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Uttering Curses in Classical Hinduism: An Inquiry into Power and Violence

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Based on textual evidence in ancient Indian texts, the uttering of curses (*sāpah*) was a feature of the culture from ancient times and continues into the current period, although the practice has not attracted the scholarly attention that it arguably deserves. The importance of the curse in Indian culture is also evident in other ancient religious cultures such as Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Greco-Roman. Within the cultural context of India, the curse and its effectiveness are related to its ancient theory of language and its connection to the notion of karma, which are associations that it will be necessary to review to give a more complete grasp of the phenomenon of the curse.

According to Indian textual evidence, a curse is uttered by a divine being or an authoritative person with the intention of causing harm. An example from the epic Rāmayana (7.68-69.16), where a Brahmin, a person of authority, curses an ascetic to eat his own flesh. A curse is to be distinguished from a vow, oath, or an act of truth that are different speech acts in classical Hinduism. The Sanskrit term for a vow (*vratā*) is not well defined in the Vedic period but develops the meaning of taking an ascetic regimen in the Dharma literature such as a fast. The vow involves a promise or a declaration of intent (Lubin, 2001, p. 566). A wife might vow to fast, for instance, for a specific period for the benefit of her husband and children. Some scholars interpret the vow as a promise to do some religious act (Gold, 1988, pp. 48-49; Harlan, 1992, pp. 45-48; Person, 1996). In contrast, Brereton interprets the vow less as a promise and more akin to a commandment that implies an obligation (Brereton, 1981, pp. 70-71).

The German scholar Hermann Oldenberg is among the first to call attention to the relationship between a curse and an oath (*vacana*). A curse can be directed against oneself if one violates one's word or tells a lie. Likewise, the words of an oath have power when one pledges one's life, possessions, life of a relative, or invites self-harm if one breaks one's words (Oldenberg, 1923, p. 516). However, Minoru draws a connection between an act of truth (*satya-kriyā*), an oath and an ordeal (*divya*). In the latter

instance, when there is no witness to testify to the truth of some action and the subject is falsely accused an ordeal is constructed to provide reliable witnesses. These witnesses are identified as the five elements (*mahābhūtas*, for example, fire, wind, water, earth, and ether), heavenly bodies (sun or moon), inner principles (heart, soul, vital breath, or digestive fire), and the gods (Minoru, 2009).

An especially interesting speech act is the act of truth that can be encountered in the epic literature, although it is rooted in earlier literature such as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.16) and its assertion that truth possesses potency like the power inherent within a sacred mantra. More specifically, an act of truth is a statement uttered to be true if some previous circumstance is true. Arguably, the most famous example of this type of speech act appears in the epic *Mahābhārata* (3.50-79) and its tale of the beautiful princess named Damayantī, who utters an act of truth at two crucial points during her life. While she is attempting to decide the identity of her future spouse, four Hindu deities—Indra, Varuṇa, Agni, and Yama—appear before her along with her true beloved Nala, but she is unable to distinguish between them. To dispel her confusion about her suitor's genuine identity, she utters a truth act related to the fact that Nala is destined to be her husband from the very first moment that she heard his name mentioned and calls on the gods to reveal her beloved. Responding by assuming their true appearance, the deities appear as figures who do not blink their eyes, wear fresh garlands, are free of perspiration, wear dust free clothes, are without shadows, and do no touch the earth with their feet, which exposes their identity and enables Damayantī to properly distinguish Nala from the divine beings. This outcome is made possible by the power inherent in the act of truth. In a second episode, Damayantī encounters a hunter in the forest who decides to rape her. In response to the hunter's evil intention, she utters an act of truth related to her virtuous role as a wife and her loyalty to her husband. The power inherent in her act of truth causes the death of the aspiring rapist (Mbh 3.60.35).

These narratives about Damayantī help one identify two major elements of an act of truth: (1) a formal declaration of fact and (2) a command, resolution, or prayer of the reciter that a particular purpose be accomplished. But the philosophical basis of the act of truth is a single-mindedness with which the performer fulfills one's duty, according to one's social responsibility grounded in one's caste and station of life. If one's duty is performed efficiently, purposely, and with integrity, the utterance will cause something to happen, assuming that what is uttered is true. This implies that the perfect execution of one's duty can achieve any wish by compelling the gods to give (Brown 1940, pp. 36-45). This scheme indicates that power can be exerted over the phenomenal world by means of virtue. Nonetheless, even immoral people can successfully exercise an act of truth by appealing to the fact that they have remained loyal to their dharmic duty. It is also possible to draw a distinction between an act of truth and an oath or curse: "basically by the magical use of a formal declaration of a truth to accomplish a miracle, and thereby to affirm one's authority..." (Thompson, 1998, p. 145).

A vow, oath, or act of truth tend to be characterized as more positive forms of speech acts compared to a curse. Why is this the norm? It is because the intention of a curse is to cause harm; it can be

conceptualized as a negative speech act that is a combination of communication, power, and violence, which are features that will be developed later. In the meantime, it can be affirmed that a curse shares with hate speech the degradation or stigmatizing of another person or target.

The Indian author Yāska attempts to create typologies of speech acts in his work the *Nirukta*, a fifth century BCE text that represents an etymological dictionary. This work lists nine categories of mantra by identifying three main types and six additions to the main types (Patton 1995). For the purposes of this essay, it should be observed that the six additional types include curses and accusations (*śapathābhiśapau*). Therefore, this text testifies to the importance of curses in ancient Indian culture.

Primary textual sources from a cross-cultural perspective suggest three major types of curses: revenge, binary, and conditional. A revenge type of curse is uttered to punish an offending party after having been harmed by them in the past. In contrast to the revenge type of curse, a binding curse is intended to restrain another person from any action that might be used against the curser in the future with regards to a variety of issues, whereas the conditional type of curse will automatically transpire if pre-established conditions are not met, or certain events occur that one wants to avoid.

Roots of the Curse in Ancient Indian Culture

In ancient Indian Vedic culture, the term curse is derived from the Sanskrit root *śap*, which also means to swear an oath. From this root term, related terms evolve such as *śapatha*, *śāpa*, and *abhiśāpa*. The term *śapatha* suggests both a curse and an oath, whereas *śāpa* and *abhiśāpa* refer specifically to a curse. The lifting of a curse is called *śapodhāra*, the termination of a curse is expressed by the term *śāpānta*, and a release from a curse is termed *śāpavimocana* (Smith 1982, p. 205). The term *śāpānta* (literally, the end of the curse) suggests that when certain specified conditions are met the curse ends. Hindu literature suggests two possible scenarios involved with ending a curse. The person uttering the curse might simultaneously announce the beginning and end of a curse inflicted on a victim, or the victim may ask the pronouncer about the termination of a curse. (Smith, 1995, p. 134). The terms of the curse could be modified when an inflictor of the curse is moved by mercy for the intended victim. But it is normally the case that once a curse is uttered the speech act cannot be altered by the perpetrator or anyone else. Finally, the term *śāpāstra* refers to those who use curses as weapons, suggesting a relationship between a curse and a subject's powers gained by the practice of asceticism (*tapas*).

In the ancient Ṛgveda (10.87.13) hymn to Agni, the poet equates a curse to a missile that originates from the fury of the mind. In another hymn (10.30.7), a poet reminds the Waters (Apām Napāt) that they owe Indra a favor for freeing them from a great curse. According to another hymn to Indra (RV 8.66.14), a poet acknowledges the warrior god's help rescuing him from neglect, hunger and a curse. Sometimes, the Vedic poet asks for protection from a curse by directly addressing Agni (RV 1.7.6; 4.4.3; 7.11.3). The request for protection from a curse is also directed to Agni by a poet within the context of describing the installation of the sacrificial fire (RV 5.3.7). The poet mentions evil speech and curses

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and calls attention to the presence of the sacrificial fire that also marks a protective presence against those who might offend his people and himself.

There is evidence in a Ṛgvedic (6.25.9) hymn that a curse is intended to cause one's adversaries to enter conflict with each other. Within the context of a call to destroy evil doers, evil itself and false speech, another hymn (RV 7.104.15) depicts a subject who calls a curse of death upon himself if he is a sorcerer or if he shortens the life span of another person. By threatening a curse upon oneself, if what one affirms is not true, the poet supports and even proves the veracity of what he asserts.

References to the curse continue in the Atharva Veda where it is distinguished from *aghām* (evil) that manifests itself as a lack of prosperity, fortune, or happiness (Bodewitz, 2006, p. 123). A person pleas, for instance, for a curse to avoid him just as a fire does a pond (6.37.2). Another person attempts to counter a curse by invoking words against it and hoping that it dries up from its roots like a tree that is struck by a thunder bolt (10.7.59.1). The Atharva Veda also depicts a subject invoking a curse so that it will recoil back onto the original utter (2.7.5). Other passages from the Atharva Veda give suggestions about how to protect oneself from a curse. A poet asks Agni to burn those who pronounce curses (AV 1.28.3), another poet refers to a plant that can wash away the filth associated with a curse (AV 2.7.1), and an irate poet invokes a counter curse against an offender and wishes for the curser's death (AV 6.37.1-3). Still, another poet asks to be freed of the power of a curse and the fetters of the deity Varuṇa (AV 7.112.2). It is also not beyond the imagination of a poet to return the evil associated with a curse back to its originator (AV 10.1.5). It is also possible to find evidence of a self-curse in the Atharva Veda like that evident in the Ṛg Veda mentioned previously. In this case, the poet asks to die if in fact he is a sorcerer (AV 8.4.15). According to the *The Kauśika Sūtra of the Atharva Veda* (46.24; 47.7) it is possible to counter a curse with an appropriate mantra at the right moment, assuming that the mantra is uttered by someone competent and justified in using it. This text (42.22) also instructs a person to utter a sacred mantra while gazing at the source of evil (Gonda, 1969, pp. 18-20). From the perspective of at least one scholar, the oral utterance of a curse is not always necessary because the effectiveness of the curse is connected to simply becoming thought (Hillebrandt, 1897, p. 177).

Not only is it possible to find citations about protecting oneself in the Ṛg Veda, but it is also possible to find something similar in the Atharva Veda corpus. The Atharva Veda calls attention to an eye ointment that is identified as an instrument to protect a person from a curse and other forms of externally inflicted malaise (4.9). In another instance, a pearl-shell functions as an amulet for protection against distress, demons, and additionally promotes long life (AV 10.1-7). Protection against a curse is also provided by a metal amulet (AV 1.6). If a person is apprehensive about being cursed, the subject can verbally redirect a curse back upon the perpetrator of a curse (AV 2.7.5). Normally, the power of an amulet depends on the substance that constitutes it, which includes such things as barley, sour milk, or honey that are believed to be items with substantial magical power (Gonda, 1960, p. 113).

In the Brahmanical ritual manuals, a curse can function like a myth to explain the origin for a thing or

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situation in the present. The harvesting of trees with axes and the pain that it inflicts is recounted and attributed to the gods becoming sick and cursing trees for their illness (PB 6.5.11). The act of fishing and the killing of fish by human beings is attributed to the deity Agni and his curse upon the unfortunate fish (TS 2.6.6.1). Like evidence in the Ṛgveda and Atharva Veda, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (14.9.4.11) encourages a curse to be invoked with the purpose of recoiling back onto the original curser. This type of action occurs within a ritual context when the rules of the rite are violated. If a person performs a required, sacrificial act incorrectly that person places oneself in a precarious situation that makes one vulnerable to the power of a curse. (Keith, 1970, p. I: 395). This type of scenario is also indicative of the fact that the efficacy of a curse is dependent on time, place, authoritative status of a speaker, and the accurate pronouncement of the formulaic words, giving the curse its authenticity (Gonda, 1989, p. 143).

Because Vedic students often lived with the families of their teachers, the Brahmin's wife needed to be protected or discouraged from having a sexual relationship with a student, who could be near the spouse's age. Contained within the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (6.4.12) are instructions for a curse to be uttered on someone who flirts or carries on an affair with the wife of a Brahmin, a procedure consisting of the following steps: "He should place some fire in an unbaked pot, spread out a bed of reeds, arranging them in a way that is the reverse of the normal, apply ghee to the tips of these reeds, again in an order that is the reverse of the normal, and offer them in that fire, as he recites: take away the enemy's out and in-breaths, take away his sons, and livestock, take away accumulated merit from performing sacrifices, and his hopes and expectations" (Olivelle, 1998, p.157). Being cursed in this manner, an afflicted person will lose his virility and acquired merit from his good works. This scenario seems to imply that a curse is not a senseless waste of words, but rather materialize and attach themselves to a person afflicted (Gonda, 1987, p. 125). This suggests that a curse is akin to karmic residue that attaches to a person, even though curses and karmic retribution appear to be incompatible. Thus, it seems to be appropriate to examine how the gap between them might be bridged.

There are bodily gestures associated with performing a curse. Some texts instruct a person to touch his head while uttering a curse, such as the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (1.10.11) or *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (14.6.9.28). The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (3.8.5.10) also advocates to a curser that he should hold water in his hands while cursing another person. The water is magically empowered by the curse, which enhances its effectiveness.

Classical dharma literature is often concerned with the social implications of a curse. *The Nāradasmṛti* (12.12) provides a list of those who are unsuitable marriage prospects that includes the following: a male impotent from birth; a castrated person; someone only able to have sexual intercourse fortnightly; and a person having become impotent because of a curse inflicted by one's teacher (*abhiśāpād guru*). The *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (1.29.15) asserts, for example, that a person who practices sorcery or utters a curse is defiled but does not lose their caste standing. The *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (17.3-5)

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recalls a curse from the Ṛg Veda (1.21.5) referring to enemies that can become childless by the power of the curse and evokes the notion of a person gaining immortality via their offspring (RV 5.4.10) to suggest what can be lost to a person who is cursed, signifying the potential personal, social, and teleological consequences of being cursed.

The Relationship between Karma and the Curse

There are two scholarly approaches toward identifying the origin of the notion of karma. There is one approach that identifies the origin of the concept of karma within ancient Vedic religion, whereas a second theory seeks its origins outside of Vedic culture and argues that the external source then influenced the religion. The internal approach is represented by the efforts of Herman Tull (1989), while the external conception is exemplified by Johannes Bronkhorst (2007, 2011).

Tull finds traces of karma in Vedic ritual thought with its emphasis on positive and negative actions related to the correct performance of ritual. He also finds an agricultural component in the concept of karma. Moreover, the process of rebirth is established on the model of the five-fire doctrine that relates the process of human generation to the continuous activity of the cosmic sacrifice and its five sacrificial fires. Each element identified is associated with each of these five spheres as an element of the fire. Thus, the five-fire doctrine is connected to the five spheres of the cosmos—the heavens, atmosphere, earth, man, and woman (Tull, 1989, p. 33). In his theory, Tull stresses the continuity of the Vedic tradition.

In contrast to Tull, Bronkhorst discovers an influence from Buddhism on Vedic culture and the concept of karma. More germane to this essay is Bronkhorst's discussion of the relation between karma and the curse. He finds a tendency in Indian literature to attempt to reconcile karma with the curse. The latter tends to adjust to karma on the bases of moral considerations (Bronkhorst, 2011, p. 99). Inexplicable disasters are, for example, personally explained by invoking well-deserved curses that sometimes originate earlier in a person's life. This shows that "Curses and karmic retribution thus come to work in tandem, the former giving concrete shape to the just deserts of the person cursed" (Bronkhorst, 2011, p. 99).

Another theory supporting the external origin for the doctrine of karma comes from O'Flaherty and Obeyeskere. According to O'Flaherty's position, Vedic literature contains much rice imagery that tends to exclude the Indus Valley and its Vedic religious culture as a source of the karma theory. What gives raise to doubt about this origin for the notion of karma is the wheat growing civilization of this region. In contrast to the Indus Valley and its wheat cultivation, tribal peoples external to the Indus culture grew rice (O'Flaherty, 1980, p. 3). This fact thus supports Obeyeskere's opinion that the tribal people originated the theory of karma (1980, p. 138). Moreover, O'Flaherty thinks that the karma theory probably preceded the idea of rebirth (1980, p. 3).

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Usually conceived as an impersonal force and unvarying cosmic law that operates automatically, karma is associated with the curse. This understanding is a bit misleading, even though it contains a grain of veracity within it. Things with respect to the notion of karma can be more complex. The narrative about Māṇḍavya, an ascetic Brahmin and dharma expert who took a vow of silence, relates how he got himself into trouble with the king for not identifying some robbers. Condemned to death for his failure to help legal authorities, the ascetic Brahmin was impaled on a stake along with the robbers. The ascetic willed himself to stay alive long enough to receive a request from the king for forgiveness for the monarch's mistake. After forgiving the monarch, the ascetic was taken down from the stake, but it was impossible to extricate the stake from him, prompting the ascetic to have the stake cut off at its base. He continued to exist with the stake within his body, earning the name "Tip-of-the-stake" (Māṇḍavya).

After being freed from the stake, Māṇḍavya went to the home of Dharma to scold him and to inquire why he was so severely punished. Dhama told a tale that when Māṇḍavya was a child he used to stick blades of grass up the tails of little butterflies. Thus, his current encounter with the king was retribution for his past karmic actions. Protesting that he was being harshly punished for a minor offense, Māṇḍavya cursed Dharma to be reborn in the womb of a lower caste woman and vowed to establish a moral boundary for the fruition of the law in the world by making it impossible to legally hold anyone guilty of transgressions against another until the age of fourteen (Mbh 1.57.78-79), which represents the age of adult responsibility. This type of narrative shows a definite connection between the operation of karma and a curse. When the ascetic curses Dharma this utterance suggests the dramatic personalization of the notion of karma (Goldman, 1985, p. 421). This narrative also suggests the pivotal role of amnesia for deeds committed in the past and a forgetfulness about the origins of a current curse. As the narrative recounted illustrates, the instrument of punishment for negative karmic actions is the curse, suggesting a close association with the mechanics of karma. And this applies equally to humans, divine beings, and demons.

A point not made by writers on the subject is that your prior karma and your current harmful deeds can be a curse on the actor in the sense that your past karma can determine your present harmful condition, or your present karma can curse you when these deeds are negative or adharmic. There is also a place for creativity in the operation of karma within the *āśrama* system because "life is affirmed without disregarding its transcendent dimension. This way of action involves creativity: working with and through karma as opposed to negating it. The net result of both approaches is the same, overcoming the negative influence of past action" (Chapple, 1986, p. 92). In addition, the narrative about Māṇḍavya connects the curse with violence in the past and the current moment.

Even though a curse is a speech act intended to harm another subject or group, it does not mean that humankind is inherently violent and manifests a tendency towards a cycle of violence as the aggrieved party strives to reciprocate the violence perpetrated upon them. Classical Hindu literature suggests that

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issues of protection and justice trump violence, even though violence often plays a role in the narratives. An example from the composer Bāṇa's *Kādambarī* (529.13-530.2) stresses a moral and ethical issue. In this narrative a young Brahmin sexually harasses Mahāśvetā who curses him, causing his death. She refers in the story to her curse and the lack of the five great elements (*mahābhūtas*) lacking in his body that are traditionally witnesses of right and wrong. Tragically, the young Brahmin male is her beloved. Like this narrative, the violence associated with a curse is one type of violence among others in ancient Indian culture. The Indian narratives are not suggesting that Indians are a violent people. But they are suggesting that there are situations that are violent (Collins, 2008, p. 10). If we consider the context for the invoking of a curse, it is possible to see that the utterance of a curse represents a situation that is intertwined with fear, anger, anxiety, and heightened excitement. In addition to its situational aspect, the violence associated with a curse is also dynamic and even dramatic based on numerous examples already given. Moreover, the nature of the curse within the classical Indian context suggests a culture that manifests an interactional society.

The Ascetic's Use of the Curse in Epic Literature

At least a couple of scholars have recognized the importance of the curse in the epic literature. Goldman sees the proliferation of curses in both epics as nothing but a dramatic personalization of the idea of karma (1985, p. 421). But Brockington calls Goldman's position implausible (1998, p. 452). What is, however, indisputable is the presence of numerous narratives concerned with ascetics using curses to punish those responsible for offending a particular ascetic in some fashion. Numerous narratives in epic literature recount a curse being uttered by an ascetic, a powerful figure who is feared by kings and average citizens. When uttered by a spiritually advanced ascetic a curse functions as a powerful weapon that is greatly feared by royalty and common people (Olson, 2015, pp. 134-137).

According to a tale in the *Mahābhārata* (3.116.1-15), the married ascetic Jamandagri lived with his wife and five sons in the forest. After going to bathe at the river, the wife spied the king sporting with his wives in the water, and she became enamored of the monarch to the extent of losing control of her emotions and began to tremble, a condition that enabled her ascetic husband to discover the reason of her unusual demeanor. Because of her lack of martial fidelity, the ascetic ordered his initial four sons to kill their mother, but they remained mentally confused, emotionally conflicted, and silent. Thereupon, the father cursed them to become insane, causing the four sons to behave like wild animals. Then, the father repeated his order to his fifth son, Rāma, who decapitated his mother with his axe. The husband's anger subsided, and he urged his fifth son to choose a boon as a reward for executing such a difficult deed. Rāma wished that his mother be restored to life, that she would be unable to remember the murder, that he not be personally influenced by negative karma himself, and that his brothers be restored to normal.

The narrative about Jamandagri depicts him violating dharma (established law), acting impulsively from anger, and demonstrating the power of his ability to curse. It is the acquisition of ascetic (*tapas*) power that makes his curse especially powerful. Thereby, it demonstrates using language as a tool of power. It is also possible to witness the use of language as an intentional form of injury. Grounded in the power of the ascetic gained by practicing arduous austerities, the curse is a negative speech act that attempts to harm or do violence to another person, group, deity, or demon. This narrative enables one to recognize the curse as a form of communication uttered by an authoritative person that operates magically without additional actions. Commonly, the curse uttered by an ascetic is analogous to a powerful weapon comparable to a flash of lightning in the minds of composers. Its application has the potential to exhaust the power of the ascetic, who is then forced to resume his practice of *tapas* to regain the power expended (Gonda, 1960, p. 285).

According to an epic narrative (Mbh 3.158.50-55), the results of a curse can trigger a teaching moment for an ascetic. As a learned, ascetic Brahmin stands under a tree reciting sacred scriptures, a female heron defecates on him from the top of the tree. In response to this defiling action, the ascetic directs an injurious thought towards the bird that kills it. Witnessing the result of his curse, the ascetic becomes remorseful at the sight of the inanimate heron's body lying on the ground, which motivates the ascetic to vow to overcome his emotions. Again, this is literary evidence of the close association in epic literature between curse, power, and violence.

In another narrative from the same book of the *Mahābhārata* (3.137.1-20), the composer weaves together elements of humor, the demonic, fear, immorality, and the curse of an ascetic. The tale involves Yavakrī, a wandering ascetic, who arrives at the hermitage of another ascetic named Raibhya. Upon seeing Raibhya's beautiful daughter-in-law, the wandering ascetic's mind becomes excessively lustful, prompting him to sexually proposition her. Fearing the curse of Yavakrī while also aware of her father-in-law's ascetic powers, she consents to submit sexually to the wandering ascetic at an isolated location. Upon his return to his heritage, Raibhya discovers his daughter-in-law crying, comforts her with gentle words, and learns what happened to her, which sends him into an angry rage. Tearing a handful of hair from his head, he offers it as an oblation to the ritual fire that creates a beautiful woman. Repeating his actions, Raibhya creates a gruesome ogre with horrible eyes. When these two figures ask for instructions, the ascetic tells them to kill the immoral wanderer. Acting as a team, the beautiful demon successfully seduces the wandering ascetic and steals his water pot, which makes it impossible for him to cleanse himself after his sexual encounter. Being rendered vulnerable because of his state of pollution, Yavakrī witnesses the dreadful demon coming at him with a trident in her hand. Quickly responding to this dire situation, Yavakrī runs to a nearly pond to hide, but the body of water is dry along with nearby rivers. Finally, he runs to his father's sacrificial ground where he is restrained by a blind servant. While he is confined by the blind servant, the demon is able to beat him and split his heart with its trident killing the immoral ascetic.

Epic literature also depicts the curse of the ascetic operating to check the power of other powerful beings. The *Rāmāyaṇa* (4.11.38-45) recounts the violent narrative of Vālin seizing the two horns of Dundubhi and throwing the gigantic demon to the earth, killing it. Lifting the lifeless body of the demon, Vālin hurls it a long distance and over the hermitage of the ascetic Mataṅga. While the inert body of the demon passes over the ascetic's hermitage, drops of the demon's blood are scattered and fall on the hermitage. In reaction to the falling blood from the dead demon, the ascetic pronounces a curse on Vālin with the purpose of causing his death, if he should enter the abode of the ascetic. The fearful Vālin begged forgiveness from the ascetic, even though he was a mighty, heroic figure. This narrative scenario thus suggests that it is possible to conclude that the curse of the ascetic is more powerful and curbs the power of a great warrior in this narrative.

The narrative examples of the ascetic's use of a curse demonstrates its infallible nature and veracity (Minoru 1998, p. 231). This observation suggests that the ascetic's words have truth (*satya*, Mbh. 3.13.117; 5.80.48), value, and a confidence in the prior truthfulness of the ascetic (Mbh. 1.49.19), which stands opposed to idle speech and lies. When an ascetic is motivated by anger to utter a curse this attitude stands in sharp contrast to his/her blessing, a result of the ascetic's satisfaction. As illustrated by the various examples of stories, the curse of an ascetic is often associated with a specific duration of time, and seldom is uttered as an eternal curse, a scenario that mitigates the curse to some extent (Minoru, 1998, p. 235).

The Curse as a Type of Speech Act

The curse of an ascetic or another authoritative person operates like a speech act, representing a performative utterance because the oral expression of a curse makes something happen that is usually harmful to an intended party. According to the analytical philosophy of J. L. Austin, speech acts are locutionary verbal acts that express something with a certain sense and reference, which is similar to stating "the automobile is running" with respect to a specific automobile, whereas an illocutionary act of utterance represents an act of saying something, as for example when saying "start the auto," by performing an act of giving a direct order. Finally, a perlocutionary utterance accomplishes something by the act of saying, for example, "turn the engine off." Austin also insists that certain conditions are necessary for a performative utterance to be successful that involves an accepted conventional procedure within a particular context. In addition, the participants and circumstances must be appropriate for the invocation of the specific procedure used. Moreover, a performative utterance includes a complete and correct execution of the procedure by all participants (Austin ,1967).

In narratives featuring an ascetic's curse, the ascetic is depicted controlling the power of the words that already possess an inherent power, while other characters in the stories play roles as instigators of the ascetic's verbal ire. A good example of this situation is the narrative of the ascetic Kahoḍa, a student of Uddālaka, who receives instruction from this distinguished teacher, and accepts Sujātā, daughter of the

teacher, as the student's bride. During the bride's pregnancy, her fetus tells its father that he did not get his studies right. Taking offense at these words spoken by the fetus in the presence of his students and thereby humiliating him in front of others, the father curses the fetus to be born crooked in eight different ways (Mbh 3.132.6-9). A reader might protest the injustice and violence of such a curse against a defenseless fetus by a temperamental ascetic. However, no matter how unjustified the ascetic's action is, this narrative suggests the danger and violence associated with the ascetic's use of a curse to punish perceived offenders.

Besides attacking vulnerable figures, various narratives relate tales of ascetics cursing other ascetics. According to a narrative in the *Mahābhārata* (9.36.3-50), Trita is a superior ascetic, who falls into a pit when he encounters a wolf and cries out for help, but he is abandoned by his two ascetic brothers—Duita and Ėkata—while in the pit, cursing them for leaving him in such a precarious predicament. The two uncaring brothers hatch a plot to perform sacrifices and acquire wealth by gaining all the sacrificial patrons of their unfortunate brother stuck in the pit. In addition, the two brothers acquired numerous animals as fees for their religious services and conspired to keep the animals for themselves. While captive in the pit, Trita imagines sacrificial fires and a *soma* plant from which he extracts *soma* juice. Proceeding to perform a sacrifice mentally and giving forth a vociferous shout that is heard by the gods, the divine beings are motivated to investigate the situation and source of the thunderous sound. Giving the gods their portions of the sacrifice, Trita asks to be saved from his predicament, and his request is granted. When he encounters his traitorous brothers again, he curses them to wander as fierce wolves and extends the curse to include their offspring who are cursed to become monkeys, bears, and apes. Apparently, the two evil brothers were not powerful enough to counter the power inherent in the curse of the offended brother possibly because their transgressions subverted their power, rendering Trita morally and ethically powerful.

Concluding Remarks

Within the context of classical Indian culture, the phenomenon of the curse was grounded in and developed along with the conviction that words have power. Vedic poets personified language as Vāc (literally, speech or word) and conceived it as an internal power, a creative force, and the essence of a thing (Brown, 1968; Renou, 1955). When Vedic poets referred to Vāc as a cow they intended to express its creative, nourishing, and life-sustaining qualities (RV 9.100.10-11). In addition to the conception of Vāc, Vedic literature depicted language as mysterious, divine (RV 5.10.2; 10.114), and a revelation (*śruti*, RV 10.71.1). Thus, language indicated power and power relations, and a person gained power by mastery of language (Goldman, 2000, p. 85). Certainly, a curse was a dramatic example of the power associated with language much like a mantra.

In summary, this essay distinguished a curse from other types of speech acts, such as a vow, oath, act of truth, and ordeal. It also reviewed types of curses, their role in Indian classical culture, and their

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philological associations. Attention was called to modes of protecting oneself from a curse and how it functions to explain the origin of things like a creation myth. The nature of a curse was expanded by examining its connection to the notion of karma and how there is a tendency to reconcile them in the culture. And its violent aspect was highlighted.

The curse was isolated from other powers typical of an advanced ascetic for special consideration in the epic literature. It was discovered that a curse uttered by an ascetic included the characteristics of infallibility, truthfulness, and manifests a duration of time. Because of his power to invoke a curse against a victim, the ascetic was greatly feared by all classes of society. The fear of ascetics distinguished them from the remainder of society. Thus, the utmost caution had to be taken not to intentionally or unintentionally upset or offend an ascetic and risk incurring the wrath of his curse.

Finally, this essay reviewed the curse as a speech act as defined by J. L. Austin. Based on the analytical philosopher's theory, a curse is a performative utterance, which means that it makes something happen. In the case of the Indian ascetic's use of a curse, it is possible to recognize that language used as a performative utterance operates both as a tool of power and a power in its own right. The language used to utter a curse indicates that words can be creative, exert power, bring harm, or even destroy others. The circumstance, authoritative nature of the curser, and power of the words used make something happen.

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