

What is an epic about?: Nīlakaṇṭha's *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* and the Meta-Epic as Mode of Writing and Reflection

I. Introduction

Nīlakaṇṭha is well-known as furnishing the vulgate used by modern critical and other editions of the *Mahābhārata*. His own motivations in collecting manuscripts from various parts of India for a more 'cosmopolitan' edition emerge from his attempt at writing a complete commentary, the *Bhāratabhāvadīpa* (henceforth *Dīpa*), on the text using a non-dualist philosophical framework. I approach the *Dīpa* through two distinct but related entry points, epic studies, particularly the *Mahābhārata*'s commentarial reception and, secondly, Vedānta studies. As we know, Nīlakaṇṭha's *Dīpa* can be approached as an Advaitic work, outside of its function as an epic commentary. Indeed it has often functioned as both— providing assistance to the modern reader about difficult or obscure passages of the epic and, at other times, as an Advaitic philosophical work of some ingenuity.¹

As Minkowski (2017, 718) has noted, his commentary is “an anagogical, sometimes allegorical reading, which understands the epic as a developmental instruction in non-dualism”. Minkowski's work has, more generally, explored the breadth of Nīlakaṇṭha's extant oeuvre, discussed the modern Indological reception of his *Dīpa* commentary and commented, at some length, on the relation of his brand of Advaita with that of his contemporaries. The commentary as such remains untranslated, large parts of it unexplored in contemporary scholarship, apart from brief sporadic translations of passages culled from sections of the commentary. The provided translations are therefore my own (and in need of further revision).

In Sections I and II (focusing on two sections of the *Dīpa*) I discuss Nīlakaṇṭha's vision of the epic's import, as a text meant for spiritual edification

¹ This is reflective of a broader phenomenon of seeking to comment on and include in the purview of the established canon of Vedānta other texts. Kiyokazu Okita (2020) has questioned the general perception of Vedānta as the exegetical tradition on the *prasthānatraya*—the *Gītā*, *Brahmasūtra* and *Upaniṣads*—so as to include commentaries on the *Purāṇas*, particularly the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, within our understanding of Vedāntic discourse; the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* itself, as claimed by Madhva, claims to comprehend the collective wisdom of the Vedas and the *Mahābhārata*.

and liberation, through his employment of the fourfold *puruṣārtha* (aims of life) scheme and his use of typically Advaitic tropes, particularly the conception of *dhī-* or *cittaśuddhi* (mental purification) as a framework to determine the epic's deeper import.² More generally, I begin with interrogating the broader phenomenon of viewing the epic *synthetically* as carrying a single deep purport, teaching or message—a program that, perhaps much older, gathers steam in the second millennium, especially from around the 13th century—and the extent to which the category of the meta-epic can be illuminating here (or not). Section III engages the non-dualist context of the commentary exploring the multifarious senses of non-dualism and identity, theistic and otherwise—in particular the fraught question of the nature of identity or union between the individual self and lord—extant in Nīlakaṇṭha's period. Here the reading of a particular passage in his commentary containing a maxim (*nyāya*)—that of the wasp and the caterpillar—becomes a crucial entry-point to evaluate the distinct conceptions of identity and divine union in the commentarial tradition.

The question has been raised about what kind of Advaitin Nīlakaṇṭha was (Minkowski 2010).³ At one level, this is quite straightforward. While it has been acknowledged that he was firmly situated in the Shankarite lineage, citing from Sureśvara, Sadānanda and others, a deeper study of how closely he is tracking Śaṅkara Bhagavatpāda's own idiom, tropes and categories⁴ remains a desideratum⁵. I track some of these categories and arguments in the discussion of the *Dīpa* in subsequent sections.

I.i What is Bhārata About when it is About Everything?: The Question of the Epic's Purport and the Meta-epic

² The *puruṣārtha* scheme was already employed by previous commentators before Nīlakaṇṭha, although not with the same ambitiousness of scale and hermeneutic significance that he attributes to it.

³ The question has been posed in the context of the many novelties introduced by him as a pre-modern commentator upon various texts. Here the theistic context of his day and interlocutors has been invoked as somewhat explaining his stylistic and doctrinal innovations, which also goes to some length to explain why Nīlakaṇṭha chose to comment on an epic at the first place.

⁴ This is significant given that many other Advaitins of the Shankarite lineage do not follow Śaṅkara as closely as Nīlakaṇṭha appears to.

⁵ The appellation used to nominate the actual 'founder' of Advaita, and author of the *Brahmasūtra* commentary, most of the primary Upaniṣads and Gītā, in distinction to the assumed title of Śaṅkarācārya by others in the lineage.

In spite of the fact that the *Mahābhārata* has been claimed to be all-encompassing in scope, attempts to extract a coherent vision of the epic have taken various forms, including commentaries, of which the *Dīpa* is the foremost example insofar that it takes up the task of commenting on the whole epic, and not merely the difficult sections or those that comprised the partisan favorites of a particular sect, such as of Nīlakaṇṭha's own time (it does, in practice, make short work of certain sections with lengthy expatiations of others pertinent to his own agenda). The two other commentators on the total *Mahābhārata* seem to have been Sarvajña Nārāyaṇa and Vimalabodha (both 13th century), although, as noted, they do not bring a strong overarching ideological vision to the text as does Nīlakaṇṭha. As Minkowski has noted, Nīlakaṇṭha was well aware that he was doing something new and that "there is little precedent for the sort of overarching goals he has set for his commentary, and little precedent for his methods. (2005, 237).

Meta-epic reflection on the epic's meaning and purport, however, can take many forms, as we witness since at least early to middle of the second millennium. A variety of works begin to play with extant versions to decipher deeper meanings of the epic's themes and purpose, either by weaving meta-narratives around an epic (such as the *Yogavāsiṣṭha Mahārāmāyaṇa*), spiritual retellings of epic stories (*Adhyātmārāmāyaṇa*), or commentaries on parts or the whole of the epic (such as Nīlakaṇṭha). And what may be said of the composition history of the *Bhagavadgītā* itself which, while a minuscule part of the entirety of the epic, comports itself as its inner microcosm, and has been subsequently read in analogous terms, concentrating the epic's themes and questions upon the physical as well as allegorical, internal or spiritual planes or 'battlefields' (literally, the great battle or 'mahā-bhārata') through its exploration of dharma, karma, mokṣa, bhakti and other themes? Here the *Gītā* itself becomes a spiritual allegory of and meta-reflection upon the quasi-mythical, quasi-historical events of the story.

Since at least the time of Devabodha (11th century?) the fourfold aims of life (*puruṣārtha*) scheme has been one mode of organizing and cohering the diverse content of the text, while simultaneously incorporating *mokṣa* (freedom/liberation) as a candidate for the text's self-understanding of its own didactic aims. That the epic interrogates after and, perhaps, is about *dharma* was never in doubt, although that leaves us guessing about the actual import (*tātparya*) of the

epic, if there ever was one. Scholarship has debated other possible candidates for the text's central concerns, such as debates around the relative force of destiny (*niyati*), human effort (*puruṣakāra*) and action (*karma*) in the unfolding of personal and collective history. Referring to the churning passages of the *Mahābhārata*, Alf Hiltebeitel has noted that they isolate a central purpose of the epic's overall design, constituting heightened reflections on the narrative's essence as liberating instruction on truth and dharma. (Hiltebeitel 2005, 507). Here non-dualism, I would argue, offers another such model of meta-epic reflection, when uncoupled from its specific Advaita Vedānta lineage to include the diverse ways in which non-duality, unity and identity have been theorized in the Vedic-Hindu religious continuum.

It is also likely that, philosophically, the *Mahābhārata* may endorse a generally monistic metaphysics in spite of its Sāṃkhyaesque vocabulary and tone in sections, affirming an emanationist model of creation emerging from a single primal being or reality; whether this primitive being is conceived theistically or purely ontologically.⁶ This consideration provides some context for Nīlakaṇṭha's own attempt at offering a strong monist/non-dualist reading of the epic, if only through the lens of a highly specific and sectarian version of non-dualism. Nonetheless, as I later discuss, it is a mistake to identify the extent of non-dualism with the Advaita of Śaṅkara, or even Vedānta; the Kāśmīra Trika offers its own non-dualist vision of reality, even interpreting the deeper meaning of the epics under its own version of non-dualism (see below). We also know that competing and complementary iterations of non-dualism thrived in ancient India (*kālādvaita*, *puruṣādvaita*, *bhāvādvaita* etc.) that had little to do with Shankarite Vedānta.

Ānandavardhana's and the more generally Kāśmīra Śaiva aesthetic reception of the *Mahābhārata* has been well-documented as an attempt to provide another such meta-reading of the epic's import through its invocation of the category of indifference or dispassion (*nirvedatva*). Here the purpose of the epic becomes the inculcation of a sense of indifference or disillusionment towards the world and worldly aspirations, a reading somewhat justified by the implosive character of the epic's own narrative, its tragic undertones, the haunting persistence of

⁶ For an in-depth discussion of explicitly philosophical elements in the epics—and not, as intended here, the meta-epic philosophical reading of the *Mahābhārata*—refer, for instance, to the Special Issue on “Locating Philosophy in the *Mahābhārata*”, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 45, No. 4, including essays by J.L. Fitzgerald 2017 and A. Malinar.

violence (*hiṃsā*), the non-finality and ambiguity about *dharma*, or the rather sobering end of the epic itself (depending on where one interprets the ending of the epic to occur), something it shares with the *Rāmāyaṇa*). These features may not of themselves suffice to read a spiritual motive/motif in the author(s) by way of recommending *mokṣa* as freedom from this essentially finite, dissatisfactory and tragic character of the world (*saṃsāra*)—even if *mokṣa* comes to join the other three aims of life (*puruṣārthas*) as another concern of the text—nonetheless, the *nirvedatva* thesis finds itself on stronger ground if read as an absent presence the text merely points to or gestures towards indirectly, at safe distance from its immediate concerns and agendas but marking the horizon of its meaning; a possibility that is subsequently exploited in the spiritual readings and revisions of the epic.

In the medieval and pre-modern commentaries especially, we find a rhetoric of extraction and recovery of the hidden, secret or depth (*gūḍha/rahasya*) meanings of texts or simply discussions of their deeper import (*tātparya/bhāva*), as in the case of Nīlakaṇṭha's own *Dīpa* and *mantrarahasyaprakāśa* works, Madhusūdana's *Gūḍārtha Dīpikā*, Madhva's *Mahābhārata Tātparyanirṇaya*, or the *Bhāratatātparyasaṃgraha* of Appayya Dixit. In and through all these, the tension between depth and surface, literality and allegory, inner and outer meanings, haunt the question of the *aboutness* of the epic from the very beginning, even if they get deployed in innovative ways in Nīlakaṇṭha's own era. As for Nīlakaṇṭha himself, Minkowski has observed that he does not aim to negate or replace the text's surface meaning with his Vedānticized reading, but only add a deeper-level analysis (2005, 239).

Here I wonder if the category of the 'meta-epic' can be brought to bear upon this eclectic array of texts in order to be able to identify some aspects of their compositional logic. I have, since the drafting of my abstract, not found this to be the most promising hermeneutic to approach them, if only because it leads me to larger genre-related, intellectual-historical and text-receptive questions about this motley collection of texts that must await a more patient exploration of the text in its specificity. Therefore the following remarks are only exploratory and preliminary, and subsequent sections will keep to specific features of and passages from the *Dīpa*.

It is worth clarifying that employing the frame of the meta-epic, and the 'meta-' as a trope, is not an attempt at identifying a genre or collection of texts

rendered cohesive under a set of common tropes, structure, style or form. Yet certain, what may be called, meta-epic considerations are brought to bear upon the epics by a diverse set of texts that seek to unravel a deeper layer of meaning that renders the epic and its myriad contents cohesive. Some generic features of such texts may be discerned. They typically seem to affirm a deeper spiritual, typically (if not exclusively), non-dualist (*advaita*) core to an epic's surface form, even if some, owing to their unique composition histories, seem to fall between the cracks of South Asian textual genre classification, the *Yogavāsiṣṭha Mahārāmāyaṇa/ Mokṣopāya* being a case in point. These texts claim to be (i.) about the *whole* epic, (ii.) aim to reveal its *hidden* (*gūḍha/ rahasya*) import, (iii.) one that is necessarily spiritual (*ādhyātmika*) and (iv.) typically, if not exclusively, representative of a non-dualist (*advaita*) framework. Here I will attend to the question as to why variant iterations of non-dualism, whether theistic, non-theistic, Vedāntic, extra-Vedāntic etc.—such as Ānandavardhana's own Kāśmīra Trika non-dualist context—are often invoked as providing a meta-framework for rendering intelligible the deeper import of the *Mahābhārata* (and the epic in general).

Lena Linne has sought to develop a theory of the meta-epic and meta-generic with respect to the Greek epics. The meta-epic is described there, amongst other ways, as a text that comments upon the nature of an epic. It constitutes the 'medium' or 'locus' of the meta-generic reflection, the epic becoming its 'object'. The prefix 'meta' serves to indicate that the metalanguage or text is set on a higher level than the object language or text it comments or reflects on. 'Meta', also meaning 'beyond', 'behind', 'after', also connotes in philosophy (metaethics, metaphysics) a discourse of a second-order that poses questions of the most fundamental type about its subject matter, its nature, meaning and criteria of intelligibility. Likewise, a 'meta-narrative' is understood as an overarching account or interpretation of events and circumstances that provides a pattern or structure for the beliefs of a certain group of people, giving meaning to their experiences. Can such a framework be brought to bear upon the program to comment holistically on the nature, meaning and purpose of one of the Sanskrit epics (*Mahābhārata* or *Rāmāyaṇa*) in its entirety by authors with very distinctive sensibilities, backgrounds and spatiotemporal locations? One important feature isolated by Linne is the meta-epic's self-referentiality:

“For instance, the term “metafiction” is usually employed by critics for a piece of fiction that reflects either upon fiction in general or

plainly upon itself; the meta-level and the object-level are identical, and the metafictional text becomes self-reflexive or self-conscious. When the prefix “meta” is used to signify self-reflexivity...an instance of “metagenre” or a “metageneric text” is a (part of a) text which comments upon the nature of the text’s own genre.”

At one level various texts looking back at the Sanskrit epics are clearly self-referential in this way—indeed, the epics themselves may be said to contain many meta-epic ‘moments’ or instances when they begin to reflect on their own authorship, creation, nature and purpose. Author of the two epics show up as characters within the stories themselves. Characters and events of one epic show up in the other in a kind of shared discursive universe that further expands itself into the commentarial and post-epic literature, including later iterations of the epics themselves, Sanskrit and vernacular. A.K. Ramanujan has, in fact, independently employed the category of ‘meta-texts’ with reference to the epics, even speaking of later meta-Rāmāyaṇas (1989). This shared discursive universe functions like a coherent self-referential mechanism or, rather, organism that feeds upon its own data to comment on it, object- and meta-language merging in discursive continuity. Such reflection, moreover, goes beyond simply questions of genre to include considerations of import and meaning, interrogating after and exploring categories employed to make sense of or ‘fix’ an epic’s import.

II. Mahābhārata as Mokṣaśāstra: Nīlakaṇṭha’s Hermeneutic Strategies and the Spiritualization of an Epic

While Nīlakaṇṭha’s assessment of the epic’s import would be empathetic to a reading such as Ānandavardhana’s—both, we will recall, invoking competing conceptions of non-dualism—and its invocation, by the logic traced earlier, of the emotion of peace (*śāntarasa*) as the central flavor of the epic.⁷ However, in practice, Nīlakaṇṭha seems to adopt a different strategy of extracting the ultimately spiritual, liberative or pacifying character of the narrative, one which appeals to the purification of the mind (*cittaśuddhi*) as the primary means by which the text functions in the larger apparatus of the seeker of liberation (*mumukṣu*). This appears to be a novelty introduced by Nīlakaṇṭha within the broader project of spiritualizing and *non-dualizing* the epics, and needs further

⁷ Within Advaita itself this conception is perhaps closer to Bhaṭṭanāyaka’s aesthetics that discusses *brahmāsvāda* and *rasāsvāda* as analogical in many respects.

examination. The rationale is not so much that the events of the epic contribute towards the evocation of a sense of world-weariness, disinterest or disillusionment. Rather, they serve as good and bad exemplars of the kinds of behaviors and attitudes conducive or non-conducive of the ultimate good, and the actions they narrate may be practiced or avoided depending on their instrumental worth in the attainment of mokṣa. As we will see, at the center of this account is dharma itself, acting, for Nīlakaṇṭha, as a liminal value between the aims of artha and kāma on one hand and mokṣa on the other; capable of being instrumentalized in either direction depending on one's choices. This framework is spelt out in Nīlakaṇṭha's introduction to the *śāntiparva*:

For the less-knowing, the triplet of artha, kāma and mokṣa is for the satisfaction of the causes of wealth (artha) and desire (kāma). For the highest-knowing, [the triplet of artha, kāma and mokṣa] is for the purpose of liberation by way of the purification of mind (*dhīśuddhi*) and for the purposes of worship and livelihood.⁸

The gradation of individuals based on their inner preparedness and faculties of understanding is crucial to Nīlakaṇṭha's hermeneutic project. Elsewhere the threefold distinction of mediocre (*manda*), middling (*madhyama*) and superlative (*uttama*) is employed to explain the very motive of the composition of the epic, composed with the mediocre and middling intellects in mind, having culled therein the wisdom of the fourteen traditional disciplines of knowledge (*vidyāsthānas*).⁹ The insight here, borrowed from Śaṅkara's own strategy to positively incorporate the desire-action framework of Vedic ritual performance into a spiritual trajectory of attaining self-knowledge and liberation, is the crucial idea that often the same actions and behaviors that lead one into a downward spiral of sense-gratification and worldly ensnarement, in the satisfaction of earthly desires, wealth and power can be positively deployed towards spiritual ends when performed with the right attitude and regulated by spiritual ends.

⁸ dharmāditrayam arthakāmakaraṇaprītyartham ity alpakā dhīśuddhikratujīvanārthakatayā muktyartham ity uttamāḥ. Dīpa XII.1. I am yet to fully explore Nīlakaṇṭha's treatment of mental purification in the entirety of the *Dīpa* but one further consult I.9 and I.21 commentary.

⁹ Dīpa on I.1

Here dharma itself assumes a double nature. It may be put in the service of the satisfaction of desires and gaining prosperity or, conversely, in the service of doing the preparatory work necessary for gaining self-knowledge by way of mental or internal purification. Dharma, it seems, assumes the role in the epic of that served by sacrificial performance in the Vedic context, a domain with a somewhat ambiguous status that could, when pursued uninhibited and unchecked, lead to one's downfall—being linked with or influenced by the two 'lower' aims, artha and kāma—and, when performed out of a sense of duty and dispassion, be deployed towards spiritual ends. So Nīlakaṇṭha will say that “only the ruler who is free of desire, greed etc., entirely dispassionate, aspires after dharma alone generated by the protection of his people (*prajāpālana*), is worthy of having a kingdom”¹⁰, and not because he entertains any desires to please the people (*prajārañjana*) in and of themselves.¹¹ In other words *niṣkāma dharma*, the dispassionate and dutiful practice of dharma—which, Nīlakaṇṭha avers, is the dominant theme of the 17th *Mahāprasthānikaparva*¹²—replaces the conception of *niṣkāma karma*, dispassionate action, familiar to us from the second to fourth chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā* and from Śaṅkara's discussion of mental purification.

For Nīlakaṇṭha, the entire material of the epic can be organized around one or more aims of life, or their means, as topically dominant in each of the text's *parvas*. This scheme is most synoptically presented in the *mausalaparva*:

Thus, of the [four *puruṣārthas*] artha, kāma, dharma and mokṣa spoken of in the *ādiaparva*, dharma is presented in the middle of the *sabhā*- and *vanaparvas* by means of sacrifice, truth, resolution, attending to the guru and holy sites. In the next eight sections beginning with the *virāṭparva*, artha, which is grief-inducing, is described through precepts for royal attendance, violence, untruth and destruction of the race. In the twelfth [*śāntiparva*], misfortune-inducing kāma, which is of the nature of the fruit of what is desired,

¹⁰ yaḥ kāmaloḥbhādiḥiṇo' tyantanirviṇṇaḥ kevalaṃ prajāpālanaṃ dharmamātraṃ kāmāyate Sāṃkhya eva rājyārha iti. Dīpa XII.1

¹¹ The analogy of a performer playing an instrument is appropriate here, where one can distinguish between her playing in order to please the audience as opposed to seeking to perform to the best of her ability out of her devotion to her craft or task at hand.

¹² Dīpa on XVI.1

and mokṣa, liberative of all trouble and harm, are presented. Having investigated the causes of mokṣa in the triplet beginning with the thirteenth [*anuśāsanaparva*]—giving/liberality, knowledge/meditation and residence in the forest—in the sixteenth [*mausalaparva*] it is established that those who, not having dwelt in the forest like Dhṛtarāṣṭra, absorbed in artha and kāma alone, are destroyed by the vice of abusing alcohol etc. In the seventeenth [*mahāprasthānikaparva*] the results of desireless (*niṣkāma*) dharma, i.e. the forsaking of residence etc., and in the eighteenth [*svargārohanaparva*] the attainment of heaven that follows upon it are examined.¹³

We are thus witness to a thematic progression, according to Nīlakaṇṭha, examining dharma, artha, kāma and finally mokṣa in the twelfth *śāntiparva*, a fulcrum point where the text begins to turn towards a discussion of the causes and consequences, positive and negative, of the pursuit of each aim of life. Here the performance of *niṣkāma* or desireless or dispassionate dharma—akin to dispassionate *karma* or action—becomes preparatory for adopting the renunciatory path that will eventually lead the pāṇḍavas to the attainment of heaven. By conducting everyday royal affairs dispassionately, a ruler may employ the third *puruṣārtha* in service of the fourth, by using it as a means of internal or mental purification.

The notion of mental purification, *dhīśuddhi* or *cittaśuddhi*, is a corner stone of the Advaitic, particularly Shankarite account of the complex organization of mediate and direct instrumentality of the various elements that may contribute towards the final event of self-knowledge. In fact, it is one response to the larger question of how to integrate diverse practices, values and duties, often at loggerheads with each other, that impinge upon the Brāhmaṇic practitioner. Each social class (*varṇa*) had its assigned duties. For the Vedic Brahmin, this included the performance of Vedic rites that militates against the Advaitic

¹³ *evam ādiparvaṇi sūtritānām dharmārthakāmamokṣāṇām madhye sabhāvanayor yajñasatyadhṛtigurusattīrthasevanādinā dharmāḥ pratipāditaḥ. virāṭyādyāṣṭake sevānītihiṃsānṛtakulakṣayādinā arthaḥ śokaprado nirūpitaḥ. dvādaśe arthaphalabhūtaḥ kāmāḥ sopasargo nirupaplavaṃ category mokṣapadaṃ nirūpitaṃ. trayodaśāditraye mokṣhetūn dānavidyāvanavāsān ca nirūpya ṣoḍaśe dhṛtarāṣṭravat vanam anāśṛitya kevalam arthakāmāsaktās te madirādikalahena vyasanena vinaṣyati iti pratipādyate. saptadaśe niṣkāmadharmasya phalaṃ grhādes tyāgo 'aṣṭādaśe tatpūrvikā svargaprāptiś ca nirūpayisyate. Dīpa XVI.1-9*

denunciation of action (*karma/kriyā*). The spiritually-oriented Vaidikas and Brahmins were further involved in various yogic and meditative (*upāsanā*) practices that again, for the non-dualist, fall on the side of action and its ultimately binding nature. There were also the more generic (*sādhāraṇa*) dharmas not restricted to particular social classes.

Yet Śaṅkara had to account for their instrumental value in some way and could not simply denounce them as worthless or, worse, antithetical to spiritual aims. This was accomplished by exploiting Mīmāṃsā strategies and concepts of direct (*ārād*) and proximate (*sānnipatyā*) instrumentality, as well as the broader principle of sequentiality (*pāramparyā*). By doing so Advaitins were able to account for a way in which both class (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*) duties on one hand, and various ethico-spiritual practices on the other, were acknowledged, even positively instrumentalized towards the attainment of mokṣa that was, in principle, outside the reach of any and all activity, physical or mental. In this scheme the performance of Vedic ritual with a disinterested, dispassionate attitude could independently result in the attainment of discrimination (*viveka*) and dispassion (*vairāgya*) by the purification resulting from such disinterested practice.

Nīlakaṇṭha's innovation seems to have been to extend this theory from *vaidika dharma* to *rājadharmā*, the tasks and duties of the royal and warrior class, in a way that seems to contextualize Śaṅkara's account for the epic setting, dominated as it is by accounts of warring kings and princes easily susceptible to pride, anger, desire, conceit and other emotions. They could also, by the same logic, perform royal duties with dispassion and, in doing so, trans-instrumentalize or repurpose their class duties towards mokṣa by 'purifying' and preparing their minds and internal constitutions. The logical culmination of this practice will be the kind of renunciate forsaking of residence and abandonment of kingdom such as we see in the *mahāprasthānika* and *svargārohaṇa parvas*, something unimaginable for regular royalty unprepared for such an undertaking.

It may be worth noting that for an Advaitin non-dualist such as Śaṅkara or in Nīlakaṇṭha's own repurposing of Shankarite strategies of trans-instrumentalization, a founding contrast is one of dharma and brahman, evident in the very opening invocations of the fundamental hermeneutic texts of Pūrva and Uttara Mīmāṃsā or Vedānta; one an inquiry into dharma, the other into

brahman.¹⁴ In Nīlakaṇṭha's epic context, the contrast is maintained—the context simply having shifted from *brāhmaṇa* or *vaidika* dharma to *kṣatriya* or royal dharma. And the problem still had to be faced of how a *kṣatriya* could pursue spiritual ends like mokṣa without abandoning his class duties, just as how the Vedic Brahmin may continue to be immersed in the Vedic ritual universe while still somehow repurposing it towards mokṣa. To both, the Advaitic response was mental purification (*cittaśuddhi*) and dispassionate (*niṣkāma*) activity.

III. Nīlakaṇṭha's (and other) Non-dualisms : Visions of Becoming Divine in the Theistic Milieu

Nīlakaṇṭha's own interests and affiliations introduce a strongly non-dualist (Advaitic) reading of the epic, raising many questions. Why should an epic be commented upon by an Advaitin and a philosopher at the first place? Why at this time and place? What constitutes, under these moves, the Advaitic canon, beyond the *prasthānatrayī* and the well-attested Advaitic corpus? What becomes of the Advaitic canon under such an imaginative revision of the body of texts considered worthy of philosophical attention, even effective towards soteriological ends? For it is not merely a question of emphasizing the philosophical or didactic elements of the epic, an aspect that was never in doubt in light of the patently Sāṃkhyaesque and Vedāntic tone of many of its sections. Rather it is the sense and import of the epic as a *whole* that was at stake for Nīlakaṇṭha, and which makes his claims controversial. Therefore the question is also about the motivations behind, strategies deployed and implications of attempting to read, even transmute the epic into a potential *mokṣaśāstra*. Some of these motivations have to do with the increasing popularity of the text amongst Vedāntins across the board, and its particularly theistic context that perhaps compelled Nīlakaṇṭha to double down on a strictly non-dualist reading in the face of other interpretations of the epic's import, particularly with respect to competing theistic conceptions of divine union, identity or non-duality.

Non-dualism itself, however, can connote many meanings and denote many distinct lineages and contexts of application, outside of the Shankarite Vedānta he subscribed to. Advaita studies has, in contemporary scholarship, become identified with Advaita Vedānta studies, even if there have been attempts to

¹⁴ Respectively, 'athāto *dharmajijñāsā*' and 'athāto *bhramajijñāsā*' at the opening of Jaimini's *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* and Bādarāyaṇa's *Brahma Sūtra*.

broaden the scope of this Advaita Vedānta (in some recent scholarship including the work of Anand Venkatkrishnan, Michael Allen, Elaine Fisher, Eric Steinschneider and others) beyond its classical, elite, śāstric, Sanskrit or cosmopolitan contexts, these terms often used somewhat confusedly and interchangeably, in the recovery of what has been called ‘Greater’ Advaita Vedānta and ‘Vernacular’ Vedānta.

At the same time, it has been acknowledged to a much lesser degree that Advaita itself—as a discourse about and commitment to *non-dualism* broadly understood—is not exhausted by its Vedāntic expressions and deployments, and traditions as diverse as Mahāyāna Buddhism and Kāśmīra Śaivism have staked claims on alternative visions of what constitutes non-duality. At the same time, partly in conversation with the ‘greater’ and ‘vernacular’ Advaita Vedānta traditions and partly outside of it, a broader set of subcontinental traditions, often but not exclusively devotional, have subscribed to some variant of monist or non-dualist views about the relationship of the individual with god or the divine fabric of the world. With the exception of Madhva, his reading of the *Mahābhārata* along dualist lines included, a general consensus around a variety of qualified or restricted non-dualism, across Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sectarian affiliations, seems to have been the norm in the subcontinent’s wider religious history. There is a desideratum, in other words, of recovering a semantics and intellectual history of *a-dvaita*, literally, non-duality, outside of its being as a proper name identifying certain well-known readings of scripture.

This is perhaps a way of, and one motivation for, approaching an epic like the *Mahābhārata* as a *non-sectarian non-dualist*. Put differently, attaining union or ‘becoming one’ with the divine, as a mode of fixing the sense of *a-dvaita* in the epic and purāṇa contexts, is arguably a thematic the epics are at home with, a familiar universe even if it intersects with other alternative visions of the self’s place in the cosmos. Here Nīlakaṇṭha’s, admittedly somewhat idiosyncratic reading of the epic, begins to assume a more recognizable, perhaps even palatable form, both inside of and, as I will try to show, outside of his affiliation as an Advaita Vedāntin of a particular lineage.

Becoming divine or becoming one with the deity—as one mode of conceiving non-dualism—is a fundamental idea and aspiration for Vedāntins of all denominations (except perhaps the Madhva dualists who stand alone in this regard), but also Śaivas and Tāntrikas of various denominations. Disagreements

tend to be about the precise nature of this unity or oneness and the means to realizing it. Fundamentally, we can distinguish the more theistic Vedāntas (Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava) from Advaita Vedānta in their greater acknowledgment of and engagement with god as ultimately real, the object of all devotion and the ultimate source of all value. By Nīlakaṇṭha's own time, Advaitic contemporaries have begun to flirt with the proliferation of theistic schools, articulating versions of Advaita (strict non-dualism) more in line with this devotional spirit, Madhusūdana and Appayya Dīkṣita being two such prominent figures. A crucial part of Nīlakaṇṭha's own project comprised in 'neutralizing' this trend and articulating a version of Advaita that was responsive to theistic and devotional trends without compromising on the fundamental Advaitic philosophical commitments.

It may further be noted that within this eclectic intellectual marketplace of competing non-dualisms, the Śaivas have historically been a tad more comfortable with more strictly non-dualist intuitions—asserting the absolute oneness of self and god/deity—than their Vaiṣṇava counterparts, even when the former emerged from theistic milieus. This is most evident in the common Śaiva aspiration of becoming Śiva himself—'I am Śiva' ('śivo 'ham') being a common formula in its spiritual practices.

At the same time, epic literature provided Vedāntins of all denominations fertile ground to develop their competing understandings of deity and conceptions of attaining identity or oneness with it, all the more since their central protagonists were themselves conceived as divinity incarnate, furnishing ideal exemplars of how to embody divine qualities in oneself, and integrate the divine aspects of the self with the merely mortal.¹⁵ While their roles as *avatāra* comprise their unique historical dispensation, their everyday behavior and often ambiguous status as human or divine, flawed or perfect, provided ample opportunity to think with the theme of mortality as such, what it means to be human and act in a world beset by existential suffering and moral failures, while being reminded

¹⁵ The tension between these two elements is evident not only in the depictions of the two *avatāras*—the question of Rāma's divinity, whether and when he becomes aware of his own divine identity in the epic's retellings, remains an open question—but also figures like Hanumān, Sītā, Arjuna and many others.

from time to time, that one's ultimate nature was, in some way, spiritual and, therefore, untouched by karma and suffering.¹⁶

III.i The Wasp and the Caterpillar: Two Ways of becoming One with God

Visions of the human divine or the human attaining to or realizing its divinity have precursors in the Vedic imaginary, not only in theological speculation but in various contemplative practices that required some kind of transference or transposition of identity of the practitioner on to some deity or deified being. Later theistic visions of such oneness recall ancient practices of contemplating upon the divine in/as oneself. The *upāsanās* of the *Brāhmaṇas* and *Āraṇyakas*, further developed in the *Upaniṣads* and subsequent Vedāntic commentary, often operated by the logic of seeking identities between the self, cosmos and various higher powers or deities. Indeed, the arguably oldest and core section of the *Brahmasūtra* dealt with such practices found in the early Upaniṣads. And one of Śaṅkara's central hermeneutic challenges lay precisely in determining which Upanishadic passages denoted the *transcendent* Brahman as an object of knowledge, and which others denoted aspects of the *immanent* Brahman as objects of meditation; and, most importantly, keeping their boundaries intact.

This boundary-setting and surveillance remains, arguably, a core Advaitic project and emerges again in Nīlakaṇṭha's own time, but now with respect to the strongly theistic currents flowing around him. In its current avatar—as an opposition between *knowing* Brahman and *worshipping* Its immanent aspect in some form—Nīlakaṇṭha again takes recourse to Śaṅkara and his fundamental distinction between the *puruṣavyāpāratantra* and *vastutantra* dimensions of reality. The former is the domain of life and reality responsive and accessible to human choice, will and action; the latter not so subject, the foremost instances of the latter being cases of epistemic knowing where where choice or will cannot alter or change the nature or value of a thing. My perception of the blue lotus as I perceive it at this moment is determined purely by the nature of the lotus itself (*vastutantra*), but my imagination of it, in an act of visualization for instance, is indeed subject to my will and imagination (*puruṣavyāpāratantra*).

¹⁶ The especially royal and courtly setting of the epics provides another angle on the nature of the self's divinity insofar as kingship itself partook of a religious dimension and was often justified through the divinity inherited and inherent in kings by birth. Refer Pollock 1984 and Gonzalez-Reimann 2006.

Now Nīlakaṇṭha must honor this distinction while salvaging the role and value of devotional practice. He does so by acknowledging their distinction but making them two varieties of the same kind of purified attention (*śuddha dhyāna*), even introducing his own terminology of distinguishing them—the *bhāvanāmaya* and *praṇidhānamaya* modes of attention corresponding, respectively, to the *puruṣavyāpāra* and *vastutantra* domains of reality, but the status of the former now elevated in comparison to its treatment in the more typically Shankarite Advaita. In an important passage of the *ādiṣarva* he explains:

Therefore two kinds of attention are necessary for those desirous of the object [of attainment]: [devotional] contemplation and [cognitive] submission. Here the first dependent on human activity pertains to what is not at hand... Awareness so subdued by it [i.e., by attending to or contemplating on the object in this way], and progressively gleaned away from manifest [embodied] form (*mūrti-ākāra*), having its basis in the unmanifest (*avyakta*) [alone], is resolved in Virāṭ etc. [which are] the causal Brahman. This is indeed the attentional progression spoken of in the *Bhagavadgītā* and all *Purāṇas*.

[Cognitive] submission [on the other hand], pertaining to the nature of the thing, is the means of resolving the triplet of Virāṭ etc.—superimposed upon the self like snake on the rope—by means of stabilizing awareness by perceiving the pure nature of the thing that constitutes the ultimate basis (*adhiṣṭhāna*) [of everything].¹⁷

This is indeed novel territory for mainstream Advaitins. Redolent of the strategy identified in the previous section, Nīlakaṇṭha *trans-instrumentalizes* the *puruṣavyāpāra* - *vastu* distinction to make the former an integral part of the cognitive process of knowing Brahman for those not ready for immediate and

¹⁷ tasmāt bhāvanāmayaṃ praṇidhānamayaṃ ca iti dvividham api dhyānaṃ śuddhaṃ vastupratipatsor āvaśyakam. tatra ādyaṃ naṣṭavanitāvad asannihitaviṣayaṃ puruṣavyāpāraṇtram. tena vaṣīkṛtaṃ cittaṃ kramaśo mūrtiakārataḥ pracyāvya avyaktamātrālabano bhūtvā virāḍādaḥ kāraṇe brahmaṇi cittaṃ praṇidadhyāt. ayam eva dhyānakramaḥ śrīmadbhagavadgītādisarvapurāṇeṣu uktaḥ. praṇidhānaṃ ca vastutattvaviṣayaṃ pūrvoktasphaṭikadr̥ṣṭāntena ātmani adhyatasya virāḍādītrayasya rajjusarpasya iva cittasthirīkaraṇena adhiṣṭhānabhūtaśuddhavastudarśanena praviladhiṣṭhānapanalarāṇam. I.22-23

direct knowing. Nīlakaṇṭha further elaborates on the explicitly immanent and relatable aspects of the divinity, such as the conception of Viṣṇu dwelling in realm of Vaikuṇṭha or worshipping Him in physical (*mūrta*) form, as earlier stages in the movement from the *mūrta* (manifest/ material) to the *amūrta* levels of attentional progression. Citing Vedic precedence to the idea that the formless may be worshipped through a relatable material form of one's liking, he says:

So even that realm, called 'Vaikuṇṭha' or 'Kailāsa', [is spoken of] by the Veda as "Being one is imagined variously", "He who bears the names of the gods [or is their name-giver] is one indeed" etc. Based on the Vedic statement "As It is contemplated on, so one becomes having left this realm", there is attainment of the *likeness* of form (*sārūpyaprāpti*) with what is contemplated for those engaged in [devotional] contemplation, on the analogy of the wasp and the caterpillar; this is, however, not the attainment of *identity* [with what is contemplated or attended to] as has been demonstrated in the *Vedāntakataka*.¹⁸

The result of such devotional contemplation can only be likeness (*sārūpya-prāpti*), not the realization of absolute identity (*aikya-prāpti*). It maybe worthwhile to recall here one of the many articulations of the four ways of attaining oneness with the lord seeking to cohere the distinct versions of non-dualisms and theistic visions of becoming united with the lord post-mortem in its own time:

1. *Sālokyā*: going to the 'loka' or realm of the deity worshipped
2. *Sāmīpyā*: being in proximity of the deity worshipped
3. *Sārūpyā*: taking on the form that looks alike the deity worshipped
4. *Sāyujyā*: merging with the deity worshipped in some form¹⁹

¹⁸ evaṃ tal loko 'pi vaikunṭha iti kailāsa iti caekaṃ santaṃ bahudhā kalpayanti, yau devānām nāmadhā eka eva ityādiśrutibhyaḥ. taṃ yathā yathā upāsate tathā itaḥ pretya bhavanti iti srutes vad bhāvanāvatāṃ tatsārūpyaprāptiḥ kīṭabhṛṅgaganyāyena bhavati na tu tadaikyaprāptir iti vyutpāditam vedāntakatake. Dīpa I.24

¹⁹ The full verse is as follows: tena sālōkyasāmīpyasārūpyasāyujyānām mukhyamuktivābhāvaś ca sūcito bhavati. saguṇaviśayakatayā teṣāṃ caturṇām api mithyātvāt paricchedaśūnyatvarūpabhramatvasya saguṇe asaṃbhavāt. brahmātmanā samsthiṭiḥ. [From Candrasekhara Bhārati's commenatry on the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*]

Each succeeding one designates a more intimate *merging with* the lord, the latter two being clearly non-dualist in orientation, although even the first two may be said to identify weaker versions of attaining a kind of *spatial* unity or oneness. All these, however, for Nīlakaṇṭha as for the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, only designate an immanent or qualified level of unity. Nīlakaṇṭha's innovation in this theistic marketplace of competing non-dualisms, Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, involves the incorporation of Viṣṇu, the supreme deity, as the fifth element in the typically four-fold scheme of Vedāntic emanationism and, concomitantly, the possibility of reuniting or merging with Him—on the model of the fourth, *sāyujya* mode of attaining oneness above—as an alternative, if lower, and slower path, of attaining self-knowledge. As Minkowski (2010, 719) has discussed,

What is distinctive in Nīlakaṇṭha's metaphysics is the quasi-emanationism, which culminates in an embodied supreme deity. Nīlakaṇṭha also innovates in taking this complex of doctrine and practice to be the *Mahābhārata*'s essential message. The idea that there are two liberative paths, one that directly liberates (*sākṣānmukti*) and one that eventually does so (*kramamukti*), is already implied in the *Brahmasūtra*; it is articulated in Śaṅkara's commentary on that text. Nīlakaṇṭha puts this old dichotomy to a new use, to fend off the newly urgent claims of theistic movements, namely that they offer a better way to a better final end.

The notion of aspiring to become deity (*īśvarabhāvāpatti*) is the primary mode of conceiving non-duality in Śrīkaṇṭha's Śivādvaita, elaborated in his *Brahmasūtra* commentary and elsewhere. Nīlakaṇṭha's criticism of Appayya Dīkṣita's views—a fellow non-dualist with Advaitic leanings but also adopting theistic Śivādvaita views in his work—expressed in his sub-commentary *Śivārkaṇḍīpikā* consists in the accusation that the latter smuggles in a non-dualism of the deity Śiva, as opposed to the non-dualism of ultimate Being or Brahman, endorsing union with the Lord through worship.

Now two analogies are employed by Appayya and Nīlakaṇṭha to articulate the precise mode of realizing this unity. As Minkowski (2017, 721) explains, “Nīlakaṇṭha compares the relationship between the soul and the Lord in Appayya's model with the relationship between an unripe fruit (*śalāṭu*) and a ripe fruit (*phala*), or alternatively, between the larva (*kṛta*) and the bee (*bhṛṅga*).

The soul, when liberated, becomes the Lord, just as an unripe fruit matures into a ripe one, just as the larva becomes the bee.”

The latter reference particularly identifies a Sanskritic maxim or analogy (*nyāya*) to convey the point, the *kīṭabhṛṅganyāya*. According to Minkowski, Nīlakaṇṭha is drawing the analogies from Appayya’s Śivādvaita works such as the *Dīpikā* on Śrīkaṇṭha’s *Brahmasūtra* commentary. However, a closer look at the citation (*Brahmasūtra* IV.1.3) shows that Śrīkaṇṭha makes reference to the caterpillar (*kīṭa*) and bee (*bhramara*). Nīlakaṇṭha’s reference to the maxim mentioned above, on the other hand, identifies a *bhṛṅga*, a wasp or particular kind of bee. While *bhṛṅga* and *bhramara* can also sometimes be synonymous, his larger point seems to be quite different than Śrīkaṇṭha’s own.

On the surface, both seem to be invoking the same analogy to conceive the relation between the self and the lord/brahman, but they rest on very different premises and sensitivities, revealing their particular doctrinal commitments. Śrīkaṇṭha’s point, also reflected in the fruit example, is to speak of a logic of maturation whereby the individual grows or matures into the lord when liberated, just as the very same young larva matures into the fully grown bee. However, this does not seem to be the point of the maxim of wasp and the caterpillar, employed by Nīlakaṇṭha’s in his *Bhāratabhāvadīpa*, which actually identifies two distinct species altogether and their mutual relation. It makes reference to the known phenomenon of a caterpillar being seized by a wasp for the fertilization of its eggs, thus becoming its host in a parasitic relationship. The metaphor is indeed quite violent:

To stop the caterpillar host’s immune system fighting back, each egg is coated with a *Bracovirus* that has become integrated into the very cells of the wasp. The infection hijacks and chemically disables the caterpillar’s defenses, altering its immune system and controlling its growth and behavior to suit its parasitic crew. Over the next two weeks the larvae slowly consume their host from the inside-out, leaving only the essential organs, to keep the surrogate womb ticking over. When they are fully grown, they paralyze the host and start to rasp at the inside of the caterpillar’s skin with tooth-like projections around their mouths, before bursting out in a grizzly mass extrusion. But that still isn’t the end of the caterpillar – the larvae have one task left for it. The virus corrupts the

caterpillar's behavior, so rather than limping off to die, it spins a silken pad over the top of the fuzzy mass of *Cotesia* cocoons. Here it stays put. The zombie security guard protects its killers for another 10 days.²⁰

'Zombie wasp' is indeed an appropriate metaphor for *this* conception of the relation between the individual and lord, capturing well Nīlakaṇṭha's understanding of the role of devotional meditation and contemplation (*bhāvanā/upāsanā*) on the spiritual path. As we will recall, this maxim is supposed to be reminiscent, for Nīlakaṇṭha, of the Vedic idea, "As It is contemplated on, so one becomes...", culminating in a *likeness* of form (*sārūpyaprāpti*) with what is contemplated for those engaged in such devotional contemplation. This is quite distinct from the attainment of *identity*.

Incidentally, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (7.1.28-29) makes a similar point in order to commend the virtues of complete absorption in the lord: "A worm who is trapped by the wasp in a hole in the wall keeps meditating repeatedly on the wasp out of envy and fear and thus attains the form of a wasp (*tat-svarūpatām*) in its next life."²¹ And the *Laukikanyāyasāhasrī* (maxim 110) explains *kīṭabhṛṅganyāya* as follows: "The caterpillar captured by the wasp, constantly dwelling on it out of fear, attains to its nature; likewise, meditating on Hari and Hara with love, one attains to their nature."

Across these sources, the key underlying idea is that constantly dwelling on something generates a positive force or energy that transforms the host into embodying the very qualities, even the nature, of the object of meditation or absorption. This has also been identified, in the context of Mīmāṃsā, and sourced from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (III.14.1) as the *tatkratunyāya* or maxim that says, in spirit: "As one resolves, plans or determines (*tatkratu*), that [or in that way] one becomes".²²

²⁰ Nick Baker, "Parasitic wasps vs white butterflies: How this deadly gruesome 'zombie' wasp invades and takes over a poor caterpillar's body", in BBC Discover Wildlife.

²¹ The full reference is: *kīṭaḥ peśaskṛtā ruddhaḥ kuḍyāyām tam anusmaran saṁrambha-bhaya-yogena vindate tat-svarūpatām evaṁ kṛṣṇe bhagavati māyā-manuja īśvare vaireṇa pūta-pāpmānas tam āpur anucintayā*. ŚB 7.1.28-29.

²² *yathākratur asmin loke puruṣo bhavati tathā itaḥ pretya bhavati* (CU III.14.1). Exact translation (Sastri 1930, 227): "According as his will is in this world, so the man will be after he has departed hence."

The insight here, distinct from Śrīkaṇṭha's emphasis, does not appeal to a logic of maturation or growth into what may be a natural progression of things; the larva must after all, one day, transform into a bee. Rather, it points to the forcefulness and violence with which an erstwhile agent is transformed or absorbed into its object, one that was originally radically distinct and separate. This also conveys the point, crucial for Nīlakaṇṭha, that the resulting state of union achieved cannot be one of absolute identity; but only a likeness of form (*sārūpya*), driven by both the subsumptive power of the lord to literally take over or make the self 'hostage' to Its divine presence, if only out of the attraction of devotional love, as well as the will and single-minded focus of the devotee upon the lord. The metaphor thus, somewhat paradoxically and beautifully, captures both the passivity and agency involved in such complete transformation of the individual in its exposure to the divine.

In either case, at least for Nīlakaṇṭha, the metaphor and accompanying maxim, provide a useful framework to conceive of the relation between the more theistic conceptions of divine union (*śivādvaita* or otherwise), as opposed to the more strictly non-dualist (*śuddhādvaita*). Since the transcendent Brahman lacks any and all form (*rūpa*) and qualities (*guṇa*), it is not possible to *become* it or assume its likeness, even if there is instrumental virtue in attaining such relative union, later culminating in the Advaitic cognition of absolute identity. For Śrīkaṇṭha as for Appayya (especially in his more *śivādvaita* works), merging with or *becoming* the divine, on the logic of the *tatkratu* maxim, is where the buck stops: "Constantly mediating on Śiva, one becomes Śiva", as Śrīkaṇṭha explains (IV.1.3 commentary).

Minkowski has read this manner of thinking as representative of an ecumenical, inclusive or pluralist attitude often identified with Hindu traditions insofar it renders possible the worship of one and the same godhead in various forms.²³ At

²³ "There are elements here of a claim that one still encounters today, usually in a blander and less philosophically precise form, about the one god who may legitimately be worshipped in many forms. It used to be asserted that this sort of claim was paradigmatic of the Hindu tradition in all eras. Versions of that claim supported experiments with a variety of secularism in the Gandhian and Nehruvian era. On the other hand, it has been asserted more recently that this sort of claim is a modern development, one that emerged in the 19th century as part of the transformation of Hinduism into neo-Hinduism. I tend to think of it as a modern development, but in a modernity that started much earlier than is usually thought, one that was already under way in the 17th century." Minkowski 2010

the least, *this* version of non-dualism amongst the many extant in Nīlakaṇṭha's own time—since it imagines the ultimate godhead as a transcendent, formless and decontextualized presence—does open up a space for a kind of religious inclusivism where any sect or religion is free to imagine the godhead in its own terms, provided that the philosophical point is granted to the pure (*śuddha*) Advaitin. In either case, for Nīlakaṇṭha, it provides a model to think about and with oneness, identity, plurality and difference, pertinent at once to both the philosophical-ontological and socio-religious spheres. And his strict or pure non-dualism allows him to adopt a strategy to accommodate other non-dualisms as consistent with it, and therefore socially acceptable as practiced and practical varieties of non-dualism.

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