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Vrātya or Ancient Indo-Aryan Violence? Challenge and Defeat within the Patterns of Vedic and Buddhist Dialogues¹

ABSTRACT: *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* (JB) II 225 and *Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa* (PB) XVII 1.9 have been authoritatively interpreted by Falk (1986: 29–30) as evidence that the Vrātyas behaved in a peculiarly aggressive way. The present study puts forward the hypothesis that such violence was not a distinguishing feature of the Vrātyas, but an inherited common trait of the Indo-Aryan culture, which, for example, is well documented in its strong warrior tradition, in clashes between clans and families for dynastic reasons, in the frequent use of curses and other acts of verbal violence and in the ritual violence of bloody sacrifices. These various deep-rooted cultural patterns might all have stemmed from the original highly competitive social organization of the Indo-Aryan people. The way in which Vrātyas selected their leader,

¹ All translations are by the authors unless explicitly stated. Chiara Neri is responsible for §§ 2; 2.2; 2.3; 2.4; 3; 3.1; 3.2; 4; 5; Appendix 1; 2 and Tiziana Pontillo for §§ 1.1, 1.2; 1.2.1; 1.2.2; 2.1. We are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable corrections and insightful suggestions. All remaining errors are our own.

regardless of his birth status, in line with Buddhist meritocracy, also proves to be in line with this assumed competitiveness of the origins.

This paper concentrates on the violence inherent in the Vrātya dialogues and their dramatic consequences. These dialogues are compared here with the Old and Middle Indo-Aryan “verbal contests” on the basis of Vedic and Pali texts, in the wake of work by Witzel (1987) and Manné (1990), who singled out relevant schemes and formulas in both the Brahmanical and Buddhist sources. Indeed, the earliest sources provide ample evidence of agonistic sapiential debates (the so-called *brahmodyas*), in which the loser is forced to submit to the winner or even undergo a much worse punishment.

KEYWORDS: Old and Middle Indo-Aryan violence, comparing Vedic and Pali sources, Vrātyas, *brahmodya*, verbal contests, debate and curses

1. The common pairing of Vrātyas and violence

1.1. The most ancient occurrence of the plural *vrātyas*

Vrātyas have been connected to violence and especially to bloody rituals ever since their first mention in the Vedic sources. Apart from Śaunaka *Atharvaveda* XV, whose antiquity is heavily questioned, the earliest occurrence of the appellation Vrātya belongs to the *Vājasaneyī-samhitā* (VS). This occurs in a passage dealing with human sacrifice (*puruṣamedha*)² and may be found in the *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* (TB)³ in

² Human sacrifice seems to be admitted to in Vedic sources: see Krick 1977: 93–94; Houben 1999: 121–122.

³ TB III 4.5.1:

*nadībhyaḥ pauñjiṣṭham ṛkṣīkābhyo naiśādaṃ puruṣavyāghrāya durmadaṃ
gandharvāpsarābhyo vrātyam prayudbhya unmattaṃ sarpadevajanebhyo
pratipadam avebhyaḥ kitavam iryatāyā akitavam. piśācebhyo bidalakāram.
yātudhānebhyaḥ kañṭhakakāram* (The Sanskrit text is based on the edition published in Punyakhyaṇṭane in 1999).

To the Rivers a fisherman [has to be offered], to the Rkṣīkās a hunter, to the Puruṣavyāghra a mad man, to the Gandharvas and Apsaras a Vrātya, to the assailing

quite a similar form. A Vrātya as a human being of low status figures in the list of victims offered to various mythological beings:

VS XXX 8: *nadībhyaḥ pauñjiṣṭham ṛkṣikābhyo naiśādam puruṣavyāghrāya durmadam gandharvāpsarobhyo vrātyam prayugbhya unmattam sarpadevajanebhyo 'pratipadam ayebhyaḥ kitavam īryatāyā akitavam piśacobhyo bidalakārīm. yātudhānebhyaḥ kañṭhakikārīm.*⁴

To the Rivers a fisherman, to the Rkṣikas a hunter, to the Puruṣavyāghra⁵ a mad man, to the Gandharvas and Apsaras a Vrātya, to the teams⁶ an intoxicated man, to the troops of serpents and demons a confused man, to the lords of dice a gambler, to the lady of excitement a non-gambler, to the demons Piśacas a woman who splits logs, to the evil spirits a woman who is a necklace-maker.

A Vrātya man is offered here as a sacrificial victim to the Gandharvas and the Apsaras and Gandharvas are often associated with the Vrātyas on a divine level. This fact was clearly expounded by Vasilkov (1989–1990: 395) who emphasized similarity in looks and behaviour characterizing both the Gandharvas and the long-haired “members of the unmarried boys’ age-group, i.e. ‘brotherhoods’ of young warriors in many cultures.”⁷ Hauer interpreted the Gandharvas mentioned in this VS passage as beings who drive people mad or possess them,

beings a drunk/mad man, to the troops of serpents and demons a confused man, to the favourable lords a gambler, to the lady of excitement a non-gambler, to the demons Piśacas a log splitter, to the evil spirits a necklace-maker.

⁴ The Sanskrit text is based on Weber 1972.

⁵ For more details on the Rkṣikas, divine feminine beings related to the world of hunters, and on the supernatural being called Puruṣavyāghra, probably an embodiment of the spirit of one of the members of god Rudra’s wild host, see Vasilkov 2015: 238–245 and Pontillo and Sudyka 2016: 275–287.

⁶ Hauer (1927: 54 fn. 3) assumes that this refers to demons who drive man to intoxication or mad excitement.

⁷ Dore 2016 is entirely devoted to the study of the relationship between the Gandharva imagery and the Vrātya culture.

relying on the Vedic compound *gandharvagr̥hīta*, which we found in *Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa* (AB) V 29.2, *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* (BĀU) III 3.1 and III 7.1, where a maiden (*kumārī*), a daughter (*duhitṛ*) and a wife (*bhāryā*) are respectively “possessed by a Gandharva.” However, in the above attestation from the VS, the Vrātyas already appear to be alien to a common Brahmanical⁸ religious landscape and victims rather than agents of violence.

1.2. The most quoted Vedic passages on the Vrātyas

In order to take a closer look at the attribution of peculiar aggressiveness to the so-called Vrātyas, the present paper will re-examine some of the most iconic texts that, with very few exceptions, have dominated all recent literature on the Vrātyas. Indeed, in recent years whenever scholars have mentioned the Vrātyas *en passant*, they have also regularly quoted the occurrences of the term which we re-analyze here. However, we focus on the challenge-style of dialogues that characterise the Vrātyas and, in particular, try to show how all the ancient Indo-Aryan “verbal contests”⁹ in the Vedic and Pāli sources presuppose a simple but bewildering principle, which might be best summed up with the following formula:

the insufficient knowledge displayed by X allows Y to use violence against X.

Starting from the premise that the Vedic and Buddhist dialogues exhibit comparable patterns as first demonstrated by Witzel (1987), we attempt to show that this does not depend on any particular inclination to violent behaviour, more so as in the case of the Buddhists it should, as a matter of course, be categorically excluded. In our reconstruction,

⁸ Hereafter, the term “Brahmanical” is used to denote a cultural context dominated by the Brahmanical class, especially that established after the so-called “Śrauta reform.”

⁹ Here we adopt the expression coined by Kuiper 1960.

this shared aptitude is rather taken as a remnant trace of a very ancient Indo-Aryan pattern.

Having said that, let us reiterate three important points Harry Falk underlined in the chapter titled “Die Aggressivität,” found in his reference work on the Vrātyas (1986: 29–30):

Vrātyas harassed a very specific target group, namely a chieftain or a Brahmin (<i>rājani vā brāhmaṇe vā</i>), to rob them for their own benefit;	<i>Baudhāyana-Śrautasūtra</i> (BŚS) XVIII 24
they injured the Brahmin who is not to be injured (<i>ahimsyaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ himsanti</i>);	JB II 225
they used to beat the one who should not be beaten with a stick (<i>adaṇḍyaṃ daṇḍena ghnantaḥ</i>).	PB XVII 1.9

1.2.1. The reading of BŚS XVIII 24 is not indisputable Candotti and Pontillo (2015: 200) have recently advanced a different interpretation of the same passage,¹⁰ basing their conclusions on a specific inquiry into the sense of the term *pratigraha* as it appears therein:¹¹

BŚS XVIII 24: *te rājani vā brāhmaṇe vā pratigraham icchante māsāya vartave vā*.¹²

They seek somebody who plays the function of receiving on their behalf/ to their benefit in a chieftain or in a brāhmaṇa, either for a month or for a season.¹³

¹⁰ As for some consequences of this reading on the general assessment of the Vrātya phenomenon, see Pontillo and Dore 2016: 12.

¹¹ For the *Ṛgveda*, *Śaunaka Atharvaveda* and *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā* occurrences of *pratigraha*, see Candotti and Pontillo 2020.

¹² The Sanskrit text is based on Kashikar 2003.

¹³ Cf. tr. Hauer 1927: 105–106: “Sollen sie von einem König oder einem Brahmanen ein Geschenk erbitten zu Gunsten des Monats oder der Jahreszeit (in der sie opfern).” [They should ask for a gift from a king or a Brahmin for the benefit

In fact, if this sentence is not read in isolation but in context, it becomes obvious that the protagonists, i.e., the supposed aggressive robbers, are going to perform a sacrifice, the *Vrātyastoma*, which, as Candotti and Pontillo set out to show in 2015, was a sacrificial practice aimed at: a) forming an alliance between the members of the group and appointing a leader; b) distributing the booty amongst the whole group at the end of each expedition. Their reconstruction was mainly based on: 1) Thite's (2004) translation of the sentence *vratyānām pravāse vrātyastomāḥ* in ĀpSS (22.5.4) as "In (order to lead the) life of the Vrātyas, *vrātyastomas* [are to be performed]"; 2) Thite's (2004) relevant comment, which highlighted the fact that *vrātyastomas* are soma-sacrifices to be obligatorily performed by *āhitāgni*-sacrificers, i.e., sacrificers entitled to maintaining sacred house fires, and not people who needed to have some state of pollution removed.

Of course, our aim in proposing a new interpretation of this text is simply to find more clues about the most ancient layer of the Vrātya phenomenon. With this in view, let us take a look at the two sentences from BSS XVIII that follow the sentence which have caught Falk's attention in 1986 and was analyzed above.

*te yam abhisamjānate taṃ sthapatim kurvanti. sa eṣāṃ vratāni carati.
so 'dhaḥ saṃveśy amāṃsāsy astryupāyī bhavati. tad dhi dīkṣitavratam.*

They appoint him as their leader (*sthapati*-), whom they agree on. He brings about their observances. He becomes one who lies down [on the ground], who does not eat meat, who does not approach his wife. This is the observance of the consecrated man (*dīkṣita*-).

of the month or season (in which they sacrifice)]; tr. Falk (1986: 28): "Diese (Vrātyas) wünschen sich bei einem König oder Brahmanen eine Gegengabe für einen (bestimmten Monat) oder eine Jahreszeit" [These (Vrātyas) require in response an offering from a king or a Brahmin for a (particular month) or season.]; tr. Kashikar (2003: 1207): "They seek acceptance by a king or a brāhmaṇa one month or one season before."

In the light of the expanded passage, we believe that it is not hard to assume that rather than describing a group of people who want to find “favour” (*pratigraha*) with a chieftain or a brahmin, the text is actually talking about a horde whose chief is the immobile core of their aggressive action and the trustworthy keeper and dispenser of their goods. The ritual meaningfulness of the term *pratigraha* we find here should not be underestimated. As is well known, in the Brahmanical tradition, *pratigraha* becomes one of the six activities prescribed for the members of the *Brāhmaṇa-varṇa*—*Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (MDhŚ) I 88. But the denotation of the action of “receiving goods” as *dakṣiṇās* by means of the masculine noun *pratigraha-* is well documented in earlier Vedic sources, e.g., in our BŚS itself, which is probably the earliest *Śrautasūtra*, in BŚS XXI 10 (*dakṣiṇānām pratigraha*) and in another of the earliest *Śrautasūtras*, i.e., in *Lātyāyana-Śrautasūtra* (LŚS) V 5.1–2 (*dakṣiṇapratigraha*).¹⁴

Furthermore, several Vedic sources actually contain a number of occurrences of inflected forms of the corresponding verbal base *prati-grah-* in this technical sense, while others have the deverbal *nomen agentis pratigrahitr* often opposed to *dātṛ-* “giver” (see Candotti and Pontillo 2015: 203; 2020: 36–41). It therefore seems plausible that the quite ancient BŚS XVIII 24 retains a partial memory of the role of the granter. Moreover, the performers of the mentioned Vrātyastoma might have been common warriors who lived as a brotherhood and were looking for somebody to become their leader, an individual who had perhaps already proven himself trustworthy and thus fit for the role of the *pratigraha*. In brief, according to the first quoted sentence from BŚS XVIII 24 re-examined here, what the community is described as doing amounts, in fact, to simply looking for a consecrated *primus inter pares* chosen on a meritocratic basis.

Other *Śrautasūtra* passages confirm that when the Vrātyas are going to perform the Vrātyastoma sacrifices, they choose their leader simply according to his merits. In other words, they select from among themselves the one who is the best endowed with power, by virtue of

¹⁴ Here we follow Parpola’s dating (1968: 201; 1973: 15; 2011: 342).

study or descent, or, even in the absence of these [qualities], because of his accumulation of wealth, and regardless of his birth status (see e.g. LŚS VIII 6.1–2). It is extremely interesting to note that this model of leader selection is attested to specifically in the Buddhist tradition where the spiritual leader achieves this status because of his huge merits, i.e., for having reached the spiritual state of Buddha or of *arhant*. The study by Neri (2015) demonstrated further that such a meritocratic election was also in use among warrior tribes such as the Licchavis, Mallas, and Vajjis.

1.2.2. Again on the Vrātya aggressiveness

Let us now read the second and third passages that Falk (1986) considered as documenting Vrātya aggressiveness.

JB II 225: (...) *uta hy ahiṃsyam brāhmaṇam hiṃsanti śrotriyaṃ vā grhamedhinaṃ vā*. (...) ¹⁵

(...) And they harm a brahmin who should not be harmed, who is conversant with the sacred knowledge or who performs the domestic sacrifices. (...)

Here the crucial verbal base *hiṃs-* “to harm, to injure” appears twice, both times to strongly emphasize the fact that Vrātyas expressly violate trustworthy priests. In other words, the passage bemoans the fact that Vrātyas do not respect hierarchies and rights acquired by birth or status.

PB XVII 1.9: (...) *aduruktavākyaṃ duruktam āhur adaṇḍyaṃ daṇḍena ghnantaś caranty adīkṣitā dīkṣitavācaṃ vadanti ṣoḍaśo vā eteṣāṃ stomaḥ pāpmānaṃ nirhantum arhati yad ete catvāraḥ ṣoḍaśā bhavanti tena pāpmano 'dhi nirmucyante*. ¹⁶

¹⁵ The Sanskrit text is based on Vira and Chandra 1986.

¹⁶ The Sanskrit text is based on A.Ch. Śāstri and P. Śāstri 1935–1936.

They define a not-wrong speech as a wrong speech. They beat with a stick somebody who does not deserve it. They speak a *dīkṣita*-language although they are not *dīkṣitas*. Indeed, the sixteen-versed *stoma* is apt to remove the guilt. Inasmuch as these four verses are made up of sixteen syllables, by means of this [stoma] they are freed from their guilt.

In this Sāmavedic Brāhmaṇa, Vrātyas again seem to do something that is considered neither justifiable nor permissible. Our translation is not so far from Caland's (1931: 456) "They call good words bad," but the short sentence, *aduruktavākyaṃ duruktam*, has been the subject of much discussion. In the past, some scholars (e.g., Horsch 1966: 418) assumed that the Vrātyas might have spoken a variety of Prakrit in which the consonant clusters of Sanskrit were simplified, and hence the Vrātyas found Sanskrit "difficult to pronounce" (*durukta*-). According to Hauer (1927: 69), they might have pronounced "vile speeches" or, for Biswas (1955: 34), they might have used "words with malevolent intent." Elena Mucciarelli (2015: 79) compared these translations and advanced a view that Vrātyas might have been said (*ukta*) to use a language which was *durukta*- in the sense of the antonym of *sūkta*, i.e., a language different from that of the *Ṛgveda* which is "well said, properly recited." Moreover, Hock (2016: 103; 114) returning to a hypothesis advanced in 1991 interpreted the puzzling phrase as "Speech that is not difficult to speak / badly spoken they consider difficult to speak / badly spoken," in a ritualistic more than in a linguistic sense. He considered this detail as being merely one of several strategies adopted in the Vedic texts to intentionally paint the Vrātyas in a bad light due to an increasing ritualistically oriented Brahmanical "anti-Vrātya" propaganda program. We are persuaded that within such a propaganda the whole passage hints at an assumed injustice and subjectivity on the part of the Vrātyas in assessing their rivals' answers in the verbal contests, with an attitude which is ultimately violent.

Nonetheless, in our opinion, the so-called Vrātyas were the latest descendants of the ancient Indo-Aryans themselves, namely those who went on to perform competitive sacrifices and who adopted

a behaviour that the Brahmanical sources started to stigmatize as foreign and unprecedented. This allowed the authors of Brahmanical texts to rid themselves forever of censured facets of their common Indo-Aryan past, by attributing them exclusively to the Vrātyas. The criticized subjectivity they complained about could merely be determined by the sheer absence of formalization of everything in rigid rules and predictable behaviour, as was instead dictated by the emergent Varṇāśrama system.

Let us read an example of verbal clashes between different groups of Vrātyas.

BŚS XVIII 26: (...) *atho haitena kurubrahmaṇām putrā ūjire. teṣām aupoditir gaupālāyana vaiyāghrapadya sthapatir āsa. tena heṣṭvā pañcālān vrātyā abhiprayayus tān ha pitara ūcur mā putrakāḥ pañcālān yasiṣṭopavādino vai pañcālā upa vo vadiṣyantīti tān hānādṛtyaiva prayayus. (...)*

(...) The sons of the brahmins of the Kurus performed this sacrifice. Vaiyāghrapadya from the Gopāla gotra and son of Upodita was the *sthapati*. Having performed this sacrifice, the Vrātyas went against the Pañcālas. The elders said to them: “Dear boys, do not try to go against the Pañcālas whose custom is to call down curses; they will curse you.” Disregarding them, the young ones went (against the Pañcālas). (...)

Here an expedition is undertaken by the young Kurus against their kinsmen, the Pañcālas. These young Kurus are also significantly called *kurubrahmaṇām putrāḥ* with an epithet which is not appropriate for people who have absolutely nothing to do with what the Brahmanical system represents, and, at the same time, they are defined as the *vrātyas*. And their attitude to verbal contests is underlined, together with the rivals’ habit of slandering and cursing their opponents.

The episode continues with the narration of the attack which took place the day after the *ukthya*-performance: the young men who had just been expressly defined as the *vrātyas* have assailed the Pañcālas who were also performing the sacrifice. In this case, too, their leader

is depicted more as a brahmin than a warrior, since we are told that “he knew the Vedas by heart.” Indeed, he starts by addressing a ritual question to the Kurus who have crept up on the sacrificial arena from behind. Since he is confident in his knowledge of the Vedas, he can definitely ask his rivals for the Vedic source of a ritual detail which in his opinion is not based on tradition.

BŚS XVIII 26: (...) *tān ha śvo bhūte bahispavamānam sarpato 'nvālebhire pavitram vai bahispavamāna ātmānaṃ pavayiṣyāmaha iti vadanto 'tha pañcāleṣu gandharvāyaṇo vāleya āgniveśyo 'nūcāna āsa tān ha saha sarpataḥ papraccha ke sarpanto 'ti vayaṃ maruta iti teṣāṃ vaḥ ka sthapatir ity ahaṃ viṣṇur ity aupoditir gaupālāyano*¹⁷ *vaiyāghrapadyaḥ pratyuvāca yat kiṃ cakārtha kas tac cacāreti ha parokṣāvratam anunirdideśeti. (...)*

On the next day they (i.e., the Kurus) approached them from behind as they crept up on the purifying rite during the Bahispavamāna prayer, saying: “Bahispavamāna is sacred, let us purify ourselves!” Among the Pañcālas there was Vāleya, from the Gandharva gotra and son of Agniveśa, who knew the Vedas by heart. At the same time he asked those creeping (Kurus): “Who is creeping?” [They answered:] “We are the Maruts.” “Who is your *sthapati*?” Vaiyāghrapadya from the Gopāla gotra and son of Upodīta answered: “This is I, that is Viṣṇu.” “Whatever was done by all of you people, who [actually] did it? Who pointed out this secret practice [and on] what previous model was it based?” (...)

In the end, the leader of the Pañcālas actually curses the rival Vrātyas since they were obviously unable to answer his question about the specific ritual feature. What is extremely interesting here is that the ignorance attributed to his opponents, that is their inability to supply the required answer, is precisely what justifies the curse. In other words,

¹⁷ We are adopting the reading *gaupālayana*, suggested by one of the two anonymous reviewers, although both Kashikar’s (2003: 1210) and Caland’s (1982: 374) editions use the reading *gaurpālayana* here and in the passage mentioned above.

the insufficient knowledge displayed by X allows Y to use violence against X and even to banish X.

BŚS XVIII 26: (...) *tān hovācāviduṣo va upāvādiṣmāpa vo hnumaha iti pitā vai tatputrān upāvādīditi hainam ūcuḥ pāpīyasī te prajā bha- viṣyatīti tathā haivāsa. tato ha vā etat pañcāleṣu gandharvāyaṇā vāleyā āgniveśyāḥ pāpāyitā iva mahākulaṃ ha tatpurā babhūva sa yo vrātyam upavaded evam evainam upavaded atha. yo vrātyo 'laṃ prativacanāya syād evam evainam pratibrūyāt.*

He (the one from the Gandharva gotra) said to them “We have cursed you as ignorant; now we are refuting you.” “This is as if a father [were to] curse the sons”—so they (Kuru) replied to him, “Your offspring will meet with evil.” So it happened. Since then, the descendants of Vāleya of the Gandharva gotra and sons of Agniveśa fell into disgrace. Formerly it was a great clan. One who curses the Vrātyas will similarly be cursed. The Vrātya who is capable should reply to the one who disputes in this way.

Thus, the mutual cursing is followed by a final, more general statement that solemnly attributes this predilection for verbal contests and curses to the Vrātyas as such, even though the whole episode seems to resemble a *brahmodya*, i.e., a Vedic verbal contest on ritual and theological topics.¹⁸

2. Verbal contests in the Old and Middle Indo-Aryan culture

As pointed out by Witzel (1987), verbal contests documented by Old and Middle Indo-Aryan sources share several features, and there is, moreover, a clear trace of a common early use of the just mentioned *brahmodya*.

¹⁸ “(...) type de questions-énigmes et de réponses alternées auquel se plaisent les joutes religieuses” (Renou and Silburn 1949: 87).

2.1. Old Indo-Aryan *brahmodyas*

Indologists generally associate *brahmodyas* with the Upaniṣads, especially the earliest ones. The term itself occurs in BĀU III 8.1, as noted by Brereton (1997: 2). A well-known example is included in the episode regarding the proud Dṛpta Bālāki (Gārgya’s descendant) who, in both BĀU II 1–20 and in *Kauṣītaki-Upaniṣad* (KauṣU) IV 1, challenges king Ajātaśatru by claiming to be able to provide an excellent formulation of the truth. He begins by identifying the Brahman with various things, which are all promptly rejected by the king, until he is forced to concede defeat and ask Ajātaśatru to accept him as his pupil. Analogously, Śvetaketu fails to answer King Pravāhana Jaivali (or Citra Gāṅgyāyani) in BĀU VI 2.1–16, *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* (ChU) V 3.1–10.10 and KauṣU I 1–2.¹⁹ Thereafter Śvetaketu returns home and his father Uddālaka Aruṇi decides to go to the king to learn from him, after admitting the latter’s superiority. Even the story of Naciketas who did not stop before asking the last question to his father Uśan, patron of a Sarvavedasa sacrifice, is highly illustrative. Naciketas overstepped the limit of his own knowledge—a crucial fact in this dramatic kind of dialogue as proven by Witzel (1987: 364 fn. 5)²⁰—and was cursed by his father *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad* (KaṭhaU I 4) and made to enter the kingdom of Yama prematurely.

Nonetheless, as George Thompson (1997: 22) has recently reminded us, the classical *brahmodyas* were “deeply embedded in Vedic poetic style, and thus even present in the earlier poetry of the *Ṛgveda*.” For instance, a section of one of the most famous long *brahmodyas* texts contained in VS XXIII perfectly matches a passage from the mysterious hymn *Ṛgveda* (RV) I 164. Brāhmaṇas also document analogous contests, sometimes involving the same characters, who return later in

¹⁹ For a synoptic analysis of these three versions of Śvetaketu’s story see Olivelle 1999: 54–57.

²⁰ More recently, Magnone (2019: 212–215) pointed out how *brahmodya* unified two traditions sharing the special attention paid to the discordance between speech and truth, namely one that threatened the bursting of the head of those who spoke without knowing and one that punished those who did not speak despite knowing.

the *Mahābhārata*, as Diletta Falqui's article in this volume shows. One of the protagonists of the telling story of Śvetaketu, namely his father Uddālaka Aruṇi, is also the main character of a dramatic *brahmodya* in the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB),²¹ when Śauceya is the loser in the ritual contest on the meaning of the Agnihotra and becomes Uddālaka's pupil. In these texts, the violent context is also expressed by the fact that the head of the one who challenges another, that is the one who exceeds the limits of his knowledge, bursts and is shattered. The following passage mentions such a risk.²²

ŚB XI 5.3.13:

*śauceyo jñaptāḥ. imāni samitkāṣṭhāny upāyāni bhāgavantam iti sā hovāca yādevaṃ nāvakṣyo mūrdhā te vyāpatiṣyad ehy ūpehīti. (...)*²³

Śauceya, after being instructed, said: "These are the logs for fuel: may I come to you who are venerable as a pupil." He replied: "Should you not have said this, your head might have flown apart: come, enter as a pupil!" (...)

And what exactly is this head that flies apart? Heesterman (1985: 58) did not consider this expression to be a metaphor, at least not at the beginning, but a part of the cyclical exchange of roles between the patrons of the sacrifice and the officiant priests, a feature that characterized the pre-classical sacrifice.²⁴ This sacrifice was supposedly based on a conflict between two agonistic parties, so that the severed head of the enemy would actually have been the sacrificial head,

²¹ This story also occurs in *Gopatha-Brāhmaṇa* (GB) I 3.14.

²² An analogous risk is mentioned in TB III X 9.5, where one of Atyarṇha Āruṇi's students is sent to Plakṣa Dayyāmpāti to question him about the Sāvitra fire: his original teacher advised him not to ask questions beyond a given limit (i.e., beyond the *prāṇa* subject), because otherwise his head would burst. See Witzel 1987: 372.

²³ The Sanskrit text is based on Weber 1964.

²⁴ Indeed, the Vedic texts only mention the case of Vidagdha Śākalya, who died shortly after losing at the end of a discussion with Yājñavalkya (BĀU III 9.26: (...) *taṣya ha mūrdhā vipapāta*. "(...) His head really shattered apart"; see Witzel 1987: 375.

i.e., a human skull was probably a mandatory element of the first layer in the *agnicayana*, i.e., the building of the fire altar (Heesterman 1985: 50). Such a scenario was recognized by Parpola (2015: 139) in the following advice given to the guardians of the sacrificial horse when they start their year-long expedition before the performance of the Aśvamedha in ŚB XIII 4.2.17:

yád yad brāhmaṇajātám upanigácheta tát tat pṛcheta brāhmaṇāḥ kíyad jūyám aśvamedhásya vitthéti te ye ná vidyúr jinīyáta tānt sárvaṃ vá aśvamedhaḥ sárvasyaiṣa na veda yó brāhmaṇaḥ sánn aśvamedhásya na véda só 'brāhmaṇo jyéya eva.

Whenever you meet somebody who was born a brahmin, you should ask them: “O brahmins, how much do you know of the Aśvamedha?” And you should deprive of any property those who did not know because the Aśvamedha is everything. A brahmin who knows nothing of the Aśvamedha, is not a brahmin, he should indeed be deprived of any property.

What is evident here is a clearly hostile background, accompanied by the well-known ritual violence prevalent in ancient Indo-Aryan culture. Ritualistic and theological disputations must have been extremely important within the earliest sacrificial system. Thus, Parpola (2015: 139), on the basis of Vedic passages such as our starting quotation, i.e., BŚS XVIII 24, concludes:

It is for the sake of such ritualistic and theological disputations that the vrātinās²⁵ should select the most learned among them as their leaders. Ignorance was used as a pretext for robbing and killing, and such ancient practice seems to be reflected in the learned disputations of the Upaniṣads (...).

On the other hand, a sentence like the one reminding us that a brahmin who is ignorant is not a brahmin is intriguingly close to renowned

²⁵ This is another word used for Vrātyas, which Valentina Ferrero worked on in these same Proceedings.

Buddhist reflections on the Brāhmaṇa Varṇa and on social classes in general, such as the early *Uraggavagga*, 141 in the *Suttanipāta* or *Soṇa 4* in the *Udāna*.

2.2. Verbal contests in Buddhist Theravāda tradition

In the early Buddhist literature as represented by the Theravāda Pali canon, the discussions and the debates could also be considered to be a form of competition. The debates, typical elements of Indian culture, have a special place in the Pali canon. In fact, there are many *suttas* that describe discussions between the Buddha and people who held different views, frequently leaders of other religious groups, whether brahmins or ascetics. We cannot be sure that these debates occurred and that they proceeded as described in the *suttas*, though it is certainly the case that they promote the Buddhist position, being an important instrument for the transmission of the Buddha's teachings. They also provide valuable information about rival religious groups and their ideas.

In the following discussion, we will analyze the competitive aspect present in debates found in select early Buddhist *sutta* texts, the presence of the *brahmodya* technique, and the peculiar violent splitting-of-the-head formula aspect that occurs in some of these verbal competitions.

2.3. The structure of debates in Buddhist texts

Joy Manné (1990) tries to demonstrate that each canonical Pali *sutta* collection (*nikāya*) had a different function and purpose,²⁶ and that the *suttas* can be divided into three main categories: sermons, debates, and consultation. For our purpose, particularly interesting

²⁶ Manné (1990: 29) for example claims that the original purpose of DN [*Dīghanikāya*] being the attraction of converts, that of MN [*Majjhimanikāya*], the presentation of the leader, etc. both as a real person and as an archetype (a Tathāgata), and the integration of new monks into the community and the practice.”

are the debates that Manné (1990: 32) defines as “a formal intellectual confrontation in which one party challenges another in a contest of religious knowledge.”²⁷ Manné argues that there are three types of debates: the dramatic debate, which is recounted as it goes along; the reported debate, which is a debate that has taken place in the past and which the Buddha repeats on a later occasion; and finally, the debate with hypothetical opponents during which the views of certain general groups are disputed. The debates generally have as their main features two opponents: the Buddha or a senior monk and an adversary. Commonly the good credentials and social status of the opponent are presented at the beginning. These debates concern a variety of topics, but most frequently the Buddha is challenged on his teachings. Generally, the discussion ends with the rival being defeated and his admission of this.²⁸

In many respects the Buddhist debates seem to have inherited elements from the earliest Indo-Aryan debates, for example, according to Manné (1990: 52): “The challenge, the refutation and the defeat in the Buddhist debates conform to the same rules, allowing for the difference in situation, as in the brahmanical debates.” Similarly, the consequences of the defeat, which generally see the defeated asking to become a lay disciple or be ordained as a monk, are similar in Vedic text.²⁹ The authors of these Buddhist texts seemed to have

²⁷ According to Gombrich 2009: 7: “When he encounters non-Buddhists, the Buddha hardly ever initiates a discussion or begins by putting forward his own views. As T. W. Rhys Davids pointed out a century ago, this reminds us of Socrates, who always got discussions going by asking the other party to state their views.” For further information about the Buddha’s debate technique, see also Gombrich 2006: 17–26.

²⁸ “The participant who is forced in the course of the debate to admit that he does not know the whole truth stops putting challenging questions and instead is reduced to asking the Buddha to explain the matter to him. In this way, he acknowledges that he is defeated” (Manné 1990: 53).

²⁹ As for the rule according to which “In the course of the discussion, participants who do not know the whole truth have to state this clearly, they must cease questioning (...) and thus declare defeat, or they must become the pupil of the winner,” as explained by Witzel (1987: 372), see above § 2.1.

assimilated some elements of the Brahmanical-Upaniṣadic debate style in order to defeat the brahmins themselves, such as that reported in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta* where, as Black (2011) demonstrates, the Buddha knows the Vedic tradition better than the brahmin Ambaṭṭha.³⁰ Not surprisingly, the Buddha, like the Vedic sages, always wins the debate. But several features of the Buddhist and Vedic model may have their origin in a more ancient Indo-Aryan milieu.

2.4. The *brahmodya* in a Buddhist context

One of these features common to Vedic and early Buddhist texts is the old *brahmodya* technique, which was discussed in § 2.1 with reference to Brahmanical literature.

Thompson (1997) shows that there are different types of *brahmodya* which exhibit different forms of complexity. However, this term is frequently used in a more generic way to illustrate a competitive debate that increasingly became more common in India. As Fiorucci (2015: 14) claims:

By the time of the early Upanishad these debates were no longer taking place exclusively in the arena of sacrifice but began also taking place in public assembly halls and in the courts of kings. With the proliferation of the ascetic movement around the time of the Buddha it seems that the institution of debate became a normal feature of the urban landscape.

³⁰ Black (2011: 150) claims: “The Buddha defeats Ambaṭṭha not because he convinces the young brahmin with Buddhist doctrine, but rather because of his method of argumentation. The Buddha employs a number of debating tactics that are characteristic of the ways that brahmins establish their knowledge in the Upanishads. In particular, the Buddha uses an etymology, appeals to the authority of ancient verses, and invokes the authority of Vedic sages. The Buddha utilizes each of these rhetorical methods—some of which he rarely uses in discussions with non-brahmins—to demonstrate that he knows the Vedic tradition better than Ambaṭṭha knows it himself.”

The Buddhist equivalent of the *brahmodya* is what is referred to in Pali sources as the *kathojja* (“dispute, quarrel”), the equivalent of Sanskrit *kathodya*, but the terms are not synonyms. While the *brahmodya* is a verbal contest based on ritual and theological questions (and later becomes a ritualized exchange), the *kathojja* is a debate or dispute characterized as “open,” or at least much less ritually formalized.

What can be considered to be a particular form of *brahmodya* present in the Pali canon is the *satya-kriyā*³¹ in Sanskrit or *sacca-kiriyā* in Pali. This compound consists of the noun Skt. *satya*, P. *sacca*, “truth” (PED s.v.), and the noun Skt. *kriyā*, P. *kiriyā*, “doing, performance, action” (DP s.v.), derived from the verbal root *kr* “to do.” It designates an oath, a solemn declaration of truth by means of personal integrity or virtue.³² These truth statements are used for a variety of purposes, such as helping other people, ending a natural disaster, and invoking or meting out a punishment.³³

3. The violent aspect of verbal competitions: the shattering of the head and Vajrapāṇi / Vajirapāṇi

Witzel (1987: 381ff.), in his fine article on the subject, compares the image of the shattered head in the Brahmanical and Buddhist literature. In fact, the Pali canon provides several mentions of instances where a person who is debating with the Buddha does not reply to a *sahadhammika*, a reasonable question, and the Buddha tells him that his head will be split into seven pieces if he does not answer. This

³¹ According to Thompson (1997: 19): “The response portion of these *brahmodyas* is often no more than a naked, and even aggressive, assertion of self that is unsupported by any serious attempt at answering the questions posed in the interrogation portion. Such an act of self-assertion is essentially what a *satyakriyā* also is.” The Sanskrit *satya-kriyā* (or *satyādhiṣṭhāna*) is associated to the *brahmodya* also by Thieme (1964: 30; 1984: 117) and Witzel (1987: 373), etc.

³² The *sacca-kiriyā* dates back to as early as the *Rgveda*: it refers to an ancient Vedic belief that human beings could derive power out of truth by fulfilling their duties (*vrata*) according to the cosmic order (*ṛta*). See Brown 1972: 261–262.

³³ See Thompson 1997: 19–20.

punishment was also utilised in Vedic literature (see above § 2.1) and in these sources, this description is quite realistic, whereas in the Pali canon it seems to have a more symbolic value. In the Brahmanical context, the head-splitting occurs by itself as a result of a curse, while in the Buddhist case it never actually takes place.

In Buddhist texts, the character who threatens to carry out the splitting of the head is Vajrapāṇi / Vajirapāṇi. He is a *yakṣa* / *yakkha* who protects the Buddha. At a certain point, during the competitive dialogue, precisely when the Buddha's competitor refuses to answer a question or admit his ignorance or defeat, Vajrapāṇi appears, only visible to the Buddha and the opponent, and his *vajra/vajira* is ready to split the head of the Buddha's rival.

In the *Papañcasūdanī* (Ps) II 277 = *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (Sv) I 264 Vajrapāṇi is identified with Sakka,³⁴ who is the same as Śakra or Indra, the god of war in Vedic mythology, and in the *Ayakūṭa Jātaka* (Ja n. 347, III 145–147) there is an account of how Sakka made a promise to protect the Bodhisattva in his future life.³⁵

Interestingly, in the Gandharan Buddhist art, Vajrapāṇi is depicted in the form of Heracles with whom he has common iconological and physiognomic elements, a topic to which many studies have been devoted (e.g., Flood 1989, Schwab 1998, Tanabe 2005, Filigenzi 2006).³⁶ For us, the use of Heracles to depict Vajrapāṇi is interesting

³⁴ *yakkho ti na yo vā so vā yakkho sakko devarājā ti vedītabbo* “‘yakkha’: whether he is a *yakkha* or not, Sakko, king of the gods, is what is meant.”

³⁵ Moreover, according to Malasekera (s.v. Vajirapāṇi), this arrangement was made in fulfilment of a promise made by Sakka—in the presence of Mahā Brahmā, on the occasion when the Buddha was reluctant to preach the Dhamma (see *Vinaya Piṭaka* i.5f)—that if the Buddha were to agree to establish the Dhamma, Sakka would afford it the necessary protection. For a more complete information on Vajirapāṇi in the Buddhist and Indian literature, see Lamotte 2003a and 2003b.

³⁶ Homrighausen (2015: 33) provides an interesting, likely reason for this: “The Kushans, invading nomads, included Herakles in the cosmopolitan imagery they developed as they incorporated urban centers into their empire. The Buddhist sangha responded to this royal usage of Herakles by inserting him into their artistic lexicon, both as a figure of protection for the Buddha and as a subtle claim of royal patronage of the sangha.”

because it shows the adoption of another powerful and violent defender for the protection of the Buddha and his teaching.

3.1. The analysis of the head shattering formula

Here we will analyze some formulas used for the shattering of the head.

1. The first type is formed by combining *muddhā*, “head,” and the verb *phalati*, “to split, shatter,” frequently used in the future tense, and *sattadhā* (adv.) “in seven pieces.”

This version of the formula is present, for instance, in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta* (*Dīgha-nikāya* (D) I 87–110). Here a young arrogant brahmin, Ambaṭṭha, goes to the Buddha to check whether he has the thirty-two marks of the great man (*mahāpurisa-lakkhaṇa*). He offends the Buddha by speaking about his lowly Sakyan origin which he contrasts with his own superior Brahmanical origins. Then, the Buddha contests Ambaṭṭha’s claim by demonstrating that his family has a lower origin than that of the Sakyas and by rejecting the idea that superiority is due to birth. When Ambaṭṭha, pressed by the Buddha, refuses to answer, Vajirapāṇi appears, though only visible to him and the Buddha, and the Buddha threatens him by saying, *etth’eva te sattadhā muddhā phalissati*, “your head will shatter into seven pieces right here.”³⁷ This forces Ambaṭṭha to end the conversation and admit his defeat. Thus, in the context of competitive dialogue, we seem to have an actual threat, which Vajirapāṇi is there to enact.

The other *sutta* in which there is a competitive dialogue and in which Vajirapāṇi appears is the *Cūlasaccaka-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikāya* (M) I 227–237). Here Saccaka, the Nigantha’s son, asks the Buddha questions about self-identification with the form (*rūpa*) and the other *khandhas*, but when the Buddha answers his questions and asks him other more difficult ones (the reasonable questions), he refuses to answer. Vajirapāṇi then appears and Saccaka is forced to admit his defeat (M I 231, 29, 34).

³⁷ See D I 94, and cf. D I 95,7; D I 95,12–13.

In other *suttas*, such as the *Vuṭṭha-sutta* (*Aṅguttara-nikāya* (A) IV 373–378), this formula assumes a different aspect. Here, a monk accuses Sāriputta, one of the Buddha’s two chief disciples, of having hit him, but later retracts his false accusation and confesses that he had lied. Thus, the Buddha asks Sāriputta to forgive him using these words:

A IV 378: *khama sāriputta imassa moghapurisassa, purāssa tath’eva sattadhā muddhā phalissatī ti.*³⁸

Sāriputta, pardon this foolish man before his head splits into seven pieces right there!

In this case, the splitting of the head is more a *tópos*, a natural punishment for a wrong action.

A special use of this formula is in the *Sutta-nipāta* (Sn 976–1031). In this *sutta*, there is a brahmin who curses another brahmin by telling him that if he does not give him some money his head should split into seven parts in seven days (Sn v.983: *sattame divase tuyhaṃ, muddhā phalatu sattadhā*).

A goddess appears to the poor brahmin, who was worried about this curse, and reassures him by telling him that the only one who can give him an explanation is the Buddha. Although in this case, the context of a dialogical debate is missing, the reference to cursing someone with a wish that their head split in seven probably represents an ancient cultural practice.

The Buddha explains to this brahmin the splitting of the head in metaphorical terms:

Sn v. 1026: *avijjā muddhā ti jānāhi, vijjā muddhādhipātīnī, saddhāsatisamādhīhi, chandaviriyena saṃyutā.*³⁹

³⁸ The Pali text is based on Morris and Hardy 1885–1900.

³⁹ The Pali text is based on Andersen and Smith 1913.

Know that ignorance is the head. Knowledge is the head-splitter, joined with faith, mindfulness, and concentration, (and) with resolution and energy. (tr. Norman 1992: 115)

The Buddha thus on this occasion gives to this sentence an exquisitely symbolic and sapiential meaning.

In the *Suruci-jātaka* (n. 489), a devoted wife is attacked by a goblin and Sakka defends her as an honest woman by saying:

Ja IV 320 (x7): *musā me bhaṇamānāya, muddhā phalatu sattadhā.*⁴⁰

If I am speaking lies, then may my head split in seven.

So, in this case, our formula is a statement of truth, probably well-known and accepted as a guarantee of sincerity.

In the *Candimā Sutta—Saṃyutta-nikāya* (S) I 50—there is also no debate, but a dialogue between deities. A deity named Candimā (the moon) falls captive to Rāhu, god of the asuras (i.e., during an eclipse). Candimā asks the Buddha for help and the latter asks Rāhu to let Candimā go, stating that Buddhas have compassion for the world and Rāhu agrees. While recounting this event to the asura Vepacitti, Rāhu tells him:

S I 50: *sattadhā me phale muddhā jīvanto na sukhaṃ labhe
buddhagāthābhigīto 'mhi no ce muñceyya candiman ti.*⁴¹

My head would have split in seven pieces
While living I would have found no ease
If, when chanted over the Buddha's verse
I had not let go of Candimā. (tr. Bodhi 2000: 145)

In this case as well, the expression “my head would have split in seven pieces” seems to be the negative consequence of a bad action.

⁴⁰ The Pali text is based on Fausbøll 1877–1896.

⁴¹ The Pali text is based on Feer 1884–1898.

In the *Milindapañha* (Mil) this expression is associated with the context of the giving of gifts, where it is said that if someone obstructs bestowing of a gift meant for someone else out of jealousy, his head will split into a hundred or a thousand pieces:

Mil 157: *sace koci issāya uddissakaṭaṃ upakkhaṭaṃ paribhogaṃ antarāyaṃ kareyya phaleyya tassa muddhā satadhā vā sahasadhā vā.*⁴²

If anyone out of jealousy, were to make a stumbly block (to a gift made) for a specific person (to a gift) that had been prepared, then would his head split into hundred or a thousand pieces. (tr. Horner 1969, vol I: 220–221)

Thus, this later text suggests that the number seven of the other examples is merely symbolic, or suggestive, because here the head will split into a hundred or a thousand pieces. It is also a further example of the splitting of the head as an automatic consequence.

3.2. The Analysis of the head shattering formula in the Pali Texts

A very similar formula involves another verb but lacks reference to the number of parts the head would split into: *muddhā* and the verb *vipāṭeti* / *vipphalati*, “to split.” This formula seems to have more a rhetorical function when compared to the previous examples.

In the *Kūṭadanta-sutta* (D I 127–149), the Buddha discusses the sacrifice but the brahmin Kūṭadanta accepts just a part of some of the Buddha’s assertions.⁴³ He justifies himself by saying that he is forced to endorse them because if someone does not subscribe to the well-spoken words of the Buddha, his head shall split:

⁴² The Pali text is based on Trenckner 1880.

⁴³ He does not approve totally because some of the Buddha’s claims puzzle him, as for example, when the Buddha says that he remembers events from his past life.

D I 143: *nāhaṃ bho samaṇassa gotamassa subhāsitaṃ subhāsitato nābbhanumodāmi, muddhāpi tassa vipateyya, muddhā pi tassa vipateyya, yo samaṇassa gotamassa subhāsitaṃ subhāsitato nābbhanumodeyya.*⁴⁴

I do not fail to approve; for he who approves not as well-said that which has been well spoken by the Samana Gotama, verily his head would split in twain. (tr. Rhys Davids 1899: 181)

Here, too, there is a reference to the idea that if someone were to contradict a truth statement his head would automatically split. In this case, the context is a non-competitive dialogical debate and our formula seems to be used rhetorically.

The same rhetorical trend is present in the *Pāthika-sutta*. Here it is asserted that if a certain monk who persists in holding erroneous beliefs were to voice them in front of the Buddha, his head would split:

D III 13: *sace pi 'ssa evam assa ahaṃ taṃ vācaṃ appahāya taṃ cittaṃ appahāya taṃ dīṭṭhiṃ appaṇinissajjivā samaṇassa gotamassa sammukhībhāvaṃ gaccheyyan ti, muddhā pi tassa vipateyyā ti.*

If he thinks that, holding to those words, to that idea, maintaining that opinion, he would come to meet the Samana Gotama, his head would split asunder. (tr. Rhys Davids 1921: 17)

The image of a splitting head acts as a rhetorical use of punishment; almost a warning. It also occurs in many other *suttas*, such as the *Cīvara-sutta* (S II 219–222 and see in particular S II 220), where the Buddha admonishes a monk, stating that if one says he sees and hears something and that it is not true, his head would split⁴⁵. This is used as a deterrent to being insincere.

⁴⁴ The Pali text is based on Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1890–1911.

⁴⁵ The context of the *sutta* is more complex because it concerns the quality of a teacher and the capacity to recognize it, but the use of the splitting-head formula seems to be a purely rhetorical and conventional usage.

A similar case, but in a positive context, is present in another passage of the Aṅguttara-nikāya, where a layman asks Ānanda to explain Dharma to him and after receiving his answer, says:

A I 221–222: *kyāhaṃ, samma āyasmato ānandassa subhāsitaṃ subhāsītato nābbhanumodissāmi. muddhā pi tassa vipateyya yo āyasmato ānandassa subhāsitaṃ subhāsītato nābbhanumodeyyā ti.*

How, friend, could I not thank the Venerable Ānanda for his well-stated words? If one were not to thank the Venerable Ānanda for his well-stated words, one's head would split apart! (tr. Bodhi 2012: 308)

Thus, in this case, our phrase seems to be rhetorically used to show gratitude.

In the Dhammapāda as well it is said that knowledge and fame destroy the fool, splitting his head.⁴⁶ Thus, also in this generic case, the formula does not seem to be more than a rhetorical expression.

We can find probably some other texts in which this formula is present in different contexts and usages. But to sum up, the first formula (*muddhā + phalati + sattadhā*) is used in several slightly different ways and with different shades of meanings, namely, it is used in competitive dialogues (with or without Vajirapāṇi appearing), as a natural consequence of bad actions, as a truth statement, as a curse, and as a proof of sincerity or a deterrent from insincerity. The second formula (*muddhā + vipāṭeti / vipphalati*) for the most part is used purely rhetorically.

⁴⁶ Dhṃ v. 72: *yāvadeva anantthāya, ñattaṃ bālassa jāyati. hanti bālassa sukkaṃsaṃ, muddham assa vipātayaṃ* “A reputation for skill arises for a fool merely to his disadvantage; it destroys the fool's good share (of merit), splitting his head” (tr. Norman 1997: 11).

4. The Buddhist view on excessive debate

However, excessive verbal wrangle is depicted as decidedly negative in some *suttas*. Ascetics who engage in debates immoderately are often considered conceited, proud, and narrow-minded. The Buddha admonished his monks to refrain from such debates because even if they end in victory, the common consequent attitude that “only this is true” is a negative mental attitude. Moreover, the purification of the mind cannot be achieved through engagement in debate and argument, see Sn vv. 830–834, and in particular:

Sn v. 832: *ete vivādā samaṇesu jātā etesu ugghāti nighāti hoti etam pi divvā virame kathojjaṃ, na haññadatthatthipasaṃsalābhā.*

These disputes have arisen among (other) ascetics. Among them there is the elation (of victory) and the depression (of the defeat). Seeing this too, one should abstain from dispute, for there is no other aim but praise and profit. (tr. Norman 1992: 56)

Furthermore, as is well known, the Buddha himself refuses to answer the famous ten metaphysical questions (Skt. *avyākṛta-vastu*, P *avyākata-vastu*, “indeterminate question”) about the nature of the world, the existence of a soul and the status of a Tathāgata.⁴⁷

5. Conclusions

Verbal disputations were part of the Indo-Aryan culture right from the start. They developed over time with different nuances in several Indo-Aryan branches, including the so-called Vrātyas, who, as we have seen, actually launched verbal challenges even regarding ritual

⁴⁷ See e.g. *Cūlamālunkya-sutta* (M n. 63), *Aggivaśchagotta sutta* (M n. 72) *Sabbāsa-va-sutta* (M n. 2), etc.

issues and raged against those who could not answer, i.e., the losers, or cursed them and their descendants.

Especially worthy of attention is the competitive aspect in dialogues reported in Buddhist literature, which occasionally incorporates the violent head-splitting image. This image is clearly adopted from the early Indo-Aryan usage but re-adapted in Buddhist texts. This image generally has a symbolic value, is a proof of superiority in a competitive discussion. But in other texts, it functions as a proof of honesty or a *saccakiriyā*, an oath, a curse, or a rhetorical statement. While the Buddha sometimes engages in debates, he generally advises his monastics to not engage in excessive debate, especially when it comes to metaphysical questions (§ 4).

The violence which is often present—at least in symbolic terms—in verbal competition in Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical environments, may be the residual element of a much older and more extensive competitiveness of the warrior and the ascetic aspects of the Indo-Aryan culture (§§ 2.1.; 2.2.; 3.; 3.1). In fact, the original Indo-Aryan pattern of violent verbal contests is well documented in the earliest Vedic sources, whereas the Brahmanical tradition seems to have partly rejected the aggressiveness of such competitions, exclusively attributing this characteristic to the Vrātyas, by way of employing a program of a systematic anti-Vrātya propaganda, which runs parallel to the emerging culture of non-violence.

All in all, it is difficult to establish the intensity, or circumscribe the perimeter, of the origins of the Indo-Aryan violence, even if considering solely the verbal one, but what seems clear to us is that at some stage this violence has been diligently, systematically and knowingly attributed to the Vrātyas alone. This was probably done by the brahmins so as to cast the Vrātyas in a bad light, to distance themselves from the violence that they too had practiced earlier, and ultimately, to marginalize the Vrātyas.

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- Dhp *Dhammapada*. 1994. = *Dhammapada*, ed. by O. Von Hinüber and K. R. Norman. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
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- KauṣU *Kauṣītaki-Upaniṣad*. See: BĀU.
- LŚS *Lāṭyāyana-Śrautasūtra*. 1998 = *Lāṭyāyana-Śrauta-Sūtra*, ed. and trans. by H. G. Ranade. Vols. 1–3. New Delhi: IGNCa–Motilal Banarsidass.
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- Mil *Milindapañha*. 1880. = *Milindapañho: Being Dialogues Between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nagasena*, ed. V. Trenckner. London: Pali Text Society.
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APPENDIX 1

E.g.: *muddhā + phatati + sattadhā*

Reference	Text	Translation	Notes
D I 94	<i>etth'eva te sattadhā muddhā phalissati</i>	Your head will split into seven pieces right here.	Competive dialogue + Vajirapāṇi
D I 95,7	<i>etth'ev'assa sattadhā muddhā phalissati</i>	His head will split in seven pieces right here.	
D I 95,12–13	<i>etth'ev'assa sattadhā muddhaṃ phālessāmi</i>	I will cause his head to split in seven pieces right here.	
M I 231,29	<i>etth'ev'assa sattadhā muddhā phalati</i>	His head splits into seven pieces right here.	Competive dialogue. + Vajirapāṇi
M I 231,34	<i>etth'ev'assa sattadhā muddhaṃ phālessāmi</i>	I will cause his head to split in seven pieces right here.	
A IV 378	<i>tatth'eva satthā muddhā phalissati</i>	His head shatters into seven pieces right there.	Natural punishment for a wrong action
Sn v. 983	<i>sattame divase tuyhaṃ, muddhā phalatu sattadhā</i>	In seven days may your head be shattered into seven pieces.	Curse

Reference	Text	Translation	Notes
Ja IV 320	<i>muddhā phalatu sattadhā</i>	May [my] head split into seven pieces.	Statement of truth
S I 50 (x 2)	<i>sattadhā me phale muddhā</i>	My head would have split into seven pieces.	Statement of truth. Negative consequence of bad action
Mil 157	<i>phaleyya tassa muddhā satadhā vā saḥassadhā vā</i>	His head would split into a hundred or a thousand pieces.	Impersonal punishment

APPENDIX 2

E.g. *muddhā + vipāṭeti / vipphalati*

Sutta	Text	Translation	Notes
D I 143 D III 13	<i>muddhā pi tassa vipateyya muddhā pi tassa vipateyya</i>	His head would split.	Rhetorical function. Warning
S II 220	<i>muddhā pi tassa vipateyya</i>		Rhetorical function. Deterrent to be honest
A I 222	<i>muddhā pi tassa vipateyya</i>		Rhetorical function. Gratitude
Dhp 72	<i>muddham assa vipātayaṃ</i>		Rhetorical function. Warning