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A Victim Speaks Back

Jagdīs Gupta’s *Śambūk* (1977)

Śambūka¹ was a Shudra who broke the rules of dharma by practising asceticism, thus leading to the death of a Brahmin boy, for which Rāma punished him with death. This minor, though well-known, episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition has evoked controversies over many centuries, or at least caused consternation, among many later *Rāmāyaṇa* authors and readers (see e.g. Goldman & Sutherland Goldman 2017: 104–113 and Sinha 2011).

The *śambūkavadha* episode belongs to the *Uttarakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki’s epic (*sarga* 64–67.4) and opens with a Brahmin’s arrival at the gate of Rāma’s palace. The Brahmin, carrying the dead body of his son, explicitly blames Rāma for the untimely death of his child:

“now the realm of the great Ikṣvākus has no protector since it has acquired for its protector Rāma, a king who brings about the death of its children. [...] It is perfectly clear beyond any doubt that either in the city or the countryside there must have been some transgression on the part of the king, and thus there has been the death of a child” (7.64.11 and 14, transl. by Goldman & Sutherland Goldman 2017: 382).

Rāma summons his council, during which the sage Nārada explains that the death of the Brahmin boy is a result of some Shudra’s engagement in the ascetic practices reserved only for the three higher *varṇas*, or classes of society – Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. Rāma calls for the Puṣpaka, a flying chariot or palace

¹ Due to different pronunciation and transliteration/transcription rules with respect to Sanskrit and Hindi words that are written in the same way in the Devanāgarī script, throughout my paper (except of transliterated passages) I use Sanskrit forms in the case of the names of (literary) characters that originated in Sanskrit literature, in order to avoid confusion and multiplying different forms of words. Otherwise I follow the transcription commonly used for Hindi, in which short ‘a’ is usually dropped in final and certain intersyllabic positions. Therefore, I write Rāma and Śambūka but *Rāmcaritmānas* and *Śambūk*.

(cf. Goldman & Sutherland Goldman 2017: 1409), and sets out to search his kingdom. When Rāma finds the ascetic, just at the moment he learns that he is a Shudra, he beheads him. The very moment the ascetic is killed, the Brahmin boy is restored to life. Rāma is told about this by the gods who praise him for his deed, after he addresses them with the request for the boon to restore the boy to life.²

With time, this episode, evidently meant to support the *varṇāśrama* system, and in particular Rāma's treatment of Śambūka, began to cause a great deal of concern among the poets dealing with the story of Rāma's deeds. Some of their varied attitudes to the episode have been treated by Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman in the most recent, comprehensive discussion of its reception and different renderings in Indian literature in the introduction to their translation of the *Uttarakāṇḍa* of Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (Goldman & Sutherland Goldman 2017: 104–113; cf. Bulke 1999: 492–496). They, very rightly, consider the killing of Śambūka as one of the two – besides the episode of the abandonment of Sītā (*Sītātīyāg*) – critical events in the account of Rāma's (later) life, which is testified to in the ample literature available in many Indian languages. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman state:

“These events have significantly shaped the receptive history of the book and, indeed, the entire epic from at least the medieval period. The controversies raised by these episodes have only become more stark and heated in modernity with the rise of various social movements and forms of identity politics in India. These include regional, caste- and class-based, feminist, and Marxist readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which focus on one or both of these episodes, representing them as revelatory of the regressive social and political ideologies represented by the epic” (Goldman & Sutherland Goldman 2017: 82).

And indeed, modern authors and critics have tended to perceive the killing of Śambūka first of all as an unjustified, atrocious attack on a representative of the lowest order of Hindu society and proof that Rāma is far from being what he is supposed to be, namely the ideal man, supreme in righteousness (*maryādāpuruṣōttam*).

In this context, it is also worth bringing to our attention a provocative observation made by Devdutt Pattanaik on the utterly modern medium of Twitter. Pattanaik wrote:

“Many L[eft] W[ing] activist groups talk how Ram killed Shambuka, a shudra, to show how ‘Brahminism’ is oppressive. But same [sic] groups will not speak of how

² In the critical edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the scene with the gods belongs to the passages that were relegated to Appendix I but have been restored to the critical text in the Princeton translation; Goldman & Sutherland Goldman 2017: 218. As we shall see, it has been elaborated in Gupta's poem.

Ram also kills Ravana, a brahmin. The latter information complicates matters and prevents reducing Ramayana into binary politics" (Pattanaik 2019).

We may add here that Pattanaik's tweet as well as his (offensive) comments with which he reacted to other people's response make a worthy supplement to the research on the present-day reception of this episode. This is so especially since his idea undoubtedly adds a new – surprisingly largely unvoiced – dimension to the discussion on the controversial nature of the episode, and particularly because it is also reflected in Gupta's poem (52).

The main aim of this paper, concerned with the episode of killing Śambūka as presented in a Hindi poem *Śambūk* (1977) by a well-known Hindi poet Jagdīs Gupta (1924³–2001), is a close reading of the poem and an analysis of the tools employed by the poet to elaborate this traditional narrative in order to make it fit the modern world. Besides this we will also take a closer look at the ideas and convictions of society, social roles as well as obligations, and – more broadly – of the essence of being a human presented in the poem. While Śambūka will be the focus of the analysis, in this episode, as we shall soon see, there are the proverbial two sides of the same coin. So first, it is Śambūka, who, by being killed by Rāma, becomes an indispensable part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative tradition and with this act gains his narrative subjectivity, though in Vālmīki it is more potential than reality. Second, there is Rāma, the main actor of the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative, whose character, traditionally known as perfect, has been blemished by this act. Thus, discussing the episode, we cannot but refer to Rāma and his rule (*rām-rājya*), praised and acclaimed by mainstream Hindu tradition in its scriptures and social practice, but not favourable towards Shudras, expecting from them subordination and subjection to the other three orders of Hindu society. Before delving deeper into the analysis of Gupta's poem, I shall first briefly outline the main points concerned with the episode in Hindi literature and provide the background of the poet and his poem.

Gupta's *Śambūk*

A. The context

The *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition in Hindi literature boasts some great compositions of the early modern period such as Tulsīdās's *Rāmcaritmānas* (1574) or Keśavdās's *Rām-candracandrikā* (1601). The tradition of *rām-kathā*, or the story of Rāma's life, in

³ The year of Gupta's birth is given differently as 1924 or 1926; cf. e.g.: Śarmā 2007: 11, Datta 2005: 1512 and the poet's official website (<<http://www.jagdishgupt.com/>>, accessed August 20, 2020).

Hindi has been continued in the modern period as well, when authors, especially poets but not exclusively, not only narrate the entire story but also increasingly tend to choose single characters or certain episodes and make them the focus of their innovative narratives. Thus, we have *Sāket* (1932), by *rāṣṭrakavi*, or “national poet”, Maitilīśaraṇ Gupta, one of the most famous Hindi poems which grew out of an interest in Ūrmilā as an exemplification of female characters neglected by Indian authors of all epochs (for more, see Stasik 2009: 176–188). There is also one of the most discussed Hindi poems *Rām kī śaktipūjā* (*Ram’s adoration of Shakti*, 1936) by Sūryakānt Tripāṭhī “Nirālā” that shows Rāma full of genuine doubts, in great pain, desperately looking for the right solution (for more see Stasik 2009: 171–174), and a much more recent novel *Apne-apne Rām* (*To each his own Rām*, 1992) by Bhagvān Siṃh, claimed as one of the most controversial and/or one of the best Hindi novels in the last few decades (for more see Stasik 2009: 216–222).

However, none of these well-known works is in any way concerned with Śambūka’s killing by Rāma. In fact, few Hindi authors have chosen to single out this episode as the basis for their works. One exception worth mentioning here is a less-known drama entitled *Śambūk kī hatyā* (*The killing of Shambuk*, 1975) by Narendra Kohlī, an author well known for his widely-discussed *rāmkaṭhā* novel series published under the title *Abhyuday* (*The rise*, 1989; Stasik 2009: 208–216). Thus, Gupta’s *Śambūk* deserves a closer investigation as a work that fits in with the democratic trend (*janvād*) growing in strength at the time around its publication, i.e. the time of the Emergency in India (1975–1977). It also serves as evidence for the interest of Hindi writers in the Dalit movement/consciousness (*dalit cetnā*), social (un)equality, unprivileged social groups, and – more generally – in human rights.

Jagdīś Gupta was one of the important voices of the *Nayī kavītā*, or New Poetry, movement in Hindi. In the years 1954–1967 (Rosenstein 2004: 15), he also contributed to its development and consolidation as an editor of a journal under the same title. He has to his credit new poetry collections such as *Nāv ke pāṅv* (*Boat’s feet*, 1955), *Śabd damś* (*Words’ bites*, 1959) or *Himviddh* (*Cold stricken*, 1964). In his later creative life, preoccupation with Indian tradition and its narratives, which served him as a dialogic tool operating between the past and the present, becomes visible in his oeuvre. Among them we can mention *Gopā Gautam* (1985) that revisits Buddha’s life in terms of marital and male-female relationships. *Bodhivṛkṣ* (*Tree of awakening*, 1987) is also devoted to Buddha, while *Jayant* (1991) focuses on the character of Śacī and Indra’s son to look again at the female-male relationship from a new perspective. To this series also belongs *Śāntā: Rām kī bahān*⁴, another work, apart from *Śambūk*, rooted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

⁴ I have been unable to establish the year of its first print. Its text is available on the poet’s official website (<<https://jagdishgupt.com/upload/books/final-shanta-242117017.pdf>>).

In the preface to his poem, Gupta wrote that in 1970, a few years before the publication of *Śambūk*, he had started working on a project designed as a collection of poems entitled *Purāvṛtt* (*Old stories*), in which he intended to present “old stories and Puranic episodes with new significance and in a new form” (*prācīn kathāō tathā paurāṇik prasamgō ko nayī arthavattā ke sāth naye rūp mē*; Gupta 1977: vii–viii). According to the poet himself, the kernel of the planned work was the poem *Rakt tilak* which at the end of the project turned out to be the last section of his published work *Śambūk*. Gupta writes: “What was the beginning became the end, and the oddity was that whatever Śambūka said in it about Rāma, it got self-realized in the entire composition; all the ideas gathered in that poem continued to flow naturally in the texture of the whole composition” (*jo ādi thā, vahī ant ban gayā aur vicitrā yah huī ki rām ke viṣay mē usmē jo bhī kahā gayā thā, pūrī racnā mē vahī svayamev caritārth hotā gayā, jo vicār-sūtr us kavītā mē samgrahit hue the, sārī racnā kī bunāvaṭ mē vahī sahaj rūp se parivyāpta hote rahe*) (Gupta 1977: viii).

In Gupta's poem, unlike in Vālmīki's epic where Śambūka opened his mouth only to disclose his Shudra identity (7.67.2–3), Śambūka dominates the scene, voicing his grievances against Rāma, his rule and the social order represented by him. Śambūka serves as an embodiment of the oppressed classes and is seen as a genuine “son of the [Indian] soil” (*bhūmiputr*; Gupta 1977: xiv), of whom the opening lines of the poem say: “Wherever a human being will be hurt, silent, / Shambuk will become his voice” (*manujatā ho jahā āhat, mūk, / vahī uskā svar bane śambūk*; Gupta 1977: 2). Taking into consideration the period when the poem was created, the character of Śambūka and his story should be seen as a helpful tool to express “that what is impossible to say directly” (*jo bāt sīdhe...kahnā sam-bhav na ho*; Gupta 1977: 8, see also Śarmā: 56).

The poem consists of eight sections: “Rājdvār” (“The royal gate”; 3–14⁵), “Puṣpak-yān” (“Pushpak chariot”; 15–24), “Van-devtā” (“Forest gods”; 25–36), “Daṇḍakāraṇya” (“The Dandaka forest”; 37–44), “Pratipakṣ” (“A dissenting voice/An opponent”; 45–69), “Chinn-śīs” (“The severed head”; 71–78), “Ātm-kathya” (“A self-narrative”; 79–98), and “Rakt-tilak” (“The tilak of blood”; 99–102). The first three sections can be seen as, first of all, an extension of Vālmīki's traditional narrative, a kind of a prelude to the rest of the poem which is the author's original elaboration of the episode and of Śambūka as Rāma's opponent, a character in open conflict with him and the oppressive order he represents. As a result, Gupta's Śambūka grows out of the past, to speak with a new voice about the new times.

accessed June 10, 2020); from bibliographical details provided in its file we learn that its text is given after the 2011 edition, i.e. ten years after Gupta's death.

⁵ In the foregoing analysis of the poem, all numbers given in brackets refer to Gupta 1977.

B. Elaborating the past

The poem opens with an image of the gate of Rāma’s palace, called “the heart of Ayodhyā” (*ayodhyā kā hṛday*), that is a witness to the imminent scene – at the gate stands a Brahmin with his arms outstretched in desperation showering curses into the air. The dead body of his son lies on ground. As in Vālmikī’s *Rāmāyaṇa* the same in Gupta’s poem, the Brahmin blames Rāma for his son’s death. The people of Ayodhyā join him in these accusations, openly disclaiming the righteousness of Rāma’s character:

“‘It’s a king’s fault’, a voice rose.
[...] Ram’s rule has not been flawless,
Even this [pure] lotus is smeared with mud.
The king did wrong,
So why do his subjects suffer...
Don’t say that the king is illustrious,
he is self-interested and sinful.”

(“*doṣ rājā kā*”, *uṭhī āvāz* / [...] *rām-rāj nahī rahā akalaṃk / is kamal mē bhī sanā hai paṃk / huā rājā se kuch pāp / kyō prajā par chā rahā santāp / mat kaho rājā pratāpī hai. / svārth par hai aur pāpī hai*; Gupta 1977: 6)

While Rāma’s council meets, the royal medic (*vaidya*) tries unsuccessfully to bring the boy back to life. Vāsiṣṭha, summoned to the council for help, on his way meets the sage Nārada. In their brief but fateful conversation, Nārada reveals to Vāsiṣṭha the reason for the boy’s death: “A Shudra is carrying out ascetic practices, deep in the Daṇḍaka forest, [hanging] upside down [on a tree branch]”⁶ (*kar rahā tap sūdr koī / adhomukh daṇḍak gahan mē*; 11, cf. 63) and recommends steps to be taken:

“When Ram goes to the forest
And kills
The Shudra ascetic,
Its natural result will be
Restoring to life
The Brahmin’s son.”

(*vipin jākar / sūdr-muni-vadh / jab karēge rām / vipra-sut / hogā tabhī jīvit / sahaj pariṇām*; Gupta 1977: 12)

Rāma decides to act alone and sets off in the Puṣpaka in search of the Shudra ascetic.

⁶ This form of Śambūka’s penance is also well known in the *Rāmāyaṇa* visual tradition, e.g. from the famous illustrated Akbar’s *Rāmāyaṇa* (see e.g. <https://commons.wiki-media.org/wiki/File:Rama_kill_shambuka.jpg> and <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rama_slays_Shambuka.jpg>, accessed October 7, 2020) as well as from popular contemporary illustrations.

The second section (“Puṣpak-yān”) is almost entirely an elaboration of the extremely scant traditional material included in Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* 7.66.10–13 and adds detail to Rāma’s flight over his kingdom in search of the Shudra ascetic. When he lands in the Daṇḍaka forest, the forest gods (the section “Van-devtā”) come to greet him amidst blooming nature and agitated animals. The gods first salute Rāma (27–28) and then begin a long choral monologue (28–32), in which, unexpectedly, they attack and accuse Rāma of not effectively improving the fate of his poor, hungry, uneducated, backward people living far from his metropolis. They say that he no longer belongs to the world and people among whom he spent fourteen years of his exile (28–29). Their words make Rāma burn inside with a fire of anger which seems to emanate from him and embrace all nature, threatening its existence. After a while, he returns to his calm and composed state (36).

“Daṇḍakāraṇya” is entirely devoid of narrative threads and offers a description of the surrounding wild nature almost undisturbed by human presence, emanating beauty, peace and harmony. From the point of view of the poem’s structure, it can be seen as a kind of calm before the intense climax of Gupta’s work, stretching over the next three sections: “Pratipakṣ”, “Chinn-śīś”, and “Ātmkathya” (45–98). In these very sections that form a major part of the poem, Śambūka receives his own voice and, gradually dominating the scene as tribune of the people, becomes – in Mieke Bal’s terms – a focalizer, a subject that sees and speaks and uses fully his ability to perceive and interpret (cf. Bal 2009, esp. 12–18).

C. Narrating the present, heading for the future

The opening lines of “Pratipakṣ” plainly disclose the character of the ensuing dialogue between Śambūka and Rāma – a written witness to the episode:

“Whatever mental dialogue,
Took place before the killing
Between two self-willed people,

All that what has remained in disturbed memory
This pen has written down,
From the execution site.”

(*do manasvī vyaktiyō mē / huā vadh se pūrv / jo bhī mānasik saṃvād / likh diyā vadh-bindu se – / is lekhanī ne / kṣubdh man ko rahā jo kuch yād; Gupta 1977: 45*)

The following dialogue features Śambūka as Rāma’s uncompromising opponent, endowed with a distinct powerful voice in which he formulates a very strong critique of Rāma’s rule, system and values of which Rāma is an ardent protector. Śambūka considers this system unfair and hostile (*viṣam ghātak vyavasthā*). What is characteristic, Śambūka, despite Rāma’s fame as the ideal ruler, does not

recognize him as the leader of the people. According to him, Rāma cannot distinguish between what is right, moral (*dharm*) and wrong, immoral (*adharm*), legitimate action (*karm*) and evil action or inaction (*akarm*), discriminates against the low-born, and has no sympathy for his people! Śambūka cannot but ask Rāma why he became king (*rām tum rājā bane kis hetu ho?*; Gupta 1977: 51), and – instead of seeing to the needs of his people – has taken on the role of a judge, a punishing king (*daṇḍnāyak bhūp*), a killer of Shudras (*śūdr-ghātī*). Śambūka more than once (Gupta 1977: 49ff) accuses Rāma of not caring for equality and justice; what is more, he declares Rāma to be partial and contemptible in his doings.

“Is killing the only basis for your justice?
Are all your opponents only objects to be killed?”

If someone on your side errs,
You keep silent and forget all measures.
Rulers always have this convenience
Which always is an inconvenience for their subjects!
You kill and call it salvation.
How long will this contemptible business of yours last?”⁷

The core of this dialogue is formed of Śambūka’s ideas about the essence of humanity and self-dignity as well as of their importance for the equality of people regardless of their birth and colour. In this context, Śambūka makes Rāma an object of ironic tease.

“I am a Shudra
My body is black
And has made you
Cast mistrust on me.

This has made my guilt
Inexcusable
And a Brahmin’s son
Suffer.

But let my question be audible:
‘Aren’t you of dark hue yourself?’”⁸

⁷ Gupta 1977: 53: *kyā tumhāre nyāy kā ādhār hai vadh mātr? kyā vipakṣī sab keval tumhāre lie vadh ke pātr / jo tumhāre pakṣ mẽ ho, kuch kare anyāy / tum rahoge maun, bhūloge samast upāy / śāsakō ko sadā yah suvidhā rahī hai rām! prajā ko isse sadā duvidhā rahī hai rām! mārte ho aur kahte ho se uddhār / calegā kab tak tumhārā yah ghrṇit vyāpār?*

⁸ This brings to mind one similar example of teasing Rāma on grounds of his skin complexion. It can be found in Tulsīdās’s *Rāmlalānahachū* (12) and concerns Rāma as a bridegroom, or in fact the entire family of Daśaratha; for more see: Stasik 2009: 93.

*(śūdr hū māī / liye kālī deh / isī se mujh par / tumhārā sandeh / isī se akṣamya merā
pāp / isī se brāhmaṇ tanuj ko tāp / kintu merā praśn ho ākarṇ / kyā nahī tum svayaṃ
śymal varṇ?; Gupta 1977: 62)*

Śambūka is here not only ironic but also seems to strip Rāma of self-complacency as if saying to him “you are not flawless either!” as well as getting even with him. He claims that Rāma is immersed in divinity, making his people humble towards him and the world around. Rāma is distant and aloof and treats them like children incapable of acting on their own (Gupta 1977: 61–62, 65–66). Śambūka goes so far as to demand from Rāma to reverse the order of things by breaking caste boundaries and thus changing the people’s condition (*varṇ-sīmā tor do rām! manuj kī gati mor do hai rām!*; 66) and ends his speech with a call: “Let the new human being, set in motion thanks to his own power, live on the new earth!” (*śakti se apnī rahe gatimān / nayī dhartī par nayā insān*; Gupta 1977: 68). After these words, the traditional climax of the traditional narrative takes place – Rāma beheads Śambūka with his sword. Yet, unlike in tradition, Śambūka’s voice does not die with him but reverberates with his pure intentions (*pāvan saṃkalp*), introducing the poem’s audience to the next section.

The section “Chinn-śīs” takes the form of a monologue built on a drastic image of Śambūka’s severed head talking to Rāma. The artistic device of a drastic image is skilfully used to go beyond the traditional narrative of the episode – in which, what needs to be emphasised, Śambūka says just a few sentences; undoubtedly it strengthens the potential power of Śambūka’s message of *varṇ*-less and casteless society (esp. Gupta 1977: 73–75).

Almost at the beginning of this section, Śambūka rationalizes the core of the episode by rejecting the traditionally recognized reasons for the death of the Brahmin’s boy and restoring him to life. He plainly declares:

“It is something imagined that
The Brahmin’s boy died
Because of a Shudra’s penance.

It is something imagined that
The Brahmin’s boy got revived
Thanks to killing the Shudra.”

*(śūdr-tap se / vipra-bālak mar gayā / yah kalpnā kī bāt / śūdr-vadh se vipra-bālak
jī uṭhā / yah kalpnā kī bāt; Gupta 1977: 71)*

Śambūka, wondering how one could think that and take it as the truth, is fully aware that this is part of a larger whole – an oppressive society based on the caste system and the inequality of people, allowing one to exploit another. He expresses his dream of a casteless society offering a full scope of opportunity for individual development and achieving desired goals, regardless of social position, thanks to

a person's abilities and will (Gupta 1977: 74–75). Positioning himself as a son of the soil (*maĩ dharā kā putr hũ*; Gupta 1977: 76), Śambūka condemns Rāma for his cowardice manifesting itself in his “policy of killing” (*hai vadh-nīti kāyartā tum-hārī*; Gupta 1977: 77), aimed at annihilating inconvenient opponents.

Ātmkathya is another section of the poem in a form of Śambūka's monologue, or to be exact – the monologue of Śambūka's severed head. It opens with an image of Śambūka who speaks of himself:

“I was
A live earthen vessel
That got smashed with
A blow of a steel blade.
[...]
The world
Left me lying
Where I had been smashed.

Now
I am a dead earthen vessel.
It seems to me
That my both eyes
Have become several times larger
And took root in the earth.
[...]
My gaze has become all-pervading.”⁹

The concept of a human body as an earthen vessel (*ghaṭ*) is well known, for example, in the *Sant* tradition and particularly in Kabīr's poetry. In the poem, it receives a new dimension: it strengthens the credibility of Śambūka not only as a son of the soil, literally fused with it, but also as a tribune of the people speaking on their behalf.

Ātmkathya essentially elaborates on the narrative of the eternal humiliation of the oppressed sons of the soil, exemplified by Śambūka's own life experience. Against all odds, he continues to dream his dream of equality, of moving up, but instead of reaching this goal he is constantly pushed down, confronted with violence meant to keep him and others like him in their place (Gupta 1977: 84–87). Śambūka is bitterly ironic when he observes that being considered untouchable by the high-castes, in their fits of anger, he could surprisingly be touched by them

⁹ *maĩ thā / miṭṭī kā ek zindā ghaṭā / jise lohe kī coṭ se / toṛā gayā / [...] jahā maĩ toṛā gayā / duniyā ne / rahne diyā mujhko / vahā hī paṛā / maĩ hũ / ab / miṭṭī kā ek murdā ghaṭā / mujhe lagtā hai / ki merī donō ākhē / kāĩ gunī hokar / dhartī maĩ jar gāĩ / [...] merī dṛṣṭī sarvavyāpī ho gayī*; Gupta 1977: 80, 81–82.

when they rained kicks on him (*krodh mē, yā – / barbar āveś mē – / kaise bhī sahī / are un sabke / chūne lāyak to māī ho gayā*; Gupta 1977: 88). Such behaviour, instead of making him obedient and humble, made him rebellious to the extent that his relatives rejected him in fear of being cursed (*śāp-bhay se trast*) by their oppressors.

This rejection led to Śambūka's life in seclusion in which the only consolation was an interaction with an exceptional elderly sage who treated him with sympathy and affection. In an interesting way, Śambūka refutes in this section basic elements of the tradition on which this episode was founded and reveals the secret of his penance. In fact, he becomes an ascetic by chance. One day, he was attacked by barbarian bandits and it was they who hung him on a tree branch over the fire as if to cook him. As he was hanging there in solitude, his hair grew and body got blackened by the fire. With time, people somehow learnt of him as of a Shudra doing severe penance, and started making pilgrimages to his place. Thanks to this misunderstanding, Śambūka, for the first time in his life, experienced respect and admiration from other people and did not want to set the record straight. Rāma is the first to discover the truth from him (Gupta 1977: 90–93). Śambūka also discloses to Rāma the true reason of the Brahmin boy's death – he was bitten by a snake. Thus, we again see rationalization play an important role in the elaboration of the traditional narrative and the development of its new elements.

This section closes with what can be seen as Śambūka's constructive criticism of Rāma – his advice for Rāma to build a refined, civilized society founded on respect for the individual (*hai samāj vahī susaṃskṛt / jahā hotā vyakti kā sammān*; Gupta 1977: 97).

The poem ends with a short section entitled *Rakt-tilak* (100–103) that, as previously mentioned, was intended by the poet as an opening of his planned work but ended up as its eloquent ending. It refers to the episode of Ekalavya, known from the *Mahābhārata*. Ekalavya, a prince of the Niṣāda tribe of forest-dwelling hunters, aspired to become a master archer, but as is known from tradition, he could not achieve his goal – he had to cut off the thumb of his right hand as a *guru-dakṣiṇā*, or a “fee” demanded by Droṇa whom he considered his guru.

Rakt-tilak is another section of the poem essentially in the form of a monologue that resorts to drastic images. In the opening lines, we see the severed head of Śambūka vomiting blood thick and dark with his words addressed to Ekalavya's silent severed thumb (*śākhā mē laṭke / śambūk ke / kaṭe hue śiś ne / śabdō se / gārḥā-kālā rakt vaman kar / ekalavya ke / śaracchinn gūge āgūṭhe se kahā*; Gupta 1977: 99) – they both epitomize the unjust suffering of the oppressed caused by partiality and self-interest of those of high social rank. Śambūka's head asks Ekalavya's thumb to consecrate his forehead with the *tilak* made of the blood he

shed, considering this act “a coronation of dignity trampled underfoot” (*pairō se kuclī pratiṣṭhā k[ā] / rājyābhiṣek*; Gupta 1977: 99). The poem ends with Śambūka’s strong conviction that the *tilak* of blood blazing on Śambūka’s forehead, likened to Śiva’s third eye, will burn the false sense of self to ashes (*vah rakt-tilak / prajvalit hote hī / kar degā bhasmāt jhūṭhe ahaṅkār kī / pūrī vāsnā-deh / nissan-deh*; Gupta 1977: 102).

It is noteworthy that although the presence of Rāma is almost constant in the poem’s narrative, as his character in the poem’s structure is meant as Śambūka’s antagonist, he does not play a significant role. The lines uttered by him in responses to Śambūka’s statements and accusations are rather brief and unconvincing. He, a multiple killer (Gupta 1977: 51, 53), appears antipathetic, which is also a smart device to make Śambūka a fully-fledged protagonist.

Conclusions

In Gupta’s poem, Śambūka speaks on behalf of all genuine sons of the soil (*bhūmi-putr*), the downtrodden and oppressed, and according to his own words, he is guided purely by the happiness and prosperity of the people (*lok-maṅgal*; 63). However, while he proclaims important truths about the dignity and esteem owed to every human being and is an implacable critic of the prevailing order, at times, like Rāma, he may seem unconvincing. The reason for this in Śambūka’s case is elaboration and rationalization that are pushed too far. Śambūka is depicted as a person deprived of any rights to personal development who becomes an ascetic by chance under very strange circumstances, and yet also as a person adept in the tradition of Hinduism, well acquainted with it, who effortlessly quotes from Sanskrit (Gupta 1977: 49, 51). When he refers to the *Rāmāyaṇa* characters, such as Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇ, Hanumān and Sītā, as well as to its episodes, distancing himself from them from the position of their external observer-focalizer, he destroys their mythical-epic dimension by rationalizing and ironizing and as a result minimizes their importance (e.g. Gupta 1977: 52–57, 55, 60–61, 62). His distanced attitude of an observer-cum-critic is most understandable but it seems that Śambūka’s expertise in the Sanskrit tradition is an artistic creation that weakens the potent load of his message about Brahmins’ discrimination against Shudras, at least in terms of their access to (traditional) education.

In the context of the actual meaning of Śambūka’s words, one should not ignore the form of his penance which can be read as a metaphor of his main goal – Śambūka wants to reverse the whole order of things and put it upside down. And this is what he calls Rāma to do (see esp. Gupta 1977: 63).

As we have seen, the poem’s original narrative is built on drastic images with the aim to increase the power of Śambūka’s message. Thus, both the image of the talking, blood-stained and vomiting-blood severed head of Śambūka, and the image of the severed thumb of Ekalavya asked to adorn Śambūka’s head with a *tilak* of blood should be seen in terms of the poetics of the anti-aesthetic. In the sense that they are not so much meant as disdain for the beautiful and pleasing but as a means to create an aesthetic shock and make the message of “injustice, pain, moral crimes, and sufferance” better discernible (Asavei 2015: 4).

In *Śambūk*, Gupta presented his audience with a new suggestive reading of a traditional episode. Despite certain drawbacks mentioned earlier, his Śambūka is endowed with a plain-spoken voice shaped by Dalit consciousness and democratic disagreement with the unjust authority and violations of human rights in India of the 1970s.

Thanks to the artistic devices used in the poem, Gupta’s vision is also slowly developed to reveal what is invisible and not spoken of – the figures of fictional and non-fictional rulers who despise their citizens, do not listen to their voices and believe that terror and fear of punishment will allow them to maintain their status, so that they will always be able to relish the splendour of power. But there is the poet (as the Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz says: “You can kill one but another is born¹⁰”) to show the invisible and say the unspeakable, because “The poet is one who speaks the unspeakable” (*kavi vahī jo akathanīy kahe*¹¹).

Oh Ram!

In the language of blood

Created by you

At every occasion

Silent Shambuk

Tells you that,

Abandoning the path of karma and the Veda,

And adopting

The path of caste discrimination,

You’ve erred

In upward-looking dignity

Of human society.

(*he rām! / tumhārī racī / rakt kī bhāṣā mẽ / har bār / tumhī se kahtā śambūk mūk, / taj karm-ved-path, / varṇ-bhed-path – / apnākar / mānav samāj kī / ūrdhvamukhī maryādā mẽ / tum gaye cūk*; Gupta 1977: 1).

¹⁰ Translated by Richard Lourie, quoted after <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49482/you-who-wronged>>, accessed October 16, 2020.

¹¹ The opening line of Jagdīs Gupta’s poem *Kavi vahī*; <http://www.anubhuti-hindi.org/gauravgram/jagdishgupt/kavi_vahi.htm>; accessed August 10, 2020.

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