Elements of Animate and Inanimate Nature in the Practice of *Avadhāna*

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the practice of *avadhāna*, which is based on highly developed cognitive skills (ability to concentrate, memory) and showcasing of manifold strengths and knowledge during partially improvised spectacles. Various challenges to be met involve the elements of animate and inanimate nature. The main purpose of the article is to investigate the occurrence of these components and their role in the *avadhāna*, as well as to examine the possible sources of specialised knowledge in equinology (*aśvaśāstra*), elephant lore (*gajaśāstra*) and visual poetry (*citrakāvya*) required from the *avadhāna* performers.

Keywords: *avadhāna*, nature, performance, *citrakāvya*, attention

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1. Introduction

The *avadhāna*, or – as it can be referred to – the art of attentiveness, is still understudied and relatively mysterious.[1] Even though the origin of the practice is not the main focus of the present paper, it is relevant to refer,

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[1] Even though the *avadhāna* can be dated at least to the 12th–13th century and is still practiced today, it has remained outside of academic interest for a long time. The most comprehensive work on the topic appears to be the *Kannaḍadalli Avadhānakale* [*The Art of Avadhāna in Kannada*] by R. Ganesh, a contemporary practitioner of the art. Recently, the revised version of the *Kannaḍadalli Avadhānakale*, authored by Ganesh and Kiran 2020, has been published in English as *The Art and Science of Avadhānam in Sanskrit*. The work is an important source on the practice of *avadhāna*. Nevertheless, it focuses on the literary form of the art of attentiveness, mentioning the other types only briefly. It studies the *avadhāna* from the point of view of a performer, offering a valuable insight into practical aspects of the practice. A reader interested in the general description of *avadhāna* and the features of the art beyond the scope of the present study (including the origin of *avadhāna*, epigraphic evidences or the study of *avadhāna* in the context of categories of ritual and performance) may refer to the recent articles devoted to the subject, such as Sudyka and Galewicz 2012; Cielas 2017, 2020.

at least briefly, to its beginnings. The *avadhāna* originated probably as a literary performative art influenced by several pre-existing practices. The art of attentiveness understood as showcasing poetic talents and cognitive capacities in the form of fulfilling manifold tasks during partially improvised performances flourished the most probably at the Indian courts. The poets who sought for the royal approval and recognition went through the examination inspired by the tradition of composing extemporised poetry, solving literary puzzles, and competing during the *kavigoṣṭhī*s, 'the assemblies of poets'. The idea of organising the meeting of poets at the court is not the only one behind the origin of *avadhāna*. Solving riddles or puzzles played an important role also in the so-called *brahmodya*s ('*brahman* utterance') long before it became a component of the art of attentiveness. The *brahmodya* can be characterised as '(…) a ritualised verbal contest involving a formulaic interrogation sequence posed by one priest and an equally formulaic response on the part of a rival' (THOMPSON 1997: 13). An exchange of questions and answers with a strong competitive component is a principal incorporated also in the *avadhāna*. The most similar to the tradition of *brahmodya* appears to be the *vedāvadhāna*, where scholars recite the Vedas from memory in accordance with various modes of recitation, collectively known as the *vikṛtipāṭha*s, and exhibit other skills. The *pāṭha*s were developed for the sake of memorising the Vedas, independently from the *avadhāna* and much earlier than the art of attentiveness originated. Even though the Vedic scholars are often addressed reverentially as the *vedāvadhānī*s,[2] a proper Vedic *avadhāna* performance consists of not only the recitation of *vikṛtipāṭha*s but includes other elements.[3]

    The art of attentiveness did not originate at once, it is a result of many practices combined. Through the centuries it incorporated various elements of Indian culture. The well-known symbols, the everyday objects or traditions characteristic for the Indian subcontinent became tools in the process of examining skills displayed by the *avadhānī*s. The art of attentiveness is far from being homogenous. It is practised all over India, in many languages, like Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, etc. In some places, for example in Karnataka or Andhra Pradesh, it became more popular than in the others, but it has never been limited to one area only. During performances, in front of the audience, the practitioners fulfil their tasks involving many fields of science or

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[2]   The *avadhānī*, 'the one who possesses concentration' is a practitioner of the *avadhāna*. A female practitioner is called *avadhāninī*. Analogically, an exponent of the *vedāvadhāna* is known as the *vedāvadhānī*, etc.

[3]   Among them one can find, for example, specifying a number of phonemes, syllables, words or the accents in a given hymn or the whole Veda, reciting a hymn with the addition of the syllable *ūṃ* before each word, and alike.

artistic skills, at times engaging exceptionally developed senses and specialised knowledge. The tasks are set by the questioners (*pṛcchaka*s). In the course of the trial, the performers are not allowed to take notes. The key prerequisite of the *avadhānī* is an extraordinary ability to concentrate – the factor joining all of the types of the art.

The abilities showcased by the *avadhānī*s and the types of the art can be divided into three categories: mnemonic, technical, and artistic. In the first one, the pivotal component is memorisation. The difficulty lies in the number of elements to remember. The mnemonic formula of *avadhāna* is characteristic especially for the Jain tradition. The second group of attentive skills includes technical abilities. Here, the *avadhānī*s complete the tasks that require certain erudition, knowledge of codes and the above-average development of senses gained through the extraordinary concentration and *dhairya* – steadiness, self-control and intellectual vigour. The notable kinds of the technical *avadhāna* are the *tṛṇāvadhāna*, 'the blade of grass *avadhāna*', the *netrāvadhāna*, 'the ocular *avadhāna*', and the *aṅguṣṭhāvadhāna* 'the thumb *avadhāna*', to be described in the following part of the present study. In the third category of the practice, artistic expression is a clue component. The *avadhānī*s have to be characterised not only by all the qualities enumerated before but also by the *pratibhā*, imagination, the spark of talent and creativity. The paradigmatic artistic kind of *avadhāna* is the *sāhityāvadhāna*, 'the literary *avadhāna*'. To this group belong also the theatrical *nāṭyāvadhāna* and the *citrāvadhāna* focusing on painting. Throughout the artistic *avadhāna,* the *avadhānī* gradually creates pieces of art (depending on the type it can be poems, theatrical etudes, paintings, etc.) by the questioners' stipulations. In the *sāhityāvadhāna*, at the end of the performance, the practitioner additionally recalls from memory all the stanzas composed previously.

The borders between the mnemonic, technical and artistic *avadhāna*s are fluid. Some practitioners present their skills only within the scope of one kind while the others specialise in one but incorporate the elements of other types as well. For instance, to show versatility, the practitioner of the artistic *avadhāna* may include in the performance some purely mnemonic or technical tasks. Also, unrelated challenges examining various skills, usually from the domain of technical *avadhāna*s, can be performed within a single spectacle. Then, we speak of the *nānāvadhāna*, 'the manifold art of attentiveness', popular especially among Jains and in Tamil Nadu.

The literary sources attest to the performances in which the *avadhānī*s fulfilled manifold tasks in a single session. An enumeration of challenges can be found for instance in the Tamil works of the *viṟaliviṭutūtu* genre, 'message borne

by *viṟali* singer' (Peterson 2016: 64), e.g. in Kavirāyar's *Kūlappanāyakkaṉ Viṟaliviṭutūtu* composed in the 18th century in the honour of the author's patron, Nāgama Kūlappa Nāyakkaṉ, and in the *Naṉṉāvūr Caṅkamēcuvaracuvāmi Vētanāyaki Ammaṉ Pēril Viṟaliviṭutūtu* (NCVNAVVT) from the 17th century. The works describe the humiliation of *avadhānī*s (referred to as the *avatāṉi*s in Tamil) by the courtesans and their mother-bawds and contain parts with the *résumé*s of Aṭṭāvatāṉi and Cōṭacāvatāṉi (Peterson 2016: 72–74).[4] Similar enumerations of activities as well as other congruous tasks can be found also in later sources, e.g. in the 19th-century and the early 20th-century testimonies of the art mentioned in the present article or the memoirs of the practitioners (see, e.g. Mitchell 2009: 146–154). Once compared to the contemporary forms of *avadhāna*, these accounts attest to the transformations, inclusions and exclusions within the art. Most of the *nānāvadhāna* tasks do not occur in the contemporary *avadhāna*s at all, even as an element of the specialised art of attentiveness, and the exact character of some of them is not very clear. Additionally, the available sources usually limit the information to a short enumeration of the challenges, devoid of further elaboration. Yet, the data confirm a more universal character of certain endeavours while the others appear to be related to a particular area only.

In both groups – the pan-Indian and regional – the challenges connected to nature occupy a meaningful position and set the frame of performance or supplement and coalesce other tasks. Nevertheless, the present paper is the first attempt of specifying such components in the art of attentiveness and analysing their role.

The elements of nature can be exploited in the *avadhāna* in two manners. The first one is related to the artistic types of the practice. Every time the *avadhānī* creates a piece of art nature can be present in the form of a primary or secondary motif. The second manner, which is the focal point of the present article, is strictly connected to the technical types of *avadhāna*. In some of them, the described components serve as a basis for particular challenges or even for the individual types of the art related to specific animals, plants, or natural objects.

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[4] Aṭṭāvatāṉi and Cōṭacāvatāṉi, the names of the main characters, correspond to the Sanskrit terms *aṣṭāvadhānī* and *ṣoḍaśāvadhānī*, the performers of the eightfold and the sixten-fold *avadhāna*. The numbers refer to one more division within the practice. The distinction depends on the number of challenges given by the questioners during a single performance. The *aṣṭāvadhāna*, 'the eightfold attention' with eight tasks, is the most popular variety. Analogically, the performance consisting of sixteen challenges is called the *ṣoḍaśāvadhāna*, of one hundred the *śatāvadhāna*, and the like.

2. Plants, performers' bodies and the elements of inanimate nature

Particular types within the *avadhāna* tradition depend entirely on the objects of the living world. The *tṛṇāvadhāna* is a practice of conveying the message by various movements of a blade of grass (*tṛṇa*), which becomes a means of communication. A few facts should be noted concerning the choice of medium in the practice of *tṛṇāvadhāna*. Various kinds of grass play an important role in Indian culture. They occur in Vedic rituals, where the usage of certain Gramineae is not coincidental.[5] The blade of grass can be also interpreted as *brahman*, the first cause and the source of everything. It is the focal point of a mythological tale known from the *Kena Upaniṣad*,[6] in which *brahman* challenges god Agni to burn a blade of grass. The god of fire is not able to fulfil the task because his powers stem from *brahman*. Two given examples represent a vast number of connotations of grass in Indian culture. Nevertheless, a minute analysis of the meaning of *tṛṇa* appears to be rather irrelevant for the study of *avadhāna*. The choice of medium in the *tṛṇāvadhāna* is not coincidental – the art of attentiveness exploits the elements significant for Indian culture – but it seems that its denotation does not have a direct influence on the course of performance. A blade of grass serves as a means of communication, but the intended meaning of a conveyed message does not depend on meaning carried by *tṛṇa* itself. Unfortunately, the exact origin of the *tṛṇāvadhāna* code is not clear. It is not practised anymore and no sources describe the course of performance or specify the roots of the practitioners' knowledge. Therefore, it is impossible to state whether the system of movements has been adopted for usage in the *avadhāna* or if it has been created exclusively for the art.

As a form of the art of attentiveness the *tṛṇāvadhāna* is analogous to the variations of *avadhāna* in which particular parts of the body play the role of a medium of communication. In the *netrāvadhāna,* the performer uses his eyeballs, eyelids and eyebrows, and in the *aṅguṣṭhāvadhāna,* the message is conveyed through the movements of a thumb. The *avadhānī*s perform in a couple: one of them has to express the message while the other has to decipher it. Each motion and particular position of eyes, thumb or blade of grass corresponds to one syllable, a phoneme or a short phrase. It is a universal code that can be used to convey a message in any language. The performer who does not know the language of the ordered message passed orally can always code it phonetically. In the case of messages written down and handed

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[5]   Interested reader may refer to the work by Jan GONDA 1985 devoted entirely to the study of ritual functions and significance of grasses in Vedic religion. One of the chapters of the book is focused on *tṛṇa*.

[6]   The story is narrated in the prose part of the *Kena Upaniṣad* (third and fourth *khaṇḍa*s).

for transmitting, as far as the text is written in the script known to the *avadhānī* and does not contain any unfamiliar phonemes, the language does not play any role. The silent spectacle runs in full focus because every single mistake, both on the account of a person conveying the information and on the side of its recipient, results in the distortion of a message and the failure of *avadhāna*. It can be compared to a public performance of transmitting a text *via* Morse code. A skilled and attentive observer can decode and understand it without a pen and piece of paper or any special equipment.

The *netrāvadhāna* and the *aṅguṣṭhāvadhāna* can be classified as the *abhinayāvadhāna*, 'the gesticulation / dramatic movement *avadhāna*'. Such categorization may also suggest the source of codes used by the *avadhānī*s. As noticed by Kṛṣṇamūrti:

> Sarasvati Mahal Library, Tanjāvūru has published in Two Volumes 'Nāṭya Śāstra Samgraha' in 1953. (…) This work, besides dealing with the origin of Nāṭya and the actions of limbs etc. and their uses, gives specific handposes equated to various Rāgas, Rāginis. (…) Several types of handmoves are also indicated for general application. (…) After reading and practicing all the actions of the several limbs prescribed in this text, one can begin to communicate through gesture any idea. Semantic attitudinisation can be standardised and the art of abhinaya-avadhāna can be developed, like netra avadhāna or extempore (oral) avadhāna (Kṛṣṇamūrti 1975: 38–39).

Kṛṣṇamūrti suggests that the basis of the art of attentiveness involving body parts movements is the dramatic art and works devoted to the *nāṭyaśāstra*. According to this assumption, the code used by the *netrāvadhānī*s and the *aṅguṣṭhāvadhānī*s is neither their creation nor it was developed for the *avadhāna*. It appears that the art of attentiveness incorporated, and possibly modified, a well-known repertoire of certain body movements. The inspiration for *avadhānī*s specialising in these types of *avadhāna* might be, therefore, treatises on performing arts, in particular on dancing, which enumerate the movements of body parts and elaborate on their execution. One of them is a 13th-century work by Śārṅgadeva titled *Saṅgītaratnākara*, 'The Ocean of Music and Dance'. In the chapter devoted to dance, the author who was patronised by Siṃhaṇa II from the Yādava dynasty describes among *aṅga*s the hand gestures. Some of them involve particular positions of a thumb. The gesture called *muṣṭi*, 'fist', for instance, is characterised in the following way:

When the finger-tips rest compactly in the middle of the palm, not covered [by the fingers], and the thumb remains pressed against the middle finger, that is called Muṣṭi. It is employed to indicate the holding of a spear, a sword or a stick and fighting of various kinds; and with the thumb turned forward, [this pose indicates] running (…) (KUNJUNNI RAJA and BURNIER 1976: 17).

The *muṣṭi* pose mirrors particular position of a hand used by the *aṅguṣṭhāvadhānī*s. However, similarly to other *aṅga*s of a hand described by Śārṅgadeva, it does not indicate phonemes or syllables but words, actions and ideas. The *aṅguṣṭhāvadhānī*s employ sequences of thumb poses while the rest of the hand remains static. An analogous situation is in the case of eye, pupil, and eyebrow movements presented by Śārṅgadeva in *Saṅgītaratnākara* and elaborated on in the chapter on *upāṅga*s. The author characterises many of them and determines their use. Nonetheless, the referred poses are supposed to express sentiments, emotional states, and general ideas, while in the *netrāvadhāna* each movement represents certain syllables, letters or phonemes. For this reason, it cannot be concluded that treatises on dance are a direct source of knowledge for the *avadhānī*s specialising in the technical forms of the art of attentiveness implementing the body movements. Many of the poses characterised by the theoreticians were incorporated in the *avadhāna*, but their meaning was the most probably modified and adapted for the purpose of the art of attentiveness.

The *netrāvadhāna* and the *aṅguṣṭhāvadhāna* are still practised. Two teenage girls, sisters from Machavaram in Andhra Pradesh, S.V. Sirisha and K. Sirisha, mastered both arts and perform all over the country showcasing their skills in transferring messages in Telugu, Hindi and English using their eyes and thumbs.[7] They have learned the *avadhāna* skills from their school headmaster, Adinarayana Swamy, who admitted that 'they have been practising since grade 6' (RAJITHA S 2017). Another famous duo is Lalitha Kameswari and K. Rama Kumari.[8] They perform the *netrāvadhāna*, also outside India, for example during the TANA (Telugu Association of North America) Conference

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[7] The sisters performed during the World Telugu Conference in Hyderabad on 17 Dec. 2017. Mahaa News, a 24 hours Telugu News Broadcaster, registered their *avadhāna* completed in front of Nara Chandrababu Naidu, a former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and leader of the opposition in the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly (see MAHAA NEWS 2018). S.V. Sirisha and K. Sirisha also performed on television, see 10TV NEWS TELUGU 2016; HMTV NEWS 2016 or ETV TELANGANA 2016.

[8] The duo showcased their skills, for instance, on the occasion of Tanikella Bharani's (an Indian actor, screenwriter, poet, playwright and director) birthday celebrations organised by the Kala Foundation in Hyderabad. The video is available online (SRI T 2013).

2009, in Chicago. The couples are only two of the most famous examples of contemporary practitioners of the ocular art of attentiveness; it appears that at the beginning of the 21st century the ocular form of the art has become more and more popular.

The other instances in which plants or the elements of inanimate nature occur in the *avadhāna* are limited to single tasks. The most popular are different varieties of tossing items on the practitioner's back in the course of other challenges. The most common things to be thrown are pebbles or small or medium size flowers – big enough to be felt but also small enough not to hurt the *avadhānī*. Pebbles or flowers can be thrown singly or few at a time, at irregular intervals. The *avadhānī* has to count them and specify their total number at the end of the performance. One of the accounts mentioning the practice seems to be unreliable. Ramalakshmi claims that a certain '(…) Gurudanti Narisimhulu, a blind man[9] from Chicacole Sarkar[10] used to do Ashtavadhanam in 18th century. He was able to play chess and to count rice thrown on him amidst literary gathering' (Ramalakshmi 1977: 80). Taking into consideration the size of the rice seeds it is difficult to believe it could be used in this particular task. The information may be a single testimony describing highly developed skills, surprising even in the context of the *avadhānī*s' exceptional abilities or, more likely, an example of the exaggerated depiction of the practitioner's remarkable talent.

The account of the tossing task performed by Narisimhulu is the only attestation known to me that features rice. Nevertheless, the same practice involving the usage of flowers and pebbles is very popular in various types of *avadhāna*. Besides being the canonical component of the *nānāvadhāna*s, the tossing task is often included as one of the challenges supplementing the *sāhityāvadhāna* or the mnemonic *avadhāna*. It is denoted as the *puṣpatāḍana*, 'the striking with flowers'. The role of the challenge is manifold. It verifies a degree of sharpening the sense of touch obtained due to concentration.[11]

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[9]   The incapacity of the blind practitioners was limiting the set of tasks they could perform. But in some of the challenges, especially those requiring a highly developed sense of touch or hearing, they were particularly skilful. Another notable blind *avadhānī* was Govardhan Sharma Gattulalji, a man living in Bombay in the 19th century (Telang 1944: 158–160) (ref. HC).

[10] Chicacole Sarkar was one of the five Northern Circars – the districts according to the division of British India's Madras Presidency (ref. HC).

[11] Other challenges connected to the development of senses are guessing 'the places where flowers were hidden from sight', or 'naming a person by the sounds he made', both quoted in the NCVNAVVT (Peterson 2016: 73). In the first one, the *avadhānī* uses olfaction. The second one depends on the performer's hearing, like in the *ghaṇṭāvadhāna*, the *avadhāna* of bells. In this type of the art, the practitioner specifies the number and type (including the size or material) of bells that rang behind a screen throughout the performance and gives the

Being fulfilled along with the other tasks, interrupting them, it also examines the *avadhānī*'s ability to multitask.

3. Horses, tigers and elephants

In the vast repertoire of the *avadhāna* animals also found their place. Particularly interesting are three tasks: playing 'the game of tiger', taming a rutting elephant, and recognising horses by the hoofbeats, all attested in the *viṟaliviṭutūtu*s (PETERSON 2016: 73−74). Each of them is different. They feature various animals and require from the practitioner different prerequisites. Among the requirements are not only particular skills or mastering the senses. The challenges cannot be completed without specialised knowledge.

Less complicated – also because it does not involve the presence of a living creature – seems to be playing 'the game of tiger'. Even though the character of the challenge is not specified, it refers probably to the *āṭu puli āṭṭam*, 'the game of goats and tigers', in Telugu known as *pulijūdam*. The NCVNAVVT mentioning the task is in Tamil and, naturally, it describes the form of *avadhāna* popular in Tamil Nadu. The *āṭu puli āṭṭam* is a south-Indian, strategic, two-player hunt game. The game's origin is not clear beyond any doubt. As noticed by Agrawal and Iida, 'Some sources say that the game originated in the Himalayas, and others that it came from further south in India (…)' (AGRAWAL and IIDA 2018: 2).

The *nānāvadhāna* often exploited various games; the most common were chess and cards but local games were performed as well. The rules of *āṭu puli āṭṭam* are not very complicated. In this asymmetric game (one player controls three 'tigers' and the other player controls up to fifteen 'goats') the players move the pieces representing animals on the lined board with twenty-three intersections of lines. 'The tigers' try to kill 'the goats' while 'the goats' try to corner the opponents.[12] The *āṭu puli āṭṭam* requires concentration and planning, even more difficult to keep in the *avadhāna*, since the games are usually played simultaneously to the execution of other challenges. By completing them (not only playing but also winning) at the same time as the other tasks the *avadhānī*s

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final number of the strokes. Some peculiar tasks involving somatosensation and olfaction were performed also by Śrīmad Rājacandra. This 19th-century Jain layman from Gujarat included in his *avadhāna*s such elements as recognising books by smell and touch or using olfaction to determine the amount of salt in food. In the first case, twelve books of different sizes were given to Rājacandra. After a brief examination, he was able to recognize them being blindfolded. Using primarily the sense of touch and his mnemonic skills he was able to give, without seeing, the titles and authors of books presented to him previously.

[12] More information on *āṭu puli āṭṭam*, its origin, rules, and strategies, can be found, for example, in AGRAWAL and IIDA 2018 or JIN and NIEVERGELT 2009.

prove their ability to multitask.

The second challenge, taming a rutting elephant, appears to be more dangerous. The *avadhānī* has to deal with a living creature and elephants in rut are well-known for their erratic and aggressive behaviour. According to Evans

> Male elephants, and very rarely females, on obtaining maturity, are subject to peculiar paroxysms of excitement, which seem to have some connotation with the sexual functions (…). The behaviour changes, shown by disobedience to commands, trying to break away, or showing violence to man or destructive tendencies and being altogether out of sorts (Evans 1910: 175–176).

Calming the great and agitated animal is not an easy task, even if performed independently from the other challenges. In India, elephant lore (*gajaśāstra*) is an important branch of science. The *avadhānī*s were not trained mahouts, specialising in catching, tending, and taming elephants on daily basis. Without prior preparation, they would not be able to fulfil the challenge of pacifying a rutting animal. Their knowledge of the matter was probably based on various texts on elephantology, like the *Hastyāyurveda*, according to the tradition composed by the mythical founder of scientific elephantology, sage Pālakāpya. It focuses primarily on the medical treatment of elephants. Some passages containing the information on *gajaśāstra* can be found also in the 67th chapter of Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsamhitā* or in the 31st and 32nd chapter of Kauṭilīya's *Arthaśāstra*.

One work on elephant lore seems to be particularly popular in South India. The *Mātaṅgalīlā* by Nīlakaṇṭha (17th–18th century) was well-spread in Kerala and its author might have been a native of Malabar (Ganapati Sastri 1910: Preface). The work contains a separate chapter devoted to the problem of must or musth – the condition of rutting elephants known in Sanskrit as *mada*. The opening stanza includes only basic information on tending elephants:

> *atimadhurarasānāṃ   sevayā patrabhaṅgaiḥ   kabalakubalaśaṣpair annapānair yathoktaiḥ |*
> *śrutisubhagavacobhiḥ   pāṃsupaṅkāmbudānair   bhavati muditacetāḥ kāmacārena nāgaḥ || ML 9.1*

> By the service of very sweet liquids; thanks to shattered leaves, young grass, *kabala* fodder,[13] food and drink as prescribed; by the words pleasant to the ears; by the gift of sand, mud and water; in consequence

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[13]   Both terms mentioned in the stanza, *kabala* and *kubala*, denote a natural fodder for elephants consisting of branches and leaves of certain plants.

of moving freely – an elephant is of delighted soul.[14]

At this point, the text does not specify the ways to calm an animal, although some of the remarks may be useful for that purpose. *Patrabhaṅga*, for example, 'the shattered leaves', means also 'the leaves of hemp' that due to their calmative and tranquillising properties could pacify a maddened elephant. Subsequently, stanzas 9.20–22 contain the list of substances that can be used to produce the calmative pill. The next verses contain the recipe enabling the production of a special unguent:

> *mātuluṅgasuvahāsahākaṇāsaptaparṇavijayeṅgudīmadhu-* |
> *dugdhapiṣṭam idam aṅgalepitaṃ mattavāraṇavaraṃ vaśaṃ nayet* ||
> ML 9.23

> Citron, *suvahā* plant, aloe, long pepper, the flowers of *Alstonia Scholaris*, *vijayā* plant, the nut of *Terminalia Catappa*, honey, and milk rubbed altogether – this smeared on limbs should reduce to subjection a chosen ruttish elephant.

The instructions and recommendations from the *gajaśāstra* for sure were a great source of knowledge for the *avadhānī*s who wanted to tame an elephant in rut. Unfortunately, the records of the challenge do not include any description. It is not clear whether the *avadhānī*s had a limited time to perform the task and if it was acceptable to use auxiliary substances or tools.

The Sanskrit literature contains references to numerous stories of taming elephants by the means of spiritual powers or artistic skills. In the *Vatsarājacarita* and Bhāsa's four-act *nāṭikā* ('play', a short or light comedy, or drama of the second order) titled the *Pratijñāyaugandharāyaṇa*, the authors described how Vatsarāja went to the forest to tame an elephant with the help of his *vīṇā*, the Indian lute (Krishnamachariar 1989: 562, 579). The dramatist Hastimalla ('the elephant wrestler') allegedly earned his name when one of the Pāṇḍya kings decided to test his *samyaktva*, the firmness of faith in Jainism, and let loose a maddened elephant on him. By all accounts, Hastimalla encountered and tamed the animal with his spiritual power or subdued it by a spontaneously composed stanza (Patwardhan 1950: 7–8).[15] It is rather unlikely that the *avadhānī*s approached enraged elephants in the same way, lacking scientific knowledge. No matter what was the course of the elephant challenge, the performers had to stay focused, multitask and – most importantly – needed to have a working knowledge of elephant lore.

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[14] All the translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
[15] I thank David Pierdominici Leão for drawing my attention to Hastimalla.

From the point of general prerequisites, the challenge of recognising horses galloping in a herd by the hoof-beat was quite similar. The *avadhānī* had to concentrate, be able to perform the task while solving other puzzles and tests, and have specialised knowledge. The challenge also required well-developed hearing. The Indian sources on equinology (*aśvaśāstra*) contain detailed systematisations of horses. For the challenge in question, the most useful data appear to be divisions based on the trot. To the best of my knowledge, the *aśvaśāstra*s do not classify the animals by the criterium of their gait or pace, even though they mention five types of *aśvadhārā*, 'the horse pace'. Nakula summed them up in the *Aśvaśāstra*:

> *dhārāḥ pañca pravakṣyāmi munibhir yāḥ prakīrtitāḥ |*
> *prathamā vikramā dhārā dvitīyā pulakā smṛtā ||*
> *tṛtīyā pūrṇakaṇṭhī tu caturthī tvaritā smṛtā |*
> *pañcamī caiva yā dhārā nirālambā prakīrtitā ||*
> *ṣaṣṭhī caiva tu yā dhārā śruyate na tu dṛśyate |* AŚ 25.1–3ab

I will explain the five paces of a horse which are named by the sages.
The first pace is *vikramā* ('proceeding', 'step'), the second is known as *pulakā* ('extended', 'broad'),
The third one is *pūrṇakaṇṭhī* ('up to the neck') and the fourth is known as *tvaritā* ('swift', 'hasty').
The fifth one, moreover, is the one named the *nirālambā* ('devoid of support') pace.
The sixth one, however, is a pace that has been heard about but has never been observed.

As reported by Nakula, *vikramā* is a normal, regular pace, *pulakā* is the gait on four legs, *pūrṇakaṇṭhī* involves the movement of legs and neck, *tvaritā* is a spontaneous, swift pace and *nirālambā* is the gait provoked by beating a horse (AŚ 25.3cd–6). Recognising them from hearing is beyond any doubt possible but it does not say anything about the kind of horse since each animal can move in all of the ways depending on circumstances. The author of the NCVNAVVT claimed the *avadhānī* was able to identify the horses, not their pace. Conceivably, it refers to the division of *kula*s, 'the families' of horses. In one more work titled *Aśvaśāstra*, its author (traditionally Śālihotra, considered to be the founder of veterinary sciences in India) enlists fifty-four families, 'blood stocks' of horses. The same division can be found in Nakula's *Aśvaśāstra*, in the *kulalakṣaṇādhyāya*, 'the lesson on the features of blood stocks', where twenty-six best types are described in detail. Among the features are the remarks concerning the hooves and how the animals of particular types move. For instance, the best Cambodian horses (*kāmboja*

type) are characterised by tough hooves (AŚ 18.1) and steady legs (AŚ 18.19), while *vāhlīka* horses are described as unsteady, moving at a high speed (AŚ 18.21–22). Presumably, a thorough knowledge of the features mentioned by the experts in equinology, careful observation of living animals, and mastering the sound perception allowed the *avadhānī*s to distinguish the horses and name their types by the hoof-beat.

4. The elements of nature in the *citrakavitva* of the *sāhityāvadhāna*

In some sources mentioning and describing the *avadhāna*, occurs a specific type of literary composition called *citra* or *citrakāvya*, 'the pictorial/figurative poetry'.[16] The term *citrakāvya* encompasses manifold kinds of ornate poems. It includes verses filled with intriguing and ingenious embellishments of sound and meaning, complex alliterations, and visual *bandha*s – the stanzas governed by intricate arrangements, to be re-written in the shape of well-known objects or patterns. The NCVNAVVT refers to nine kinds of *cittiram* (Tamil equivalent for Sanskrit *citra*) (Peterson 2016: 74). None of the Sanskrit theoretical works known to me divides *citra* into nine types. The number may have its source in a regional tradition of the figurative poetry or denote the sum of *cittiram*s mastered by a particular *avadhānī*.

Other records of employing *citrakāvya* in the *avadhāna* are less obscure. Madhuravāṇī, a poetess and *protégé* of Raghunātha Nāyaka active at the 17th-century court in Tanjore, mentioned *citra* in the *Śrīrāmāyaṇasāratilaka* (RST). The text is a Sanskrit translation of the Telugu rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* composed by Raghunātha and the only available work by Madhuravāṇī. In the RST 1.93, the poetess described herself as being proficient in various forms of the *avadhāna*. In the RST 12.82, she emphasised her prowess in the composition of *citra*s. At the end of the 19th century, in the village of Mettupalayam in Karoor district close to Coimbatore, during a spontaneous private *avadhāna, śatāvadhānī* Rangacharya Shastri composed a visual stanza (Telang 1944: 157). One of the questioners requested the *liṅgabandha*. 'The *liṅga* pattern' denotes a stanza which thanks to a certain arrangement of syllables can be rewritten in the visual form resembling *liṅga*, a column symbolising the male organ, usually assigned to Śiva and his iconography. In its pictorial form, the *liṅgabandha* looks more like a rhombus. As an additional treat, the questioner asked to place in the middle of the stanza's visual form the phrase *śrīraṅgakavaye namaḥ*, 'hail to the honourable poet

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[16] The description of *citrakāvya* and systematization within this kind of poetry lie beyond the scope of the present article. For more information on the figurative compositions in Sanskrit literature, please consult e.g. Balasubramanyan 2010, Cielas 2016, Jha 1975 and Lienhard 1996.

Rangacharya!' (Telang 1944: 157). Rangacharya Shastri was not the only 19th-century *avadhānī* composing *citra*s. Cēllapilla Vēṅkaṭa Śāstri, half of the acclaimed duo known as the Tirupati Vēṅkaṭa Kavulu, was profiting from his ability to compose *citrakāvya*s and using them to impress wealthy citizens of Rajahmundry ('lawyers and rich merchants') to get money for his performances (Krishnamurthi 1985: 17).

The aforementioned testimonies confirm the usage of pictorial poetry in the *avadhāna* of the past. It seems though that the first *sāhityāvadhāna* with the *citrakavitva* or 'the pictorial poetic skill' as a fixed task took place in 1986, during the *aṣṭāvadhāna* of R. Ganesh, a *śatāvadhānī* from Bangalore. Ever since then, visual stanzas occur in the art of attentiveness more and more often. Frequently exploited visual patterns are the *paśupādapabandha*s, 'the patterns of animals and plants'. Among the most common *citra*s ordered by the questioners are various *padmabandha*s ('the lotus flower patterns'), *puṣpagucchakabandha*s ('the flower cluster patterns') and manifold *nāgabandha*s or *sarpabandha*s ('the snake patterns'). The *paśupādapabandha*s created during the *avadhāna* performances are usually built upon a complex system of alliterations. The *avadhānī*s facing the challenge have to master the knowledge in the field of *citra* composition. The Sanskrit theoreticians described various *bandha* formations. They often supplemented the explanations with the instances of visual stanzas of their creation or quoted from the literary works. Comprehensive enumerations and descriptions of *citrabanadha*s can be found in the *alaṃkāra* section of *Agnipurāṇa* (ca. 8th–9th century), the fifth chapter of Rudraṭa's *Kāvyālaṅkāra* (9th century) or the *Sarasvatīkaṇṭhābharaṇa* by Bhoja (the second *pariccheda*, 11th century) and Mammaṭa's *Kāvyaprakāśa* (the ninth chapter, 11th century). These works (and some others, although to a smaller degree) provide the information allowing a flawless composition of visual stanzas, including the *paśupādapabandha*s. Thanks to the rules established by the theoreticians the contemporary poets, also the *avadhānī*s, create visual stanzas and continue the tradition, additionally enriching it with novelties.

The images of animals and plants are often exploited in *citrakāvya* poetry because of the conveyed symbolism. The poets who want to create ideal *bandha*s (ideal both from the point of formal requirements and artistic value) reach for the prolific images helping to create a complex picture in which sonic, semantic and visual layer complement each other. Such motives like the lotus flower or the snake bring about connotations important for Indian culture. *Padma* is a universal symbol closely related to religion (as a symbol

of purity, the object often attributed to various divinities, an element of the *devapūjā*, the adoration of the god, etc.).[17] The *padmabandha*s, typical for the laudatory poetry constituting an entire type within the *citrakāvya* production, are one of the most common visual figures in Sanskrit literature. Therefore, their presence in the *avadhāna* is not surprising.

Similarly, the snake patterns occur repeatedly in art, architecture, and folk production. Like the lotus flower, in the iconography, the serpent motif is ubiquitous, whether it represents Śeṣa on which Viṣṇu reclines, the gate guardians, or the Nāgas, the semi-divine half-human half-serpent beings, to give only a few examples. Snakes in India are auspicious and apotropaic. They symbolise pious devotion, keeping the life energy.[18]

The vast meaning of *padma*s and *nāga*s in Indian culture can be shown in the present article only cursorily. Especially, since it does not have a direct influence on the performance. The choice of *bandha*s is not dictated by the religious meaning of symbols hidden in the visual forms. The *pṛcchaka*s order the composition of particular *citra*s because of their level of difficulty, own familiarity with creation of certain forms, and alike. While requesting a *bandha* a questioner may have in mind certain cultural or religious connotations of the pattern but it is not a necessary condition. The same way, an *avadhānī* may refer in his composition to the symbolic sense of the visual layer of the text or omit it entirely.

Combining the creation of visual stanzas with the *avadhāna*'s arduousness is considered to be the ultimate challenge of the *sāhityāvadhāna*, especially from the point of poetic quality. The *citrakāvya* was perceived by the Sanskrit theoreticians as an aberration and violation of rules governing the composition of the ideal poetry. Their composition requires a lot of effort from the author who wants to fuse the features assigned by critics to *kāvya*'s paragon with the stipulations of visual stanzas. Sanskrit theoreticians did not formulate their accusations against the *citrakāvya* elaborately and clearly. They classified it as an inferior kind of poetry (e.g. Mammaṭa in the *Kāvyaprakāśa* 1.5cd or Jagannātha, the 17th century, in the *Rasagaṅgādhara* 19) or they assumed it should be excluded from the domain of poetry completely (like Ānandavardhana, the 9th century, in the *Dhvanyāloka* 3.41–42, *vṛtti*) without specifying the allegations or grounds for such an opinion. One can only assume what exactly was the basis of their judgment. From the analysis of the

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[17]   For more information on the significance of lotus flower in Indian culture, especially in the contexts of Sanskrit visual poetry, see CIELAS 2013.

[18]   For more on the meaning of snakes in Indian culture see ZIMMER 1990: 59–69. The subject, especially in the context of religion, was studied carefully by OLDHAM 1905.

theoretical discourse on figurative poetry and from the study of examples of visual stanzas it can be concluded that the main reason lies in a comprehensive approach to the *citrakāvya* represented by the authors of the normative texts. The theorists referred to *citra* as a coherent literary phenomenon understood as overfilling the work (or its fragment) with the complicated, unnatural and blurring the clarity rhetorical figures. Such a simplified understanding of the visual poetry negated its value from the point of view of qualities that should characterise the *kāvya* production. The Sanskrit figurative poetry, in general, did not give the predominant significance to such principles as the *rasa* ('the taste' of a work, prevailing sentiment) and the *guṇa*s ('the merits', positive properties of composition; here in particular to the *prasāda* – 'clarity'). It influenced the negative judgment of the theoreticians; in their eyes, the lack of clarity was deciding, discrediting attribute of the *citrakāvya*. Nevertheless, the study of visual poems shows the heterogeneity of tradition. For some categories of the *citra,* the negative opinion is fully justified but in the rich corpus of the figurative poetry, one can find also refined works composed by eminent poets, like Bhāravi or Māgha.

Composing visual poems means facing the allegations of the theoreticians and connoisseurs of poetry. Adding the circumstances of the *avadhāna* performance – time limitation, the necessity of meeting the questioners' demands and depending exclusively on mnemonic potency without the use of pen and paper – completing the *citrakavitva* seems almost impossible. Nevertheless, R. Ganesh is not the only *avadhānī* successfully facing the challenge of combining *citrakāvya* with the art of attentiveness. Another contemporary poet specialising in the task is Shankar Rajaraman, a psychiatrist from Bangalore. The *citrabandha*s created by them during performances are not devoid of literary quality and are not limited to elementary patterns exploiting basic alliterations occurring in the stanza in small number.

5. Conclusion

The examples of *avadhāna* challenges described in the present paper show the richness and the polymorphous character of the art. The elements of nature can be found in every type of *avadhāna*. Many of the presented tasks appear not to be practiced anymore, like recognising horses by the hoof-beats or taming rutting elephants. Moreover, even though certain texts refer to them, it does not seem that they were very popular, although it is difficult to state how often they were practiced. On the other hand, there are the technical forms of *avadhāna*, like the *netrāvadhāna*, *tṛṇāvadhāna* and *aṅguṣṭhāvadhāna* – practiced in the past, completely forgotten at some point, to be finally revived

in last two decades, at least in the case of ocular and thumb *avadhāna*. It cannot be excluded that in the nearest future also other forms of the art of attentiveness which are not practiced anymore will flourish once again. Among the tasks described in the present essay there are also challenges which never ceased to be included in the *avadhāna* performances. One of them is the tossing challenge, which, as noted earlier, was and still is practiced in nearly every kind of art of attentiveness. Naturally, the motives connected to nature have always been a part of the *sāhityāvadhāna*. The descriptions of seasons, landscapes, places, animals, and people, to mention only few examples, are omnipresent in the Indian literatures, and improvised verses created in the course of literary *avadhāna*s are no exception. Only recently, the elements of nature were included in the *sāhityāvadhāna* in the form of visual stanzas. Before the 1986, *citrabandha*s occurred in the art of attentiveness only sporadically. The *citrakavitva* is not a canonical component of the *sāhityāvadhāna* because of the difficulty of the task but it is important to emphasise the growing popularity of the challenge.

The elements of nature incorporated into the *avadhāna* are not coincidental. All of them belong to the domain of imagery closely connected to Indian culture. They constitute the set of components mirroring various aspects of Indian beliefs, literature, practices, and performative arts. The semiotic value of the elements of animate and inanimate nature in the *avadhāna* makes the performance more vivid and multi-levelled, brings to mind myriads of connotations. Described tasks show the resourcefulness of the art of attentiveness and the ingenuity of its practitioners. Almost everything can become the foundation of a challenge. The elements of nature, similarly to the constituents of other tasks, are matched to examine particular skills and fortes. Knowledge in nearly every branch of science can be tested in the *avadhāna*. As the given examples show, even elephantology and equinology can be the source of inspiration. The fundament of the art of attentiveness is the focus. The subject of challenges is not crucial; for verifying the ability to concentrate the essential factor is the formal frame of the performance – the order of tasks, the timespan, the simultaneity of challenges, etc. Of course, specialised knowledge or artistic skills required for the completion of particular endeavours are also important, but they are of secondary relevance for the general concept of the *avadhāna*. By diversifying challenges the *avadhānī*s make performances more appealing and entertaining for the audience. Personal predispositions of the practitioners also play a salient role. After all, the *avadhānī*s showcase the skills in which they are proficient. But generally, the elements of nature frequently occur in the *avadhāna* because they mirror Indian culture – the repository from which draw the practitioners of the art. In this way, all of the

references, allusions, tasks, and other elements of performances rely on general cultural and poetic tradition. Certain challenges, like most of the components of the *sāhityāvadhāna*, are modified versions of well-known literary puzzles, adapted for the art of attentiveness but not created for its purpose.[19] It is true also in the case of other *avadhāna*s; *netrāvadhāna* and *aṅguṣṭhāvadhāna* draw from the repertoire of body movements described in the normative texts; the parts of *nānāvadhāna*s are based on well-known practices (as games existing independently from the art of attentiveness, solving mathematical formulas, and alike). Even tasks which seem to be unique for the *avadhāna*, like for example the tossing challenge or others, connected to senses, are referring in one way or another to the symbols and traditions important for Indian culture (for instance by the usage of marigold flowers or alluding to various *śāstra*s). What is entirely unique for the art of attentiveness is its form and the abilities of performers examined in a peculiar way. The challenges respond to the public demand. The images, symbols, objects and living creatures belonging to the world of nature, among other things, help to create an encapsulated version of Indian tradition in the form of the *avadhāna* performance.

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Abbreviations

AŚ = *Aśvaśāstra* of Nakula – see Gopalan 1952 and Joshi 2008.

ML = *Mātaṅgalīlā* of Nīlakaṇṭha – see Ganapati Sastri 1910.

NCVNAVVT = *Naṇṇāvūr Caṅkamēcuvaracuvāmi Vētanāyaki Ammaṉ Pēril Viṟaliviṭutūtu.*

RST = *Śrīrāmāyaṇasāratilaka* of Madhuravāṇī – see Ramaraju 1972.

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Arthaśāstra = see Rangarajan 1992.

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[19] For more on the adaptation of literary devices for the *sāhityāvadhāna* see Cielas 2020.

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