J Indian Philos (2017) 45:575–585
DOI 10.1007/s10781-015-9288-1

The *Mahābhārata* and the Revival of Brahmanism

Johannes Bronkhorst[1]

Published online: 1 October 2015

Abstract There are good reasons to think that Brahmanism initially belonged to a geographically limited area, with its heartland in the middle and western parts of the Gangetic plain. It was in this region that Brahmanism was at that time the culture of a largely hereditary class of priests, the brahmins, who derived their livelihood and special position in society from their close association with the local rulers. This situation changed. The most plausible hypothesis as to the reasons of this change sees a link with the political unification of northern India, begun by the Nandas and continued by the Mauryas. Both the Nandas and the Mauryas had their home base in the region called Magadha and had no particular interest in brahmins and their sacrificial tradition. As a result Brahmanism as an institution was under threat; it either had to face disappearance, or reinvent itself. It did the latter. Brahmanism underwent a transformation that enabled it to survive and ultimately flourish in changed circumstances. This paper will argue that the *Mahābhārata* can be looked upon as an element in this Brahminical project. Far from being a mere collection of stories and general good advice, it was an instrument in the hands of a group of people who were determined to change the world in ways that suited them, and who to a considerable extent succeeded in doing so during the centuries that lay ahead.

Keywords Brahmanism · *āśramas* · *Mahābhārata* · *agrahāras*

Recent years have witnessed the rise of a need to rethink the history of Brahmanism. Various factors indicate that it makes sense to think that this tradition underwent a major transformation during the final centuries preceding the Common Era. It seems no longer possible to look upon Brahminical culture and religion as the more or less

✉ Johannes Bronkhorst
johannes.bronkhorst@unil.ch

[1] Université de Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

universal background of most other cultural and religious developments in the Indian subcontinent. Quite the contrary, Brahmanism presents itself as initially belonging to a geographically limited area, with its heartland in the middle and western parts of the Gangetic plain. It was in this region that Brahmanism was at that time the culture of a largely hereditary class of priests, the brahmins, who derived their livelihood and special position in society from their close association with the local rulers. This situation changed. The most plausible hypothesis as to the reasons of this change sees a link with the political unification of northern India, begun by the Nandas and continued by the Mauryas. Both the Nandas and the Mauryas had their home base in the region called Magadha, outside the area where Brahmanism held sway. The Nandas and the Mauryas had no particular interest in brahmins and their sacrificial tradition. As a result Brahmanism as an institution was under threat; it either had to face disappearance, or reinvent itself. It did the latter. Brahmanism underwent a transformation that enabled it to survive and ultimately flourish in changed circumstances.

Brahmanism had been a priestly religion with heavy emphasis on elaborate sacrifices. The transformed Brahmanism that in due time succeeded in spreading all over the Indian subcontinent and into Southeast Asia was primarily (though not exclusively) a socio-political ideology. Brahmanism had clear ideas about the correct hierarchical order of society (with the brahmins at the top), and about the correct manner of running a state. Brahmanism did not abandon its elaborate sacrificial heritage, to be sure, but now it came to include less elaborate (and sometimes totally unconnected) forms of religious practice. In this way it could adjust to a variety of religious cults, with one non-negotiable condition: brahmins were the ones most suited to establish and maintain links with "higher" realms; they were the ones to advise rulers on social and political matters; and they were the ones to occupy the highest place in the social hierarchy.

The outcome of this Brahminical transformation was quite extraordinary. A thousand years after the establishment of the Maurya empire (presumably a catastrophe for the brahmins), Brahminical socio-political ideology had come to predominate in an immense geographical area, reaching from Vietnam and Indonesia at one end to western India at the other. This dominating presence found expression in various ways, including the use of Sanskrit (the sacred language of Brahmanism) in political inscriptions, in courtly literature, and even in an important part of the literature of Buddhism and Jainism. The American Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock (1996 and 2006) has coined the term "Sanskrit cosmopolis" to designate this phenomenon.

In order to understand the incredible success of the Brahminical vision of society and politics, it is crucial to recall that it was not the outcome of political conquest or colonization. In general, Brahmanism spread by other means than the force of arms—initially in the Indian subcontinent, then also into Southeast Asia. The spread of Brahmanism was also not a mere question of religious conversion. As noted above, Brahmanism should not exclusively or even primarily be thought of as a religion, but rather as a socio-political ideology with a variable religious dimension. Rulers who adopted it did not necessarily convert from one religion to another, and Brahmanism had no missionaries in the religious sense of the term.

The *Mahābhārata* is a text that had its role to play in this process that we might call "the transformation and spread of Brahmanism." In order to see what this role was, it is useful to characterize briefly what the transformation of Brahmanism consisted of during the Mauryan Empire and the centuries that followed it. It took primarily two forms:

1. Brahmanism created or codified a number of rules for brahmins that assured their separate identity.
2. Brahmanism acquired, refined or codified a number of skills that brahmins could offer to outsiders, both rulers and others.

These two points can be further specified as follows:

1. The rules formulated by brahmins primarily for their own use are multiple. They concentrate, by and large, on a life-style that is pure in various respects: the ideal life of a Brahmin is marked by numerous ritual events that range from daily (small) sacrifices to the list of so-called sacraments (*saṃskāra*). Importance is also given to the Brahmin's purity of descent (i.e., he has only brahmins as ancestors, both on the paternal and the maternal side), and on the distance he keeps from those persons and things that are considered polluting.
2. The skills that brahmins could offer to outsiders, i.e. to non-brahmins, cover virtually all "supernatural" realms (predicting the future on the basis of bodily, astral or other signs, sacrifices and more restricted ritual acts intended to attain certain goals, magically potent formulas, curses, etc. etc.). In addition to this, Brahmanism developed a unique "Science of Statecraft", which for centuries embodied the most sophisticated set of guidelines available regarding the internal organization and the external tactics of polities.

The rules and skills indicated above found expression in the Brahminical literature of that period. The most important surviving relevant Brahminical literature falls into three categories: (a) late-Vedic and Vedic auxiliary literature; (b) the Sanskrit epics, followed soon after by the *Purāṇa*s; (c) political treatises. The distinction between these three categories is not absolute, for they sometimes overlap: there are sections dealing with political issues in Vedic auxiliary literature and in the Sanskrit epics; "correct behavior" (*dharma*, see below), too, is prominently treated in the epics. By and large it can yet be stated that category (a), late Vedic and Vedic auxiliary literature, is for "internal consumption", by brahmins for brahmins, whereas category (b), the Sanskrit epics, though composed by brahmins, also or even primarily addresses outsiders. Category (c), the political treatises, is mixed: though composed by brahmins for brahmins, the brahmins addressed were (ideally) counselors to rulers who were to benefit from the contents of those treatises.

The *Mahābhārata*, being one of the two Sanskrit epics, reveals itself in this way as an element in a Brahminical project that came to be extraordinarily successful. Far from being a mere collection of stories and general good advice, it was an instrument in the hands of a group of people who were determined to change the world in a way that suited them, and who succeeded to a considerable extent in doing so during the centuries that lay ahead.

If we look at the *Mahābhārata* in the way here suggested, questions arise, such as: Does the *Mahābhārata* contain features that inform us about the process of transformation of which it was a part? If so, which features do this? Does this text reveal to us which problems in particular Brahmanism had to face during this crucial period?

The authors and redactors of the *Mahābhārata* inevitably came up against the culture of the country that had united northern India into a single empire and had thus signaled the end of the Brahminical way of life as it used to be. This country was Magadha. It is from Magadha that the Nandas and the Mauryas ruled their empire, and it was inevitably the culture of Magadha that gained in this way enormously in importance. The region of Magadha was originally quite small but shared a common culture with the regions that surrounded it, which I collectively refer to as "Greater Magadha."

The culture of Greater Magadha differed in a number of important respects from Vedic culture. But since the sources at our disposal leave so much to be desired, our information about the culture of Greater Magadha is far from complete. Nonetheless, we are acquainted with a number of its features, and we must necessarily concentrate on these.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two cultures concerned the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution. Vedic culture did not have it: the culture of Greater Magadha did. Except for some late passages that are hard to date with precision, Vedic literature is unaware of this belief. Associated with the belief in rebirth and karmic retribution was the ideal of gaining liberation from the cycle of rebirths. This ideal was the *nec plus ultra* of spiritual life and exceeded all other possible ideals; it is therefore not surprising that brahmins claimed it for themselves in their dealings with representatives of the culture of Greater Magadha. We do not expect to find these notions in the texts "by brahmins for brahmins", such as the ritual manuals (*śrauta-* and *gṛhya-sūtra*) and in the early treatises on correct behavior (*dharma-sūtra*), and indeed, they receive very little attention in these texts. We expect, rather, to find them in texts that address outsiders as well as insiders, i.e. in texts like the *Mahābhārata*. We are not disappointed. Parts of the *Mahābhārata* show a critical awareness of these notions, and of the different ways taught by the religious movements from Greater Magadha to bring liberation about. I have studied some of these passages elsewhere, and will not say more about this issue at present.

So, rather than saying more about the way in which the notion of rebirth and karmic retribution and the ideal of liberation find expression in the *Mahābhārata*, I propose to concentrate, in the remainder of this lecture, on another important aspect of this situation. I turn to a feature that indicates, as I understand it, that the new kinds of brahmins had entered into competition with the ascetic movements of Greater Magadha materially as well as ideologically (the brahmins were to lose the ideological battle in the long run). The movements from Greater Magadha—among which Buddhism and Jainism are but the ones best known—were supported by society. In their simplest forms, their members begged for their food. Support from rich and powerful sympathizers subsequently allowed these movements to receive ever more substantial gifts. In the case of Buddhism the development was particularly dramatic: from being a collection of simple mendicants, in the course of

time the Buddhist community came into the possession of caves—fixed places in which to pass the rainy season—and moved on to the ownership of ever bigger and richer monasteries. Obviously, the spiritual message of these ascetic movements tapped resources to which Brahmanism in its new shape wanted to gain access, too.

This situation explains the shape (or at least one of the shapes) taken by Brahmanism in its reinvented form. Far from being mere ritual specialists catering to the needs of those possessed of political power, the new Brahmanism came to depict some of its most eminent members as ascetics who dedicated themselves to self-restraint and elementary ritual occupations in places isolated from ordinary human society. These eminent brahmins lived in so-called *āśrama*s, presented as peaceful and profoundly sacred places where even animals gave up their mutual animosity and lived without fear.

The idyllic nature of *āśrama*s is quite striking to most readers of Sanskrit literature. They may not all realize that the very notion of the *āśrama* is a non-Vedic invention. Vedic literature, for all its length, has no *āśrama*s and does not even know the word. On the other hand, the notion is omnipresent in texts like the *Mahābhārata*, where it may indeed appear for the very first time. Given our aim to look for evidence of the way in which Brahmanism transformed itself during and after the Mauryan Empire, it is only natural to look upon this notion as part of the new way in which Brahmanism now presented itself to outsiders. The *Mahābhārata* was an ideal vehicle to make this new notion known. It is full of stories in which eminent brahmins residing in *āśrama*s play a crucial role. In what way could this new notion serve the interests of the new Brahmanism?

I have already suggested an answer to this question. I have suggested that the Brahminical *āśrama*s correspond in a certain way to the caves and monasteries that other religious movements acquired from their supporters. Kings and other lay supporters of the ascetic movements from Greater Magadha provided ascetics with caves or other places to stay, and supported the religious activities (such as, e.g., *stūpa* worship in the case of Buddhism) that were carried out there. This custom existed already at the time of Emperor Aśoka, the first ruler to leave us inscriptions. One of his inscriptions records the gift of a cave to be put at the disposition of Ājīvika ascetics. Numerous other inscription of similar intent were to follow in subsequent centuries.

The brahmins, too, wanted to profit from this largesse, but they did not live in caves or monasteries. Instead, they presented themselves as living in *āśrama*s, where their religious activities consisted in the recitation of Vedic texts and in keeping the sacred fire going along with the ritual oblations to be made into this fire. Implicitly, this self-representation of the brahmins was an invitation to donors to provide them with the facilities that would allow them to create such sacred places.

There was however one major and essential difference between the brahmins and the ascetics from Greater Magadha. The ascetics from Greater Magadha could receive gifts from those they recognized as the rightful owners of property. The brahmins, on the other hand, often presented themselves as being the rightful owners of this earth and all it contains. Claims by others to this effect, including kings, were therefore to be considered as ultimately ill-founded. The following passage from the *Mahābhārata* states this clearly:

> The brahmin is declared to be foremost of all in this world on the basis of Law. Those who know Law know that the brahmins were created first of all. All that is later belongs to him because he is first-born and noble. So the brahmin is to be respected and honored, and he consumes the best of what comes. All that is best or most highly preferred is to be offered to the Brahmin, according to Law.[1]

And a Dharmasūtra, the *Gautama Dharmasūtra* (11.1), puts it in the briefest possible manner: "The king rules over all except brahmins."[2]

In view of this claim, the Brahminical position was ambiguous to say the least. Brahmins were entitled to property, and others should offer it to them, but unlike the ascetics from Greater Magadha, brahmins were not beggars. Brahmins did not beg and did not need to beg—they simply received what was theirs in the first place.[3] It now becomes clear why *āśrama*s are never depicted as resulting from a gift. In the stories they are simply there, leaving us with the impression that they were the result of a saintly Brahmin who had one day settled down in an isolated place in the jungle.

We cannot exclude that this is what *sometimes* happened. Some *āśrama*s may have begun "as a simple dwelling of a *sādhu* who had ceased traveling and settled, frequently after many years of pilgrimage to holy places throughout the Indian subcontinent", as a recent author puts it.[4] However, it is important to recall that the texts that inform us about *āśrama*s belong, virtually without exception, to the literature composed by brahmins for outsiders (if perhaps not exclusively so). This literature was composed with a purpose, and it would be a mistake to read it as we read a newspaper, as providing information about how brahmins really lived rather than as presenting an image of how they wanted others to think they lived, or would live if given a chance.

Interestingly, there are a few Buddhist texts that mention *āśrama*s and put them in an altogether different light; I found passages in Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* and in Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* that speak of non-brahmins (prosperous citizens in one case, a prince in the other) who created, or constructed, *āśrama*s for others (presumably brahmins) to live in.[5] These Buddhist authors apparently did not feel the need to maintain the pretense that *āśrama*s came about on their own, and stated the obvious: That the inhabitants of *āśrama*s were, in the majority of cases, provided with their dwelling and the accompanying privileges by powerful or rich donors.

We know, as a matter of fact, that gifts to brahmins of land, or of the usufruct of villages, became a common feature in India. These gifts, when referred to as gifts,

[1] *MBh* 12.74.29cd-31: *agryo hi brāhmaṇaḥ proktaḥ sarvasyaiveha dharmataḥ // pūrvaṃ hi brāhmaṇāḥ sṛṣṭā iti dharmavido viduḥ / jyeṣṭhenābhijanenāsya prāptaṃ sarvaṃ yad uttaram // tasmān mānyaś ca pūjyaś ca brāhmaṇaḥ prasṛtāgrabhuk / sarvaṃ śreṣṭhaṃ variṣṭhaṃ ca nivedyaṃ tasya dharmataḥ //* Translaton of Fitzgerald (2004).

[2] *Gautama Dharma Sūtra* (*GautDhS*) 11.1: *rājā sarvasyeṣṭe brāhmaṇavarjam.*

[3] Nor do they receive salaries for services rendered. The honorarium (*dakṣiṇā*) for the performance of a sacrifice is an integral part of the sacrifice, not a salary. See Malamoud (1976, passim).

[4] Clark (2006, p. 29).

[5] *Buddhacarita* 2.12; *Jātakamālā* chap. 31: 228, ll. 11–12.

primarily in inscriptions, are not called *āśrama*s (with the few exceptions in Buddhist literature already mentioned), but *agrahāra*s, *brahmadeya*s or *brahmadāna*s. The most common term, *agrahāra*, is frequent in inscriptions that record such gifts, but may occur for the first time in the *Mahābhārata*. In other words, the institutions of Brahminical *āśrama*s and *agrahāra*s may have arisen more or less simultaneously. My suggestion, as you may suspect, is that they represent two sides of the same coin. Rulers would give *agrahāra*s to brahmins and proudly proclaim this in their inscriptions, brahmins would not acknowledge these gifts as gifts and would rather speak of the *āśrama*s in which they lived their exemplary lives.

It would be possible, and extremely interesting, to trace the new custom of giving land to brahmins to its origins and see what conclusions can be drawn from the information thus collected. I will not do so at this occasion.[6] I will rather say a few words about the new image that brahmins presented of themselves by means of the *āśrama*s in which they supposedly, or ideally, passed their lives. So far we have considered that the notion of the Brahminical *āśrama* was conceived so as to allow brahmins to compete with the ascetic movements from Greater Magadha in obtaining support from sympathizers. It is tempting to interpret this in purely economic terms: the brahmins wanted to acquire as many riches as they could get, preferably in the form of land and the usufruct of villages. Seen in this way, the brahmins simply wanted to enrich themselves on the backs of those foolish enough to give them what they wanted.

This way of looking at things may not be completely wrong, but it is not completely right either; a close look at the ideal Brahmin in his ideal *āśrama* will show why. The ideal inhabitants of an *āśrama* are depicted as poor, or rather, they are depicted as leading extremely frugal lives. There is no place for luxury or indulgence in literary *āśrama*s, whose inhabitants are, on the contrary, proud of their ascetic practices, and therefore of all the things they can do without. This abstinence, moreover, is a matter of choice, at least in literature. This is clear from the fact that the same ascetic Brahmin can, if circumstances require it, create by a simple act of his will all the luxuries and pleasures of the senses that one can possibly imagine. The *Rāmāyaṇa* tells us that this was done for the soldiers of Bharata, Rāma's brother, when they were invited to spend the night in the *āśrama* of Bharadvāja. Bharadvāja himself, however, had no need for all that; he preferred his ascetic life-style.

Thus brahmins used the literary device of the *āśrama* to gain certain advantages. But not all of these advantages were of the economically measurable kind, though I certainly do not claim that brahmins were not interested in economic benefits; nor that the exalted notion of the *āśrama* may not have helped them to obtain them. But I do wish to emphasize that economic benefit was but one, and not necessarily the most important one, of the aims that this literary device was meant to serve. Advantages can be of many kinds, and political power and material riches were not among the ones that the brahmins wanted to be thought of as pursuing. With hindsight, this was a wise decision, if not perhaps for individual brahmins, then certainly for brahmins as a group, and for Brahmanism as an institution. The

[6] See however Appendix for some preliminary observations.

fictitious characters of the *Mahābhārata* showed what special privileges brahmins claimed to be entitled to—primarily respect and reverential treatment—and many real brahmins in subsequent centuries received those privileges. Economic advantages and political influence may in some cases have accompanied those privileges, and these were certainly not spurned by the majority of brahmins. But few of them would publicly proclaim that these constituted an aim in itself, and many would be happy without them.

Let us once more return to the typical inhabitant of the *āśrama* as represented in literature. We saw that the *āśrama* is presented as an institution that is independent of its social surroundings. It is most notably never presented as a gift, or as something founded for its inhabitant(s) by a donor. Its typical inhabitant, too, is independent of his social surroundings. He dedicates his time to ascetic pursuits, but unlike his confreres from Greater Magadha, he does not beg. Indeed, he lives on what the forest provides him, primarily fruits and roots.[7] Like the *āśrama* in which he may live, this ascetic is independent of society, and is ideally not supported by people living in society.

I do not exclude the possibility that in the long history of India there may have been people who have tried to live ascetic lives of this kind. But I am inclined to look upon this kind of asceticism as primarily, and originally, a literary (or religious) fiction, one prompted by the same considerations that gave rise to the notion of the *āśrama*. I do not know whether and to what extent it is at all possible to survive in an Indian forest, especially if hunting (and sometimes cooking) are not part of one's lifestyle, but I have serious doubts about it.[8] It is, on the other hand, clear why the Brahminical tradition had a place, perhaps even a need, for this notion of the completely independent Brahmin who had chosen to cut himself off from all ordinary contacts with human society.[9] The same reflections that had given rise to the notion of the *āśrama*, gave rise to the notion of the Brahminical ascetic. Both

[7] So e.g. *MBh* 3.58.21cd: *āśramāś ca maharṣīṇām amī puṣpaphalānvitāḥ*; 3.86.14bc: *…saṃpannaphalamūlavān / āśramo 'gastyaśiṣyasya…*; 3.86.15cd: *agastyāśramaś … bahumūlaphalodakaḥ*. Similarly *Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra* (*BaudhDhS*) 2.11.15 = *GautDhS* 3.26–28: *vaikhānaso vane mūlaphalāśī ... agrāmyabhojī*; *Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra* (*ĀpDhS*) 2.22.2: *tato mūlaiḥ phalaiḥ parṇais tṛṇair iti vartayaṃś caret*; *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra* (*VasDhS*) 9.4: *akṛṣṭaṃ mūlaphalaṃ saṃcinvīta*; Manu 6.13: *sthalajaudakaśākāni puṣpamūlaphalāni ca / medhyavṛkṣodbhavāny adyāt snehāṃś ca phalasaṃbhavān*. Also *Arthaśāstra* 1.3.11: *vānaprasthasya* [*svadharmājīvaḥ*, from 1.3.9] ... *vanyaś cāhāraḥ* "[The special duties] of the forest-anchorite are: … living on forest produce (only)" [Kangle]. A detailed description of the way in which the forest-dweller survives without receiving anything originating in the village economy is found at *MBh* 12.236.1-14, which has a close parallel at Manu 6.1-31 (which, in its turn, has a puzzling reference to the village in verse 28).

[8] See Wrangham (2009, Chap. 1), for an argument seeking to show that survival in the wild without cooking is scarcely if at all possible for humans. (*BaudhDhS* 3.3 [Olivelle 2000, pp. 306–311] distinguishes between hermits [*vānaprastha*s] who cook [*pacamānaka*] and those who do not cook [*apacamānaka*].) For details about the food habits of ascetics in the *MBh*, see Shee (1986, 266 ff.). The BBC television series "Wild Food" by Mears (2007) reminds us of the massive amount of time hunter-gatherers require to find and prepare their food; this hardly corresponds to the image of the peaceful life of the Brahmanical ascetic in his *āśrama* who, moreover, is not supposed to hunt. Note however *BaudhDhS* 2.11.15 = *GautDhS* 3.31 *baiṣkam apy upayuñjīta*, which Olivelle (2000, pp. 129, 281) translates: "He may also avail himself of the flesh of animals killed by predators."

[9] Theoretically this way of life is open to others, too. For example, Yudhiṣṭhira considers adopting it after his victory over the Kauravas. Unfortunately the chapter in which he gives vent to these ideas (*MBh* 12.9)

notions emphasize that, at bottom, brahmins do not owe anything to anyone. Both notions appear to have misled generations of scholars into believing that they correspond to a historical reality.

This presentation would not be complete without mentioning that Brahmanism did not limit itself to its own forms of asceticism, which were incorporated in the independent and self-sufficient Brahmin living in an *āśrama*. No, it also adopted an alternative ascetic life-style, one which it borrowed in most essentials from the competitors from Greater Magadha. This other kind of Brahminical ascetic does beg for his food, and is therefore dependent on the village economy. This other kind of Brahminical ascetic is also typically involved in pursuits that have their origin in Greater Magadha, most notably the attainment of liberation from rebirths and karmic retribution. Both kinds of asceticism are already noticeable in the *Mahābhārata*, and indeed, they are sometimes juxtaposed in a most remarkable manner. Chapter 1.110 tells the story of King Pāṇḍu, who must abstain from sexuality as a result of a curse. His first reaction is to become a shaven ascetic, bent on liberation (*mokṣa*) and begging for his food. His two wives are unhappy with this decision and point out that there is another ascetic life-style in which Pāṇḍu does not have to abandon his wives, and which leads to *heaven* rather than to *liberation*; this is the life-style of the forest-dweller. Here, then, these two ascetic life-styles are presented as alternatives. Many other *Mahābhārata* passages show the prevailing ambiguity about the ultimate goal. Chapter 12.9, for example, juxtaposes the two ways of life when depicting Yudhiṣṭhira's desire to become an ascetic.[10] Later texts, roughly from the *Mānava Dharmaśāstra* onward,[11] order these two altogether different ascetic life-styles into a sequence: one is a forest-dweller in the third phase of one's life, and a wandering mendicant in the fourth. Passages like these remind us that the "pure" Brahminical ideal of being independent and self-sufficient masters of the world was, in historical reality, often affected by ideas and ideals that came from other groups with whom brahmins had to share the land. They also remind us that the *Mahābhārata* stands at the beginning of a long process in which Brahmanism had to confront, or accommodate, a large number of cultural alternatives.

Appendix

*Agrahāra*s were gifts to brahmins. I have suggested that the *āśrama*s that frequently occur in Brahminical literature are the reflection in that literature of those gifts. They are not recognized as gifts, and I have proposed that this is due to the fact that the Brahminical self-representation left little place for gratitude on their part: everything worthwhile was theirs by right. This does not mean that Brahminical

Footnote 9 continued
mixes this way of life, that of the independent forest dweller, with another one, that of the begging mendicant. (See further Pāṇḍu's reflections at *MBh* 1.110, discussed below.)

[10] See, e.g., the transition from verse 12.9.11 to verse 12 (which is a close parallel of 1.110.7).

[11] Note that already a portion of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (*MBh* 12.234–236) clearly recognizes the four successive phases of life.

texts do not encourage other members of society to give gifts to brahmins; the opposite is true. Everyone is, from their point of view, obliged to give gifts to brahmins. These gifts include the "gift of land" (*bhūmidāna*) that appears in Brahminical literature from a certain date onward. A section of the *Anuśāsana-parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh* 13.61) deals with this, and the notion appears, unsurprisingly, also elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It also appears in a number of Dharma and Gṛhya Sūtras, and this too is not surprising. The idea is criticized in some late-Vedic texts, most notably the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (13.7.1.15) and the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (39.8 [8.21]). A passage of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.2) appears to look upon it more favorably. It is tempting to conclude from this concern with the gift of land that these late-Vedic texts, or at least the passages concerned, date from after the fall of the Mauryan Empire, but this is not certain. This conclusion would however agree with the inscriptional evidence, which appears to record such gifts to brahmins from the middle of the first century BCE onward. This dating, as usual, is uncertain, and the situation becomes even less certain in view of the fact that the Pali Buddhist canon speaks on a number of occasions of *agrahāra*s, there called *brahmadeyya* or *rājadāya*.[12] However, unlike the expression *brāhmaṇa-gāma* "Brahmin village" (not a synonym), there is no compelling reason to believe that the passages containing these expressions are particularly old.[13]

References

Āpastamba Dharma Sūtra. See Olivelle (2000).
Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya. See Kangle.
Baudhāyana Dharma Sūtra. See Olivelle (2000).
Bronkhorst, J. (forthcoming). Āśramas, agrahāras, and monasteries. In *Proceedings of DICSEP 5, fifth Dubrovnik international conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas*, August 2008.
Buddhacarita of Aśvaghoṣa. See Johnston.
Clark, M. (2006). *The Daśanāmī-Saṃnyāsīs. The integration of ascetic lineages into an order*. Leiden: Brill.
Fitzgerald. (2004). See Fitzgerald in the General References.
Gautama Dharma Sūtra. See Olivelle (2000).
Jātakamālā of Āryaśūra. See Vaidya.
Johnston, E. H. (Ed., & Trans.). (2004 [1935–1936]). *Aśvaghoa's Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*. Part 1, *Sanskrit Text, Sargas 1–14*; Part 2, *Introduction and Translation*; Part 3, *Translation of Cantos 15–28 from Tibetan and Chinese versions*. Lahore: University of the Panjab (Panjab University Oriental Publications Nos. 31–32). (Printed originally in Calcutta at the Baptist Mission Press; Reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.)
Kangle, R. P. (Ed., & Trans.). (1969–1972). *The Kauṭilīya Arthaśāstra* (2nd ed., 2 Vols.). Bombay: University of Bombay.
Mahābhārata. See Fitzgerald, Smith, Sukthankar, and van Buitenen in the General References.
Malamoud, C. (1976). Terminer le sacrifice. In M. Biardeau & C. Malamoud (Eds.), *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne* (pp. 155–204). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
Manu. See Olivelle (2005) in the General References.

[12] Tsuchida (1991, pp. 56–57) and Wagle (1966, pp. 18–19).

[13] See Bronkhorst (forthcoming), with a reference to von Hinüber (2006).

Mears, R. (2007). *Wild food*. A DVD accompanying the BBC Television series. Etchingham, East Sussex: Woodlore. Published in book form by Ray Mears and Gordon C. Hillman. London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.

Olivelle, P. (Ed., & Trans.). (2000). *Dharmasūtras. The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass.

Pollock, S. (1996). The Sanskrit cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, vernacularization, and the question of ideology. In J. E. M. Houben (Ed.), *Ideology and status of Sanskrit. Contributions to the history of the Sanskrit language* (pp. 197–247). Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Pollock, S. (2006). *The language of the gods in the world of men. Sanskrit, culture, and power in Premodern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shee, M. (1986). *Tapas und Tapasvin in den erzählenden Partien des Mahābhārata*. Reinbek: Dr. Inge Wezler.

Tsuchida, R. (1991). Two categories of brahmins in the early Buddhist period. *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko, 49*, 51–95.

Vaidya, P. L. (Ed.). (1959). *Jātakamālā of Āryaśūra*. Darbhanga: Mithilā Institute.

Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra. See Olivelle (2000).

von Hinüber, O. (2006). Hoary past and hazy memory: On the history of early Buddhist texts. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, 29*(2), 193–210.

Wagle, N. (1966). *Society at the time of the Buddha*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Wrangham, R. (2009). *Catching fire: How cooking made us human*. New York: Basic Books.