91</sup> threw us into a state of confusion,  
 and everyone started to scatter... //76//  
 One of our men yelled, “Cowards! There’s not that many of them.  
 Stand and fight!”  
 So some flung their ritual implements like weapons.  
 Others tossed their purses of gold into the bushes and dropped  
 their shawls  
 as they fled out of fear of being beaten with clubs.  
 Some put down their bags and dispersed while assailants who  
 held daggers  
 stood ready and called out, “Come out wherever you are!”  
 Other begged, “Oh sir! Show compassion. I’ll starve without this bag.  
 Here, take my clothes.” And some said, “We’ll give you whatever  
 we have in our group.  
 Just leave. And more thing, don’t lay a hand on our women.”  
 We spoke out so that they would take note of our courage, honor,  
 and rank.  
 And when we submitted to being robbed, some of the thieves  
 stopped and left. //77//  
 An armed Bowman, instead of leaving the way he came, grew angry  
 with the man facing him and stabbed him amid the confusion.  
 When a greedy man refused to give anything, a bandit gave him  
 a flesh wound,  
 albeit not too deep, and grabbed whatever he had in his hands.

90 This complex verse is written in the grand *Mahāśragdhara* meter of twenty-two syllables. The entire stanza is in Sanskrit except for the first word of the poem, *kavisēn*, a Telugu verb meaning to join, approach, or in this context attack.

91 “Dark-skinned men” is *nalla-prajan*, literally black people.

An armed man swung at a fleeing traveler but missed  
and stopped just as he was starting to give chase.  
Men were sent out to search for a fat man who fled, even though  
he had no money in his hands.  
They poked around with spears to find those who had hid in the  
shrubs.  
They stole the travelers' fine folded clothes  
but kindly let them keep their old clothes to use as loincloths.  
With arrows fitted with big oleander leaves they searched the  
soles of the travelers' shoes,  
and they even untied their topknots. //78//  
This is how the thieves, amid all the confusion, robbed the travel-  
ing party, freely taking at will their fill of various belongings. //79//  
At that moment I tried to escape. But I was quickly seen  
by a gruesome savage thief named Kākaśmaśru, Crow Mustache.  
He had been watching me ever since we were in town  
and now he was chasing after me.  
He had a long black waistband, tightly wrapped  
around his waist from his hips up to his chest.  
His mustache had grown longer than a cat's whiskers  
and swayed like a swing atop his big potbelly.  
His face was smeared with ash, and a bandana covered his mouth  
like a dirty old hat stained with wax.  
A silk cloth dangled from the joint of his little finger<sup>92</sup>  
and sparkled along with the brilliance of his dagger.  
He was very very scary. //80//  
I abandoned my student and started to run away  
but Kākaśmaśru threw his dagger and hit the back of my neck.  
I fell over, and he dragged me, and loosened  
the soft waistcloth that covered my bulging belly.  
And as I resisted, he ripped open my gold purse.

92 "Silk cloth dangled from the joint of his little finger" is a literal translation of *ciṭi-vreli pūsapai ghaṭiyillu vēḍa paṭṭu*. The image is unclear.

He pulled at my earrings that were like snake hoods  
until I had no lobes left. He undid my bandana  
and the chinstraps of my hat<sup>93</sup> as he robbed me and fled. //81//  
I couldn't control my big mouth<sup>94</sup> and shouted,  
"Hey you! You there! What a pity!  
You used to live in town, and look at you now.  
Go ahead! Let's see how that money helps you!" //82//  
And then, thinking that I might complain to the town magistrate  
about being robbed of everything, he turned back to finish me off.  
He stabbed me with quick thrusts, and ran away  
out of fear of the crowd that was following behind him. //83//  
Meanwhile a group led by my wife's brother approached  
from the nearby main road. He had learned of all the events  
that had befallen our traveling party. And when he saw me  
he felt sad. He placed my exhausted body in a yoke  
and scolded me as he carried me away. And on our way ... //84//  
Some, who were cut with crane-shaped swords, held their shoul-  
ders in,  
pressed their wounds with their fingers and searched for a doctor  
to give them stitches.<sup>95</sup>  
Others wrapped dirty old rags around wounds that they got from  
clubs  
hitting their heads and went from house to house asking for por-  
ridge or gruel.  
Some told their woes to people who listened with great pity in  
their hearts,

93 "Chinstraps of my hat" is *kaśeṅgerula tēkkiyu*. VVS, 664, and TKR, 648, both con-  
cur that this a reference to headgear known as a *kuḷḷāyi*. The term seems to be of Per-  
sian origin and substantiates the claims made by Philip Wagoner in reference to the  
sartorial Islamicization of Vijayanagar culture. See Phillip Wagoner. "Sultan among  
Hindu Kings: Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara,"  
*The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55, no. 4 (Nov. 1996): 851-880, for a detailed analysis.

94 "Big mouth" is *noṭi-śani*, literally the mouth's bad luck.

95 "Doctor to give them stitches" is *kuṭṭiḍa vējju*.

and when ladies tore their saris to give them fresh cloth, they bid them well.

Others fell upon their relatives and used the robbery as an excuse to talk about great riches one couldn't even dream about.

My wife's brother continued on through the commotion past town landmarks

and brought me here. He put me down in the shade of this banyan tree

and in the time it took for him to go and fetch some drinking water, my breathing stopped, and I took this form. //85//

I took on this dreadful body because, at the moment of my death, it was as if my eyes were tied to that gruesome image of Kākaśmaśru,

that savage who chased me in the conflict, wounded me, and caused a fever of fear.<sup>96</sup>

Couldn't you end this by giving me the fruits of the *Kauśiki* song?" After he finished, the *dāsari* said, "I know nothing of these fruits.

The only result of divine services willingly performed according to the rules<sup>97</sup> is the joy on the face of the Great God.<sup>98</sup> How could a devotee calculate the value of those fruits?" And timidly he added, "But since you are bound to that body, take some of these fruits, this much or that much, and god will save you. Be assured."

And while the words were still in his mouth... //86//

He watched and watched as that body transformed into a Brahmin figure,

shining with golden light. Like fire emerging from a cloud of smoke,

96 "Fever of fear" is *vēra-veki*.

97 The poet makes a distinction between two kinds of service (*kainkaryam*), those done according to Vedic prescription (*ājñā*) and those done out of personal volition (*anumati*).

98 "Great God" is *parameśa* and refers here to Viṣṇu rather than the epitaph's more common attribution to Śiva.

there stood Śoma Śarma, a *Vaiṣṇava* invested with all the riches of devotion.

His head was shaved smooth in three areas with one lock remaining and his sacred thread was white as snow.

His upper body was painted with the sacred mark in twelve places<sup>99</sup> and he wore a row of garlands made of *tulasi* and lotus.

He had a tiny loincloth, a thread around his waist, and clothes the color of saffron.

He carried a clean pot filled with water.

He held a copy of the *Divya Prabandham* in his hand

and recited the holy mantra starting with the second half first.<sup>100,101</sup> //87//

In this way, due to the power of the devotee's service, he not only regained his Brahminhood but acquired a wealth of devotion, and was filled with supreme joy, like a crystal of salt splitting into two. Soma Śarma, in an act befitting his true form, praised the *dāsari*. //88//

"*Jaya! Jaya! Jaya!* Supreme master of song!

You are like a drop on a lotus petal, resting on this impassible ocean of life.

You are like a sickle that slices through questions of existence.

*Jaya! Jaya! Jaya!* Your sweet tongue savors the taste of Śauri's stories.

*Jaya! Jaya! Jaya!* You fooled us by taking birth as a lowly man.<sup>102</sup>

99 "Sacred mark in twelve places" is *ṣaḍdvīpa puṇḍravallula* and refers to the *Vaiṣṇava* practice of painting a *pañga-nāmam* or sacred fork-shaped marker onto various parts of the body above the waist.

100 This is a reference to the second half of the *dvayam* mantra: *śrīmate nārāyaṇāya namaḥ*.

101 This verse contains eight repetitions of the preposition *toḍa*, with, and is reminiscent of another long *sīsa padyam*, cf. AM II.73.

102 "Lowly man" is *jana-arvācīna* and refers to the *dāsari* himself, or possibly other untouchable *bhaktas*.

*Jaya! Jaya! Jaya!* You took refuge at the feet of the ultimate teacher.<sup>103</sup>

And you stood by your word, offering your body as food.

*Jaya! Jaya! Jaya!* You follow the command of god and treat all creatures equally.

You are imbued with compassion, but deaf to teachings about gods other than Mukunda.

*Jaya! Jaya! Jaya!* Your limbs are marked with the eight marks of devotion.<sup>104</sup>

You are like a bee drinking nectar at the lotus feet of Murāri's devotees,"<sup>105</sup> //89//

Sang the Brahmin as he circumambulated the *dāsari*. Soma Śarma had turned his face away from the pleasures of home, wife and other things, and feared a future birth. He went on pilgrimage, again and again, to holy places like the Badarī Grove<sup>106</sup> where the Great Lord resides, and finally attained the supreme happiness.<sup>107</sup>

I told this sacred story in my form as a wild boar while I carried the Lady of the Earth.<sup>108</sup> //90//



103 "Ultimate teacher" is *deśika* and refers to Nārāyaṇa as the first teacher in the *Vaiṣṇava parampara*.

104 "Eight marks of devotion" is *catur-dvaya bhakti-lakṣaṇa citāṅga*.

105 This effusive praise poem is completely in Sanskrit and offers a fascinating point of comparison to Viṣṇucitta's *jaya* poem to Lord Viṣṇu in AM IV.16.

106 "Badarī Grove" is *badarī-vana* and likely refers to the famous Himālayan pilgrimage place known today as Badrināth.

107 "Supreme happiness" is *parama-nirvṛtin* and also implies his ultimate death.

108 Viṣṇu is the narrator of this story; he explains that he originally told this tale to Bhūdevī, goddess of the earth, as he raised her from the bottom of the ocean in his *varāha avatāra*. The translation of this *vacanam* has been truncated.