Myth and Identity II: Narrative Construction of One's Social Entity by Parīṭ Communities in Maharashtra

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Abstract: By defining the operational concept of dantakathā, this article attempts to represent the cognitive status of four narratives collected by the author from the Parīṭ community of Maharashtra, a community traditionally assigned the occupation of washermen in the service of the village's dominant castes. It points out some specific features of dantakathā, a symbolic form of social communication and outcome of language; especially enlightening when viewed in the perspective of linguistic studies. This study attempts to prove that 'a narrative may discursively function as a covert assert for cultural and social counter moves of counter-power, and unavowed wishes of dissent or discontent.'

This is a methodological essay submitted in continuation of my first study, previously published in the Indian Folklore Research Journal (Vol. 1, 2001: 81-122). In this article I wish to be explicite, though summarily, my practice of data processing. I shall first define the operational concept of dantakathā that I construct to appropriately represent the cognitive status of those specific narratives that are my concern. I shall then present my analytical tools and cognitive devices. The third part will show examples of the kind of investigation that I advocate, namely, my readings and insights of four narratives out of twelve recently collected from the Parīṭ community in Maharashtra. Parīṭ are a community traditionally assigned the occupation of washerman in the service of the village’s dominant castes. I shall conclude by pointing out some specific features of dantakathā, a symbolic form of social communication and event of language to be viewed in the perspective of linguistic studies.

A Concept of Oral Narrative

Dantakathā is to be rescued

Initially myth, from the Greek muthos, ‘speech, talk, relation’, is not differentiated from logos, word (Vernant 1988: 196). It pertains to legein, to speak or make utterances, as is clear from the composite nouns muthologein, muthologia. It is only from the 5th century BC that muthos started being opposed
to *logos*, which originally meant equivalently ‘speech, discourse’ before specifically signifying explanation and reason. Within the context of philosophical exposition and historical investigation, *muthos* tended to be looked down upon and considered a futile enunciation deprived of ground as it could rely neither on the support of rigorous demonstration nor unquestionable testimony. *Muthos* stood disqualified in the quest of truth. Since then the constituency of myth as object of knowledge in the West owes its existence to a double denial: “...the mythic is defined by what it is not, through a double rapport of opposition, first, to the real (myth is fiction), and then to the rational (myth is absurd).” (Vernant 1988: 195).

The same shift leads the Marathi noun *katha*, especially *dantakatha*, oral narrative, towards a notion of story with four structuring features: (1) with regard to the form of expression, it is a narration (fable, tale, legend), that is, a series of events linked as to build up a continuous story; (2) with regard to the mode of production, it is a fiction (embellishment, imaginary creation, for entertainment) opposed to the real; (3) with regard to the parameter of truth, it is inauthentic, an absurd and illegitimate utterance opposed to the rational; and (4) with regard to its mode of transmission, it circulates by word of mouth, its reliability and veracity being therefore questionable.

In short, two distinctive deficits specifically define *muthos* and *dantakatha* by what they are not: first, they are no more essentially act of speech, a discursive event; and second, they are no more essentially act of cognition, a reliable rational enunciation.

Our challenge is to rescue *muthos* and *dantakatha* as oral narrative, that is, as one form among many of human discursive rationality and symbolic communication. There are two epistemological perspectives that command and guide this rescue. First, the forms of rationality are as multiple as the various cognitive strategies devised by men to explore, order and rule over the different physical and social realms of reality. One universal reason manifests itself in various and changeable forms of reasoning. Reason exists historically only, that is, in the plural. Second, let us be cautious about the word ‘myth’, generally recognised by the sciences of religion as “legendary traditions pertaining to the origin of everything, to the primeval times and the divine powers.” As anthropologists, we find it difficult to apply this notion to traditional oral narratives. To eschew misunderstandings, instead of ‘myth’ let us preferably talk of ‘oral narrative,’ the most appropriate translation of the Marathi word *dantakatha*. Let us now construct the term by defining the main features of those oral narratives that we have collected from the lower section of the society, and thus turn it into an operational concept.

**Cognitive Status of Oral Narratives**

1) **Universal concrete.** The narrative as a discursive form operates through concatenation of events that are always concrete representations apprehended through an intellect immersed within and acting through the sensibility. The narrative as a form of cognition is, therefore, concretely universal.

2) **Cognitive discourse for a community.** It is futile to ask about the individual who once composed the narrative. Individuals utter stories, accounts, dreams, fancies, tales, legends, etc., of which a few only are selected,

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reshaped and turned into collective narratives with an exemplary and apodictic value. Private, casual, inadequate and personal aspects are levelled or erased. A community is needed to reappropriate, transform and re-edit the story so as to meet its general cognitive, ideological and moral needs.

3) **Pure oral text only.** Most of the time, the narratives we collect nowadays reach us, and even the younger members of the community, as pure oral text only, that is, hardly as an event of discourse sharing a meaning with an audience in given historical circumstances. (Ricoeur 1971: 48-49).

4) **Codified linguistic document.** The narrators do not change the words or construct them at will. None of them would ever consider his words as his/her own utterances. Their oral texts are stereotyped, immutable sentences reported as received. They are fixed linguistic data transmitted as common patrimony. The narratives run from a beginning to an end as a totality to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted whether it makes sense or not to the present listener or reader. The dantakathā stands on its own, for itself, as a discourse significant by itself. The narrative unfolds itself but nobody unfolds it.

5) **Autonomy of each text.** The relevance of each narrative is not to be construed against the derivative processes through tracing it back to its historical motivations and conditions of production. Each narrative is to be taken as seriously as any other one (Lévi-Strauss 1988: 196), though it remains true that a narrative is the totality of its variants and variations. No point in looking for an original and true version to which available narratives should be compared for assessment of their reliability and authenticity.

6) **Decontextualisation.** We cannot point out the audience or the context that our texts mean to address. They reach us essentially as decontextualised texts. We cannot, therefore, make sense of our narratives through direct identification of the things spoken about as part of a situation that we would belong to and share with the author as one of his interlocutors. Moreover, no empathic transport is possible. We cannot either submit the text to our usual cognitive formats (Gadamer 1960: 310). We are left with ‘the world of the text’ only (Thompson 1981: 139-144). Positively, this emancipation means that ‘the world of the text may explode the world of the author.’ The text “is the projection of a world, the proposal of a mode of being-in-the-world, which the text discloses in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references.” (Ibid. 192).

7) **Free for a new referential value.** A ‘free’ text makes room for an appropriation in new situations. Our reading of the narratives will be an attempt of that sort. The emergence of that extended regime of symbolic communication can be referred to Frege and Ricoeur’s distinction in a proposition between the sense and the reference. The sense is the ideal object that the proposition intends, and hence is purely immanent in discourse. The reference is the truth-value of the proposition, its claim to reach reality. The new referential dimensions are inaugurated by processes of reinterpretation. These processes become possible and unavoidably required due to a shift from the event of saying to the meaning of what is said. We have a text severed from the speaker’s intent. That availability to any audience of an ‘emancipated’ text inaugurates a new life for the text.
which may be owned by any new speaker for a new discourse. The room is made for a wider horizon (Gadamer 1960: 310-11) of symbolic exchange and cultural inter-breeding in indefinitely new spaces of communication escaping the time and space boundaries of the initial speech event.

**A Method of Analysis and Cognitive Categorisation**

The study proceeds through differentiating the components of each narrative with the help of several analytical tools and cognitive maps. The aim is to identify the cognition processes that monitor the composition and modulate the sequences of the story into one single tight set of discursive units. Like every linguistic phenomenon, an oral narrative is made up of constitutive units. These units obviously imply the presence of those that structure any language, namely the phonemes, the morphemes and the semantemes. The whole narrative is in the same relation to these units as the latter are to semantemes and semantemes to morphemes. Each form differs from the previous one by a higher degree of complexity. Lévi-Strauss (1968; Thompson 1981) calls mythemes as the elementary, larger, internal components or units. They are a “bundle of relations”, which the narrative uses as its basic constituents. A mytheme could be defined as a cluster of semantemes assembled to form a small set, which makes sense as a discrete semiotic composition that cannot be split into its elements without losing its function of elementary semantic set. As Lévi-Strauss says “only in the form of combinations of such bundles do the constituent units acquire a signifying function” (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 211). This function is simply the “arrangement or disposition of mythemes, in short, the structure of the myth” (Thompson 1981: 155). I shall use the word ‘sense’ to refer to this structure.

The diachronic layout of the components, that is, their syntagmatic order of interlinking, can be compared to the progressive unfolding of a dramatic performance till a satisfactory resolution or equilibrium is reached. As in a play, the end of a sequence often appears as a switching point to which the next one is linked by some imperative nexus. This logical nexus is, most of the time, an abrupt reversal of situation, as if the whole story had to develop and progress through a chain of ups and downs linked to one another by an internal logical necessity. For Thompson, “to explain a narrative is to grasp this entanglement, this fleeting structure of interlaced actions. The application of this technique ends up by ‘dechronologising’ the narrative, in a way that brings out the logical underlying narrative time” (Thompson 1981: 153). The interplay of oppositions and their combinations within an inventory of discrete units is what defines the notion of structure in linguistics. The narrative is a form of discursive structuration, that is, a mutual imbrication, interlocking or interconnection of actions into a unique structured totality through different events fitting into one another by some in-built necessity that is its ‘sense.’ They follow from one another as a linear chain of happenings the logic of which ought to be spelt out.

The first step of my procedures consists in the formalisation of the discursive event by displaying in a table form its interlinking patterns. This provides us with a re-construct of the interconnected dramatic steps of the
whole discourse. This reconstruct is devised in such a way as to draw the attention towards the initial crisis, the sets of unfolding oppositions and their resolution. This discursive structuration helps to discover and state the in-built intent of the narrative as a process.

The second step consists in devising various analytical procedures. They comprise the following. The subject is a kind of title; it gives a short summary and it proves useful as a synthetic reminder in the form of a statement answering for a nutshell question: ‘What is the whole happening about?’ By *semanteme*, I mean the lexemes specific to the narrative: they may be representations, objects, concepts, events, imaginary figures, etc. And, they could be further sorted out in various classes such as: actant and agency, function, space and time, etc. *Mytheme* refers to stereotyped narrative units, which we try to cut into as many paragraphs, while specifically identifying those mythemes that are the common linguistic wealth of a Marathi speaker. *Theme* tries to define the central issue to which the narrative addresses itself. It is sought to be articulated as a short answer to the question: ‘What is the narrative dealing with?’ *Theme Index* is mainly meant to serve classificatory purposes. *Process* refers to the dynamic profile of the discourse as a whole. It points to the overall achievement, the global discursive aim of the narrative, namely, what it actually, symbolically and/or socially, performs as an act of speech. *Hermeneutic viewpoints* are understood as a set of interpretative perspectives. These are categories similar to the weft, those threads woven across a warp to give the fabric a composite structure. They help to semantically make sense of the discursive concatenation of events.

Several interpretative perspectives are possible and may overlap without exclusivity, depending upon the level, the angle or the context of reading. The first immediate level is that of the motivation which prompts the narrator to recount the narrative, often in response to a query of the collector. In general, the immediate referential context in which the story is remembered gives us the narrator’s point of view, the first hermeneutic viewpoint to be taken into consideration. This is the interpretation immediately offered to the collector and the analyst. It may appear partial, limited or ad hoc to an analyst who is not party to the possible functions that the narrative might immediately fulfil. It may look like a close sight, prompted by circumstantial needs. The need is naturally being felt for a sight from a distance, from a wider perspective or another vantage position. These are the viewpoints that are further stated. *Logic mode* tries to identify the logical structures that shape the texture of the whole text and give it consistency. *Cognitive forms* are to be understood as internal structures of significance or production of the text. They are categories similar to the broad canvas that gives a texture to the fabric: they give inner insights, they point to frameworks of understanding. Their function is to circumscribe fields of cognition, project modes of apprehension and organisation of the lexemes and mythemes available to the narrator. Each of these forms shows a particular performative capacity.
A debate was going on between Khandobā and Viśvanātha. Khandobā was saying that he was born out of a homā, the sacred fire. He was saying that when the homā was lit in Kāḍā, he was born out of the smoke that was rising to heaven from the homā. To ascertain whether Khandobā was born out of the homā, Viśvanātha decided to put Khandobā to the test. He told Khandobā: “In the Himalayas, there is a golden pimpa” tree on a hill. Bring one leaf from that tree and five pebbles from the hill, within seven days.” If Khandobā could achieve that, then only would he be admitted into the gods’ world. There were two mighty demons — Ratnāśura and Ratnābhuya — guarding the gold pimpa” tree on the hill. They used to kill anybody who climbed the hill. Not even a bird would dare go near. Amidst all these obstacles, Khandobā succeeded in bringing five pebbles but the pimpa” leaf remained to be brought. Khandobā hid himself in a recess at the foot of the hill.

There was a lake nearby. A Pariṭ came near the lake to fetch water. At that time, the Pariṭ saw Khandobā. The Pariṭ enquired why Khandobā was there. Khandobā told him the whole story. The Pariṭ told Khandobā that as long as he did not get the pimpa” leaf, he would provide him with bhākar (pancake of millet, bread) and water. One day, the demons from the hill were climbing down in pursuit of a peacock and a cow. Both of them struck two arrows. Ratnābhuya missed his aim but Ramāśura’s arrow hit the cow in the stomach. She was bleeding. The peacock was saved and ran away. The Pariṭ, as usual, had gone to fetch water. He saw the cow hit with the arrow. He pulled the arrow out of her stomach. He gave her water to drink. The Pariṭ was completely covered with blood and cowdung. Both the demons came down the hill and saw the Pariṭ. They started beating him. A fight ensued between the Pariṭ and the two demons. The fight continued for two days. In this fight, Ratnāśura died. But Ratnābhuya was saved. He became very angry because the Pariṭ had killed his brother. But the Pariṭ possessed some power that gave him an upper hand in the fight. Ratnābhuya saw the cowdung on the body of the Pariṭ and cursed him, “You and your generations will thus remove the polluting dirt”. After giving the curse, Ratnābhuya disappeared. Khandobā, in the meantime, climbed up the hill while the fight was going on, brought the pimpa” leaf and returned to Kāḍā.

Analytical Elements

Subject: Khandobā brings a golden pimpa” tree leaf from Himalaya to Kāḍā, evidence of his godhead, while Pariṭ is cursed by demons to wash polluting clothes.
Semantemes: Kāḍā, Khandobā, Viśvanātha, cow & cowdung, peacock, homā and its smoke, Himalaya hill and its climbing, golden pimpa” tree, demons, test of godhead, magic powers, heroic feat, curse, revenge, numbers 2, 5, 7.
Mythemes: M.47: Test of godhead M.26: Gods’ impotency and scare M.52: Man overpowering demons
Theme: Constitutive features of Pariṭ caste: a self-perception
Theme Index: Caste Identity & Occupation
Process: Securing godhead for Khanḍobā, Parīṭ’s deity, and founding Parīṭ’s professional work and status

Hermeneutic viewpoints:
- Portraying Parīṭ’s courage, power and outstanding cultured conduct
- Tracing back the history of the privileged relationship of Parīṭ and Khanḍobā
- Vindicating Khanḍobā’s claim to a status of godhead

Logic mode: Antagonism Identification Recognition Vindication


Themes and Interpretation

A Scenario of Recognition of Godhead

The initially explicit intent of the narrative is clearly an official recognition by Viśvanātha, the supreme lord of the universe, of a status of full-fledged godhead for Khanḍobā, (litt. ‘father of the territory’) allegedly lord of the earth, actually a god newly born on earth at Kaḍā from the smoke only of homā, the sacrificial fire. The smoke is śudrā by nature in the Purāṇās. The quest and claim of a fully divine upgradation into a ‘god from god’ of that śudrā ‘god from earth’ is firstly reflected in the redundancy of two spatial idioms, that of the smoke of homā ascending to heaven and that of Khanḍobā climbing up the Himalaya, abode of the supreme gods. Secondly, the corresponding inverted moves of the smoke going up from earth towards heaven and of the pebbles and leaf being brought down from the heights of the divine are correlated signs of an identity of nature suggested by a free ascending and descending movement. The evidence actually consists in that the pimpa leaf, metonymy of divinity, writes off the fact that Khanḍobā is born from the smoke and not from the fire itself. The message is explicitly clear: Khanḍobā really belongs in the sphere of the divine.

To ascertain narratively this identity, the text progressively weaves the scenario of a dramatic play that develops through constantly opposed happenings. That is, the argument gets moving ahead by devising stages which link one with the other in a succession of bouncing steps.

The first act stages the initial moment of utmost incapacity, defeat and failure of Khanḍobā to prove his claim. Far from daring to stage a show of strength and face the mighty guardians of the hilltop, killers of all living beings who dare stand in their presence, Khanḍobā looks for a quietly secure place. The scenic metonymy is appropriate to his status of śudrā: he seeks protection from the demons in a hideout at the foot of the hill, a refuge underneath and aloof from any frontal and open confrontation; he shrewdly shies away from a trial of strength and remains in a state of total inaction.

The second act starts with an opposite move coming from the earth, from the Parīṭ, the people who owe allegiance to Khanḍobā, their community god. The Parīṭ spontaneously, out of vested interest, extends an unqualified support to Khanḍobā by providing him with bread and water till he succeeds.
But this gives hardly any hope as the situation all of a sudden worsens. As a blatant challenge to Khanḍobā’s claim to control on earth, the ferocious demons hired by heaven forcefully counter-attack in a way which makes a mockery of Khanḍobā’s conceit to be a god on earth. It is too obvious that Khanḍobā does not have the capacity; not even a vague desire, to secure the welfare of the earth and the living beings it carries, including in the first place the Parīṭ, his own protégé and dedicated ally. The demon brothers most significantly embark on a spree of furious looting, which tries to destroy the most sacred things on earth, the cow and the peacock, epitome of life resources on earth, the peacock being moreover the devak of the Parīṭ.

Both the gods, Viśvanātha and Khanḍobā, are conspicuously silent, that is, absent-minded about this. They seemingly are not answerable to the earth. In heaven, Viśvanātha, the god presiding over the whole universe, is just concerned with the debate going on among the potential residents of the divine sphere. Their concern is the protection and preservation of established prerogatives against the controversial claim of a new intruder to full godhead. On earth, Khanḍobā, the śudrā, remains hidden and avoids getting entangled in a disaster that is not in any way his concern, though the earth is being looted under his eyes.

As a consequence of divine desertion, the demons have a free hand to massacre. It needs a man who lives from the resources of that earth to commit himself to save the earth. The Parīṭ who has come to fetch water, immediately takes sides with Khanḍobā, his god on earth. For the time being, the two demons have hit a cow, emblem of the earth, its most valuable wealth and source of life on it. Their triumph knows no resistance whatsoever. Still, the speaker makes the peacock, his devak, escape the arrow of the brother demons.

The third act starts with a counter move from the Parīṭ, who faces the challenge. Actually, the demons do not provoke the Parīṭ, and the Parīṭ is cautious enough to get his alter-ego, the peacock, escape their aggression. The Parīṭ is not the demons’ enemy. But he cannot refrain from spontaneously involving himself at the sight of the wounded cow, whom he attends to and saves. He is significantly smeared profusely by the attributes of the cow, her blood and dung — an indication of his total identification with her lot. This behaviour soon raises the wrath of the demon brothers and leads the Parīṭ to an open fight with them. One is killed and the other one overpowered. The discursively most significant climax of the scenario at this stage is that one single and sole man, the Parīṭ, stops the demons’ looting.

The third act ends with a double victory: the demons are defeated by the Parīṭ and Khanḍobā has been able to climb the hill now unguarded, as the demons forget their mission and indulge in fighting the Parīṭ on the earth. We are made to understand that the Parīṭ, initially no party to the conflict, has attracted upon himself the anger of the demons for entering into a battle which was not waged against him but which he made his own out of a free decision to help his god, save the cow and the earth, risking his life to that effect. Meanwhile, facing no obstacle and no risk, Khanḍobā is at ease to bring down the evidence of his godhood, the pimpāṭ tree leaf.
The fourth act bounces back as far as the Parît is concerned. If Khanôbâ is blessed with a glorious return to KaDî as a full god, though with no supportive deed to his credit, conversely the fighting and heroic Parît is cursed by the angry surviving demon who takes revenge on him and his descendants: the Parît shall for ever remove the dirt from polluting clothes. The text gives no clue about the type of rationality or logical necessity commanding such a reversal. I like to articulate it in the following diagram to stress the perplexing difficulty it raises:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the sphere of man:</th>
<th>+ Parît’s heroic fight</th>
<th>- Curse as reward &amp; attribute of pollution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the sphere of gods:</td>
<td>- Gods’ apathy &amp; absence</td>
<td>+ Blessed with godhead &amp; supremacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other terms, the logical necessity that binds the three semantemes of ‘Parît’s heroic fight’, ‘demon’s revengeful curse’ and ‘washerman’s polluted occupation’ is the least apparent in the text but irrevocably built into the structure of the narrative. It is its main aporia.

One might wonder whether the demon’s pronouncements condemning the Parît to a polluted occupation and thus a status of indignity should be taken at their face value. We know that the curse happens to be interpreted by Parîts in an ambivalent way. The latter figure out the curse of having to deal with polluting dirt splashing upon them rather as an outstanding blessing in disguise: the washerman’s distinct prerogative is indeed to remove dirt and pollution from men’s clothes and thus purify the world. The Parît ‘bears’ and deals with the dirt of the world to rid the latter of pollution. But if Parîts can interpret and turn the curse into a blessing in the same way as they may also consider the splash of cow’s blood and dung upon them a blessing, how could this reading be borne out by the structural necessity of the narrative?

I shall address the aporia later on. At this stage I wish only to take note of some discursive procedures such as the staging of imbalanced pairs of actants to proceed through inversion or play of opposites. Let us observe the various functions of such pairs in engineering reversal plays. For instance, there are two demon brothers: one is killed, but the other one temporarily overpowered and kept alive for him to seek revenge, and thus push ahead the narrative towards the main and ultimate goal of the narrative, that is, the foundation of the professional status of the Parît. There are two things to be brought from the hill: Khanôbâ brings only one of them, five pebbles, but the other one remains out of reach, thus taking the drama ahead again. The demons have two targets, the cow and the peacock, but they miss one of them, the peacock, the Parît’s devak; the scenario still draws upon a half-killing of the cow to allow for the Parît to successfully attend to her and then bring in the demon’s vengeance. Two of the cow’s attributes smear the fighting Parît, blood and dung. Only the dung finds its corresponding value in the polluting dirt that the Parît removes from clothes. But the cow’s blood is unmistakably of a positive semantic value as compared to the possibly
ambivalency of the dung and dirt ‘borne’ to be removed, and thus discursively introduces the semanteme of pollution of which the Pariṅś clear the world.

One may also in this respect, structurally and semantically, by an effect of redundancy, relate the two comparable semantemes of the Pariṅś attending to the wounded cow and washing the polluting clothes, the consequence of both being the same, namely, the Pariṅś is smeared by dung and dirt. In other words, the Pariṅś takes upon himself the pollution and violence of the world. By his occupational attributes, the Pariṅś is victimised and would not disown a function of victim that actually turns him into a saviour of the cow and a purifier of human beings. The demon’s curse is thus definitely inverted into a blessing. The differential value of the cow’s blood as opposed to that of dung and dirt possibly points towards that semantical reversal of the curse into the recognition of the redeeming function of the Pariṅś’s occupational assignment.

**Systems of Relation and Quest of Status**

Besides playing with contrasting pairs and sets of opposition and inverting events to develop a course of action, the narrative stages four types of actants operating from four distinct spheres of agency. The types of interaction prevailing between the four actants can be specified with the help of the following diagram with double entry, paradigmatic and syntagmatic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Viśvanātha</strong></th>
<th>versus</th>
<th><strong>Khanḍobā</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two demon brothers</td>
<td>versus</td>
<td>Pariṅś</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The horizontal or syntagmatic entries display two dynamic moves of confrontation, which are comparable to the extent that they are a contest for assertion of identity and recognition of status by the actants, Khanḍobā and his Pariṅś, hitherto denied proper recognition by entities from a higher level in the realm of the divine. Khanḍobā’s attempt to stand the test devised by Viśvanātha, the supreme god of the universe, is a contest for a status of full-fledged godhood by an inferior or newly pretending god from the earth who is looked down upon as only born from the smoke of the fire and not the fire itself. The second contest is a fight by a man of inferior status at the image of his god, whom supra-terrestrial devilish forces try to simply eliminate. It is a contest for sheer survival as a man with full dignity and status on earth by a Pariṅś, looked down upon for being engaged in degrading occupational tasks, and doomed by a curse to remain confined in them. The Pariṅś is staged with a forceful demonstration of strength, power and cultural excellence far superior and qualitatively unparalleled to those of the demons.

But these two attempts of recognition happen through significantly different processes. Khanḍobā captures the pimpa tree leaf without having to fight or show any strength or personal qualities whatsoever he might have. He succeeds in obtaining a position of ascendancy on earth as a reward for no deed or exertion on his part. The Pariṅś on the contrary has to wage a protracted fight against divine demonic entities and win on the strength of his own forces. He shows, twice, against two demons, his capacity to struggle
and win on his own. Unlike Khanḍobā, he is not granted ‘free of cost’ what he looks for. He has to ‘earn his life’ through a successful fight or else he simply perishes. He is moreover instrumental in the success of Khanḍobā, in two ways; directly, through faithfully feeding him with bread and water and, indirectly, thanks to a prolonged fight which keeps the demons engaged. The Pāriṭ does not only gain his survival at the risk of his life as a human being, he cares also that Khanḍobā to secure the status of full-fledged godhead. The whole structural necessity of the text of the narrative syntagmatically develops around and on the basis of the Pāriṭ’s determinant agency. He is the crucial actant.

What eventually matters, through the inbuilt sense of the text as a structured scenario, is the intentionality of the narrative as a discourse held by Pāriṭs. Through differentially staging four individual actants confronted by one another in a tight framework of rapports, the discourse aims in particular at the construction and establishment beyond dispute and for ever, of the constitutive elements of the Pāriṭ community as a distinct social entity in the triple world of men on earth, gods in heaven, and demons from hell possibly hired to destroy the others at the call of any one.

Pāriṭ secure for themselves the first ground of a claim to full-fledged collective identity by assisting their god Khanḍobā to obtain full-fledged godhead. The system of symbolic communication in which the narrative makes sense assumes indeed that each community fundamentally owes his entity to the god with whom it identifies itself. The conquest and recognition of a status of full godhead for Khanḍobā is the first decisive guarantee of the recognition of a full-fledged collective status for the Pāriṭ in the universe.

The vertical or paradigmatic reading points to the second decisive ground of this constitution. This reading gives us further insight into the relationship on earth of the Pāriṭs with their god Khanḍobā as opposed to that of the demons to the god of the universe Viśvanātha. At first sight, both the sets exhibit a comparable state of dependency of the gods upon their assistants. To preserve his position of absolute ascendancy, Viśvanātha sought to hire a team of mighty demons who are not their own masters but mere mercenary killers upon whose good or bad faith the lord of the universe has to entirely and helplessly rely. Khanḍobā depends similarly in all respects upon the Pāriṭ.

But this similarity leaves room for significantly inverted forms of relationship between the respective partners. The two demon brothers do not care for their master. Their conduct proves to be deceitful and counter-productive with regard to a god posturing as the lord of the universe and trying to preserve his singular prerogative of absolute ascendancy against new śūdra contestants. Moreover, Viśvanātha does not care in the least for the destructive whims of his own guards. Conversely, the Pāriṭ directly and indirectly does care for Khanḍobā whom he spontaneously volunteers to faithfully and committedly assist till the end. This loyalty earns Khanḍobā a position of divine ascendancy that Viśvanātha did not want to grant him.

What is most significant in both the paradigmatic sets of relationship, is, firstly, that the gods’ common attributes are those of impotency and
powerlessness. Helplessness and carelessness qualify their attitude as far as the lot of the earth and its living beings is concerned. Secondly, in that context, the actant playing the key and decisive role is the Parīt. The latter is put at the centre of the stage at the moment Khandobā feels weak and eschews a confrontation with the demons. Unlike Khandobā who keeps the lowest profile and even stays apart in a hideout, the Parīt significantly enters the scene with a quiet consciousness of his strength, without feeling inferior or afraid. He stands up alone with no claim to ascendancy but only out of a commitment to save the earth and its inhabitants, out of humanity. He feeds his helpless god and attends to the wounded cow without bothering about being splashed with blood and dung. Then he goes on defending the earth, the territory Khand of his lord, Khandobā, which is also his domain. He is the only one who acts with a deep and sure sense of self-reliance and confidence in his own potency. Khandobā on the contrary does not care to help out his Parīt; he simply cannot. He only shrewdly takes advantage of the situation. One might even indict him for cunningly and callously making use of his Parīt as a scapegoat with no concern for the latter’s life or the lot of the earth. Once back in Kalā, he has no thought or worry whatsoever for his Parīt, not even a vague feeling of gratitude or a word of acknowledgement.

Ultimately, if each community fundamentally owes his entity to the god with whom it identifies itself, the discursive construction of the narrative structurally suggests the reverse. The narrative constructs the Parīt’s overall entity as the sole true ground and space of excellence, power and flawless dignity in the whole universe.

Negotiation within a given Dispensation

The puzzling aporia is that the single actant with a capacity to withstand the demons’ onslaught and uphold the most sacred values on earth, and to whom moreover Khandobā owes his access to divine ascendancy, is doomed for his deeds of excellence and power to remain at the bottom of the hierarchy of all beings on earth, with an occupational status of servility marked by the indignity of pollution. The outcomes of both the confrontations fit into sets of values predefined by a given dispensation, irrespective of the actual merits of the actants. They are, moreover, ascertained through baffling ways. Khandobā’s divine excellence is decided by chance, thanks to a favourable opportunity, far from being evidenced by an act of bravery worth the name. Khandobā was only shrewd enough to circumvent the test and take advantage of circumstances upon which he has no control and does not envisage to have any. The Parīt, on the contrary, to whose brave deeds Khandobā owes his godhead, is doomed to be cursed by the demon whom he has overpowered after a two-day fight. The narrative ends with a reimposed status quo. This finale may be viewed as a striking narrative self-contradiction.

The feeling of logical impropriety or the appearance of gross self-contradiction vanishes when we realise that the ultimate significance of the narrative is not born out by its overt outcomes. Its signification, that is to say, its process of production of meanings is of the nature of a discursive negotiation through which the Parīt speaker finds a way to assert his counter statements through a prescribed given dispensation. He cannot openly
articulate his disagreement; he may not even feel mentally strong to conceive
of such an open denial. He would not any way have the conceptual means
and arguments to counter in a frontal attack an order that he has internalised
and deeply incorporated as a washerman used to wash polluting clothes for
generations. Despite all these hurdles, the speaker finds roundabout ways
to voice his dissenting feelings. A skilful dramatic expertise enables him to
articulate his counter claims through the narrative structuring of his
discourse. The ultimate outcome is for him a triple gain.

First, the Parīt is instrumental in obtaining for Khandoṣā, his god, the
status of full godhead, thus securing for his own community an essential
ground of legitimacy.

Second, the narrative lays the foundation to secure legitimacy for the
Parīt caste occupation, though at the cost of being placed at an inferior level
of servility and pollution. Though this occurs through the mouth of an
overpowered demon, the latter in a way represents a transcendent order of
truth. Here are two processes of significance that place the Parīt in the
predefined hierarchical system of relations and value of the universe in
which he happens to be born and remains ideologically trapped. The
narrative secures for the Parīt community an undisputed recognition, at its
given place, in the sole world dispensation, which ultimately makes sense
of the universe at that given period of time.

Third, notwithstanding or whatever be this status of inferiority, the
narrative very consciously traces back the way it is rewarded to a deed of
outstanding bravery. The latter discursively secures for the person of the
Parīt attributes of unparalleled excellence and power among gods, demons
and men alike, that is, in the whole universe. If we consider that this
undisputed ascendancy is turned down into a state of servility and indignity
by a curse which finds its explanation in the will of a demon to take revenge
on a deed which is otherwise highly courageous and meritorious, the
Parīt community may indeed feel entitled to semantically reverse the value
of the curse and turn it into a blessing in disguise. Through this, the
Parīt strongly, consciously and forcibly establishes the dignity of his own
person despite and against the ideological dispensation which demonically
fights to degrade him. Being prescribed by perverse demons that cannot but
obviously act wrongly in the eyes of the common man, this dispensation
appears itself questionable. The discourse may possibly win the day by
structuring a text that implicitly and covertly appeals to common sense
against the prescribed order.

Eventually, ambiguity prevails. Two opposite insights appear consonant
with the text. A first one would remain at the surface, as the text immediately
reads, that is, a foundation discourse for the Parīt community within a
hierarchical dispensation that is taken for granted and internalised without
the slightest doubt. Another insight may take argument of the internal self-
contradiction of the whole textual structuring and read the narrative, within
the established worldview which the text cannot escape and in which it
only makes sense, as a counter-discourse meant to ascertain the moral
excellence and the remarkable power of a human being, the Parīt, over
impotent gods and malevolent demons. The order of the triple world rests
in all respects upon the Parīt.
Wither? A further life for the text?

The life of the text nowadays rests upon its inbuilt ambiguity which may break open another Parīt discourse, provided the Parīṣ today wish and/or prove able to draw upon this narrative as a stepping-stone to clear the former ambiguity of their discourse and the ambivalence of their text.

Would they reinterpret the curse of a malevolent demon so as to turn it into a blessing in disguise and conceive of themselves with pride as those who, within the given dispensation, are earmarked to carry the holy blood and dung of a wounded cow and clear the dirt from polluting clothes? For ages, the Parīt community has taken the curse for granted and endured its painful consequences with resignation. Though associated with pollution and looked down upon by its masters, the Parīt, as assigned by demons, has found solace and earned merit in making moral capital of his dedicated service of those higher up in the hierarchical dispensation. The rule of the dispensation became an unavoidable destiny.

Should they not prefer to explain away their servile and polluted status as an invalid curse of a malevolent devil, disown it as illogically enforced by a dispensation which keeps them trapped, and then re-write the end of the narrative accordingly? What would be the revised scenario of the text and its revised logic of structuration?

The fact is that the text has the potential to argue from within against the legitimacy of the whole framework which it fits in, and is trapped into, and provoke its implosion. The narrative could be restructured on the valour, the righteousness, the self-reliance and the autonomous power vested in the Parīt, its crucial actant; thanks to whom the triple world remains entrenched in its status quo. The implosion would consist in provoking the collapse of the unsaid systemic dispensation according to which impotent, helpless and careless gods do undisputedly prevail upon man’s sole effective and civilisational agency. The denunciation would expose how that dispensation from the outset subordinates altogether the sphere of human agency to the impotent sphere of a divine control with no valid reasons. I would point to the shrewd ideological logic by which the dispensation makes a faithful man serve the power and prestige games of those who actually depend on their servants, men being made scapegoats and demons killer mercenaries of the dominant. It would ultimately relate that ideological logic to the social control of those higher up sections, which simply need to subjugate servants such as the Parīt in order to keep them faithfully dedicated to serve their needs and whims.

Text‘ of Parīt -02

A king had four sons. Three sons were already married. The last one was to die as soon as the religious chants of marriage, mangalāstaka, would be over. To counter this, the rṣī, the sage, told him to send for Somā, the Parīt woman. “Ask her to perform the oil application ceremony, telavaœ, and lead the bridegroom to the marriage pedestal.” The king and his chief minister set out, sitting on a log, on a journey beyond the seven oceans in search of Somā, the Parīt woman. The king told her to bring the gift of life for his son. She told her sons and daughters-in-law that in case
something happened when she was gone, not to burn or do anything. They should wait for her return. Here, Somā, the Parīt woman came to the court of the king and performed the telavan, the oil application ceremony of the last son. She led him to the marriage pedestal and participated in the wedding ceremony. The marriage over, her sons and daughters-in-law died. The marriage at the king’s court got over without any hitch.

The Parīt woman, Somā, was returning home. She came across the temple of a goddess. She prayed to the goddess sincerely. The day was Somavat, a Monday, and a new-moon day. The goddess granted her a boon that her sons and daughters-in-law would come back to life. All the merit of the good deeds of Somā, the Parīt woman, had come to the rescue of the king. The boon given by the goddess gave life back to her children. The day was Monday, Somvār. It was also a new-moon day. In memory of that day, the Parīt woman got the name of Somā.

Analytical elements

Subject: Somā, a Parīt woman rescues a king’s son from sudden death, while the goddess brings the Parīt woman’s whole family back to life.

Semantemes: King & king’s minister, ṛṣy, wedding function, telavan, mangalāṣṭaka, son and daughter-in-law, sudden death, the goddess, boon & merit, Monday, new-moon day, the seven oceans.

Mythemes: M.30: Crossing the Seven Oceans M.33: The weak, scapegoat and victim M.49: Efficiency of Man’s Merit M.21: God takes care of his sincere devotees.

Theme: Unparalleled life saving powers of a Parīt woman. Theme Index: Female Power

Process: Inverting the hierarchical order of dependency, power and status between a Parīt woman and a king.

Hermeneutic viewpoints:
- The superior powers of a Parīt woman displayed & resorted to by ṛṣy & king in distress
- Mysterious & personal relationship of a Parīt woman with the all powerful goddess
- Parīt woman portrayed deliberately risking her life to save others’ life

Logic mode: Hierarchy Recognition Reversal Salvation


Themes and Interpretation

Supremacy on Earth Under Challenge

The narrative stages four actants belonging to distinct spheres of agency: a king, agent of power on earth; a ṛṣy, agent of divine knowledge; the goddess, supreme agency of life in the universe; and a Parīt woman, in the role of mediator between the goddess and human life on earth. The syntagmatic
chain displays their interaction. The text constructs this interaction with a clear intent, that is, to exhibit an inversion of relations of ascendancy and dependency as regards status and values.

The narrative opens with a situation of crisis, which places the king and his court in a situation of utter powerlessness: his last son is doomed to die immediately after his wedding ritual is over. The king finds himself in a state of complete helplessness. This is like a frontal contest of his status of repository of power and wealth. This state of powerlessness leads him to depend on and surrender to two other agencies. The first one is a ‘knowledge’ agency, that is, the guidance of a rṣṇi who directs him towards a second ‘life’ agency, a Pariś woman endowed with the power to rescue beings from death.

The challenge hits the king and his whole court on three accounts: (i) as a king, repository of power together with his minister over human beings; (ii) as a male human being together indeed with the rṣṇi, as the latter directs him towards a simple washerwoman, and (iii) as a being of common human condition as he has to undertake a long journey beyond the seven oceans, that is, beyond the boundaries of the territory inhabited by humankind. The source of life is under the control of no human being whatsoever. The king, despite all his power, is staged as helpless as any one of them.

The narrative stresses a first lesson in order to convey a first message. The lesson is that of the utter dependency of human beings for their life on sources and agencies out of their usual reach and control. The message is that the king has to beg the Pariś woman, the last of his servants, to “bring the gift of life for his son.” And this is what she undoubtedly brings by her presence, by performing the ritual of telavan, and by her prominent role during the ceremony: she leads the king’s son to the marriage pedestal and attends the function. A Pariś woman is staged in a role of overall ascendancy over a kṣatriya whose might has already been humbled when the king and his minister set off on a long journey to beg her to come and perform telavan. This is a first inbuilt sense of the narrative as a Pariś discourse. A discursively implicit and covert reversal of status fulfils a Pariś’s dream of superiority over kṣatriya.

The Pariś Woman, a Power Mediator

The calm and unwavering Pariś woman’s consciousness of a capacity to hold in check forces which inflict sudden death on human beings is in sharp contrast to the king’s helplessness and distress. Seemingly, the Pariś woman considers it a matter of routine to be requested to intervene, as she does not even explicitly confirm her positive reply. Nor is she asked whether she would like or be able to come and perform. Her capacity is taken for granted. Let us say more appropriately, that in the logic of the text, her dedication is first a constitutive attribute predicated by a dispensation that all actants know and agree upon, and second a kind of personal, moral qualification of her agency. The rṣṇi had anyway revealed it with the authority of his own function of ‘seer’ of divine and invisible realities.

The same knowledge is, moreover, on the part of the Pariś woman, a matter of personal experience. This is strikingly signalled by her sole
statement before leaving her place and following the king home. She clearly foresees and knows through a knowledge that is beyond the reach and competence of anyone else, the move of retaliation by the forces of death upon her own family once she will have thwarted them at the court of the king. She is a go-between mediating the rapports between two spheres, that of this earth from where the king has come, and that of extra-terrestrial forces. Her residence accordingly is ‘beyond the seven oceans’ at some extreme external limit of the earth. She is, moreover, clairvoyant about the good and bad drives which control those extra-terrestrial forces.

Two effects of significance may be read here. The first is the explicit display of a female power, which on earth is vested with an absolutely superior capacity to act as intermediary life saviour. She performs the ritual and leads the bridegroom to the pedestal, she rescues the king’s son by her own presence and her assigned performance. This power is, moreover, the reflection on earth of the goddess’ supreme life agency. The *Parît* woman’s life agency is grounded in the close and mysterious, personal relation that she entertains with the goddess. She is staged as ontologically belonging in the realm of the *devi* and partaking of the latter’s supremacy as a life-giving agency.

The second effect of significance is implicit. The *Parît* woman’s mediation of power over forces of sudden death operates through a ritual practice, which is the privileged attribute of her person as a woman from the *Parît* community only. This second structurally inbuilt significance of the narrative as a *Parît* discourse is a covert claim of the right and privilege of the *Parît* to perform a ritual practice propounded as significantly constitutive of the *Parît’s* distinctive social function and entity. The *r̥ṣṭī* is duly staged by the discourse with the function of reminding everyone, starting with the king, that no marriage celebration can dispense with *telavaṇa*. The ritual is unavoidably to be performed by a *Parît* woman if one wants to dispel the serious wrath of invisible powers possibly causing death and breaking the lineages. One may read the text as a most effective, though implicit, and threatening warning addressed by *Parît* speakers to anyone, starting with those in power, be they like the king already blessed with three happily married sons. The ritual performance of *telavan* cannot but be recognised by everyone as the *Parît’s* indispensable right, its function being that of securing the safety of lineages among human beings. This role is a ground of the *Parît’s* social distinction and distinctiveness.

The end of the second actantial sequence is conversely identical to the end unit of the first act. It gets the narrative getting ahead with another reversal, as foreseen and indirectly announced at the end of the first act.

**The Goddess, Supreme Seat of Power**

The *Parît* woman is only a mediating agency between two worlds, namely, the earth, territory of utmost powerlessness, helplessness and death even of those in power, and the Other, an invisible and mysterious constituency of life and power over death. She is perfectly conscious and aware of this. With confidence and full knowledge of the facts, she enters the goddess’
temple and prays to the goddess without shyness, fear or apprehension. But only with a sincere heart. The predicates which qualify the event, that is, Monday and new-moon day, and the immediate granting of the goddess’ boon, stresses, on the one hand, the personal equation which links the Parīt woman and the goddess and, on the other hand, that the goddess only is the supreme seat of life and power over life.

Ambivalent Concept of Efficiency

If we raise the question of a possible further life for the text, an answer may be found in reference to the ambivalent concept of efficiency that is advocated. The text, as an apodictic form of speech, structures a society by authoritatively establishing who the effective centres and mediators of life-power are in the universe. In this respect, the narrative stands as a definitive assertion of Parīt distinctiveness on the ground of a community-specific, life-saving ritual performance. This implicit and inbuilt assumption of the discourse cannot nevertheless be construed as its ultimate intentionality. The text seemingly focuses more on an ontological question, namely, the seat, the source and the mode of the life-giving capacity of that particular Parīt woman. She is named Somā for explicit reasons. These reasons point towards a main first answer. But later on a second answer is given in terms of merit. The text eventually is ambivalent in this regard.

Initially, the life-giving power is incorporated in the figure of Somā on account of her personal, that is, substantial connection with extra-terrestrial sources of life, ‘beyond the seven oceans.’ This close symbiotic contact with the goddess is also visible when Somā goes and meets the devi in the temple and is immediately listened to by the goddess. The narrator feels nevertheless prompted to explain the boon with another reason, that is, the merit of Somā’s good deeds. This concept, easily picked up from the common language of his rationalistic theological environment, is predicated upon a moralistic, quantitative and causative mechanism. It refers to a mode of agency quite different from that of a woman naturally, symbiotically endowed with extra-terrestrial forces. We may dislike the present narrator’s view as seriously restricted by a mechanistic and not energetic vision of efficiency, which is the fundamental perspective of the narrative. The concept of merit as an accumulated, calculated and quasi automatic reserve of effectivity earned by prolonged good deeds and austerities differs from the initial logic of the text which makes sense within another ontological and vitalist vision of the universe.

Text8 of Parīt -059

This story happened very very long ago. There was a king who ruled over a city. He did not have any child. One day, a sādhu came to the city. He felt pity for the king. The holy man gave his blessing. Thanks to the knowledge of the sādhu, the queen gave birth to a baby girl. At the royal court and in the kingdom everybody was happy. A Brāhmaṇ predicted the girl’s future. “O king! this daughter, the moment she steps on the marriage pedestal, will become a widow.” The king felt deeply concerned. The court was distressed. The king’s subjects were worried. The same sādhu, through
whose mercy the daughter was born, was brought to the king. The holy man listened to the king and said: “Somā, the Parīṣ woman, lives beyond the seven oceans. Ask her to perform with her hands the turmeric and oil application (haṁādṛ and telvaṇa) ceremony.”

The daughter came of age. Before celebrating her marriage, the king sent a team of courtiers to fetch Somā the Parīṣ woman and bring her with honour to his court. The king consulted the Brāhmaṇ about the auspicious time for performing the wedding ceremony. Somā the Parīṣ applied turmeric to the bride and the groom. The marriage ceremony got over amidst all joy. There was happiness everywhere in the kingdom. On the other side, beyond the seven oceans, the daughters-in-law, the sons and the grandchildren of Somā the Parīṣ died. Somā the Parīṣ came to know about this through her intuitive knowledge.

Somā the Parīṣ sat down for a penance at the royal court. God was pleased. He told her to ask for a boon. First, Somā the Parīṣ asked for a first boon: “God! Bring my sons, daughters-in-law and grand-children back to life.” God complied. Then the god told Somā the Parīṣ woman to ask for another boon. She said: “Oh god! If a Parīṣ woman of my caste performs the telvaṇa ritual, the oil and turmeric ceremony, may all that is evil for her go away.” God was astonished. She did not ask for wealth and riches. This is what she is asking for? God said: “Don’t you want some compensation for you?” “No!” said Somā the Parīṣ woman. The king was also overcome with surprise. He gave her a gift of a sari and a blouse, plenty of gold, diamonds, rubies and sent her back home. Even today, we are invited in weddings and treated with honour (māna).

Analytical Elements

Subject: Somā, the Parīṣ woman, is called to save the king’s lineage through performing telvaṇa at the king’s daughter’s marriage.

Semantemes: king, sterile queen, sādhū, Brāhmaṇ, wedding ceremony, telvaṇa, haṁādṛ, seven oceans, intuitive knowledge, prediction, penance, blessing, boon, sudden death, sari and blouse, gold, diamonds, rubies, honour, wealth.


Theme: Unparalleled life saving powers of a Parīṣ woman. Theme Index: Female Power.

Process: Ascertaining the Parīṣ’s right to the distinctive caste honour of performing the wedding telvaṇa ritual.

Hermeneutic viewpoints:
- The outstanding power over death of a Parīṣ woman saves the king’s lineage.
- The Parīṣ caste is rightly honoured for its auspicious role of performing telvaṇa at wedding ceremony.
- Parīṣ woman portrayed deliberately risking her life to save others’ life.

Logic mode: Hierarchy Recognition Reversal Salvation.

Cognitive Forms: Recognition-1 Social Distinctiveness. Salvation-2 Woman Plays a Role of Saviour. Salvation-4 Ritual Efficiency. Supremacy-7 Excellence of Moral Merits
Themes and Interpretation

The Pariṣ Woman, Saviour of King’s Lineage

The opening situation of crisis is that of a kingdom doomed to collapse for want of issue to secure a lineage to the king. The crisis repeats itself twice: first, the king has no child, and, second, the only one girl child born to him, thanks to the pity of a holy man whose blessing grants him a daughter, will become a widow from the very instant of her wedding ceremony as per the forecast of a Brāhmaṇ. Somā, the Pariṣ woman, is brought in on the direction of the same holy man to rescue the groom. Somā figures in the narrative as essentially the saviour of the king’s lineage. This is her first and most significant function. King and king’s subjects rejoice: “There is happiness everywhere in the kingdom.” The discursive intentionality of the narrative is for the Pariṣ to assert themselves as the most faithful servants and allies dedicated to the king, his kingdom and subjects’ welfare. They are indeed the unique possible saviours of all their lineages. Their service can by no means be dispensed with.

One might possibly, though very implicitly and indirectly, read as in Prt-02, a covert wish to prove how Pariṣ are superior to Kṣatriyas, as the latter need the Pariṣ to maintain their supremacy as rulers down the ages. One may also read a covert wish to oppose an efficient female agency to the helplessness of a male king through showing the unqualified ascendancy of female power over king’s power. But the most significant and determinant intentionality of the discourse seems to extol the unparalleled life-saving powers of a woman who is Pariṣ and not of a woman as such. Somā is centre-staged as a woman from Pariṣ community to be invested with supraterrrestrial powers as the sole hope of rescue for the king and his kingdom doomed to collapse.

One opposition only is overt and very intentional: that of the Pariṣ to the Brāhmaṇ. The Pariṣ woman nullifies the prediction of the Brāhmaṇ who is obviously staged with a dubious role: he declares the auspicious time of the wedding ceremony knowing perfectly that there is no such auspicious time as he himself has predicted the death of the bridegroom. This prediction and the inefficiency of his ritual role at the time of marriage structurally place him on the side of the forces of death out to harm human beings.

The Distinctive Social Function of the Pariṣ

The second message follows from the first one. The honour that the Pariṣ woman receives when she is brought in with the greatest honour possible on account of the function that she is expected to perform, and again when she is sent back with the most magnificent gifts as rewards for her deed, earns the community itself the same treatment “even today,” says the narrator, when Pariṣ “are invited to weddings” and perform the same auspicious ritual. The discursive process of the narrative consists in ascertaining forever the Pariṣ ’s right to the distinctive ‘honour,’ that is, the privileged social role of performing the wedding telavau ritual. The narrative is motivated by an attempt to construct the Pariṣ’s social entity and obtain a
lasting social recognition and appreciation of their function as saviours of lineages, in short a position of singular social distinction down the ages.

Two personal attributes of the Parīt woman contribute, moreover, to enhance the status and image of all the Parīts. First, she does not care for herself and her whole family, in contrast to the king. Her sole concern is her duty as a Parīt woman vested with divine powers over sudden death for the profit of the king’s lineage. But she is not concerned for the king’s welfare only. She is concerned with the welfare of all the lineages of all the families of the kingdom to be similarly protected by other Parīt women who shall perform the same ritual after her. She is consequently concerned in this respect with the effective protection of these other Parīt women from the revenge on them of the forces of death which she experienced herself. One may understand that she is not actually saving the king because he is a king, a powerful individual worth a particular attention of which the other citizens would not be equally the object, but because he is a human being to be saved from untimely and unjustified disaster. Her disinterestedness is explicitly stressed by the text when god himself expresses his astonishment at her refusing any compensation for herself, and when the king’s surprise echoes god’s astonishment.

Second, she obtains that her family comes back to life through her own penance as a merit personally earned, not as a reward or a gift for a service which was her duty an account of her capacity. The text gives her a status of assured autonomy as far as death and life are concerned. She is too free from what matters the most for those on earth: riches and prestige. She simply identifies with the divine power. She returns back home, beyond the seven oceans, as soon as her performance and her penance are over on this side of the world. She belongs in another realm.

Feudal Structural Differentiations

The inbuilt oppositions which have been stressed in Parīt-02 are, structurally speaking, given less prominence in Parīt-05. They only remain latent in the background, available for further possible variations and further re-appropriations of the same basic scenario. One is the opposition between a kṣatriya, a king with power, wealth, court and subjects, but impotent, unable to maintain his lineage and his kingdom on two occasions. His power and male ascendancy needs a Parīt woman to secure a lineage through his daughter. But this dependency is apparently not construed by the present textual version as a contest or a will to defiance, let alone a dream of reversal. It is placed within a feudal hierarchical order of faithful service and subordination rewarded by gifts and due public honour. This is clearly signified by the honour with which the Parīt woman is welcomed, and substantiated by the munificent generosity of the king who, when Somā returns home, pours gifts over his saviour, though she herself remains indifferent to them. This king’s generosity stresses his superior status, a status which is actually maintained and secured by the Parīt woman’s deed. The Parīt community finds satisfaction in being, since then, unavoidably invited to perform and treated in return with honour in all weddings. The
Parīṭ’s discourse is here seemingly not intended to challenge even indirectly the king’s power and status. The aim is on the contrary to insert oneself into a feudal order through performing a feat which gives legitimacy to that form of integration as a loyal subject in the whole dispensation, and moreover validates a claim of indispensability of that function to secure the safety of the whole order.

The ritual honour of the telavan performance compensates for the Parīṭ’s status of social subordination and service of the king. This narrative, as a number of other oral narratives, expresses and enhances the feudal system of relationship, which binds to one another, out of dedication, the subaltern to the superior, to the profit of the king as much as to the gratifying glory of his servant, the Parīṭ. It would be difficult to read the text in the present version as a process of reversal of values. Parīṭs expect the social honour of telavan as a ritual of recognition of their role as indispensable servants and lineage-saviours.

Among other latent elements which may suggest grounds for a further life of the text, is an implied vision of the universe as constituted by the differentiation of three spheres, namely, (i) the sphere of power on earth, constituency of the Kṣatriya; (ii) the sphere of knowledge, constituency of holy man, sādhu and Brāhmaṇ; and (iii) the sphere of divine power, of which in the present narrative, god is the actant as it was the goddess in Parīṭ-02, constituency of the supreme source of life. It is with that substantive domain that the Parīṭ woman is in touch by a mysterious congeniality (what the present text calls her ‘intuitive knowledge’) and by a direct control over it through penance.

Once again, as in Prt-02 this component of penance/merit, which is called by the mention of god being pleased and whose theological logic is a mechanistic and individualistic logic of reward for ritualistic or ascetic performances, differs from the initial logic of the text which is one of personal and natural affinity of the Parīṭ woman with the realm of supra-terrestrial powers. Soma’s efficient agency is of the nature of a qualitatively distinct and different ontological nature. It is not to be accounted for in terms of terrestrial and quantifiable transitive moral causality but of ontological status of mediator between forces of life and forces of destruction. Ultimately, this potent agency is an apodictic argument of ascendancy over Kṣatriya, sādhu and Brāhmaṇ alike, which brings the Parīṭ community a reflected glory. Eventually, if we focus on the aims of the narrative as a discursive performance, the merit for penance and congeniality to divine power perform the same function. What is significant is not the difference of signifiers but the same discursive function that various signifiers may perform. Conversely, the same signifiers may perform different functions. Signifiers are a matter of idioms and culture and not of discourse and substance.

Text10 of Parīṭ -10

Many years ago, a king was ruling over the earth. A king named Rukhmananda was reigning. He was very much fond of trees, flowers and fruits. He was maintaining a large garden in his palace. In this garden there were fragrant flowers and fruits.
Everyone was captivated by the sight. Once, god Indra, king of gods, was performing a puja. Flowers were needed for the puja. Indra ordered the gods to go and fetch flowers. Gods stole and took away flowers from the earth garden of king Rukmananda. The next day, Indra told the gods to bring again those very flowers. This happened every day with regularity. To that effect, gods were coming from heaven on earth with a subtle body. The servant of the king noticed that flowers were stolen. The king placed a guard on duty. He appointed a secret agent to spy. But the thief was not found. The reason is that gods were coming with a subtle body and going back once they had plucked the flowers.

Once at dawn, Jambali happened to pass along the garden. He was pleased at the sight of the whole environment full of fragrance. He made a pause but did not stop there. He entered the garden. He sat and entered into meditation under a tree. He was blissfully engrossed in his thoughts. He lost consciousness of time and place. A short while later, the servant of the king saw the Jambali. He thought that he had found the thief. He arrested the Jambali and brought him in front of the king. The king recognised Jambali. He was angry against his servant. The king begged the Jambali’s pardon. The Jambali inquired about the king’s difficulty. The king told the story of the theft of flowers from the garden. The king honoured the Jambali. The Jambali gave the king the roots of a particular herb and told him to burn them at dawn in the garden. “Your difficulty will be removed once the smoke spreads.”

The king did as directed. The king burnt the herbs at dawn in the garden. The smoke spread. Gods had entered the garden with their subtle and invisible body. But under the influence of the smoke they obtained back their terrestrial body. The weight of their body forbade them from going to heaven. What to do now? There, in heaven, Indra was ready to perform the gods’ worship. The Gods went to the court. They informed the king. They could not afford to be late for the puja. It was necessary for them to reach heaven with a subtle body. But how to obtain a subtle body? To that effect, the fruit of somebody’s merit was required. The king sent a crier in the town. “Listen! Oh! Listen! The fruit of merit is wanted for gods to obtain a subtle body. Whoever may possess such fruits of merit is requested to come to the king’s court.”

The king’s subjects were stunned when they heard the crier. The gods actually needed fruits of merit. Who can give this to them? Eventually, the wife of a Parīt came forward. The king brought her in front of the gods. She said: “Oh Gods! I have taken a vow during the month of MargaDṛṣṭa, on the eleventh day of the bright half. I am offering you this merit.” Thanks to the fruits of the merit of a Parīt woman, all the bodies were delivered from their weight. The Gods obtained their original subtle body. They happily travelled to heaven.

Analytical Elements

Subject: A Parīt woman gives up her merit to gods for them to resume their subtle body and reach heaven bringing flowers needed for gods’ worship.

Semantemes: King with palace, court, guard, messengers, pleasure garden & fragrant flowers, Indra & puja, gods moving with subtle body, theft of flowers, Jambali, magic smoke from herbs, meditating, merit of vow made on the eleventh day of bright half of MargaDṛṣṭa.

Theme: Outstanding religious feat of a Parīt woman Theme Index: Female Power

Process: A Parīt woman’s religious feat by securing gods’ worship earns a moral distinctive status for the Parīt.

Hermeneutic viewpoints:
- Profound dedication of a Parīt woman to gods’ service
- King is meant to uphold the supremacy of the divine worship and holy men
- Holding on gods reveals a unique superiority & secures a moral ascendancy

Logic mode: Ascendancy Consensus Hegemony Inversion

Cognitive forms: Dispensation-1 Accepted as Prescribed. Gender-3 Women’s Determinant Role. Identification-4 Symbolic Upgrading. Recognition-1 Social Distinctiveness. Supremacy-6 Religious Ascendancy

Themes and Interpretation

The Stake: Gods’ Worship or Supremacy

The narrative is clearly structured after the usual logic, which consists of devising stages which follow one another through discursive reversals, that is, raising obstacles and engineering crises to solve them and ultimately re-establish a situation conform to the initial status quo or prescribed dispensation. The prescribed status quo is here the everyday statutory performance of gods’ worship in heaven. Till then, no obstacle has put it in peril. The garden of Rukhmananda, king of the earth, is providing the most fragrant flowers that heaven needs the earth to provide for the pleasure of the gods. The ritual is, in fact, above all a visible sign of the allegiance of the earth to the gods’ transcendent supremacy. The gesture of flowers’ offering and the spatial differentiation of the spheres in which the actants move, display the perfect hierarchical linking of earth and heaven through the cooperation of their respective kings in a context of faithful subordination of the earth to heaven. This worship is subject to a minor obstacle only: the gods sent by their king, Indra, to go and fetch flowers on earth, cannot ply with their terrestrial body. Indra has, therefore, given them the appropriate subtle body. This is the discursive device of the narrative to stage a crisis. As the subtle body necessary for plying is invisible on earth, the suspicion of theft is bound to be raised. The king places guards to catch the thief. The gods’ subtle body allows them to escape their control and arrest. This however creates perilous circumstances.

The second act starts with the wrong arrest of a rṣṛ. This event as such does not signal any similar peril for the gods. Still, it is discursively staged to bring into the text the rṣṛ’s suggestion. The smoke from an herbal root is
effectively used to open a crisis: the gods are too heavy in their terrestrial body to fly to heaven and take the flowers that Indra needs to perform the worship. The latter is held up. The crisis was latent in the end situation of the first act: its solution is similarly latent in the situation discursively staged at the end of the second act. The gods in difficulty immediately go to the court where the king is expected to manage a way for them to be given on earth again their subtle body initially provided in heaven by Indra, the king of gods. The king is clearly told that the solution consists in finding the merit necessary to that effect.

The third act accordingly starts with the king sending his crier to ask for somebody capable of supplying the required merit. The people are stunned by the demand that they ought to provide merit to gods. The narrator underscores their strong astonishment and the crier’s inability to find a person with this merit, only to stress the extraordinary feat of a Parīt% woman. She is the only one with the capacity and generosity to provide the required fruits of merit for the gods to obtain on earth nothing less than a subtle body that only Indra could give them in heaven. The gods accordingly reach heaven as soon as the gift is made. The worship is then resumed with no hindrance. The situation normally prevailing at the start is duly re-established. One essential in-built connotation of the discursive structuration of the narrative is that of the absolute prominence of gods. This is signified by their worship having to be performed every day in heaven. That unsaid import is the most significant effect of the narrative. The latter makes sense and the necessity of its logic is compelling once we take for granted the necessity of such a worship and of the dispensation that it signifies.

**Merit, the Essential Actant**

If we focus no more on the discursive structuring necessity of the plot but on the actants, other in-built and no less significant significations may be conspicuously brought forward once we focus on the way their relations are patterned. Let us look first at the actants’ respective status. The two parallel kings of men on earth and gods in heaven are naturally dedicated to cooperate and act in unison for the sake of the overall dispensation of the universe, of which the king of gods is the keystone in heaven and the king of men the manager on earth. Rukhmananda never objects to gods plucking flowers or flowers being plucked for gods. In the first place, gods are not arrested. They are not thieves at all. The idea would not in the least occur to the mind of the author of the text that the guards should be staged as capturing the gods and bringing them to the king’s court as thieves. Such a discursive element could not in the least appear. What spontaneously comes to the author’s mind is rather that the order of things demands that gods resort to the assistance of the king as being the one who should by all means help them out effectively, by recovering their subtle body and bringing the flowers that they have plucked to heaven. The gods take for granted that the king is the one who can and must by all means manage to find the merit required
to that effect among his subjects. The same similarly occurs with the र्रज़: the king is angry against his guard arresting the holy man who seemingly has all the right to enter and enjoy the beauty of the garden as the scenery is facilitating his meditation. The king’s flowers are meant for gods and divine men. The king’s garden ultimately belongs to gods. The king’s duty is to uphold gods’ needs, rights and highest honour. He accordingly sends his crier to find somebody with the required merit. The king is on earth the dedicated and faithful servant managing on earth the interests of gods, that is, in the first place upholding their statutory position of domination from the heights of heaven.

The gods are the second decisive actants. Once we focus on their agency, that is, their effective capacity to act, one of their characteristic features appears to be their dependence on everyone else. They figure as the most subaltern agency, with the least possible degree of autonomy and the highest extent of impotency. They obtain their subtle body in heaven from Indra, the most powerful entity above them, and on earth, from a Parिष woman, apparently the most powerless entity in the universe. They also depend upon the king to find that woman with a merit capable of obliging them. In heaven, they are powerless in front of Indra who provides them with a subtle body and rules over them. On earth, they are meritless in front of human beings who may hold upon them through their merit. We cannot but conclude that ultimately merit is on earth the sole and essentially powerful substance capable of any agency. But gods from heaven are deprived of it.

The third actant, the र्रज़, appears here as the repository of secret insight and overall knowledge, and accordingly a source of more or less magic tricks, a ‘resource-person’ or a kind of ‘divine consultant,’ so to say. But not an agent worth the name. His outlook is defined by meditation, other-world consciousness, absence-mindedness as regards the usual faculty of human awareness.

Ultimately, the decisive agency on earth is the Parिष woman, the fourth crucial actant. Her central function in the process of narrative structuration is comparable to the role of her male counterpart in Parिष-01. She alone can actually resolve the crisis. The ground of her agency, a capacity to act with immediate efficiency, is her merit and not herself as a Parिष woman on the ground of ontological attributes as in Parिष-02. The key agent, the actant par excellence in the last instance is here merit. Merit only can perform what Indra’s power did at the start, that is, give a subtle body. In other words, that merit is of the same nature as Indra’s supreme power. We are brought back to the very same conclusion to which the discursive structuration of the drama took us, but now in terms of substance and agency, namely, the divine power is the sole substance and unique agency in the universe, whether in heaven as attribute of Indra or on earth as merit appropriated by human beings. In ontological terms, merit proves such a powerful agency because it partakes of the sole substance of the universe of which Indra, king of gods, is the manager.
The Pariṣṭ’s Culture Politics on Earth

The narrative is more than a text. It is an act of speech, a discourse of the Pariṣṭ. It is not by chance that only a Pariṣṭ woman is found on earth to be with such an amount of merit. The speaker constructed or produced the narrative as a discursive asset to serve aims of culture politics. His intent is to upgrade his Pariṣṭ community in the social hierarchy of status and value by staging a Pariṣṭ woman as partaking of the agency of Indra himself. On the one hand, the narrative is strongly and altogether entrenched in the most other-worldly dispensation which rules over the entire social fabric with the king as its guardian on earth. On the other hand, this flawless and total identification with, and acceptance of, that dispensation is used to serve another intention.

The narrative as a discourse is a claim not of reversal of an order that places the Pariṣṭ at the bottom, but of the highest gradation of the Pariṣṭ woman on the scale of social and religious values of that dispensation. The phraseology, the style and the immediate context are those of a narrator who is a varkar’. This explains the language, the semantemes and mythemes of his text. He resorts to the Brahmanic idioms available to him from the lectures that he heard from learned gurus. But the ultimate implication and intended aim of his narrative as acts of speech do not differ, in the last instance, from the other narratives. All of them are similarly discursively structured to mean and carry an attempt to explicitly upgrade the Pariṣṭ community in the world of men on earth through the very idioms and representations of the prescribed over-all dispensation that discriminates against them. Merit, the key agent, to be found available only with a Pariṣṭ woman, discursively performs the same function as the ontological potency of Somā, the mediator, in symbiotic congeniality to extra-terrestrial forces in the previous narratives Pariṣṭ-02 & 05.

Conclusion

The aim of this article is essentially to give a hint of a possible method, with examples showing the results that this method may yield. With regard to further questions of methods of interpretation, I would like to shortly point to three constitutive features of the kind of narratives which I study. These features are bound to bear upon any further hermeneutical attempts.

The first remark refers to the textual variants of similar and comparable discursive patterns. I purposively presented two such narratives to stress the point that our readings should, in such case, study each text for itself, focussing on the specific logic of discursive structuration of each one in particular, irrespective of the other variant. No question of one genuine version to be declared the initial and original text, which was later altered. Each narrative is to be considered as a full-fledged act of speech. Structuration is reason.

The comparison of variants is nevertheless enlightening for two reasons, which have nothing to do with establishing the authenticity of one against the other. First, it may reveal differential discursive intentionalities; all of them are to be given an equal cognitive status and importance. Second, it
may reveal similar functions performed by different or even opposite signifiers. What is significant is the discursive process of structuration, which is then highlighted, the variety of signifiers proving to be of cultural and idiomatic relevance only.

The second remark refers to the mode of articulation of statements. Some are explicit utterances while others are implicit assumptions. The latter are the unsaid. They generally refer to what is taken for granted as a matter of consensus to all, speaker and listeners. It is against this cognitive horizon that the narrative makes sense to all. For instance, in the four narratives herewith quoted, the assumption is that the social entity of a collective of people can be identified and constituted by four referential parameters: a god owned as one's particular deity; an occupation sanctioned by a transcendent authority; ritual functions, that is, social roles exclusively reserved; and singular, absolutely distinctive personality attributes calling for respect and prestige.

At the deepest level of conditions of significance, the implicit consists of a definite system of representations within which the text is inserted. This system is an aggregate of logically connected ideas, which, as a matrix of further symbolic formations, pre-determine, in a given society and at a given period of time, what can be possibly conceived, articulated, and understood, whether to be welcomed or rejected. It is a virtual, systemic, cognitive framework about the universe as a whole and the hierarchical ordering of its components. This system is not stated as such. It only shows up through the surface of the text, in the latter’s symbolic forms of all sorts — attitudes, conducts, constraints, concepts, narrative linking, logic modes, cognitive forms, hermeneutic insights, mythemes, etc. It is an inbuilt set of assumptions, which narratively reflects an overall dispensation.

This dispensation is internalised by all and prescribes the conduct of every one, whether speaker, listener or actant. It frames the fundamental and unescapable mindset of all of them. This frame not only commands modes of knowledge and cognitive forms; it also motivates the agency of the actants as the narrative structuration draws upon it. We may assume that each community thinks and acts according to a mindset more or less distinct from those of other communities, and that the corpus of all its narratives is the best symbolic repository in which that inbuilt system of representations outcrops. I would not like nevertheless to conclude this article by stating what this system is for the Parïts, as this would require an elaborate argumentation based on an acquaintance with the whole corpus of their narratives. I look forward to presenting it in the next article after an account of the remaining eight narratives of my set of Parït texts.

The third remark is to stress the ambivalence and ambiguity of the narratives as symbolic forms of expression and social communication. The narrative as a bundle of signifiers assembled to construct a tight series of happenings, can carry, on account of the principle of double significance (Benveniste 1974:64), which is the essential and specifically constitutive dimension of language as a human faculty, several un-said and possibly opposite significations for a listener and a reader. The whole narrative as a signifier potentially incorporates several meanings and justifies diverse readings. This is what makes room for two significant attempts.

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First, this opens up a way towards counter-cultural moves and power contests within the given structured framework itself. We have seen that a narrative may discursively function as a covert asset for cultural and social moves of counter-power, unavowed wishes of dissent or discontent. In this regard, a substantial corpus of narratives from one particular community may give a measure of the consent and/or dissent attitudes with which that community looks at its universe, that is, at the basic system of representations against which the narrative makes sense and on which ground only it can be constructed.

Secondly, this gives legitimacy to attempts of interpretation and appropriation by speakers and listeners from different contexts or with different queries, as for all of them the text is a pure text, that is, a text without context, that is, available to anyone. The initial speaker’s intention, and the context and audience he was addressing are irrevocably lost. The receiver, if he wishes to own up the narrative as a text which tells him something, may then freely choose and decide upon — he cannot indeed but do so — the meaning and truth of the text as per his own criteria of reading and the demands or expectations of his own context. The truth of the narrative lies now with the present reader. This attempt represents what we may legitimately call the possibilities of a further life for the text. The structure and cognitive status of that expanded life, that is, the conditions of legitimacy and validity of that hermeneutic attempt as a mode of understanding may possibly be spelt out in another submission.

Notes

2. “The double investigation conducted on the one hand by Hellenists on the history of the word muthos in the Ancient culture, and the difficulties met by anthropologists while trying to apply this notion borrowed from the Greeks to the traditional oral societies, warn us against the temptation of raising the myth to the status of a kind of mental reality built in the human nature and that one could find operating everywhere and always, either before the properly rational operations, or side by side or in their background.” (Vernant 1990:10).
3. This point of procedure and method justified by the state in which the oral narratives reach us is not only a matter of circumstantial constraint; it corresponds to an hermeneutical principle as well, namely, the inadequacy and fallacy of any historical objectivism in general, the distance in time and space being on the contrary the ground itself or the condition of possibility of hermeneutics (Gadamer 1960: 177-269, 296-305).
4. In this sense, what Gadamer (1960: 393-99) writes about the written tradition in which the language dimension, the very essence of tradition, reaches its full hermeneutical signification, applies to our oral narratives reaching us as autonomous text.
5. I may not give here for reason of space the tables that display this structuration, as they do not substantially add to our information; mainly their lessons are incorporated in my final comment ‘readings and insights,’ from which the reader will get a hint of them.


7. Source: The narrative was collected by Dattā Śinde, Size: Word#: 143, Character#: 946, Para#: 8. Comparative references: Parīt -05, Vadār -09


9. I purposively select this narrative, a variant on the pattern of Prt-02, for methodological reasons: despite the identity of the plot, the discursive intentionalities vary once we focus on the combination of the textual components. Whatever their similarities, the two acts of speech differ. This shows how each version should be analysed for itself. Here, structuration instead of comparison is reason.

10. Source: The narrative was collected by Sureś Kokāte, on May 5, 2000 from Shri Bābarō Śeku Wagh, Aurāḷā, tal. Kannad, dist. Aurangābād, 72; Character# 2387, Word# 355, Para# 14.

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