

Theologising the Inaugural Verse: *Śleṣa* Reading in *Rāmāyaṇa* Commentary

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Abstract: In full-length commentaries from the early second millennium, intellectuals from the Śrīvaiṣṇava community of South India recast the Rāmāyaṇa within the frame of a shared metaphysics oriented towards the paramount overlordship of the god Viṣṇu. By employing innovative strategies and incorporating the performative modes of temple oratory, these intellectuals sought to transform the paradigmatic exemplar of Sanskrit literary culture into a soteriological work within the conceptual categories of Sanskrit aesthetics. This paper examines the procedures and purposes of this hermeneutic project as evident in the sixteenth-century commentary of Govindarāja.

Introduction

The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki is accepted by many contemporary Hindus as a foundational religious text. This particular understanding, though often taken to be an ahistorical given, is the result in part of a transformation in the receptive history of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a hermeneutic project which sought to overturn one categorisation of the genre of the epic (as a work of literary culture, *kāvya*) and replace it with another (as a 'remembered' work of tradition, *smṛti*). This paper focuses on the interpretation of the *mā niṣāda* verse of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, considered the first instance of poetic composition in Sanskrit, by the sixteenth-century Śrīvaiṣṇava intellectual, Govindarāja. My concern is to recover the historical agency involved in one of the critical practices through which the *Rāmāyaṇa* came to be, in a sense, what it is today.

Govindarāja and other Śrīvaiṣṇavas sought to overturn the antecedent receptive history of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as *kāvya*, developing methods to transform the epic into a soteriological work within the conceptual categories of Sanskrit aesthetics. This is nowhere more evident than in Govindarāja's innovative application of the trope of *double entendre* (*śleṣa*) to *mā niṣāda*, an interpretive practice stretching interpretive theory in the extreme, with the capacity to destabilise language itself by bifurcating the text phonically and semantically into primary and secondary levels of denotative meaning.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First I briefly review the early receptive history of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, its status as *kāvya*, the special significance of *mā niṣāda*,

and the Śrīvaiṣṇava engagement with this history of reception in commentaries from 1250 to 1600. I then present an analysis of Govindarāja's *śleṣa* reading. I conclude with some preliminary reflections on the hermeneutic implications of Govindarāja's radical doubling of meaning through *śleṣa*. What are the limits of this form of interpretation? Are there implicit or explicit norms governing *śleṣa* reading? Or is it a total free-for-all, where one might, in theory, similarly double any text according to whim (and the technical virtuosity of the interpreter)? I am especially concerned with the degree to which Govindarāja's practice invokes standard categories in Sanskrit aesthetics, only to deviate from these in provocative ways.

Rāmāyaṇa as kāvya

The earliest characterisation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, dating back to the frame-narrative of the epic itself, was as *kāvya*. According to Sanskrit literary tradition, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was in fact the first work of poetry, the *ādi-kāvya*; this designation is based in large measure on *mā niṣāda* which is the subject of this paper. The setting for this verse – one of the most famous in the entire Sanskrit language – is as follows. The poet, Vālmiki, has just visited the divine sage Nārada, who recounted in brief the story of the acts of Rāma, best among men. Thinking about what he has heard while returning to his hermitage with his student, he beholds a disturbing sight: a hunter kills a *krauñca* bird in the act of love before his very eyes. Vālmiki utters a curse:¹

Hunter, may you never attain stability, since you killed one among this pair of *krauñca* birds in the thrall of sexual desire.

*mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhāṃ tvam agamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ/
yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam//*

To Vālmiki's amazement, this utterance issues forth in a special form, with four feet each containing an even number of syllables set to the melody of a *vīṇā* and to musical time, as Vālmiki himself remarks to his student three verses later (R 1.2.18). As we learn, the god Brahmā has just bestowed upon him the gift of poetic composition.

Beyond the frame narrative itself, the convention that this verse marks the origin of *kāvya* develops in the earliest Sanskrit epic poetry (Aśvaghōṣa in the second century C.E.), and is repeated in numerous subsequent works of Sanskrit poetry and aesthetics. But it is not entirely clear what exactly constitutes this newness. Sheldon Pollock has recently explored this issue in ways that highlight the differences between the *Rāmāyaṇa* and what was perceived to precede it – the Veda. Much of the literary-aesthetic discussion centres on formal features, especially metrical innovation, yet the *anuṣṭubh* metre in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* is

composed was already in existence for perhaps a millennium or more.² But Pollock identifies an additional element of newness, one more subtle and complex, not explicitly theorised by Sanskrit poets: here, for the first time a poet represents personal, human experience independent of any mythic context. It is in this sense, more than any other, that the *Rāmāyaṇa* represents a break from the ritual arena of the Veda. We may observe here the distance between this literary-aesthetic conception of the text and that of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, for whom the *Rāmāyaṇa* attains its status as *smṛti* precisely by virtue of its exposition of the injunctions of the Veda (*vedopabr̥mhanam*).

The dominance of the former in the early receptive history is attested by the perfunctory treatment the *Rāmāyaṇa* receives in the *Purāṇas* and the plethora of Sanskrit *kāvya* retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, almost a class of literature unto itself – the strongest evidence we have of the reception of the epic prior to the second millennium.³ This status of *Rāmāyaṇa* as exemplar of *kāvya* later received explicit theorisation by the early aestheticians, Ānandavardhana (ninth century) and Abhinavagupta (tenth century). In *Dhvanyāloka* 1.5, Ānandavardhana defines the essence of *kāvya* itself – as poetic sentiment (*rasa*), or more specifically the suggestion of poetic sentiment (*rasa-dhvani*) – with *mā niṣāda* as his example.⁴

Rāmāyaṇa as smṛti

From the end of the first millennium, a number of vernacular and theological traditions began to develop devotional, theistic approaches to the epic (resulting in the production of major works including the *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, twelfth or thirteenth century, the ‘lost’ *Mūlarāmāyaṇa*, fourteenth century, the *Ādhyātmārāmāyaṇa*, fifteenth century, the *Rāmcaritmānas*, sixteenth century, and the *Rāmāyaṇatātparyanirṇaya*, sixteenth century), as the institutional locus for the reception of the epic shifted from the court to the temple, but nowhere as early and in as sustained a manner as in the Śrīvaiṣṇava order.

In commentaries, retellings, and prose poems from the ninth century, Śrīvaiṣṇavas recast the epic within the frame of a metaphysics oriented towards the paramount overlordship of god Viṣṇu. A vast array of esoteric literature and poetry developed around the *Rāmāyaṇa*, including Kulacekarālvār’s ninth-century imaginative association of the narrative with the Govindarāja shrine at Cidambaram, Maṇipravāḷa (mixed Tamil and Sanskrit) commentaries and esoteric works of Periyavāccān Piḷḷai (b. 1228) and Vedānta Deśika (b. 1268), Sanskrit praise poems of Vedānta Deśika, and finally Sanskrit commentaries on the epic from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries.⁵ This shift to the temple culminated in the establishment of cultic worship of the figure of Rāma at Vijayanagara in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a process in which Śrīvaiṣṇavas were primary players. Within the Śrīvaiṣṇava temple, oral, performative modes of interpretation developed through which stories from the *Rāmāyaṇa* were used as parables exemplifying the devotional concept of surrender (*prapatti*). In full-length, verse-by-verse Sanskrit commentaries, Śrīvaiṣṇavas directly challenged the

literary–aesthetic tradition. Śrīvaiṣṇavas were dominant in developing a text-critical apparatus for the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which may to some degree be measured by the fact that four of the six commentaries used in the preparation of the Varodara critical edition are Śrīvaiṣṇava.⁶ Of these, Govindarāja's *Bhūṣaṇa* merits special consideration for a number of reasons: it is the most magisterial and widely disseminated of all the commentaries; in addition, by incorporating the comments of earlier writers verbatim directly into the body of the text, it represents a virtual compendium of Śrīvaiṣṇava interpretations.

Govindarāja directly asserts that the *Rāmāyaṇa* qualifies as a *smṛti* at several points in his commentary, even in his comment on R 1.4.7, where the *Rāmāyaṇa* refers to itself as *kāvya* ('the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* poem', *kāvyaṃ rāmāyaṇaṃ kṛtsnam*). Here, in typical fashion, Govindarāja adapts a rubric from aesthetics, the taxonomy of didactic discourse developed by Mammaṭa, the eleventh-century synthesiser of Abhinavagupta, only to introduce a counter-analysis: according to this taxonomy, while the Veda teaches like a lord, and legendary narrative (*itihāsa*) like a friend, *kāvya* teaches like a lover; Govindarāja refers to the analogy only to emphasise that the *Rāmāyaṇa* is both a *kāvya* and a *smṛti*. Similarly, but in a much more subtle and powerful way, Govindarāja redeploys Sanskrit aesthetic categories by developing novel interpretive methods and accommodating them to more familiar Sanskrit scholastic categories. By far, the most conspicuous and complex case of this style is his *śleṣa* reading of *mā niṣāda*.

What is *śleṣa*?

To make sense of what Govindarāja is doing here, it will be helpful to consider the distinguishing characteristics of *śleṣa* as laid out in Sanskrit poetics. *Double entendre*, or *śleṣa*, is a rhetorical trope in which a single phonemic sequence yields numerous meanings. As Appayya Dīkṣita (sixteenth century) defines it in his classic textbook on poetic figures, the *Kuvalayānanda*, *śleṣa* is 'the stringing together of multiple meanings' (*nānārthasamśrayaḥ śleṣaḥ*).⁷ Depending on the type of *śleṣa* and depending on one's language ontology, *śleṣa* may be said to involve homonyms or homophonemic utterances – in other words a complex form of paronomasia. A classic English example is when Mercutio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is stabbed, knows he is to die, and says: 'Ask for me to-morrow and you shall find me a grave man'; here the pun rests on the two meanings of the single word 'grave', a serious person or a corpse in a grave.⁸

Śleṣa, however, includes a much wider range of phenomena than such forms of paronomasia, not only multiple meanings of single words, but also alternative splitting of compounds, construing of syntax, and even symbolic associations of morphological and phonemic elements. *Śleṣa* emerges as a major category of analysis in Sanskrit poetics and a distinctive mode of composition, with the development of an entire technical apparatus (including associative lexicons) and the production of 'double-stream' poems, *divisandhāna-kāvya*, from the beginning of the second millen-

nium. Yet, despite this complex diversity, there are certain standard features of *śleṣa* theory and usage against which we may measure Govindarāja's *śleṣa* readings.

As an example, we can turn to a verse from Daṇḍin (c. 725), which Appayya Dīkṣīta cites:

Rising in fame, handsome, the circle of neighboring rulers devoted to him, this king captures the hearts of people with his light taxes. (Contextual Meaning)
Rising atop the eastern mountain, resplendent, a red-hued orb, the moon captures hearts with its gentle rays. (Non-contextual Meaning)

*asau udayam ārūḍhaḥ kāntimān raktamaṇḍalaḥ/
rājā harati lokasya ḥṛdayaṃ mṛdulaiḥ karaiḥ//* (K 64)

Here, the *śleṣa* rests on the double meanings of several words: *udaya* (fame, the eastern mountain); *rakta* (devoted, red colour); *maṇḍala* (circle of neighbouring rulers, orb); *rājā* (moon, king); *mṛdula* (light, gentle); and *kara* (tax, ray). Even in this relatively straightforward example, where the doubling of meaning is produced through semantic polysemy rather than phonemic resegmentation, the sophistication necessary for both composing and identifying a *śleṣa* should be clear. *Śleṣa* is not merely a technical device but rather a carefully cultivated, learned compositional practice with identifiable features. This king-moon verse of Daṇḍin involves a common form of *śleṣa*, with the eulogy of the king expressed through rhetorical comparison. What results is two stable levels of meaning simultaneously co-narrated, producing a verbal effect of doubling akin to the duck-rabbit icon Wittgenstein and others analysed. With this example in the background, I turn now directly to Govindarāja's *śleṣa* reading of *mā niṣāda*.

The inaugural verse

I cite the verse in its entirety here again:

Hunter, may you never attain stability, since you killed one among this pair of *krauñca* birds in the thrall of sexual desire.

*mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhāṃ tvam aḡamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ/
yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam//* (R 1.2.15)

Govindarāja first provides a literal gloss of the verse, which contains a grammatical irregularity, focusing attention onto elements that become the axis of the *śleṣa* reading. Even though this grammatical problem is not directly connected to the *śleṣa* itself, Govindarāja meditates so microscopically on grammar that the broader context recedes from view. The prescriptive application of Pāṇinian grammar to epic usage is a standard feature of epic commentary, but Govindarāja exploits this

practice, it would seem, to provide an opening for his counterintuitive second reading of the negative particle, *mā*. The issue is that the verb in the aorist (*lūi*) retains the augment ‘*a*’, even though this normatively should be elided to form the injunctive. First, he provides a fairly straightforward resolution by citing the seventh-century *Kāśikā* position so that through a different morphological analysis of the negative particle, (*mā* vs. *māñ*), the augment would no longer be prohibited.

But, as though this solution were unsatisfactory, Govindarāja next refers to another, more unusual explanation, that of the now lost twelfth-century *Durgha-ṭavṛtti* by the Buddhist grammarian Maitreya Rakṣita.⁹ Maitreya Rakṣita resolves the problem of the unwanted augment by providing an alternate break of the phonemic sequence. Significantly, this move involves taking the negative particle *mā* to mean *Śrī* (or *lakṣmī*, ‘fortune’, ‘prosperity’, name of the goddess, wife of Viṣṇu), actually an attested lexical meaning. By avoiding the augment altogether, one may read the phrase as, ‘o hunter, unfortunate one, may you never attain stability’ (*mā niṣāda pratīṣṭhām tu-ama gamah*). What Maitreya Rakṣita has done is replace ‘*tvam agamah*’ with ‘*tu-ama gamah*’, ‘*ama*’ being a *bahuvrīhi* compound meaning ‘unfortunate’ (i.e., without *lakṣmī*, *alakṣmika*). Although Maitreya Rakṣita’s construal is unnatural in terms of word order, it is grammatically plausible. And, again, it serves Govindarāja by providing a precedent for taking the word *mā* to mean *Śrī*, albeit in a different part of the verse. The stage is now set for the more dramatic readings to follow.

Govindarāja’s *śleṣa* reading

Govindarāja perceives in the verse the sort of bitextuality we normally associate with *śleṣa*, both the more straightforward kind that occurs in *śleṣas* such as the king–moon example cited earlier (based on semantic polysemy), and the more complex kind involving phonemic resegmentation.¹⁰ An example of the latter, involving the exact same element referred to above upon which both the grammatical reading of Maitreya Rakṣita and Govindarāja’s own *śleṣa* reading rests – the word, *mā*, as referring to the goddess, *Śrī* – is found again in the *Kuvalayānanda*. I cite the half-verse twice to represent orthographically the two different ways it may be read:

May the all-giver, the lord of *Śrī* who held up the mountain and the earth, protect you.

(1) *sarvado mādhavaḥ pāyāt sa yo gaṃ gām adidharat/*

May he who is always the lord of *Umā* and who held up the *Gaṅgā* river protect you.

(2) *sarvadomādhavaḥ pāyāt sa yo gaṅgām adidharat/* (K 63)

Here, the doubling of meaning cannot be confined to a play on the polysemy of single words. Rather, the same sequence of sounds is divided, on the one hand, into

the words ‘all-giver’ (*sarvada*) and ‘husband’ (*dhava*) of ‘Śrī’ (*mā*), and, on the other, into the words ‘always’ (*sarvadā*), and ‘husband’ (*dhava*) of Umā (*umā*). This double reading is made possible by the rules for euphonic combination (*sandhi*) in Sanskrit.

While other examples involving resegmentation similarly rest on features proper to the Sanskrit language such as the splitting of compounds, such resegmentable utterances, or oronyms, occur in almost all languages. In English, we find this more frequently in speech than in writing, given the rigidity of writing conventions, in combinations such as ‘bean ice’/‘be nice’. With Udbhaṭa’s (c. 800) definition, this kind of *śleṣa* came to be known as a *śabda-śleṣa*, i.e. a *śleṣa* in which the phonemic dimension itself rather than meaning is predominant; Govindarāja’s construal of *mā*, the crucial element in his reading, closely resembles a *śabda-śleṣa*. The previously cited king–moon example, however, is classified as an *artha-śleṣa*, a *śleṣa* based on meaning.

Govindarāja’s *śleṣa* reading rests on both standard lexical meanings and more complex etymologies and derivations. Replacing the negative particle, *mā* with *mā* as the goddess Śrī (as taken by both Maitreya Rakṣita’s grammatical explanation and in the *Kuvalayānanda*), Govindarāja combines it in compound with the next word, *niṣāda*. Based on the derivation of this word from the first class root *sad* plus the prefix, *ni*, he takes *niṣāda* to mean ‘place of residence’ (*nivāsaḥ*). The meaning for the newly formed compound is: ‘one in whom the goddess Śrī resides’, i.e. Viṣṇu. The entire verse is thereby transformed into the desired benediction. We should note that this reading, though grammatically plausible, is based on no attested sense of the word *niṣāda*, which is actually derived from a different verb – the fourth class verb *sad* meaning to scatter or finish rather than the first class *sad*. But it is upon this foundation that the entire *śleṣa* reading rests. Govindarāja further glosses the compound as Śrīnivāsa, a common Śrīvaiṣṇava epithet for Viṣṇu.

With this vocative in place – *mā-niṣāda* as Śrīnivāsa – Govindarāja fills out the other details of the *śleṣa* reading. First, the verb, now an aorist and not an injunctive, is understood to function semantically like an imperative. Next, he reads ‘stability’, *pratiṣṭhām*, as greatness (*māhātmya*), ‘one among a pair of *krauñca* birds’ (*krauñcamithunād ekam*) as Rāvaṇa (paired with his demon wife, Mandodarī), and ‘in the thrall of sexual desire’, *kāmamohitam*, as ‘filled with desire’, i.e. Rāvaṇa’s lust for Sītā. Finally, Govindarāja gives the *śleṣa* reading in its entirety: ‘May you, o Śrīnivāsa, who killed the one among the pair of demons filled with lust, be forever victorious’. It is a virtuoso hermeneutic performance, which completely transforms the verse through the meticulous application of the rules of Sanskrit grammar.

How this reading differs from *śleṣa*

The resemblance Govindarāja’s reading of *mā niṣāda* bears to *śleṣa* – construed bitextuality through both resegmentation (*śabda-śleṣa*) and double meanings (*artha-śleṣa*) – should be clear. I would now like to look at the primary ways this reading differs from the theorisation of *śleṣa*. The relationship between Sanskrit

poetics and Sanskrit poetry is complex: neither does theory bear a straightforward empirical relationship to practice nor does practice invariably conform to the normative precepts of theory. In addition, each rhetorical category is contested and reworked in different ways by theorists, *śleṣa* more so than almost any other. Yet there appears to have been consensus regarding one dimension of *śleṣa*: the copresence of *śleṣa* with other figures.

For a given bitextual utterance to be characterised as a *śleṣa*, the two levels of meaning usually convey a relationship inherent in another figure (*alamkāra*). This second figure may be a simile (*upamā*), metaphor (*rūpaka*), or another of the sense-based figures (*arthālamkāras*); Udbhaṭa (c. 800) characterises this relationship as the appearance (*pratibhā*) of the second figure. The exact nature of the relationship constitutes one of the major points of debate in the poetic tradition, and the central issue is a taxonomical one: if *śleṣa* is copresent with other figures, what determines its autonomy viz. these figures? Answers to this question range from subsuming all other figures involving *śleṣa* under *śleṣa* itself, as Udbhaṭa does, to taking *śleṣa* itself to be a mere mode of these other figures, as Daṇḍin does (Bronner 1999: 259–60).

To illustrate how such a tropic relationship functions in a *śleṣa*, we can return to the king–moon example cited earlier. Here, the relationship between the king and the moon is a metaphor (*rūpaka*), which we might rephrase as: the king is the moon. This metaphor also governs the double meanings of the other elements of the verse such as fame/the eastern mountain (*udaya*) and taxes/rays (*kara*). Such tropic relationships are easily identifiable wherever *śleṣas* occur in Sanskrit poetry and are in fact often marked by the presence of explicit indicators (*iva* for *upamā*, *eva* for *rūpaka*, *api* for *virodha*, etc.).

One notable exception to this rule, which would seem to provide an opening for Govindarāja's reading to be classified as a *śleṣa*, is Ānandavardhana's distinction between *śleṣa* and suggestion based on the denotative capacity of sound (*śabda-śakti-mūla-dhvani*). In demarcating the domain for this category, Ānandavardhana must differentiate it from *śleṣa* which it closely resembles. A major problem for Ānandavardhana is to integrate the new concept of suggestion to existing categories of rhetoric that he inherits. According to Ānandavardhana, most previous examples of *śleṣa* may now be subsumed under the new rubric of *śabda-śakti-mūla-dhvani*. If the figure related to the bitextual expression is merely implied (*ākṣipta*), it is a case of suggestion; if this figure is directly expressed (through the presence of the words such as *api* for contradiction, or *virodha*, and *adhika* for distinction, or *vyatireka*) it is a case of *śleṣa*.

But more apposite to Govindarāja's reading is Ānandavardhana's identification of a variety of *śleṣa* in which no separate figure is present at all: the co-narrating of multiple plot elements (*vastus*). This category would seem to correspond better to the *mā niṣāda* reading than a *śleṣa* requiring the presence of another figure, not only because it is difficult to conceive of a tropic relationship between the two levels as Govindarāja lays them out, but also because it is not clear what could provide the focus of comparison as the word *rājā* does in the king/moon example.

Govindarāja's reading could in theory be classified as a *śleṣa* if *śleṣa* were characterised only as a form of bitextual utterance.

The actual example Ānandavardhana provides, however, is not so straightforward. The verse simultaneously describes the exploits of Viṣṇu and Śiva using the exact same phrase from the earlier example of *śabda-śleṣa* ('the all-giver, lord of Śrī', *sarvado mādhavaḥ*, and 'he who is always the lord of Umā', *sarvadamādhavaḥ*):

May the all-giver, lord of Śrī, protect you. He is the one who destroyed the cart, who once made his very body that conquered the demon Bali into a female form, who killed the raised serpent. That one who resides in sound upheld the mountain and the earth. The immortals praise him as, 'destroyer of the head of Rāhu'. He himself gave a home to the Andhakas.

*yena dhvastam ano 'bhavena balijitkāyaḥ purā strikṛto
yaś codvṛttabhujarīṅgaḥ ravalayo 'gaṃ gāṃ ca yo 'dhārayat/
yasyāhūḥ śāśimacchirohara iti stutyam ca nāmāmarāḥ
pāyāt sa svayam andhakakṣayakaras tvām sarvado mādhavaḥ//*

May he who is always the lord of Umā protect you. He is the one who destroyed the god born of mind, who once made the conqueror of the demon Bali into his own weapon. His necklace and bracelets are serpents and he bore up the Gaṅgā river. The immortals praise him as, 'Hara', the bearer of the moon on his head. He himself destroyed the Andhakas.

*yena dhvastamanobhavana balijitkāyaḥ purāstriṅkṛto
yaś codvṛttabhujarīṅgāravalayo gaṅgāṃ ca yo 'dhārayat/
yasyāhūḥ śāśimacchiro hara iti stutyam ca nāmāmarāḥ
pāyāt sa svayam andhakakṣayakaras tvām sarvadamādhavaḥ// (D 2.21)*

It should be apparent that this example is not substantively different from the king/moon verse and that a similar metaphorical relationship between Viṣṇu and Śiva could be posited.¹¹ It seems that this category primarily allows Ānandavardhana to preserve some scope for *śleṣa*, now considerably marginalised by suggestion. So with the exception of this somewhat complex example of co-narrated plot elements, Govindarāja's reading would fail to qualify as a *śleṣa* due to the absence of another figure.

Govindarāja's *mudrālaṃkāra* reading

But this single *śleṣa* reading does not exhaust the fecundity of meaning at play in *mā niṣāda* for Govindarāja; rather, it is only the first of a series of interpretations which multiply meanings for the entire ten-verse passage preceding the *mā niṣāda* verse. Through this intricate procedure, the single word *krauñca* in the *mā niṣāda* verse is made to yield no less than six different senses. These

subsequent readings are all applications of another figure from Sanskrit poetics: the figure of signing (*mudrālaṃkāra*).

The *Kuvalayananda* defines *mudrālaṃkāra* as the ‘indication of indictable meanings’ (*sūcyārthasūcana*). *Mudrālaṃkāra* occurs most commonly in benedictory verses (*nāndīs*) at the beginning of plays but also in other modes of composition. The mechanics of this figure is clearly distinct from *śleṣa* in that the double meanings (usually names or titles) are merely indicated by the words of the verse and form no secondary level with a coherent syntax. Govindarāja himself cites the rule regarding the use of *mudrālaṃkāra* in benedictory verses: ‘Whether through meaning or sound, there should be some indication of [the contents] of the poem’ (*arthataḥ śabdato vāpi manāk kāvyārthasūcanam*).

An apposite example of *mudrālaṃkāra* is the first verse of Bhāsa’s *Pratimānāṭaka*, an important Sanskrit retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.¹²

May the god of the furrow, pleased with good verse, alluring with a beautiful neck, and bearing auspicious marks, protect us in life after life. That awe-inspiring lord is the unmatched enemy of the one who caused the goddess to cry.

*Sītābhavaḥ pātu sumantratustaḥ sugrīvarāmaḥ sahalakṣmaṇas ca/
yo rāvaṇāryapratimās ca devyā vibhīṣaṇātmā bharato ‘nusargam//*

Bhāsa’s verse indicates the names of various characters from the *Rāmāyaṇa* including Sītā, Sumantra, Sugrīva, Lakṣmaṇa, Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa, and Bharata, as well as the title of the play, *Pratimā*. Just as the *Pratimānāṭaka* introduces narrative elements through the words (*śabdataḥ*) themselves, other plays and poems do so through meaning (*arthataḥ*). So, in Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala*, the description of creation in the introductory verse presages Viśvāmitra’s creating heavens for Trīśāṅku. Other, non-*kāvya*, examples of the use of *mudrālaṃkāra* include the *Vṛttamaṇimālā*, which indicates the names of metres in each verse as a mnemonic.

Govindarāja’s first *mudrālaṃkāra* reading involves an indication of each of the six books of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (through meaning rather than sound, since the titles of the books are not directly stated):

Phrase	Meaning	Indicated book
<i>mā-niṣāda</i>	‘Śrīnivāsa’	<i>Bāla Kāṇḍa</i>
<i>pratīṣṭhām tvam agamaḥ</i>	‘keeping one’s vow’	<i>Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa</i>
<i>śāśvatīḥ samāḥs</i>	‘for all time’	<i>Āraṇya Kāṇḍa</i>
<i>krauñca</i>	‘crooked, small’	<i>Kiṣkindhā, Sundara, Yuddha, Uttara Kāṇḍas</i>

In this first *mudrālaṃkāra* reading, Govindarāja construes the emplotment of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in a manner more in the mode of *kāvya* than anywhere else in his commentary.

The second and third *mudrālaṃkāra* readings are far more ambitious. Govindarāja situates both in response to an objection regarding the propriety of Vālmiki representing his own experiences in the first fifteen verses of the chapter. This objection provides Govindarāja with a convenient opening; he responds that the entire passage from verse three to *mā niṣāda* is yet again an indication of the meaning of the poem, this time of the two central themes of the epic described in 1.4.7 (cited above; where the *Rāmāyaṇa* refers to itself as *kāvya*): the killing of Rāvaṇa (*paulastyavadha*) and the great acts of Sītā (*sītāyās caritaṃ mahat*).

Both readings rest on the presumption that Vālmiki's omniscient vision allows him to perceive distant events as if before his very eyes; therefore his comments to his student and his witnessing the killing of the *krauñca* bird convey prospectively subsequent events in the epic. The first reading for the theme in question describes Vālmiki viewing Rāma killing Rāvaṇa. The passage begins with Vālmiki pointing out a bathing spot to his student:

Bharadvāja, look at this bathing spot free from dirt, beautiful, with clear water like the mind of a good person.

*akardamam idaṃ tīrthaṃ bharadvāja niśāmaya/
ramaṇīyaṃ prasannāmbu sanmanuṣyamaṇo yathā//* (R 1.2.3)

In the 'Killing of Rāvaṇa', Vālmiki actually views with his mind's eye the location of the building of the bridge over the ocean as described in the *Yuddha Kāṇḍa*, perhaps considered a sacred bathing spot (*tīrtha*) because of the pilgrimage site of Rāmeśvaram. On the primary level Vālmiki asks his student to see (*niśāmaya*) the bathing spot, but on the secondary level he asks him to hear (*niśāmaya*) the story. 'The Great Acts of Sītā' reading proceeds along almost identical lines in describing Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā. Again, Vālmiki sees this event in his mind and describes it to his student. The bathing spot refers to the Godāvāri river, and its environs to the Pañcāvaṭī hut where Rāma and Sītā reside.

These last two examples are profoundly different from other *mudrālaṃkāra* 'indications of contents'. Now this technique no longer involves a mere indication of names, but approaches full allegoresis (for which there is no equivalent in Sanskrit theory) of the passage.

Conclusion

We can now return to the questions posed in the introduction. The radical bifurcation of the text in *śleṣa* reading powerfully illustrates the complexity of the hermeneutic project of *Rāmāyaṇa* commentary. Such commentaries are generally valued by Indologists merely for their philological utility as reflections of an original, as

exemplified by Rosalind Lefebber in an introductory essay to her translation of the *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa*:

A close consideration of the commentator's point of view forces us to perform a kind of triangulation, to measure the intellectual and emotional distance between ourselves and the commentators, and thereby perhaps perceive as well the distance between ourselves and the text.¹³

Although of heuristic value for translation, such triangulation renders ancillary or even wholly extrinsic phenomena not immediately pertinent to the recovery of an original. This approach ignores the supplementarity involved in any act of interpretation, the absence of hermetic closure in a text, the productive work of commentary as a concrete intervention in the world.¹⁴ Without accounting for the way commentaries, doxographies, anthologies, and retellings are characterised to a greater or lesser degree by supplementary distance from their originals, the historical agency involved in projects such as the theologisation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* would fail to come into view. This distance is especially pronounced in commentaries interjecting Vaiṣṇava metaphysics into an antecedent source composed more than a millennium earlier.

The virtuosity of Govindarāja's technique is his ability to traverse this distance and fuse his readings with the original. Govindarāja's *śleṣa* reading is nowhere challenged in the subsequent commentatorial literature, which may seem surprising given that the *śleṣa* appears to be the projection of the reader rather than a constitutive feature of the text. This would suggest that Govindarāja's reading is not a free-for-all, but rather delimited in some way.

The question of whether meanings identified are proper to the text itself or the projection of the reader is invariably adjudicated in Sanskrit through appeals to authorial intention (*vivaḥṣā*). The criterion of intentionality is distinct from that of the presence of a tropic relationship discussed earlier. Although it would seem that reading an utterance as bitextual would lack the presence of another figure, it is theoretically possible to read double meanings which do in fact bear this kind of relationship. Govindarāja's *śleṣa* reading is difficult to classify as a *śleṣa*, however, on both grounds: while it is a stretch to argue that this set of meanings is intended by the author, it does not appear even possible to posit a tropic relationship between the levels.

The identification of a *śleṣa* is normally not a subject of controversy for Sanskrit readers, in part because of the presence of several standard features. Authors often explicitly identify a given verse as a *śleṣa*. Bronner also points out genre-based, implicit conventions such as 'the unmistakable distinction between the bitextual and alliterative blocks', in Subandhu's *Vāsavadatta*, which serve 'as an implicit yet clear sign for the location of *śleṣa*'; moreover, the use of certain vocabulary and words indicating the presence of another figure (*iva*, *eva*, *api*) enables readers to identify a *śleṣa*. (Bronner 1999, 401–3). These are all conspicuously absent in *mā niṣada*.

After Vālmīki utters the curse and marvels at its metrical form, god Brahmā appears before him to explain that *mā niṣāda* is the result of his own gift of composition. Brahmā then grants Vālmīki the power of omniscient narration so he may recount all the events of the *Rāmāyaṇa*: ‘Whatever happened to that intelligent one, whether in secret or out in the open ... all will become known to you’ (*rahasyaṃ ca prakāśaṃ ca yad vṛttaṃ tasya dhūmataḥ ... sarvaṃ viditaṃ te bhaviṣyati*, R 1.2.33–4). The later sixteenth-century commentator Ātreya Ahobila actually locates the intentionality for the *śleṣa* level of meaning with Brahmā and not Vālmīki, the implication being that the doubling of the text is in fact concealed from Vālmīki himself. This position is linked to the deeper epistemological questions regarding how readers go about identifying *śleṣas*. But Govindarāja does not go down this path.

Govindarāja’s *śleṣa* reading seems to be based not on an appeal to intentionality, but to the intersubjective interpretive principles of the pragmatic arena of the Śrīvaiṣṇava temple. Śrīvaiṣṇava Maṇipravāla literature was the sedimentation in writing of oral discourse, especially the temple lecture (*upanyāsa*). Here, the open-endedness of exegetical practice is summarised in the single phrase Śrīvaiṣṇavas use to describe performative commentary: ‘text of enjoyment’ (*anubhava-grantha*); the objective of such commentarial activity is not to fix meaning once-and-for-all, but to participate creatively in the original, employing intricate world play, improvisational techniques, repetition, and novel forms of citation. Vasudha Narayanan has demonstrated that such practices in the *Tiruvāymōḷi Vācakamālai*, for example, apply ‘a performing art technique to a verbal commentary’, paradigmatically through glossing a single word or phrase in multiple ways on the model of the elaboration of a melodic theme (*rāga*) or dance movements.¹⁵ Stories are lifted out of their immediate narrative context into a didactic arena. A major objective of the hermeneutic project of the theologisation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was to widen the audience for such techniques from a restricted one (esoteric or *rahasya*) to one that was in some sense universal. Further study of the differences between the hermeneutic standards of temple and courtly institutional spheres may help elucidate the way Govindarāja and other *Rāmāyaṇa* commentators translate the modes of vernacular oral commentary into Sanskrit scholastic commentary through seemingly idiosyncratic practices such as *śleṣa* reading.

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Notes

- 1 *Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki* (1994) 1.2.15. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix, 'R' Other scholarly treatments of commentaries on this famous verse include Bronner (1999) and Goldman (1992) 93–106.
- 2 Pollock (2003, 80–1) and (2006, 77–9).
- 3 Some of the most famous include Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (fourth or fifth century), the *Bhāṭṭikāvya* (sixth or seventh century), Bhavabhūti's *Mahāvīracarita* and *Uttararāmarcarita* (eighth century), the *Pratimānātaka* and *Abhiśekanātaka* ascribed to Bhāsa (perhaps eighth or ninth century) and Murāri's *Anargharāghava* (ninth or tenth

century). Ramanujan (1989) wrote eloquently about 'reflections' in South Asian folk practices of retellings and embedded narratives, where familiar stories are performed and modified so that each version involves subtle variations, and a masterwork like the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be represented poetically hundreds of times without exhausting its capacity to generate new meaning. We may meaningfully think of these Sanskrit adaptations as belonging to a literary series, where new works evoke the antecedent text (here, Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*) through intertextual allusions and cues. See Jauss (1972).

- 4 *kavyasyātmā sa evārthas tathā cādikaveḥ purā/ krauñcadvandaviyogottaḥ śokaḥ ślokatvam āgataḥ// Dhvanyāloka of Ānandavardhana* 1.5. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix, 'D'. In his *Locana* commentary, Abhinavagupta teases out the implications of this key *kārikā*: 'That very meaning (i.e. the suggestion of poetic sentiment, *rasa-dhvani*) is the essence of poetry. For example, long ago the grief (*śoka*) produced from the separation of the two *krauñca* birds became the poetry (*ślokatva*) of the first poet'. This is, of course, a clear reference to Vālmiki's reflection in 1.2.18 that his new form of poetic composition should be called '*śloka*' since it was produced on the part of one overcome with grief (*śoka*) (*śokārtasya pravṛtto me sloko bhavatu nānyathā*) (R 1.2.18). The critical issue for Abhinavagupta is that the 'grief' in question cannot refer to Vālmiki himself but only to the *krauñca* bird, for aesthetic response – the experience of *rasa* – is bliss; Abhinavagupta further clarifies this 'grief' as the stable emotion (*sthāyibhāva*) for the poetic sentiment of pity (*karunā-rasa*) which is dominant in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Hence, the *rasa* in question pertains to the entire epic and not only to this particular verse. One peculiar aspect of Ānandavardhana's and Abhinavagupta's analysis of *mā niṣāda* is the reversal of the gender of the slain *krauñca* bird: although in Vālmiki's original it is clearly the male *krauñca* bird who is killed by the hunter's arrow, in Ānandavardhana's *vṛtti* and Abhinavagupta's commentary, the male bird instead laments the death of the female bird. Jeffrey Masson has convincingly argued that the reversal of genders is not the reflection of an alternative recension but is an intentional counter-reading, indicative of a sophisticated understanding of the status of *mā niṣāda* as an epitome of the narrative structure, what according to literary convention is called a poetic kernel (*kāvya-bīja*). What the aestheticians must have in mind is a parallel between the separation of the female bird from the male bird and the separation of Sītā from Rāma, the experiential basis for the identification of the poetic sentiment of pity (*karunā-rasa*) as the predominant sentiment of the poem. Govindarāja draws on the concept of *kāvya-bīja* in his successive *mudrālaṃkāra* readings. Masson (1969). Abhinavagupta's reflections on the origin of aesthetic experience. *Journal of the Oriental Institute [Baroda]* 18, 207–24.

5 See Mumme (1991) and Narayanan (1994).

- 6 At least six Sanskrit commentaries antedate Govindarāja (c. 1550–75); with the exception of the thirteenth century *Vivekatilaka* of Uḍāli Varadarāja (the earliest extant commentary, c. 1250), all were produced during the Vijayanagara period in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, several at the Ahobila Maṭha. The latter include the cryptically titled *Rāmānujīya* (fifteenth century) and the commentaries of Veṅkaṭakṛṣṇadhvārin (c. 1450–1500), Vaidyanātha Dīkṣita (c. 1500), Īśvara Dīkṣita (1518), and Maheśvaratīrtha (c. 1500–50 C.E.). We can date Govindarāja's own

commentary on the basis of the established dates of other contemporary figures. Govindarāja credits the inspiration of Vedānta Śaṭagopa Jiyar, the fifth head of this same Ahobila Maṭha, who was *rājaguru* to the chiefs of the Nāṇḍyāla family according to an inscription dated December 1548; this Śaṭagopa Jiyar probably presided at Ahobila from 1548 to 1557 (Sastry 1930, 278). Govindarāja also credits the encouragement of Bhāvanācārya, who lived during the reigns of the first Tuluva Vijayanagara kings in the early sixteenth century. Finally, Govindarāja obliquely refutes the opinions of Appayya Dīkṣita, whose dates are uncertain but roughly coterminous with those offered here, mid-sixteenth century. Combining these references, 1550–75 C.E. appears to be the probable date for the composition of the *Bhūṣaṇa*. See Raghavan (1940–42) 1–8, Shastri (1942) and Aiyangar (1942).

- 7 *Kuvalayānanda of Appayya Dīkṣita* 63. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix, 'K'.
- 8 *Romeo and Juliet* of William Shakespeare (1992) 3.1.97–8.
- 9 Harold Coward and K. Kunjuni Raja include this entry on Maitreya Rakṣita: 'This Buddhist grammarian in eastern India lived between 1092 and 1122, according to Yuddhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka, who thinks he may have been a Bengali. In addition to works on Buddhist Grammar, including *Dhātupradīpa*, *Dhurghaṭavṛtti*, and a *Tantrapradīpa* on Jinendrabuddhi's *Kāśikanyāsa* (a fragmentary manuscript, which is listed as residing at the Asiatic Society Library in Calcutta), he appears to have written a *ṭikā* on the *Mahābhāṣya*, which has been lost'. (Coward and Raja 1990, 207)
- 10 I draw the terms, 'bitextuality' and 'resegmentation' from Bronner (1999).
- 11 The actual king/moon verse, however, is as Appayya Dīkṣita tells us cited by Ānandavardhana as a case of suggestion, because the two levels of meaning are respectively contextual and non-contextual.
- 12 *Pratimānātaka of Bhāsa* 1.
- 13 Lefeber (1994), Tr, 27.
- 14 This formulation is drawn from Inden (2000).
- 15 Narayanan (1994) 109.