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ROYAL AMUSEMENTS, SPORTS, MAGIC AND YOGIC PRACTICES ACCORDING TO THE *SĀMRĀJYALAKṢMĪPĪṬHIKĀ*

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Abstract

The largely understudied *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* is known to a small number of Sanskritists as a compendium on kingship, which they believe to be from South India. The text is composed in the form of an ongoing dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī and the colophon attributes it to the *Ākāśabhairavakalpa*. Hence, the text is catalogued as a Tantric text. Apart from Tantric rituals, the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* also contains chapters on various activities that the king must perform publicly and privately. Chapter 107 contains an elaborate description of the *Navarātri* festival, which describes various amusements that the king should witness on the night of the *Mahānavamī*. Dance performances, wrestling combats, acrobatic shows, magic and presumably yogic practices are some of the physical exercises on the list. This paper aims to highlight these physical practices and demonstrate how performers and ascetics shared the same space during religious festivals, a situation that could favour the exchange of practices and embodied knowledge. Secondly, it aims to demonstrate how the information on these royal spectacles contributes to a hypothesis that the text was probably composed during the Vijayanagara period. This was primarily done through the studies of both primary and secondary sources and by matching the descriptions of the aforesaid physical exercises with stone reliefs located in temples and monuments in Hampi.

KEYWORDS

Yoga, Wrestling, Tantra, *Navarātri*, Vijayanagara.



Introduction

Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā is a manual on Tantric rituals and statecraft written in Sanskrit and consisting of approximately four thousand verses composed in the *anuṣṭubh* metre in the form of an ongoing dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī. The work has not been attributed to any author and, according to its colophon, is considered as a part of the *Ākāśabhairavakalpa*.¹

The printed version of the Sanskrit text was first published in 1952 and reprinted again in 1990, collated from various manuscripts found at the Thanjavur Mahārāja Serforji's Sarasvatī Mahal Library (TMSSM) in Tamil Nadu. The introduction to this edition notes that some of the manuscripts were actual personal copies of certain kings. One of them (B6707) bears the handwritten name² (see Fig. 2) of the Maratha King Tulajā I who ruled Thanjavur in Tamilnadu, between 1729 and 1735 CE (Sarangi 1993: 36). This suggests that the *Sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikā* (hereafter SLP) was most probably studied and utilised by kings.

In the printed version, the work contains one hundred and thirty-nine chapters known as *paṭalas* while manuscript B6707 (see Fig. 1), on which the printed text is supposedly based and which, of all the manuscripts, is said to be the most complete, has only one hundred and thirty-six *paṭalas*. It is possible that the editors of the printed edition, K. Vasudeva Sastri and K. S. Subrahmanya Sastri, added three additional chapters found in other fragmentary manuscripts that are also kept in the Sarasvatī Mahal Library. Moreover, the order of the *paṭalas* in B6707 and in the printed edition do not agree.

As the title of the work suggests, the text centres on Tantric methods of worship of the Goddess *Sāmrājyalakṣmī* that grant sovereignty and power to the king, who has to perform the duties and rituals laid down in this text to acquire mystical powers that will allow him to rule his kingdom righteously, destroy his enemies, atone for his sins and avert both natural and supernatural calamities. Nevertheless, some Vedic methods of worship are also found in the text.

¹ A compilation of Tantric rituals and mantras centring around *Ākāśabhairava*, a fierce form of Śiva and other ferocious deities.

² *tulajārajñah pustakaṃ sāmrājyalakṣmīpīṭhikākhyam*.

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Figure 1: B6707 manuscript at the TMSSM.

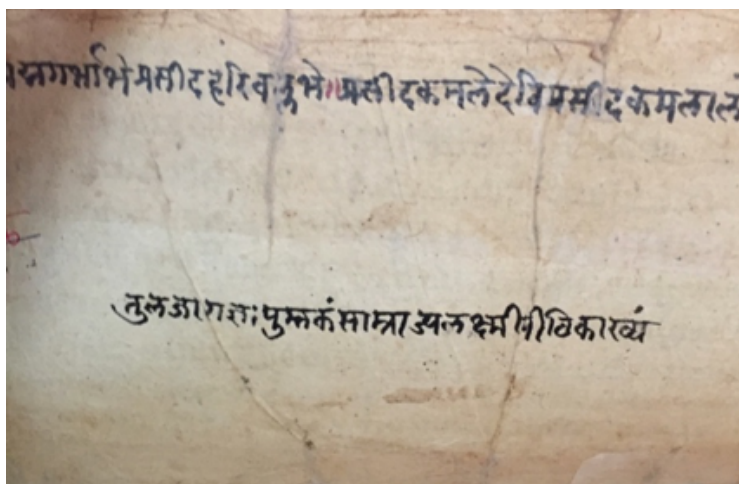


Figure 2: Handwritten name of King Tulajā. TMSSM.

At first glance the SLP may be considered to be, in general, a political text according to the model of the *Arthaśāstra* on account of its significant connection with the king and his office. It also deals, however, with many other topics connected with complex Tantric rituals, royal ceremonies and festivities that are supposed to be performed by the king. Although the SLP is not the first work to contain both ritual and political material (for example, *Kālikāpurāṇa*³ also contains a chapter on *Rājadharmā* while the *Arthaśāstra* contains chapters on rituals⁴), the SLP is referred to by scholars namely, Gode (1952), Thite (1978) and Sarangi (1993), as both an encyclopaedia and a Tantric manual probably because it contains a large section on rituals that makes up more than a quarter of the entire work (unlike the aforementioned treatises on politics that comprise considerably smaller portions).

From a close reading of the text, it is possible to identify two major parts: Tantra and kingship and, within those, six sections on the following topics:

1. Propitiation of the Goddess Sāmrājyalakṣmī through Tantric rituals
2. Omens and associated pacification rituals
3. Eight types of forts
4. Coronation rituals and royal duties
5. State festivals
6. Miscellaneous chapters containing information on, for example, the king's pilgrimages, military expedition, archery and characteristics of horses and elephants.

The section on state festivals comprises fifty-two *paṭalas* (*paṭala* 71–123) and hence is one of the largest sections in the SLP and describes various religious observances that the king should perform both in private and public. The *Navarātri* festival spans much of this section, which vividly describes amusements, sports, magic and yogic practices performed or witnessed either by the courtiers or the king himself.

³ The *Kālikāpurāṇa* is one of the eighteen Upapurāṇas, i.e. secondary Purāṇas, with ninety-eight chapters and over nine thousands *śloka*s.

⁴ Book Fourteen is, indeed, titled “Esoteric Practices.” See Olivelle 2013: 421.

Royal Spectacles During *Navarātri*

The *Navarātri* festival occupies one of the largest sections of the SLP and it is described in great detail, including various modes of worship (Vedic, Puranic and Tantric), sacrifices, processions, and diverse forms of amusements that span the succeeding fourteen *paṭalas*. Hence, in their research, Gode (1952), Thite (1978) and Sarangi (1993) conclude that the SLP belongs to the Vijayanagara Kingdom, because the fourteen *paṭalas* on the *Navarātri* celebration contain vivid descriptions of *Navarātri*, which resemble many South Indian celebrations (as may still be witnessed today) as well as descriptions found in the records of the former Vijayanagara territories such as Mysore, Ramnad and Śivagaṅgai. The three scholars also link the SLP to Vijayanagara by matching SLP's detailed descriptions of the *Navarātri* festival with secondary sources. Although they provide some convincing theories, they do not match the SLP's descriptions of *Navarātri* with epigraphical, iconographical and art historical sources.

It is in *paṭala* 107 (*nānāvidonasvarūpakathanam*) that twenty-five amusements are mentioned. These can be divided into four categories: artistic, dramatic, physical and martial exercises. The twenty-five amusements are performed as spectacles for the king, courtiers and honoured guests on the night of the *Mahānavamī*, the ninth and final night of *Navarātri* before the culmination of the festival on the next day—*Vijayadaśamī*, which celebrates the victory of Durgā over the demon Mahiṣāsura. The list of the twenty-five spectacles according to the order of appearance in the text is as follows:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Golden chariot procession | 2. Elephant procession |
| 3. Cavalry parade | 4. Infantry parade |
| 5. Tributes | 6. Courtesan dance |
| 7. Mṛḍangam recital | 8. Vīṇā recital |
| 9. Acrobatic show | 10. Puppet show |
| 11. Spontaneous poetry recitation | 12. Comedy |
| 13. Boat show | 14. Magic show |
| 15. Holding of breath underwater | 16. Fire show |
| 17. Wrestling match | 18. Ram fight |
| 19. Wild buffalo fight | 20. Fancy dress show |
| 21. Hanuman show | 22. Ghost show |
| 23. Lamp chariot procession | 24. Machinal invention show |
| 25. Pyrotechnic show | |

Physical and Magical Practices as Royal Spectacles

A number of physical practices appear as spectacles performed for the king on the night of *Mahānavamī*. The first physical practice described in *paṭala* 107 is the acrobatic show, as seen in the following verse:

tatas tv atyunnatastambhaprotaśūlāgravartinīm ||
paśyen nānāvidhākārāṃ vidyāṃ āścaryakāriṇīm | 107.14cd–15ab

Next, [the king] should see varieties of the wondrous art [stunts],
which is performed on a spike fixed atop a very high pole.

This description of an exercise that takes place on a pole bears a similar form to the *mallkhamb* or Indian pole wrestling, which is also performed on a tall, pointed pole, polished with castor oil or sandalwood oil (see McCartney in this volume). In the corpus of Sanskrit literature, *mallkhamb* is first mentioned in the *Mānasollāsa*, a 12th-century *nibandha* (“compilation”) on a wide-ranging variety of subjects written by King Someśvara of the Cālukya Dynasty. The SLP actually bears many similarities to the *Mānasollāsa*; they are both court compilations intended to be exclusively utilised as manuals for kings. Additionally, they were composed in the same geographical terrain and social backdrop—in the Deccan, which today spans a large region across the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Apart from the *Mānasollāsa*, *mallkhamb* is sparsely mentioned in any literature and apparently only became popular when it was revived by Balambhatta Dada Deodhar, the physical instructor of Bajirao Peshwa II (r. 1740–1761 CE), who introduced the sport to the public in the 18th century (Burt 2010: 33). But the fact that the SLP mentions that the king “should see varieties of the wondrous art [stunts]” could mean that the act might be of a more acrobatic than martial nature or it might also be a combination of both. As McCartney (in this volume) points out there is a thin line between acrobats and wrestlers, and during the Vijayanagara period groups of men known as Dombar/Dommara and Vipravinodis, who hailed from Andhra Pradesh, were employed as both wrestlers and acrobats and even as soldiers in the court.

Wrestling, indeed, is another physical exercise mentioned in *paṭala* 107 of the SLP thus:

mallayuddhaṃ tataḥ paśyed ullasanmuṣṭitāḍanam ||
yudhaṃ mauṣṭikacāñūrāṃ yenālpam anumīyate | 107.22cd–23ab

Then [the king] should see the wrestlers fight by sporting with their fists
because of which the fight of Muṣṭika and Cāñūra is supposed trifling.



Figure 3: An 18th century manuscript painting depicting *mallakhamb*.
Courtesy of Patrick McCartney.

As a matter of fact, amongst groups of people mentioned throughout the SLP, wrestlers are mentioned most often, appearing in *paṭalas* 63.10, 91, 101.31, 107.22, 112.10 and 113.14. But the sport is mentioned more exclusively in *paṭala* 91 (*khuralīvratasvarūpa-kathanam*, “military exercises”) where wrestling is part of the king’s military exercises. Raghavan (1979: 219), however, describes *khuralī*, mentioned in this *paṭala*, as “a high platform with four sides with a mound of red mud at the centre,” rather than the act of wrestling itself. The wrestling match began upon the king’s arrival with the worship of the mound with offerings by the wrestlers, during which the power (*śakti*) of the weapons, *vetālas* (“vampires,” “zombies”) and Śiva’s *gaṇas* (“semi-divine beings”) were invoked, possibly to attain their ferocious and protective qualities. Similarly, the *Mallapurāṇa*, which is written in the form of dialogue between Someśvara and Kṛṣṇa,

calls the wrestling arena the *ākhāḍhaka*; this can be either square, triangular or circular in shape, measuring twenty-one *hastas* or thirty feet.⁵ Furthermore, chapter 10 of the *Purāṇa* dictates sixteen types of exercises, which the wrestlers should do in order to prepare the body for wrestling matches. However, the exercises are referred to as *śramas*⁶ in the *Mallapurāṇa* and not as *khuralīs* as mentioned in the SLP. It is possible to speculate that the figure Someśvara could be King Someśvara III (r. 1127–1138 CE), the Cālukya king who supposedly wrote the *Mānasollāsa*, which also contains chapters on the art of wrestling. Additionally, the *Mallapurāṇa* mentions the worship of Niṃbajā Devī by the wrestlers within the *ākhāḍhaka*. It is also noteworthy that Goddess Niṃbajā is a *kuladevī* (“clan deity”) mostly worshipped in Karnataka. With this information, it can thus be speculated that the *Mallapurāṇa*, the *Mānasollāsa* and the SLP could likely belong in the same region, tradition and cultural landscape.

Back to the SLP: chapter 91 also describes different wrestling moves such as looking upwards and downwards, shrugging of shoulders, beating of thighs, threatening, roaring, staring, jumping, shouting, clapping, striking with fists, tossing of heads and knees. In addition to the weaponless matches, sword and mace duels also take place after which the king honours the winners and other participants.

The SLP also talks of “magical practices” as spectacles during *Navarātri*. They are the *jalastambhana* and *agnistambhana* and are mentioned together in *paṭala* 107 thus:

tataḥ paśyej jalastambhavidyān tām pṛthiviśvaraḥ ||
yayā duryodhanasyedaṁ karma saṁsmaryate adbhutam |
paśyed agnistambhavidyān tatas tām pṛthivīpatiḥ ||
yayā syād vālalagnāgner laṅkāyām mārutes smṛtiḥ | 20cd–22ab

Then, the king should see the act involving [the holding of breath under] water, which reminds [him] of Duryodhana’s extraordinary principal act. Then, the king should see the art involving fire, which should remind [him of] Hanuman whose tail has been set on fire in Laṅka.

In the SLP, the *jalastambhana* and *agnistambhana* are performed as re-enactments of stories from the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* respectively. The former is represented in

⁵ See *Mallapurāṇa*, chapter 6, verse 14–36.

⁶ See McCartney in this volume.

the scene from the *Gadāyuddha Parva*⁷ in which Duryodhana hides under the water for three days to avoid being captured by the Pāṇḍavas led by Yudhiṣṭhira and the latter in the scene from the *Sundara Kāṇḍa* in which Hanumān burns Laṅka after Sītā has been rescued.

The Monier-Williams dictionary translates *agnistambhana* as the “magical quenching of fire” and *jalastambhana* as the “magical solidification of water.” These two acts also appear in *paṭala* 64 of the SLP, which outlines the sixty-four types of arts that the king should master. The list includes both regular and supernatural accomplishments. *Jalastambhana* and *agnistambhana* are listed as numbers forty-nine and fifty. Additionally, the two terms appear on the list of the sixty-four arts mentioned by Bhāskaraṛāya (1690–1785 CE) in his commentary on the *Lalitāsahasranāma*,⁸ which lists them as fortieth and forty-second in the order.⁹ It must be noted that Bhāskaraṛāya directly quotes the SLP¹⁰ when he comments on the 236th name of Lalitā: *om catuḥṣaṣṭikalāmayyai namaḥ*, which comes in the fifty-eighth śloka of the *Lalitāsahasranāma*.¹¹ It can be corroborated, therefore, that Bhāskaraṛāya, a well-known author of Tantric texts and practitioner of Śrīvidyā knew the SLP, but it is unclear whether the *jalastambhana* and *agnistambhana* are acrobatic practices and served as courtly entertainments during

⁷ Sub-parva (chapters 30–65) of the *Śalya Parva*.

⁸ A thousand names in praise of the Goddess Lalitā composed in the form of a *stotra*.

⁹ See the complete lists of the SLP and Bhāskaraṛāya’s sixty-four arts in Suebsantiwongse 2021: 84–85.

¹⁰ *catuḥṣaṣṭikalāḥ śārṅgadharīye kathākośe ca śrīdharīye lakṣmīpīṭhikāyām ca vailakṣanyena gaṇitās tāḥ niṣkṛṣya likhyante –*

*aṣṭādaśalīpibodhas tallekhanaśīghravācane citram |
bahuvīdhabhāṣājñānam tatkaṇṭhāśrutanigāditāyutam ||
vedā upavedāś catvāraḥ śāstrāṅgaṣaṭke dve |
tantrapurāṇasmṛtikāḥ kāvyālaṅkāraṇāṭakādi dve ||
śāntir vaśyākārṣanavidveṣoccātamāraṇāni ca ṣaṭ |
gatijaladr̥ṣṭyagnyāyudhavāgreṭastambhasaptakam śīlpam ||
gajahayathanaraśikṣāḥ sāmudrikamallasūdagāruḍakāḥ |
tattatsuṣīrānaddhaghanendrajālanṛttāni gītarasavādau ||
ratnaparīkṣā cauryam dhātuparīkṣāpy adṛśyatvam |
iti bhāskarasudhiyā kavīnaktā niṣkṛṣya kalāś catuḥṣaṣṭiḥ ||*

These are differently enumerated in the *Śārṅgadharīya*, Śrīdhara’s *kathākośa* and the *Lakṣmīpīṭhikā*. See full list in Table 4.2 of Suebsantiwongse 2021: 84.

¹¹ *catuḥṣaṣṭyupacārādhyā catuḥṣaṣṭikalāmāyī |
mahācatuḥṣaṣṭikotiyoginīgaṇasevitā || 58*

“Salutations to Her who is richly endowed with the sixty-four types of service, who embodies the sixty-four arts [and] who is attended by the sixty-four crores (sixty-four hundred million) of the great yoginis.”

Navarātri or whether they are supernatural accomplishments (*siddhis*), which resulted from yogic and/or Tantric practices.

The magical act of manipulating water is also found in several other Sanskrit texts, namely the *Ṛgveda* (3.33), *Kausikasūtra* (38.7), *Mahābhārata* (8.2–3), *Brahmavaivarta-Purāṇa* (*kṛṣṇajñanmakhaṇḍa* 78.32ff), *Agnipurāṇa* (306.18), *Pañcatantra* (2.3.78), *Tantrasārasaṃgraha* (19.20), *Prapañcasāratāntra* (17.30), *Śaktisaṃgramatantra* (1.14.34) *Rājatarāṅginī*, *Ṣaṭkarmadīpikā* and *Mahāmāyā* (Goudriaan 1978: 308, 349). Many varieties of the *jalastambhana* mentioned in the aforesaid texts include diverting the flow/course of the river, splitting apart a river or a sea, stopping rain/storm and walking on water. However, the texts do not specifically mention who are the performers of these acts, except the *Siddhanāgārjunakakṣapuṭa*, which describes a kind of “show” (*kautuka*) where a pot filled with water is spilt open while the liquid inside remains standing—this is described as being done while uttering a Rudra mantra and performed by jugglers to impress the public (Goudriaan 1978: 349)—and which probably agrees most with the context mentioned in the SLP. But as the SLP states that the *jalastambhana* “reminds the king of Duryodhana’s heroic act,” it can be inferred that the act simply requires the performer to hold his breath under the water longer than usual.

The *Agnipurāṇa* (306.18), *Tantrasārasaṃgraha* (19.20), *Kāmaratna*, *Bṛhajjābāla-Upaniṣad* and *Siddhanāgārjunakakṣapuṭa* mention *agnistambhana* or immobilisation of fire (Goudriaan 1978: 350–351). The practice is frequently mentioned as involving the application of the fat of a frog mixed with the fat of an owl or a ram. The *Siddhanāgārjunakakṣapuṭa* stipulates that one can walk over hot charcoal after the application of this ointment or be able to hold a hot ball of iron in the mouth which, according to Goudriaan (1978), is also a type of *kautuka* (“entertainment”) and thus resonates with the material found in *paṭala* 107 of the SLP, although it is unclear how the performer who probably dressed as Hanuman performed the act involving fire. But it is imaginable that the performance involved carrying and playing with fire.

The SLP does not say much about the performers of spectacles mentioned in *paṭala* 107, but it is obvious that acrobats and wrestlers performed the pole stunt and wrestling matches. Similarly, it cannot be worked out from the text who could have performed the *jalastambhana* or *agnistambhana*, as both can be done by either a magician,¹² a

¹² There is no textual evidence that explicitly suggests who were the magicians, but the stone friezes found in several Hampi temples such as the ones depicted in Figure 8 and Figure 9 prove that magicians and/or court jesters were active in Vijayanagara.

stuntman, an ascetic¹³ or someone who was qualified at all these. However, other textual and archaeological evidence can help us in reconstructing the socio-religious background from which the SLP originated.

Navarātri Amusements and the Links with Vijayanagara

As mentioned earlier, most scholars who have worked on the SLP conclude that it was written within the Vijayanagara milieu mostly because of its description of *Navarātri*. Coincidentally, some of the royal spectacles found in *paṭala* 107 also match some of the historical sources and iconography at Hampi.

It is not clear whether ascetics (yogis?) or other entertainers performed the spectacles involving extraordinary acts, but we know from inscriptions, literary sources and temple reliefs that Vijayanagara was frequented by yogis, magicians, jugglers and comedians (Verghese 1995: 168). The *Navarātri/Dīpāvalī* section in the SLP specifically mentions yogis on two occasions. Firstly, in *paṭala* 101,¹⁴ which elaborates the duties of the king (*rājadharmā*) and who he should protect, yogis are amongst those mentioned. Secondly in *paṭala* 112,¹⁵ which describes the rituals on the *Narakacaturdaśī* festival; here the king is described as being surrounded by different court personages, which include sons of vassal kings, priests, ministers, poets, singers and yogis.

Śaiva ascetics from various sects, namely Vīraśaiva, Lakulīśa, Pāśupata, Kaula, Kāpālīka, Kālāmukha and Matsyendranātha had their *maṭhas* (“monasteries”) in Vijayanagara. This is because the Virūpākṣa Temple, which houses the kingdom’s tutelary deity, was a famous Śaiva-*kṣetra* (Kottraiah 2008: 64). But of all the Śaiva cults, Vīraśaiva and Kālāmukha were the most prevalent. Ascetics are also mentioned in the SLP where they are listed as a group of people that the king should protect in *paṭala* 101 (*rājadharmā*), and they are mentioned along with other courtiers in the royal audience on the *Narakacaturdaśī* day (the fourteenth lunar day on the dark fortnight before the new

¹³ It is not unusual to see even today ascetics performing in public forms of *tapasyā* (“austerities”), physical practices (difficult, acrobatic *āsanas* for example) or other “magical acts” as a form of *nāṭak* (“drama”) to attract people and elicit a reaction in them (Daniela Bevilacqua, personal communication).

¹⁴ *sarvācārasamān śāntān sarvatra priyavādinaḥ ||*
sarvakarmavinirmuktān yoginaḥ paripālāya | SLP 101.37cd-38ab.

¹⁵ *āsthānavartināṃ rājñāṃ mantriṇāṃ ca purodhasām ||*
sāmantarājaputrāṇāṃ vibudhānāṃ vinodinām |
kavīnāṃ gāyakānāṃ ca yogināṃ ca niyoginām || SLP 112.12-18.

moon day) (*paṭala* 112). Therefore, it is plausible to imagine that ascetics may have participated in the *Navarātri* celebration as well.

The entertainments highlighted in the SLP are mentioned extensively in both foreign and Indian eyewitness accounts, which are the most descriptive sources of Vijayanagara history. There are several accounts of foreigners who visited the city, which are dated between the 16th and 17th centuries. The Portuguese envoys/traders, Domingo Paes and Fernão Nuniz, who visited the kingdom in 1520 and 1536 CE respectively (Sewell 1972: vi), wrote the most lengthy and vivid accounts of the social and political life of 16th century Vijayanagara. Other chroniclers were Abdur Razzāq from Persia (1444), Niccolò de Conti (1492), Ludovico Varthema (1510) and Cesare Frederici from Italy (1588), Tomé Pires (1515) and Duarte Barbosa (1516) from Portugal and Afanasy Nitkitin from Russia (1466-1472) (Filliozat 2015: x).

Some of the aforesaid foreign accounts vividly describe sports and entertainment that took place in the kingdom, especially during *Navarātri*, some of which are also noted in *paṭala* 107 of the SLP. Wrestling is mentioned most frequently in foreign chronicles. Nuniz says that “the king has a thousand wrestlers for these feasts who wrestle before the King, but not in our manner, for they strike and wound each other with two circlets” (Filliozat [Nuniz] 2015: 228). And as Paes writes, “their wrestling does not seem like ours, but there are blows given so severe as to break teeth and put out eyes, and disfigure faces, so much so that here and there men are carried off speechless by their friends.” These two passages seem consistent with verse 107.22cd–23ab (quoted above). However, the SLP does not mention the injuries caused to or by the wrestlers. Furthermore, Paes mentions that Kṛṣṇadevarāya used to wrestle with his wrestlers every morning,¹⁶ and according to Nuniz, wrestlers also seem to have had a special standing at the Vijayanagara court: “as soon as they have done this the wrestlers seat themselves on the ground, for these are allowed to remain seated, but no other, howsoever great a lord he be, except the king so commands” (Sewell [Paes] 1972: 269).

The SLP also gives a special position to wrestlers: for example, it speaks of how, on the *Nārakacaturdaśī* day,¹⁷ they give a massage and a warm bath to the

¹⁶ “The king is accustomed every day to drink a *quartilho* (three-quarter pint) of oil of gingelly before daylight, and anoint himself all over with the said oil; he covers his loins with a small cloth, and takes in his arms great weights made of earthenware, and then, taking a sword, he exercises himself with it till he has sweated out all the oil, and then he wrestles with one of his wrestlers” (Sewell [Paes] 1972: 249).

¹⁷ The day before *Dīpāvali*, when people in South India take an oil bath before sunrise.

king.¹⁸ This information can be compared to a similar passage written almost a hundred years after Nuniz by the Jesuit missionary Pierre du Jarrić, describing a gymnasium at the Vijayanagara court: “Then several strong and brawny youth called *geitas*, who are ready beforehand, rub the nobleman; then they box, jump, fence and take other kinds of exercise with him, in order to strengthen him; and this they do until perspiration flows freely. Then the *geitas* cover the whole of the nobleman’s body with sand, and massage him, and move his arms and legs in every direction as if they would disjoint his bones” (1610). Similarly, the Italian traveller Pietro della Valle also reports seeing skilful and stout wrestlers in the court at Ikkeri, another Nāyaka township in the empire (Saletore 1982: 166).

Another striking similarity between the SLP and one of the chronicles is found in Razzāq’s diary: “the jugglers performed astonishing feats; they set up three beams joined one to the other; each way was a yard long and half a yard broad, and about three or four high. Two other beams were placed on the top of the first two beams, which are of about the same length and breadth” (Filliozat [Razzāq] 2015: 274)—this passage matches verse 107.14–cd–15ab (quoted above), which describes the acrobatic show that I have earlier suggested bears similarities to the *mallkhamb*.

Although written a century later in Mysore, the former feudal territory of Vijayanagara and the surviving inheritor of the Vijayanagara culture, the *Kaṇṭhīravanarasarājavijayam* written in Kannada by Govinda Vaidya, a court poet of Kaṇṭhīrava Narasarāja Wodeyar I of Mysore (r. 1638–1659 CE), shares remarkable elements with the SLP, both giving an extensive list of entertainments performed for the king during *Navarātri*. Govinda Vaidya mentions in chapter 20 of his work that on the night of the *Mahānavamī* “there was an influx of scholars, officers, celebrities (*prasiddha-puruṣaru*), astrologers, singers, reciters, entertainers, pimps, jesters, masseurs, tricksters, quick-change artists and citizens of the city” (Sivapriyananda 1995: 110). Govinda Vaidya’s list also matches the lists of court personages and entertainments given in *paṭalas* 101 and 107 of the SLP respectively. But in the *Kaṇṭhīravanarasarājavijayam*, ascetics of different *saṃpradāyas* are mentioned as having participated in the *Navarātri* festival, as seen in this passage: “special camps (*bidara*) were laid out to lodge the rulers and chiefs coming from various kingdoms far and near [...] Separate arrangements were made to feed the people belonging to different sects and social groups. There were kitchens for Vīraśaivas,

¹⁸ *hemapiṭṭhe samāsinaḥ prāṇmukhaḥ prayataśucīḥ ||*
nadatsu pañcavādyeṣu bāhyakakṣyāntare tataḥ |
kaṇatkaṇkaṇayā badhvā daravalgādūrojayā ||
abhyaktaḥ snāpito mallaiḥ kaiś cit koṣṇena vāriṇā | SLP 112.8cd–10ab.

Liṅgayatas, Śrīvaiṣṇavas (of the Rāmānuja School) and monastic members of all the sects of the kingdom as well as for yogis, disabled people, wrestlers, acrobats, tricksters, quick-change artists, poets and musicians were also set up” (Sivapriyananda 1995: 110). Nonetheless, the text does not state whether the ascetics were participants in any of the spectacles.

The similarities between the SLP and literary sources concerning the amusements during the *Navarātri* festival are also supported by iconographical evidence found in various places in Hampi, the former capital of the Vijayanagara kingdom. The structure that contains the highest number of friezes that vividly exhibit these is the *Mahānavamī* Dibbā, more commonly known as “The Great Platform,” a stone structure situated at the heart of the city containing the highest number of friezes that vividly exhibit a variety of amusements, which Longhurst, an earlier scholar of Vijayanagara, suggests are depictions of the *Navarātri/Mahānavamī* festival.¹⁹

Wrestlers, for instance, are depicted on this platform in a number of acrobatic poses with intertwined bodies (Figs. 4–6). The popularity of this sport is also reflected in the number of friezes distributed elsewhere in the city and conforms, too, to eyewitness accounts. Iconographies of female wrestlers are also seen on the Great Platform and agree with the account of Nuniz (Fig. 7).²⁰ However, the SLP does not mention any female wrestlers.

Jugglers, clowns and jesters are not mentioned directly in the SLP as performers (Figs. 8–9), but their images are seen on some temple pillars across Hampi and they appear in a passage in the *Kanthīravanarasarājaviṣayam* (quoted above). Moreover, some of the iconographies of these entertainers depict them with beards and non-Indian costumes, which suggest that they are foreigners, probably Arabs²¹ (Figs. 10–11). This evidence also agrees with a verse in *paṭala* 107 of the SLP, which describes that the boat show (number thirteen on the list of royal amusements) was performed by foreigners (*dvīpāntara*).²² By way of this evidence, it can be confirmed that the entertainers, both Indians and foreigners, lived and worked in the Vijayanagara court and were probably active participants in the *Navarātri* celebration as well as in the daily life of the court.

¹⁹ See Longhurst 1925 [1917]: 55–63.

²⁰ See Filliozat [Nuniz] 2015: 232.

²¹ Or perhaps Ḥabshīs, people who were originally from Ethiopia, renowned for their strength and martial abilities. Ḥabshīs were numerous in the Deccan in this period.

²² *tato dvīpāntarajanapratibimbair adhiṣṭitām ||*
nāvan narapatih paśyet vikārākārahīṣanaiḥ |107.18cd–19ab.

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Figure 4: Wrestlers. Prasanna Virūpākṣa Temple. Photograph by Saran Suebsantiwongse.



Figure 5: Wrestlers. Great Platform, Hampi. Photograph by Saran Suebsantiwongse.

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Figure 6: Wrestlers. Great Platform, Hampi. Courtesy of Anna L. Dallapiccola.



Figure 7: Female wrestlers. Great Platform, Hampi. Photograph by Saran Suebsantiwongse.

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Figure 8: A magician/court jester, Viṭṭhala Temple, Hampi.
Photograph by Saran Suebsantiwongse.



Figure 9: A magician/court entertainer, Viṭṭhala Temple, Hampi.
Photograph by Saran Suebsantiwongse.

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Figure 10: Foreign entertainers. Great Platform, Hampi. Courtesy of Anna L. Dallapiccola.



Figure 11: Foreign entertainers. A structure in the Royal Centre, Hampi. Courtesy of Anna L. Dallapiccola.

Finally, iconographies of figures performing what seem like yogic poses are found in large numbers in Hampi temples as well as in other temples located within the Vijayanagara territories throughout South India. In Figure 12, for example, a long-haired figure balancing himself on a rod can either be interpreted as a yogi, an ascetic or simply an acrobat. The rod may be perceived as a *khaṭvāṅga* belonging to an ascetic who performs penance on a pile of skulls in a cremation ground or a *daṇḍa* of yogi, but

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such an *āsana* would need to be attested with a textual source. Nonetheless, through the studies of yogis sculptures at important pilgrimage centres throughout Karnataka, Seth Powell (in this volume) believes that they broadly depict Śaiva and Siddha yogis, and amongst these, due to their *vāhanas* and ornaments, some can be specifically identified as Nāth yogis.

These friezes support the evidence provided in textual sources, including the SLP, that communities of yogis and ascetics from a profusion of orders thrived in Vijayanagara to perform austerities, look after pilgrimage centres, spread religious ideologies and advise kings. A combination of evidence drawn from the bas-reliefs depicting ascetics performing *āsanas* or “magical acts” might suggest that the performers of practices like *agnistambhana*, as described in the *Navarātri* celebration, were ascetics demonstrating *siddhis* to impress the crowd or even the king on different occasions.



Figure 12: An unidentified figure balancing on a rod, Virūpākṣa Temple, Hampi. Courtesy of Anna L. Dallapiccola.

Conclusion

Through the surveys of various Sanskrit texts from mediaeval South India, the SLP emerges as the most comprehensive text to date to prescribe the royal amusements that the king should witness during the *Navarātri* celebration. The spectacles consist of music, dances, poetry, plays, martial art demonstrations and magic, many of which also correspond with the foreign chronicles and Indian literature from the Vijayanagara milieu. Owing to this fact, the SLP is agreed by most scholars to be from Vijayanagara, which was renowned for its grand celebration of *Navarātri*, which was subsequently inherited by its vassal states throughout South India.²³

The pole stunt and wrestling are the only two activities on the list that require physical strength, flexibility and stamina and are probably related; the “pole stunt” in the SLP may be more than just an acrobatic show and may be the *mallkhamb*, which is first mentioned in the *Mānasollāsa*. Looking at the history of *mallkhamb* in the Deccan, it is quite likely that the wrestlers mentioned in the SLP probably belonged to the Domar community from Andhra Pradesh (see McCartney in this volume).

References to the *jalastambhana* and *agnistambhana* are found in various Tantric texts and in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but the SLP, in mentioning these two spectacles, specifically links them to the two *itihāsas*. The SLP, however, does not specify who performs these spectacles. They could have been performed/acted in the stories from the epics by magicians/stuntmen, who could hold their breath underwater for a long time and manipulate fire or hot coals. It is also possible that they were enacted by ascetics who performed them as yogic/Tantric *siddhis* as these forms of practices are present among *tapasyās* performed by ascetics/tapasvis/yogis. This is because the *jalastambhana* and *agnistambhana* both appear on the lists of the sixty-four arts (which always comprise many yogic *siddhis*) highlighted in *paṭala* 64 the SLP and the commentary on the *Lalitāsahasranāma* by Bhāskaraṛāya, which belongs in the category of Tantric texts. We do not have sufficient information to point out how they were performed during the Vijayanagara period, but it can be supposed that they require

²³ Colourful and vivid references to courtly personages, some of whom also take part in the *Navarātri* entertainments described in *paṭala* 107, are mentioned in various chapters throughout the SLP. Namely there are vassal kings, courtiers, priests, ascetics, poets, philosophers, musicians, dancers, acrobats, soldiers, doctors, wrestlers, veterans, youngsters, police and foreigners—all of whom, according to the text, should be honoured and protected by the Emperor. This reflects Vijayanagara’s diverse cultural and religious traditions, social pluralism and tolerance promulgated under the system of the *rājadharmā*, which most scholars agree to have been one of its foremost state policies and which consequently led them to date and assign the SLP to the Vijayanagara period.

strength, flexibility, concentration, willpower and possibly some magical tricks in order for them to be worthy as royal spectacles. It may be said that these two spectacles reveal the fine line between “supernatural abilities” and magic tricks and how the former could be manipulated and made into mundane entertainments under certain circumstances.

There is no solid evidence in the SLP as to who the performers of these two extraordinary acts were but, by looking at other textual sources and iconographical data from the Vijayanagara milieu, which the SLP supposedly belongs to, it is imaginable that ascetics from different *sampradāyas*, probably Śaiva, Siddha and Nāth yogis, who lived in Vijayanagara, the home of the Virūpākṣa Temple and a major Śaiva pilgrimage centre, and who held prominent positions in the court, could easily have been the performers of these two spectacles and possibly others.

When the SLP is concurrently studied with the history of Vijayanagara along with a plethora of bas-reliefs depicting entertainments and physical practices, we get a broad textual and visual understanding of how they were practised, for whom and by whom in the court. We see how some physical practices mentioned in the SLP, and therefore of the Vijayanagara period, may be perceived as both spiritual and, at the same time, purely entertainment performed during the grandest and the most spiritually and politically significant festival of the year—the *Navarātri*.

What is clear, however, is that ascetics of various kinds shared the religious space of temples and the time of religious festivals with different kinds of performers, some of whom were held in great respect and esteem by the kings. We can suppose, therefore, that such environments provided opportunities for the exchange of physical practices, many of which would confer benefits that are highly prized also within yogic culture, such as bodily resistance, flexibility and determination.

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