

In Dialogue with Classical Indian Traditions

Encounter, Transformation and Interpretation

Edited by Brian Black and Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad



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“*Mahābhārata* Dialogues on Dharma and Devotion with Kṛṣṇa and Hanūman”

Bruce M. Sullivan

The most well-known, frequently memorized, and arguably most important dialogue in the Hindu religious tradition is to be found in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*Mahābhārata* 6.23-40).¹ In this chapter, I compare this dialogue with another with which it has many parallels and thematic resonances, the dialogue between Hanūmat (Hanūmān) and Bhīma from the *Āraṇyaka Parvan* (*Mahābhārata* 3.146-53).² The critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* shows both passages to be represented throughout the manuscript tradition, and to have relatively few variant readings. Themes shared by these two dialogues include their presentations of Time as determining the quality of human life, Time’s manifestation in the four eons (*yuga-s*), the importance of following one’s *dharma*, and devotional worship (*bhakti*) of the divine.

These two dialogues are parallel not only with regard to their themes but also their structure: each is an encounter of a Pāṇḍava warrior with a divine elder relative who instructs his junior as a *guru* instructs a disciple. That the disciple in both cases is a *kṣatriya* means that the admonition to follow his *dharma* refers specifically to the warrior’s *dharma*. But the passages also repeatedly use the expression *svadharma* (one’s own *dharma*), which will be significant as we shall see; *kṣatriyadharma* and *svadharma* (even for a warrior) are not necessarily synonymous. Kṛṣṇa and Hanūmat both deliver their discourses in dazzling divine forms that overwhelm their Pāṇḍava

disciples, who soon request in each case that the deity resume his prior form. The revelation of divinity is also a secret: Kṛṣṇa displays his divine form only to Arjuna despite the presence of many other warriors on the battlefield, while Hanūmat's revelation occurs privately and he tells Bhīma to keep it a secret. Indeed, the parallels between these two dialogues are sufficiently numerous and close as to suggest to me that the Hanūmat-Bhīma dialogue is likely to have been patterned on the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Time and Yuga

In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Arjuna is stunned by the vision of Kṛṣṇa's Viśvarūpa form, which he associates with the eon-ending cataclysm: Arjuna tells Kṛṣṇa that he is "Seeing your mouths that bristle with fangs and resemble the fire at the end of the yuga..." (*Bhagavad Gītā* 11.25). Kṛṣṇa's immediate response to Arjuna confirms his perception: "I am Time grown old to destroy the world, embarked on the course of world destruction..." (*Bhagavad Gītā* 11.32). This exchange follows shortly after the previous chapter's statements by Kṛṣṇa that also identify him as Time, even before he reveals his Viśvarūpa form. In Kṛṣṇa's recitation of entities with which he is identified, he states "I am Time among those that count..." (*Bhagavad Gītā* 10.30). Kṛṣṇa goes on to say, "I alone am imperishable Time, the Placer who faces all directions. I am Death who seizes all, and the source of what will come to be..." (*Bhagavad Gītā* 10.33-34).

One of the most widely known verses in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is Kṛṣṇa's statement on his repeated births: "I come into being from yuga to yuga, for the rescue of the

good and the destruction of the evil, in order to restore dharma." (*Bhagavad Gītā* 4.8).

The context for this statement to Arjuna is Kṛṣṇa's presentation of his many births, all of which he remembers, and while he is unborn and eternal, he takes birth whenever dharma is threatened. Similarly, Kṛṣṇa states that he is imperishable, beyond time and the rebirth cycle, a process he describes as follows: "...the Day of Brahmā lasts thousands of yuga-s, the Night of Brahmā ends after thousands of yuga-s" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 8.17). But those who practice exclusive devotion to the Supreme Person Kṛṣṇa go to him at death and, on reaching him, their souls are not reborn again. This statement will be considered again with other statements about devotion (*bhakti*).

Kṛṣṇa presents himself in the *Bhagavad Gītā* as Time, the divine force that determines the limit of existence for the world and every human being. He also presents himself as beyond the controlling influence of time, as beyond death and rebirth, of which he is the master. Presiding over creation and destruction, he takes birth on earth to protect dharma and those who follow dharma.

In the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*, the theme of time conceived as four yuga-s is prominent. Once Bhīma realizes that the old monkey before him is his brother Hanūmat, both being sons of Vāyu the Wind God, Bhīma bows to him and asks to see the "incomparable form" (*rūpam apratimaṃ*) in which Hanūmat jumped over the ocean to reach Sītā in captivity, on Rāma's behalf (*Mahābhārata* 3.148.3). Hanūmat says in response that the form from an earlier yuga cannot now be seen again since all beings comply with the yuga in which they live, and that even for him Time is inescapable. Bhīma, however, is curious about the four yuga-s to which his brother has referred, and

asks for a description. The remainder of chapter 148 is dedicated to that description, key features of which are summarized here:

Kṛta Yuga: White Nārāyaṇa is the soul of all beings; the four social classes are well-defined and perform their own tasks (*svakarmaniratāḥ prajāḥ*, *Mahābhārata* 3.148.17). Dharma is complete in four quarters.

Tretā Yuga: Acutya (Kṛṣṇa) becomes red, and dharma is diminished by a quarter. Sacrifice and ascetic practices are engaged in, and people adhere to dharma, following their *svadharma* and performing rites.

Dvāpara Yuga: Viṣṇu becomes yellow, and dharma lives on only half-strength. With the *Veda* separated into four, truthfulness and morality decline.

Kali Yuga: Keśava (Kṛṣṇa) becomes black in this age of darkness, and only a quarter of dharma survives. Ordered social life, dharma, and rituals all fail.

Having stated that beings conform to the yuga in which they live, Hanūmat nevertheless grants his brother the favor of viewing his form from the earlier yuga, and expands to mountainous size, thereby demonstrating that he is not bound by constraints of time. Delighted yet awestruck, Bhīma asks Hanūmat to reduce his overwhelming magnitude (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.1-16). Hanūmat displays knowledge of time as measured out in four yuga-s, each with its own distinctive qualities. He also displays mastery of time and freedom from the restrictions time and the yuga-s impose. As he informed Bhīma, Hanūmat had asked Rāma, “May I live as long as the story of Rāma (*rāmakathā*) lives on in the worlds” (3.147.37), which Rāma granted, thereby

making Hanūmat practically immortal. Most of the rest of Hanūmat's discourse concerns dharma, and will be discussed below.

The four-yuga system, and Time as a divine force determining human limitations, are not unknown elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata*. The four-yuga system is presented in a discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira by Mārkaṇḍeya (*Mahābhārata* 3.187). While it differs somewhat from Hanūmat's description, there are many similarities.³ Another passage (12.70) presents the idea of four yuga-s associated with a decline in the power and efficacy of dharma. Clearly, the yuga idea is important to the *Mahābhārata*, even if expressed with variations, since it is presented to the two eldest Pāṇḍava brothers, in each instance by an immortal spokesman revealing extraordinary knowledge about how the universe functions. As context for understanding the ideas of Time and yuga-s in the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*, I cite three other places in the *Mahābhārata* where these topics are presented.

In the first chapter of the text (1.1.187-190), Dhṛtarāṣṭra laments the outcome, highlighting a series of events at which he had lost hope of victory, and Saṃjaya addresses him as follows:

No one steps beyond the path the Ordainer has ordained. All this is rooted in Time, to be or not to be, to be happy or not to be happy. Time ripens the creatures. Time rots them. And Time again puts out the Time that burns down the creatures. Time unfolds all beings in the world, holy and unholy. Time shrinks them and expands them again. Time walks in all creatures, unaverted, impartial. Whatever beings there were in the

past will be in the future, whatever are busy now, they are all the creatures of Time—know it, and do not lose your sense.⁴

The text here depicts Time as controlling all beings, governing the length and quality of life itself, and as a force that creates and destroys.

After the battle has apparently ended, Śiva tells Aśvatthāman that his enemies “have fallen under the power of Time” and will die that very night (*Mahābhārata* 10.7.63). Aśvatthāman offers himself to and is possessed by Śiva, then attacks the sleeping warriors in their camp at night, describing his plan to “careen around like Time” (*kālavat*) in his death-dealing ferocity (*Mahābhārata* 10.8.8). As he kills his enemies, a female manifestation of death appears before them: the Night of Time (*kālarātriṃ*), a black-skinned woman bearing a noose, whose eyes and mouth are blood-red, as are her garlands and ornaments, a dreadful goddess wearing a single garment covered in blood (*Mahābhārata* 10.8.64-67). Aśvatthāman himself, exiting the site of the massacre, is said to blaze like the fire at the end of the yuga that has reduced all beings to ashes (*Mahābhārata* 10.8.137).

Finally, years after the battle, Kṛṣṇa’s clan has largely survived the fighting but Time is stalking them. In the form of a fierce, monstrous bald-headed man with black and orange skin, Time peers in their windows and haunts them (*Mahābhārata* 16.3.1-2). Soon the warriors are killing each other in a drunken brawl.

These passages show that the *Mahābhārata* includes a recurrent theme of Time as a divine force, sometimes embodied in frightful forms and associated with death. The text describes the author Vyāsa himself as *kālavādin*, one who espouses this

understanding of Time (*Mahābhārata* 6.4.2). As W.J. Johnson has observed, in the *Mahābhārata*, Time is an expression of the “cosmic crisis” of transition from one yuga to the next.⁵ Though Time as a controlling force is prominent in the text, the concept of four yuga-s as a measure of the passage of time and the declining quality of life through time is expressed relatively rarely in the *Mahābhārata*. In my view, references to the fire at the end of the yuga (such as in *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.25 and *Mahābhārata* 10.8.137) reflect a developing concept of the cyclical destruction of the world (*pralaya*), later understood (and articulated clearly in *Purāṇa* texts) as occurring not at the end of each yuga but at the end of the fourth and final eon, Kali Yuga. González-Reimann (2010: 65) has argued that “...when the *Mahābhārata* was composed the yuga theory was at a formative stage and was most likely being shaped within the later strata of the Epic itself.” That the moral decline and departures from dharma are not explained in the *Mahābhārata*’s final books as deriving from the onset of Kali Yuga is claimed by González-Reimann as a key point for interpreting the *Mahābhārata* and for understanding the yuga idea.⁶ I acknowledge the relevance of his observations, but see no reason to assume that composition occurred in strata or layers over centuries, something for which we have no definitive evidence. It is important to notice that the text does contain a clear articulation of the idea that reaching the fourth and final yuga in the series is responsible for violations of dharma. Below I discuss a very direct statement of this point of view from none other than Kṛṣṇa, who justifies Bhīma’s apparent violations of dharma by referring to the decline of dharma through four yuga-s (*Mahābhārata* 9.59). González-Reimann argues that the scarcity of indications that the

outcome of the narrative, with its apparent violations of dharma, is due to the onset of the final yuga because the idea was only becoming clear to the text's composers as it reached the form we find in the critical edition. But it may also be that other meanings are to be found in the text as well, such as the view of Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta that the aesthetic purpose of the *Mahābhārata* is to produce in the audience a disenchantment with worldly values and a turn to spiritual aspirations.⁷ Since the defining qualities of poetry are traditionally understood to include multiplicity of meanings and poetry's power to suggest meanings, I propose that we regard the text as suggesting and allowing such a diversity of interpretations, even including some that are rarely stated explicitly. In other words, I suggest that we see the text as the product of poetic creativity in which *pralaya* and yuga imagery may be deployed in a variety of ways to achieve aesthetic purposes for its audience.

Dharma

The *Mahābhārata* is widely acknowledged to be a text in which exploring the meanings and applications of dharma is central to its purpose and is one of its great accomplishments as a scripture. As James Fitzgerald observed, "The word *dharma* signifies a concept that is one of the most central and important topics of thought and debate in the *Mahābhārata*" yet also the most difficult for him to translate.⁸ The text says of itself that Vyāsa composed it "for the sake of dharma" (*dharmakāmyayā*, *Mahābhārata* 18.5.41), and we see throughout the text the preoccupation with discussing the subtleties of dharma. The very first word of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is

dharma: its setting is on the field of dharma. Indeed, the very first word spoken by Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* is his pronouncement that Draupadī has been won by Arjuna according to dharma (*dharmeṇa labdhā*, *Mahābhārata* 1.181.32), so Kṛṣṇa's introduction to the text's action (and to the text's audience) is as an authority on dharma. The two dialogues here under consideration feature discourses on dharma delivered by deities, each of whom functions as guru to a disciple who is a warrior. The discourses focus on *kṣatriyadharma*, the way of life incumbent on all warriors, and also include admonitions that the warrior should follow his *svadharma*, his own dharma. As the latter is more specific, *svadharma* will be the focus of comparison.

Famously, Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna as follows: "It is better to perform one's own dharma (*svadharma*) poorly than another's dharma well; it is better to die in one's own dharma than to thrive in another's" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 3.35). Similarly at the end of the text Kṛṣṇa states: "It is better to do one's *svadharma* poorly than another's well; action performed in accord with one's own nature incurs no fault" (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.47). Such general statements are applied more specifically to being a warrior in Kṛṣṇa's instruction (*Bhagavad Gītā* 2.31-33):

Recognizing your *svadharma*, do not waver, for there is nothing better for a warrior than a war that accords with dharma. It is an open door to heaven, happily found; and warriors who find a war like that are fortunate, Pārtha. If you will not engage in this war according with dharma, then you give up *svadharma* and honor, and take on sin.

Hanūmat's instructions to Bhīma are similar. He tells the warrior "Do not commit violence, my friend: guard your *svadharma*. Abiding by your *svadharma*, you must learn and discover highest dharma" (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.25). After expounding on aspects of dharma shared by all (sacrifice, study, and donation), and the practices unique to each of the four social classes, Hanūmat addresses Bhīma's particular situation: "Kaunteya, yours is the warrior's dharma: protection by dharma. Practice your *svadharma*, with senses and conduct controlled" (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.37). As James Hegarty's chapter in this volume demonstrates, Vidura's advice on kingship in the *Mahābhārata* similarly emphasizes the importance of equanimity in a ruler, so it echoes the teaching of Hanūmat to Bhīma here. Hanūmat describes the dharma of a king, including the use of spies and diplomacy, and the important duty of administering punishment and reward. He ends his discourse on dharma by stating that "This is the severe and difficult dharma that is imposed upon you, Pārtha; guard it humbly in accord with performing your *svadharma*" (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.50). The surprising feature of Hanūmat's instruction on dharma is the emphasis on a king's dharma since Bhīma is not becoming a king. The closing statement from Hanūmat, however, generalizes the application of punishment and protection as the means by which the *kṣatriya* attains heaven (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.51-52).

As context for understanding how *svadharma* relates to *kṣatriyadharma*, I call attention to two passages; each one concerns a Pāṇḍava warrior who is being encouraged to attend to his *svadharma*. The passage concerning Arjuna occurs on the battlefield as he, Kṛṣṇa, and others are watching a duel between Bhūriśravas and

Sātyaki. Kṛṣṇa observes that his clansman Sātyaki, an ally of Arjuna, is fighting without his chariot, is weary, and is losing the duel against Bhūriśravas. Kṛṣṇa pronounces the encounter unfair and urges Arjuna to protect his follower (*Mahābhārata* 7.117.42-49). Seizing Sātyaki by the hair and kicking him in the chest, Bhūriśravas raises his sword to kill Sātyaki, but Arjuna shoots an arrow that cuts off the arm of Bhūriśravas (*Mahābhārata* 7.117.60-62). Bhūriśravas berates Arjuna for attacking him while he was engaged in combat with Sātyaki, citing the warrior code of conduct on which they had agreed before fighting, and accuses Arjuna of abandoning *kṣatriyadharma*. According to Bhūriśravas, this action is uncharacteristic of Arjuna, who knows *svadharma* better than anyone in this world; the act, he says, surely must have been inspired by Kṛṣṇa (*Mahābhārata* 7.118.1-15). Others observing Arjuna's action condemn it as well. Arjuna responds to this critique by declaring, "Every king here knows my great vow that no ally of mine can be killed within bowshot of me. Remembering this, Bhūriśravas, you ought not to condemn me, for it is improper to condemn someone without knowing his dharma" (*Mahābhārata* 7.118.23-24). Arjuna proclaims that his action was not prohibited by dharma. While Arjuna indicates that all know of his vow, clearly others on the battlefield either did not or had forgotten about it since they denounce his action as inappropriate for a warrior. When Sātyaki beheads the dying Bhūriśravas and is widely censured for doing so, he too cites a vow of his own that he would kill any opponent who treats him abusively and kicks him. In fact, Sātyaki is angry at Arjuna for interfering with the fulfillment of his own vow! He also insists that his action was

proper (*Mahābhārata* 7.118.31-48). This episode thus has two interesting instances of vows overriding the general principles of *kṣatriyadharma*.

Bhīma also takes vows that modify his dharma as a warrior. As Draupadī is being treated abusively, Bhīma vows that if he does not rip open the chest of Duḥśāsana and drink his blood, he will not after death attain the worlds of his ancestors, a vow widely applauded in the hall (*Mahābhārata* 2.61.44-46). When Duryodhana lewdly shows Draupadī his left thigh, Bhīma similarly vows that if he fails to break that thigh in battle he would not attain the worlds of his ancestors (*Mahābhārata* 2.63.14). As a climactic moment at the end of the battle, Bhīma kills Duḥśāsana and drinks his blood, reminding him and astonished onlookers of the many Kaurava misdeeds that caused Bhīma to make such a ferocious vow (*Mahābhārata* 8.61). In killing Duryodhana, not only does Bhīma strike below the belt with his club, he also presses the head of Duryodhana into the earth with his left foot, taunting him (*Mahābhārata* 9.58.1-13). Warriors even on the Pāṇḍava side are scandalized by this, and Yudhiṣṭhira speaks to Bhīma, telling him not to let his dharma falter (*Mahābhārata* 9.58.14-18). A stronger response comes from Kṛṣṇa's brother Balarāma, who curses Bhīma and rushes toward him. Kṛṣṇa intervenes, saying, "You know that a warrior's dharma is to accomplish what he has vowed to do" (*Mahābhārata* 9.59.14). Since Bhīma had vowed in the assembly hall to break Duryodhana's thighs, he has done nothing wrong, according to Kṛṣṇa. He urges his brother to remember Bhīma's vow and to remember that the Kali Yuga is beginning (*Mahābhārata* 9.59.21), but Balarāma remains furious and leaves. Kṛṣṇa queries Yudhiṣṭhira about how he can condone

Bhīma's act of *adharma*, stepping on Duryodhana's head (and does not mention striking below the waist). Yudhiṣṭhira refers to being cheated, insulted, and exiled by Duryodhana, whom he describes as a greedy and unwise man, and that he tolerates Bhīma's action, whether it is dharma or *adharma*. Kṛṣṇa acquiesces, and Yudhiṣṭhira announces his approval of all Bhīma has done on the battlefield (*Mahābhārata* 9.59.28-36). Bhīma salutes Yudhiṣṭhira, announces that their enemies are eliminated, and that Yudhiṣṭhira should rule the earth according to his *svadharma*. Yudhiṣṭhira congratulates Bhīma on his victory, and for fulfilling his promises to his mother and his anger (*Mahābhārata* 9.59.39-44).

These warriors have taken vows that obligate them to perform certain actions. As is clearly stated, a warrior is expected to act to fulfill his vows; to do otherwise would be a violation of that warrior's dharma. His *kṣatriyadharma* has been modified by the addition of the vow he is now obliged to fulfill; completion of that vow is now included in his *svadharma*. Accused by Bhūriśravas of abandoning *kṣatriyadharma*, Arjuna replies by citing his vow and states that "it is improper to condemn someone without knowing his dharma." Sātyaki's widely condemned action was proper, according to him, because it was performed in fulfillment of a vow and therefore not a violation of dharma. The warriors on the battlefield who hear their justifications for their actions, justifications based on having taken vows to perform such actions, have no argument with the view that fulfilling those vows is in accord with dharma. Both of Bhīma's extraordinary actions that contradict the general principles of *kṣatriyadharma* are also presented as in accord with dharma due to his vows. Stepping on

Duryodhana's head is generally condemned, but that was not part of his vow.

Nonetheless, Bhīma's actions are sanctioned by Kṛṣṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira, who agree that vow fulfillment is obligatory. And in Bhīma's case we also have an appeal to the onset of Kali Yuga as justification for less stringent adherence to dharma.

James Fitzgerald (2004: 679) has observed as follows:

Everyone has a *svadharma*, a proper dharma, a pattern of life incumbent upon him or her that will ensure his or her welfare after death. But though ancient Indian *karman* is highly individualistic, one's *svadharma* is not individual or personal: It varies according to one's sex, one's *varṇa*, and one's *āśrama*, etc.

To his list of *svadharma* variables, clearly we need to add vows. In light of the examples here cited, in which the vows taken are specific to an individual person's circumstances (being kicked in the chest; breaking a certain person's thigh with a club in battle), Fitzgerald's comment that "one's *svadharma* is not individual or personal" is difficult to reconcile with these passages.

Bhakti

Each of the texts under consideration here, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*, features a deity encouraging a devotee to worship with devotion (*bhakti*). In the context of discourses on dharma, they present *bhakti* as the way to be religious, though they differ in an interesting manner.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* uses the term *bhakti* thirty-three times, in a variety of compound expressions and case endings. For example, after Kṛṣṇa reveals his divine form to Arjuna, then resumes his human form at Arjuna's request, Kṛṣṇa says,

Arjuna, I can only be known by *bhakti* having no other object; this is how I can be seen, and known truly, and entered into, enemy-burner. Only one who acts for me, who regards me as highest, who is my devotee (*madbhaktaḥ*), who is free of attachment and hatred for any being, comes to me, Pāṇḍava. (*Bhagavad Gītā* 11.54-55)

Kṛṣṇa's final words on *bhakti* in the *Gītā* (18.65-68) sum up how to be religious on the path of devotion.

Fix your mind on me, be devoted to me, sacrifice to me, honour me: this way truly you will come to me. I promise you: you are dear to me. Abandoning all dharma-s, take me alone as your refuge. Do not agonize; I will release you from all evils. This should never be told to one who neglects asceticism, or who is not devoted to me, or who does not want to hear it, or to one who disparages me. One who expounds this supreme secret to my devotees and has shown the highest devotion to me will come to me, without a doubt.

Kṛṣṇa is very clear that *bhakti* is to be directed to him exclusively, though he also indicates that whatever divine form is worshiped with faith, he makes that worship effective (*Bhagavad Gītā* 7.22-24).

Hanūmat's discourse to Bhīma refers only once to *bhakti* (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.24): "Bull of the Bhāratas, the Gods give their grace when worshiped with offerings, sacrifices, *mantra*-s, and with *bhakti*, O Bhārata." This statement is made by Hanūmat in his divine form that Bhīma had asked to see, and in the context of his discourse on dharma. In contrast to the discourse by Kṛṣṇa, the briefer discourse by Hanūmat does not direct the warrior to offer exclusive devotion to him, nor indicate that such devotion would after death bring the devotee to Hanūmat himself. Rather, multiple ways of being religious are stated to induce the Gods (plural) to show grace to the worshiper.

That these discourses in which *bhakti* is advocated are delivered by deities is clear. Twice Kṛṣṇa is addressed as Viṣṇu by Arjuna (*Bhagavad Gītā* 11.24 and 30). Though the term *avatāra* is not used in relation to Kṛṣṇa, the idea is clearly articulated when Kṛṣṇa states that he is eternal, has had many births and remembers them all, and that he takes birth to support dharma in yuga after yuga. To Bhīma, Hanūmat articulates the *avatāra* idea by referring to Rāma as "Viṣṇu in human form" (*viṣṇur mānuṣarūpeṇa*, *Mahābhārata* 3.147.28). In fact, this episode includes the only use of the term *avatāra* in the whole *Mahābhārata*! The word is not used in reference to Hanūmat or Rāma, and in the narrative context of this episode it is not primarily about divinity either; it refers to Bhīma, crashing through the forest on his way to the mountaintop, being regarded by the female consorts of Yakṣas and Gandharvas as if he were "a new incarnation of beauty."⁹ Here we see subtle suggestions of the erotic mood (*śṛṅgāra rasa*) in the fact that Bhīma goes on a quest for flowers in this idyllic

setting due to Draupadī's demand, "if you love me, bring me many more" (*Mahābhārata* 3.146.11). Repeated references in the text to her desire for these flowers, and his intention of pleasing her by gaining possession of them through heroic acts, establish a mood of *śṛṅgāra rasa*.¹⁰ This erotic motif is striking in its narrative context, as Draupadī and her husbands the Pāṇḍavas are in exile, living much as ascetic renouncers would have lived, and with hints of celibacy. Despite repeated references just before this passage to their asceticism (e.g., *tapas* twice in 3.141.22), they are not renounced ascetics, so the erotic mood is not jarring. Subtle suggestion is also apparent in the use of the term *avatāra*, which has other, very significant connotations that have nothing to do with the erotic, but with attitudes of devotion to God. Just as the erotic *rasa* is being suggested by the setting, Draupadī's demand, Bhīma's beauty, etc., the presence here of the term *avatāra* may be taken as suggesting an attitude of *bhakti*, a subtle cue to the audience just before Bhīma meets Hanūmat and hears about devotion. I credit the poet with full awareness of the meanings of the word *avatāra*, and with intentional deployment of the religiously significant term at the beginning of this passage in which the divinity of Hanūmat is about to be revealed; again, meaning is communicated subtly through suggestion. Both passages, then, can be seen as disclosing an underlying Vaiṣṇava ideology concerning *avatāra* manifestations.

Conclusions

To amplify on the three themes presented in this chapter, I will comment on two more parallel features of these discourses. Both Arjuna and Bhīma ask to be shown a

divine form, and receive teachings on Time, dharma, and *bhakti* from God in that form. In the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa complies with Arjuna's request to see his supreme form (*rūpam aiśvaram*, *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.3), and dazzles the warrior with his infinite form on which all the Gods are represented. As chapter 11 of the *Gītā* ends (*Bhagavad Gītā* 11.46), Arjuna asks that Kṛṣṇa again assume the form with which he is familiar, Kṛṣṇa's four-armed form. This request is odd, however, in that the text contains no indication that Arjuna has ever before seen Kṛṣṇa with four arms, nor does the text state that Kṛṣṇa reverts to his conventional two-armed form at any subsequent moment. Neither traditional commentaries nor modern translators seem to take note of this anomaly in the text.¹¹ Perhaps the "familiar form" to which the text here refers is the form of icons of Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu, familiar to the text's audience if not to Arjuna in the narrative. In a parallel with the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Bhīma requests to see the "incomparable form" (*rūpam apratimaṃ* 3.148.3) in which Hanūmat leaped over the ocean in the prior yuga and Hanūmat, after some hesitation, grants his request. Thrilled but stunned by his magnitude, Bhīma asks that Hanūmat resume his smaller form (*Mahābhārata* 3.149.10-15). Hanūmat discourses on dharma and *bhakti* for the rest of the chapter before shrinking his body to smaller compass (*Mahābhārata* 3.150.1-2). To end their encounter, Hanūmat disappears before Bhīma's eyes (*ity uktvāntaradhīyata*, *Mahābhārata* 3.150.15), a further indication of his divinity. That his forest fare consists of the roots and fruit of banana trees that taste like the elixir of immortality (*amṛta*) suggests that Hanūmat's diet (plus Rāma's boon) contribute to lengthening his lifespan, perhaps to eternity.

Not only are the discourses between these Pāṇḍava warriors with divine beings on similar topics, they are also private and secret discussions. Kṛṣṇa gives Arjuna the “divine eye” to see his supreme form, and tells him that it is a form that no one but Arjuna has ever seen (*Bhagavad Gītā* 11.47). The teaching presented in the *Gītā* is described by Kṛṣṇa as the ultimate secret (*rahasyaṃ hy etad uttamam, Bhagavad Gītā* 4.3). At the end of the text (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.63-68), Kṛṣṇa again describes his teaching as the supreme mystery (*paramaṃ guhyaṃ*) and not to be shared with any but devotees. Hanūmat, after completing his discourse, vanished with the request his location not be revealed. Both teachings are transmitted in secret, even if Hanūmat’s mountainside location includes Yakṣas and Gandharvas who might be inclined to eavesdrop, and even if Arjuna’s chariot is surrounded by many thousands of warriors who may wonder what they are discussing.

Scriptures are provided with written commentaries in India, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a text with a particularly rich tradition of commentary authorship. Hundreds of formal commentaries in Sanskrit on the *Bhagavad Gītā* are extant, from Śaṅkara’s in the eighth century to the present.¹² Indeed, V. S. Sukthankar (2016: 119) broadens the concept of “commentary” in the following statement: “The *Gītā* is in fact the heart’s heart of the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Mahābhārata* is a sort of a necessary commentary on the *Gītā*.” While I will not adopt this expansive view of commentary, it is certainly the case that the *Mahābhārata* is a text that refers to and comments on itself with great regularity.

The many parallels between the two dialogues in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, are too numerous to be accidental, and suggest to me that these two dialogues stand in intertextual relationship to one another. Within the *Mahābhārata*, such a relationship between passages is not unknown: the *Anugītā* (*Mahābhārata* 14.16-50) is a passage that refers to and was clearly inspired by the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Despite the evident disparity in meaning between the two passages, the *Anugītā* clearly responds to the prominent place of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the *Mahābhārata*. Indeed, as observed by Arvind Sharma (1986: 2), the *Anugītā* is “the first comment, if not commentary” on the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹³

The *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*, while not a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā* since it does not present a line-by-line explication of the *Gītā*’s meaning, is a kind of comment, but I maintain that the relationship between the two passages is a strong one. So how does the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* help an audience read (or hear) the *Bhagavad Gītā*? By providing a much more extensive account of the functioning of time in four yuga-s, the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* gives meaningful context to the statement by Kṛṣṇa that he comes into being in yuga after yuga to support dharma. By also specifying the form in which Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa appears in each yuga, Hanūmat articulates the Vaiṣṇava idea of the manifestation of the divine as an *avatāra*. And while that term appears in neither passage’s discussion of divine manifestations, Hanūmat provides support and context for Kṛṣṇa’s explicit statements of his divinity, and his Viśvarūpa revelation. How does the *Bhagavad Gītā* help an audience read (or hear) the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*? By having Hanūmat fulfill the same function in

the text, as the revealer of cosmic truths to a Pāṇḍava warrior who is his relative, the text invites us to see Hanūmat as divine. The two passages reinforce each other's messages.

Not only are these two passages in dialogue with one another, but perhaps as well with another passage in the *Mahābhārata*. I refer to the revelation of Kṛṣṇa's divine form in the Kaurava assembly hall (*Mahābhārata* 5.129). Kṛṣṇa goes to the Kauravas as an envoy but his peace overture is rebuffed; Duryodhana plots to capture him but Kṛṣṇa, with a laugh, reveals his (four-armed) form that displays the Gods, the Pāṇḍavas, his weapons, flames, and dazzling rays of light. Most present are astonished at this dreadful, awe-inspiring form (*Mahābhārata* 5.129.12a, *ghoram ātmānaṃ*) and close their eyes, but Droṇa, Bhīṣma, Vidura, Saṃjaya, and the ascetics and sages in the room had been granted divine sight and beheld this vision. After resuming his usual two-armed form,¹⁴ Kṛṣṇa departs and confers with the mother of the Pāṇḍavas, Kuntī, to see what message he could convey from her to her sons (*Mahābhārata* 5.130). Interestingly, she gives her sons (via Kṛṣṇa) a discourse similar to Hanūmat's on the four yuga-s and dharma, including a king's dharma! The striking echo of Hanūmat's discourse raises the question whether this passage stands in intertextual relationship with both the *Hanumat-Bhīma-Samāgama* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹⁵ Certainly the revelation of Kṛṣṇa's divine form in the assembly hall foreshadows in the narrative his similar revelation to Arjuna alone on the battlefield. Kuntī's discourse on dharma, intended for all her sons, reinforces the similar but private discourse to Bhīma by Hanūmat. Moreover, as we consider that Kṛṣṇa's own description of his discourse in the

Bhagavad Gītā as “the royal wisdom, the royal mystery,”¹⁶ we can see that all these passages share themes concerning the role in society of the king, and the kṣatriya class in general.

The *Mahābhārata* presents Hanūmat without introduction or explanation in the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*. From the text, it is evident that the audience is expected to know and recognize Hanūmat, and the fact that Bhīma does not recognize him, instead responding with boasting and bravado, is clearly intended to be humorous. The *Mahābhārata*’s own version of the story of Rāma, Sītā, and Hanūmat is found later in the text (*Mahābhārata* 3.258-75), there called the “Rāmopākhyāna.” The *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* is drawing on an already established tradition about the nature and personality of Hanūmat, so this episode stands in intertextual relationship to another work. It could be Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, though we do not know whether it was composed before the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*. The work with which the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* is in dialogue could be the *Mahābhārata*’s “Rāmopākhyāna” subtale, called “the Rāmāyaṇa subtale” in the *Mahābhārata*’s table of contents.¹⁷ Perhaps both textual versions of Rāma’s story, and the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* itself, all draw on earlier oral traditions about Hanūmat, but these are unknown to us. In any case, the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* provides a perspective on Hanūmat that adds to the audience’s understanding of him, particularly with regard to his divinity and his teachings.

In this chapter, I have sought to show the intertextual relationship between several dialogues in the *Mahābhārata*, particularly the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* and

the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Certainly the *Gītā* has made a greater impact on the *Mahābhārata* as a whole than has the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama*, but I believe that I have demonstrated how the latter has been in part inspired by the former and is responding to it. The parallelism of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* calls for an explanation, and it seems evident that the influence flows from the former to the latter, with the *Hanumad-Bhīma-Samāgama* patterned on the more famous and profoundly significant *Gītā*.

Notes

1. All citations of the *Mahābhārata* are to the Critical Edition: Sukthankar, V. S., *et al.* (1933-59). *Bhagavad Gītā* citations will be to *Bhagavad Gītā* chapters and verses.

Translations are by the author except where noted otherwise. Recent works by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (2014a, 2014b, 2016) on the history of interpretation of these texts, and the shortcomings of approaching the texts as consisting of layers from diverse authors and times, have contributed significantly to the understanding of the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* as a whole.

2. It is conventional to use as his name either Hanūmān or Hanumān, and as noted by John Brockington (2004: 134, note 1), the spelling with long u is more frequent in the *Mahābhārata* (though he does not use that spelling in his title). However, for the sake of consistency with other names cited in the stem form, I will use Hanūmat in this

article (apart from the title for the sake of recognition). This episode's name is somewhat variable. *Ādhyāya* colophons in the manuscripts consulted for the Critical Edition have a variety of titles, including both long and short u, the word *samāgama* ("meeting") replaced by *saṃvāda* ("dialogue"), and some that omit reference to Bhīma: *Hanumat-Vākyaṃ* ("Hanumat's Speech") and *Hanumat-Darśanaṃ* ("The Vision of Hanumat"). I call this passage *Hanumat-Bhīma-Samāgama* because of the prevalence of this title in *devanāgarī* and Kāśmīrī manuscripts of this episode (with short u here even though the long u is more prevalent in the *Mahābhārata* as a whole). This episode is discussed in greater detail in Sullivan (2016).

3. Hence I do not entirely agree with the view that the yuga teaching is neither consistently presented in the *Mahābhārata* nor integral to the text, as argued by Luis González-Reimann (2002; see especially pp. 102-06). See also the insightful chapter by González-Reimann (2010), where he argues for the dice match as inspiration for the four-yuga concept. Alf Hiltebeitel (2011) extensively discusses the terms yuga and *kalpa*, and Hindu and Buddhist uses of them, in chapters six and seven of his monumental work *Dharma*.

4. van Buitenen (1973: 30). I do not feel that I can improve upon his translation, except perhaps in regard to his rendering of *avidhṛtaḥ* as "unaverted"; the word is perhaps best understood as meaning that Time is unavoidable.

5. W. J. Johnson (1999: xxviii-xxxv), in his excellent introduction, discusses the views of Dumézil, Biardeau, and Hildebrandt on the “cosmic crisis” of the *Mahābhārata*. See also on this topic the first article published by Alf Hildebrandt (1972).
6. González-Reimann (2011: 101–110).
7. See, for example, discussions in Sullivan (2011), the introductory essay to a special issue of the *International Journal of Hindu Studies*.
8. Fitzgerald (2004: 671). His article describes three different meanings that he translates as (1) Law or Lawful Deeds; (2) Rightness; (3) Virtue.
9. Quoting the translation of van Buitenen (1975, vol. 2: 500): *navāvatāraṃ rūpasya* (*Mahābhārata* 3.146.33). Sutton (2000: 156) missed this subtle use of *avatāra*, stating that the *Mahābhārata* “has a more limited understanding of the concept and in fact never once in the Critical Edition uses the term *avatāra*.”
10. As discussed by David Gitomer (1991) in his “Rākṣasa Bhīma.”
11. Traditional commentators and modern translators alike ignore what seems an anomaly in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa to resume his familiar four-armed form, though such a form was never previously displayed or mentioned in the

Mahābhārata. For example, Śaṅkara, in the earliest extant commentary on the text, comments neither on the oddity of assuming the four-armed form purportedly seen previously, nor on the absence of a resumption of his two-armed form anywhere in the text (Sastry, 1977: 297); Rāmānuja is similarly silent (Ādidevānanda, 1991: 388).

12. As observed by Richard Davis (2015: 55), referring to Callewaert and Hemraj (1982: 98-110), who listed 227 commentaries. Subsequent decades will have increased the total.

13. And as Brian Black observes (in an unpublished manuscript quoted with kind permission, p. 18), "Thus, in contrast to the *Bhagavad Gītā* which is a call to arms and justification for war, the *Anu Gītā* is a discourse which emphasizes renunciation and non-violence. In contrast to Arjuna's initial dilemma of whether to fight or not, the *Anu Gītā* is delivered within the context of Arjuna's remorse after the war." Arjuna's remorse not only offers a reason for the *Anugītā's* emphasis on renunciation but supports the interpretation that the *Mahābhārata* leads its audience to embrace spiritual, not worldly, values. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa's teachings go far beyond encouraging Arjuna to do his duty as a warrior, and include the mutual love between God and devotee as a practice that transcends even dharma.

14. *Mahābhārata* 5.129.16b reads *saṃjahāra vapuḥ svakam*. While van Buitenen (1978: 428) translates this as “withdrew his real form,” a more literal translation could be “withdrew his own (beautiful) form.”

15. The perspective on royal dharma in all three *Mahābhārata* passages contrasts markedly with the Jain approach to royalty, as discussed by Jonathan Geen in his chapter in this volume. While the Jains envision a king immediately abdicating the throne to become a Jain monk as the only way to fulfill his spiritual needs, the *Mahābhārata* advocates that a king remain on the throne to rule society. As Kṛṣṇa teaches in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one can remain in society, renouncing neither dharma nor one’s social role, while also attaining the highest spiritual ends. In a somewhat parallel pattern, Brian Black, in his chapter in this volume, draws attention to how the *Upaniṣads* tend to emphasize complementarity between the king and the religious leader, while the Buddhist *Nikāya* texts are more likely to emphasize their distinct roles.

16. *Bhagavad Gītā* 9.2a: *rājavidyā rājaguhyam*.

17. The table of contents in the *Ādi Parvan*, the *Parvasaṃgraha*, terms its long *Vana Parvan* subtale *rāmāyaṇam upākhyānam* (Mbh 1.2.126c), but it is obviously not Vālmīki’s text. Van Buitenen (1975: 180) comments: “The ones responsible for the inclusion of the story of *Rāma* in *The Book of the Forest* either did not know of Vālmīki’s poem, or knew that the story of *Rāma* was different from it.” Brockington

demonstrated close correspondences between the Northeast recension of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the “Rāmopakhyāna” but also acknowledges the latter’s influence on the former, indicating that the two constitute a literary feedback loop, or stand in intertextual relationship; see Brockington (1998: 473-77); and in greater detail, Bailey & Brockington (2000: 288-325).

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