Representations of Nature in the South Indian Oral Narrative of Maṇṭēsvāmi

Towards a Holistic Worldview and the Conceptualization of "Ecosocial Ideals"

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Introduction: "Ecosocial Ideals," a Need for "Dalit Ecologies" and Vīraśaiva Worldview

In the light of the disastrous effects of climate change, pollution and environmental damage, which appear to disproportionally affect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged strata of the Indian population (Dalits and Adivasis),[1] there is a pressing need for what David Barnhill (2010) calls "ecosocial ideals". According to him, these ideals "concern speculations about positive alternatives to our contemporary problems, turning our attention to behaviours, values, ideologies, cultures and social structures that might constitute a wiser and healthier relationship with the earth and each other" (ibid.: 282, cited in Rangarajan 2014: 528). In this paper, we look at the principles that guide the interaction of Maṇṭēsvāmi's followers with and attitude towards nature as instances of such "ecosocial ideals". These appear to be inextricably linked with the religious and ethical ideals of Vīraśaiva belief. Vīraśaiva philosophy, for example, generally advertises a harmonious relationship between humans and all living beings, informed by respect for the divine creation and the knowledge that mankind depends on it to survive.

The idea of social and ecological harmony, together with "well-formulated dharmic [ethico-religious] injunctions for environmental protection" is already found in the ancient Indian concept of the "earth family (vasudhaiva kutumbakam)" that includes "all living beings in the universe as members" and in the Sanskrit *Arthaśāstras* (ca. 300 BCE), textbooks on economic, political and social strategies to obtain and ensure prosperity

1 Dalit (from Sanskrit *dalita* "broken", "crushed") refers to a member of the lowest castes in traditional Indian society, some of which were regarded as "untouchable" castes due to their members' occupation being viewed by the higher castes as (ritually) polluting. While the term Dalit is self-chosen, the official term is "Scheduled Caste". Similarly, tribal groups often call themselves Adivasis, or "earliest inhabitants", while administrative institutions categorize them as "Scheduled Tribes".

(ibid.: 528–529). Other classical texts, such as the pan-Indian epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, address the relationship between mankind, creation and the divine and "offer rich insights into the ethnoecology of the terrestrial ecosystems of India" (ibid.: 529) as well.[2] Oral literary and performative traditions also give us an idea of how this relationship can be conceptualized, namely, by emphasizing "the human-nature continuum", as reflected, for example, in the "creation myths and the way of life of tribal cultures" (Saraswati 1995: 4, cited in Rangarajan 2014: 520).[3] In this paper, the concept of the human-nature continuum is elucidated based on the analysis of selected text passages from the Maṇṭēsvāmi oral narrative, which reflect the world-view and way of life of the deity's devotees, who belong to the lower and ex-untouchable castes of the southern part of the Indian state of Karnataka.

However, in view of the production and publication of ecocritical research and literature in India, oral and folk literary traditions or, more generally, literary works by marginalized groups seem to have been largely overlooked (or ignored) by both Indian scholars and scholars from abroad. Indulata Prasad gives the example of Dalits, whose "knowledge has been omitted from the ecological canon" (2022: 99). She further points out that the reason for this omission is founded in the Indian caste system, which "shapes and mediates access to nature, knowledge of the environment, and environmental activism" (ibid: 100). Prasad, thus, calls for a caste-sensitive framework called "Dalit ecologies", which needs to include detailed studies and analyses of Dalit oral and literary traditions (ibid). Recently, though, scholars have finally taken up studying and "rereading such traditions to theorize Dalit relations with their environments, recognize them as key stakeholders in the environmental discourse, and address their ecological precarity" (ibid.).

Although the oral-performative tradition associated with the Vīraśaiva Saint Maṇṭēsvāmi is maintained by singers who belong to the wider Dalit community, the focus of this paper is not on the issues of caste in relation to environmental discourses and activism. Instead, it offers a glimpse into an alternative perspective of the relationship between man and nature, namely, one that overcomes the dichotomy between man/culture and nature, or subject and object, characteristic of the Western philosophical tradition. The Maṇṭēsvāmi tradition's ecocentric philosophy, as reflected in the narrative, is shaped by the devotees' intimate relationship with nature, as well as by the ethical and philosophical principles inherent in Vīraśaivism. This approach is inspired by the idea of ecocriticism being

2 Early Tamil literature (300 BCE–200 CE), called *sangam* literature, should be mentioned here as well. The poems pertaining to this classical South Indian genre can be divided into two categories, *akam* ("inner") and *puram* ("outer"). While *akam* poetry deals with "the inner world" of the people, with feelings and emotions, *puram* poetry addresses matters of the public domain, such as heroic deeds and battles. These two subgenres, in turn, can be divided into seven subcategories, called *tinai*, which are based on the landscape in which the poetry is set. Thus, Nirmal Selvamony comments that Tamil *sangam* poetry reflects a culture "deeply rooted in the soil" and "where place is the first principle of literary presentation" (2008: 153, cited in Rangarajan 2014: 529–530).

3 Baidyanath Saraswati further explains that "[t]he oral traditions of hunter-gatherers, fishers, farmers, and the pastoral transhuman envisage the seamless view of man and nature as an inseparable whole" (1995: 4, referenced in Rangarajan 2014: 520).

> a methodology that re-examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualisations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments. (Gersdorf and Mayer 2006: 10).

The focus in this paper is on the Maṇṭēsvāmi narrative tradition, thus, it is primarily concerned with the representations of nature within and through oral literary tradition. Therefore, my analysis is based on two Maṇṭēsvāmi texts: the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic as sung by Inkal Mahadevayya, edited by H. C. Bōraliṅgayya (1997) and a multiple narrator text edited by Ambaḷike Hiriyaṇṇa (2014).[4] While the first text is mostly only available in the Kannaḍa language, except for a few passages of different episodes published by C. N. Ramachandran (2007) and G. N. Devy (2012), the second text has been translated into English in its entirety (Hiriyanna and Bhat 2014). In particular, two passages from the texts: the *Creation Myth* and the *Kalinga Cave Episode*, are taken up for a detailed study, discussing the following questions: How is the creation of the universe and the relational web between man, nature and the divine or spiritual conceptualized in the narrative? Why do certain animal species get singled out in the creation process and why do they play such a significant role in the episode set in the Kalinga Cave? Or, more generally, in which ways and to which purpose is nature imagery used in the Maṇṭēsvāmi oral epic? What kind of stylistic devices and aesthetical means are employed? Does the text invite the reader (or, rather, the audience) to put the ethical ideas and morals it addresses into practice, particularly where the interaction of humans and nature is concerned?

In order to understand the character and uniqueness of the Maṇṭēsvāmi oral-performative tradition better, here is some information on its socio-cultural and religious background. The tradition is native to the remote, hilly, forest-covered southern part of Karnataka, traditionally inhabited by hunter-gatherer and shepherd communities, as well as by communities practicing (shifting) cultivation. It has evolved around the worship of the young Vīraśaiva Saint Maṇṭēsvāmi,[5] who presumably lived at the close of the 15th century, yet, he and his teachings are very popular up to this day. Vīraśaivas are especially fervent devotees of Śiva, who is one of the highest gods of the Hindu pantheon. Vīraśaivism is a reform movement, which is said to have been founded by Basava in the 12th century. In essence, Basava promoted a just and egalitarian society as well as harmony on earth through the Vīraśaiva doctrine. Maṇṭēsvāmi lived around three hundred years later than Basava and is regarded as a reviver of Basava's ideals of early Vīraśaivism. Even more, he harshly criticized that Vīraśaiva morals had been corrupted and contemporary society had adopted the hierarchical structures it had once rejected so rigorously. He is believed to have been low-born himself, thus, it is no surprise that he spread his

4 Both texts have been collected as part of an attempt to preserve the oral tradition before it might become extinct. As a result, several renditions of the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic by different performers (individual singers and groups of singers) have been documented on audio- and/or videotape, a few of which have been put into writing and published.

5 *Maṇṭe* means "small mountain" or "hillock" in Kannaḍa, the official language of Karnataka state. The word *svāmi*, in turn, is an honorific term of address, denoting respect towards the addressed, often a religious leader.

teachings primarily among groups that have been marginalized both socially and spatially, such as Dalits and Adivasis. Maṇṭēsvāmi's teachings are based on Vīraśaiva doctrine, but have been adapted to the lifestyle of his followers, characterized, among others, by manual work, community spirit, meat-eating and vestiges of animism. In other words, he has established his own branch, or sect, within Vīraśaivism.

Maṇṭēsvāmi's birth, his wanderings, struggles and miraculous deeds, as well as his retreat from the world are told in an oral epic named after him. An important role in maintaining this narrative tradition is played by the Nīlagāras, professional singers initiated into the oral-performative worship tradition associated with Maṇṭēsvāmi. They sing the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic as part of night-time rituals, temple festivals, life-cycle ceremonies and on their alms walks.[6] However, the Nīlagāra tradition has been disappearing in recent decades as it is no longer a means of winning a livelihood for the singers: Their art and devotion is less and less appreciated by the devotees of Maṇṭēsvāmi, whose understanding of this aspect of the worship tradition seems to have diminished. With the decline of this particular oral-performative tradition, which also functions as a cultural memory, the Nīlagāras' knowledge of the local flora and fauna and their world-view represented in and through the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic is being lost as well. It is at this world-view and its underlying Vīraśaiva cosmology that we take a closer look in the following analysis of the creation myth.

The Creation Myth: A Representation of Vīraśaiva Cosmology

According to the genesis portion of the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic as sung by Inkal Mahadevayya, in the beginning, there is only light. This "supreme light" (*parañjyōti*) is then equated with Maṇṭēsvāmi. Thus, in the opening canto, and throughout the entire narrative, the motif of light is used repetitively. Maṇṭēsvāmi, for instance, is referred to as "the supreme light", the "light of the Netherworld" and "light of the world" in the first chapter. Maṇṭēsvāmi, in turn, is identified as the creator of the universe. He makes both an earth and a sky: the earth, with plants and trees, will be the world of his (human) children and the sky will be the world of gods (Ramachandran 2007: 48–52). Next, Maṇṭēsvāmi brings into being several deities, both male and female, whom he also calls his children (ibid.: 53, 59, 61, 63, 71–74). Among them is a daughter, Vidiyamma, who acts as a female creator: She makes "all kinds of animals" and, subsequently, creates hundreds of female and male "dolls" (ibid.: 75). The use of the word "doll" suggests that human beings possess only limited agency, as they are controlled by and dependent on the divine will. Nevertheless, they are an important part of the divine creation, but so are trees and plants, for example, on which humans depend for food, as stated by Maṇṭēsvāmi: "Let the plants and trees […], born on this earth, let them provide food for the children I have begotten" (ibid.: 51). This description of the creation process correlates with the assumption that in prophetic monotheism, in our example, Śaivism, animals are usually created for the benefit and

6 Groups of Nīlagāras walk from house to house on designated days of the week, singing selected episodes from the epic of Maṇṭēsvāmi, begging for alms, which they usually receive in the form of natural produce. In return, they offer the blessing of Maṇṭēsvāmi.

continuity of human beings (Chapple 2018). Nonetheless, "[t]here is a recognition in Hinduism that nonhuman forms of life also are expressions of divinity and that in the hierarchy of beings there are animals not only below us but also above us, on earth and in divine worlds" (Jacobsen 2018b). Some animals, for example, are worshipped in India both as a live animal and in iconographic form. One of these animals is the snake (*nāga*), and more specifically, the cobra, which occupies a significant place in Indian mythology, folklore and religious practices, but also in the realm of divine beings:

> Snakes are particularly worshipped by women who desire children since snakes are connected to fertility. Since nāgas are associated with anthills and trees, these places also become centers for snake worship. Snakes are worshipped for their power and protection, for fertility and healing of disease, but snakes have a dual nature. They are benevolent and when treated properly protect the family and give fertility. But if not propitiated properly, they become dangerous. (ibid.)

It is the snake's association with anthills and trees, and implicitly with meditation and ascetic practices, as well as its dual nature that is of interest to us later, in the context of the analysis of the Kalinga Cave Episode. As per the narrative, Vidiyamma continues to create "hundreds of scorpions" and "hundreds of snakes", as well as "ants and chameleons, insects and worms" (Ramachandran 2007: 75). It is noteworthy that these specific animals are singled out in the creation process. The animals just mentioned are rather ambivalent beings, as they are usually associated with danger, demise and death, but also with fertility (especially the snake).

While the ambiguous nature of the snake has just been discussed, I would also like to draw attention to the fact that snakes, scorpions, ants, chameleons, insects and worms are associated with the notion of liminality. These wild creatures are not only found in what we could call liminal spaces, such as forest borders (neither village nor forest and jungle), caves (simultaneously on the ground level and beneath the surface, offering protection but also leading into the unknown) and dying matter (neither dead, nor fully alive). But, more importantly, all of them undergo a kind of metamorphosis at some point of their lives: they transition from one state of being to another, a stage marked by liminality and ambiguity. Snakes and scorpions, for example, shed their skin, insects pupate and re-emerge in another form and chameleons are able to change their colour according to their surroundings. Analogous to an animal undergoing a metamorphosis, in Vīraśaivism, the devotees, especially the spiritual leaders (*svāmi*s), go through different stages on their spiritual journey to become a liberated soul, passing through phases of liminality as well. We will discuss the issue of liminality and ritual transformation in detail once we turn to the study of the Kalinga Cave Episode below.

Coming back to the question of the relationship between man and creation, Maṇṭēsvāmi claims that "among all creatures, the noblest of all is man; the highest on earth […] is this creature called Man" (ibid.: 80). Although human beings are presented as superior to most other beings, they are, nevertheless, merely one entity among many within the relational web of creation. Humans, for instance, depend on various elements of the environment (e.g. clean air, potable water, arable land and woods) for survival. So, ideally, they should protect nature and its resources. It is their moral duty

as well as a sign of respect and devotion not to damage divine creation. This practice of non-injury or non-violence towards all living beings, be they humans, plants or animals, in Indian religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, is known as *ahiṃsā*.[7] The ethical principle of *ahiṃsā* and the concept of rebirth in Indian religions, which includes the belief that humans have been animals in past lives, have shaped the relationship between humankind and nature to the effect that many orthodox Hindus, Buddhists and Jainsare vegetarians and practice *ahiṃsā* as best as they can in daily life, or, at least, adopt an attitude of empathy towards all living beings (Chapple 2018). There is a scene in the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic that illustrates this ethical concept of *ahiṃsā* particularly well: the saint and his disciples are on a walk and realize that the cloth bags they carry around with them to collect alms, called *śivakante*, have become dirty and need to be cleaned. Maṇṭēsvāmi advises the washerman:

> The living beings like lice or their eggs should not lose their lives in the process. […] The *Śivakante* is not to be dipped in water, not to be thrashed on stone, not to be boiled in steam. Not a single living being that might be sheltered in it should be hurt in the process of cleaning it. (Hiriyanna and Bhat 2014: 102)

Although this incident is a test for the washerman and clearly possesses a ritual dimension, it reminds the audience of the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic's oral performance that every life is precious, that each and every living being has its place and purpose within the framework of divine creation and should not be harmed, either on purpose or due to carelessness. Thus, the Maṇṭēsvāmi narrative illustrates the ideal of a harmonious coexistence with all the creatures on earth. This trope is carried forth in the Kalinga Cave Episode.

The Kalinga Cave Episode: Illustrating a Vīraśaiva's Spiritual Journey

In the Kalinga Cave Episode, the plot shifts its focus – as suggested by the title – to a remote and eerie cave far away from all civilization. Maṇṭēsvāmi decides to teach the community of smiths, who have accepted neither his authority nor his teachings, a lesson: he abducts the seven-year-old son of an arrogant and wealthy ironsmith and imprisons him in a dark cave, together with various dangerous animals. The young boy called Kempācāri

7 The word *ahiṃsā* derives from the Sanskrit root *hiṃs* "to injure", "to harm", "to kill" or "to destroy", in combination with the negative particle "a", together meaning "noninjury" (Jacobsen 2018a). It appears that the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* emerged in the first millennium BCE as a reaction to and "critique of the vedic animal sacrifice (yajña)", thus, originally being "a criticism not of war but of violence against animals" (Jacobsen 2018a). For this reason, *ahiṃsā* is often associated, or even equated, with vegetarianism. However, Anna Scarabel (2020) opines in her study of the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* that, in terms of diet, the principle of *ahiṃsā* does not apply to different social groups in the same way: those following the spiritual path to liberation (e.g. ascetics) should observe a strictly vegetarian diet, while those leading an active life (e.g. warriors) could also eat meat. Maṇṭēsvāmis' low-caste and very active followers also eat meat, as it is more easily accessible, affordable and nourishing than plant-based foods. In this paper, then, the term *ahiṃsā* is used in the sense of non-violent practices in general and an attitude of empathy towards all living beings.

or Kempaṇṇa is held in there for twelve years and finally re-emerges as an enlightened man, as Siddappāji, who later becomes Maṇṭēsvāmi's successor. In the beginning, however, Maṇṭēsvāmi is not sure whether the tender boy will survive, as the following citation shows:

> The Light of the World, Light of the Heavens,
> Light of the Depths,
> Elder of the Earth
> Looks at Kalinga Cave.
> Can't figure out if son Kempanna's inside;
> Doesn't know if he is dead.
> Left the child captive to snakes, captive to scorpions,
> Left him to be tormented by killer scorpions.
> Can't find him; what use calling out to a dead son? (Devy 2012: 65)

Indeed, the inhospitable cave reminds us of a grave or netherworld where unfathomable creatures dwell. Among these creatures, scorpions and cobras, or *nāgas*, feature most prominently. Cobras are connected to water in Indian mythology and common belief, be it in the form of rain, a lake, a river – or "the dark, creative, cosmic waters of the underworld" (Jacobsen 2018b). The cobra is a poisonous snake, therefore, it also "represents danger and power over life and death" (ibid.). The other animals mentioned in the quotation can also bring death. Even if they did not attack and kill the young man, the knowledge and anticipation that they could is a form of torture in itself. Altogether, the atmosphere created in this passage by using the image of a dark and dangerous cave, stands in marked contrast to the image of the divine light, symbolizing creativity, hope and true knowledge, evoked in the creation myth.

Kempācāri, who has grown up sheltered until the day of his violent kidnapping, is probably confronted with his own mortality for the first time and – understandably – does not know how to cope with it. He lies there, in the cave, lamenting:

> I toss to the left –
> the cobra torments me.
> I turn to the right –
> the python torments me.
> God! I lie in the middle –
> the killer scorpion torments me.
> Can't bear this captivity. (Devy 2012: 65)

As illustrated by this quotation, the helpless, possibly even immobilized, Kempācāri cannot escape his captivity and the danger to which he is exposed. There is literally no place to which he can turn for safety, which makes him doubt his own survival. Finally, he seems to realize that he is at Maṇṭēsvāmi's mercy and that his only hope is to put his faith in Maṇṭēsvāmi. He, thus, pleads to the saint to end his torture, but the ordeal seems to go on endlessly, with the passing of time being creatively depicted with the help of nature imagery:

On his temples
Grow *matti* trees.[8]
On the little one's forehead, son,
Grow *bhasumanga* trees.
In his two eyes
Wasps breed.
In his nose
Grow *muguthas* trees.
In his mouth, O God!
Grows an anthill.
On his shoulders
Grow *buruga* trees.
On his back
Grow *bilpatre* trees.[9]
Under his arms
Bees build hives.
Huge bees, child;
Little bees.
Inside his heart's nest
Cobras make children.
In his navel, child,
A pipal tree[10] is born.
In his palms
Grow *angalinga* trees.
On his feet
Grow *padarakshi* trees. (ibid.: 66–67)

Apart from marking the passage of time, the imagery suggests that Kempācāri has surrendered to his fate, as he remains in a meditative state, letting nature slowly take over. The image of nature taking over Kempācāri's body, using it as a shelter and a sort of breeding ground for some species, thus, integrating it in the natural processes of growth and abundance, indicates that the young man has been claimed by nature. In this context, the pipal tree growing from his navel is an especially powerful image: Just as a foetus in the womb is connected to its mother by the umbilical cord, Kempācāri seems to be connected to nature (or "mother Earth" to stay in the metaphor) through the pipal tree, which is considered sacred by Hindus and is, thus, part of different worship traditions.[11]

The image of Kempaṇṇa slowly becoming one with nature, having lost himself in it, vividly represents the essence of the philosophical system of *advaita*, and more specifically of *śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita* in the context of Vīraśaivism: the term denotes "a scheme of

8 Bot. *terminalia elliptica*.

9 Bot. *aegle marmelos*.

10 Bot. *ficus religiosa*.

11 I am grateful to Saigeetha Hegde for sharing her thoughts on this imagery. Furthermore, the pipal tree is associated with meditation and asceticism, as holy men (*sadhus*) tend to meditate beneath this particular tree. This observation complies with the fact that Śiva is often depicted as an omniscient yogi who leads an ascetic lifestyle on the sacred Mount Kailash and the Maṇṭēsvāmi tradition is essentially a Śaiva tradition with aspects of asceticism.

ultimate nondualism but with differentiation in the realm of active phenomena, or 'energy qualified monism'" (Michael 2018). While followers of other forms of Śiva worship believe that the world is merely an illusion (*māyā*), Vīraśaivas "insist that the energized world (*śakti*) of manifest forms and names is real but only insofar as it is rooted in the nature of Śiva" (ibid.). In other words, the world of nature, and every single being in it, is real and ultimately one with Śiva, as it is "the real energy of Śiva," according to Michael (ibid.). The belief of everything there is ultimately being the energy of Śiva fits well with the ethical concept of non-violence or *ahiṃsā*: by practicing *ahiṃsā*, Vīraśaivas demonstrate that they recognize the divine energy, God Śiva, in every living being.

It is the goal of every "true" follower of Vīraśaivism to eventually achieve "a state of 'oneness' (*aikya*)" with Śiva by transcending distinction and identifying with him (ibid.). The importance of the spiritual journey of an individual soul is expressed in the *ṣaṭsthala* scheme, which traces the six (*ṣaṭ*) stages or steps (*sthala*) on the way to spiritual attainment. This "most important philosophical scheme" of the Vīraśaiva movement "is firmly based in the practical realm of devotion and spiritual development" (ibid.). And, indeed, it is a spiritual development and profound transformation that Kempācāri undergoes in Kalinga cave.

In the course of time, Kempācāri completely relinquishes his former identity, focusing all thought on Maṇṭēsvāmi, as becomes apparent by his inner monologue:

> Don't know when the master's feet
> Will appear, Kempanna thinks.
> Hugging the python, he prays;
> 'I have no one but you.'
> Forgets his mother,
> Forgets his father.
> Forgets his brothers.
> My darling
> Forgets his hut,
> Cowshed, sheep,
> Bullocks, buffaloes;
> Renounces the twelve-lakh [1,200,000] fortune
> That awaits him in his house.
> Ayya, Elder of the Earth [Maṇṭēsvāmi],
> You are my only hope, says he. (Devy 2012: 68)

In captivity, Kempācāri has learned to cope with the agony and the possibility of a premature death. He has totally accepted whatever his fate may be, which is spectacularly captured in the metaphor of "hugging the python". In contrast to the poisonous cobra that has been repetitively mentioned previously, the python is a constrictor and the image of the young man hugging the python might mirror such a snake strangling its prey, suggesting that Kempaṇṇa is able to control his fears, emotions and desires. He has learned to overcome them by meditating on and putting his faith in Maṇṭēsvāmi. Like a snake shedding its skin, Kempācāri has also left his old self behind and undergone a sort of metamorphosis. Interestingly, in Indian folklore, a snake leaving behind its skin symbolizes "longevity or immortality, and it is a simile of mokṣa (liberation) and of the way one

who is liberated leaves evil behind" (Vogel 1926, cited in Jacobsen 2018b). Indeed, Kampachari has severed all his material and emotional bonds with the physical world beyond the cave and all his worldly desires seem to have dissolved. He has learned to completely relinquish his ego through suffering and meditation. Even more, he seems to have found liberation by becoming a fervent devotee of Maṇṭēsvāmi (i.e. Śiva) and experiencing oneness with him.

The transformation or spiritual journey Kempācāri has undergone is completed with him being "reborn" as Siddappāji, as the following words by Maṇṭēsvāmi show:

> May the name your parents gave you
> Cease in that dungeon this moment.
> May the name of Kempachari
> Perish this very day. […]
> Siddappaji, Siddappaji,
> Get up and come, says he. (Devy 2012: 74)

By giving up his old name and identity, Kempācāri has symbolically died in the cave and been reborn as a new and reformed man, as implied by his new name, Siddappāji.[12] Even more, his new name points to Kempācāri having completed his spiritual development and, in the last and sixth stage of the *ṣaṭsthala* scheme, attained oneness with Śiva, as the Sanskrit word *siddhi* signifies "perfection", "completion" or "complete attainment". The development the young man is going through is marked by a long period of liminality, of him being in a state of "in-betweenness". His story might remind us of an animal undergoing a metamorphosis or a person undergoing a time of transition in their life.

The different stages of an individual's transformative period in their social life have been described by Arnold van Gennep (1960) in his famous theory of the rites of passage. According to this theory, there are three stages: separation, liminality and incorporation, each of which is associated with special acts and places. It is the second or liminal stage, that is of interest to us in the context of the Kalinga Cave Episode. In this phase,

> individuals or groups transition from one established category or status in society to another by separating from their previous social identity, experiencing the liminal period when they were neither the identity that they formerly held nor the new identity that they will transition to, and then incorporating or aggregating into their new identity as they re-enter society. (Banfield 2022: 611)

12 Kempācāri's captivity and transformation "is a variation of the very old myth of Valmiki, the first Sanskrit poet who wrote Ramayana", according to C. N. Ramachandran (2004). He writes: "It is said that Valmiki was initially a hunter, who, after being advised by divine sages, meditated for long in the name of Rama. He was so preoccupied in his meditation that an anthill grew around him; and after 12 years he came out of the anthill as a sage-poet" (ibid.). The name Valmiki goes back to the Sanskrit word *valmika* "anthill". Maṇṭēsvāmi and Siddappāji are both believed to be incarnations of Śiva by their followers and it is said that they also manifest themselves in anthills from time to time, demanding to be worshipped by the people.

Or, in other words, individuals who find themselves in this particular stage in a rite of passage "are neither what they used to be nor are they what they will", but, simultaneously, they are both of these things and neither of those things, as well as a "blending of those two things into a third (as in a hybrid)" (ibid.: 611, 613). Liminal experiences and statuses are, thus, often associated with notions of transition, in-betweenness, indeterminacy and ambiguity.

Applying van Gennep's three-fold theory to the text, Kempācāri's abduction relates to the first stage, separation, the leaving behind of his familiar surroundings and social context. The creatures witnessing – or perhaps even assisting – his transformation from an ordinary human being to an enlightened man and later a spiritual leader himself, are all animal species which could be described as liminal beings (as discussed above). Their undergoing a metamorphosis at some point in their life might be read as an analogy to Kempācāri undergoing such a transformation as well, spending the liminal stage of his personal rite of passage in the Kalinga cave. In the cave, he is no longer Kempācāri, the son of a wealthy ironsmith, but, at the same time, he is not yet Siddappāji, an enlightened, "a great soul". However, once he realizes that the purpose of his existence lies in the devotion and service to Maṇṭēsvāmi, he is freed from his prison and initiated into the fold of the Vīraśaiva sect founded by Maṇṭēsvāmi, thus, integrating his new identity and re-entering society or, in this particular case, an ascetic order. He eventually becomes the saint's successor and is remembered and worshipped by thousands of devotees during an annual festival held in his honour in the village of Chikkalluru up to this day.

Conclusion: *Śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita* Philosophy as a Model for Overcoming the "Otherness" of Nature and an Inspiration for Ecosocial Ideals

As we have seen, nature imagery is used in the Maṇṭēsvāmi epic to create certain moods and ambiences and evoke specific emotions. Moreover, it is used to represent Vīraśaiva cosmology as well as the complex ethical and philosophical principles pertaining to Vīraśaivism's belief and value system. Regarding the use of nature metaphors, consider, for example, the use of light imagery throughout the oral narrative: in the creation myth, Maṇṭēsvāmi is established as the all-powerful creator and, in turn, equated with light, which is the origin and basis of all other creations. Time and again, he is referred to as "the supreme light". In the Kalinga Cave Episode, however, the mood shifts from one of light, creativity and prosperity to one of fear and terror by evoking images of a dark and grave-like cave inhabited by potentially deadly animals. The dramatic effect is even enhanced by taking over the perspectives of Maṇṭēsvāmi and Kempācāri, which is marked by a change from third- to first-person narration. Once Kempācāri has completed his transformation, he removes the boulder blocking the cave's entrance with the help of the superhuman powers he has gained during his captivity and light streams in, reflecting his journey from the darkness of ignorance to the light of true knowledge.

Regarding the cosmology represented in and through the Maṇṭēsvāmi oral epic, we have learned that it is hierarchical: man is depicted as the noblest creature of all, with animals and plants having been created for his benefit. Yet, at the same time, he is de-

pendent on nature and divine grace for his well-being and survival. From a holistic – and idealistic – point of view, then, it would be in humanity's own interest to protect nature in order to guarantee its continuity. In addition, some animals, such as the cobra, are worshipped as deities and, thus, stand above human beings in the cosmic hierarchy. More importantly, we have discussed the concept and practice of *ahiṃsā*, or non-violence, towards all beings in various Indian religious traditions and how this principle might be realized in everyday practices. The practice of *ahiṃsā* can be regarded as an "ecosocial ideal", as it calls for empathy towards all living beings and, ideally, their protection or non-injury, acknowledging their capacity for suffering.

Furthermore, using the example of specific animal species that have been singled out in the creation process according to the narrative, the concept of liminality, as one of the stages in van Gennep's theory of the rites of passage, has been discussed in detail. More importantly, the process of Kempācāri becoming a *siddha* in the Kalinga cave by giving up his human self and desires, as well as his former faith, is captured strikingly in the image of becoming one with nature. It is also a metaphor for Kempācāri becoming one with Śiva, thus, reaching the sixth and last stage in Vīraśaivism's philosophical scheme of *śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita*, the six stages of becoming a liberated soul, the goal of every "true" Vīraśaiva. According to *śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita* philosophy, the world of nature is "the real energy of Śiva". Therefore, the protection of nature constitutes an act of devotion and, vice versa, the exploitation and destruction of nature is an offence and an obstruction on the path to liberation. Another significant aspect in this context is the abandonment of one's ego, pride and greed. On the one hand, this could alleviate one's anthropocentric perspective in favour of a more ecocentric view, in which nature embodies the divine. On the other hand, this could lead to adopting a simpler, less consumerist, lifestyle, thereby reducing one's ecological footprint. From the Vīraśaiva point of view, then, the economical use of resources and the protection of nature are an "ecosocial" and religious ideal. This view also fits well with the rather ecocentric lifestyle of the social groups that worship Maṇṭēsvāmi, such as tribals, shepherds and agricultural labourers, who possess an intimate knowledge of the local flora and fauna and the intricate relational web between human beings and nature.

Moreover, these groups perceive of this relationship as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Thus, in contrast to the Western philosophical tradition, nature is not seen as the "other" of man, and there does not seem to be a need to either reconcile or delineate the two. Thomas Claviez, for example, acknowledges that other (earlier or contemporary) cultures are "informed by a mythical, or mythopoetic, world-view, [and] rather emphasize aspects that connect humans and non-humans in a holistic, if hierarchized, cosmology" (2006: 437). He argues that it might be exactly such "a pre- or non-scientific perspective on the relation between man and nature" (ibid.) that could provide "the moral-philosophical framework" on which the ethical demand for the preservation of nature can be based (ibid.: 435). It is exactly such a holistic and – from the perspective of Western scholarship – alternative, world-view that the cosmology and *śaktiviśiṣṭādvaita* philosophy represented in the Maṇṭēsvāmi narrative tradition provides. Furthermore, the tradition may inspire a more environmentally friendly lifestyle, based on principles such as *ahiṃsā*, which could be interpreted in terms of an "ecosocial ideal". The Nīlagāras ensure that the democratic and ethical principles underlying the worship tradition of Maṇṭēsvāmi

are actually practiced and that everybody, regardless of caste, class, religion or gender, can learn about (and act upon) the religious and (eco)social ideals of Vīraśaivism.

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