

## Vedantic Comedy and Religious Nationalism in V. Raghavan's Sanskrit Drama, *Vimukti*

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### *Abstract*

In V. Raghavan's contemporary Sanskrit drama, *Vimukti* (written 1931, published 1964), the renowned scholar of Sanskrit aesthetics gives the comic sentiment (*hāsya*) a Vedantic reworking, turning comedy into a form of the sentiment of peace (*śānta*) and a means of liberation (*vimukti*). On the surface, the play is a farce about a Brahmin, Ātmanātha, beset by six unruly sons, a quarrelsome wife, a witch of a mother-in-law, and three sisters-in-law. With his house under threat of demolition by the government, Ātmanātha debates getting another house, running away, or suicide. On a philosophical level, the play presents a Vedantic philosophical allegory wherein the self (Ātmanātha) seeks liberation from the six senses (the sons), material *prakṛti* (the wife), illusion (*māyā*, the mother-in-law), and the *guṇas* (the sisters-in-law). The impending destruction of his house signifies bodily death. In the denouement, the sons/senses are literally arrested by the government, Ātmanātha's house stands, and he receives a *mantra* from the mayor of the city/supreme being (*īśvara*) that kills his mother-in-law and pacifies his wife (*prakṛti*). The play offers an allegory for liberation of the soul from materiality and illusion. References to modernity in the play further suggest that this liberative mocking of materiality doubles as a denunciation of Western capitalism and sensuality in favor of an imagined Indian spirituality and traditional morality. On my reading, the play suggests a liberation not just of the individual soul but of the entire Indian nation from the snares of Western materialism as part and parcel of India's "liberation" from colonialism. Thus *Vimukti* echoes Raghavan's nationalist and scholastic advocacy for the redemptive and religious nature of Sanskrit culture. The drama plays off a common trope of the West as materialistic and the East as spiritual. As such, the play serves as a unique example of contemporary Sanskrit literature that builds on a tradition of Sanskrit allegorical plays and speaks to both classical aesthetics and modern sentiments.

### *Introduction: Laughing at the West*

The early European scholars of Sanskrit often panned Sanskrit literature for its supposed lack of the comic element.<sup>1</sup> Of course this is a misreading since Sanskrit aesthetics

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Siegel, "Bibliographical Essay" in *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (Chicago: U of C Press, 1987) 465-66.

includes the comic “*hāsya*” as one of the major sentiments, and there are numerous plays labeled *prahasanas*. While it is often quite difficult for someone of a different culture to comprehend another culture’s jokes, Orientalists generally viewed Sanskrit literature as overly philosophical. It was against this denial of the comic in Sanskrit that Lee Siegel wrote his book *Laughing Matters*; but long before Siegel, the noted Indologist Dr. V. Raghavan also made a case for the existence of the comic in Sanskrit in lectures given in 1953 at the University of Oxford and in 1964 at the University of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Raghavan’s lectures also intended to overturn this Orientalist tendency to ignore comedy in Sanskrit literature. Yet in doing so Raghavan manages to give credence to the initial Orientalist tendency to see India as overly philosophical: “Because the Indian mind had been predominantly philosophical, it is not correct to deny it the perception of the comic; for to do so is to deny its very prominent characteristic of the philosophical outlook.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is inherent in a self-essentializing view of the Indian mind as philosophical to have comedy. As if to make his case, V. Raghavan himself authored a comedic philosophical play in Sanskrit, entitled *Vimukti*, written in 1931 and published in 1964 and in 1968, in which the philosophical ideal of liberation requires a certain comic sensibility.

*Vimukti* is at once a comedy and an allegory, and the Sanskrit and Vedānta traditions also have a long history of philosophical allegories, extending back to the Upaniṣads (e.g. *Śvetāśvataraopniṣad* 4.6-7 and *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* 3.1), and continuing to classic dramatic allegories such as Kṛṣṇamiśra’s *Prabodhacandrodaya* and Vedānta Deśika’s *Samkalpasūryodaya* which respectively promote Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta.<sup>4</sup> This tradition of Vedānta philosophical allegories continues with V. Raghavan’s *Vimukti*, wherein the main character, Ātmanātha, represents *puruṣa* (the soul), who is beset by difficult family members who represent *prakṛti* and an evil mother-in-law who is *māyā*, is threatened by Death who threatens to destroy his house/body, and is finally freed with the help of the mayor, who is the supreme deity, and the realization of all of it as an allegory and everything as a play. *Vimukti* is on one level a farce about a family’s dysfunctionality, and on the next level it is all an allegory for the self’s enmeshment in materiality. Like *Prabodhacandrodaya* and *Samkalpasūryodaya*, there is also a doxographical concern about different schools of

<sup>2</sup> V. Raghavan, *The Comic Element in Sanskrit Literature*, (Madras: The Samskrita Ranga, 1989). Siegel’s book was published in 1987, two years before Raghavan’s student S.S. Janaki published his essays as *The Comic Element in Sanskrit Literature* in 1989. Siegel therefore does not mention Raghavan’s work at all, and one wonders how his book might have been different had he had access to Raghavan’s lectures.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael S. Allen “Dueling Dramas, Dueling Doxographies: The *Prabodhacandrodaya* and *Samkalpasūryodaya*” *Journal of Hindu Studies* (2016): 273-297.

thought,<sup>5</sup> and a debate about different views of the existence of a deity is included in the play, allegorized as the mayor of the town. Yet on my reading there is a deeper concern for doxography than merely the various philosophical and religious traditions. There is a level of allegory hinted at in the play that opposes not just *prakṛti* and *puruṣa* but a more contemporary divide between the West indexed as materialistic and immoral and the East indexed as spiritual and philosophical, such that the liberation is stylized in the play as not merely self from materiality but a philosophical and pure India that emerges from the businesslike and depraved West. I am hesitant to invoke the idea of Frederic Jameson that all third-world literature is a national allegory given Aijaz Ahmad's clear and convincing critique,<sup>6</sup> but I do hope to show there is a level at which this allegory's opposition of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* subtly maps this East/West::spiritual/material trope in twentieth-century thought. As such, the play serves as an intriguing example of modern Sanskrit literature, an understudied area of research, but also of modern Indian philosophical thought as conceived of as a marker of colonial and postcolonial Indian identity.

The author of this Sanskrit play, V. Raghavan (1908-1979), is known to many in the field of Indology as a leading light and prolific writer in the field in the twentieth century. Raghavan was a professor of Sanskrit at the University of Madras and compiler of the *New Catalogus Catalogorum*; he is perhaps best known for his work on Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāra Prakāśa*, and he also wrote on other aspects of Sanskrit literature, philosophy, drama Carnatic music, and dance.<sup>7</sup> But in addition to his work as a scholar, he also wrote numerous plays, poems, and other works in Sanskrit, of which *Vimukti* is but one example.<sup>8</sup> For his creative output, the Śāṅkarāchārya of the Kanchipuram Math bestowed on him the prestigious title of *kavī-kokila*. His plays were staged by the Sanskrit theater troupe he founded in 1958, the Samksrita Ranga, which continues to this day to perform Sanskrit dramas both classical and modern, including *Vimukti*, a 1987 recording of a staging of which I will have occasion to mention.

Some further contextualization of Raghavan is necessary to understand him as a colonial and postcolonial figure and as a proponent of the revival of Sanskrit for nationalist

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<sup>5</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See Frederic Jameson "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (Autumn, 1986): 65-88; and Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory' *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 3-25.

<sup>7</sup> For a bibliography collected a decade before Raghavan's passing, see A.L. Mudaliar, ed. *Bibliography of the Books, Papers, and Other Contributions of Dr. V. Raghavan* (Ahmedabad: The New Order Book Co.: 1968).

<sup>8</sup> For a study of Raghavan's original writings, see Charles S. Preston, "Writing a More Samskrta India: Religion, Culture and Politics in V. Raghavan's Twentieth-Century Sanskrit Literature," PhD Dissertation (University of Chicago, 2016). This essay is an expanded version of a subsection of that dissertation.

purposes. While never an active political figure, he was close to those in the anticolonial movement such as Tamilian freedom fighter S. Satyamurthi in whose house Raghavan was a fixture in his college days around the time *Vimukti* was written; and he rubbed shoulders with those in power in the postcolonial period such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who once requested Raghavan write a Sanskrit play on the revival of the arts in postcolonial India, entitled *Punaranmeṣa*.<sup>9</sup> Mary Hancock has tried to paint him as an RSS figure based on a few articles he wrote for *The Organiser*,<sup>10</sup> but I contend this is an overstatement and Raghavan's political leanings were conservative but far more Gandhian; he even wrote an elegiac poem for M.K. Gandhi.<sup>11</sup> If called upon to categorize Raghavan, I would suggest that he fits the mold of the more conservative wing of the Congress Party, or what Christophe Jaffrelot would call a "Hindu traditionalist," a position that lacked outright Hindu nationalism's xenophobia and tendency toward creating ideologues, and is rather "manifested simply by the promotion of culture."<sup>12</sup> Raghavan served on the 1956 Sanskrit commission that advocated for Sanskrit as the national language and wanted to promote Sanskrit. I think this promotion of Sanskrit needs to be understood not anachronistically in terms of its modern hardline right-wing iteration but as a part of a more centrist cultural nationalism.<sup>13</sup> Raghavan authored numerous essays about the revival of Sanskrit for independent India. To wit, he writes: "This culture has its bedrock in Sanskrit literature...it is while reading the Sanskrit literature that you have the sense of belonging to one country and one pan-Indian culture."<sup>14</sup> But it is not merely cultural nationalism for him but a sort of religious nationalism, and we ought to be reading *Vimukti* in light of the inherent religiosity he sees in Sanskrit literature: "The aim of art and poetry in India is to reinforce spiritual truth and to help to its realization."<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere he writes: "One can truly claim for Sanskrit culture a world significance at the present time. It is in fact this spiritual culture that has gained for Sanskrit today a world-wide vogue."<sup>16</sup> Note that Sanskrit culture quickly slips to spiritual culture. There is indeed a slipperiness of terms

<sup>9</sup> V. Raghavan, "Punaranmeṣa," *Sanskrita Ranga Annual*, Vol. 2 (1961): 63-72.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Hancock, "Unmaking the Great Tradition: Ethnography, National Culture and Area Studies," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* Vol. 4, No. 3-4 (1998): 343-388

<sup>11</sup> V. Raghavan, "Mahātmā," *Ṣaṃskṛta Pratibhā* 8.2 (1970): 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 83.

<sup>13</sup> For a sensitive study of the Sanskrit Commission, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Sanskrit for the Nation." *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 2 (May 1999): 339-381.

<sup>14</sup> V. Raghavan, *Sanskrit: Essays on the Value of the Language and the Literature* (Madras: The Sanskrit Education Society, 1972), 65.

<sup>15</sup> V. Raghavan, *Love in the Poems and Plays of Kalidasa*, Transaction No. 22 (Basavangudi, Bangalore: The Indian Institute of World Culture, 1967 [2<sup>nd</sup> impression]), 4.

<sup>16</sup> V. Raghavan, ed., *The Indian Heritage: An Anthology of Sanskrit Literature*, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works, (Bangalore: The Indian Institute of Culture, 1956), xix.

in Raghavan's writing such that religion, philosophy, and spirituality all seem to be blurred, and if there seems to be slipperiness in this essay about those terms, it is because of Raghavan's own tendency. At any rate, Raghavan's religious nationalism is not of the sort that attacks Muslims, and indeed Raghavan was quite in favor of religious harmony.<sup>17</sup> It is rather a nationalism that seeks to define Indian cultural identity in terms of its religious traditions and philosophical prowess and against Western materialism. Indeed, Raghavan's quote above about philosophy and comedy tips his hat in this direction, and it is borne out subtly in *Vimukti*.

### *A Family Farce*

Raghavan describes *Vimukti* as an "underlying philosophical allegory...woven outwardly as a realistic farce."<sup>18</sup> The *prastāvanā* (prologue) of the play elaborates this idea as the director/Raghavan says to his friend that he will stage a comedy, but the ensuing conversation is far from comical; instead it provides significant insight into the philosophical dimension of this allegorical play. The friend enthusiastically replies that everyone likes a comedy, even if just in small doses, but the director's response switches gears abruptly toward the critical. Here Raghavan/the director laments that people's love of comedy and disdain for culture is a matter of a short attention span and the impact of capitalism: "Time is to be blamed. Everywhere, in the thriving world and sensual path of action, there is no time to breathe among the modern diligent businessmen who have no time for quietly reading a poem properly or seeing a play."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the material world precludes the peaceful study of the arts and the enjoyment of drama. The author here expresses his exasperation with the conflict of interest between money and art in modern India. At the same time, he subtly hints at a philosophical dimension as well: the word for "world" (*prāpañcika*) has an additional meaning of being a deceitful or false creation. While Sanskrit may be notoriously polysemic, the fact that Raghavan uses this word rather than a generic word for "world" (e.g. *loka*) indicates his negative assessment of materiality and points to the importance not just of

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<sup>17</sup> V. Raghavan, "Religious Harmony." *The Swarajya Annual Number* (1970): 221-224.

<sup>18</sup> V. Raghavan, "Synopsis" in *Vimuktiḥ (A Two-Act Philosophical Farce with a Sanskrit Commentary)* (Madras: Punarvasu [Author's Imprint], 1968), xiii. Originally published as "*Vimukti Prahasanam*," *Saṃskṛta Pratibhā*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1964): 127-60. The version published as a stand-alone book in 1968 retained the pagination of the original *Saṃskṛta Pratibhā* publication.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. "nanu kāla evātra aparādhyati. viśvato 'pi pravardhamāne prāpañcike vaiśayike karmayoge, nirucchvāsāvakāśaṃ vyavasāyināmādhunikānāṃ karmaṭhānāṃ sarvathā nāstyeva avakāśaḥ mahat kāvyam nāṭakaṃ vā visrabdhamupaviśya paṭhituṃ, prekṣituṃ vā."

aesthetics over materiality, but of the liberation (*vimukti*) attainable through understanding the physical world as a false illusion.

The prologue continues to lament the modern state of the world. The director's friend remarks that people have become like machines, do not read the newspaper, and are interested only in comic books and amusing news.<sup>20</sup> The director adds that modern humor is merely shallow mocking due to mutual stupidity.<sup>21</sup> When the friend asks if the director means to produce such shallowness on the stage, the director replies affirmatively, but insists that is not the whole truth, and that he has in mind a comedy that is "*alaukika*," in other words, religious and not secular or mundane. Indeed, this is a philosophical comedy and not merely a farce. The fact that the play includes an autocommentary with citations and explanations further adds to the notion that Raghavan intended this as more than just a silly play: he wishes it to stand as an example of sophisticated modern Sanskrit literature and philosophy, and to show that Sanskrit continues to be a useful language for such composition.

The play's basic plot can be summarized briefly before delving into the comedy and the allegory. In Act I, we meet with the main characters: the Brahmin Ātmanātha, his six sons, his overbearing wife Trivarṇinī, and his wife's three sisters. The sons are completely unruly, each in a different way, and they and their father verbally abuse each other harshly. The wife constantly criticizes her husband and defends her miscreant sons. Sick of it all, the Brahmin threatens to leave the house for somewhere peaceful and take up the ascetic life of a renouncer. When the wife's sisters arrive, they make the household's finances even more unbearable than they already were. The eldest son offers to take over running the household, and the sons then propose to take up various jobs befitting their errant proclivities, but their mother intercedes promising to take care of all their material needs. Unfortunately, they then discover that their house is utterly dilapidated and liable to collapse at any moment.

Act II opens with the Brahmin Ātmanātha performing his evening worship but thinking about his wife's sister, Candrikā, with whom he has always been in love. She comes on stage and he speaks to her briefly, but then he hears his wife approach and sends his secret lover to hide in a nearby *maṭha*. While the husband and wife proceed to squabble, with the belittled husband receiving some sympathy from passersby, the dark and threatening character Daṁṣṭrī comes on stage to declare that, by order of the mayor of the city, the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. "...*hāsyapatrikāsu vinodavārtāsu ca kutukī*..."

<sup>21</sup> For "shallow," Raghavan uses the word *gādha*, which literally means shallow in the context of a river. He explains in the included autocommentary that he means *asāra*, "useless" or "sapless." Hence I suspect that he has borrowed the English nonliteral sense of "shallow," a rather interesting linguistic cross-pollination, unless this is a possible meaning of "*gādha*" not known to the available Sanskrit-English dictionaries I have consulted.

dilapidated house is to be torn down, and so the Brahmin and his wife ought to flee. A conversation ensues between the wife and some citizens about whether or not there really is a mayor of the city. Ātmanātha is understandably upset and threatens again to run away, although some passing city folk suggest he will be provided a new house. Soon the sons and the two remaining sisters-in-law come on stage bickering, but just then Daṃṣṭrī arrives and, on the order of the mayor of the city, arrests the sons and has the police chief throw the two aunts in the river. Ātmanātha, still confused and about to commit suicide, then meets an old man from the *maṭha* who dissuades him and tells him that his ills are the result of his evil mother-in-law, the witch Māyāvātī. The man gives Ātmanātha a mantra that kills his mother-in-law and makes his wife suddenly submissive and repentant for her ill-mannered ways. The old man is revealed as the mayor of the city himself, says that he is pleased by Trivarṇinī's newfound peacefulness, and renames her Prasannā (gracious). Finally, both the mayor and the newly renamed wife consent to Ātmanātha's marriage to Candrikā. The play's final verse, spoken by Ātmanātha, explicitly reveals all the parts of the allegory and its comic element, which he exhorts the audience to understand.

In *Vimukti*, the basic level of the play's humor is apparent through the characters' actions and speech, and particularly their immoral actions. The play sets a comic tone in the first few lines when the lascivious son Ūlūkākṣa ("owl eye") announces that he has come from the tank where he was flirting with a woman. His father, Ātmanātha, asks him if he bathed (*snātam tvayā*), to which he responds, changing merely one letter, that he was bathed by her (*snātam tayā*), and he asks deviously if his father knows who she is and if she might be someone's wife.<sup>22</sup> The little word play and Ātmanātha's criticism of such sexual behavior (the father curses him as a playboy) indicates both the comic sentiment and the moralizing tone of the play. Later, this same character offers to take a job as a curtain puller in a movie theater. Another instance of comedy and "modernity" in *Vimukti* occurs during a fight between Ātmanātha and Trivarṇinī when she mentions that "as in the Western world divorce is newly possible in India."<sup>23</sup> For an orthodox audience, divorce is forbidden, so there is an anxious humor in this moment. These comic moments locate the play in the Westernized present, unique in and of itself for a Sanskrit play, but also express a certain concern for the influx of Western morals. Even for an audience that might understand only a small portion of the Sanskrit dialogue, the constant bickering between the family members is readily apparent. Depicting the internal squabbles of family life is a common component in later Sanskrit

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 133. "nādyāvadhī bhārate loke pāścātye iva yatheccham yadā kadāpi vivāhatantuvicchedaḥ..."

comedies.<sup>24</sup> In fact, in the 1987 video recording of the play, the majority of the lines that the audience found funny were these moments of fighting among husband, wife, and the children.<sup>25</sup>

Raghavan also indicates a comic sensibility through the use of Tamil phrases translated into Sanskrit. In Sanskrit dramatic arts, as Raghavan notes in his lectures on the comic element, non-Sanskrit languages can be used as a medium and a means of the comic sentiment, a tradition that continues with the Kūḍiyāṭṭam vidūṣaka (jester) who will harass the audience members in Malayalam during a Kūḍiyāṭṭam performance. In *Vimukti*, Tamil colloquialisms translated into Sanskrit appear with great frequency, and especially Tamil idioms that either express general exasperation with misbehavior or function as insults lobbed between the characters.<sup>26</sup> For one example of a Tamil saying translated into Sanskrit, a particular character who is always hungry is described as going about like a dog from house to house at meal times and acting like a crow.<sup>27</sup> Another food-related retort in the same conversation is the common Tamil expression, “Strike me on the back, not on the belly” (i.e. punish me, but do not deny me food),<sup>28</sup> which Ātmanātha says to his wife when she incorrectly declares that that day is an Ekādaśī fasting day. Raghavan explicitly says in the autocommentary that this is a translation of a Tamil idiom.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, the eldest son chastises his ever-hungry brother, Calaprotha, by saying, “You are an elephant bound in a house and fit for feeding.”<sup>30</sup> There also appear the curses, “May your eye be like a *paṭola* flower,” and “May your mouth be fit for worms,” both of which Raghavan mentions in his autocommentary as common Tamil ways of cursing someone.<sup>31</sup> Later, the eldest son dismissively tells his father to “just be in some corner somewhere.”<sup>32</sup> These instances of Tamil phrases do more than just give the play a humorous sense of the reality of social relations: they indicate a felt need to translate Tamil into Sanskrit, to make the entire play Sanskrit rather than have certain parts in the vernacular, unlike classical Sanskrit dramas

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<sup>24</sup> This theme of animosity between a mother and daughter-in-law is the theme of an eighteenth-century play that Raghavan’s Samskrita Ranga staged and that he edited and published. See V. Raghavan, ed. *Snuṣāvijaya: An One-Act Play*, by Sundararājakavi, Second Edition (Madras: Samskrita Ranga, 1977).

<sup>25</sup> My thanks to the Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for the Performing Arts for providing me with this video.

<sup>26</sup> I owe a debt of thanks to Prof. T.V. Vasudeva and Mrs. Lalitha at KSRI for their assistance in both noticing that these phrases in the Sanskrit were Tamil sayings and helping me find the Tamil originals.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 136. Sanskrit: “*etadaparyāptamiva gehaṃ gehaṃ śveva praviśya bhojanavelāsu kākāyase tvam.*” Tamil: “*viṭu viṭu pōy sāpāṭṭu vēllai illa kākāk mādiri parakkīra.*”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Sanskrit: “*prṣṭhe tādāyata, mā mā udare.*” Tamil: “*muṭihā aṭi, vaiṭil āṭikāṭe kūṭāṭu.*”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., commentary, p. IV. “*dramiḍābhānakānūvādaḥ.*”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 142. Sanskrit: “*ko vā tvāṃ hastinaṃ gr̥he nibadhya bhojayitum prabhavet!*” Tamil: “*yānai kaṭṭi yār tīnī pōṭṭu.*” Raghavan also says this is a translation of a Tamil saying in the commentary (p. V).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., autocommentary, ii.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 141. Sanskrit: “*yatra kutra koṇe bhava.*” Tamil: “*ora mūlayile keṭa.*”

where certain characters speak Prakrit. This phenomenon is common in modern Sanskrit and it seems to be part of an effort to make a case for Sanskrit's extensive capacity for humor and daily speech.

### *A Very Vedānta Allegory*

The comic element in *Vimukti* arises also from the names of some of the characters, particularly the sons of Ātmanātha, and the names also provide a window into the allegorical dimension of the play. Each son represents one of the senses according to classical philosophy. The eldest is the wily Latakeśvara (king of thieves), who represents the mind. The others are the leering and lascivious Ulūkākṣa (owl eye), who is sight; the ever hungry and gossiping Calaprotha (moving snout), who represents the sense of taste; then Śuṅḍāla (elephant, or one with a proboscis), who represents the sense of smell;<sup>33</sup> next Kaṇḍūla (itchy), who is touch; and finally Dirghaśravas (long ears), who represents hearing. The sons are depicted as unruly and enmeshed in this-worldly materialistic activity from which the self wants to escape. Ātmanātha, our lead character whose name means “lord of the self,” represents the individual soul, or *jīvātman*, that seeks liberation. The wife's name, Trivarṇinī, which means tri-colored, is an extension of the idea that the three *guṇas* of Sāṃkhya philosophy – *sattva* (truth), *rajas* (passion), and *tamas* (darkness) – are represented by three colors: white, red, and black. Actually, however, her sisters represent these *guṇa*-s. The beloved Candrikā is the one good *guṇa*, *sattva* (truth), while the play explicitly refers to the other two sisters as “Red” and “Dark.”<sup>34</sup> Finally, the sisters' mother, Ātmanātha's mother-in-law, is Māyāvātī, who is *māyā*, the philosophical concept of the world's illusoriness. In short, this is Sāṃkhya philosophy on one level that then has a Vedānta overlay with the idea of *māyā* and a theistic dimension added by the mayor of the city/supreme deity.

Raghavan indicates the philosophical dimension of the play not only through the allegory but also through frequent uses of quotation from sacred texts and classical literature. He is maintaining the tradition not only by reviving Sanskrit drama, but also through incessant citation, turning his modern text into a literary patchwork quilt. In *Vimukti*, he quotes from Kālidāsa a few times, but the preponderance of quotes is from philosophical

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<sup>33</sup> In one funny moment, Ātmanātha angrily tells this son, “Because your nose takes up your entire face, there is no space between your ears.” Ibid., 129. “*iyatyā bṛhatyā nāsayaiva svīkṛtasarvavadanābhogasya te satyaṃ nāstyeva śrotrāvakaśaḥ.*” Later this son offers to be a perfume vendor (*gāndhika*), but another suggests he should deal snuff (*nāsācūrṇāpaṇasthāpanam*). Ibid., 143.

<sup>34</sup> Candrikā, “moonlight,” signifies the white *guṇa*. The red sister is Śonita (literally “red” or “blood.”) The third sister is Hastinī, a female elephant, and she is derisively described as not just dark but also overweight.

texts. At times, the play feels like philosophical “quote salad” (not unlike a bad undergrad paper). There are frequent quotes from the Upaniṣads, Patañjali’s Yoga Sutras, the works of Śankara, and other classical texts of philosophy. Sometimes the quote is just a small notion barely recognizable as a quote without the autocommentary, as when Ātmanātha says that “the path ahead is difficult,” which Raghavan notes in the commentary is from verse 3.14 of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*. At other times, Raghavan’s characters quote religious texts in ways that have nothing to do with the meaning of the original: sitting in the dark of night waiting for his house to be torn down, Ātmanātha quotes Rig Veda 10.129.3: “darkness is hidden by darkness.”<sup>35</sup> These minor quotations give the text a historical and religious depth, further blurring the line between comedy and philosophy. As they are in quotation marks in the written text, they also mark the text as directed toward readers and not just for staging.

At the same time, Raghavan is also critical of citation in *Vimukti*. When Ātmanātha rebukes his eldest son for bringing his aunts to their house, he asks if even one woman is not enough to fear hell,<sup>36</sup> to which the son retorts citing lines directly from the Upaniṣads supporting the value of women. He also points out the importance of the kick of a beautiful woman to bring about flowers. Supporting his own hedonistic perspective, he quotes Manu’s insistence in *Dharmaśāstra* that what is proper includes what satisfies oneself.<sup>37</sup> In response Ātmanātha declares that, “For the worthless confusion of everything, modern folks recite Sanskrit.”<sup>38</sup> To which the son suggests that the old folks have forgotten the real meanings and merely recite like frogs,<sup>39</sup> thus hinting at the famous Rig Veda verse describing Brahmins as sounding like frogs (RV 8.103). This last exchange is not merely about the usefulness of quotes, but more strongly suggests the foibles of using Sanskrit to support new ideas alien to tradition. Certainly one can use the *Dharmaśāstra* to support a supposedly Euro-American hedonistic view (just as the Raj tried to enlist the *Dharmaśāstra* to govern the country), but this takes it out of context. Likewise, the son critiques the rote memorization and meaninglessness of croaking Vedic recitation by Brahmins.

Quotation cuts both ways in this text, however, when modern attempts to quote the classics go horribly wrong and completely twist the original meanings, thereby adding to the comic sentiment. There was much laughter at the 1987 performance when Ātmanātha

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 157. “*tama āste tamasā gūḍhamarge.*”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 139. “*apyanalam ekā strī rauravāya?*”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 140 “*ātmatuṣṭistathaiva ca.*” (*Manavadharmaśāstra* 2.6).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. “*anarthāya sarvaviplavāyaiva ādhunikaiḥ saṃskṛtaṃ paṭhayate.*”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. “*kevalaṃ bhekā iva paṭhantaḥ*”

attempts to appease his wife by quoting a verse from the Lakṣmī Stotra.<sup>40</sup> In another instance, he calls his son stupid, but does so directly changing the words of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Brhadarānyaka Upaniṣad*: he says “*mauḍhyānmauḍhyāt sambhavasi!....mauḍhyaṃ vai putranāmāsi*”<sup>41</sup>; or “You are born from stupidity...you are stupidity in the form of my own son.”<sup>41</sup> In another instance, Trivarṇinī’s sisters try to quote from the Upaniṣads to comedic effect changing the famous adage *tat tvam asi* (“you are that”) into *yatte tat asmākampi* (“what is yours is ours”), said with reference to their sister’s belongings as they make themselves right at home in their brother-in-law’s house despite the financial burden caused. They also refer to the Upaniṣads but change the first parts of texts’ names so that the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* becomes the *Śaṭha* and the *Cāndogya Upaniṣad* becomes the *Māndhyayogya*. But this is not mere malapropism since “*śaṭha*” means “deceit” and “*māndhya*” means “sickness.”<sup>42</sup> Essentially, Raghavan has the sisters-in-law, daughters of Māyāvātī saying that their view of the world is utterly wrong, reinforcing the play’s critique of materialism and exhorting a departure from being mired in the *guṇas* such as *rajas* and *tamas* (passion and darkness, the two sisters who misspeak here). In the same conversation, Trivarṇinī misquotes the *Mahānarāyaṇa Upaniṣad*’s verse (11.6) that the lord Narāyaṇa pervades all, saying instead, “the wife works pervading everything.”<sup>42</sup> At the level of the allegory, she thus identifies as *prakṛti* and daughter of Māyā, that which animates the entire material world but is separate from the supreme deity. On another level, this misquote also functions as a critique of strong women. Space does not permit a full exploration of the topic of gender in this play, but the opposition of strong women like Trivarṇinī with passive women like Candrikā bears mentioning. As with the critique of divorce, lust, and other moral shortcomings, the play appears to be making a conservative statement about proper morality and wifely duty.

### *Debate, Death, and Divorce*

*Vimukti* also includes a humorous philosophical debate in which atheist materialists have some of the last words, but Raghavan, through the play’s overall narrative arc, ultimately makes fun of the atheist position. Here he most evidently appears to be drawing on the precedent set by *Prabodhacandrodaya* and *Samkalpasūryodaya*. The exchange occurs just after Daṃṣṭrī/Death has condemned Ātmanātha’s house to fall. Trivarṇinī asks whether

<sup>40</sup> In the 1987 performance the performer adds another dimension of humor by reciting something that sounds vaguely like the *Lakṣmīstotra*, but the words are all wrong.

<sup>41</sup> In the original, “*aṅgādaṅgāt sambhavasi...ātmā vai putranāmāsi*.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 138. “...*tat sarvaṃ vyāpya bhāryā viceṣṭate*...” In the original text: “*vyāpya narayaṇa sthitaḥ*.”

or not there even is a mayor of the city, to which Ātmanātha affirms there is such a person.<sup>43</sup> Trivaraṇinī thinks him utterly mad or possessed and declares that Ātmanātha could not possibly know.<sup>44</sup> It is apparent from the context that Trivaraṇinī is questioning the existence of god and presenting knowledge of god as an epistemological impossibility. As she proceeds to question a group of townsfolk who have gathered, a philosophical debate ensues.

The fact that Raghavan has not clearly demarcated specific schools in this section makes this play's doxographical dimension far weaker than it could be. But the fact that he seems most concerned to skewer atheists, as we will see, means that irreligion is of most concern and he lumps irreligion in with materialism. For example, in an essay written in honor of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan when he became President of India, Raghavan rails against the "secularists and modernists."<sup>45</sup> In his own self-description, written toward the end of his life, he asserts: "A firm believer in God and in spiritual values, material affairs and mundane considerations had played a minimal role in my life."<sup>46</sup> Thus as I read it, the segment is less concerned with doxography than with continuing the trope of the superiority of religion over materialism. The first person Trivaraṇinī questions about the existence of a mayor/god replies angrily, "Damn you! Who cares about you, or your house, or knows the lord of the house?"<sup>47</sup> Raghavan does not supply a footnote explaining what this position might be, but in its sense of the insignificance of answering the question makes me think it could be a Buddhist response. A second person remarks that Daṃṣṭrī has been going around saying that various houses will fall, and no one believed him, but since a few have begun to fall, "I infer that there must be some lord of the houses."<sup>48</sup> The commentary mentions the *Brahma Sūtra* here,<sup>49</sup> a reference to Vedānta, although the use of *anumā* (inference) hints slightly at Nyāya. The third debater suggests that: "If that should be so, then the lord has a very cruel heart, in my opinion."<sup>50</sup> In the commentary, Raghavan suggests that this is a *pūrvapakṣa* argument, but does not equate it to a particular school.<sup>51</sup> To the possibility of a cruel god, a fourth debater replies, "I see it differently. He is not cruel, but is following some rule, and it is only because of that rule that he casts us from the houses. In no way at all is this

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 149. "Triv.: 'ko 'yam asmad-grhasvāmī?' Brā: 'priye! āmasti kaścit asmadgrhasvāmī, nagarasvāmī ca.'"

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 149-150. "...satyaṃ matto vā āviṣṭo vāsi...na kimapi tvayā jñātum sambhāvyaṭe."

<sup>45</sup> Raghavan, "Culture and Independence," in *The Radhakrishnan Number*, edited by Vuppuluri Kalidas, (Madras: Vyasa Publications, 1962) 186.

<sup>46</sup> Nandini Ramini, *V. Raghavan, Makers of Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2014), 84.

<sup>47</sup> V. Raghavan, *Vimukti*, 150. "dhik tvām! ko vā tvām, tvadgrhaṃ vā, tvadgrhasvāmināṃ vā jānāti?"

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. "...manye, ko 'pi asmadgrhāṇāṃ svāmī vartata iti, tādrśena kenāpi bhavitavyamityanuminomi."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. "yadyevaṃ syāt, tadā sa svāmī paramakrūrahrdaya iti me tarkaḥ."

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., viii.

lord unjust or pitiless.”<sup>52</sup> The commentary here again refers to the *Brahma Sūtra*, but the exact position, that god is just following the rules, is not clearly associated with a school. The sixth person to speak represents a purely Vedānta position in saying, “They see his garden, but do not see him,”<sup>53</sup> thus quoting from *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.14.<sup>54</sup> Except for the first respondent, all the others thus far mentioned are at least theists of various sorts trying to wrestle with the issue of theodicy.

The fifth and seventh debaters, however, clearly represent Cārvāka *nāstika* positions, and while humorous, they also appear to suggest that the Vedānta answer is correct by virtue of their materialism and the fact that in the end of the play they are proven wrong. Of the two atheists, the fifth debater presents the following rebuttal:<sup>55</sup>

Damn you, damn all of you clamoring about dancing in the sky.<sup>56</sup> The very existence of the lord isn’t known now, but you all debate his qualities. If you follow reason, then there isn’t any lord of our town. If he were to exist, why don’t we see him in the streets or festivals?<sup>57</sup>

His argument is fairly simple: there is little point in debating the qualities of god if no one has yet proven his existence, and further, he is never plainly visible. It is to this that the sixth debater replies, “They see his garden, but they do not see him,” implying that the world is the visible creation of god, and thus one can deduce the existence of a creator from this illusory garden of delights. The response of the sixth debater is the *siddhānta* argument, matching the play’s message of the illusoriness of the world, although, in the end, the play declares that *māyā* maliciously creates the illusion and god benevolently provides a way to destroy it.

The seventh debater, however, has the last word, and he is a slightly different type of Cārvāka from the classical Cārvāka, and much closer to what we might call a Euro-American Cārvāka. He is utterly unconcerned by the question, rather interested in enjoying the world, and particularly swimming with women:

Let it be. Come, this is a very pleasing river with warm water. Let’s bathe, let’s play. Otherwise this bathing place is joyless. We will descend there in the section full of bathing village women.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. “*ahaṃ punarutprekṣe- na sa krūrah, sa kamapi karmavidhīmanuṣṛtya naḥ gr̥hebhyo niyamenaiḥ prakṣipatīti. sarvathā yasmin kasmīnapi svāmīni nopapadyate khalu vaiṣamyam nairghr̥ṇyam vā.*”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. “*ārāmasya paśyanti na taṃ paśyati kaścana.*”

<sup>54</sup> The source is mentioned in the autocommentary, Ibid., viii.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Raghavan explicitly notes in the autocommentary that this is the Cārvāka position.

<sup>56</sup> In terms of classical arguments, this would make more sense as “sky flower” but that is not what is in the text.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. “*dhik tvām dhik vaḥ sarvān ākāśatāṇḍavāḍambarāṇiḥ. adhya svāmīnaḥ sattaiva na jñāyate. bhavantastu tadīyaguṇānadhikṛtya vivadadhve. yuktiranuṣāryate cet, naivāsti ko ’pyasmatpattanasvāmī. yadi syāt katham nalokeyate asmābhiḥ rathyāsu yātrāsu.*”

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 151. “*bhavatu. āgacchata, sāyam koṣṇimnā atīva subhageyam nadī. snāsyāmaḥ, vihariṣyāmaḥ. athavā śrotīyāvātāraghaṭṭo ’yam paramanīrasaḥ. tatra majjantībhiḥ grāmāpramadābhiḥ saṃkule bhāge avatarāmaḥ.*”

As Raghavan notes in the autocommentary, this person is a certain type of Cārvāka who is a sensualist or enjoyer of pleasures.<sup>59</sup> We might call his position the classical Epicurean. This Cārvāka is ruled entirely by the senses, and his interest in bathing women echoes the beginning of the play and the lascivious nature of Ātmanātha's son, Ūlūkākṣa. Thus Raghavan establishes a connection between materialists and sensualists, and another connection between religious and moral folks, and then he establishes a strong ethical distinction between those two types of people. Further, by combining sensualism with materialism, the play once again marks the Indian and religious in contrast to a supposed Euro-American and materialist outlook. The audience is meant to laugh at the philosophical debate ending in "let's go swimming with the women," but at the same time to disdain such a sinking of the philosophical and theological into the realm of mere senses.

Ātmanātha's house represents the physical body that houses the individual self, and this house is infirm and mortal. Various conversations make this connection quite apparent in a fairly humorous manner. Toward the end of Act I, Trivarṇinī says that the unstable house could fall at any moment, even if afflicted by rain or wind, but the word used for "affliction of rain," is "*jāladoṣa*," which is the Tamil word for the common cold.<sup>60</sup> Raghavan here uses a nice pun to make a critical allegorical point. When Trivarṇinī complains that her husband refuses to fix the dilapidated house, she quotes him (in absentia) saying that all houses are falling down a little (i.e. all bodies are decaying), but that we have had previous houses (past lives), yet this is the best house (a human birth).<sup>61</sup> This last comment refers to the idea that the human birth is the best birth from which to achieve liberation, and liberation can be accomplished during life, not after death. The character of Daṃṣṭrī in the play represents death, and thus the threat that Ātmanātha's house will be torn down symbolizes his impending death. After Ātmanātha receives this news, a friend informs him that not only can he not escape his wife (*prakṛti*), but that the lord will arrange another house,<sup>62</sup> meaning that he will be reborn with a reborn version of the same wife. As expected, Ātmanātha, wishing for complete liberation, declares that he is afflicted by the daughter of Māyā, and that if he has a say in the matter, he does not want any new house, or a new wife. In other words, he wishes for *vimukti*.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., viii. "*saptamaḥ cārvākasyaiva rūpāntaram, yo vaiṣayikasukharasikah.*"

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 151-152.

The issue of divorce, indicated earlier as a means of adding comedy, also has a significant allegorical meaning in the context of the play's philosophy of liberation. Later in the argument between Trivarṇinī and Ātmanātha, after they have fought about a divorce, Trivarṇinī declares that she is doing everything, but Ātmanātha should be active in the world, implying that she is doing the housework but he needs to get a job. But the allegorical reading is that she projects the illusion of this world, and he should participate in this illusion through the senses and through action. The husband responds that he wishes to be free, and this second stage of life (the householder stage) is too painful. His wife replies that "effort alone is this stage of life,<sup>63</sup> and that in the land of India everyone seems to have this mental illness deriding the second stage of life and going off to become sages.<sup>64</sup> This is the fundamental question of choosing between the life of a householder and the life of an ascetic.

But there is a further issue at stake in this text: the question of whether it is better to live or to die, and whether dying is the only path by which to achieve liberation. It is this fundamental question within the tradition that led many Orientalist scholars to think of Hinduism, erroneously, as negating the importance of life and the world. The final message of the play is that one can achieve liberation in this life and world, but there are hints of this perspective along the way, as well as other moments where the question and possibility of suicide reappears. Even Trivarṇinī declares, "The living man sees a hundred blessings." Later, a depressed Ātmanātha declines the offer when a certain Brahmin offers him a path toward another city full of pleasures, e.g. a path to heaven. Yet towards the end Ātmanātha is on the verge of suicide and declares that there is no other path to take but to depart this world, and his dialogue directly quotes but misconstrues the sense of "there is no other path" in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*.<sup>65</sup> The old man, whom we soon learn is the supreme deity, counsels the nearly suicidal Ātmanātha, declaring that the living man sees a hundred blessings, and the embodied form is best for pursuing dharma.<sup>66</sup> The liberation in *Vimukti* is thus a this-worldly liberation achieved through knowledge, not death. The play itself dramatizes a variety of different possibilities and paths other than liberation, but in the end, Ātmanātha realizes the allegory, and thus this final verse:

You are the lord, I am *puruṣa*, the house here is my body, that Daṃṣṭrī is death,  
This wife is *prakṛti*, her sisters are the *guṇa*-s, and her mother is *māyā*.  
The six sons are the senses of the mind, the city is the world.

<sup>63</sup> Raghavan employs some nifty word play here: "*satyam śrama evāyam āśramah!*" Ibid., 134.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. "*kathamevaṃ viśvajānīno 'yaṃ bhāratadeśe manovyādhiḥ? dviṭyāśramaṃ sarve ninditvā jñānibhūtamātmānaṃ manyante.*"

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 155. "*nānyaḥ panthā vidyate 'yanāya.*" Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 3.8.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 157. The old man corroborates his point with quotes from the *Kumārasambhava* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Thus for the sake of release, *prakṛti* becomes Good-natured,<sup>67</sup>  
Therefore, having seen this comedy, people ought to know.<sup>68</sup>

This last line leads us back to the idea of comedy. Raghavan’s character does not merely refer to the comedy in the play: he gestures toward the comedy that *is* the whole world. Ātmanātha has achieved liberation by seeing the allegorical nature of the comedy in the events of the play, but also by seeing the world *as* a comedy, and it is a view that the play, at least as Raghavan intends it, makes available to its audience.

The *nāndī* verse that opens the play clarifies the last line of the last verse (and is clarified by it). In the *nāndī*, Raghavan criticizes the tendency to be overly involved in the material world, and he further valorizes a detached perspective from which the world appears comical:

Having hastened down illusory paths eager for banal things, we fight.  
Because of the loss of trivial things desired, our throats burst crying,  
Having seen us restless heroic actors in the great comedy of the world,  
The liberated lotus-faced soul laughs at us with compassion.<sup>69</sup>

The first two lines echo Raghavan’s frequent critiques of materialism. The last two lines, however, provide a very different perspective: he depicts the entire world as itself a comedy, and humans as heroic actors. We soon see, however, that this description of humans as “heroic” actors was ironic. The director/Raghavan cites the verse of Ballaṭa about the fool who mistakes a drop of water for a pearl. We laugh at this fool, but the pearl/drop simile reveals the illusoriness of value and materiality. In response to the director’s comment, the friend says, “All these who appear as heroes are just clowns.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, those who take themselves too seriously fail to see the illusion of this world. We are all, on this account, clowning around on the stage of life. At the end of the autocommentary, Raghavan gives a second set of “final” verses wherein he describes the whole world as a stage and the supreme lord as a stage director and spectator that makes us engage in different roles: “The sutradhāra [director of the play] is the lord of the world (Śiva) who is the witness and makes us engage

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<sup>67</sup> Literally, *prakṛti*, just identified as the wife, becomes “*sattvasthā*,” that which has the nature of truth or goodness, *sattva*, which is the *guṇa* that Candrikā represents.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 160. *īśāstvam, puruṣo ’smi, gehamiha me deham, sa daṁṣṭrī yamaḥ  
sā bhāryā prakṛtiḥ, guṇā bhaginikāḥ, māyā ca tāsām prasūh/  
ṣaṭ putrā mana indriyāṇi, nagaram lokah, vimuktyai tataḥ  
sattvasthā prakṛtiḥ, tathā prahasanaṁ dṛṣṭvā janā jānatām//*

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 127. *tucchebyaḥ sprhayā prapañcasaraṇiṣvāpatya saṁyudhyataḥ  
tuccālābhavināśato ’pyavirataṁ dīryadgalaṁ krandataḥ/  
asmān vīkṣya jaganmahāprahasane sañceṣṭino nāyakān  
jīvanmuktamukhāmbuje vijayate hāso dayāpyadbhutam//*

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 128, “*evaṁ ca sarve ’pyete nāyakaṁ manyā vidūṣakā eva.*”

in different roles. May the supreme lord be pleased by our roles.”<sup>71</sup> Certainly Raghavan knew of Shakespeare’s “all the world’s a stage” line from *As You Like It*, but here that notion operates as a full-blown theology.

### *Conclusion: Comedy and Contemporaneity*

In *Vimukti*, Raghavan has combined two *rasas*: *hāsya* for the lower-level comedy and *śānta* (peacefulness) for the higher-level philosophical message. At the same time, *hāsya* itself becomes the symbol of this higher level of awareness. Comedy here is thus not a matter of secular pleasure but shifts up into the realm of the theological as a sign of liberation from the thirsts and wants of mundane material life. *Hāsya* becomes a sentiment not merely of derision but of pathos for the less spiritually advanced. However, the derisiveness of *hāsya* is not lost altogether, as the materiality from which liberation can be obtained, and at which one is supposed to laugh, is subtly painted as one of capitalist modernity and Western values. The opening verse and prologue’s complaints about the modern businessman and his ignorance and neglect of Indian culture imply the author’s rejection of Western culture and its capitalist mentality. He is laughing at the West. Recalling that *Vimukti* was written in 1931 when young and idealistic Raghavan was associated closely with the Independence movement of the activist S. Satyamurthi, the play’s exhortation for liberation from materiality as defined by Western consumerism reads as a call for liberation that is not merely philosophical but also political. Also, considering that *Vimukti* was written a mere two years after the 1929 Wall Street stock market crash and ensuing global financial crisis, the play could be read, in a small way, as exhibiting anxiety about capitalism run amok. In place of capitalism and the materialist culture with which the colonists dominated the subcontinent, Raghavan’s play expresses a need to return to the spiritual, the supposed expertise of the Orient. He calls for an emancipation from nonreligion, especially from atheism, and an emancipation that leads to a comic vision that makes fun of family foibles but also of Western morality and materialism.

In closing, I want to return to Raghavan’s conviction, noted in the first paragraph, that the “Indian mind” is “predominantly philosophical” and therefore must have comedy. I pointed out there that this was a sort of self-Orientalizing. Operative in *Vimukti* I think is the old trope, much discussed, that posits a West with superior material abilities and the East as superior in spirituality. It is a trope that Hindu nationalists of various stripes have long resorted to in order to create an inner identity unassailable by European capitalist prowess.

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<sup>71</sup> Raghavan, *Vimukti tīkā*, xi.

*sūtradhāraśca sākṣī ca yo jagannātyakautukī/  
sa nātyayogairasmākaṃ prīyatām paramēśvaraḥ*

Partha Chatterjee finds this formulation as far back as the work of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and writes: “The superiority of the West was in the material of its culture....But culture did not consist only of the material aspect of life. There was the spiritual aspect too....In the spiritual aspect of culture, the East was superior – and hence undominated.”<sup>72</sup> The unfortunate positivism of this quote notwithstanding, the trope of East/spiritual, West/material has a long history in both European and Indian thought, and it is picked up in elite Indian circles in the colonial and postcolonial era as a means of creating a strong national identity identified with religion. What is particularly interesting about *Vimukti* is that Raghavan seems to coalesce this trope with the play’s allegory of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, and the soul’s liberation from the material plays out as an allegory of materialism vs. spirituality that hints at this larger supposed civilizational duality and suggests not only a liberation of soul from matter but of Indian spiritual prowess from debased and materialistic Western mores. In short, it is a combination of a new trope with an old philosophical concept. This mixture of old philosophy with modern ideas is what I think makes *Vimukti* so compelling as a text.

Not only that, but *Vimukti*, we should not fail to note, is also in the old language of Sanskrit and includes Tamil language and modern ideas translated into Sanskrit. I might agree with Sheldon Pollock’s concern, in his declaration of Sanskrit as dead, that the text is not fully a communicative medium as it likely reached only a small audience. But to Pollock’s argument that Sanskrit lost the ability to “make literary newness, or as a tenth-century writer put it, ‘the capacity continually to reimagine the world,’”<sup>73</sup> I would counter with the example of *Vimukti* that certainly is an example of literary newness and has reimagined not just philosophy, combining it with comedy, but has injected a modern view of a divided East and West mapped on to an old philosophical duality of spirit and matter. In addition, I would make the claim that *Vimukti* in a language other than Sanskrit would lose its philosophical depth lent it by the use of frequent classical Sanskrit quotations and an autocommentary. The language itself, I think, gives it an air of tension between classical old language and contemporary farce, a productive tension that feeds the play’s tension between materialist modernity and an attempt to forge an Indian identity steeped in Sanskrit culture and philosophy. Yet as much as I read a political dimension into the text, it is not the whole

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<sup>72</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 66. See also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 6.

<sup>73</sup> Sheldon Pollock, “The Death of Sanskrit,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2001): 392-426, 414.

of the text: the play is an entertaining farce and a unique philosophical allegory that keeps its politics quite hidden. *Vimukti* serves as but one small example that there is more to Sanskrit in the contemporary period than explicit and hardline politics, and there is a wealth of Sanskrit literature written in the twentieth century that bears further study to reveal how modern writers in this ancient language incorporated contemporary tropes and ideas.



Image 1: Scene from the 1987 performance of *Vimukti*. From left to right: Daṃṣṭrī, Ātmanātha, Trivarnīnī, Latakeśvara, Kaṇḍūla, Calaprotha, Ulūkākṣa, and Śuṇḍāla. Photo courtesy of the Samskrita Ranga and the Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts.