

# Redefining *Dharma* in a Time of Transition: *Ānṛśaṃsya* in the *Mahābhārata* as an Alternative End of Human Life

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## Abstract

Classical Indian thought has often stated that human life has four ends: *dharma* (social righteousness), *artha* (material profit), *kāma* (sensual pleasure) and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation). The historical tradition called *itihāsa* claims itself as a comprehensive commentary on these four. The principal *itihāsa* text available to us, the *Mahābhārata*, boasts of containing everything that exists on these. However, the ultimate goal of human life in the *Mahābhārata* is predominantly *dharma*. But, the *dharma* the *Mahābhārata* speaks of is not necessarily what *dharma* came to represent in classical *Brahmanical* orthodoxy: a combination of the institutions of *varṇa* and *āśrama*. Rather, in the narrative sections of the *Mahābhārata*, which possibly originated in the context of the Later Vedic Kuru kingdom of c. 1000–800 BCE, there is often a questioning of the traditional hereditary *varṇadharma*. Through the character of *Yudhiṣṭhira*, the *Mahābhārata* unfolds an alternative understanding of *dharma*, known as *ānṛśaṃsya* (non-cruelty). Scholars have often considered it as an alternative to the heterodox notion of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence). This paper shows the gradual evolution of the ideal to show that its fundamental opposition is not with the heterodox *ahiṃsā*, but with the orthodox *varṇadharma*, particularly *kṣātradharmā*, the martial heroism expected of the *kṣatriya*.

## Keywords

*Ānṛśaṃsya*, *Ahiṃsā*, *Mahābhārata*, *Varṇadharma*, *kṣātradharmā*, *Yudhiṣṭhira*

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Human civilization stands at a crossroads as never before. Technological advances have made life easier than ever; medical science has succeeded in providing us with the highest average life expectancy in history; and information technology is reaching new heights every day to dissolve the distance between places and time zones. However, while all these should have made the world a safer, happier and friendlier place, in reality, we are witnessing a world insecure to the core because of the scary shadow of terrorism, hatred, communal violence and a new wave of populist intolerant ultra-nationalist politics. Rather than relishing the fruits of its successful march for centuries, people live in constant fear of the inevitable doom represented by the nuclear weapons piled up in different corners of the world and the rapid degeneration of the natural environment and ecosystem for pursuing petty political and economic interests. Naturally, it is high time we ask ourselves what the ends of human life are.

If we look to the past, the text that seems invaluable in addressing these questions is the *Mahābhārata*, composed as an *itihāsa* (a genre of early Indian historical tradition) depicting an epoch-ending transition (*yugānta*) marked by a violent catastrophic war. The text seems to have reached its present shape over more than a thousand years, and assumed an encyclopaedic character in due course.<sup>1</sup> However, if there is a running theme the text concerns itself with, it is the question about the ends of human life. In classical Brahmanical thought, there are four major ends of human life, known as the *puruṣārthas*: *dharma* (social righteousness), *artha* (material profit), *kāma* (pleasure of the senses) and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation).<sup>2</sup> There are several discourses in early Indian literature attempting to ascertain their relative merits. Interestingly, the traditional definition of the historical tradition named *itihāsa*, as collected by Taranath Tarkavachaspati, places importance on the tales of old times, containing lessons on these four aspects of human life:

*dharmārthakāmamokṣāṇām upadeśasamanvitam/  
purāṇṛttakathāyuktam itihāsaṃ pracakṣate*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There are opinions against this idea, but these are hardly supported by the available evidence. For instance, Alf Hiltebeitel's argument that the *Mahābhārata* was compiled in a short span of time by a 'symposium'/'committee' seems to be more a result of the author's imagination than of convincing evidence. See Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The idea first evolved as the concept of *trivarga* or the three aspects of human life: *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. By the middle of the first millennium CE, the addition of *mokṣa* to the list transformed the concept into *caturvarga*. From the Early Medieval period onwards, the *caturvarga* are frequently represented in literature as *puruṣārthas* or the ends of human life. For a recent thorough discussion, see Patrick Olivelle, 'The Good Life in a Dis-enchanted World', in the proceedings of 'The Ends of Human Life in Ancient Indian and Chinese Traditions', A workshop organized by the Parekh Institute of Indian Thought, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi and the Berggruen Institute, Los Angeles (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Taranatha Tarkavachaspati, *Vācaspatyam*, vol. I (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Surbharati, 1990), 924.

As we shall see below, the *Mahābhārata* claims to contain everything that exists on the Earth about these four ends of human life. However, what is the *Mahābhārata*'s position on the relative merits of these four ends? Though the text expresses sympathy towards *mokṣa* in certain places (such as the *mokṣadharmaparvan* in the 'Śāntiparvan'), while even *artha* and *kāma* have been espoused occasionally (for instance, the *kāmagītā* in the 'Āśvamedhikaparvan' valorises *kāma* above everything), the supremacy of *dharma* is acknowledged throughout the text. However, it is the *Mahābhārata*'s treatment of *dharma* that makes it a curious text. Being a text composed over a long time, worked on by several different authors, the *Mahābhārata* contains various understandings of *dharma*. Unlike several other major Brahmanical texts, it does not always equate *dharma* with a combination of the fourfold *varṇa* system and the four *āśramas*. Rather, it continuously speaks of the multiplicity of *dharma*. Among the multiple interpretations of *dharma*, some are even contradictory to the ideal of *varṇa*. The historical milieu of the origin of the central narrative of the *Mahābhārata* further complicates this narrative.

Though the composition of the text has usually been dated between 500 BCE and 500 CE, historians such as Romila Thapar and R. S. Sharma, who differentiate between the narrative and didactic sections of the text, note that the older narrative sections represent the context of the period of the Later Vedas (c. 1000–600 BCE).<sup>4</sup> A similar view has been expressed by J. A. B. van Buitenen, on the basis of the seemingly Later Vedic context of the *Mahābhārata* narrative and the Vedic location of some of the characters,<sup>5</sup> that 'It seems more likely than not that the origins of the *Mahābhārata* fall somewhere in the eighth or ninth century'.<sup>6</sup> The *Mahābhārata* tradition, in all probability, originated as an *itihāsa* of the Later Vedic Kuru kingdom which, according to Michael Witzel, was not just the earliest proto-state of the Indian subcontinent but possibly the location where the *varṇa*-based Vedic orthodoxy and orthopraxy were formulated.<sup>7</sup> The *Mahābhārata*'s representation of *dharma* as the principal end of human life, though not necessarily consistent with the hereditary *varṇa* system, is thought-provoking if we keep this context in mind.

<sup>4</sup> R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 135–52; Romila Thapar, 'The Historian and the Epic', in *Cultural Pasts* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 613–29.

<sup>5</sup> The history of the migration of the Bharatas and Purus into the Indian subcontinent and the eventual formation of the Kuru clan, which dominated the early part of the Later Vedic Age, is well documented in the *Rg Veda*, whose tenth book, the latest interpolation in the text, knows the Kuru chief Śāmtanu, while the Kuru chief Parikṣit is known to the *Atharva Veda* as a contemporary ruler (XX.127.7.10). The descendants of Parikṣit were extinct by the time of the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (III.3.1). The *Mahābhārata* basically tells the saga of the Kurus between Śāmtanu and Parikṣit. Janamejaya, the son of Parikṣit and the patron of the first full narration of the *Mahābhārata*, and Vaiśampāyana, the first narrator of the saga, are well-known Later Vedic figures, the latter being even named as the *ācārya* of *Bhārata* or *Mahābhārata* in the *Āśvalāyana Grhya Sūtra* (III.4).

<sup>6</sup> Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. I, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xxiv.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Witzel, 'Early Sanskritization: Origin and Development of the Kuru State', in *The State, Law and Administration in Classical India*, ed. B. Kolver (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1997), 27–52.

The sociopolitical landscape of Later Vedic India was a complex one. On the one hand, the institutionalization of the *varṇa* system was taking place, while, on the other hand, the ritualistic Vedic sacrificial religion was facing the first voice of dissent from the Upaniṣadic *ṛṣis* (seers). The Upaniṣadic tradition allowed itself to be incorporated into the Vedic corpus as its fourth subdivision, but it questioned the infallibility of the Vedas and pointed out the futility of sacrificial ritualism. On the political plain, rudimentary Kuru–Pañcāla kingships were seeking legitimacy from the *Brāhmaṇas* who were demanding hereditary monopoly of spirituality for themselves and hereditary kingship for their patrons. But the *gaṇasamṅhas*, like the Yādava–Vṛṣṇis, were carrying forward a political confederacy based on the older notion of power being shared by the members of the clan. The conflict of the two orders is represented in the *Mahābhārata* conflict of the Vṛṣṇi chief Kṛṣṇa with the Magadha monarch Jarāsaṃdha, but still the *gaṇasamṅha* was strong enough to emerge victorious and its chief important enough to be venerated in the most important monarchical ritual—Yudhiṣṭhira’s *rājasūya*. Thus, it was a two-way struggle between Vedic-Brahmanical order based on heredity and the older order (also supported by a large section of the Upaniṣadic thinkers) based on ability. In this situation, ripe with possibilities, we can locate the text that tells not just the story of a Kuru–Pañcāla political clash where the Pāñcālas were aided by a junior branch of the Kurus but also the story of a clash between hereditary succession claimed by Duryodhana (the eldest son of the king Dhṛtarāṣṭra) and succession by ability claimed by Yudhiṣṭhira (a son of queen Kuntī, wife of king Pāṇḍu, by a deity personifying ‘Dharma’), who had no blood relation with the Kuru clan. Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black rightly describe the main issue of the text as the conflict of primogenitive birthright and behavioural fitness.<sup>8</sup> Primogeniture appears to be a new idea in kingship, not yet completely established.<sup>9</sup> The tribal notion of selecting the ablest as the chief was still present, by virtue of which the great king Bharata chose Bhūmanyu, son of Bharadvāja, as his successor, neglecting all of his own incompetent sons.<sup>10</sup> The system continued

<sup>8</sup> Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, eds., ‘Introduction’, in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

<sup>9</sup> For different readings of the issue of primogeniture in the *Mahābhārata* see J. A. B. van Buitenen’s, ‘Introduction’, in Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. I, xv–xix and R. P. Goldman, ‘Fathers, Sons, and Gurus: Oedipal Conflict in the Sanskrit Epics’, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 6 (1978): 325–92.

<sup>10</sup> Vyāsa, I.89.17–20. All references to Vyāsa’s *Mahābhārata* are from the multivolume Critical Edition prepared under the general editorship of V. S. Sukthankar, published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona. The translations followed are Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. I, trans. van Buitenen (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973) (for the ‘Ādiparvan’); Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. II, trans. van Buitenen (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975) (for the ‘Sabhāparvan’ and the ‘Āraṇyakaparvan’); Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. III, trans. van Buitenen (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) (for the ‘Virāṭaparvan’ and ‘Udyogaparvan’); Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata* (Book Six): *Bhishma*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Alex Cherniak (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2008) (for the ‘Bhīṣmaparvan’); Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata* (Book Nine): *Shalya*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Justin Meiland (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007) (for the ‘Śalyaparvan’); and Vyāsa, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. VII, trans. James Fitzgerald (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004) (for the ‘Strīparvan’ and ‘Śāntiparvan’). For the rest of the text, the translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.

up to the period of Śaṃtanu, in whose favour his elder brother, Devāpi, abdicated the throne.<sup>11</sup> However, Śaṃtanu's passion for the fisherwoman Satyavatī brought a disjuncture. Devavrata (Bhīṣma), who was the fittest to succeed to the throne, made a vow to Satyavatī's father, assuring the unborn children of Satyavatī the throne.<sup>12</sup> Bhīṣma's famous vow unfolded into a crisis, as both the sons of Satyavatī died young.<sup>13</sup> In this situation, Satyavatī asked Vyāsa, her son born out of a pre-marital union, to beget children on the two widows of Vicitrvīrya—Ambikā and Ambālikā. Born of this levirate, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the eldest of the next generation princes, was denied the throne on account of his blindness, and younger Pāṇḍu became the king. However, this choice of the more able over the legitimacy of primogeniture frustrated Dhṛtarāṣṭra, whose son Duryodhana fought hard to establish his legitimate claim to the throne, and remained a staunch advocate of the martial *varṇadharma* of the *kṣatriya* caste throughout the text. Thus, there was a constant conflict between Duryodhana and the five surrogate sons of king Pāṇḍu. The latter group, known as the Pāṇḍavas and headed by the eldest Yudhiṣṭhira, escaped Duryodhana's early attempts to kill them off, and became powerful enough to force a partition of the kingdom, after Draupadī, the princess of the strong kingdom of Pāñcāla, became the common wife of the five brothers. The conflict reached its height when Yudhiṣṭhira not only lost all of his property in a dice game against Duryodhana and his party, but in desperation staked and lost Draupadī, who was molested in the open court. After this, war seemed the only option left, despite Yudhiṣṭhira's reluctance to fight. Gradually, events led to the Bhārata War, in which the senior branch of the Kurus, as well as the Pāñcālas, was nearly wiped out, and Yudhiṣṭhira became the king.

Standing against Duryodhana's militant support for the hereditary *kṣātradharmā*, the violent *varṇa* duty of the *kṣatriya*, Yudhiṣṭhira emerged as the text's most vigorous critic of the *varṇa* orthodoxy. He opined, in reply to a question asked by his ancestor Nahuṣa, that the notions of caste could hardly stand a test, since:

*jātir atra mahāsarpa manuṣyave mahāmate/  
saṃkarāt sarvavarṇānāṃ duṣparīkṣyeti me matiḥ//  
sarve sarvāsvāpatyāni janayanti yadā naraḥ/  
vān maithunam atho janma maraṇaṃ ca samaṃ nṛṇāṃ.*

(I think, great and wise Serpent, birth is hard to ascertain among humankind, because of the confusion of classes when any man begets children on any woman: language, intercourse, birth and death are common lot of all men).<sup>14</sup>

Yudhiṣṭhira asserted that *varṇa* was determined by observance of task and, hence, a *brāhmaṇa* was one in whom cultured conduct was postulated.<sup>15</sup> Yudhiṣṭhira, thus, was a complete contrast to Duryodhana. He was doubtful about *varṇa*, more

<sup>11</sup> Vyāsa, I.89.53, I.90.47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, I.94.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, I.95–6.

<sup>14</sup> Vyāsa, III.177.26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, III.177.30–5.

given to pacifism and renunciation than to his inherent *kṣātradharmā*, always questioning the rationale of warfare, and fundamentally Upaniṣadic rather than Vedic in his virtue. Therefore, we see that after a long discourse about the relative merits of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* among the Pāṇḍavas and Vidura—where Vidura, Nakula and Sahadeva extolled *dharma*, Arjuna spoke in favour of *artha* and Bhīma in defence of *kāma*—Yudhiṣṭhira subordinated all these values to the Upaniṣadic ideal of *mokṣa*.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, Yudhiṣṭhira, the *dharmarāja*, was definitely not a follower of the traditional *varṇa*-based notion of *dharma*. However, despite his Upaniṣadic leanings, he was not a renunciant either. Did he then represent a new notion of *dharma*? Mukund Lath has identified this new notion in a concept called *ānṛśaṃsya* (non-cruelty).<sup>17</sup> He thinks that this was an ideal of the *pravṛttimārga* (path of action) espoused by the *Mahābhārata*, in contrast to the better-known ideal of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), which was more suitable for the *nivṛttimārga* (path of renunciation).<sup>18</sup> Of course, *ahiṃsā* had been a cardinal virtue in non-Brahmanical Śramaṇic religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, which also espoused renunciation. Following Lath, Alf Hiltebeitel has also noted that *ānṛśaṃsya* has been celebrated as the highest *dharma* nine times in the *Mahābhārata* (III.67.15, III.203–41, III.297.55, III.297.71, V.32.11, XII.220.109, XII.316.12, XIII.47.2, XIII.159.6), more than any other ideal, including *ahiṃsā*, which is called the greatest *dharma* four times (I.11.12–4, III.198.69, XIII.116.1, XIII.117.37–41).<sup>19</sup> He also connects the idea as a response to the notion that the Magadha kings (including Aśoka), who patronized the heterodox religions celebrating *ahiṃsā*, had been absolutist despots and murderers of their fathers and brothers.<sup>20</sup>

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay takes a cue from Lath and Hiltebeitel and maintains this contrastive framework between *ahiṃsā* and *ānṛśaṃsya*, considering *ānṛśaṃsya* as a critique of non-violence.<sup>21</sup> Is *ānṛśaṃsya*, then, an alternative to *ahiṃsā*, a response to the Śramaṇic religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, with little connection with the Later Vedic context of the *Mahābhārata* narrative? It would seem so if one were to focus on the long discourse on *ānṛśaṃsya* delivered to a proud *Brāhmaṇa* by Dharmavyādha, a righteous meat-seller of Mithilā, who practised an ‘impure’ profession for livelihood, but lived according to the tenets of *dharma* in his personal life. Here, Dharmavyādha strongly pointed out the impossibility of adhering to complete *ahiṃsā* and extolled *ānṛśaṃsya* as an alternative.<sup>22</sup> Much of Bandyopadhyay’s discussion on *ānṛśaṃsya* is based on this particular episode.

However, the ‘Śāntiparvan’ and ‘Anuśāsanaparvan’ were two of the latest didactic books added to the *Mahābhārata* during its Brahmanization, with a principal

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.161.

<sup>17</sup> Mukund Lath, ‘The Concept of *Anrshamsya* in the *Mahabharata*’, in *Reflections and Variations on the Mahabharata*, ed. T. R. S. Sharma (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009), 82–9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 207.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 205–6.

<sup>21</sup> Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, ‘A Critique of Non-violence’, in *Three Essays on the Mahābhārata: Exercises in Literary Hermeneutics* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2016), 267–307.

<sup>22</sup> Vyāsa, III.197–206.



orientation to sanitize the anti-*varṇa* notions of the *dharmarāja*. Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira, before he could assume kingship, had to be schooled by the old *kṣatriya* patriarch Bhīṣma into a *rājadharmā* that espoused a symbiotic relationship between the *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya* and strict maintenance of the *varṇa* order. The Dharmavyādha episode is placed within the ‘Śāntiparvan’ discourse. If we look beyond this very late addition to the text, we may see that the concept of *ānṛśaṃsya* has a gradual development in the central narrative of the text, and it plays a crucial part in what Hiltebeitel calls ‘the education of the Dharma-king’. In fact, if the central narrative of the *Mahābhārata* has something to do with the establishment of Yudhiṣṭhira as a new kind of hero, the role of *ānṛśaṃsya* is crucial in the process.

Hiltebeitel has also noticed that the term *ānṛśaṃsya* appears for the first time in the *Mahābhārata* not in the context of Yudhiṣṭhira, but as advice to Vyāsa, to whom the authorship of the text is attributed. When Vyāsa agreed to beget children on the widows of Vicitravīrya, Satyawatī asked him to perform the act with *ānṛśaṃsya* and *anukrośa* (crying with another).<sup>23</sup> In fact, both Lath and Hiltebeitel note that *anukrośa* is an ideal crucial for understanding the nature of *ānṛśaṃsya*.<sup>24</sup> *Anukrośa*, translated as ‘commiseriat’ by Hiltebeitel, literally means ‘crying with another’, a kind of consideration or empathy for beings. However, Vyāsa does not seem to have succeeded in performing the task with *ānṛśaṃsya* and *anukrośa*. Vyāsa got angry inconsiderately when Ambikā and Ambālikā were repulsed by his appearance and body odour. Rather than dealing with their revulsion with empathy, Vyāsa ended up holding them responsible for the physical deformities of their sons. The *Mahābhārata* narrative thus starts with the failure of its author to fulfil an ideal set in front of him by his mother. Subsequently, the author celebrates the story of a hero, Yudhiṣṭhira, who did not fail.

In fact, the birth of the Pāṇḍavas themselves has been set in the context of a failure to practise *ānṛśaṃsya*. The curse that had caused Pāṇḍu’s impotence was brought forth by his killing of the sage Kīṃdama and his wife, who were copulating in the disguise of deer.<sup>25</sup> The killing itself was not condemned, for it was normal for a *kṣatriya* king to hunt deer. The act was lacking in *ānṛśaṃsya* because Pāṇḍu did not have the consideration to wait until the deer finished making love.<sup>26</sup> Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest surrogate son of Pāṇḍu, therefore undertook a difficult journey to establish an ideal his father and grandfather had failed to live up to.

We hear Yudhiṣṭhira speak of *ānṛśaṃsya* for the first time in a very unusual context, as one of the qualities of Draupadī before staking her at the dice game.<sup>27</sup> We shall see later that Yudhiṣṭhira’s assumption about Draupadī was not right in this case. *Ānṛśaṃsya* might have been a virtue Yudhiṣṭhira had already started to regard in high esteem and expected in his wife, but it was certainly not something that Draupadī had much respect for. However, that Yudhiṣṭhira’s regard for

<sup>23</sup> Vyāsa, I.99.33.

<sup>24</sup> Lath, ‘The Concept of *Anrshamsya*’, 84–5; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> Vyāsa, I.109.5–31.

<sup>26</sup> See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 109–200.

<sup>27</sup> Vyāsa, II.58.33–7.

*ānṛśaṃsya* had gradually increased would be evident when he would declare it to be the highest *dharma* to Dharma (a deity personifying the ideal) disguised as a heron Yakṣa in the ‘*Āraṇyakaparvan*’.<sup>28</sup> That he was now ready to live his ideal could be seen when, given the option of saving the life of only one of his brothers, he chose to save Nakula (and not Bhīma or Arjuna without whose valour he would never get his kingdom back) out of consideration for his already deceased step-mother Mādrī.<sup>29</sup> Of course, Dharma was pleased with Yudhiṣṭhira’s *ānṛśaṃsya*, and he passed the test convincingly.<sup>30</sup> Gradually, *ānṛśaṃsya* became the cardinal value of Yudhiṣṭhira’s life which he kept on preaching and practising.<sup>31</sup> When Yudhiṣṭhira seemed to have lost his composure temporarily, after the death of his nephew Ghaṭotkaca in the War, the author himself intervened to remind him of his virtues, including *ānṛśaṃsya*.<sup>32</sup> Even after the battle, he continued to rule with *ānṛśaṃsya*, empathetic to the war widows and the mothers who lost their sons, as well as to the poor, blind and helpless.<sup>33</sup> Such was the extent of his *ānṛśaṃsya* that he was considerate and empathetic even to Dhṛtarāṣṭra who, along with his sons, had been the cause of all of his sufferings.<sup>34</sup> In the final journey of his life, the *mahāprasthāna*, Yudhiṣṭhira’s *ānṛśaṃsya* faced its final test, which he had also passed with distinction, by not agreeing to choose heaven if it meant leaving out the dog that had accompanied him throughout his journey.<sup>35</sup> The poet, of course, is emphatic about the view that the journey of Yudhiṣṭhira’s *ānṛśaṃsya* did not end with his mortal life, nor did the multiple tests that such a virtue needed to undergo. Therefore, reaching the heaven in his earthly body, and seeing his brothers and Draupadī suffering in hell, Yudhiṣṭhira decided to forego heavenly pleasure at once, to share the torment of hell with his lifelong companions,<sup>36</sup> for he declared that where his brothers and his dear Draupadī were, that was his heaven.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Yudhiṣṭhira earned another round of praise from Dharma, for not swerving from his heart even after reaching heaven.<sup>38</sup>

*Ānṛśaṃsya*, therefore, is a philosophy of non-cruelty and considerate empathy for all beings, including low-borns or former foes, half-*rākṣasas* or the lowly and the destitute, a dead woman (Mādrī) or even a dog, as Hiltebeitel has noted.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, it is a value to be practiced by the capable, who undergo multiple tests in life and beyond, and has nothing to do with the *varṇa* assigned by birth. Hence, it is stated that *ānṛśaṃsya* can be found among the people of all *varṇas*.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, III.297.55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, III.297.71.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, III.298.10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, V.30.38, V.32.11, V.52.10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.158.53–62.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.42.10–1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, XV.2.3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.3.1–15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, XVII.3.36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII.1.20–2.12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII.3.28–30.

<sup>39</sup> Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 213.

<sup>40</sup> Vyāsa, III.117.8.



Moreover, while most other conceptions of *dharma* were directed at the after-life—either the attainment of heaven after death (the goal of the Brahmanical *kṣātradharmā*) or the liberation from the cycle of birth and death (the goal of the Śramaṇic religions such as Buddhism and Jainism)—*ānṛśaṃsya* seems to be an end in itself. It is an idea suitable even for a completely ‘disenchanted’ universe, for neither divine grace nor a happy afterlife is supposed to be the reward of its performance. Rather, Yudhiṣṭhira would choose *ānṛśaṃsya* over heaven and continue its practice even in his afterlife.

It is worth noting that nowhere in the referred instances is *ānṛśaṃsya* presented as a counterpoint to *ahimsā*. Rather, we see the gradual establishment of Yudhiṣṭhira as a counterpoint to Duryodhana, the strict adherent of his prescribed *varṇadharmā*, the violent *kṣātradharmā* (for following which he won the promised reward of heaven).<sup>41</sup> In fact, Hildebrandt’s list of the various acts considered *nṛśaṃsa* (cruel) in the *Mahābhārata*—including Purocana’s attempt to burn alive the Pāṇḍavas in the lacquer house (I.136.3), Śiśupāla’s verbal attack on Kṛṣṇa, Bhīṣma and the Pāṇḍavas during the *rājasūya* of Yudhiṣṭhira (II.42.6–11), Kaikeyī’s intrigue to send her step-son Rāma into exile (III.261.32), Kīcaka’s attempts to molest the helpless Draupadī (IV.29.5), the Pāṇḍavas’ conspiracy to disarm Droṇa by deceit and killing him unarmed (VII.166.19), and Jayadratha’s role in killing the young Abhimanyu (XIV.77.38)<sup>42</sup>—clearly shows that what *ānṛśaṃsya* opposed was not the *ahimsā* of the Śramaṇic religions, but the cruelty inherent in the violent conflicts in *kṣatriya* clan society. Therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira faced most of the counterarguments not from any non-violent ascetic, but from his own mother and wife, Kuntī and Draupadī, both firm believers in the *kṣātradharmā*.

Kevin McGrath rightly notes that ‘women in epic *Mahābhārata*, more than male heroes, speak what is considered to be social truth: what is right for *kṣatriyas* and what constitutes good behaviour’.<sup>43</sup> It is the action of the women that ‘weaves the tissue of *kula* clan’, and it is the women’s speeches which sustain and refine the values of both kin and *varṇa*.<sup>44</sup> Thus, placed in the context of a clan society, Vyāsa’s heroines are quite vocal and assertive, particularly in the defence of *kṣātradharmā*. Kuntī, who controlled her five sons throughout her life, appears to have been a staunch adherent of *kṣātradharmā*. In the ‘Udyogaparvan’, she tried to instigate the pacifist Yudhiṣṭhira to fight by praising *kṣatriya* virility.<sup>45</sup> Criticising the notion of *ānṛśaṃsya*, she said,

*na hi vaiklavyasaṃsrṣṭa ānṛśaṃsye vyavasthitah/  
prajāpālanasambhūtaṃ kiṃ cit prāpa phalaṃ nṛpaḥ//*

<sup>41</sup> See the celebration of Duryodhana’s heroic death on the battlefield and journey to heaven in Vyāsa, IX.60–4; XVIII.1–3.

<sup>42</sup> Hildebrandt, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, 211.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin McGrath, *Stri: Feminine Power in Epic Mahābhārata* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2011), 154.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>45</sup> Vyāsa, V.130.7.

(A king infected by cowardice, who does not act ruthlessly, does not win the reward that results from the protection of his subjects.)<sup>46</sup>

She would rather see Yudhiṣṭhira deliver his patrimony by any kind of stratagem:

*pitryam aṁśaṁ mahāvāho nimagnaṁ punar uddhara/  
sāmnā dānena bhedena daṇḍenātha nayena ca//*

(Unearth your ancestral share that lies buried, strong-armed son! Do it with persuasion, bribery, subversion, punishment, or policy.)<sup>47</sup>

Kuntī had no respect for Yudhiṣṭhira's considerate policies which, she thought, would only drown his ancestors if he did not fight.<sup>48</sup> To inspire him, she also narrated the story of another aggressive mother, Vidurā, who had urged her lazy son Saṁjaya to fight for and recover his lost patrimony.<sup>49</sup>

However, the most striking female character in the epic was no doubt the principal heroine, the polyandrous Draupadī. Sally J. Sutherland contrasts the outward expression of Draupadī's aggression with the inward aggressive masochism of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>50</sup> Whenever there was a need to protect herself, Draupadī was not reluctant to be aggressive. It was her questions that perturbed the Kuru court during the infamous dice match, and she could rescue not only herself but also her husbands from slavery. She was also continuously critical of Yudhiṣṭhira's passivity. In the 'Āraṇyakaparvan', she lamented to Kṛṣṇa who was the friend, philosopher and guide of the Pāṇḍava camp:

*garhaye pāṇḍavāṁs tv eva yudhi śreṣṭhān mahābalān/  
ye kliṣyamānāṁ prekṣante dharmapatnīm yaśasvinīm//  
dhig balaṁ bhīmasenasya dhik pārthasya dhanuṣmatām/  
yau mām viprakṛtām kṣudrair marṣayetām janārdana//*

(I detest the Pāṇḍavas, those grand strongmen in war, who looked on while their glorious consort in Law was molested! A plague on the strength of Bhīmasena! A plague on the bowmanship of the Pārtha! Both stood by, Janārdana, when churls manhandled me.)<sup>51</sup>

She also complained,

*naiva me patayaḥ santi na putrā madhusūdana/  
na bhrātaro na ca pitā naiva tvaṁ na ca bāndhavāḥ//  
ye mām viprakṛtām kṣudrair upekṣadhvaṁ viśokavat//*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, V.130.20.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, V.130.30.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, V.130.32.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, V.131–4.

<sup>50</sup> Sally J. Sutherland, 'Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-models in the Sanskrit Epics', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109, no. 1 (1989, January–March): 63–79.

<sup>51</sup> Vyāsa, III.13.58–9.

(I have got no husbands, no sons, Madhusūdana, not a brother nor a father, nor you, nor friends, if you mercilessly ignored me when I was plagued by the vulgar.)<sup>52</sup>

When Jayadratha later tried to assault Draupadi, she physically resisted him, and then wanted to avenge her insult by killing him. Infuriated by Yudhiṣṭhira's passivity, she urged Bhīma and Arjuna:

*kartavyaṃ cet priyaṃ mahyaṃ vadhyaḥ sa puruṣādhamah/  
saindhavāpasadaḥ pāpo durmatih kulapāṃsanaḥ//*

(If you want to do me a kindness, kill off that wretched abortion of the Saindhavas, the evil, ill-minded defiler of his race.)<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, when in disguise in the Matsya realm, she was assaulted by Kīcaka, the king's brother-in-law, in front of the passive Yudhiṣṭhira, she became vocal in rage against her husbands and even admonished the king Virāṭa and his court, despite being in the disguise of a mere maidservant:

Where on Earth are the great warriors roaming in disguise, they who were the refuge of those who sought shelter? How can those powerful, boundlessly august men like castrates suffer that their beloved and faithful wife is kicked by a *sūta*'s son? Where has their intransigence gone, where their virility and splendor, if they choose not to defend their wife who is being kicked by a blackguard? What am I to do with Virāṭa here who sees the Law violated, an innocent woman kicked, and allows it? King, you do not act like a king at all in the matter of Kīcaka, for your Law is the Law of Dasyus and does not shine in the assembly! Neither Kīcaka nor the Matsya abide in any way by their own Law. I don't blame you, King Virāṭa, in the assembly of the people, but it is not right that I am struck in your presence, Matsya! Let the courtiers bear witness to the crime of Kīcaka.<sup>54</sup>

She vented out her disgust about Yudhiṣṭhira to Bhīma, her only husband who tried to protect her:

*ahaṃ sairandhriveśeṇa carantī rājaveśmani/  
śaucadāsmi sudeṣṇāyā akṣadhūrtasya kāraṇāt//*

(Because of that gamester I run about in the royal palace in the guise of a chambermaid, cleaning up after Sudeṣṇa.)<sup>55</sup>

Draupadī would not undergo a fire ordeal like Sītā to prove her chastity. Rather, it was the abusers who, according to her, deserved the vengeance of her *kṣatriya* husbands. Thus, she had no remorse in asking Bhīma to crack Kīcaka like a pot upon a stone (*bhindi kumbham ivāśmani*)<sup>56</sup> or tear him out as an elephant tears out a reed.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, she was not in agreement with Yudhiṣṭhira's perception of

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, III.13.112–3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, III.255.45.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.15.20–36.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.19.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.20.32.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.21.38.

*ānṛśaṃsya* and detested such an idea. She would not consider a *kṣatriya* without anger a valid entity (*na nirmānyuḥ kṣatriyo 'sti loke*),<sup>58</sup> and berated weakness.<sup>59</sup> In the series of debates she had on such topics with Yudhiṣṭhira in the forest, she not only praised the path of rightful action (*svakarma kuru mā glāṣītḥ karmaṇā bhava daṃśitaḥ*),<sup>60</sup> which probably meant performing prescribed *varṇa*-duties, but also openly proclaimed violence:

*yo na darśayate tejaḥ kṣatriyaḥ kāla āgate/  
sarovabhūtāni taṃ pārtha sadā paribhavanty uta//  
tat tvayā na kṣamā kāryā śatrun prati kathañcana/  
tejasaiva hi te śakyā nihantuṃ nātra saṃśayaḥ/  
(A kṣatriya who does not show his fierceness when the moment comes all creatures will  
despise forever after. Pārtha! Don't show patience to your enemies under any condi-  
tions, for with authority alone you can cut them down, no doubt of that!)*<sup>61</sup>

In fact, the poet describes the character of Draupadī as one who is perpetually offended, particularly with Yudhiṣṭhira (*abhimānavatī nityaṃ viśeṣeṇa yudhiṣṭhire*),<sup>62</sup> which is testified by Draupadī's comment, '*aśocyam nu kutas tasyā yasyā bhartā yudhiṣṭhiraḥ*' (What pity doesn't a woman deserve who has Yudhiṣṭhira for her husband?).<sup>63</sup> Repeatedly complaining about Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of anger,<sup>64</sup> she forcefully argued why neither extreme vengeance nor extreme forgiveness was desirable, and one had to maintain a balance of both in his dealings.<sup>65</sup> She went to the extent of arguing that gentleness, patience, uprightness and tenderness—the cornerstones of Yudhiṣṭhira's cherished *dharma*—were futile.<sup>66</sup>

However, even these persistent complaints could not swerve Yudhiṣṭhira from the ideal of *ānṛśaṃsya*. Dismissing Draupadī's allegation that righteousness did not produce any result, he emphatically claimed that he performed *dharma* not because of its rewards but because it was the right conduct and his inherent nature.<sup>67</sup> Delivering a long discourse on the problematic nature of anger and why forgiveness was preferable to cruelty,<sup>68</sup> he declared that the birth of creatures was rooted in peace.<sup>69</sup> Arguing that patience and forgiveness were markers of a superior virtue, he pointed out the difference between himself and Duryodhana:

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, III.28.34.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, III.31.42.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, III.33.8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, III.28.35–6. Translation slightly modified.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.14.4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.17.1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, III.28.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, III.29.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, III.31.4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, III.32.4–5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, III.30.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, III.30.30.

Suyodhana is not capable of patience, and therefore can find none: I am capable of it, and therefore patience has found me. This is the way of those who have mastered themselves, this their eternal Law, to be patient and gentle, and thus shall I act.<sup>70</sup>

Yudhiṣṭhira's *ānṛśamsya* therefore seems to be an alternative to the ideal of martial heroism, which celebrated violence and cruelty of a *kṣatriya* clan society, rather than a critique of heterodox non-violence. The opposition to the ideal was located not in the heterodox religions, but in his surroundings, particularly in his cousin Duryodhana, his mother Kuntī, and, most vocally, in his wife Draupadī. Yudhiṣṭhira never accepted that violence could ever be righteous, though he could be persuaded to fight a war for the sake of his rightful claim when all attempts at peace failed. However, the worst sufferer of this battle was Draupadī, the most vocal advocate for the battle. She lost her father in the battle, and the night attack by Aśvatthāman on the Pāṇḍava camp—probably the most *nṛśamsa* of all the incidents in the *Mahābhārata* narrative—took away the lives of her brothers and all her five sons. This was the pivotal moment that showed the vagary of violence, since a war to avenge the humiliation of Draupadī produced the worst consequences for Draupadī herself. Given her natural inclination, she initially wanted a violent revenge, the death of Aśvatthāman. However, eventually she settled for the gemstone on Aśvatthāman's head and placed it on Yudhiṣṭhira's head.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the cycle of cruelty and violence ended when the crown gem of the *nṛśamsa* Aśvatthāman was passed on to the *a-nṛśamsa* Yudhiṣṭhira, and the irony that this transfer was prompted by Draupadī herself probably marked the final establishment of *ānṛśamsya* as a new form of heroism in the text.

The *Mahābhārata* narrative represented a new time, a new ideal, and the end of an era. Not only did it represent the transition from the age of clan society to an age of well-developed polity but also a transition where the attempts to organize polity and society according to birth was not effective, except in theory. G. C. Pande broadly notes the transition depicted in the *Mahābhārata*:

The traditional Varṇa system was becoming unreal in practice, and attempts were being made to define and question the social order even as technology was changing tools and weapons, trade and towns were emerging as a factor in social and cultural consciousness, smaller Janapada states were leading to larger empires, the Vedic religious tradition was being subjected to scepticism and criticism, the doctrines of Karman, Saṃsāra and Nivṛtti posed a challenge to the ritualistic order, new types of spirituality were emerging, and attempts were being made of new philosophical syntheses.<sup>72</sup>

Though this description is too simplistic, the days when kingship would be a monopoly of the *kṣatriya* clan chiefs, bound by a code of valour and depending on the ritual support of the *brāhmaṇas*, were indeed coming to an end. Within roughly

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, III.30.50.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, X.10–6.

<sup>72</sup> G. C. Pande, 'The Socio-cultural Milieu of the Mahabharata: An Age of Change' in *Reflections and Variations on the Mahabharata*, ed., T.R.S. Sharma (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009) 60–1.

five centuries of the date we have surmised for the origin of the *Mahābhārata* narrative, the throne of Magadha, the most illustrious kingdom of India, would not remain beyond the reach of a barber, Mahāpadma Nanda. In fact, post-Nanda India would hardly see *kṣatriya* kingship, at least not until the Early Medieval period when the Rajput clans would emerge with a claim to *kṣatriya* status. New channels of legitimization and patronage would be provided by the heterodox religions that would question the very basis of the caste system. Almost ignored by the Vedic tradition, the *Mahābhārata*, attributed to the low-born Vyāsa,<sup>73</sup> spoke of a new ideology as the ‘fifth Veda’, ‘a Veda for the women and the *śūdras*’, greater than the combined weight of the four Vedas,<sup>74</sup> a text which, rendering the Vedas insignificant, claims to contain everything conceivable about all the four ends of life: *dharma* (social order), *artha* (power and resources), *kāma* (material pleasure) and *mokṣa* (salvation):

*dharme cārthe ca kāme ca mokṣe ca bharatarṣabha/  
yad ihāsti tad anyatra yan nehāsti na tat kvacit.*<sup>75</sup>

Standing on this crossroads of ages, the *Mahābhārata* provides a new *dharma*, not of *varṇa* duties or martial violence but of non-cruelty, empathy and consideration. As the *ṛṣi* of the fifth Veda, Vyāsa proclaims,

*mātāpitṛsahasrāṇi putradāraśatāni ca/  
saṃsāreṣv anubhūtāni yānti yāsyanti cāpare//  
harṣasthānasahasrāṇi bhayasthānaśatāni ca/  
divase divase mūḍham āviśanti na paṇḍitam//  
ūrdhvavāhur viraumy eṣa na ca kaś cic chṛṇoti me/  
dharmād arthaś ca kāmāś ca sa kim arthaṃ na sevyate//  
na jātu kāmān na bhayān na lobhād dharmam tyajej jīvitasyāpi hetoḥ/  
nityo dharmah sukhaduḥkhe tv anitye jīvo nityo hetur asya tv anityaḥ//*

Thousands of mothers and fathers, and hundreds of sons and wives, experiencing world (or *saṃsāra*) have gone. And others will go. There are a thousand situations of joy and a hundred situations of fear. They affect the ignorant daily, but not the wise. With uplifted arms I cry this aloud, but no one hears me. *Artha* and *kāma* are from *dharma*. For what purpose is it not served? For the sake of neither desire nor fear nor greed should one ever abandon *dharma*, even for the sake of living. *Dharma* is eternal, but happiness and suffering are not eternal; the soul is eternal but its cause is not eternal.<sup>76</sup>

This *dharma* that Vyāsa claims as the principal end of human life is rooted in the new ideal of *ānṛśaṃsya*.

<sup>73</sup> Vyāsa’s birth as the result of a premarital union between a *brāhmaṇa* and a *dāsī* would make his social rank dubious. Possibly, he would be categorized as a *dāsīputra brāhmaṇa*, a controversial social category in Vedic literature.

<sup>74</sup> Vyāsa, I.1.208–9.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, I.56.33.

<sup>76</sup> Vyāsa, XVIII.5.47–50.



If we reflect upon the unstable world order we are living in, where the practice of complete non-violence seems desirable but impracticable, we must also consider if militant aggression is necessarily the only alternative. At a time when violent aggressive nationalism, ruthless authoritarianism, majoritarianism and jingoism are becoming dangerously popular all over the world, it is essential to remember the *Mahābhārata* notion of *ānṛśaṃsya* which, despite accepting the occasions of necessary violence in politics and practical life, speaks of the cardinal principle of considerate empathy towards all beings, the ally and the opposition, friend and foe, and fellow creatures and the natural environment. In a world too confused to decide the ends of human life, what we need above all is probably the likes of Yudhiṣṭhira who would remind us in the days of crisis: *ānṛśaṃsyaṃ paro dharmah*.

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