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A note on *pūrvaśikhā*

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T.P. Mahadevan and Frits Staal in their recent article “The turning-point in a living tradition” (EJVS 10-1, 2003) mention

two different waves of Vedism arriving in South India at two different periods of history: the first is represented by the *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans with their fronted top-knots and the second by the *aparaśikhā* Brahmans, their top-knots toward the back of their heads, making a pony tail. The *pūrvaśikhā* Brahmans who include the Nambudiris are seen to be well established in the Tamil country by the Sangam period, thus plausibly departing from the core areas of Vedic culture by ca. 100 BCE.

According to my opinion the *pūrvaśikhā* mode of wearing the hair seems to be alluded to in some Vedic texts. At the end of the *gavāmayana* or soma sacrifice lasting for one year the participants have to undergo a special kind of shaving their hair. The expression is e.g. TS 7,4,9,1 *śikhām anu pravapante* – “sie scheren [ihre Haare] entlang dem Haarschopf (gemeint wohl: bis auf den Haarschopf)” (Goto 1987: 288 note 679). Caland ad PB 4,9,22 *śikhā anu pravapante* offers a different translation: “their top-knots they one after another cause to be shaved.” Similar the parallel JB 2,374 *tasmāt sattriṇo dvādaśe māsy api śikhāḥ pravapante*, where Caland 1919 § 162 translates: “Deshalb scheeren sich die Teilnehmer an einem Sattra im zwölften Monate auch die Haarzöpfe ab.”

Caland’s translation is not likely for the following reasons. The participants of a *Gavāmayana* just follow the cows, who were the first to perform this session. The cows started the year-long session in order to obtain horns (KS 33,1; TS 7,5,1; PB 4,1; JB 2,374) or horns and claws (AB 4,17). In the tenth month they obtained horns. Some of them continued and in the twelfth month their horns “got curved.” Thus Caland ad PB 4,1,2 *śṛṅgāṇi prāvartanta* with the note that:

prāvartanta is usually taken in the sense of: “they fell off”. It is not clear to me how *pravartate* can have this meaning and I am inclined to take it in the sense of: “to get curved” (at the top) ...

The cows all obtained horns during the ten months, but those who continued the sacrifice, of them these horns got curved at the top; a *tūpara* animal, therefore, is, if I am right, not only a hornless animal, but also one with small, inward bent horns.

It seems to be clear that *pra-vartante* does not mean “to fall off”, but “to turn forward”, “to protrude”, “to start to grow” etc. (Caland 1919 § 162: “Deren Hörner begannen ... hervorzutreten”). Moreover, men imitate the session of the cows and want to look like them at the end of the year: *gavāṃ ... anurūpā bhavanti* (PB 4,9,22; JB 2,374). Therefore, *pra-vartante* and *pra-vapante* must refer to something similar. The horns of the cows turn forward during the last month of the year, and correspondingly the hair of the Gavāmayana participants is shaved forward except for the *śikhā*. In accordance with TS 7,4,9,1 *śikhām anu pra vapante* and PB 4,9,22 *śikhā anu pravapante* I am inclined to read JB 2,374 *apīśikhāḥ pravapante* (cf. the compounds *apikakṣa*, *apikarṇa* etc.): “they shave their hair forward towards the region of their hair-knots (i.e. in order to have the *śikhā* in front of their head).”

Abbreviations and Bibliography

- AB *Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa*
 JB *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa*
 KS *Kāthakam. Die Saṃhitā der Kāṭha-śākhā*
 PB *Pañcaviṃśa-Brāhmaṇa*
 TS *Taittirīya-Saṃhitā*

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