



## LIMINAL SPACES, AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURES AND ARTS

Essays in Honour  
of Professor Alexander Dubyanskiy

EDITED BY PAOLA M. ROSSI

Liminal Spaces, and Identity Transformations  
in South Asian Literatures and Arts

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# An Introduction. Liminal Experience as Aesthetic Experience?

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The present volume *Liminal Spaces, and Identity Transformations in South Asian Literatures and Arts. Essays in Honour of Professor Alexander Dubyanskiy* is a collection of articles presented at the International Seminar ‘Liminal Spaces, and Identity Transformations in Indian Cultural History’ in Milan, in September 2019, when we were on the brink of a historical change due to the pandemic experience, unaware that our lives were about to be transformed. Thus, this work was edited right in that state of in-betweenness, in that temporary transition which the lockdown was, across those thresholds of sorrow marked by the demise of our loved ones. The list unfortunately includes Prof. Alexander Dubyanskiy, a friend and colleague of ours, to whose memory this volume is dedicated. Therefore, in such a moment in suspended time, exploring liminality, at least in so far as such a category of reality may be applied to Indian culture and especially to art and literature, appeared to be a means to cope with an emergency the likes of which had never been seen before. Obviously, this work does not aspire to be exhaustive: ever since Arnold van Gennep, the enlightening and pioneering precursor whose work focused on the rites of passage (1909), through the innovative analysis performed by Victor Turner (*i.a. The Ritual Process* 1969) between the sixties and eighties of the last century, up to its contemporary application to a range of fields<sup>1</sup>, the category of liminality implies a manifold of facets of which there are indeed enough variations to warrant a whole series of books. Nonetheless, the

1. Amongst the large amount of literature, cf. Zanini 1997; Horvath–Thomassen–Wydra 2015; Calzolaio–Petrocchi–Valisano–Zubani 2017; Wagoner–Zittoun 2021.



heterogeneity of the contributions in this book certainly provides us with a multifaceted perspective: in actual fact, since liminality implies potentially myriads of interpretations, it appears to offer one of the main keys to addressing the entanglement of reality, especially the complexity of the Indian civilization, past and present. Although the focus is particularly on the literary and artistic aspects of such an extraordinary cultural heritage as the Indian one, from the Vedic period up to modernity, the category of liminality also allows us to consider different anthropological issues: firstly, the ritual one, in compliance with van Gennep and Turner's approach, but also religious experiences, sovereignty and violence, dialectics of identity, social dynamics, etc. Literature and arts, by means of their aesthetic devices, mirror critical points characterising such issues, as if poetry and artwork, zooming in on specific transition elements, were themselves on the threshold of manifold layers of reality, able to pass through their interstitial discontinuities.

Prof. ALEXANDER DUBYANSKIY, to whom this 'liminal' volume is dedicated, was an eminent scholar endowed with a strong sense of humanity, whose wide knowledge of Indian literature, especially Tamil poetry, and his extremely refined and sensitive way of enjoying beauty made him capable of revealing such 'edgelands', depicted by means of literary conventions, which thus allowed the hidden and erratic reality, conveyed by poetry, to be made clearly understandable. His last and unfinished article opens the collection and focuses on Tamil poetry composed by the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava saints (6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> CE) as an expression of the *bhakti* movement. The article aims to explore the devotees' attitude to self-humiliation and their unexpected change to ecstatic joy for their own god. This emotional antithesis is an example of that "in-between reality" which poetic art can express and unveil. Alexander Dubyanskiy notices it and highlights its liminal character. His peculiar way of interpreting the Tamil *bhakti* poetry as an example of liminal experience brings us back to his personal acquaintance with the liminal condition: in his picture, profiled by his daughter, the scholar TATIANA DUBYANSKAYA, on the basis of his private letters, he appears to be a man in transition; while discovering India for the first time in 1978, during a 9-month trip, he dived into multiple liminalities, exploring the intricate and at times contradictory feelings born out of that strange state of "non-belonging". And it was within such a shifting and oscillating Otherness that he built his relationship with the three worlds – Indian, Russian and Western. Therefore, his own words reveal an image of India as «a "soft power", a neutral secure space, where people and civilisations could meet and enrich each other», where dynamics of

interaction develop peacefully and fruitfully, resulting in a renovated and richer identity.

I hope that this volume, consisting of four sections, with 16 papers in total, might be – at least partially – an expression of the same multiple aspects of liminality as experienced by Alexander Dubyanskiy on his trip in India.

The first section, dealing with Pre-Classical Literature, is opened by DANIELLE FELLER's contribution which deals with the cosmic aspect of liminality: it concerns the meaning of the word *vimāna* mainly in the Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. A survey of epic occurrences – although quotations from the Vedic textual repertoire are also included – sheds light on the various semantic shades conveyed by the term *vimāna* in the ancient Indian literature. In particular, the name 'palace' was applied to the aerial palaces of the gods which, since they were unrooted in the sky, were thought to move about in the manner of celestial cars. In this way, they represent the fluctuating condition of liminality, inasmuch as a varying cosmic reality between heaven and earth, an intermediate dimension between the gods' realm and the human sphere, is referred to.

In this sense, the Epic Sanskrit *vimāna* may be correlated to the Vedic Sanskrit *antāriṣa* / *antāriṣā*, an outcome of \**antāri kṣā*, meaning 'between earth and heaven', given that *kṣā* is an elliptical dual from *kṣān* 'earth', parallel to *pr̥thivī* (~*dyāvā-pr̥thivī*) and *ródasī* 'two world-halves'<sup>2</sup>. In actual fact, this oscillating intermediate space comes into existence through a binary reality: a tripartite cosmos is measured out (*vi-vimā*) by a pillar (*skambhā*) which, like a rising sun moving upwards to heaven, props the latter up (*√stabh* 'to prop'), thereby keeping the two world-halves apart (*ródasī*)<sup>3</sup>. In Vedic imagery and cosmology, it is the sunlight that maps the liminal dimension as such, by *shifting between* earth and heaven.

Another cosmic aspect of liminality is probed by PAOLA M. ROSSI's article: the relationship between "solar-ship" and liminality. In this case, it is also correlated to kingship. The paper deals with the Vedic *mahāvratā*, the winter solstice rite which, as a calendrical ceremony that marks the passage from the old to the new year, is definitely the critical liminal point, where sunlight, life and prosperity are renewed. This peculiar critical threshold appears to be related to the new paradigm of 'ecumenic' sovereignty promoted by the Kuru hegemony (1200-

2. Cf. Pinault 2012.

3. For example, in R̥V 6.47.5; 8.41.10; etc.

900 BCE), especially as it is represented in the ceremony of the royal consecration (*rājasūya*). However, it also refers to the *vrātya* culture, the expression of the warrior brotherhood / *Männerbund*, characterised by initiation practices, connected to the course of the sun. Therefore, on the one hand, the Vedic *mahāvratā* ceremony may preserve some remnants of a sort of rite of passage that is implied in the *vrātya* initiation practices, that is the agonistic scene with a struggle to conquer the sun. On the other, it is the annual rite by means of which the Kuru sovereignty is publicly supported and confirmed.

The *vrātya* context and its relationship with liminality is the focus of EDELTRAUD HARZER's paper: in particular, her contribution is centred on the identity of the leader of the *vrātya* sodality, called both *gr̥hapati* and *sthapati* in the Vedic sources. Since the ancient *gr̥hapati* was responsible for the community and compelled to go on raiding expeditions to provide wealth, his role is especially liminal, inasmuch as he was also the head of those rituals - the *sattra* sacrificial rituals - which opened and closed the expeditions, and he underwent an arduous preparation for this purpose. Leadership is thus correlated to the liminal practices of both ritual and warrior initiation.

Another aspect of liminality is explored in the articles by DILETTA FALQUI and ZUZANA ŠPICOVÁ, both of which refer to the epic episode from the *Ambopākhyāyā* (MBh 5. 170- 193) that concerns gender-bending and androgyny. The former author opts for a philological approach, paying peculiar attention to lexical choices in MBh 5. 187-188, whereas the latter mostly adopts a narratological point of view, thus highlighting how the narrative structure is strongly influenced by the role of the characters. Moreover, Falqui's contribution is mainly focused on the relationship between the feminine character Ambā and asceticism (*tapas*), especially as correlated to the figure of Rudra and the obtainment of his boon *vrataphala*, 'fruit of vow'. The author maintains that asceticism, the Rudraic dimension and gender identity are correlated to liminal conditions. Instead, Špicová's paper takes a closer look at the issue of gender change and androgynous liminality from Śikhaṇḍin's perspective as Ambā reborn.

Finally, ANITA M. BORGHERO's contribution closes the first section: it deals with a grammatical issue, that is the feminine elliptic dual, as attested in the Sanskrit Vedic sources and interpreted in Pāṇini's teachings. The peculiar case of *mātārā* is analysed: in the R̥gvedic occurrences it refers to a cultural *milieu* that is not the same as the Pāṇinian one, and thus even the grammarian explanation cannot reflect the original meaning of elliptic dual. Such an interpretative shift, from the R̥gvedic elliptic dual, meaning 'father and mother', to the Pāṇinian

simple dual, meaning ‘two mothers’, is an indicator of that cultural change which operated from the Vedic Kuru hegemony onwards.

The second section of this volume collects papers regarding Kāvya Literature and Hindī Poetry. It is interesting to note that in the literary sources belonging to the common era which mirror varying historical, geographical and political Indian contexts, liminality also appears to be correlated mainly to violence, warriorship, leadership, kingship and “solar-ship”, even though more intimate emotional spheres are poetically unveiled and more refined stylistic devices and elaborate linguistic expressions are employed in such texts. Firstly, DANUTA STASIK’s article is centred on the battlefield of Lañkā as pictured in Tulsīdās’s *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574); she focuses on a few aspects (time, space, actors and artefacts) which turn traditional warrior imagery into *bhakti* devotional imagery, thus characterising such a representation of the battlefield as a liminal space, or better, “betwixt and between” illusion and liberation. In his contribution, CHETTIARTHODI RAJENDRAN highlights how in *Kādambarī* (7<sup>th</sup> CE), Bānabhaṭṭa has captured the very moment of transition, when the young prince Candrāpīḍa is about to assume the throne: in the *Śukanāśopadeśa* or ‘Śukanāśa’s advice’ the passage from the carefree life of youth to the social responsibilities of adulthood coincides with the transition from the innocent position of the young prince to the assumption of royal powers, with their burdensome responsibility. In this way, the threshold of royalty is pictured: the ancient rite of passage, which in the *vrātya* culture made the novice warrior the future chieftain, is turned into a sort of psychological transition, mirroring the anxieties of the young prince who is about to embark on an unknown way of life.

According to the analysis carried out by DAVID PIERDOMINICI LEÃO, liminality also appears to permeate kingship and royal powers in the *mahākāvya* work entitled *Pāṇḍyakulodaya*, ‘The Rise of the Pāṇḍya dynasty’, (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). This poem narrates and celebrates the origin and establishment of the Pāṇḍya kingdom, from the mythological past to the military campaigns against Kerala conducted by Campaka Parākrama (c. 1480-1508 CE), the Pāṇḍya sovereign and probably the patron of the poet. In particular, the valour of the Pāṇḍya King is praised through the significant epithet *pararājasūrya*, ‘the Sun to Enemy Kings’: the leader is depicted as the winner, who marches on the battlefield against the enemies like the sun, which, ascending the cosmos, conquers all the heavenly directions (*dīgviḥaya*). In this way a sophisticated literary work of the pre-modern period recalls one of the crucial phases of the ancient royal consecration rite (*rājasūya*), that is the so-called ‘mounting the heavenly directions’

(*digvyāsthāpana*), in which the sovereign is represented as the rising sun, who / which transcends the terrestrial boundaries and conquers the world, thus placing himself / itself firmly at the centre of the universe<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, the *kāvya* portrayal of the Pāṇḍya sovereign is the reformulation of that traditional paradigm of kingship, inaugurated by the ancient Kuru hegemony itself<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the closed relationship between the legitimisation of authority and cultural prestige, expressed by means of an extremely erudite work in the Sanskrit language, is also restated.

The liminal condition of adolescence, but from a feminine perspective, is the topic of ANNA TRYNKOWSKA's contribution: the focus is on the young heroine (*nāyikā*), who, in classical Sanskrit lyric poetry, is depicted during the process of her transformation from a little girl into a young maiden. Such a motif, known as *vayaḥsaṃdhi*, is especially developed in medieval lyric poetry by the famous Maithili poet Vidyāpati (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). Here too, and just like the aforementioned case of prince Candrāpīḍa in *Kādambarī*, the transition from youth to female maturity is pictured from a psychological point of view in which the heroine is beset by uncertainties and intimate turmoil. Interestingly, just as this emotional condition leads prince Candrāpīḍa to the awareness of royal dharmic duties, heroines discover female dharmic duty, that is *kāma* as love and desire, in a similar way when the first awakening of love moves their heart during adolescence. Moreover, such a liminal state, on the edge of the dharmic roles pertaining to adulthood, is not only poetically represented as an intimate and emotional condition, but frequently portrayed with metaphors drawn from the conceptual domain of kingship and war. Therefore, once again liminality refers to violence and leadership.

The last article of the second section of the volume deals with a connotation of liminality which has yet to be considered, but which is implicit in all the previous *kāvya* contributions: liminality as an aesthetic category. ARIADNA MATYSZKIEWICZ's article deals with the question by comparing the Burkean sublime with the Sanskrit *mahākāvya* work, *Raghuvamśa* by Kālidāsa (5<sup>th</sup> century CE), trying to integrate the Western category of sublime with concepts of Sanskrit aesthetics and literary theory. Although cultural, temporal, and environmental differences between the authors are evident, she does however conclude that many elements recognised by Edmund Burke as sources of the sublime may be traced in

4. Cf. Heesterman 1957, 103ff.

5. The *rājasūya* rite itself might have been instituted by the Kuru period: cf. Witzel 2005, 29.

Kālidāsa's language and his poetical devices, by means of which a peculiar natural imagery is suggested. Nonetheless, the aesthetic effect in Kālidāsa's poetry is mainly due to the filter of a highly refined and educated means of expression applied to Nature; inversely, the Burkean sublime relies on the conception of Nature, even by poetical art, as an uncontrollable force.

The third section of the volume contains some contributions dealing with modernity: the liminal dimension appears to be its characterising trait, since the very modern cultural identity of South Asia is fluctuating and fleeting between colonialism and post-colonialist claims, traditional heritage and innovations.

Firstly, the paper of HERMINA CIELAS concerns the Indian art of *avadhāna* ('attention', 'attentiveness') analysed here as liminoid practice. Special attention is paid to the figure of the practitioner (*avadhānī* or *avadhānini*), the transition from the courts or private scholarly meetings to the public space and to the commercial character of the present day.

Finally, the literary field is the main subject of the other two articles: the first of these by MARTA KARCZ deals with the work of Kota Shivaram Karanth (1902-1997), one of the most significant and influential novelists, playwrights and conservationists of 20<sup>th</sup> century Karnataka; in particular, she focuses on one of his best-known novels, whose original title is *Comana duḍi*, first published in 1933, then translated into Hindi and English in 1978, and finally in 2017, translated into Sanskrit by Anantha Padmanabha Shastry, with the title *Comasya dhakka*. The author argues that the translation of such a text into a form of modern Sanskrit is also a turning point 'in translation' for modern-day Indian civilization: the very identity of the Sanskrit language, well known since antiquity as a token of cultural supremacy, nowadays oscillates between a language of the elite and a language available to all Indians who want to discover their own heritage.

The other article, which closes the third section, is centred on the identity transformation of travellers who undertook journeys from India to other Asian countries in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Its author, WERONIKA ROKICKA, focuses on Bengali travel writing, looking especially into Ali's travelogue *Deśe Bideśe* (*Home and abroad*) and Ray's *Jāpāne* (*In Japan*); these works present the experience of the travellers as a liminal experience: they are accounts not only of writers in the liminal situation of travel, but also of intellectuals living in a liminal period, who contributed to making new visions of the world, such as Pan-Asianism, emerge.

The last section, the fourth one, deals with the Arts, especially temple sculpture and architecture. DARYA VOROBYEVA's paper especially concerns the sculpture images, dated back to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium CE in some

cave complexes located mainly in Southern India. The author focuses on the representations of the *vyantara-devatā* – the semidivine inhabitants who live in the space between heaven and earth, such as *gandharvas*, *apsarases*, and other threshold beings such as *kiṃnaras*, and *bhūtas / yakṣas / gaṇas*. Their liminal *status* makes their images perfectly suited for being pictured in the temple *maṇḍapa*: this is the liminal space, where the transition from the sacred to the profane comes about. Her article also provides photographic documentation.

The last article of the volume is a convincing and innovative analysis of the narrative relief sculpture in the Sun temple at Modhera (1025-1026 CE), presented by DAVID SMITH. With the support of extensive photographic documentation, the author examines the temple's iconographic programme in detail, especially the relief sculpture on the pillars in the Closed Hall and Dance Hall. On the one hand, the sculptures are assumed to reflect the concerns of the court of the temple's presumed patron, Bhīma Rāja I (r. 1022-1064), especially through reference to Bhīma as an epic hero. On the other hand, it is significant that the temple deity is Sūrya himself thus suggesting once again the relationship between warriorship, kingship and "solar-ship". Moreover, these sculptures mark the threshold between the sacred and the profane and highlight the transition of the worshipper who, as they approach the deity, proceeds from the exterior world to the vision of the Sun god inside the temple. Finally, the author focuses on a very original interpretation which draws further attention to the "liminal" value of these sculptures: each panel is a kind of stage on which a particular performance is represented; musicians and dancers, duelling heroes, erotic scenes depicting a liminal world in-between nature and imagery, reality and work of art, that is – by the author's words – «a distorted dream world, a world of rampant liminality».

This overview of the articles in the book, its main topics and themes has served to demonstrate that the category of liminality is evidently closely related to both literary and art works: firstly, they are the result of a "poietic" act which implies a liminal condition, as a point of departure for the birth of new forms of expression between reality and imagery, through the shaping of unformed material. They are the output of a transition process from absence to presence. Secondly, the fruition of artistic and poetic creations is also a liminal experience, in so far as aesthetics is a sort of "liminoid" moment, suspended between normality and regulated everyday life and an alternative "world" pictured by poetry and arts. In a certain way, artistic and literary works represent a sort of "state of exception"<sup>6</sup>,

6. Cf. Agamben 2018, 169ff.

which must be absorbed and re-incorporated / re-integrated into dharmic taxonomies and fixed identity structures. The audience is on the threshold of this transformative experience that is poetry and art. Finally, also the artist, both as creator and demiurge, either educated brahmin or low-caste artisan, experiences the liminal state of “betwixt and between”, during the poetic and artistic process from which work of art and poetry result. Although here is the risk that Western aesthetic categories are applied to the Indian culture, it is assumable that power dialectics and aesthetic creation-fruiting appear to be closely correlated to the category of liminality in the South Asian cultural perspective too: here this erratic and unsolved existence conveys multiple possibilities of becoming. An issue that calls for further and deeper exploration.

Milan, January 2023



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The present volume is a collection of 16 papers presented at the International Seminar 'Liminal Spaces, and Identity Transformations in Indian Cultural History' in Milan, in September 2019, when we were on the brink of a historical change unknowingly. And afterwards, during the pandemic experience, exploring liminality, as category of reality applied to Indian culture and especially to art and literature, appeared to be a means to cope with an emergency the likes of which had never been seen before. Obviously, this work does not aspire to be exhaustive, nonetheless, the heterogeneity of the contributions offers a multifaceted perspective: in actual fact, since liminality implies potentially myriads of interpretations, it appears to provide us with one of the main keys to addressing the entanglement of reality, especially the complexity of the Indian civilization, past and present. The focus is particularly on the literary and artistic aspects of such an extraordinary cultural heritage, from the Vedic period up to modernity; literature and arts are the lens through which variegated anthropological issues, crossing different historical phases, are investigated: firstly, the ritual question, in compliance with van Gennep and Turner's approach, but also religious experiences, sovereignty and violence, dialectics of identity, social dynamics, gender identity, etc. Literature and arts, but still by means of their own aesthetic devices, mirror critical points characterising such issues, as if poetry and artwork, zooming in on specific transition elements, were themselves on the threshold of manifold layers of reality, able to pass through their interstitial discontinuities. Finally, it is a great honour to dedicate such a volume to the memory of Professor Alexander Dubyanskiy (1941-2020), eminent scholar in Indian literature, especially in Tamil poetry, who experienced multiple aspects of liminality both of the South Asian culture and life.

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