

A World of Nourishment
Reflections on Food in Indian Culture

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LEDIZIONI

CONSONANZE

Collana del
Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Filologici e Linguistici
dell'Università degli Studi di Milano

diretta da
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ISBN 978-88-6705-543-2

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Ledizioni – LEDIpublishing

Via Alamanni, 11

20141 Milano, Italia

www.ledizioni.it

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A suitable girl.
Daṇḍin and a meal on the banks of the Kāverī

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In the sixth *ucchvāsa* of Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita* the hero-narrator of the chapter, Mitragupta, eventually happens to land on an island; here he climbs a fine mount and delights in the waters of a little lake. Thus refreshed, however, he is faced with a fearsome *rākṣasa* that dwells on the shores of the lake and that challenges him with four questions, threatening to devour him if he does not give the right answers. Of course, Mitragupta comes up with the answers, adding that, as examples of his statements, the stories of four women could be cited, and mentioning their names. The *rākṣasa* then asks him to tell their stories, and so Mitragupta's narration begins. Naturally, this is a way to bring four additional tales into the text; each is set in a different place in India and presents characters whose moral standards are not of the highest, except for the second story. The point of this tale, which is set in present-day Tamil Nadu, is to illustrate the *rākṣasa*'s question 'What makes a householder's happiness and well-being?' (*kiṃ gṛhīṇaḥ priyahitāya*), and Mitragupta's reply, 'The wife's qualities' (*dāraguṇāḥ*), the protagonist being a girl who is a paragon of virtue, named Gominī.¹ The tale dwells in particular on a description of the girl's beauty and how she prepares a meal in accordance with the solid principles of domestic economy, which qualifies her as an ideal bride. The tale probably originated from some traditional source, for a similar story is narrated in the *Mahāummagga Jātaka* (Cowell 1907, 156-246), where the *bodhisattva* puts a young woman to a similar test with the prospect of becoming his bride. However, apart from certain undeniable affinities between the two narratives,² as a whole and in the details the tale of

1. The *Daśakumāracarita* is quoted according to the edition of M. R. Kale (Kale 1966⁴). The *rākṣasa*'s questions are on page 156 of Kale's text, and the story of Gominī (*gominīvṛttānta*-) on pages 159-63; all the quotations without further indication are from this passage. All the translations from Sanskrit are mine. For the *Daśakumāracarita* I use for reference Kale's translation and commentary in the same volume, my own translation into Italian (Pieruccini 1986), and Isabelle Onians' translation for the Clay Sanskrit Library (Onians 2005).

2. Also in the *Mahāummagga Jātaka* the girl, there called Amarā, is said in passing to show lucky marks, but the main similarity lies in the fact that for the test she is asked to prepare some

Gominī reveals profoundly original qualities. In fact, one cannot help feeling that Daṇḍin was aiming at more than simply constructing a pleasant interlude. Here, together with close examination of the text and, above all, of the meal prepared by Gominī, its detailed description being of exceptional documentary value, we will try to see what his probable aim was.

To begin with, a few remarks are indispensable concerning certain significant features of the work, and the personality of Daṇḍin.³ Above all, we must remember that the *Daśakumāracarita* is a work that has come down to us in the conditions of a fragment, completed in different and much more recent periods with the addition of opening and concluding parts (*pūrvapīṭhikā*, *uttarapīṭhikā*). The ‘original’ fragment of the *Daśakumāracarita* is generally held to be part of a more extensive work entitled *Avantisundarīkathā*, of which, in turn, a substantial opening fragment has come down to us, while there are epitomes that connect the plots of both works. Due to the complex textual circumstances, albeit to some extent investigated, it is somewhat problematic to draw exhaustive conclusions on many aspects of the narrative work of Daṇḍin. Nevertheless certain aspects emerge perfectly clearly, including the orthodox Brahmanic faith of the author and, at the same time, his tendency to create characters and stories in generally ‘amoral’ terms, setting the scene for breezy intrigues or blatant misdemeanours. Moreover, Daṇḍin always seems to take great care over the precise geographical location of his characters’ roaming adventures. As for Daṇḍin himself, he wrote around the year 700 and was a *brāhmaṇa* of the Kauśika *gotra* who came from the Pallava Kingdom. Thus Daṇḍin was from present-day Tamil Nadu, the same region of India in which the tale of Gominī is set. The first, obvious, conclusion to draw is that he was well acquainted with the household chores and the recipes upon which he dwells in such detail. But let us now go on to outline the text.

Śaktikumāra is the very wealthy son of a businessman (*śreṣṭhiputraḥ*) living in Kāñcī, in Draviḍa country (*draviḍeṣu*), i.e. in the present-day city of Kanchipuram, which in the times of Daṇḍin was the capital of the Pallavas. Approaching his eighteenth birthday, and distrustful of the intermediation of others, he sets off from his hometown to find for himself a suitable wife. To accomplish this mission he disguises himself as an astrologer (*kārtāntika-*), and binds to his clothing a *prastha* of rice (*śālīprastha-*); it is hard to define the *prastha* as an exact measure, but such a quantity of raw rice can be considered a good daily

rice recipes with the very limited quantity of rice she is given (see below); as a whole, however, the tale differs greatly from that of Daṇḍin. On the similarities with other texts of the stories told by Mitragupta, cf. Singh 1979, 101-2.

3. On Daṇḍin and the issues discussed from here on, i.e. the *Daśakumāracarita* as a fragment of the *Avantisundarīkathā*, the general spirit of the characters’ adventures, the geographical references contained in the work and the biographical details of Daṇḍin himself, see Gupta 1970, 1972; Singh 1979; Warder 1972, § 490; Warder 1983, § 1961-2062.

ration.⁴ Taking him for an astrologer, the people believe that he can interpret birthmarks (*lakṣaṇa-*), and so parents show him their daughters. Whenever he meets a young girl endowed with lucky marks, and of his own social class (*lakṣaṇavatīm savarṇām*), he asks her if she would be able to prepare a tasty meal (*guṇavad annam*) with his *prastha* of rice, but he is always made fun of and rejected – until he comes across a *suitable girl*, as Vikram Seth would put it.

This comes about, Mitragupta goes on, when Śaktikumāra arrives ‘in the region of the Śibis, in a town on the banks of the Kāverī’, the great river of the South (*śibiṣu kāverītīrapattane*). It seems fairly certain that Śibis was another name for the Coḷas,⁵ the heart of whose territory was the Kāverī delta, and who were at the time still very far from enjoying the power they were later to acquire. We may even conjecture that the town which Daṇḍin refers to was the celebrated ancient port at the mouth of this river, variously known as Kāverīpaṭṭinam, Kāverīpūmpaṭṭinam, Pūmpuhār, etc.⁶ In one of his detailed studies on Daṇḍin, D. K. Gupta takes these identifications for granted, attributing the territory in question to the domain of the Pallavas at the time (Gupta 1972, 101, 103). Pallava control of the Kāverī delta dates back to the reign of King Siṃhaviṣṇu, i.e. the end of the 6th century, but it is hard to determine how things stood in this area in the times of Daṇḍin (cf. Gopalan 1928, 84-85, 104-5). However, apart from the contingent vicissitudes, I think that we may fairly safely consider this to be a region that Daṇḍin felt as his own; in fact I believe, as we shall see, that one of Daṇḍin’s aims was to celebrate the customs of his ‘country’.⁷

The girl in question is shown to Śaktikumāra by her nurse – she is an orphan who, together with her parents, has lost the considerable wealth once enjoyed, to be left with only a tumbledown dwelling. Here, through the thoughts

4. For this measurement of weight Monier-Williams (*s.v.*) proposes various equivalents, including 32, 16 or 6 *palas*. It is a unit of measure that has evidently undergone variations in the course of time, and it is hard to define it here with any precision; for the complexity of the problems regarding measurements in mediaeval India, see e.g. Paramhans 1984. The significant fact remains, however, that according to the *Arthasāstra*, precisely a *prastha* constitutes the daily supply of uncooked rice reserved for high-ranking male members of the royal household, to whom, on account of their status and indeed of their physical needs as compared with women’s and children’s, went the most abundant ration of food (Trautmann 2012, 57-58); thus, we might imagine something like half a kilo.

5. It is worth noting that the Tamil form of the name Śibi, i.e. Cempiyan, was to find frequent use among the Coḷas; thus would be named, among others, a celebrated queen of the 10th century, Cempiyan Mahādevī, whose idealized portrait is probably to be seen in a bronze statue now in the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. On this statue, and on the Coḷa art of the period of this queen, see in particular Dehejia 1990, 1-47.

6. For essential details about this site, cf. for example Ghosh 1989, 216.

7. On the other hand, we may perhaps consider a place further north along the course of the Kāverī, i.e. closer to Kanchipuram; the extremely generic toponym recurs in present-day Kaveripattinam, in the district of Krishnagiri, a place that owes its fame to the wars between the British and Hyder Ali, and his son Tipu Sultan.

of the young man as he beholds her, Daṇḍin provides a long description of the girl: this, together with the description of the meal she subsequently prepares, constitutes a major feature of this short story. Basically, it proceeds upwards, from the girl's feet to her hair, and obviously the general picture is of a comely, buxom woman with ample breasts, bewitching eyes and long black locks – the image of female beauty common to all classical Indian culture. Of course, the very epitome of this kind of description of the female body, starting 'from below', is to be seen in the portrayal of Umā in Canto I of the *Kumārasambhava*. The truly striking feature of this passage by Daṇḍin, however, lies in the fact that it aims to show this beauty coinciding, in every detail, with auspiciousness. It is indeed fitting, and obviously was meant to be, that Daṇḍin gives this interior monologue through the voice of a character representing – albeit feigned – an astrologer, since the most accurate interpretation of the passage is to be made when comparing it with the chapter dedicated to the young maiden's signs of good and bad omen by Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, the famous text on astrology attributed to the 6th century (BS Chapt. LXX, *Kanyālakṣaṇam*).⁸ In fact, the comparison shows clearly that when we read the passage by Daṇḍin we are to take as integral parts of a picture evoking and promising good fortune not only the details most evidently associated with the idea of *lakṣaṇas*, 'signs', such as the lines on the hands presaging 'abundance of money, grain and children' (*dhanadhānyaputrabhūyastva-*), but also what we might call the more aesthetic observations, dedicated to the shape, harmony and hues of the various parts of the body.⁹ Apart from the actual 'signs', the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* dwells at length on precisely these aspects, pointing out the forms of good or bad omen of each part of the female body, and of course the ideal is precisely the same. For example, Daṇḍin writes:

Her feet have even ankles, and they are fleshy and without veins; her shanks are well rounded, and hers knees are difficult to see, as if swallowed by her plump thighs.¹⁰

While Varāhamihira notes that:

8. The *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* is quoted according to the edition by M. Ramakrishna Bhat (Bhat 1986–7). The affinity between the two passages, by Daṇḍin and in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, is also briefly noted by Singh (1979, 456–57); cf. also Gupta (1972, 212–13).

9. As Bhat had already pointed out (Bhat 1986–7, Vol. 2, 674–75), fairly close comparison can also be made with the words of Sītā in *Rāmāyaṇa* VI.38.2–14. Here Sītā speaks of the predictions – erroneous, she complains, thinking that Rāma is dead – regarding her future made by the astrologers (*kārtāntikāḥ*, v. 5, etc.) on the basis of her physical appearance, and describes her own beauty as closely bound up with auspiciousness.

10. Kale 1966⁴, Text 159: *samaḡulphasandhī māṃsalāv asīrālau cāṅghrī jaṅghe cānupūrvavṛtte pīvarorugaste iva durupalakṣye jānūnī*.

If a man wishes to be a lord of the earth, he should marry a girl who has (...) even, fleshy, lovely and well-hidden ankles. Auspicious (...) are shanks without hair, without veins and well rounded, knees which are even and without prominent joints. Plump thighs, similar to the trunk of elephants, and without hair (...) confer great wealth.¹¹

Highly significant is one of the concluding phrases in Śaktikumāra's monologue: 'Surely such an aspect is not in contradiction with her character' (*seyam ākṛtīr na vyabhīcaratī śīlam*), which seems to echo the observation in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* at the end of the chapter cited: 'In general, in ugly women there are faults, and where is [a beautiful] aspect there are virtues' (*prāyo virūpāsu bhavanti doṣā yatrākṛtis tatra guṇā vasantī*, BS LXX.23cd).¹² It goes without saying that implicit in this conception is the role of *karman*, which determines 'fortune' in every respect, while the concurrence of auspiciousness and beauty is fundamental in the representation of the female figure in classical Indian sculpture and its interpretation.

In any case, having observed these features, the young Śaktikumāra decides to put the girl to the test, asking her too to prepare a complete meal using only his *prastha* of rice. The girl succeeds triumphantly and eventually, we learn, there is even some food left over. In fact, she shows herself to be not only an excellent cook, but also skilled in domestic economy, for the tale describes a series of shrewd deals she is able to pull off, though they are rather unlikely given the meagre value of the exchanged objects. She sends her nurse to sell the rice husk to goldsmiths, for it is said to be useful to polish jewels, and with the small coins (*kākinī-*) thus obtained she sends her to buy some good quality wood for the fire to cook on and some dishes – a small cooking pot and a couple of bowls (*mitaṃpacāṃ sthālīm ubhe śarāve ca*). From the wood used to cook the rice she then obtains charcoal, which she similarly sends her nurse to sell to buy the ingredients to prepare the meal and a refreshing bath for the guest, i.e. vegetables, clarified butter, curd, sesamum oil, myrobalan and tamarind (*śākaṃ ghrtaṃ dadhi tailam āmalakaṃ cīncāphalaṃ ca*). Not only do these deals seem somewhat improbable, but the tale is hardly very consistent in its description of the dishes and raw materials; in fact, to give the guest a fitting reception Daṇḍin has the girl using various other implements and ingredients which she had not purchased with her deals. At the same time, it is precisely thanks to this easy-going approach that the author is able to give us such a live-

11. BS LXX.1-3: (...) *kumāryāḥ* (...) *samopacitacārunigūḍhagulphau* / (...) *yasyās tām udvahed yadi bhuvō dhīpativam icchet* // 1 // (...) *praśastau* / *jaṅghe ca romarahite viśire suvṛtte jānudvayaṃ samam anulbaṇasandhidesam* // 2 // *ūrū ghanau karikarapratimāv aromāv* (...) / (...) *vipulāṃ śrīyam ādadhātī* // 3 //

12. For various other literary passages (of the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, etc.) reflecting the same idea, cf. Kale 19664, Notes 103; Gupta 1972, 213, n. 1.

ly account. Here we will look more closely into some of the salient features, with inevitably some repetition.¹³

Equipment, dishes, places and furnishings

The list of dishes and equipment includes, in particular, the above mentioned cooking pot (*sthālī-*), which also has a lid (*pidhāna-*), and the two bowls (*ubhe śarāve*). The latter appear suitable to contain liquids, which justifies the translation of this term, very generic in Monier-Williams' dictionary (cf. *s.v.*), with bowl or suchlike rather than 'platter' (e.g. Gupta 1970, 396). Then we have: a mortar (*ulūkhala-*) of *kakubha* wood (*kakubholūkhala-*), with a long pestle of *khādīra* wood (*vyāyatena [...] khādīreṇa musalena*)¹⁴ the end of which is iron-plated (*lohapatra-*), used, as we shall see, to make the rice good for consumption; a winnowing basket (*śūrpa-*), again for the rice;¹⁵ a ladle (*darvī-*), to stir and serve; a water pitcher (*bhṛṅgāra-*), to pour out the water to drink; another water vessel (*karaka-*), to pour out the water to rinse the mouth at the end of the meal;¹⁶ a fan of palm-leaves (*tālavṛnta-*), and, obviously, the fireplace itself (*cullī-*), which the young woman worships throwing in a few grains of rice before starting on the work of cooking (*dattacullīpūjā*, cf. Kale 1966⁴, Notes 103). The young man is immediately invited to take his place on the terrace before the house-door (*alinda-*), which has been sprinkled with water and then swept. When the time to eat comes he is invited to sit on a bench (*phalaka-*) placed on the floor (*kuṭṭime*), which has been wetted and swept too. The meal is served placing the two bowls, moistened (*ārdra-*), on a *kadalī* leaf from the garden (*aṅgaṇakadalī-*) cut to a third of its size. As is well-known, the use of banana leaves was universal in Tamil Nadu at least until very recent times as a plate or tray to serve the traditional complete vegetarian meals, consisting of rice and other preparations, which are commonly called, indeed, *meals*, and which the food cooked by the girl here resembles fairly closely. At the end of the guest's meal the nurse clears away the leftovers and spreads the floor with fresh green

13. Brief analyses of the 'culinary' vocabulary in this passage are proposed in Gupta 1970, 396; 1972, 243-46; Singh 1979, 333 (which appears entirely copied from Gupta 1970, 396). In some cases, my interpretation of the terms differs slightly from that of these authors.

14. Onians (2005, 607) notes: '*Khādīra* wood, used for the pestle, is cashew, the wood recommended for a Vedic sacrificial stake. *Kākubha* wood, used for the mortar, is from *ārjuna* tree, and is still used today to make the mast from which devotees suspend themselves for mortification at festivals. These woods bear witness that even for vegetarian preparations an evocation of the violence of sacrificial killing is required'.

15. As a description of this object, the definition by Monier-Williams (*s.v.*) may be useful: 'a winnowing basket or fan (i.e. a kind of wicker receptacle which, when shaken about, serves as a fan for winnowing corn [...])'.

16. Monier-Williams (*s.v.*): 'water-vessel (esp. one used by students or ascetics)'.

cowdung (*haritagomayopalipte kuṭṭime*). Here the young man spreads out his cloak and lies down to sleep it off.

Preparing and cooking the rice, and other cooking preparations

These are the preliminary operations performed by the girl, constituting one of the most interesting parts of the short story, especially with regard to the preliminary treatment of rice, which has much in common with the post-harvest methods used in India to this very day; when performed manually, this is a typically female task.¹⁷ The rice brought by the young man is evidently still in the form of ears; in fact, the girl completes the threshing, firstly by ‘pounding (shelling?) this perfumed rice a little’ (*tān gandhasālīn saṃkṣudya mātrayā*),¹⁸ after which she leaves it to dry – an indispensable part of the process – turning it over in the sun, which is obviously the most traditional method. Then, ‘on a firm and flat ground, beating delicately with the back of a cane, she separated the rice from the husk, without breaking this’, because in fact she meant to sell it (*sthirasamāyām bhūmau nālīpṛsthena mṛdumṛdu ghaṭṭayantī tuṣair akhaṇḍais taṇḍulān pṛthak cakāra*). The rice is then placed in the long-handled mortar – a common article in the villages of India up to this day – which basically serves to separate the grain from the bran; here the girl beats the rice vigorously, stirring it with her fingers as she proceeds, and then ‘the rice is cleaned from particles and awns through the winnowing basket’ (*śūrpaśodhitakaṇakimśārukāṃs taṇḍulān*), after which it is rinsed thoroughly. On cooking the rice must absorb all the water. In fact, the girl boils five times as much water as there is rice (*kvathitapañcagūṇe jale*); she pours it in, and when it floats up she skims off the ‘rice scum’ (*annamaṇḍa-*) placing the lid at the opening of the pot. Cooking is completed on a lower fire, stirring, and finally the rice is poured out tipping the pot upside down.

Apart from the rice, Daṇḍin tells us that the girl cooks ‘two or three [vegetable] relishes’ (*dvitrān upadaṃśān*).¹⁹ She has gathered the rice-scum in one of the new bowls which she cools, placing the bowl in the wet sand and fanning it. To this rice-scum she adds some salt (*lavaṇa-*) and scents it with incense (*dhūpa-*) which she has evaporated over the embers.

17. For the entire process of rice cultivation in India useful information can be found at http://www.agritech.tnau.ac.in/expert_system/paddy/phtc.html (last access on January 2016). For the work of women in rice cultivation, cf. for example *Women in Rice Farming* 1985 and Saradmoni 1991.

18. Throughout the passage uncooked rice is called *dhānya*, *śālī* or *taṇḍula*, and the two terms are always used in the plural when declined, while cooked rice is called *anna*, *sikṭha* (pl.) or *śālyodana*.

19. That these relishes are made of vegetables is said, quite convincingly, in the commentary by Kale (*upadaṃśān śākādīn*, Kale 19664, Text 162).

Ablutions, and lunch is served

On receiving the young man the girl offers him water for his feet. The text points out that she has already bathed (*snāna-*); now, before serving the food, she crumbles the myrobalan, and has the nurse invite him to wash in his turn, handing him the myrobalan and sesame oil for the purpose (*dattatailāmalkaḥ*). At the end of the meal she offers the young man water to rinse his mouth (*ācamana-*) – this being a codified rule (cf. *Mānavadharmasāstra* V.145).

And now we come to the meal itself. To begin with, the girl serves the young man with a rice-gruel (*peyā-*), probably prepared with the rice-scum mentioned above.²⁰ She then brings, in order: to ladlefuls of cooked rice (*tasya śālyodanasya darvīdvayaṃ*), a little clarified butter (*sarpis-*), a soup (*sūpa-*) and the vegetable relish (*upadaṃśā-*, here sg.). After this comes the remaining rice (*śeṣam annam*) together with curd (*dadhi-*) sprinkled with (*avacūrṇita-*) ‘the three spices’ (*trijātaka-*),²¹ as well as some buttermilk (*kālaśeya-*) and sour gruel (*kāñjika-*),²² the latter two being served cold (*sītala-*). The water which she then gives him to drink from a new pitcher (*navabhṛṅgāra-*) is flavoured: the text describes it as treated with aloe incense, scented with fresh *pāṭalī* flowers and infused with the fragrance of full-blown *uṭpala* flowers (*agurudhūpadhūpitam abhinavapāṭalikusumavāsitam utphulloṭpalagrathitasaurabham*). Daṇḍin gives a detailed description of the delight experienced by the young man as he drinks it. Finally, the girl gives him water to rinse his mouth from another vessel (*aparakaraka-*).

Conclusions

Thus not only is Gominī in appearance a sort of perfect embodiment of good omens, but her behaviour has proved impeccable in every respect: indeed, she has shown herself to be shrewd in her management of the domestic resources, but also careful about cleanliness or, in more Indian terms, purity. Moreover, the fact that she never strays from the home is clearly to be seen as a sign of

20. Monier-Williams (*s.v.*) defines *peyā* ‘rice gruel or any drink mixed with a small quantity of boiled rice’. In his commentary Kale, quoting Vāgbhaṭa, points out that *peyā* contains cooked rice, while *maṇḍa*, i.e. the rice-scum mentioned above, does not contain rice (*peyā sasikthā / ’maṇḍo ’sikhthā, sasikthā peyā (...)*’ *iti vāgbhaṭokteḥ* /, Kale 19664, Text 162). Gupta (1970, 396) says: ‘water-gruel mixed with some boiled rice’; cf. also Gupta 1972, 245-46.

21. Monier-Williams (*s.v.*): ‘mace, cardamoms, and cinnamon’; Kale’s commentary says instead *tvak tailaṃ trikaṭuṃ vā*, i.e. ‘cinnamon, sesamum oil or *trikaṭu*’ (Kale 19664, Text 163); for this last word, Monier-Williams (*s.v.*) has ‘the 3 spices (black and long pepper and dry ginger)’. Gupta (1970, 396), translates *trijātaka* with ‘cinnamon oil’.

22. Monier-Williams (*s.v.*): ‘sour gruel, water of boiled rice in a state of spontaneous fermentation’.

virtue – in fact it is the nurse we see engaged in transactions away from home. The tale draws to a close explaining that Śaktikumāra marries the girl; later on, however, he neglects her and takes a courtesan (*gaṇikā*) as a mistress. Yet, she continues to honour her husband like a god, the classical role of womankind (*Mānavadharmasāstra* V.154, *Kāmasūtra* IV.1). In virtue of her qualities she is entrusted with running the whole household – and so Śaktikumāra can enjoy the fruits of the *trivarga* in peace: that is why, Mitragupta concludes, it is the virtues of the wife that make a man happy.

Apart from its considerable inventive and stylistic literary qualities, characteristic of the author Daṇḍin in general, the tale is, as we have seen, interesting above all on account of its documentary value; here, clearly, we have concrete evidence of the recipes of Pallava India, and a series of utensils and practices then associated with the consumption of food. In keeping with the preamble to the account, Daṇḍin places the emphasis on rice and what can be derived from it, while the context is simple and rural. Hence we cannot assume that what has been described adds up to a standard meal of the time, nor indeed can we arrive at too many conclusions *ex silentio*.²³ Nevertheless, the fact remains that to this very day rice is the staple food of Tamil Nadu, and basically we could still today easily identify the descendants, as it were, of all the dishes mentioned in this tale.

However, as hinted above, it is perfectly possible that Daṇḍin wants to tell us something more between the lines. Among the crafty, or at least morally unconstrained, characters that throng the adventures he recounts, the figure of Gominī is outstanding on account of her virtues, and all the more so coming after the previous tale told by Mitragupta, depicting a particularly loose and indeed wicked woman, Dhūminī (who is said to come from Trigarta, a country in the North). Is it simply a matter of chance that the story of Gominī is set in the region that Daṇḍin came from? Actually, the whole account can be read as praise of the nature, manners and – why not? – beauty of the Tamil women.

Secondly, while bearing in mind the basic conditions – rice as essential ingredient, the rural context – it seems clear that the vegetarian meal prepared by Gominī, and indeed the care she takes over purity (considering, also, the various utensils described as ‘new’), have profound Brahmanic connotations. It has to be added that this is not the only case in which Daṇḍin extols the ‘orthodox’ practices of the Tamil region; a passage in the *Avantisundarīkathā* appears to describe the exquisitely pure conduct of the Brahmans who dwell, in fact, on the banks of the Kāverī.²⁴

23. On the subject of preparing rice, a passage in the *Avantisundarīkathā* contains some particularly interesting material, listing a series of operations ranging from husking to the final seasoning (*Avantisundarīkathā*, ed. Śāstrī 1954, 28-29; cf. Gupta 1972, 244). At first sight, however, the vocabulary and recipes appear to be rather different.

24. *Avantisundarīkathā*, ed. Śāstrī 1954, 195 ff.; cf. Gupta 1972, 202-3. The term ‘Brahmanic’ is to be understood here in terms of religious orthodoxy and not, obviously, with reference to the *varṇa* of the protagonists of the story: Śaktikumāra, as a *śreṣṭhiputraḥ*, is probably to be con-

Thus both the behaviour of Gominī, recalling in every respect the well-known Brahmanic standards for the good wife, and the meal she prepares can be interpreted as a little part of, as it were, the ‘conquest’ of the South by Brahmanic values or, perhaps better, of their promotion as favoured both by the Pallava dynasty with its magnificent monuments, and by a literary figure of their world as Daṇḍin eminently was.

sidered a *vaiśya*, and so too the girl, given that the young man seeks someone of his own social class (*savarṇāṃ*).

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