

3. ‘Wander Alone Like the Rhinoceros!’: The Solitary, Itinerant Renouncer in Ancient Indian Gāthā-Poetry

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Abstract

The ancient Indian *gāthā* – a proverbial, succinct type of single-stanza poetry, often collected in thematic sets – became a favoured form of expression among groups of ascetics from the middle to the end of the 1st millennium BCE. This poetry – contrasting with the magico-ritual chant or *mantra* of the priest and the artistic poem of the aesthete – functions as (self-)instruction for the ascetic/renouncer. Examples include *gāthās* that exhort him to be as untiring as the Sun in its daily course, or to “wander alone like the rhinoceros”. This chapter delineates the figure of the solitary, wandering renouncer in a selection of Brahmanic, Jaina, and Buddhist ascetic *gāthā*-verses from that period. Particular attention is given to the use of solar and heroic imagery for describing the ideal renouncer, and how this relates to the real-life conditions of wandering renouncers.

I. The Song of the Wanderer

The legend of Rohita and Śunaḥśepa is a narrative in mixed prose and verse (a genre known as *ākhyāna*) found in a late

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Vedic ritual text, the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* (ch. 7), which is meant for recitation during the royal consecration (*rājasūya*). Versions of the legend can also be found in other texts.⁷⁹ The section of the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa* in which this narrative is found appears to have been composed in Videha during the mid 1st millennium BCE – an area and a period connected to the rise of Buddhism and Jainism. The legend of Rohita and Śunaḥṣepa includes a set of five aphoristic verses – *gāthās* – composed in the classical *anuṣṭubh-śloka*-metre. Together they form a kind of song, which, although it is untitled in Sanskrit, I will refer to as the “Song of the Wanderer”; it is rather unique in Vedic ritual literature. Before we look at how the Song of the Wanderer is best understood in context of similar thematic sets of *gāthā*-verses in early Buddhist and Jaina literature, a brief summary of the narrative of Indra and Rohita is necessary.

The story goes that there was once a king, Hariścandra, who had promised to sacrifice his only son, Rohita, to the deity (*deva*) Varuṇa. When Rohita was ‘fit to bear arms’ (*sāmnābhuka*), *id est* upon reaching manhood, the father decided to perform the sacrifice. Having heard the terrible news, Rohita grabbed his bow and arrows and escaped into the jungle, where he roamed about for a whole year. Meanwhile Hariścandra got sick and Rohita, hearing about his father’s misfortune, decided to return home. As he came near the village, however, he was confronted by a *brāhmaṇa* – the *deva* Indra in disguise – who presented his message to Rohita in the form of a *gāthā*:

Great is the splendour of him who has exerted himself [*śrānta*-],
so we have heard, o Rohita!

Wicked is he who stays among men.

Indra is the friend of the wandering man [*carant*-].⁸⁰

Therefore, the *brāhmaṇa* exhorted Rohita to wander (*cara*). Putting his trust in him, Rohita continued his roaming for another year in

⁷⁹ Such as *Śāṅkhayanaśrautasūtra* 15.17–27.

⁸⁰ *nānā śrāntāya śrīr astīti rohita śuśruma | pāpo nṛṣadvāro jana indra ic carataḥ sakhā || (Aitareyabrāhmaṇa 7.15.1, translation based on Olivelle 2007:175 (cf. Horsch 1966:87f.)). Translations are mine, unless stated otherwise. Instead of *nṛṣadvāro* the *Śāṅkhāyanaśrautasūtra* has *niṣadvāro* ‘he who sits’. Each verse is followed by the exhortation to wander (*caraveti*).*

the wilderness, away from other men. As he again approached the village, Indra appeared and told him:

Endowed with flowers are the shanks of the wanderer;
his self grows and bears fruit.
All his sins are lying down,
slain by exertion [*śrama-*] on the road.⁸¹

Rohita went on toiling, wandering for a third year, until Indra approached him with a new stanza:

The fortune of the sitting man sits,
that of the standing man stands,
that of the man who lies down lies down,
the fortune of the wanderer [*carata-*] wanders.⁸²

A fourth year went by and Indra sang to him again, this time using the imagery of the four outcomes in the royal dice-game – *Kṛta* being the best outcome and *Kali* the worst:

Kali he becomes who is lying down,
Dvāpara he who is rising,
Tretā he who is standing erect,
Kṛta he attains who is wandering [*caran*].⁸³

Rohita roamed for a fifth year, until Indra recited to him the final stanza, which presents the Sun as an ideal of endurance:

Wandering [*caran*], verily, he finds honey,
wandering he finds the sweet fruit of the cluster-fig tree.
Behold the pre-eminence of the Sun,
who never wearies of wandering!⁸⁴

⁸¹ *puṣpiṇyau carato jaṅghe bhūṣṇur ātmā phalagrahiḥ | śere 'sya sarve pāpmānaḥ śrameṇa prapathe hatās || (7.15.2) Ātmā 'self' can also mean 'body', pra-patha- means 'on the (long) journey, on the wide path'.*

⁸² *āste bhaga āsīnasyordhvas tiṣṭhati tiṣṭhataḥ | śete nipadyamānasya carāti carato bhagās || (7.15.3)*

⁸³ *kaliḥ śayāno bhavati saṁjihānas tu dvāparaḥ | uttiṣṭhaṁs tretā bhavati kṛtaṁ sampadyate caraṁś || (7.15.4)*

⁸⁴ *caran vai madhu vindati caran svādum udumbaram | sūryasya paśya śremāṇaṁ yo na tandrayate caraṁś || 7.15.5. The Śāṅkhāyanaśrautasūtra has śramaṇa- 'toiling, exerting oneself' instead of śreman-.*

With this *gāthā*, and the completion of the six years of wandering, the first section of the legend comes to an end.⁸⁵ Soon thereafter, we are told, Rohita found a substitute victim for himself, Śunaḥśepa, the son of a sylvan sage, whom he exchanged for a hundred cows.⁸⁶ Rohita returned to his father with the new sacrificial victim, which was accepted by Varuṇa. How Śunaḥśepa escaped death by means of his poetic skill is another story.

II. What is ascetic *gāthā*-poetry?

Before analyzing the Song of the Wanderer, a basic understanding of the nature of *gāthā*-poetry is a prerequisite. In his seminal work *Die vedische Gāthā- und Śloka-Literatur* (1966), Paul Horsch argues that *gāthā*-literature plays an important part in the transformation from Vedic to the early non-Vedic ascetic-renunciant (*śramaṇa*) traditions during the middle to the end of the 1st millennium BCE.⁸⁷ The *gāthā*-genre can be seen as an “alternative” literature, existing parallel to the strictly priestly one. In the earliest known Indo-Aryan poetry, the *Ṛgvedasamhitā*, the term *gāthā* – which originally simply meant ‘verse’ or ‘song’ – designates a liturgical composition;⁸⁸ the same is true of its Avestan counterpart *gāvā*.⁸⁹ In Vedic India, however, *gāthā* soon came to refer solely to non-liturgical poetry, since the term *mantra* – a formula from the Vedic hymn-collections (*Samhitās*) – became synonymous with liturgical verse. It is only during the late Vedic period that one can speak of *gāthās* as constituting a separate, non-priestly literature, which is not represented in the hymn-collections yet recognized by theologians as common lore and sparsely quoted in their

⁸⁵ *Śāṅkhāyanaśrautasūtra* 15.19 adds a seventh year and a sixth verse, in the same style as the previous ones; the first half-line is taken from the fifth verse.

⁸⁶ It is not said how Rohita managed to acquire a hundred cows; he may have captured them in a raid, as befitting a young warrior (Weller 1956:86; Falk 1984).

⁸⁷ Horsch 1966:482.

⁸⁸ Horsch 1966:214–215.

⁸⁹ In Young Avestan the term is used mainly for referring to the five Old Avestan *Gāvās*, the 17 hymns or *Yasna*-chapters attributed to Zarathuštra. The metrical characteristic of the *Gāvās*, in contrast to the early Vedic *gāthā*, is their strophic form, each with a fixed number of verse-lines and syllables.

prosaic texts,⁹⁰ such as the *Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*’s legend of Rohita and Śunaḥśepa. Closely associated with *gāthā* is the term *śloka*,⁹¹ which in the post-Vedic period came to designate a specific metric form – the much loved *anuṣṭubh* – regardless of its content.

From the late Vedic period onwards, *gāthā* designates a verse of the proverbial, aphoristic type, in which the focus is on content, rather than on composition. When used within a narrative and didactic text, the function of the *gāthā* is to strengthen or summarize a statement in the prose text. The *gāthā* is a single-stanza poem; a verse is complete in itself, but it often appears in the texts together with other verses on the same subject, forming thematic sets or “songs”, such as the “Song of the Wanderer” or the “Rhinoceros-*sutta*” (below).

Gāthās in Brahmanic,⁹² Buddhist, and Jaina texts should be seen in context of the broader Indian proverbial-gnomic and didactic literature: sayings, aphorisms, maxims, and precepts originating in oral tradition. One of the subgenres of *gāthā*-literature, ascetic *gāthās*, became a favoured form of expression among groups of renunciators during the late Vedic and early post-Vedic periods. During this time, there was considerable cultural and intellectual exchange between various ascetic groups. They all seem to have made use of some sort of un-edited, pre-Aśokan, non-sectarian, floating *corpus* of sayings, similes, ideals, poetic and narrative material, which would explain the numerous shared expressions found in post-Vedic Brahmanic, early Jaina, and Buddhist ascetic

⁹⁰ *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 11.5.7.10 even mentions *gāthā* as Vedic subject of study.

⁹¹ *śloka* ‘verse of praise’, literally ‘that which is heard’. See Horsch 1966:1, 219, 223–229, 306; Gonda 1975:405–407.

⁹² In the term “Brahmanic” I include both the “Vedic Brahmanic” tradition (texts from the Vedic period, *circa* 1500–500 BCE) and the “neo-Brahmanic” tradition (texts from the post-Vedic period); both (in contrast to Jainism and Buddhism) regard the Vedas as authoritative and *brāhman* (the transcendent force that animates the ritual word and action; the Absolute) as an important concept. Thus, by “Brahmanic” I do not refer to the title *brāhmaṇa* (‘relating to *brāhman*’), since this title is used to describe oneself both in Brahmanic texts (often in the sense of ‘priest’ or as member of a hereditary class) and in early Jaina and Buddhist texts (often in the sense of ‘ascetic’). Cf. McGovern 2019.

poetry.⁹³ The *gāthās* in the Song of the Wanderer are uniform, although they neither give the impression of being the work of a single poet, nor of being invented for the legend of Rohita and Śunaḥṣepa.⁹⁴ Rather, they have sprung from the “well-spring” of ancient Indian ascetic poetry. This poetry is decidedly un-scholarly, concerning itself not with complex metaphysical theory, but with the ideal renouncer’s way of life and his attitude to the world.

III. Solar and royal themes

The theme of kingship runs through much of the legend of Rohita and Śunaḥṣepa and its *gāthās*. The first *gāthā* in the Song of the Wanderer promises *śrī* – the ‘splendour’ associated with the prospering householder and with the righteous ruler – to the man who ‘exerts’ himself ($\sqrt{ŚRAM}$), isolated from other men. And in the final stanza we have the word *śreman* ‘pre-eminence, distinction’, which is etymologically and semantically related to *śrī*. There is also the fourth stanza’s use of imagery derived from the dice-game (which is played in the royal consecration, during which the legend of Rohita and Śunaḥṣepa is recited), promising the winning throw (*Kṛta*) to the wanderer.

The theme of kingship is, moreover, seen in that Rohita himself is a prince or *kṣatriya* (member of the warrior aristocracy, ruler) and his guide none other than the *kṣatriya*-deity Indra, disguised as a *brāhmaṇa*. The latter term may in this case signify one who observes celibacy, since it was common among *śramaṇas* to identify the ascetic as a *brāhmaṇa*.⁹⁵ The statement “Indra is the friend of the wanderer” (*indra ic carataḥ sakhā*) in the first *gāthās* recalls Indra as “the friend of *munis*” (*muni* ‘mute, ascetic sage’) in a much earlier text: *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 8.17.14. The name Rohita (‘ruddy’) is itself closely connected to kingship: in the 13th book

⁹³ See Charpentier 1921:43; Rau 1963; Horsch 1966:453–454; Bollée 1980; Nakamura 1983; Norman 1983:58–59, 63f., 78, 82. In the *Dhammapada* “small groups of verses, linked together by refrain, structure, or metre, clearly make small poems whose pre-existence is shown by the fact that they occur in the same form in other traditions as well.” (Norman 1983:59)

⁹⁴ Horsch 1966:292.

⁹⁵ See McGovern 2019.

of the *Śaunakīyasamhitā* the title Rohita appears to designate a ruler ascending to power, as well as the ruddy, rising Sun, personified by the king. Verse 13.4.1 alludes to the movement of an unnamed subject, who goes to the heavenly light as Savitr, perhaps referring to the progression of the Sun, the king, and/or the itinerant ascetic.⁹⁶

A common idea in Vedic, epic, and later literature, is that both the ascetic and the king possess the solar characteristics of heat (*tapas*), fiery lustre (*varcas*, *tejas*), and splendour (*śrī*). The connections between Indra, the Sun, and itinerant ascetics (*brahmacārin*, *keśin*, *muni*, *vrātya*) have been explored by Moreno Dore (2015), in addition to whose observations I wish to point to the image of the solitary wandering Sun in two more passages. First, the episode from the “Book of the Forest” in the *Mahābhārata*, in which the *deva* Dharma, in disguise of a *yakṣa* (“nature spirit”), presents riddles to the illustrious king Yudhiṣṭhira, who has gone into exile, in order to test the king’s wisdom. One of the riddles goes: “What is it that travels alone, who is reborn, what is the remedy against cold, and what is the great sowing(-ground)?” Yudhiṣṭhira answers correctly:

The Sun wanders alone [*eka- vicarati*],
the Moon is reborn,
fire is the remedy against cold,
Earth is the great sowing(-ground).⁹⁷

The dialogue continues to praise the kind of ideals found in ascetic texts.⁹⁸ Note that, as in the legend of Rohita and Śunaḥśepa, we are dealing with a royal personage in forest exile (a recurring motif in ancient Indian literature): Yudhiṣṭhira. The royal context of the *yakṣa*’s riddle is even more obvious when we understand that its origin is to be sought in the Vedic royal horse-sacrifice (*aśvamedha*). In the riddle-contest (*brahmodya*) of this grand

⁹⁶ Dore 2015:49.

⁹⁷ *sūrya eko vicarati candramā jāyate punaḥ | agnir himasya bhaiṣajyam bhūmir āvaṇaṃ mahat ||* (*Mahābhārata* 3.297.47) Throughout this chapter references to the *Mahābhārata* is to the Critical edition (Pune), if not stated otherwise.

⁹⁸ *Mahābhārata* 3.297.53, 55, 57.

ritual the *brahmán*-priest puts his question to the *hotr*-priest, who provides the same answer as Yudhiṣṭhira does in the epic.⁹⁹

The message of the Song of the Wanderer, as we have seen, is that one should seek the fortune, essence, and fruit that come from a roaming lifestyle. Rohita lives as a wanderer *temporarily*, and does this within a sacrificial context, which is typical of the Vedic ritual texts, whereas the later Brahmanic and non-Vedic *gāthās*, discussed below, express the ideal of the *permanent* wandering. Patrick Olivelle suggests that the Song of the Wanderer echoes the earlier (semi-)nomadism of Indo-Aryan tribes, who would alternate between life on the move (*yoga* ‘the yoke, harnessing’, war and raiding) and the peaceful, settled life (*kṣema*).¹⁰⁰ Roaming outside human settlement – as hunter, warrior, raider, or ascetic wanderer – was attributed greater spiritual, social, and economic value than living among men.¹⁰¹ Both Olivelle and Horsch¹⁰² have suggested that the Song of the Wanderer points forward to the ideal of wandering mendicants or ascetics. The terms used by Indra to urge Rohita to exert himself (*śrānta*, *śrama*, *śramaṇa*) derive from the verbal root (√) *ŚRAM* ‘to toil, exert oneself’, which is used for the disciplined life of a Vedic sacrificer during his ritual of initiation, and is found in the terms *śramaṇa* ‘ascetic, mendicant’ and *āśrama* ‘hermitage, way of life’.

Thus, in the mentioned passages, the Sun is characterized by its solitary procession: (*vi*)*carati* from √*CAR*, which is used both in the sense ‘to wander, go’, and ‘to live (in a certain way), follow a discipline’. The same root is used in the Song of the Wanderer

⁹⁹ *sūrya ekākī carati candrāmā jāyate pūnaḥ | agnir dhimāsya bheṣajām bhūmir āvāpanam mahāt ||* (*Vājasaneyisaṃhitā* 23.9–10, 45–46) Similarly, but in prose, in *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 3.9.5: *asau vā ādityā ekākī carati téja evā ‘varundhe* “It is yonder Sun, indeed, that moves alone [*ekākī* √*CAR*]. (Consequently) it is fiery energy he (= the sacrificer) thus obtains.” (translation by Dumont 1948:481) And *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 13.2.6.10: *asau vā ādityā ekākī caraty eṣā brahmavarcaśām brahmavarcaśām evāsmiṃs tād dhataḥ* “It is the Sun that walks alone [*ekākī* √*CAR*]. This is *brāhman*-lustre; the two (priests) bestow *brāhman*-lustre on him (= the sacrificer).” Indra, identified with the Sun, is wide-striding in *Rṅvedasamhitā* 10.29.4 (*Śaunakīyasamhitā* 20.76.4).

¹⁰⁰ Olivelle 2007:176–177.

¹⁰¹ Olivelle 2007:175–176, 185.

¹⁰² Horsch 1966:88.

(*cara*, *carataḥ*, *caran*). A wandering lifestyle is attributed to various ascetic figures already in early and middle Vedic texts, but in contrast to the later ascetic *gāthā*-literature, asceticism in early Vedic texts is not connected to a specific genre of (proverbial) poetry. Instead, earlier Vedic songs about ascetics typically take the form of laudatory texts full of cryptic references and expressions. One such hymn is that of the celibate student or *brahmacārin* in the *Śaunakīyasamhitā*:

The *brahmacārin* wanders [√CAR], stirring both worlds;
 in him the *devas* are one-minded.
 He has firmly established earth and heaven;
 he satisfies his teacher with the heat of asceticism [*tāpas*].¹⁰³

Interestingly, in context of the link between Rohita and Indra in the later legend, the *brahmacārin* is associated, or even identified, with Indra. This is because of the *brahmacārin*'s heroic qualities,¹⁰⁴ but also because Indra roams alone: in *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 3.30.4 we learn that Indra goes about alone (*eka* + √CAR), smashing obstacles. Indra is also designated as *eka* in passages which stress his heroism and strength:¹⁰⁵ *ekavīra* 'lone hero' is an epithet given to him.¹⁰⁶ In *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 1.165.3 the Maruts, who always appear as a group, ask Indra why he travels alone. In the *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa*, in the chapter on the *agnihotra*, the epithet *ekavīra* is attributed to the Sun, which in turn is identified with Indra: "He [= the Sun] is the lone hero [*eka-vīra*], who burns/shines [*tapati*] here; he is Indra..."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *brahmacārīṣṇaṃś carati ródasī ubhé tásmin devāḥ sámmanaso bhavanti | sá dādḥāra pṛthivīm dívaṃ ca sá ācāryaṃ tāpasā pīparti ||* (*Śaunakīyasamhitā* 11.5.1, translation based on Griffith 1896:68; cf. verse 6, Dore 2015:47–48; *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 10.109.5).

¹⁰⁴ The *brahmacārin* is Indra's disciple (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 11.5.4.2; *Pāraskaragrhyasūtra* 2.2.7). The *brahmacārin*, who is Indra, has shattered the demons (*Śaunakīyasamhitā* 11.5.7, 16; cf. *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 4.12.2).

¹⁰⁵ *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 1.176.2; 8.15.3; 8.16.8; 8.90.5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ṛgvedasamhitā* 10.103.1.

¹⁰⁷ *sa eṣa vā eko vīro ya eṣa tapaty eṣa indra...* (*Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.8, cf. Bodewitz's translation 1973:36–37). On Indra as the Sun see *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 1.6.4.18, 2.3.4.12, 3.4.2.15, 4.5.5.7, 4.5.9.4, 4.6.7.11, 8.5.3.2.

Scholars have argued that the Vedic *brahmacārin* ‘he who wanders/lives with *brahman*’ is a forerunner of the later renouncer.¹⁰⁸ Two common terms for ‘renouncer’, *parivrājaka* and *pravrajita*, literally mean ‘he who wanders about’ and ‘he who goes forth (into homelessness)’.¹⁰⁹ Originally, renunciators would wander about constantly, except during the monsoon, as the heavy rains made travelling too difficult. The *ideal* in Brahmanic renunciant traditions was to travel alone, though it is questionable if this was actually common practise (we will return to this below). This ideal is expressed in an *anuṣṭubh-sloka* from the *Manusmṛti*, a version of which also appears in the *Mahābhārata*:

Verily, he should always wander alone [*eka* √*CAR*],
without any companion, in order to achieve success.
Recognizing that success is for the solitary,
he will not forsake (anyone) and he will not be forsaken
(by anyone).¹¹⁰

Another stanza from the *Mahābhārata* comes very close:

Verily, he should wander alone [*eka* √*CAR*] according to
dharma,
for in *dharma* there is no companionship.
If he confirms to this rule absolutely,
what can a companion do?¹¹¹

The same ideal is found in the *Samnyāsopaniṣads*, a collection of later Brahmanic texts on renunciation. The *Nārada-parivrājako-paṇiṣad*,

¹⁰⁸ Oberlies 1997.

¹⁰⁹ Olivelle 1974:1.

¹¹⁰ *eka eva caren nityam siddhyartham asahāyavān | siddhim ekasya saṃpaśyan na jahāti na hīyate* || (*Manusmṛti* 6.42, translation based on Olivelle 2005:150; cf. Shiraishi 1996:103–104, 125–126). Identical to *Mahābhārata* 12.237.4cd–5b except 5a which has *ekas carati yah paśyan* ‘he wanders alone, who is seeing (that success comes to the solitary)’ (cf. 12.237.7, 22). Similarly *Mahābhārata* 12.308.28 when Janaka says: ‘Free from passion, I wander/live alone, standing on the highest path’ (*muktarāgaś carāmy ekah pade paramake sthitah*). According to 12.234.9 one should ‘wander alone in the forest’ (*araṇye vicaraikākī*). See also 1.86.5 below, which is almost identical with the Jaina *Uttarajjhayana* 15.16.

¹¹¹ *eka eva cared dharmam nāsti dharme sahāyatā | kevalam vidhim āsādy sahāyah kim kariṣyati* || (*Mahābhārata* 12.186.31)

for example, proclaims that “alone, indeed, shall a mendicant wander”.¹¹² And according to the *Pañcamāśramavidhi*, a man who decides to become a skyclad ascetic must abandon absolutely everything and be prepared to be regarded as a madman by society:

Let him wander alone [*ekākī sam-√CAR*] on the Earth,
as if he were a fool, a lunatic, or a goblin.¹¹³

One can also mention a quote in the 11th century “Collection of Ascetic Laws” (*Yatidharmasamuccaya*) by Yādava, just to illustrate the consistency of this ideal in Brahmanic ascetic traditions from different periods in time. A verse quoted from Medhātithi, in which the ascetic is compared with the constant and unhindered movement of the Sun, echoes the ideal found in ancient texts:

(The wandering ascetic) is seen in one place in the morning,
in another place at noon, and in yet another at sunset.
Like the Sun, he should remain without a home
and free from attachment.¹¹⁴

The same text, quoting Yama:

Totally unfettered, let him always wander alone [*ekākī vi-√CAR*],
without a companion; for when a man
wanders alone his path becomes smooth,
but it thwarts him when he does not.¹¹⁵

To sum up: the notion of the Sun as a prototypical solitary wanderer, which we find in the Song of the Wanderer,¹¹⁶ goes back

¹¹² *eka eva ... caret ... ekaḥ cared bhikṣuḥ* (*Nārada-parivṛājakopaniṣad* ch. 7, Olivelle 1992:215).

¹¹³ *ekākī samcared bhūmau bālonmattapiśācavat* || (*Pañcamāśramavidhi* verse 37cd, translation by Olivelle 2012:261)

¹¹⁴ *ādīte ‘nyatra madhyāhne anyatrāstamite ravau | dṛṣyate tv aniketah syāt sūryavatsaṅgavarjitaḥ* || (*Yatidharmasamuccaya* 9.2, translation based on Olivelle 1995:150)

¹¹⁵ *ekākī vicaren nityam muktātmā tvasabhāyakaḥ | ekasya hi samaḥ panthā jīyate ‘nyatra jīyate* || (*Yatidharmasamuccaya* 9.19, translation based on Olivelle 1995:151)

¹¹⁶ The singleness of the Sun is implicit in Indra’s *gāthā*; Rohita wanders about alone, and the first stanza speaks about the fault of staying with other men (*pāpo nṛṣadvāro*).

to the earlier Vedic tradition and is continued in the *Mahābhārata*. It makes its appearance in a royal context (the legend of Rohita and Śunaḥṣepa told in the *rājasūya*, the riddle-contest in the *aśva-medha*, and the trial of king Yudhisthira), which is understandable when we know that the Sun is also a prototypical lone hero (*ekavīra*) and ruler. The combination of *eka* + √CAR ‘to wander alone’, which is used for the Sun in the riddle-verse, also applies to the early Vedic Indra and to the Brahmanic renouncer.

IV. The solitary Jaina hero

As we turn to the Jaina material, we find that *gāhā* (the Prakrit equivalent of *gāthā*) is typically used to designate popular verses with religious content, more seldom for the ascetic poetry found in Śvetāmbara canonical texts.¹¹⁷ Although the term *gāhā* (*gāthā*) in general has been superseded by the term *sutta* (Sanskrit *sūtra*), the type of Jaina literature dealt with below is, with regard to both content and style, fully in line with the definition of ascetic *gāthā*-poetry given above.

An important text for our understanding of the early Jaina mendicant ideal is the 15th chapter of the *Uttarajjhayāna*, which Jarl Charpentier refers to as a “Schatzkammer altjainistischer Spruch- und Legendenpoesie”.¹¹⁸ It consists of sixteen stanzas on the perfect mendicant (*bhikkhu*).¹¹⁹ His life is one of simplicity and harshness: he must endure heat and cold, gadflies and mosquitoes;¹²⁰ he must accept any kind of tasty or tasteless food, even from the household of a low-status donor.¹²¹ The forest, through which the mendicant fares, is filled with dangerous beasts and fearful sounds, but he shall pay no attention to any of that.¹²² The 7th and 8th stanzas, listing practises that are forbidden to the Jaina

¹¹⁷ Horsch 1966:218. In *Uttarajjhayāna* 31.13 the first book of the *Sūyagada* is known as “The Sixteen Gāthās”, since they form sixteen chapters of verses (except the last chapter).

¹¹⁸ Charpentier 1910:62.

¹¹⁹ Alsdorf 1963:115f.

¹²⁰ *Uttarajjhayāna* 15.4, cf. 21.18. This is very similar to verse 52 of *Khaggavisāṇasutta* (see below). Cf. *Sūyagada* [1.]2.2.14–16 and *Āyāra* 6.(3.)61, 7.(7.)111, 8.(3.)1f.

¹²¹ *Uttarajjhayāna* 15.12–13.

¹²² *Uttarajjhayāna* 15.14.

mendicant, are illustrative of some of the professions associated with various types of vagabonds, perhaps practised by some (fake) ascetics: healing, divination, and so on.¹²³ Another “profession” which a Jaina mendicant shall not engage in is that of ‘one who praises with verses’,¹²⁴ meaning a laudatory poet or bard, who travels from one patron or town to another (like the Buddhist convert Vaṅḡīsa below). The final verse, praising solitary (Prakrit *ega-*) itinerant mendicancy,¹²⁵ is characteristic of the sentiment of this *sutta*:

He who does not make his living from a craft,
 who is without home and friends, having conquered his senses,
 free from everything, with minimal defilement, eating little,
 having forsaken (his) home, wandering alone [*ega-√CAR*] – he
 is a mendicant.¹²⁶

That verse is almost identical with *Mahābhārata* 1.86.5.¹²⁷

The following two *anuṣṭubh*-verses, from other chapters in the *Uttarajjhayana*, are in the same vein:

Verily, he should wander about alone [*ega eva √CAR*],
 living on allowed food, overcoming all troubles,
 in a village, town, market-place, or capital.¹²⁸

¹²³ *Uttarajjhayana* 15.7, 20.45; Zysk 1998:27f.; McGovern 2019:153–155. Similar passages are found in *Suttanipāta* 927 and *Manusmṛti* 6.50.

¹²⁴ *Uttarajjhayana* 15.9. Cf. *Mahābhārata* 12.234.9 which says that the solitary ascetic should not praise anyone (*niḥstutir*).

¹²⁵ See also *Uttarajjhayana* 1.16.5 and *Sūyagaḍa* [1.4.2.1.

¹²⁶ *asiṣpa-jīvī agīhe amitte | ji'indie savvao vippamukke | aṇu-kkasāi labu-appa-bhakkhe | ceccā gīhaṃ egacare sa bhikkhū* || (*Uttarajjhayana* 15.16, text from Alsdorf 1963:119; cf. Tatia & Kumar 1981:90)

¹²⁷ *aśilpajīvī nagrhaś ca nityaṃ jitendriyaḥ sarvato vipramuktaḥ | anokasāri laghur alpācārāś caraṇ deśān ekacaraḥ sa bhikṣuḥ* || “He who lives off no craft, is always homeless, has conquered his senses, is entirely liberated, does not frequent houses, travels lightly on short journeys, and wanders alone [*ekacaraḥ*] through the countries – he is a mendicant [*bhikṣu-*].” (*Mahābhārata* 1.86.5)

¹²⁸ *ega eva care lāḍhe abhibhūya paṛisahe | gāme vā nagare vāvi nigame vā rāyahāṇie* || (*Uttarajjhayana* 2.9, translation based on Jacobi 1895:12). The formula *eka eva √CAR* in this verse is found also in the verses from *Manusmṛti* and *Nāradaparivrajakopaniṣad* quoted above.

He should sit down, alone, in a burial place,
 a deserted home, or at the root of a tree,
 without moving, and he should not drive away anyone.¹²⁹

Besides the theme of solitary wandering, there is use of royal imagery in Jaina ascetic texts, akin to the that of the Vedic tradition. The *bhikkhu* is compared with royal beings like the elephant, the lion, the Sun, Sakka (Indra), and so on.¹³⁰ Like a war-elephant at the frontline crushes the enemy, so does the heroic ascetic in self-control conquer his inner foe.¹³¹ The renouncer's solitary lifestyle (*egacariyā*)¹³² is known as *jinakalpa* 'the practise of the conqueror',¹³³ and has its *exemplum* in the 'conqueror' (Sanskrit *jina*) Mahāvīra Vardhamāna – the title *mahāvīra* means 'great hero' – who was the most recent *tīrthankara* ('ford-maker', one who re-establishes the Jaina path of liberation by crossing the river/ocean of *samsāra*). We read in the *Āyāra* and the *Sūyagada* that when Mahāvīra 'went forth' (*pavvaie*) as a renouncer he lived alone (*ega-√CAR*).¹³⁴ It was only after years of solitary wandering, and after attaining supreme enlightenment in meditation, that Mahāvīra began to surround himself with disciples, though the *Sūyagada* is keen to point out that his *inner* solitude was always kept intact.¹³⁵

A passage in a later text, the *Jinacaritta* or 'Biography of the Heroes', based on older material, describes Mahāvīra as being, among other things, "alone like the rhinoceros" (*khaggivisāṇam va ega-jae* – see the Buddhist *gāthās* below), "effulgent like the Sun" (*sūro iva ditta-tee*), free as the bird in the air, valorous like the male elephant, and his senses drawn in like the turtle's limbs – all of them common similes in ascetic literature. This is first

¹²⁹ *susāṇe sunmagāre vā rukkhamūle va egao | akukkuo nisējjā na ya vittāsaē param* || (*Uttarajjhayaṇa* 2.10, translation based on Jacobi 1895:12). Cf. 29.39.

¹³⁰ *Uttarajjhayaṇa* 11.16f.; cf. *Jinacaritta* 118 below.

¹³¹ *Uttarajjhayaṇa* 2.6–10.

¹³² *Āyāra* 6.(2.)52; cf. *Sūyagada* [1.]2.2.12, 1.9.30, 1.10.23.

¹³³ Tatia & Kumar 1981:59–69, 78–79; Caillat 2003:37.

¹³⁴ *Āyāra* 9.(2.)11, cf. 9.(1.)6, 5.(1.)17.

¹³⁵ According to Jacobi 1895, *Sūyagada* [2.]6.3 relates that the ascetic Makkhali Gōśāla criticized Mahāvīra for this, but was corrected by the Jaina Ārdraka: Mahāvīra is really always single and alone (though surrounded by followers).

stated in prose and then, in some manuscripts, summarized in two *gāhā*-verses.¹³⁶ The extreme brevity of the two *gāhās* make them, unlike most *gāthās*, difficult to understand without prior knowledge of what each object represents (given by the oral tradition that is reflected, we must assume, in the prose¹³⁷):

Vessel, shell, soul, sky, wind, and autumnal water;
lotus-leaf, turtle, bird, rhinoceros, and *bhāruṇḍa*-bird.

Elephant, bull, lion, king of mountains, and unshaken ocean;
Moon, Sun, gold, Earth, and well-kindled fire.¹³⁸

A corresponding enumeration in prose is found in the *Ovavāiyya*, but here it refers to the mendicants at the time of Mahāvīra: they were “solitary like the rhinoceros” (*khaggi-visāṇam va egajāyā*), “effulgent like the Sun” (*sūro iva ditta-teyā*), and so on.¹³⁹ In the *Sūyagaḍa*, likewise, Mahāvīra is likened to the Sun and to fire:

Omniscient, wandering about [$\sqrt{\text{CAR}}$] without a home,
crossing the river (of *saṃsāra*), wise, and of unlimited perception,
the highest one (= Mahāvīra) glows [/becomes heated]
like the Sun,
and he illuminates the darkness like a brilliant fire.¹⁴⁰

The image of the ascetic as glowing or becoming heated through asceticism ($\sqrt{\text{TAP}}$), like the Sun, can be compared with the solar qualities of the Vedic wandering ascetics.

¹³⁶ *imesiṃ payānaṃ donṇi saṃgahaṇa-gāhāo* “Of these words there are two summarizing verses.” (*Jiṇacaritta* 118) See Jacobi 1879:28–29, 63.

¹³⁷ Cf. the enumeration of representative objects given in a *śloka* by sage Bodhya in *Mahābhārata* 12.171.61, which is explained in another six *ślokas* in the Bombay edition (12.178.8–13).

¹³⁸ *kaṃse saṃkhe jīve gagaṇe vāu ya saraya-salile ya | pukkha-patte kumme vihage khagge ya bhārumde || kuṃjara vasabhe sīhe naga-rāyā ceva sāgaram akhobhe | camde sūre kaṇage vasuṃdharā ceva subhuya-huyavahe ||* (*Jiṇacaritta* 118, translation based on Jacobi 1884:261)

¹³⁹ *Ovavāiyya* 27. The order of appearance of the similes differs from the *Jiṇacaritta*, and the mirror is added.

¹⁴⁰ *se bhūipanne aṇieacārī | ohaṃtare dhīre aṇantacakkhū | aṇuttaram tappai sūrie vā | vairoyaṇinde va tamaṃ pagāse ||* (*Sūyagaḍa* [1.]6.6, translation based on Jacobi 1895:288). Cf. *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.8 above. Buddha Śākyamuni too is compared with, and associated with, the Sun in early texts; see Revire 2017.

V. Pali verses on wandering alone like the rhinoceros

Finally, as we come to the early Buddhist literature, it becomes clear that *gāthā*-poetry was important to the *saṅgha* founded by Buddha Śākyamuni. The *Dhammapada* and many verses in the *Suttanipāta*, *Itivuttaka*, *Udāna*, *Theragāthā*,¹⁴¹ and the *Jātaka*-stanzas, are *gāthā*-literature. Among these, the *Suttanipāta*'s *Khaggavisāṇasutta*, *Uragasutta*, and *Munisutta* (possibly identical with the *Munigāthā* referred to in the Aśoka inscription¹⁴²) are of particular interest, since they outline the ideal renouncer. According to Upali Sramon (2011), Pali literature makes a basic distinction between *gāthā* as authoritative verse-composition, and *kāveyya* (Sanskrit *kāvya*) as mere artistic poetry, the making of poems or poetry as business. The latter is a forbidden art for the monk¹⁴³ (similar to the arts forbidden for a Jaina mendicant, as we saw above), whereas the former (*gāthās*) need not have any poetic qualities, as they are only versified for memorisation.¹⁴⁴ In this context one can mention the verses attributed to Vaṅḡīsa, who, prior to becoming a wandering ascetic of Śākyamuni's order, was a wandering artistic poet:

Intoxicated with skill in the poetic art,
formerly we wandered from village to village, from town to town.
Then we saw the Awakened One,
gone to the far shore beyond all (worldly conditioned)
phenomena.¹⁴⁵

The prevalent metre of the Pali canon is the *anuṭṭubha* (Sanskrit *anuṣṭubh*) or *siloka* (*śloka*), “which has a great deal of flexibility, and seems to be equally well adapted to aphorism, question

¹⁴¹ Some verses in the *Theragāthās* and *Therīgāthās* are rather artistic and lyrical – the authors took over imagery and conventions of contemporary *kāvya* and secular poetry – and therefore cannot be considered ascetic *gāthā*-literature (cf. Norman 1983:75–76; Lienhard 1984a:76–77).

¹⁴² Calcutta-Bhairat inscription (*Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* 1925:173); Jayawickrama 1977:31f.

¹⁴³ *Dīghanikāya* 1.125, *et cetera*.

¹⁴⁴ Upali Sramon 2011:21.

¹⁴⁵ *kāveyyamattā vicarimha pubbe gāmā gāmaṃ purā puram | ath' addasāmi sambuddhaṃ sabbadhammāna pāraguṃ* || (*Theragāthā* 1253, translation by Ireland 1997; cf. Upali Sramon 2012:25, 27).

and answer, narrative, and epic.”¹⁴⁶ It has been argued that the anthology *Suttanipāta* is as close to the teachings of Śākyamuni himself as we can get. The following points suggest that the text is “archaic”, according to Nāgapriya (2014) – and, I would add, belongs to ascetic poetry: Relative absence of formulas; (re)definition of terms from the existing socio-religious discourse, such as *brāhmaṇa*;¹⁴⁷ emphasis is on behaviour, rather than metaphysics (virtues and qualities of the renouncer, rather than doctrine); and relative absence of systematized teachings. Some Pali *suttas* use refrain as “organizing principle”, mainly for mnemonic reasons, but are free from repetition of systematized doctrines and enumerations typical of later texts.¹⁴⁸

The ideal of solitary wandering or a solitary lifestyle (*ekacariyā*)¹⁴⁹ is best expressed in the *Khaggavisāṇasutta* or “Rhinoceros-*sutta*” (*Suttanipāta* 1.3 or verses 35–75), also found in Gandhari¹⁵⁰ and Buddhist Hybrid-Sanskrit (the *Khagḍgaviṣāṇagāthā* in the *Mahāvastu*). It has been suggested that the *Khaggavisāṇasutta* was originally an independent, and perhaps not specifically Buddhist, text.¹⁵¹ The refrain encourages the renouncer to “wander alone like the rhinoceros” (*eko care khaggavisāṇakappo*)¹⁵², a simile also taken up by the Jainas, as we saw. This agrees with other animal *exempla*: the lion wandering alone (*sihaṃ ... eka-√CAR*)¹⁵³, or

¹⁴⁶ Ānandajoti 2013:17. As mentioned earlier, the *ślokananuṣṭubh* is closely connected to *gāthā*-literature.

¹⁴⁷ McGovern 2019 argues that this should not be seen as a re-definition, since ascetics in the age of Śākyamuni had as much, or even greater, right to the title *brāhmaṇa* as priest had, for it appears that it was originally not birth but celibacy (*brahmacarya*) which could make a person a *brāhmaṇa*; the neo-Brahmanic concept of *brāhmaṇa* is not earlier than the Buddhist or Jaina concept of *brāhmaṇa*.

¹⁴⁸ Nāgapriya 2004; Nakamura 1987:57f. Cf. Shulman 2012:385f.

¹⁴⁹ *Suttanipāta* 816, 820–821.

¹⁵⁰ Salomon 2000:38f. It diverges from the Pali version from verse 6 onwards.

¹⁵¹ Jayawickrama 1977:31; Salomon 2000:14–19.

¹⁵² *khaggavisāṇakappo* can also be translated ‘following the habit/manner (Sanskrit *kalpa*) of the rhinoceros’ (Caillat 2003:38). It is debated among scholars how one should translate the refrain (see Jayawickrama 1977:22–23; Wright 2001:3; Jones 2014; differently Norman 1996).

¹⁵³ *Suttanipāta* 72, 166, 416.

the solitary (senior male) elephant who has left the herd.¹⁵⁴ The lion and the elephant are connected to royal and heroic imagery, as in this stanza from the *Dhammapada*: if one does not find a worthy companion,

one should wander alone [*eka-* √*CAR*],
like a king who has renounced the conquered realm,
or like an elephant in the elephant-forest.¹⁵⁵

The same goes for the *Khaggavisāṇasutta*: the renouncer should roam alone, fearless like the lion ‘the king of beasts’ (*rājā migānaṃ*), elephant, or rhinoceros:¹⁵⁶

Like an elephant, with a massive back, spotted, noble,
who has left the herd, in order to dwell according to his will in
the forest,
one should wander alone [*eka-* √*CAR*] like the rhinoceros.¹⁵⁷

Friends, family, and women must be forsaken,¹⁵⁸ for it is impossible to attain emancipation while enjoying company.¹⁵⁹ Yet, Richard Salomon argues, the “overall message of the *sutta* is not that one must have no companions at all, but rather that one should choose one’s companions very carefully for their moral and spiritual merits.”¹⁶⁰ Toward the end of the *sutta*, friendship (*metta*) is actually praised, but it is the friendliness toward *all* beings, the virtues of equanimity and non-violence, which comes

¹⁵⁴ *Mahābhārata* 12.105.51. The senior male elephant typically lives apart from the herd of female and young elephants.

¹⁵⁵ ... *rājā va raṭṭhaṃ vijitaṃ pahāya | eko care mātaṅgarañṇe va nāgo* || (*Dhammapada* 329); similarly 61, 305, 330, 395; *Udāna* 4.5; *Suttanipāta* 46, 53. *Gāthā* 239 in Pali *Jātaka* 525 deals with a king who has renounced (*pabbajito*) and goes away like a solitary elephant (*nāgo va ekako carati*). Cf. Āryaśūra’s *Jātakamālā* 30.1–4 about an elephant who is roaming alone in the forest, (peaceful) like an ascetic (*nāgavane ... ekacaro hastī ... tapasvīva*).

¹⁵⁶ *Khaggavisāṇasutta* 71–72.

¹⁵⁷ *nāgo va yūthāni vivajjayitvā | sañjātakhanda padumī ulāro | yathābhirantaṃ vihare araṇṇe | eko care khaggavisāṇakappo* || (*Khaggavisāṇasutta* 53) ‘Spotted’ (*padumin-*) probably refers to the partial loss of pigmentation on senior elephants. Cf. Shulman 2012:390.

¹⁵⁸ *Khaggavisāṇasutta* 35–38, 41, 43, 49, 60.

¹⁵⁹ *saṃgaṇikāra-*, *Khaggavisāṇasutta* 54.

¹⁶⁰ Salomon 2000:7; *Khaggavisāṇasutta* 45; cf. 47, 57.

from *detachment*, not the friendship that means attachment to another person. If it is not possible to find an exceptionally noble companion one should roam about in solitude, like a king who has renounced his kingdom,¹⁶¹ which reflects a recurrent motif in ancient Indian literature: the king who gives up his throne in order to seek *mokṣa*. Royal imagery may also hide behind verse 42: ‘he who is in the four directions’ (*cātuddisa*) refers to one who advances in all directions of space – the renouncer who is free to roam as he pleases, like the rhinoceros – but it could also reflect the Vedic ideal of the king as a conqueror of the four directions of space (*digvijaya*):

(At home in) all directions [of space], unhindered anywhere,
 being satisfied with one thing or another,
 a bearer of dangers, fearless,
 one should wander alone [*eka-√CAR*] like the rhinoceros.¹⁶²

Gāthā 48 of the *Khaggavisāṇasutta* uses the delicate simile of two bracelets, clashing against each other:¹⁶³ when a girl wears more than one bracelet they clash and make noise as she moves her arm, whereas the single bracelet remains quiet. This signifies that company should be avoided, as it leads to unnecessary talk and disturbances. The *gāthā* belongs to a set of verses known from the Pali *Jātaka* 408, which deals with four royal, pre-Śākyamuni *paccekabuddhas*, who realise the impermanence of everything in the world and renounce it.¹⁶⁴ According to Dhivan Jones, the existence of the *Khaggavisāṇasutta* in Pali, Gandhari, and Buddhist Hybrid-Sanskrit indicates its popularity among *bhikkhus*, but “the attribution from early times of the rhinoceros stanzas to the

¹⁶¹ *Khaggavisāṇasutta* 46, as in *Dhammapada* 329 above.

¹⁶² *cātuddiso appaṭiḅho ca hoti | santussamāno itarītarena | parissayānaṃ sahitā achambhī | eko care khaggavisāṇakappo ||* (*Khaggavisāṇasutta* 42, translation by Salomon 2000:174–175)

¹⁶³ *disvā suvaṇṇassa pabhassarāni | kammāraputtēna suniṭṭhitāni | saṃgahaṭṭamānāni duve bhujasmim | eko care khaggavisāṇakappo ||* “Having seen the two golden (bracelets), brilliant, well-made by the smith’s son, clashing against each other on the arm, one should wander alone like the rhinoceros.” (*Khaggavisāṇasutta* 48)

¹⁶⁴ Norman 1983:82; Salomon 2000:8–9; cf. *Mahāvastu* 1.301. On the debated term and concept of *paccekabuddha* see, for example, Anālayo 2010.

paccekabuddhas [who lived long ago], evident in the *Mahāvastu* as well as in the *Apadāna* and *Cūlaniddesa* [Pali commentary], suggests that the solitary lifestyle recommended by the stanzas seemed to the early Buddhists not to be an ideal to which they could practically aspire.”¹⁶⁵

Finally, one can mention the *Munisutta* (*Suttanipāta* 207–221), which characterises the *muni* as a solitary wanderer and emphasises the necessity of leaving domestic life, echoing the sentiment of the Vedic Song of the Wanderer.¹⁶⁶ There are similar passages in the *Moneyyasutta* (*Suttanipāta* 699–723), the *Arindamajātaka* of the *Mahāvastu*,¹⁶⁷ Āryasūra’s *Jātakamālā*,¹⁶⁸ and the *Theragāthās*. The latter include, for example, a stanza attributed to Sītavaniya praising the solitary forest mendicant,¹⁶⁹ as well as verses attributed to Tissakumāra Ekavihāriya ‘lone-dweller’. The latter describe the eremitical, sylvan life as nothing but pleasant and peaceful¹⁷⁰ – bear in mind the lyrical element in some *Theragāthās* – not harsh and physically painful as in the more realistic *Uttarajjhayana* (15.4) and *Khaggavisāṇasutta* (52).

Many of the verses in the Pali texts mentioned here are not distinctly Buddhist. They present an archaic type of pre-monastic, pre-sectarian ascetic poetry, reminiscent of the Song of the Wanderer.

¹⁶⁵ Jones 2014:176.

¹⁶⁶ *Suttanipāta* 207–208, 213; cf. 821, *Udāna* 3.9; *Mahābhārata* 12.237.22 (*munim ekacaram*), 12.316.23–24 (*ekacaryārataḥ ... eko ramate munih*); Shulman 2012:392f.

¹⁶⁷ When asked by king Arindama about the ascetic life, the *paccekabuddha* Sronaka replied: “O king, what is a kingdom to a man who fares all alone [*ekasya carato*]? This is the first blessing of the poor, homeless monk [*adhanasya anāgārasya bhikṣuṇo*].” (*Mahāvastu* 3.452, translation by Jones 1943) The story is based on the Pali *Sonakajātaka* (number 529).

¹⁶⁸ *Jātakamālā* 21.11–12: “In cremation-grounds, deserted areas, mountains, or forests teeming with fierce wild animals, abandoning their houses, ascetics dwell wherever they are at sunset. Intent on meditation and constantly wandering alone [*ekacarās*], they withdraw from the sight of women...” (translation based on Meiland 2009)

¹⁶⁹ *Theragāthā* 6; cf. 95 and 245.

¹⁷⁰ *Theragāthā* 537–540 and 543–544.

VI. How much of this reflects the historical reality?

Now, the reader may wonder how much of all this high talk of living in solitude and walking constantly reflects historical reality? This is not easy to determine. We know that there were no monasteries in India when the Buddhist and Jaina ascetic orders were formed, and the texts describe how Śākyamuni, Mahāvīra, and their disciples visited and taught in various parks and similar localities.¹⁷¹ When we acknowledge the similarities between the Pali/Prakrit *gāthās/gāhās* and the Song of the Wanderer, it seems probable that by the mid 1st millennium BCE the ideal of the solitary wandering ascetic was already firmly established. From this time, especially towards the end of the 1st millennium BCE, various ascetic groups (Buddhist, Jaina, Brahmanic) shared this ideal.

Both Śākyamuni and Mahāvīra organized their disciples in orders – perhaps because, as Stanley Tambiah writes, the personal quest of the renouncer was thought to be best undertaken in a community of like-minded.¹⁷² In a monastic environment it becomes necessary to find a space where one can be alone – if not physically then at least mentally and spiritually. *Viveka* ‘seclusion’ is highly esteemed in early Buddhist texts.¹⁷³ Śākyamuni differentiated between physical/outer and spiritual/inner solitude, the latter being more important, whereas the former could be realized temporarily.¹⁷⁴ “Canonical texts describe monks who had not reached the stage of Arahant, as well as great disciples and the Buddha himself, living alone at times, or with one, two or a few companions”.¹⁷⁵

The solitary wandering mendicant clearly contrasts with the *bhikkhu* who stays permanently at a monastery. The contrast is

¹⁷¹ Shiraishi 1996:150–158; Pieruccini 2018.

¹⁷² Tambiah 1981.

¹⁷³ Anālayo 2009. Cf. *Dhammapada* 205, *Suttanipāta* 257.

¹⁷⁴ Wijayaratna 1990:111–117. Physical seclusion forms the basis for mental seclusion (*citta-viveka*), but the highest is seclusion from defilements, which is reached in final liberation (Anālayo 2009; cf. Hudson 1976).

¹⁷⁵ Wijayaratna 1990:111; cf. *Mahāvagga* 1.12 (Śākyamuni in solitary secluded meditation, *rahogata- paṭisallīna-*); Dutt 1924:110f.; Shiraishi 1996:158–159, 162, 166, 191–192 (*eka, ekavihārī, vijānavāta, vivitta*). Śākyamuni is said to have regularly gone into seclusion, for as long as up to 3 months (Anālayo 2009).

also stark between ascetic *gāthā*-poetry and Buddhist monastic literature, which presents the monk as “caught in a web of social and ritual obligations”.¹⁷⁶ The domestication of monks is partly related to the influence of Buddhist lay people, who seek the merit that comes from supporting monks; for it is in the laity’s interest that monks are easily accessible in permanently settled communities.¹⁷⁷ Daniel Boucher describes domestication and ascetic reform as a recurring pattern in monastic culture; the solitary or “eremitical” ideal never loses its attractiveness for new generations of ascetics:

Buddhist reclusion has long struggled between two poles: the untamed renunciant on the outermost fringes of human civilization, an ascetic who earned his reputation from years of austerity; and the domesticated monk, sedentary and respectable, perhaps scholarly, but more often a ritual specialist attuned to the needs of the laity. These two poles, of course, are essentially coterminous with Weber’s charismatic and bureaucratic modes of leadership. ... [I]t was the very success of wilderness-dwelling monks in acquiring patronage that eventually compromised this ascetic thrust. This dialectic – reform, domestication, and renewed reform – is a recurring pattern in monastic culture everywhere.¹⁷⁸

It seems highly likely that the mendicant ideal, expressed in the *gāthās* I have presented, reflects the real-life conditions of many ascetics around the mid 1st millennium BCE: they were wandering about alone or in small groups, from place to place, except during the rainy season. The earliest Buddhist order has been described as “a dispersed body of wandering hermits”.¹⁷⁹ We should bear in mind that the ascetic poetry, although expressing high ideals,¹⁸⁰ discards poetic refinery and imagination; the *gāthās*

¹⁷⁶ Lopez 2007:33.

¹⁷⁷ Bailey & Mabbett 2003:10.

¹⁷⁸ Boucher 2011:218–219. See Carrithers 1983 (on Singhalese monks); Prebish 1995 (on the sylvan renunciate ideal); Bailey & Mabbett 2003:87, 178–179 (on Thai monks).

¹⁷⁹ Dutt 1924:183; similarly Nakamura 1987:59; Bronkhorst 1993:99–100; Shiraishi 1996:160; Bailey & Mabbett 2003:165–168.

¹⁸⁰ Shulman sees the *Khaggavisāṇasutta* not as “an historical statement, but an idealized picture” of what “the author(s) felt the life of a recluse could be like.” (2012:391)

are not intended to be mere words, but to function as guidance and self-instruction for one seeking the highest goal. Moreover, realistic botanical and faunal references in the verses, as well as references to vagabond-professions, suggest direct experience of life on road and trail. It is not difficult to imagine the easily memorized verses of the Song of the Wanderer, or the *Khaggavisānasutta*, being recited by ascetics while on the move.

As time went by, the ideal of solitary wandering became increasingly distanced from the real-life of Buddhist monks, as monasteries were built, and was viewed with nostalgia or projected onto a pre-Śākyamuni age of *paccekabuddhas*. Yet, from time to time, there appeared reformers who reacted against the domestication of the ascetic order and sought a more eremitical or mobile way of life. To some extent, the Brahmanic and Jaina renouncer-traditions were more successful than the Buddhist one in keeping alive itinerancy.¹⁸¹ Even today, Indian *sādhus* spend much of their life on the road; they tend to spend their first period as *sādhus* travelling, then settle down at some pilgrimage-site and form congregations, rather than live as solitary wanderers.¹⁸² Within Jainism, a more settled lifestyle developed around temple-complexes, while sylvan mendicants (*vanavāsīs*) continued to be wanderers. Today, although Mahāvīra’s solitary lifestyle is seen as ideal, *bhikkhus* usually live in groups (*gaṇas*). Except during the rainy season, when they stay at shelters, Jaina mendicants walk tirelessly from one locality to another.¹⁸³

VII. Final words

One can conclude that there are profound similarities between late Vedic, neo-Brahmanic, early Jaina, and early Buddhist *gāthā*-poetry on the benefits of wandering alone (*eka* + \sqrt{CAR}). Not only would Indra’s “Song of the Wanderer” fit fairly well among the *gāthās* of the *Suttanipāta* or the *Uttarajjhayaṇa*, but

¹⁸¹ Olivelle states that in the medieval period the ideal of ceaseless wandering was maintained, even when most ascetics resided in monasteries (1995:18; 2007:177–178).

¹⁸² Hausner 2007:95–107.

¹⁸³ Caillat 1989:101.

the *role* of Indra, too, brings to mind the Buddhist and Jaina Indra (Śakra, Sakka, sometimes in the disguise of a *brāhmaṇa*), as tester, friend, even worshipper, of ascetics. Since Rohita is a *kṣatriya* on the threshold of adulthood, it is only fitting that the prototypical *kṣatriya* Indra establishes a relationship with him, but in addition to that we should recognize the common traits of warrior and ascetic – for, as we have seen, already in the early Vedic period Indra is associated with the lone hero and the ascetic. The common traits here are heroic conquest (exertion on the battlefield and in self-overcoming) and solar attributes.

The Sun functions as prototype of both the solitary wanderer/ascetic and the hero/ruler. The spatial movement of the Sun signifies conquest and tireless exertion.¹⁸⁴ The attributes of king and hero are projected on the renouncer as having unlimited spatial freedom and as spiritual conqueror (*jina*, *vīra*). The concept of *digvijaya* or ‘conquest of the quarters of space’ derives from the Vedic royal ritual, in which a tour in the corners of the land is undertaken by the victorious *kṣatriya*. In traditional hagiographies of Ādi-Śaṅkarācārya, this term is applied to his metaphysical conquest of India’s four corners, as renouncer and scholar, which demonstrates the “complementarity of royal and ascetic paradigms in traditional India.”¹⁸⁵

The physical solitude of the ideal renouncer, and his detachment from society – though dependent on it for his bodily sustenance – mirrors his ultimate goal: *nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, also known as *kaivalya*, which translates as ‘absolute isolation’.¹⁸⁶ This goal can only be attained individually, not collectively.¹⁸⁷ Paradoxical though it may seem, the homeless, wandering renouncer, engaged in nearly constant movement in the spatial world, is precisely the person who is supposed to have attained a state of

¹⁸⁴ Olivelle 2007:186. There is a *śloka* attributed to Bhartṛhari which compares a solitary hero, who conquers all land touched by his feet, with the Sun, whose rays reach the entire Earth (*Nītiśataka* 108 in Kāle & Gurjar; Miscellaneous 15 in Gopalachariar).

¹⁸⁵ Bader 2000:xii, 139, 169; cf. Burghart 1983:376–378. On similar Jaina views see Dundas 1991. The celibate is attributed freedom of movement in all worlds in *Chāndogyopaniṣad* 8.4.3, 8.5.4.

¹⁸⁶ Compare Latin *absolutus* ‘absolute, complete, freed, independent’.

¹⁸⁷ *Sūyagaḍa* (1.)2.3.16–17, (1.)10.12, (1.)13.18; Schneider 1960.

true rest. His course is “trackless”.¹⁸⁸ The opposite of the sagely renouncer is the ignorant man who feels at home in this world; he too ‘wanders about’ (\sqrt{BHRAM}), but in circles¹⁸⁹ – “bound, revolving like a wheel (in movement)”¹⁹⁰, in “the circular path of birth and death”¹⁹¹ – unable, the texts assert, to make the trans-saṃsāric leap.

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¹⁸⁸ The ascetic’s course (*gati-*, *pada-*) is trackless, invisible (*na dṛśyeta*), like that of birds in the air and fish in the sea (*Mahābhārata* 12.154.28, 12.174.19, 12.231.24). Olivelle notes that the term *gati* can refer to the final goal, liberation, but also to “the way an ascetic is expected to go about in the world. He leaves no trail. He travels unnoticed and without a destination.” (2012:98)

¹⁸⁹ *bhogī bhamaī saṃsāre | abhogī vip̄pamuccai ||* “The voluptuary/enjoyer wanders about in *saṃsāra*; the non-enjoyer is liberated.” (*Uttarajjhayaṇa* 25.41).

¹⁹⁰ *baddho bhramati cakravat (Mahābhārata* 12.287.19; similarly 12.316.57: *paribhramati saṃsāraṃ cakravat*), referring to one who is ignorant of *mokṣadharmā*. *Vairāgyaśataka* of Bhartṛhari, verse 70 (Gopalachariar): You roam (*bhramasi*), from the lowest region to the highest, but is still ignorant of *brāhmaṇ* which leads to *nirvṛtti* (‘cessation, rest, abstaining from worldly acts’). In verse 39 the ordinary man is said to wander around (*paribhramati*) in *saṃsāra*. The use of \sqrt{BHRAM} in these verses can mean ‘to wander about’, but also ‘to circulate’, and ‘to move unsteadily, err, confuse’ (cf. Āryaśūra’s *Jātakamālā* 6.34–38).

¹⁹¹ *jāi-maraṇassa vaḍumagaṃ (Āyāra* 5.[6.]122), which the *muṇi* transcends.

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