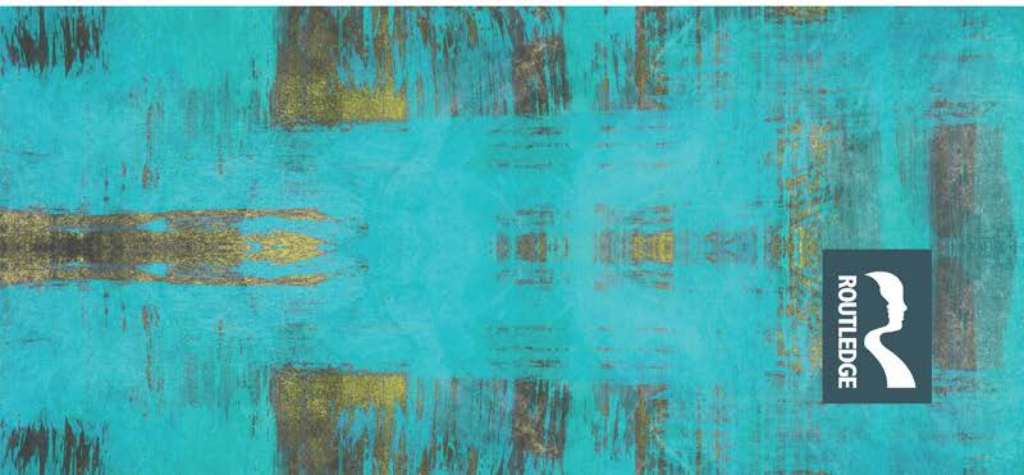
EXPLORING AGENCY IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

ETHICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF *DHARMA*

Edited by
Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya,
Vrinda Dalmiya and Gangeya Mukherji



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The Mahābhārata, one of the major epics of India, is a sourcebook complete by itself as well as an open text constantly under construction. This volume looks at transactions between its modern discourses and ancient vocabulary. Located amid conversations between these two conceptual worlds, the volume grapples with the epic's problematisation of *dharma* or righteousness, and consequently, of the ideal person and the good life through a cluster of issues surrounding the concept of agency and action. Drawing on several interdisciplinary approaches, the essays reflect on a range of issues in the Mahābhārata, including those of duty, motivation, freedom, selfhood, choice, autonomy, and justice, both in the context of philosophical debates and their ethical and political ramifications for contemporary times.

This book will be of interest to scholars and researchers engaged with philosophy, literature, religion, history, politics, culture, gender, South Asian studies, and Indology. It will also appeal to the general reader interested in South Asian epics and the Mahābhārata.

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FOREWORD

While inaugurating the Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Shimla, Dr S. Radhakrishnan had suggested that apart from exploring a diversity of significant academic issues, its scholars would do well to engage with fundamental questions concerning the 'human condition'. This suggestion was germane to the future of the Institute as he had visualised it. It also represented a concept that through its capaciousness embraced an expansive range of academic disciplines and perspectives. For more than fifty years, the Institute has supported an impressive range of research projects and seminars. Many of these have turned around the core concern that was so perceptively proposed at its founding moment. Be that as it may, the relationship between ideas and institutions has always been synergetic. It is impossible to indicate when and how an institution becomes home to certain ideas and why ideas sometimes coalesce to become institutions in themselves. It is, perhaps, through prolonged processes of intense philosophical churning and the turmoil of human experience that such ideas and institutions acquire meaning, relevance and acceptability.

The *Mahābhārata* probably stands unparalleled in its ability to raise disquieting questions of great moral consequence borne out of such churning and turmoil. Few texts have the ability to transcend their times and converse with us today in such intimate terms: to talk to us about our thoughtfully cultivated worldviews and to delve deep into our subconscious. In doing so, the *Mahābhārata* also persistently lays bare matters that are uncomfortable and confounding. The entwining of agency, event, time and destiny seems to provide answers but, in reality, draws us further into ever-more-complex inquiries.

A Summer School was organized at the IIAS, Shimla, to focus on the specific question of 'agency' that remains central to the text. The foremost scholars were invited to deliberate upon it, and *Exploring Agency*

in the Mahābhārata: Ethical and Political Dimensions of Dharma is a volume that has emerged from the fascinating discussions that ensued at this gathering of scholars. The editors have worked hard to bring together the different articles and place them in a very meaningful sequence. On behalf of the IIAS, I wish to express my thanks to them. Professor Vrinda Dalmia and Dr Gangeya Mukherji, both former Fellows of the Institute, have written a very significant and insightful introduction that itself attracts serious scholarly attention.

Chetan Singh
Former Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book extends from the third Summer School in September 2012 of the series organised at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. For imagining the idea of the Mahābhārata School and invaluable help in formulating the particular concept as well in the planning and structuring of the event and for inviting us to build this anthology, we remain grateful to the then-Director of IIAS, Peter Ronald deSouza. We wish to express our thanks to the scholars who responded to the invitation to speak to the school, the scholarly community then in residence at IIAS and not least to the participants of the school, all of whom provided a rich fare of ideas, comments and feedback which is reflected in the organisation of this volume. We are grateful to Chetan Singh for extending all support to the project. We take pleasure in thanking members, former and current, of the staff at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study who were, characteristically for the Institute, ever courteous and helpful, in particular Premchand, Vijender Singh Rana, Debarshi Sen and Ashok Sharma. Finally, we record our thanks to the members of the team at Routledge, especially Shoma Choudhury, who have helped forward the project from manuscript to publication.

INTRODUCTION

To Do

Vrinda Dalmiya and Gangeya Mukherji

Part I

The Conceptual Back-Story

At the very end of the Mausala Parva, one of the closing books of the *Mahābhārata* chronicling the death of god (Kṛṣṇa), the authorial sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa admonishes the warrior hero, Arjuna, that it is Time that brings human endeavour to fruition.

> Time indeed is the seed from which the universe unfurls, O Dhanañjaya. It is Time, again, that withdraws everything when it pleases. One becomes mighty, then again, losing that might becomes feeble; one becomes a master and rules others, and, again, losing that status, becomes a servant carrying out the commands of others. Your weapons, having achieved success, have gone back to the place they came from. They will, again, come into your hands when time will be ripe for their approach.[1]

Arjuna had been left desolate at the death of his divine friend and mentor and had returned to Vyāsa after his own failure to protect Kṛṣṇa's women from rampaging marauders. Vyāsa explained this turn of events in terms of the omnipotence of destiny and the powerlessness of man, recommending that it was time for the Pāṇḍavas to consider their final retirement. The image of Time as the originator and final arbiter of human action is a trope invoked at crucial junctures throughout the narrative. In the Vana Parva, Yudhiṣṭhira discloses the cosmic truth to be the fact that we, along with all living creatures, are being slow-cooked by Time in the cauldron of the world. This metaphor of the ontological kitchen poignantly captures the ubiquity of change

thrust on us. Indeed, it is paradoxical that an epic so vividly describing the heroic deeds of intrepid warlords and warrior princes should lay so much emphasis on limitations to autonomy by an all-pervading force outside the realm of human influence. The text's metaphysical intuitions (You are all puny puppets in the hands of Time/God) seem to rub uncomfortably against its ethical intent (Rise up, take control and win over your foes, and gain the fame that is justly yours).

Of course, an unqualified dismissal of human initiative does not necessarily follow from the supremacy of Time (and its causal grip), and a constraint on human freedom of choice need not render the ancient epic anachronistically inappropriate for discussing issues of duty and justice or their ethico-political ramifications. Quite to the contrary, the text affords not only an entire range of ideas on the questions of free will and agency but rehearses the central debates across various philosophical standpoints prevalent during its own time.[2] As Nicholas Sutton has argued, it is precisely the din of debating voices on this issue that brings out the *Mahābhārata*'s open attitude to the question: Are humans ever free to do what they choose? 'There can be no simple solution to the problem of destiny and free-will', he says, 'and the stature of the epic is surely raised by the fact that when viewed as a work in its entirety it makes no such attempt. Rather it offers different perspectives from different religious tendencies each of which contributes to the development of the reader's comprehension'.[3]

Philosophically speaking, the tension between human initiative on the one hand and external forces, which include but are not restricted to Time/Fate/Divine purpose/*prārabdha* on the other – in short the *puruṣakāra/daiva* debates scattered throughout the *Mahābhārata* – seem to echo the freedom/determinism debates in Western philosophical literature. In response, compatabilist solutions probing the possibility of action in a deterministic world are available in both contexts. Thus, the *Mahābhārata* need not give up on *doings* as distinguished from that which is *done* to us – a difference crucial both for the ontology of action and for free will. The wiping out of a village by a storm and of mass deaths due to a drone strike are both (unfortunate) changes or 'happenings'; but while the former is explained by causal links in atmospheric pressure systems, the latter references decisions and choices made by a commander-in-chief and attains the status of an 'action'. *We* initiate actions and thereby exhibit agency, but we simply suffer events that happen to us. And such actions/doings can be meaningful even in a world structured by the inexorable progress of a causal juggernaut.

Agency, then, is our capacity to 'make things happen' and brings in its tow the philosophical back-story of the concept of *action* (or doing)

as opposed to that of a mere happening. The further tie between an 'act' on the one hand and *ourselves* on the other is generally tracked through concepts like desire, volition, intention (in the Western philosophical world) and with terms like *cikīrṣā, ichhā* and *prayatna* in the Sanskrit milieu. The details of this 'inner story' vary from system to system, but overall, the subject initiating actions is constructed as an *agent* or actor who has a complicated psychological structure of (roughly) knowledge, belief, desire and choice that motivate the will to act. In fact, Elisa Freschi reinforces this last step in noting that "*prayatna* plays an essential role in the Indian polemic about the *existence of a self*"[4] (our emphasis) since the self must exist as the 'exerter' of will. Of course, additional metaphysical pushes associated with the *karma* theory (like *saṃskāras, adṛṣta , prārabdha*) are added to the psychological story of the formation of will in the Indian context. But the general point is that *agency* parsed as the capacity for 'doing' or 'making something happen' first brings in the concept of *action* as distinct from an event; and actions, in turn, introduce *agents* as their unique originators.[5] Thus, agency (or its closest equivalent, *Kartṛtva*) finds its semantic home in a conceptual web in which the two notions of *action* (*kriyā, karman*) and *agent* (*kartā*) as its cause (*kāraṇa*) are primary nodes.

Such a dual anchoring also situates agency squarely within the domains of ethics and politics. From the point of view of ethics, initiating an action (rather than passively undergoing an event) invokes *choice*, and this makes the agent responsible for the particular behaviour. It also evokes in others what P. F. Strawson famously called 'reactive attitudes'[6] of praise and blame, admiration and resentment. Condemning atmospheric belts of low pressure is meaningless in a way that protesting the sovereign's 'act of war' is not. Framed by laments of women in the aftermath of war, Gāndhārī in the Strī Parva reflects both attitudes – she expresses despair at the loss of loved ones brought on by the event of war, but she also points an accusatory finger at Kṛṣṇa as accountable for the carnage. Incidentally, this blameworthiness of Kṛṣṇa presupposes another (negative) notion of agency: someone can be held responsible for a change if he (like Kṛṣṇa) chooses not to exercise his power to stop it. However, our positive and negative actions – what we *do* (and not do) – make us *who we are*. Thus, the ethical compass of agency also marks us as being virtuous or not.

In its political dimension, the agency-action-actor triad entangles with power in different ways depending on the sense given to the 'political' itself. The *Mahābhārata* is, of course, directly concerned with sovereignty. Bhīṣma's discourses in the Śānti Parva lay out conditions

for good governance and what a king should do for maintaining control in crises and peace. On the other hand, discourses like that of Sulabhā and Janaka (Śānti Parva), and between the 'ordinary housewife' and sage Kauśika (Vana Parva), are instances in which individuals 'speak truth to power' and question authority. But it is an open question whether the methodological individualism in the epic can account for the formation of *democratic* political subjects. Of course, the *Mahābhārata* references agency in its more quotidian forms that also inevitably tangle with power. An ability to act, after all, must be expressed within social institutions even when it is deployed to change them. Thus, *who* is allowed to act and which subjectivities are constructed as agents by the social order become important political questions – answers to which are sometimes not explicit on the surface of a text. The epic narrative, for example, allows Draupadī to speak and publicly interrogate the received ethical order. But interpretations differ on whether she is at all a political agent and can represent a subaltern voice of protest or even a gendered resistance against an existing patriarchal order.

The problem-space of this anthology are such the ethical and political dimensions of agency in the *Mahābhārata*, which co-exist with strong tendencies to undermine human initiative altogether. Unlike the determinist or the libertarian who take agency and natural causality to be *in*compatible, the compatibilists construe agency to be a special form of causation. The contrast between agent-causation and event-causation as two alternative explanations of change make possible the ontological category of 'action' in a causally determined world. An *action* is caused no doubt, but caused by an *agent* and not by an event. But ironically, this triad of agency-action-agent appears to crumble no sooner than it has been set up in the epic world. The *Bhagavadgītā* celebrates *action* but strangely undercuts any sense of the action as 'mine'. In fact, it goes further to destabilize the very notion of a doer since it is only when befuddled by the ego maker (*ahaṃkāra*) that we think of ourselves as agents. But without the concept of an 'agent', do we have a denial of 'agency' altogether or a different conception of it? This question alerts us to the possibility that maybe it is too simplistic to construe the *puruṣakāra/daiva* debates in the *Mahābhārata* as the freedom/determinism controversies in the West. Remember that the point of the Śānti Parva is to motivate Yudhiṣṭhira to *act* as a king, but the point of the epic as a whole (according to at least one commentator) is the 'education of the *Dharma*-King'.[7] The coupling of action with '*dharma*' opens up the Indic terrain of agency to further complexities, and enfolding agency within the dhārmic context

both complicates simple compatibilist analyses of the notion, as well as introduces problems of its own. Section II analyses these shifts in notions of action and agent, while Section III picks up on the unique characterization of the *Mahābhārata* as an *itihāsa* and proposes to see the epic *itself* as an 'actor' with narrative or textual agency. Section IV gives a brief summary of chapters that follow.

Part II

Dhārmic Agency and the Moral/Political Order

Doing dharma or making our lives consonant with *dharma* is the bare sense of *dhārmic agency*. Acknowledging modern concerns regarding the dhārmic universe of the *Mahābhārata* makes one wonder whether the epic represents a metaphysics and psychology of action that continues to perpetrate historical wrongs and disembowel entire cultures and societies. Alternatively, one is led to speculate whether the *Mahābhārata*'s dhārmic vision can nuance agency and point to an ethics and a politics robust enough to redress injustices of our times in a creative way. In this section, we first begin with how *dharma* as a *puruṣārtha* complicates ethical and political agency and then segue into idiosyncratic problems that arise because of the epic's unique take on *dharma*. The section ends on the suggestive note that dhārmic agency is linked to embodiment, thereby opening up a space for reading contemporary notions of 'impure agency' and moral luck into the epic ethos.

Cultural insight is contingent on awareness of the core values that define the tradition under study. Symptomatic of the intellectual vigour of the times, there is an acknowledged multiplicity of the goals of human endeavour in the *Mahābhārata* – its conception of the four puruṣārthas of *artha*, *kāma*, *dharma* and *mokṣa*. As Peter Hill claims:

> With Buddhists, Jains, Ājivakas, orthodox Hindus, and others all propounding their own formulas for karma, *dharma* and *mokṣa*, (then) it is no wonder that the question of human action was one of the most debated and divisive issues during the vast religious re-orientation which occurred between approximately 600 BC and AD 500.[8]

But note that the 'question of human action' now pertains not merely to its logical possibility (as it did in the freedom/determinism debates) but to what it should *aim* at. The possibility of action or karma is

intertwined with discussions of the feasibility of pursuing *dharma* and/or *mokṣa* – two core values of the times.[9] Hill considers *dharma* – social duties tagged to social location (*svadharma*) along with virtues common to all locations (*sādhāraṇa dharma*) – to be the pillar of the *pravṛtti* system of values, while *mokṣa* – or 'liberation' from all social duties – is considered the essence of the *nivṛtti* outlook. But it is clear that *both* require efficacy of individual action and freedom. In fact, the answer to why the *Mahābhārata* was concerned with freedom of choice at all would seem to lie principally with the essential concern in Hindu culture for mokṣa and *dharma*, the ultimate values . . . which effectively pre-disposed Hindu thinkers towards placing a high value upon power, control and freedom.[10] But let us look at the unique dimensions that ethico-political freedom acquires when it is geared towards achieving these goals of *dharma* and *mokṣa*.

Agency and Dhārmic Ethics and Politics

The *Mahābhārata*'s support of *pravṛtti* values is uncontroversial. This project minimally requires that the epic assert the meaningfulness of human exertion (*puruṣakāra*) in the face of an all-pervading destiny (*daiva*). We have made sense of this in terms of the compatabilist response to freedom/determinism debates. But let us look at this option in the epic's idiom now. In the Anuśāsana Parva, Brahma invokes an organic metaphor comparing exertion to soil and destiny to the seed and the apt combination between them to the fruition of life.[11] Along with riches and fame, even a place in heaven is said to flow from such harmony of exertion and destiny. The four social classes achieve excellence in the scheme of *varṇāśrama dharma* through the proper fulfilling of prescribed offices only when sufficient effort is directed towards that end, and not through mere birth in a particular caste ordained by destiny. The celestials also are said to achieve and maintain their eminent status by exertion and adherence to their own dhārmic codes. The supreme deity, Viṣṇu himself, is 'engaged in austere penances in the bosom of the deep',[12] and great rulers and sages rise and fall due to small, momentary digressions from *dharma*. In this arrangement, destiny determines the degree of success granted to effort, but at the same time, it is wholly powerless to confer *merit* in the absence of action.[13] Since human action is not value neutral, to frame agency entirely within the doctrinal parameters of *prārabdha* and *karma* – the Indian cousins of causal determinism – would limit the position of the *Mahābhārata*.

This, however, opens up the structural space for a compatibilism. Addressing the balance of fate and autonomy, Peter Hill clarifies that

for 'our Epic mythologist, it certainly did not follow that just because God readily and frequently intervened in human affairs, man had no freedom and human action was meaningless'.[14] Rather, the theory of an omnipotent fate is generally offered when agents are subjected to unusual physical or emotional adversity due to the turn of events. It assuages, as in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, an unnecessary sense of guilt or enervating grief and could well be a salve to enable agents to *continue* acting. Further, on no occasion does an actor get absolved of his genuine share in a wrongful act or crime. The text is remorseless in not allowing acts of omission or commission to go unchallenged on the ethical plane whether on grounds of expediency or on those of chance or fate. Dhārmic agency, therefore, does not rule out moral responsibility or the need for ethical discrimination and cultivation on the part of the actor.

But now this discrimination sometimes also includes a critical look at *dharma* being a viable goal itself. An excellent example of this is in the Vana Parva when Draupadī voices joint scepticism about *dharma* and the relevance of human action in the face of divine caprice. In this episode, Draupadī blames Yudhiṣṭhira for being indifferent to their present degenerate condition and urges him to forsake his pledge for exile. Her argument is that traditional ethical virtues of truth and generosity are rendered barren in a teleology constructed to be naturally unfavourable to the virtuous. The travails of her truth-seeking husband incline her to disbelieve the maxim 'he who protected *dharma* was protected in turn by *dharma*'.[15] It is incomprehensible to her that the 'simple, gentle, liberal, modest, truthful' king could be prone to the vice of gambling and in a few reckless moments stake and lose his kingdom, his brothers and his wife. But strangely, Draupadī is disposed to blame not her husband for this but the creator of the universe! Human beings are, after all, subject to the will of God – 'as a wooden doll is made to move its limbs by the wire-puller, so are creatures made to work by the Lord of all'.[16] But then, Draupadī finds that the creator himself is not a dispassionate lawgiver but is moved by impulses that are perceptively, all too human – the 'Supreme Lord, according to his pleasure, sporteth with His creatures, creating and destroying them, like a child with his toy (of soft earth)'.[17]

This is a multi-layered disquiet about agency as pursuit of *dharma*. First, we have the usual scepticism about free will and choice necessary for ethical life. The deterministic strand (*daiva*) here is destiny and shifts moral responsibility to the Maker of a defective human will. But then comes a strong critique of Divinity itself at variance with traditional Hindu cosmology. According to the latter, gods enunciate the

sustaining principle of the universe (*ṛta*), which also doubles up as the moral code for humanity. Draupadī's doubts about God/s thus seep into a critique of the *moral order* itself – an order that allows Yudhiṣṭhira to suffer but Duryodhana to prosper: 'I do not speak highly of the Great Ordainer who suffereth such inequality',[18] Draupadī scorns. Simply establishing the possibility of free will (in the traditional compatibilist move) does not answer *this* kind of scepticism. The compatabilist thread in the *Mahābhārata* is intertwined with establishing the thicker notion of *dhārmic action*, which is tied, as Draupadī's question shows, to the efficacy of the ethical order itself.

The entanglement of *dharma* with ethical agency is presented with a strong socio-political content. *Varṇāśrama dharma* provides the undeviating norm for the human agent and is a *social* hierarchy. The agent is born in an unequal society: their *dharma* is determined by their social location, and aspiration is primarily individual within this grid. Note that the perceived subaltern, Karṇa, is concerned with his own rise and supremacy in this order and Draupadī speaks of her humiliation as a *kṣatriya woman*. Thus, the freedom to act combines seamlessly with opportunity for actors to excel but is not inclined to changing the social mores for a radically different order. In the hierarchy of three kinds of action enumerated in the Gītā, *vikarma* or wrong action are those that are against scriptural norm. They are placed lowest and considered most disreputable.

The resonance of this for contemporary political sensibilities seems negative. Hannah Arendt's identification of political inequality in the very structure of a monarchy – and hence in the social order of the *Mahābhārata* times marked by a rigid *varṇāśrama* hierarchy – accounts for the conservative position of the epic. The 'fundamental experience of monarchies, and also of aristocracies and other hierarchical forms of government, is that by birth we are different from each other and therefore strive to distinguish ourselves, to manifest our natural or social distinctness'.[19] In Arendtian terms, this logic precludes true democratic action in the sense of inverting a god-given order and wresting political equality by 'acting' together. The *Mahābhārata*, of course, does speak of *dharma* of *groups* or *classes* of people – rāja*dharma* and kṣātra*dharma*, for example, pertain to agency of kings and kśatriyas as groups in the varṇāśrama order. But these articulations are 'collective aggregations of actions'[20] very different from the political notion of public negotiation and 'acting together'. Strictly speaking, the problem of aligning social equality with metaphysical egalitarianism remains unresolved in the *Mahābhārata*, and one has to dig much deeper to

harness *puruṣakāra* (individual effort) for more egalitarian orders of citizenship. The results of this search are bound to be ambiguous.

The *dharma* universe then infuses ethico-political agency with a flavour of its own. But given how *dharma* itself is further developed in the text, at least two new tensions arise in the dhārmic framing of action. The first of these concern the 'fit' between action and its association with the 'beatitude of *mokṣa*' – the consonance of the *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* world views. The second is the unrelenting contextualism of *dharma* and the changes in agency that this calls for. Let us start with the former.

Agency, the Sthitaprajña and Mokṣa

Though the *Mahābhārata* is primarily concerned with *dharma*, the cultural significance of mokṣa as the highest goal was bound to leave some traces in the epic. For instance, in the Gītā, moral cultivation and discrimination required of ethical agency generates what is called a *daivī sampad* (godly excellence), which leads to *mokṣa*. In contrast, cultivation of the *āsurī sampad* (the demonic quality of wealth/excellence) works towards *nibandha* or earthly bondage. Of course, the individual is free to strive for either of the two, but can *mokṣa* be 'sought' at all in a dhārmic universe?

Much has been written about the inscrutability, incommensurability and untranslatability of '*dharma*' – its being *sūkṣma* or *gahana*. And much has been written about attempts to reconcile the *puruṣārthas* of *dharma* and *mokṣa*. James Fitzgerald glosses the meaning of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* as 'what is "transcendentally" good or right to do or be'[21] – where 'transcendental' refers to some connection with 'good circumstance of one kind or another (whether good *lokas*, a fortunate *saṃsāra* or the beatitude of *mokṣa*) in the future, specifically after death'.[22] Fitzgerald goes on to speak of three different forms[23] in which this general other-worldly orientation is expressed in the epic's empirically grounded parsing of *dharma*. These are *dharma*:

(i) as normative *action* or behaviour,
(ii) as an *abstract quality* of rightness or justice and
(iii) as good character or virtuous dispositions/habits of doing particular acts.

All three forms of dhārmic expression become important as we proceed, but for now, let us look at (i) specifically as it appears in the Bhagavad Gītā.

On the metaphysical level *dharma* (even *varṇāśrama dharma*) is basically a *karman* – a deed or action but with a normative force, an injunctive compulsion or ought-to-be-doneness (*vidhi-codanā*). The *Bhagavadgītā* makes action central because, among other things, it is impossible *not* to do anything. Its theory of *niṣkāma* karma or acting without attachment urges on us a way of being where neither action nor the fruits of action, taint who I am. The *kartā*, or the one who acts, is not the Self (the true 'I'), and a cultivated indifference (being *niṣkāma*) towards the fruits of action (*phala*) further distances the agent from her action. Desireless actions ensure that causal connections between an actor and actions do not morph into the agent 'owning' either the action or its *phala* by the agent. This is cultivating the attitude of a *sthitaprajña,* which is a step towards *mokṣa*. If so, does this not articulate a theory of action without *agency*, or alternatively an understanding of agency that does not entail an *actor* being ethically accountable? Dhārmic agency as *niṣkāma karma* appears to make a mockery of action understood with reference to an *agent*. But how deep is the de-construction of the conceptual nexus of actor-agency-action here? And how troubled is the relation between dhārmic duty and *mokṣa*? After all, in moments when protagonists in the epic desire to escape into renunciation, the text always brings them back to their *svadharma* on the empirical, this-worldly plane. The epic's admonitions to Yudhiṣṭhira to perform his kingly duties or to Arjuna to go to war could not, after all, simply be urging on them a life of play-acting or 'as if'.

Without entering into fancy metaphysical footwork of (say) the Advaitins or the Sāmkhya, Roy Perrett[24] suggests a detour into moral psychology to explain this dissonance. We all have first-order desires for objects/states in the world. But the sense of ourselves *as agents* flows from second-level endorsements of what we do. The struggling addict retains hope of recovery because her second-level desires (of not wanting to want the drug) conflict with her ground-level actions motivated by a desire for it, and in conceptualizing who she is, *she identifies with the former*. Being *niṣkāma* or 'without desire' is to be, according to Perrett, without 'attached desires', that is, without the 'attachment' of first-level desires to a consciously constructed self in terms of second-order endorsements of desires. A *sthitaprajña* – one who is even-minded in the face of widely differing and even opposing first-order states of affairs – like success or failure, for instance – is not someone who constructs herself as desiring either. She does have first-order goals and intentions the content of which are guided by her socially determined *svadharma*. However, the *further* 'attachment'

to these desires through a second-order adoption of those actions as constituting the self is absent. In this way, the dhārmic vision rejects a thick sense of identity rather than rejecting agency. As Perrett puts it,

> our sense of ourselves as agents, requires that we have a sense of our actions as flowing from beliefs and desires, that we have actively arrived at, rather than those that have simple arisen in us i.e., from second order desires and volitions, rather than from just first order desires.[25]

Such self-authorship is a stumbling block for religious life, but it need not deny mechanisms of agency required for performing *svadharma* at the ground level. The *karma-yogin*'s ethical actions thus involve an agent and the entire apparatus necessary for initiating an action,[26] even as she re-structures her desires and intentions away from congealing into a consciously endorsed self-identity.

Actions performed in this way correspond with *akarma* of the Gītā (4:18–24) where the actor performs action motivated only by its rightness and not its fruits. *Akarma*, however, remains a form of *karma* – akin to *yajña* (a ritualistic sacrifice or giving up of ownership by dedicating something to the deity) and is placed as the highest form of action. Interestingly, M. K. Gandhi went on to make this ethical vision the touchstone for political agency. His 'Discourses on the Gita' links the possibility of *niṣkāma karma* to an actor of 'resolute intellect' who is able to 'work without looking for immediate results' in the realm of 'politics or social reform' in his times.[27] Successful political action is now tied to cultivating an interiority, which in Gandhi's subsequent descriptions includes humility and non-violence. Absence of desire (the heart of *niṣkāma karma*), therefore, reconstitutes the *political actor* in a specific way and bridges the acknowledged divide between the private and the public and between the hermitage, the home and the polis by bringing in supposedly quotidian acts and domestic duties within the political.

Agency and Dharma as Āvasthika

We move now to another apparent inconsistency in the dhārmic framing of agency. *Dharma*, we are told, is *āvasthika* or contextually inflected. However, serious epistemological problems arise when (for example) meat eating is deemed wrong but sage Viśvāmitra is not condemned for consuming stolen dog meat (in the Śānti Parva), or when killing is condoned, yet sage Kauśika is sent to hell for having caused

the death of innocent travellers (in the Karṇa Parva). Given such fluidity, dhārmic agency cannot consist in blindly following any pre-given rules or performing pre-specified actions. But without rules/regularities, how do humans come to *know* what particular deeds constitute *dharma* in a particular situation? And without such knowledge, how can they regulate behaviour and choose ethically? Thus, in the Śānti Parva when Bhīṣma reinforces *dharma*'s flexibility, Yudhiṣṭhira throws up his hands in despair, plunging into a deep scepticism about the ethico-political project itself.[28]

The epic's answer to such moral despair can be discerned in the episode involving Yudhiṣṭhira's infamous lie. In an attempt to dishearten Droṇa from fighting, Yudhiṣṭhira's statement 'Aśvatthāmā is dead' was intended to deceive Droṇa into believing that Aśvatthāmā, his son, was dead. But Yudhiṣṭhira 'cloaked' this lie by mumbling in an undertone the *truth*, '(I mean) Aśvatthāmā, the elephant'. The epic disapproval of this act is clear: Yudhiṣṭhira's chariot, which had always floated a couple of inches above the ground to mark his dhārmic excellence, came down to earth as soon as he uttered this statement. The question for us is: why did Yudhiṣṭhira fail *dharma* here? The beginnings of an answer could lie in Jonardon Ganeri's[29] suggestion that the incident shows Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of the crucial virtue of 'receptivity'. Before going into the nature of this virtue, note the general structure of the answer being offered here. Fitzgerald's claim that apart from (i) normative *action* itself, *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* also refers to:

> (ii) 'the abstract *quality* of the correctness, rightness, goodness or justice'[30] of an action, and (iii) inner qualities/virtues of an agent – their 'enduring attitudes, dispositions and habits for particular patterns of action'.[31]

Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira's not having the character-trait or virtue (of receptivity) indicates his lack of *dharma* in sense (iii) quoted. But because of this characterological lack, he also missed the quality of 'rightness' in the proposed lie, or *dharma* as in (ii): he failed to see the positive ethical quality in the 'lie' proposed by Kṛṣṇa. Thus his uttering a convoluted truth is a case of *adharma* occasioned by his not being 'receptive' to the quality of rightness in the appropriate way.

Receptivity, in the required sense, becomes important given the value pluralism of the *Mahābhārata*. A 'receptive agent' pursues truth as an intrinsic value but not in isolation. Rather, she needs to 'open herself' to the varied import truth has in the context of other co-dependent virtues. This, Ganeri says, amounts to allowing truth to 'run riot in the

soul'.[32] Because of a semantic inter-penetration of values, pursuing any one virtue (like truth) can bring radical and unexpected changes in our priorities in any particular setting that involves other values as well. This is because what truth *amounts to* is conditional on all the intrinsic values relevant in specific contexts. A receptive agent sees this and transforms contextualism into a deep, moral particularism. A truth seeker, for instance, may well find that she needs to deprioritize literal truth in a particular case because of how other values like compassion and heroism (say) affect what truth speaking *means* in that situation. Kṛṣṇa is 'receptive' in this way and therefore open to reconstituting the meaning of truth creatively like a 'poet': he accepts the constraints of 'metres, verses and metaphors to produce the music' and 'governs from above'.[33] Yudhiṣṭhira, on the other hand, is a rule-fetishist unable to imagine how deviating from principles can still accord with *dharma*. He is therefore bound (or condemned) to speaking the literal truth and, in doing so, misses what is *dharma* in that context.

Of course, such an indictment of Yudhiṣṭhira as lacking receptivity and, hence, failing to act dharmically pertains to *one* episode. In the polyphonic evaluation of the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira on other occasions is seen as gifted with contextual sensitivity. Along with Kṛṣṇa, he is described, albeit in smaller measure, as the ultimate exemplar of *ānṛśansya* (non-cruelty),[34] which comes from empathy or a rare insight into the minds and aspirations of others. Mukund Lath argues that Yudhiṣṭhira exemplifies this when he chooses that Nakula, rather than his other brothers, be brought to life after their disastrous encounter with the Yakṣa. Lath traces this choice to Yudhiṣṭhira's empathic understanding of Mādrī's emotions and vulnerabilities *were he to have opted for one of his other siblings*. The latter would, in effect, have been a choice of Kuntī's sons and would have left Mādrī childless. But note that reviving Nakula would still leave Kuntī with one living son, Yudhiṣṭhira himself. In *this* episode, then, Yudhiṣṭhira appraises proper action not in terms of rules nor his own desires but creatively comes up with a course of action through sensitivity to the particular situations of the protagonists involved.

The pluralism in the *Mahābhārata* – its upholding of many intrinsic values without a strict hierarchy amongst them – makes conflict between desired goals a serious problem. It introduces the importance of context-dependent sensitivity about what should be done in a particular case. Receptivity is a disposition that *makes sense of* a value in terms of others and grasps their contextualized significance – a grasp that can re-arrange the priorities of what we aim at. Similarly, being empathic is also a disposition that can tell us what *amounts to* being

non-cruel in a specific situation.[35] Non-cruelty cannot be achieved algorithmically. Here we hark back to *dhṛ* (to hold together/to sustain) as the etymological root of *dharma* as the upholding of an *order* or an *ordering* that is maximally non-harmful – but with the caveat that an axiological plurality can be 'held together' in different ways in various circumstances. The deliberation involved in an ordering that is deemed dhārmic is a 'governing from above' and not mechanical rule following.

Passages in the Śānti Parva (12.142) embrace plurality and contextualism by gesturing to decision making based on the faculty of *prajñā*. Choice of an action is now linked to a cataleptic flash of emotional insight generated by *prajñā*. However, the epic's account of how this faculty is trained in order to function effectively is distinctive. The central idea is the necessity of immersion in *dvaidha* – which literally means 'two-sidedness' but gestures to the many moral values an action can have from different points of view. Interestingly, someone who is *unaware* of such *dvaidha* (or value multi-facetedness) cannot act ethically.[36] So the epic asks us to saturate ourselves in these differences – to actively seek them out and to even imaginatively produce them ourselves (like poets) if we fail to encounter them. In setting conflicting value judgments as counter-points to each other, the purpose is not a synthesis nor a sceptical undercutting of one by the other. Rather, exposure to this multifarious array gives the faculty of *prajñā* a flexibility because of which it can go on to extrapolate what is right and should be done. Differences in moral judgments, doubts and confusions, instead of leading to paralysis, actually enable ethical judgments on a case-by-case basis.[37] Acting dharmically is to be creative and adaptive and not simply repetitive, and the link between action and agent is complicated in the *Mahābhārata* by an interesting theory of training the moral sense.[38]

Agency and Vulnerability

As a text for all, the *Mahābhārata*'s message about how to act, even though relayed to kings and warriors, is relevant for ordinary beings like ourselves. Such beings are embodied and encumbered. Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of *Dharma*, does not shed his body when he first ascends to Heaven: the being of *Dharma* is being bodied. Physical limitations produce epistemic uncertainty or even ignorance, and the dependence of corporeal bodies opens them to being harmed by others. Agents in the *Mahābhārata* are, therefore, constitutionally vulnerable on both epistemological and metaphysical registers. Crafting ethico-political

agency for such beings may bring the epic very close to what some feminist scholars call 'impure agency'[39] and its entanglement with moral luck.

Agency, when theorized as being in rational control, rules out unintended consequences or what we do not consciously 'make happen' as lying outside the sphere of moral responsibility. But this is a gloomy and inhospitable picture of the world, as pointed out by feminist scholar Margaret Walker. Vulnerable beings are and must rely on 'impure agents' where what agents are accountable for go beyond actions consciously willed. When I trip and fall down, I expect and hope that a passer-by who did not cause or initiate my fall would still feel morally compelled to help me get up. Moreover, actions as physical events are embedded in a causal order quite independent of what agents will. This makes what we do risky, because it can set in motion processes that we knew nothing about. Yet when a well-meaning political strategy (say) goes wrong, we do not brush it off as something we did not intend and hence are not responsible for; we depend on international moral conscience, if not our own, to address the collateral damage. The *Mahābhārata*'s ethico-political stance seems to line up with these insights. And once again, this is deeper than garden-variety compatibilism. In the Vana Parva, King Śībī's *rājadharma* to protect a pigeon, inadvertently deprived the hawk, who was stalking the pigeon for food. Offering his own flesh to the hawk in retribution, Śībī clearly held himself accountable for a result he had neither willed nor anticipated. Is this widening ethical agency with a realization that every action is also an *event* with a life of its own?

The *Mahābhārata*'s embrace of moral luck is also reflected in instances when agency goes horribly wrong. Satyavatī's father remains unaware of the terrible injustice that his seemingly natural desire to secure sovereignty for Satyavatī's progeny causes. He negotiates to exclude Bhīṣma, who promises to eschew married life, from the line of kingship. Satyavatī, however, is then fated to witness the impotency of her son, and her own yearning for ensuring lineage leads her to subject her daughters-in-law to sexual ordeals by treating them as mere reproductive vehicles. Within two generations, almost the entire clan is left to be represented by widows and a single grandchild. *This is agency gone awry* because of the unintended consequences of Satyavatī's and her father's ambition; but it is an agency the epic shows no tendency to either disown or excuse. A *dhārmic* universe recognizes the mismatch between an impersonal causal order and the order of intentionality and is aware that our choices can be scuttled by forces beyond our control. This dissonance is not meant to shrug off responsibility for

suffering but to expand our accountability to situations we cannot control. We continue to act and 'to do' in a world of uncertainty, and we must do so.

However, such an extended principle of responsibility can be politically ambiguous. It can become a device for reinforcing discriminations as 'consequences' that excluded groups bring upon themselves because of their past or current actions. On the other hand, it might serve as an effective check by making others responsible for the 'unintended' suffering of those excluded. This ambiguity certainly provides for the open-endedness that is characteristic of a literary classic. Such protean resilience in connection with the kinetics of its criticism reminds us of Simon Leys' characterization of a classic as allowing for 'countless uses and misuses, understandings and misunderstandings'. Consistent with this, the *Mahābhārata* is also 'a text that keeps growing – it can be deformed, it can be enriched – and yet it retains its core identity, even if its original shape cannot be fully retrieved anymore'.[40] It is not surprising that the inherent fluidity of the textual resources of the epic that can lead to politically reprehensible consequences can sometimes themselves be re-harnessed to serve as antidotes.

Part III

Textual Agency

It is not only individuals as ethical and political agents who make things happen in the world. As a pedagogical tool, the *Mahābhārata itself* attempts to *initiate change in us*, its listeners/readers. This introduces agency at the more abstract level of a *text's* capacity of 'making something happen'. This idea can be linked to the Mīmāṃsaka notion of *śābdi bhāvanā*, according to which *injunctions themselves* (and not their utterers) have an inherent force that impels someone to do something. The *Mahābhārata*, as an exposition of Śruti, now becomes a narratively coded imperative or a *vidhi-vākya* with an inherent power to make agents 'do' as instructed. Clearly, this capacity (of a text as an 'agent' making other human agents act or do things) is related to its goal of attuning its readers to *dharma*. The link between such textual 'action' and the text *as* agent (as the initiator of the action) alludes to narrative or literary structures – the relations amongst a text, its author and its readership. The unique ways of conveying meaning that the epic adopts to fulfil its mission as an *itihāsa* become relevant here.

The first strategy is that of *retelling*. The Ādi Parva begins with a group of sages requesting Ugraśravā to narrate the story of the Great

War, which he had previously heard while attending Janmejaya's snake sacrifice. During the latter event, Vaiśampāyana had narrated the tale. But he could do so because of an even earlier re-telling: he (Vaiśampāyana) had heard the story from Vyāsa, who on that occasion had related it to three other disciples. This embedding of the epic in concentric frames of narration suggests a certain a-temporality about origins. In a dizzying self-reflexive move, the *Mahābhārata* not only 'shows' itself to be one but 'says' that it is a retelling. The 'storyteller' of the *Mahābhārata* is continually shifted backwards *within* the story itself, and it can be assumed that the three other disciples (besides Vaiśampāyana) who had heard the story were also circulating the tale in different places in the present. Thus, we have an ongoing re-telling of the story in all four spatial directions. Such omnipresence is emphasized by the oft-quoted line 1.1.24: 'some bards have already sung this *itihāsa*, some again are teaching it to others; others no doubt will do the same in the future'. The multiple incarnations of the *Mahābhārata* in vernacular languages – including English in contemporary times – seem to displace the epic from being a 'text' to a *tradition* – the 'tradition' of using a text to tell multiple stories relevant to changing contexts of the past, present and future.

Now, such embedding of the story of the *Mahābhārata* in an open-ended space of shimmering variations in meaning is essential for it being a moral text for all and for all time. Omni-presence of re-tellings is one way of ensuring universal ethical relevance: each re-telling comes with its own twist and is 'heard' differently – stories (re)told are contextually re-configured. Moreover, if the moral faculty is trained through an exposure to alternatives as argued earlier, then creating a polyphonic 'surround' by endorsing variant re-tellings in which characters make different decisions, in which central episodes take different turns, in which silences and gaps in the story-line are fleshed out and in which alternative perspectives unsettle received judgments of appropriateness becomes a strategy for the *Mahābhārata* to 'make us see *dharma*'. Re-interpretations are, therefore, intrinsic to the epic being an agent of dhārmic instruction and its own conceptualization of moral training; there is a deep link between its dual self-conception of being a *re-told story* and being an *itihāsa*.

In a different manner, this 'agentive' aspect of the *Mahābhārata* is also reinforced by Emily Hudson when she says

> one important way in which the *Mahābhārata* operates as a literary text is that it conveys meaning more through what it "does" than through what it says. By "what it does" I refer to

> the fact that its literary strategies are designed to "do" something to its audience.[41]

The narrative strategy enabling this *doing* is termed the 'aesthetics of suffering' by Hudson, and *what* it aims at is now said to be a reconfiguration of the relation between *dharma* and *duhkha*. Thus, Draupadī's harassment in court and her unanswered question shows a resounding failure of *dharma*. This makes readers/listeners critical of received dhārmic categories as providing protection against harm. But such a 'disorientation' leads them to see life for what it is – to accept vulnerability and the universality of suffering. A 're-orientation' or reconfiguration of the understanding of suffering is the stepping stone to an attitude of acceptance or peace and quietude, which, according to Hudson, is the dhārmic goal of the *Mahābhārata*.

In this way, the literary mechanisms whereby the epic brings about a change in our reactions to inevitable catastrophes also brings about a change in our 'orientation' to categories used to structure our world. 'Where is the *dharma* of Kings?'[42] asks Draupadī to express her disaffection when the categories of her being a wife, daughter-in-law, queen or even a *kṣatriyāṇī* – categories meant to protect her – fail miserably to do so. Such self-reflexivity, a deep and pervading message of the *Mahābhārata*, encourages an internal criticism not only of *what* an agent wants to bring about but also a questioning of any *one* theoretical take on the notions of action, actor and agency. It is in the spirit of such intellectual humility that this anthology presents the diverse ways in which ethical and political agency is spoken of in the epic.

As philosopher Jonardon Ganeri has recently claimed, we the 'once colonised' now live in an age of re-emergence – an era marked neither by a desire to be legitimised by colonial recognition nor by the need to integrate. Yet many of the papers collected here (including this Introduction) connect to Western theories and concepts in their analyses. This could be inescapable because we, as once colonized, can no longer inherit a past in innocence, or it could be a conscious act of philosophical cosmopolitanism or intellectual solidarity. In either case, the spirit of bringing ideas from varying geographical and linguistic regions into contact is fundamentally an act of 'creative philosophical confrontation'. Negotiating the tensions that this creates becomes a 'form of philosophical practice producing in time new measures, new philosophies, new models for the way individuals conceive of themselves and their place in the world'.[43] The seers of the *Mahābhārata*, we think, would not have objected.

Part IV

Summary of Chapters

The chapters in this volume are arranged in three sections titled 'Action', 'Actor' and 'Epic Agency and Retellings'. We have shown how explorations of ethical and political agency, even when situated within the overarching dhārmic context of the *Mahābhārata*, reference the tropes of 'action' and 'agent' even though the latter are now inflected by the idiosyncrasies introduced by the epic's articulation of *dharma*. Sections I and II engage with such complications. Furthermore, taking seriously the identity of the epic as a literary text and as an *itihāsa* leads us to consider how the *epic* itself *works/acts* in performing its aesthetic function of conveying (say) the *rasa* of peace in the first instance and in discharging its moral pedagogical function in the second instance. Section III collects chapters that engage with the notion of *textual agency*.

Section I: Action

The essays in this section delve into the structure of *action* or *doing* when framed by the theory of karma in the *Mahābhārata*. These chapters engage with freedom/determinism debates and discuss whether there can be 'choice' within a framework of karmic determination. While this is important for establishing genuine ethical agency, a political critique of the karma theory opens up questions of gendered action and takes a close look at how actions theorized in terms of karma can end up maintaining status quo and a conservative social order.

Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya begins by reflecting on the significance of the *Mahābhārata* being an *itihāsa* rather than a *kāvya*. Not strictly 'history' in the Western sense of *recording* the past, an *itihāsa* is interested in the past as guiding humans to *dharma*. The 'past' is now a dialogic partner that helps us achieve justice in the present. Moreover, the past in the *Mahābhārata* itself acts, according to Bhattacharya: as the accumulation of karma, it 'makes things happen' in the present. The life of Karṇa poignantly exemplifies this agency. However, Bhattacharya argues that Karṇa struggles against such historical agency. He crafts his actions according to his own individual code of *dharma* – a code of loyalty, promise keeping and commitment to be counted as a warrior – and stands by it in spite of tragic consequences. We have here a picture of human life locked in a tussle between the forces of a

pre-written script and an individual determination to re-write it. But like the *Mahābhārata* itself, Bhattacharya is not willing to take a stand on whether changing the dhārmic order through subjective choice is at all possible and whether Karṇa succeeds in re-scripting justice.

In the chapter by **Amita Chatterjee**, the tragedy of Karṇa's life is framed in terms of the philosophical debate between determinism and freedom or *adṛṣta* and *puruṣakāra*. Chatterjee, however, first introduces the work of Donald Davidson on the metaphysics of action – its criterion, identity conditions and explanation – before moving on to questions of agency. Davidson's influential view that *reasons* are also *causes* of action becomes the backdrop to reinforce how the *Mahābhārata* emphasizes accountability. Chatterjee does not read Yudhiṣṭhira's incontinence during the dice game as a consequence of his being blinded by passion. Rather, she deploys the Davidsonian apparatus to explain Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour as an intentional (and hence culpable) action in which his 'reasons' not to play dice fail to resist an overpowering desire to do so. Chatterjee then goes on to re-instate free will (and hence accountability) within the causal framework of karma by deploying Davidsonian distinctions. Once reasons are seen to be causes, actions are both 'free' (because reasons are what the *self* intends) as well as 'determined' (because they are *caused*). This is compatibilism as *self-determination*, which Chatterjee finds echoed in the story of Gautamī (a lesser known tale from the Anuśāsana Parva).

Christopher G. Framarin's chapter delves into the 'mechanics' of a theory of karma. The intuition that right and wrong action produce good and bad consequences for the agent raises questions of *how* this happens and whether *mokṣa* is possible given that this happens. Rejecting the view that there is no detailed 'theory' of karma in the *Mahābhārata* (apart from a simple assertion of what he calls the 'bare-bones' intuition), Framarin moves to a careful discussion of Vyāsa's concept of *karmāśaya* – a state produced by action only when it is accompanied by desire and aversion (*kleśa*) for its results. These *karmāśayas* dispose the agent to repeat an action because of a desire for the fruits of the action and also make it possible to stop the cycle of rebirth by giving up desire – a strategy that is consistent with the Bhagavad Gītā's message. Framarin goes on to argue that such a theory is an improvement on contemporary strategies that sophisticate the intuition that good/bad actions lead to good/bad consequences by introducing *saṃskāras* (merit/demerit). He gives two alternative accounts of how *karmāśayas* can be related to *saṃskāras* and shows how on either interpretation the *Mahābhārata* is able to provide a way out of the cycle of action and rebirth.

No matter how logically elegant the *Mahābhārata*'s theory of action within the framework of karma is made out to be, **Arti Dhand** launches a strong, strident critique of it from the point of view of social justice. Concentrating on the karmayoga of the Bhagavad Gītā, Dhand argues that from the point of view of subaltern oppression, the message of 'desireless action' translates into acceptance of status quo and quieting of moral conscience. The notions of *svadharma* and *svabhāva* tether duty (or *what* action should be done desirelessly) to hierarchical social roles. Dhand cites three examples of karmayogins (ideal followers of karmayoga) in the *Mahābhārata* who are all subaltern and who embrace their service (and servitude) by invoking the discourse of karma. Even though karmayoga is successful as a sorteriological strategy, she argues for its failure as an *ethical* framework to motivate changes in traditional structures of injustice.

Section II: Actor

The character of an actor – her intentions and virtues – are significant not only as the root of agency but as a means to regulate harmful agencies. The chapters in this section delve into the nature of an ideal agent in the *Mahābhārata*. They also address questions pertaining to *who* are constructed as genuine agents having a voice in ethico-political domains. In this way, analyses of the 'actor' in the *Mahābhārata* world guide us to the play of underlying power structures that create and track oppressions in that world.

Gangeya Mukherji's chapter shifts to the centrality of the agent in the *Mahābhārata*'s understanding of violence. The chapter notes the paradox of upholding both *ahimsā* and state-sanctioned war. However, Mukherji detects a severe critique of violence in the laments of the Strī Parva. His chapter traces the *Mahābhārata*'s awareness of limits of the instrumental efficacy of violence along the lines of some contemporary theorists of war. Mukherji detects a bridge to a non-martial (and non-violent) ideal in the trope of the Ideal Warrior who is armed not only with fancy weaponry but with effective virtues. In Yudhiṣṭhira's anguished quest to configure sovereignty without the taint of violence, Mukherji sees the possibility of the 'war function' being replaced by more constructive aspirations for social justice through peace.

Shirshendu Chakrabarti also locates the ideal agent in the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira, who he places alongside Hamlet and Antigone. Yudhiṣṭhira in the epic asks the most questions and is a paragon of irresolution. Yet, paradoxically, this very vacillation suggests a novel model of agency, according to Chakrabarti, which is simultaneously

a mode of self-discovery and self-making. By problematizing received codes of conduct, Yudhiṣṭhira actively creates ethical dilemmas for himself; by entertaining far-ranging alternatives to a course of action, he tries to be inclusive of other perspectives, and his quest is for a genuinely *human* morality not tied to either a *kṣatriya* or *brahmin dharma* but expanding the boundaries of both. What is interesting though is that through his doubts, ambivalences and immersion in contradictions, Yudhiṣṭhira becomes 'ready' to act with firmness at the end of the *Mahābhārata* in his resolve not to abandon the dog. Chakrabarti sees in Yudhiṣṭhira a Renaissance Self combining the active with the contemplative to embark on a quest for *svadharma* that is open to exploring radical future possibilities. The 'infinite determinability' of what it means to be a human being or an agent now comes to mark a distinctive human agency 'plunged unremittingly in agonized choice'.

In his chapter on the dialectical nature of non-human agency, **Arindam Chakrabarti** analyses the possibilities in the 'othering' of non-human actors in the narrative universe of the *Mahābhārata*. The epic's descriptions of seemingly impossible intelligent piscine, reptilian and avian agents admonishing humans on critical ethical issues, is an attempt to adopt a normative and scientific yet involved look on the human moral agent through a 'trans-species point of view'. Chakrabarti relates such evaluation of human community through what can be imagined to be a 'shared non-human subjectivity'. Inhabiting the environs of ancient Hindu and modern Western philosophy and reviewing the 'different registers of moral semiotics, virtue-ethics, and amoral politics', the chapter refers to the ethical transgression of speciesism while reminding us of the 'moral considerability' of the non-human because of our indebtedness to them. Chakrabarti finds that reflective human agency can only be developed within a wider moral imagination that recognizes the similarity of suffering across corporeal difference. This implies that ethical subjectivity framed within civilizational norms is intrinsically limited.

Such explorations of liberatory and expansive agency in the *Mahābhārata* stand in direct opposition to the relentless erasures of gendered and subaltern actors in the epic. **Uma Chakravarti**'s chapter shows how *ethics* itself in the *Mahābhārata* is *ideologically constructed* by narrow *kṣatriya* interests. The political transition from kin and clan units to kingdoms and the corresponding shifts in relation to land go together with anxieties about lineage and control of female sexuality. This is concomitant with changes in social practices of marriage which parse out as the exchange of women as wombs. But Chakravarti forcefully points out how the text – that purports to

be about *all* 'human' ethical issues – is strangely reluctant to expound on the ethical dimensions of reproductive practices even after marking them as violations. Chakravarti makes her case by analysing the *rākṣasa* mode or 'marriage by abduction' seen in the abduction of Ambā (along with her two sisters) to serve as brides for the king. The abduction of Ambā goes horribly awry – interrupting her love affair with Śālva, pushing her through patriarchal cracks in the role-based systems of social support of the times and leaving her to seek her own resolution by trans-gendering herself. Ambā's expression of sexual autonomy is not only thwarted, but her righteous rage is not even allowed to surface as a moral crisis by the narrative logic. This, according to Chakravarti, is a clear case of feminine agency and a female-bodied actor being silenced as an ethico-political discordant voice.

The story of Ekalavya and Droṇa has been looked at as an erasure of subaltern actors and agency through the lens of caste hegemony. **Sundar Sarukkai** in his chapter 'Ekalavya and the Possibility of Learning' complicates this caste reading by situating the episode within a novel theory of education that refers to the relationship between 'spontaneous action' and 'reflective ethics', as well as the 'ethics of presence and absence'. According to him, this episode allegorizes the *Mahābhārata* itself and can provide analytical resources for motivation for action without the thematic preponderance of revenge and promise. In a picture of learning in the *absence of a teacher*, Ekalavya practices in 'front' of Droṇa's idol but ultimately learns through discovering the teacher in himself, allegorically holding together the tension between teacher/student and presence/absence. The *Mahābhārata*, Sarukkai argues, attempts to teach us moral skills without the presence of sages. Sarukkai also explains the gift of Ekalavya's thumb through the idea of an absent teacher and 'ontological possession'. The taking of the thumb serves as 'metaphorical merging' since Ekalavya's action is Droṇa's own. This deep-rooted cultural trope of pedagogical merger raises the paradox of autonomous learning. As answer, Sarukkai nuances the notion of 'standing in'. The idol acts through its embodiment in the subject and adduces responsibility to and of the absent teacher. In the act of teaching, the actor, even in absenting himself, continues working through the body of the student.

Section III: Epic Agency and Retellings

This last section circles back to the *Mahābhārata* as an itihāsa and a literary text. The essays in this section theorize the epic text's ability

to convey meaning and 'make happen' changes in its readers/listeners. They variously explore what we have called 'textual agency' or the agentive structures involved in conscious re-tellings/re-hearings of the text.

Sudipta Kaviraj's chapter teases out the complex ethico-aesthetic effects of Rabindranath Tagore's 'telling' of Kuntī's story in nineteenth-century modern India but also suggests a conceptual framework to make space for such multi-layered retellings. Tagore stages a dialogue between Kuntī and Karṇa in which the hitherto hidden story of Karṇa's birth is revealed to him. The dialogic form, according to Kaviraj, shifts the *rasa* aesthetics of the episode and enables an *inside* glimpse into the act of a mother giving up her son. The two protagonists revealing themselves to each other (in twilight – a liminal darkness of shame, secrets, dream-like appearances, mystery) come to represent the modern quest for subjective springs of action. Is Tagore's story a 'new' tale? To answer this, Kaviraj introduces the idea of an 'infra-narrative space' – an under-narrated and under-determined moment in the story of a fictional character, which others can then pick up and fill out in another story. Tagore's tale, for instance, explores the interiority of the characters left un-mined in the epic. The ontological status of such modern re-tellings transcends the dichotomy of either being a mere elaboration of the epic or being radically different from it. According to Kaviraj, retellings of the *Mahābhārata* foreground contemporary ethical struggles and affective milieus and become a strategy to incorporate and negotiate the historicity in a text with the conceit of being 'eternal'.

Lakshmi Bandlamudi theorises this capaciousness of the *Mahābhārata* through a Bakhtinian framework. By looking at arguments made by Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira in the Vana Parva, on the merit of forgiving their enemies, she underlines the significance of the dialogue mode as an effective instrument for unpacking the meaning/s surrounding agency in the *Mahābhārata*. This gets able assistance in the literary critical tools/tropes of answerability and chronotopicity supplied by Mikhail Bakhtin. With particular reference to the multiple interpretations of the agency of Draupadī and Kuntī, the chapter states that the chronological modernity of these tools should not prove problematic in understanding the variegated conceptual world of the ancient epic, since the epic itself grows over time into a veritable hall of mirrors. In this way, it does not appear to prioritize any single conclusion pertaining to selfhood and agency. A readership aware of the palimpsest of ideals that history appears to offer would treat with circumspection issues connected with non–self-righteous courage and a morality of action in

the epic. According to Bandlamudi, this approach seemingly endorses (without specifically mentioning it) the Reception Theory, or what has been termed the 'aesthetic of reception' in modern literary theory by Hans Robert Jauss. As in this interpretative tradition, Bandlamudi argues that the continuing dialogue between the text and generations of readers with their expanding/varying perspectives goes against rendering any definite epistemic category to the epic and recognizes instead the undiminished agency of both the *Mahābhārata* and its readers.

B. N. Patnaik's chapter gives us a glimpse of the entrenched tradition of vernacular retellings of the epic by engaging with the Sāralā *Mahābhārata* written by the fifteenth-century Odia poet, Sāralā Dās. This Odia version, targeting a non-elite, rural audience in Odisha, virtually transforms the epic into a Viṣṇu Purāṇa with Kṛṣṇa as its principal protagonist and bhakti as its raison d'etre. Of the many episodes given a different twist in the Sāralā *Mahābhārata*, Patnaik concentrates on its re-imagining of Droṇa as a compassionate and even-handed teacher in the Ekalavya episode. An important step in this re-characterization is to contextualise Droṇa's acceptance of the grizzly gift of Ekalavya's thumb in a culture that routinely demanded impossibly difficult 'ritual gifts' or *dāna*. Moreover, in an ethos that condemned 'taking' of knowledge and in which power – even the power of weaponry – was meant to be aligned with character traits of moral discrimination, it was important for Droṇa to disarm Ekalavya, who in the story is vindictive and had 'stolen' knowledge. These justifications, however, do not prevent Patnaik from discerning a layer of political complexity in the episode. Ekalavya could well represent marginal cultures (tribals and 'forest dwellers') trying to gain access to centres of power, with Droṇa's actions signifying the pushback from the centre against such uprisings. Even so, Patnaik indicates how the religious point of view triumphs over the political in the Sāralā *Mahābhārata*. While military and political manoeuvres for bridging social divides fail in the narrative, the opposed groups are shown as working side by side through the Divine intervention of Kṛṣṇa.

Notes

1 Kisari Mohan Ganguli (trans), *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyas*, 12 vols., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007 [1893–96] (Hereafter Ganguli), 12: Mausala Parva, 16. Translation modified.

2 The thematic organization and metaphoric recurrence in the *Mahābhārata* convey a unity of thought and expression that is reminiscent of the Bible. It is interesting to recall Northrop Frye's argument for the textual unity of the Bible: 'Those who do succeed in reading the Bible from beginning

to end will discover that at least it has a beginning and an end, and some traces of a total structure. It begins where time begins, with the creation of the world; it ends where time ends, with the Apocalypse, and it surveys human history in between, or the aspect of history it is interested in, under the symbolic names of Adam and Israel. There is also a body of concrete images: city, mountain, river, garden, tree, oil, fountain, bread, wine, bride, sheep, and many others, which recur so often that they clearly indicate some kind of unifying principle'. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt Inc., 1982, p. xiii.

3 Nicholas Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000, p. 384.

4 Elisa Freschi, 'Indian Philosophy', in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action,* Timothy O'Connor and Constantine Sandis (eds), West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 419–428, 420.

5 It is interesting to note that in the earliest English translation of the entire text, completed in 1896, Kisari Mohan Ganguli rendered the Sanskrit words *hetu* and *karaṇa* as 'agency' and 'agent', respectively. The context is a dialogue in the Anuśāsana Parva between Gautamī and various interlocutors – a hunter, a serpent, *Mṛtyu* (Death) and *kāla* (Time) – to determine who could be punished for her son's death.

6 P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, London: Methuen, 1974, pp. 1–28.

7 Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: Education of the Dharma-King*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

8 Peter Hill, *Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahābhārata: A Study in the History of Ideas*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2001, pp. 358–59.

9 Of course, there are the goals of *artha* and *kāma* too – with their own complications regarding their relation to the pursuit of dharma. For instance, in the Anuśāsana Parva, the *Mahābhārata* characterizes dharma as 'Do not do unto others what is adverse to the self; this briefly is dharma which works contrary to *kāma*'.

10 Hill, *Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahābhārata*, p. 371.

11 Ganguli, 10: Anuśāsana Parva, 16.

12 Ganguli, 10: Anuśāsana Parva, 17.

13 If '*daiva*' translated as 'destiny' is taken to mean the influence of gods, then the *Bhagavadgītā* actually makes the dependence reciprocal. God enables humans, but humans also enable gods (Chapter V).

14 Hill, *Fate, Predestination and Human Action in the Mahābhārata*, p. 366.

15 *dharmo rakśati rakśitah* 2.30.8

16 Ganguli, 2: 63.

17 Ganguli, 2: 64.

18 Ganguli, 2: 64.

19 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (ed. & intro) Jerome Kohn, New York: Schocken Books, 2005, p. 66.

20 James Fitzgerald, 'Dharma and Its Translation in the Mahābhārata', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32: 2004, pp. 671–85, 679.

21 Fitzgerald, 'Dharma and Its Translation in the Mahābhārata', p. 673.

22 Fitzgerald, 'Dharma and Its Translation in the Mahābhārata', p. 674.

23 Another sense of dharma is essence.

24 Roy Perrett, *Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998.
25 Perrett, *Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study*, 30.
26 See also Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 68–70.
27 M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols., New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1958–94, 32:122.
28 *sammuhyāmi viṣīdāmi dharmo me śithilīkṛtah* (12.142.2).
29 Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, Chap 2.
30 Fitzgerald, 'Dharma and Its Translation in the Mahābhārata', p. 675.
31 Fitzgerald, 'Dharma and Its Translation in the Mahābhārata', p. 675.
32 Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, p. 54.
33 Bimal Krishna Matilal, 'Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics', in *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Ethics and Epics*, Jonardon Ganeri (ed), New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, 19–35, 34. Ganeri expresses this through another metaphor: 'If human beings orient themselves in moral space with the compass of duty and rule, Kṛṣṇa represents orientation by the polestar, seeing to it that the final destination is reached even if the path taken must sometimes meander and backtrack'. Concealed Art of the Soul, 70.
34 See Mukund Lath, *Dharmasankat*, Jaipur & Allahabad: Darshan Pratishthan & Raka Prakashan, 2004, 72.
35 For more on the notion of 'character' (and on Yudhiṣṭhira's character) in the *Mahābhārata*, see Gangeya Mukherji in 'Himsā-Ahimsā in the Mahābhārata: The Lonely Position of Yudhiṣṭhira', in *Mahābhārata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (eds), New Delhi: Routledge, 2014, pp. 219–243.
36 The *Mahābhārata* is clear that tunnel vision is the death of dharma (*na ek śākhena dharmeṇa rāgyo dharmo vidhīyate* 12.142.7).
37 *bahvyah pratividhātavyāh prajñā tatah tatah* 12.142.4.
38 See Vrinda Dalmiya, *Caring to Know: Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahābhārata*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016.
39 Margaret Urban Walker, 'Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency' in *Moral Contexts*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, pp. 21–34.
40 Simon Leys, 'Introduction' in *The Analects of Confucius*, Simon Leys (trans), New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997, p. xviii.
41 Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 27.
42 2.62.6–8.
43 Jonardon Ganeri, 'Why Philosophy Must Go Global: A Manifesto', *Confluence: An Online Journal of World Philosophies*, June 2016, pp. 134–141, 139.


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Part I

ACTION


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1

MAHĀBHĀRATA. ITIHĀSA. AGENCY

Sibesh Chandra Bhattacharya

I

The present chapter – which is sort of an introductory chapter to the volume – has been developed around three foci: (1) *Mahābhārata*, the nature of the text and context; (2) self-description of the *Mahābhārata* and the character of *itihāsa*; and (3) past as an agent in the *Mahābhārata*. We have also attempted to knit these three together to give them a unity.

The enterprise of contemporizing the *Mahābhārata* has a pretty long history. One of the ways an old work can be contemporized is to rework it, modify it, reshape and change it in terms of perceived contemporary needs. In the context of the *Mahābhārata* such exercises have been being continuously undertaken since a very long time ago. In fact the very text/texts that we now call the *Mahābhārata* itself, according to many scholars, evolved through such exercises. It is believed by many that the text developed over a long period of time through continuous reworking and grafting on an original nucleus. Apart from that, themes, sub-themes and stories of the *Mahābhārata* were taken up by later writers as inspiration for fresh works. Practically all the premier Sanskrit playwrights or poets like Bhāsa, Kālidāsa, Bhāravi, Māgha and Srī Harṣa, not to mention many other figures, took many of their themes from the *Mahābhārata*.

There is another way of contemporizing an old work: not by introducing any physical change in it but by asking contemporary questions of it or by viewing it from contemporary perspectives. Studying the issue of agency in the *Mahābhārata* is an exercise of the latter kind. Though what now goes by 'theory of action' may be of recent origin, the issues of agency have agitated humans ever since the time man began thinking about the meaning of human life and human destiny. At the centre of the issue of agency obviously lies the question of freedom of choice and action. However, the issues of agency have larger

ramifications than just the question of free will versus determinism. Free will and determinism are not as starkly antithetical as they may look at first sight; there is a great deal of grey area between the two, and the intervening space between them is quite extensive, allowing substantial scope for the play of choice, commitment, responsibility and accountability. Without entering into the philosophical niceties, it will suffice to note that because man is a social and emotional being he is always caught in a web of relationships, norms and conventions as well as webs of impulses, which become factors in his choices and actions.

The question naturally arises: why the *Mahābhārata*? The answer to some extent is obvious. The *Mahābhārata* is extraordinary; it is so in several respects. Firstly it is huge; the Critical Edition which has been prepared after a great deal of rejections of available matter is about eight times the combined volume of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Mahābhārata* is huge not just in bulk but in conception as well. It strove to become, it seems consciously, not only encyclopaedic in its reach, but it also tried to capture human life in its fullness – its strength, its frailty, the heights that it can reach as well as its lower depths – it tried to capture it all in all its rawness and refinement. Whatever may be its other features, it remains a magnificent human document. It may perhaps be said that the *Mahābhārata*'s continued appeal, despite its many forbidding features, to a large extent springs from this fact that it tries to mirror human life in its entirety and in its multi-layered complexity. We are living in an acutely disturbed period; violence has been one of the chief features of the modern age; Ashish Nandy says that the twentieth century was one of the most violent centuries in human history. We are becoming increasingly edgy and intolerant. In our violence-ridden times the *Mahābhārata* seems particularly relevant; violence and justice are among the central concerns of the *Mahābhārata*.

Another of its features is relevant to us. The *Mahābhārata* along with the Rāmāyaṇa played a crucial role in the formation of Indian culture. Many astute *Mahābhārata* scholars have asserted that the author/authors of the *Mahābhārata* consciously built it to become a sort of library of Hinduism.[1] One may not agree with this formulation, but there is no gainsaying the fact that for centuries it has been a major instructor in India.

> The *Mahābhārata* has played a major role in educating Indian peoples, in structuring and informing their imagination and

> sensibilities in fundamental ways for the past 1500 years or more. . . . The *Mahābhārata* gave them grand heroes and villains, thrilling stories and profound crises, it schooled them in cosmology, philosophy, theology and ethics.[2]

It, along with the Rāmāyaṇa, suffused the Indian atmosphere. A. K. Ramanujan puts it poetically that no Hindu reads these two epics for the first time; even before a Hindu comes of age to read and write, he is already introduced to it through diverse modes – stories told by the elders to beguile the children, numerous dramatic representations, narrations/readings of episodes/stories.[3] In short, the *Mahābhārata* was an instructor of Indian culture. And the importance of culture as an agent can hardly be overemphasized.

But the *Mahābhārata* was not the only teacher; the impact of the Rāmāyaṇa was not any less. It would be very arrogant and highly presumptuous of me to try to answer why we should choose the *Mahābhārata* instead of the Rāmāyaṇa. Ultimately it will boil down to personal preference. But even then I would venture to assert that between the two, the *Mahābhārata* remains a more gripping human document. And this is because the Rāmāyaṇa draws the line between the protagonists of the right and wrong, of the evil and good a bit too rigidly – in terms of practically absolute black and white – and thus makes it a bit rarefied, remote and academic. In contrast, the *Mahābhārata* is more complex. The grey area between the right and wrong is more widespread in it, which makes it closer to the existential human conditions.

And yet the Rāmāyaṇa probably did not draw as much of critical ire as the *Mahābhārata*. Oldenberg, for example, in his celebrated and influential work on the *Mahābhārata*, frequently used the expression 'monstrous' or other derivatives of 'monster' to characterize some features of the text.[4] It was its hugeness – both its mass and the largeness of conception which he took for chaotic looseness – that infuriated him most. Similarly, Winternitz called the *Mahābhārata* a 'literary monster'. Of late, however, the Western perception seems to be changing. It is no longer thought to be such a thing of chaos, and the much maligned Dahlmann's theory of the striking underlying unity of the structure of the *Mahābhārata* has been gaining more and more supporters. Sukthankar was of course an old supporter. Among the more recent ones can be added the names of Dumezil, Biardeau, Fitzgerald and so forth. Hiltebeitel has pointed out that what were once considered drawbacks – the largeness, the baggy looseness of texture – are

now counted by people like Henry James as signs of great artistry.[5] Although the Western dismissive attitude born of their application of the Western literary standards and value judgments are showing signs of change and the *Mahābhārata* is now being viewed on its own terms, the vestiges of the early Western assessment still continue.

Many scholars still believe, as we have hinted, that the *Mahābhārata* began its career as an oral heroic tale and grew haphazardly through continuous additions till at a later date some composers and redactors put some order into it and put it in writing. A specific aim and ideology guided the redaction and editing. It was to establish the authority of Brāhmanical Neo-Hinduism that was rising under the aegis of the Śuṃga-Gupta rulers. During the reign of these dynasties there was a revival of Hinduism that was put to serious challenge by the heterodox movements led by Buddhism and Jainism during the post-Vedic period. Such sympathetic and keen *Mahābhārata* scholars as van Buitenen, James Fitzgerald, Mary Carol Smith, Ruth Katz and others belong to this group. They generally believe that this editing and redaction were done to propagate the ideology of a new imperialism encouraged and patronized by the rising royal houses like the Śuṃgas, Kāṇvas, Guptas, Vākāṭkas and so on. These dynasties became the patrons of the resurgence of Vedic royal sacrifices like the Rājasūya and Aśvamedha.

Obviously, the suggested dates of the composition of the *Mahābhārata* vary a great deal. The *Mahābhārata* claims that it was contemporaneous with the transition from the Dvāpara to Kali. This transition, according to modern experts, took place around 1000 BC. This date does not militate too much against the archaeological data as well as the socio-economic milieu the *Mahābhārata* presents. Because of the more or less uniform association with *Mahābhārata* sites, Painted Grey Ware (PGW) pottery has been accepted as the representative archaeological datum of the *Mahābhārata*. The PGW precedes the famous NBP wares, the earliest date of which goes to around 700 BC. The socio-economic milieu of the *Mahābhārata* suggests the waning of the Early Vedic age and the rise of the post-Vedic period.[6] Buitenen accepts that the original oral bardic layer which was the nucleus of the *Mahābhārata* originated around 900 BC (Parikṣit and his descendants are mentioned in later Vedic works like *Atharvaveda* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*). But the composition of the *Mahābhārata* as a written text took about 800 years spanning from 400 BC to 400 AD.[7] Fitzgerald gives a shorter span, 100 BC–350 AD.[8] Hiltebeitel gives a still shorter span: 150 BC–0.[9]

II

Fortunately the vexed issues of the historicity, authorship and dates do not directly concern us here. However, how the *Mahābhārata* perceives its own nature as a text has some bearing on our concerns. It is well known that the Rāmāyaṇa and the *Mahābhārata* bear some family resemblance. For example, abduction and dishonour to their main female character set into motion and govern the train of the central events in both texts. In fact some scholars even think that Draupadī and Sītā are identical, both being born of mother earth and not of human womb.[10] Important parts of both the works describe the heroes' exile in the forest.[11] In both the author also figures as a character; in both the story is narrated on the occasion of performance of sacrifice. It is natural, therefore, that the names of both texts are frequently taken in the same breath.

Although we find the use of several names to describe the Rāmāyaṇa and the *Mahābhārata* – *ākhyāna*, *kāvya*, *kathā*, *carita*, *itihāsa* and the like – it seems that both the texts had slightly different preference for naming themselves. In the framing portions of the *Mahābhārata*, the portions where the text describes its own nature or tells us how it came to be composed and declares the merits resulting from reading or listening to it, it calls itself *itihāsa* at least eight times. In the same way the Rāmāyaṇa calls itself a *Kāvya* thirteen times. The *Mahābhārata* never calls itself *Kāvya*, and the Rāmāyaṇa never used the term *itihāsa* for itself except in two interpolated places which have been omitted in the Critical edition.[12] Of course, Ānandavardhana regarded the *Mahābhārata* as *Kāvya*, and the rhetorician Viśvanātha called both the Rāmāyaṇa and *Mahābhārata* as *Mahakāvya*, an appellation that generally has been accepted in most modern Indian languages.[13] Yet, it may perhaps be said that the *Mahābhārata* itself preferred the name *itihāsa*, and that is how it was generally called in the Indian tradition.

It is pertinent to ask what the *Mahābhārata* intends to imply when it calls itself an *itihāsa*. Let us begin by noting another small thing. Besides the eight framing places, the expression *itihāsa* also occurs at several other places in the *Mahābhārata* to illustrate or validate a point of view by narrating a story. It seems that the term *itihāsa* has been used in the *Mahābhārata* in two slightly different senses. Firstly, it stands for the narration of past, as the etymological meaning of the expression *itihāsa* (*iti ha āsa* or 'thus it was') implies, that is, how a thing has come about. It is the narration of past events. When finally Śāntanu intervened, disregarding his earlier promise to stop Gangā

from drowning his eighth child, Gangā narrated the *itihāsa* behind her seemingly heartless acts and explained how the *Āṣṭavasu* were cursed by Vaśiṣṭha to take birth as human beings.[14] Here *itihāsa* seems to signify past history.

Yet *itihāsa* does not exactly correspond to history as we take it in its current usage. There is substantial difference between the two. This is not perhaps a fit occasion for a fuller discussion of the highly interesting difference between history and *itihāsa*, but some of the more prominent points of difference between the two need to be taken note of. The second usage of the expression *itihāsa* in the *Mahābhārata* where the term is used to exemplify a point usually pertaining to the working of *dharma* is the sense in which the expression has been used most frequently in the *Mahābhārata*. It is this way of looking at *itihāsa* that provides the vital key to the difference between the notions of *itihāsa* and history. Firstly, *itihāsa* is much more explicitly didactic in nature than history, and it does not shy away from accepting its didactic character. *Itihāsa* teaches, and it teaches by example. *Itihāsa* is not interested in the past for its own sake; its interest is not just antiquarian interest. From this follows the second point of difference: *itihāsa* is not interested in the whole of the past; it is basically interested in what is exemplary, that is, what holds a salutary lesson. The past that is devoid of didactic value is not given a place in *itihāsa*.

However, what holds a lesson for human beings? The answer can be: that which guides man in his pursuit of the ends that enrich human lives, that is, the pursuit of the *puruṣārthas*.[15] It is in this sense of guiding man to the prescribed ends of human life, that the *Mahābhārata* calls itself *itihāsa*. This leads us to an even deeper difference of character between history and *itihāsa*. Briefly it can be said that while history remains trapped in the recording of the process of change, *itihāsa* tries to wade through the process of change to reach the shore of invariance. That which does not change is what, in real terms, is valuable. To exemplify that value is the goal of *itihāsa*. Because of history's insistence on recording the process – the process of change from the past to the present – it remains preoccupied with the ephemeral. One of the unfortunate fallouts of this, as was pointed out by Descartes, is that history seems to encourage keeping alive the sense of injustice, deprivation and suffering. And keenness to rectify the injustices of the past – often turning into avenging zeal – tends to become an obsession. On the other hand, *itihāsa* – and the *Mahābhārata* is a prime example of this – puts highest emphasis on justice. *Dharma* is a recurrent theme and an obsessive concern in the *Mahābhārata*.

Bearing in mind this character of the text – which is largely endorsed by the Indian tradition – that it is an *itihāsa*, let us try to see how the past itself has been viewed as an agency in the *Mahābhārata*. In this exploration I propose to take up certain aspects of the career of Karṇa as an illustrative example. But before doing that it ought to be re-emphasized that *itihāsa* signifying *human* past in the ordinary sense – the sense of the expression 'history' – is only a secondary-sense of the term *itihāsa* in the *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, in the West history has been often looked upon as a corporeal body of collective human activities charting a given course – as though endowed with a will of its own – and moving in a direction autonomous of the will and actions of men as individuals. Such notions have been a prominent feature of the interpretation of history in the West at least since the time of St Augustine. Within this framework history is a huge 'agent'. It is necessary at this point to underline that the idea of *itihāsa* never exactly developed these notions. We have noted that the primary sense of *itihāsa* in early India, as well as in the *Mahābhārata*, is that it is a special event or a set of events that acts as an exemplifier of the *puruṣārthas*. And in that sense it does not appear that it was assigned much of an agency role. For *itihāsa* was looked upon only as setting an example and not as a force. It could at best act as a motivator but not as a motor. I think this is a very significant feature of the notion of *itihāsa*; it was either just a narration of a past event that helps in clarifying a point (the way Gangā related how the eight Vasus were cursed) or it was a narrative holding a lesson. In either way *itihāsa* was looked upon as something not directly impinging upon the present; it was only a passive and not an active agent in shaping human lives and affairs.

But that was not the only way the past was viewed. The past as the manifestation or even accumulation of karma, however, was assigned an agency role – in fact, a rather strong one. But a significant difference between the way the role of past is viewed within the framework of the contemporary idea of history and the role of past within the rubric of karma is worth noting. Karma theory is concerned with individuals alone; in karma theory individuals are individually accountable for their actions. This accountability of course runs through future lives and conditions the shape of future to that extent, but karma cannot be bequeathed like property or a burden to future generations. History, on other hand, is viewed as a collective body of the human past, endowed, as noted, with almost a kind of autonomous inner force and momentum beyond the control of individuals but nonetheless

conditioning and influencing the collective life of men. Its role thus is radically different from the role assigned to the past in the theory of karma. Even Carlyle's formulation that history is the biography of great men, despite its individualist orientation, in its makeup and implications is different from the constitution and scope of the philosophy of karma – the activities of the great men in Carlyle's theory do not just influence the destiny of their own lives, they in no small measure affect the lives of the larger society they are part of. However, the question also remains: aren't the great men themselves in many respects the products of 'historical forces'? Anyway, there is an unmistakable difference of character between the Indian concept of karma and the Western notion of history.

III

In the career of Karṇa his past life seems to be always catching up with him at all important junctures and weaving and conditioning, as it were, his fate. Yet it would not be correct to view the life of Karṇa as though he was just a passive player and allowed 'fate' to fashion his life. At some of the most crucial points he took decisions according to previously thought-out plans and worked towards a 'conscious' goal. Karṇa's life was a complex mixture of fate/accident and human effort; his career had quite a bit of Prometheus colour. Karṇa's life exemplifies both the agency of the past and its limits. Let us try to explore him a bit.

The first point to note is that Karṇa was an unwanted and abandoned child. The *Mahābhārata* has emphatically underlined this point, and it is important to remember this. There is an external similarity in the way Kuntī conceived all her four sons; she invoked four principal gods of the Hindu pantheon – Sūrya, *Dharma*, Vāyu and Indra – for the purpose. But while in the case of the younger three sons she invoked the concerned deity with the specific objective of bearing a son, in the case of her firstborn, the text underlines that she invoked the sun god out of girlish 'curiosity', and she was so overcome with shame and regret for what she had done that she discarded the new-born child by throwing it into a flowing river. In the case of the three younger sons, Kuntī was coaxed and persuaded by her husband to invoke the gods so that she could 'bear children' for him.[16] While the birth of Karṇa was marked by shame and regret, the births of her younger children were marked by joy and pride of motherhood. However, the abandoned infant was born with divine protection – Karṇa was born with a protective natural armour and earrings, the gifts of his divine

father – and he survived. Born of a *kṣatriya* mother and divine father, Karṇa was adopted and lovingly raised by the couple Adhiratha and Rādhā belonging to the lowly Sūta caste. Karṇa had to carry the burden of this past all through his life, and this to a large extent shaped the future course of his life. While the expression 'the son of Kuntī' (*Kaunteya*, *Kuntīputra*, etc.) was used for the three elder Pāṇḍavas as a sign of honour, Karṇa was frequently addressed as 'the son of a Sūta' or 'Rādheya' (the son of Rādhā) almost as a term of abuse. Of course, ironically, not only biologically but also morally, Karṇa was entitled to be addressed as a Kaunteya.

While excellent teachers were engaged for the Pāṇḍavas as a matter of course, Karṇa with the badge of 'Sūta's son' hanging on him had to take recourse to deception in order to get training in the art of war from Paraśurāma. When the deception was discovered, his teacher cursed him that he would forget the technique of the use of arms when he would need it most.[17] Meanwhile he had also earned another terrible curse from a Brahmana that at the time of his death, the wheels of his chariot would be swallowed up by the earth.

Looking at this history, it seems that up to a point the real agent of Karṇa's life was his *past* – in the construction of which he had little or no role. That he acquired the identity of a Sūta had nothing to do with his own action, he did not choose to be so, and it was imposed on him by a 'history' that lay beyond his control. From this point of view, he seems to be only a plaything in the hands of fate. Of course, whether Karṇa had acted as an *independent agent* in choosing deception for his education is a debatable point. Bhīṣma in the Śāntiparva blamed Karṇa for it; he said that the deception led to the loss of *dharma* and *tapas* (spiritual strength) of Karṇa.[18] In Bhīṣma's opinion thus, Paraśurāma's curse was not unjustified. Karṇa had to blame himself for it. We might, however, ponder what alternative course of action was open to Karṇa. Either he could have stifled his ambitions, going against his native character (he had inherited the *tejas*/*ojas* of his father) and pursued the humble occupation of a car driver, or perhaps meet a fate similar to that of Ekalavya. I think from that point onwards, Karṇa *decided* to be the master of his own life; it was a conscious decision of his to embrace the life of a warrior and force his way to being counted as such.

This is what must have driven him to challenge Arjuna, the very best of the recognized marksman at the weapon-wielding show where Karṇa first makes his appearance in the epic as a real flesh-and-blood figure.[19] The Karṇa–Arjuna rivalry is a fascinating and intriguing aspect of the *Mahābhārata*. In the current theories of agency, the psychological makeup of an actor is given an important place.[20] What

played in the mind of Karṇa in choosing Arjuna as a target for intense hostility? One can, of course, understand the deep-seated grudge a discarded and abandoned child might bear against the genteel and the better-off sections of society. But this alone cannot account for Karṇa's chosen hostility towards Arjuna. For Karṇa did not betray even an iota of hostility to, say, Duryodhana, who like Arjuna represented the same 'class' and 'privilege' that an abandoned child growing up as an outcast had reasons to hate. I think it is more reasonable to explain Karṇa's behaviour as a conscious decision than as the natural rage of the deprived against the privileged. It was a conscious decision to announce to the world at the earliest available opportunity his own worth by challenging the very best of the worthy set. It, of course, added to the poignancy that Arjuna happened to be his brother. The tragic irony full of forebodings was immediately clear to Kuntī, who was watching the show along with other ladies of the royal household. Kuntī's silent trial began from that moment; she fainted.[21]

Karṇa also consciously chose to carve a code of conduct for himself, and he would not deviate from it however terrible the cost. He gave away the invincible armour and the shimmering earrings that he was born with, chopping them off from his body, to Indra, who came asking for these disguised as a Brahmana. This episode was an attempted deception on the part of Indra, who wanted to help his son Arjuna, by robbing Karṇa of the power that resided in these. Karṇa, however, saw through the deception; he knew what it meant, yet he did not flinch in giving them away. It was not fate but a conscious choice, a voluntary choice made with the full knowledge of the consequences.

Moreover, true to his character, Karṇa resisted firmly and politely the offers of first Kṛṣṇa and then Kuntī – both had revealed his true identity to him as the epic narrative unfolded – to give up his loyalty to Duryodhana and take his rightful place as the eldest son of Kuntī. These two meetings are revealing of Karṇa's character. We will be following Hiltebeitel, who has dealt with these two meetings in considerable detail.[22] However, while in Hiltebeitel's treatment the focus is actually on Kṛṣṇa, we foreground Karṇa in our discussion.

The venue of the first meeting was Kṛṣṇa's chariot.[23] Kṛṣṇa was returning from the Kaurava capital after the failure of his last bid to negotiate peace when he took Karṇa on his chariot and promised him the throne and all the rights of the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas if he agreed to defect from the Kauravas. From our point of view, the response of Karṇa is what is important here. Karṇa said that he knew that Kṛṣṇa was sincere and had his best interests at heart, but he would remain loyal to Duryodhana and the *sūtas*, "who had loved, raised, and

married him into their lineage".[24] "Let Yudhiṣṭhira be king forever, he who has Ṛṣīkeśa for his guide, Dhananjaya as his warrior", he said. He admitted that he knew that a 'great sacrifice' of a battle was beginning in which he along with all who would side with Duryodhana would lose their lives. But when Kṛṣṇa asked him, "Does this offer of a kingdom not tempt you?" Karṇa replied, "Why do you want to confuse me when you know my answer?"[25] At the end of the conversation, he gets down from the chariot 'after tightly clasping Mādhava'. The only boon that he had asked for from Kṛṣṇa was that all those who fell fighting in the Kurukṣetra be allowed to ascend heaven. The wish was granted, and it is noteworthy that Karṇa did not seek the boon just for himself.

In a second episode, when Kuntī tried to win him over, Karṇa again stood his ground with the same firmness.[26] He already knew his true identity by then, and the pressure on him was indeed very high; he had to disregard not only the wish of his mother but also of his father, the sun, who commanded from the heavens that he listen to Kuntī. Karṇa, however, made a promise that he would spare her other four sons in battle and only seek to kill Arjuna. Thus, "whether it is he or Arjuna who died, five (of her sons) would survive".[27] The manner of Karṇa's tragic end is well known.

Karṇa has a complex and multi-layered persona. Sukthankar's assessment of Karṇa seems a bit too harsh.[28] He thinks that arrogance, vanity and unmitigated pride define Karṇa. Streaks of wounded pride may certainly be detected in his character, but these were definitely not the whole of his personality. He of course had flaws, on some occasions even grievous ones – his conduct during the dice game and the slaughter of Abhimanyu can be cited as prime examples of this. But if we are asked to single out the chief trait of his character then 'loyalty' will stand out most prominently. Of course he carried his loyalty to Duryodhana to a perverse extreme. And Karṇa himself was aware of it, for in his conversation with Kṛṣṇa, he admitted as much.[29] Not only did he remain loyal to Duryodhana till the very last, his loyalty to his foster parents and the *sūtas* speaks of high-mindedness at its very best. Thus, as we said earlier, Karṇa framed for himself a code of conduct and lived up to it till the end. Some of his actions from the modern perspective may not look fully rational. However, rationality cannot be decontextualized and, in the human domain, cannot be looked upon as an invariant.

To apply the notion of agency without qualification, from its modern habitats to a text separated by a huge time gap and equally deep cultural difference, is always going to be risky. Moreover, in current

formulations of the issues of agency, the focus has been, as was natural considering the fact that it developed in the West, on the individual. And the main debate has revolved around questions of agency versus structure.[30] However, the ascribed role of the individual in the traditional Indian society was often radically different from that in the modern West. Having said that, we would venture to suggest that at least Karṇa himself would not have doubts that he was an independent agent of his own actions within the bounds of the code *he laid for himself*. Nonetheless, we have to bear in mind the caution that according to some studies, apparently free actions lead individuals to (often) unconsciously reproduce their social structural milieu and that social and cultural mores are not easy to defy or escape.[31]

If the distinction between 'the things that happen to a person and the things one does or makes happen' is the marker to distinguish an 'actor' from a non-actor, then Karṇa for the major part of his adult life has to be classed as an actor. On most of the counts that action theorists consider significant, like motive, desire, purpose, deliberation, intention and the like, Karṇa has to be regarded as a conscious agent engaged in shaping his life. Yet paradoxically, Karṇa always looked vulnerable and doomed – right from the very beginning. In this respect, he and Duryodhana seem to make a pair – both wilfully deciding to flout *dharma* and being prepared to pay the price.[32] This brings us to the final question: what is the *Mahābhārata*'s position regarding the question of agency with regard to *dharma*? This question arises because there seems to be, lurking behind human efforts and action – Karṇa's life seems strongly pointing to its existence – a more potent force governing the final outcome of human efforts. This force may be identified with *dharma*. It is highly hazardous to attempt any categorical answer to this question, for the *Mahābhārata* likes ending things in open-endedness, suggesting rather than stating. And the suggestion seems to be: *dharma* killed kills; *dharma* protected protects (Manusmṛti, VIII, 15).

Notes

1 J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata, The Book of the Beginning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973, p. xxiii.
2 James L. Fitzgerald, 'India's Fifth Veda: The Mahābhārata's Presentation of Itself' in *Essays on the Mahabharata*, Arvind Sharma (ed), New Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 2007, p. 151.
3 A. K. Ramanujan, 'Repetition in the Mahābhārata' in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, Arvind Sharma (ed), New Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 2007, p. 419.

4 Alduri Vishwa and Joydeep Bagchee note that Oldenberg used the expression monster and its derivatives for the *Mahābhārata* thirty-three times, Reading the Fifth Veda, edited Alduri Vishwa and Joydeep Bagchee, Leiden: Brill, 2011 pp. XXI–XXII, note 39.
5 Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 1
6 G.C. Pande, 'The Socio-Cultural Milieu of the Mahābhārata: An Age of Change' in *The Mahābhārata Revisited*, R. N. Dandekar (ed), New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990, pp. 121–37.
7 Buitenen, The Mahābhārata 1 The Book of the Beginning, pp. XII–XXV.
8 Fitzgerald, 'India's Fifth Veda: The Mahābhārata's Presentation of Itself,' p. 154.
9 Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, p. 18; *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 91ff.
10 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda, Draupadī Is Described as Sprung from the Altar*, Vedī, pp. 113–14.
11 Books 3 in both are devoted to wanderings in a forest; both Sitā and Draupadī had to face abduction in a forest.
12 Hiltebeitel, Reading the Fifth Veda, p. 75.
13 Gary A. Tubb, 'Śāntarasa in the Mahābhārata' in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, Sharma Arvind (ed), New Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 2007, pp. 170ff, see especially note 7, p. 175 on Visvanatha's designation of the *Mahābhārata* as *mahākāvya*.
14 Mahābhārata, I.92–94; Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, pp. 76–77.
15 Sibesh Bhattacharya, *Understanding Itihāsa*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2010.
16 Buitenen, The Book of the Beginning, pp. 215, 251–58.
17 Karṇa also received training from Droṇa, and it seems his caste did not get in the way this time, Buitenen, The Book of the Beginning, p. 270.
18 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 416.
19 Mahābhārata, *Ādiparva*, 125–27.
20 Sarah Buss, 'Personal Autonomy', in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Electronic version, 2008.
21 Mahābhārata, *Ādiparava, Buitenen, The Book of the Beginning*, p. 280.
22 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 422ff.
23 Udyogparva, chapters 138–141.
24 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 423.
25 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 423.
26 Udyogparva, 142–44.
27 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 426.
28 V.S. Sukthankar, *The Meaning of the Mahabharata*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998.
29 Hiltebeitel, *Reading the Fifth Veda*, p. 423.
30 Steven Vide Hitlin and Glen H. Elder Jr., 'Time, Self and the Curiously Abstract Concept of Agency' *Sociological Theory* 25:2 June 2007, American Sociological Association, Electronic version.
31 P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997; A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Introduction of the Theory of Structuration*, Berkley: University of California Press,

1984; D. Layder, *Modern Social Theory Key Debates and New Directions*, London: Routledge, 1997, referred to by Hitlin and Elder, op. cit.

32 Duryodhana is the tree and Karṇa is the trunk, Ādiparva, I.65.

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2

IN SEARCH OF GENUINE AGENCY

A Review of Action, Freedom and *Karma* in the *Mahābhārata*

Amita Chatterjee

1

'No being can live even one moment without performing an action', says Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *Srimadbhagavatgītā*, 3/5.[1] Willy-nilly, we go through the motion of action, sometimes habitually, sometimes compulsively following the inclinations of our nature, sometimes under coercion and sometimes, of course, intentionally. But the question is whether we are genuine agents in all these cases. Keeping this concern in the foreground in this chapter, I would like to explore some of the central concepts of philosophy of action vis à vis action, agency and freedom in the light of the stories of the Great Epic, the *Mahābhārata*. We shall see that the stories of the epic fit very well within the Donald Davidsonian scheme of action, action-explanation and agency,[2] which will enable us to grasp the points of contact between two theories of action, distant from each other both in space and in time, and initiate a dialogue between the two traditions around the issues being discussed.

'Agency' is universally accepted as a correlate of 'action'. An action is something which is performed by an agent, while an event is something that happens to an agent. Again, action entails agency only if the agent performs the action freely, where 'acting freely' entails the ability to have done otherwise, that is, the agent's freedom to do or not to do or to do otherwise. The question that has always intrigued us is whether anyone can ever act freely in a world which is fully causally determined like the world of the *Mahābhārata*. In the context of the *Mahābhārata*, this question assumes greater significance because not only does the epic admit that all our actions are determined by our *karma* or *adṛṣta*, the accumulated merits and demerits of our past

deeds, but also by *puruṣakāra* which refers to acts of a person performed out of his own knowledge and desire.[3] How are we supposed to reconcile these two strands of thought? This is the main problematic around which the chapter revolves.

2

The great battle of Kurukṣetra was going to start. Arjuna, the General of the Pāndava army, requested Kṛṣṇa, his divine charioteer, to place his chariot in the middle of the battlefield so that he could see the champions of unrighteousness who had joined the Kaurava camp. Kṛṣṇa complied with Arjuna's request, and Arjuna saw his grandfather, his teacher, preceptor, uncles in the opposite camp, his blood relations and relations by marriage, friends and companions in arms on both sides of the warring armies. Seeing them, Arjuna was engulfed by great sorrow. With goose bumps all over his body and with skin burning, his muscles slackened, his mouth became parched, his whole body began to tremble and his great bow Gāṇḍīva fell from his loosened grip. He saw evil signs of all sorts and thought that no good could ever result from this internecine war. He decided not to fight and sat down on his chariot dejectedly, throwing away his great bow and inexhaustible quiver of arrows.[4]

According to Sri Aurobindo,[5] Arjuna in the Gītā typifies the human soul of action. In the earlier-mentioned narrative, we come across a number of verbs, and we know that verbs signify actions. But how many of those verbs stand for actions *of Arjuna*? Some definitely fall in the category of action, others are definitely non-actions, but some fall in the grey area in between. To identify *Arjuna's* actions we are in need of some criterion, and we are reminded of the question that Donald Davidson,[6] a distinguished philosopher of action of the twentieth century, raised in the beginning of his famous essay on agency, 'What events in the life of a person reveal agency; what are his deeds and doings in contrast to mere happenings in his history, what is the mark that distinguishes his actions?'

Can we use some linguistic/grammatical clue to determine which verb-signified events are actions and which are not? Generally, phrases in which active voice is used are definitely suggestive of agency, and when passive voice is used, there is no agency. But this grammatical criterion is often insufficient to identify an action. Let us consider the following example:

'Kuntī prayed to the Sun-god' versus 'Kuntī swooned'.

In this pair of sentences, the first one signifies an action but the second does not, though their grammatical form is the same. Shifting to saying that an act performed intentionally entails agency also does not solve matters. Droṇa gave his son Aśvatthāmā a white drink made of flour instead of a glass of milk. The poor child drank the white drink intentionally, thinking he was drinking milk. But he was certainly not performing the action of drinking flour-dissolved-in-water intentionally. Let us look at another puzzling example in this context: Arjuna killed Karṇa in the battle intentionally. Karṇa was none other than the eldest son of Kuntī. But Arjuna didn't kill his eldest brother intentionally. Though the two sentences 'Arjuna killed Karṇa intentionally' and 'Arjuna killed his eldest brother intentionally' refer to the same act, the former is a correct description of Arjuna's act, while the latter is incorrect.

Davidson, therefore, defined agency as follows:

> A person is an agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes true a sentence that says he did it intentionally.[7]

An action, however, is amenable to alternative descriptions. How then are we to individuate them? Let us look at the following set of descriptions of a single action, once again from Davidson:

> I flipped the switch.
> I turned on the light.
> I illuminated the room.
> I alerted the burglar to my presence (unbeknownst to me).[8]

Some of us may hesitate to accept that the fourth description refers to the same action as the previous three. It can at best be another action which is the consequence of the act of turning on the light. But even identification of the first two as the 'same' act is not straightforward because if the light bulb was fused, then my act of flipping the switch would not have turned on the light. Maybe we should have said that I turned on the light *by* flipping the switch. Given these complexities, what then is the right way of individuating the act under discussion?

The issue becomes more complex if instead of flipping of the switch we consider a case of killing. According to the *Mahābhārata* story, Bhīma dealt the death blow to Duryodhana at time t_1, but Duryodhana did not die immediately. He lived for some time and died, say, at t_3. So the philosophical concern is: when did Bhīma kill Duryodhana? Bhīma

did not kill him at t_3. Nor can we say that Bhīma killed Duryodhana at t_1 before Duryodhana died. The case can be made more puzzling by introducing a small twist in the tale. Suppose Bhīma suddenly died at t_2. Then he would not be able to kill Duryodhana at t_3, yet in one sense Bhīma was the killer of Duryodhana. How can one solve this problem? Some[9] have suggested that we should make a distinction between 'when did the event that caused Duryodhana's death occur?' and 'when did the causing of Duryodhana's death occur?' Davidson, however, is in favour of obliterating this distinction[10] probably on pain of an infinite regress.[11] But somehow Davidson's move of thus obliterating the distinction goes against our common-sense understanding as well as common usage. I leave this issue here as an open question.

3

There are two opposed theories of action-explanation prevalent in Western philosophy. The first one has been handed down from Aristotle and became the dominant theory in the empiricist tradition. This theory upheld that just as in the natural world certain events are causally explained by some other event (e.g. the tsunami occurred in 2004 because of tectonic movement), an action is also causally explained by beliefs and desires which cause the action. For instance, to the query why I opened the door of the refrigerator, one could say that 'my desire for a drink and my belief that the drink I want is stored in the refrigerator' caused my action of opening the door of the refrigerator. If we notice carefully, actions here are taken as events, and causal connections are said to obtain among them. There is another tradition, however, which says that an action is to be explained in terms of the reasons for which an agent performs the action. This is a teleological model of explanation. An agent performs an action in order to attain some telos or purpose, and an agent usually justifies her action in terms of these reasons. For example, if someone asks why Sayantan voted for the BJP candidate, the answer may be that he wanted a stable government at the Centre and believed that a vote for the BJP candidate would contribute to that end. So Sayantan's act of voting for the BJP candidate is justified by the reasons mentioned. Most rationalist philosophers and those belonging to what is known as the *Verstehen* tradition maintain that reasons justify an action and therefore explain an action; reasons, however, are not causes.

Davidson has offered a syncretic view and has brought these two traditions closer to each other by upholding that the primary reasons for an action explain that action, but reasons themselves are also

causes.[12] The primary reason of an action consists of pro-attitudes plus belief(s), and pro-attitudes include desires, wantings, urges, promptings, moral views, aesthetic principles, economic prejudices, social conventions, public and private goals. Pro-attitudes plus belief then rationalize an action. Of course, one may object that there are lots of rationalizers who do not cite such primary reasons as causes of their action. For example, if one asks: why did Duryodhana poison Bhīma? The answer given in the epic is 'because of jealousy'. However, it is possible for us to construct 'jealousy' as being a primary reason by analysing it as follows:

> Pro-attitude: Duryodhana wanted to remove the cause of his agony.
>
> Belief: He believed by poisoning Bhīma, he could remove the cause of his agony.
>
> Thus, Duryodhana's action is explained here by his having 'primary reasons' in the sense that also cause the action.

Often we explain our actions by citing our intentions. So, for example, to the query, why did Kuntī go to meet Karṇa before the great battle? the response could be that she went to meet Karṇa before the great battle with the intention of disclosing her secret. But to Davidson, intentions are not distinct kinds of mental states. He reduces intentions to the action plus the agent's primary reason.

Some thinkers feel uneasy talking about 'causes' of actions because causes determine our actions, but agency always implies some amount of indetermination. Davidson takes a compatibilist stance here and asks,

> Why on earth should a cause turn an action into a mere happening and a person into a helpless victim? Is it because we tend to assume that a cause demands a causer, agency an agent? If I did, then there is the absurdity of an infinite regress; if I did not, I am a victim. But of course the alternatives are not exhaustive. Some causes have no agents. Among these agentless causes are the states and changes of state in persons which, because they are reasons as well as causes, constitute certain events free and intentional actions.[13]

This naturally brings us to the question of freedom of the will and associated problems. I shall return to them later, but first I want to foreground the problem of incontinent action or weakness of the will within this framework of action-explanation. To do that, Davidson

introduced a change in his framework. He accepted intention as an irreducible category and identified intentions for the future with the agent's 'all things considered' judgments. Let us explore this further.

4

If an agent performs an action intentionally and reasons for an action (which include pro-attitudes) cause the action, then how can an incontinent act be possible? Davidson tried to give an explanation of incontinent action, keeping it within the fold of intentional action. According to Davidson,

> An agent's will is weak if he acts, acts intentionally, counter to his own best judgment; in such cases we sometimes say he lacks the will power to do what he knows, or at any rate believes, would, everything considered, be better.[14]

He goes on to elaborate on this by saying:

> In doing x, therefore, an agent acts incontinently iff: (a) the agent does x intentionally; (b) the agent believes that there is an alternative action y open to him; and (c) the agent judges that all things considered, it would be better to do y than to do x.[15]

This is explained by the fact that when a man does x incontinently rather than doing y, he entertains an *unconditional value judgment* which is in consonance with his actual preference, for example, 'x is better than y'. He acts on this unconditional value judgment, disregarding the 'all things considered judgment', which is a conditional/relational judgment, and therefore he acts incontinently.

Look at Yudhiṣṭhira's weakness for dice playing. All things considered, Yudhiṣṭhira should never have participated in the game in which Śakuni was his opponent. But he ignored this judgment and, contrary to his best reason, acted in accordance with his preference. His decision was surprising because in all other situations he had obeyed the principle of continence, which says, 'perform the action judged best on the basis of all relevant reasons'. However, his weakness overrode all other considerations when he received an invitation to play a game of dice. It is not that he was unaware of his weakness, yet he succumbed to it. Why?

Davidson's conjecture is somewhat like this. The human mind is partitioned into quasi-independent structures. In one of the subsystems

of Yudhiṣṭhira's mind, there was the belief that he ought not indulge in dice playing, whereas in another subsystem (or maybe in the main system), there was the belief that a game of dice will give him immense pleasure or that he should not decline his uncle Dhṛtarāṣṭra's invitation. These two structures of mind are consistent if kept segregated. However, though both these structures are internally rational, their interaction makes one of them incontinent. Davidson conjectures that the cautionary belief operates from the other side of the intra-systemic barrier, hence its influence becomes weaker and it cannot motivate the main system. But because of its interference, the desire in the main system, though operating as a cause, fails to operate as a reason. That is, behind every incontinent action there is a mental cause which however does not rationalize the action. This partitioning does not correspond to a battle between reason and passion. It requires organized elements operating on one another in the modality of non-rational causality. I think I should clarify here that by 'non-rational causality' it is not meant that while an agent is engaged in an incontinent action, he lacks a reason for performing/doing it; rather what an agent lacks is a reason for letting his better reason for not doing that action prevail.

One advantage of this theory is that it enables a person to be morally responsible for an incontinent act because it is an intentional act. He can also be said to be morally culpable for not paying any heed to his better judgment.

5

In this section I am going to retell a lesser-known story, which is not as much a story as it is a very clear statement of the author of the *Mahābhārata* on the determinism–indeterminism issue. I am referring to the first story that Bhīṣma narrated to the Pāndava-s at the beginning of the Anuśāsana Parva. Here is the story (story from the *Mahābhārata* translated by the author):

> Once upon a time, there lived an old Brahmin lady, Gautamī, with her only offspring, a young boy. All of a sudden a misfortune struck her. A snake bit the young boy and he died. Arjunaka, one of his neighbours who was a hunter by profession, caught the snake in a snare and brought it to Gautamī. Without much ado he asked the grieving mother, 'How do you want to avenge the death of your young son? This killer snake should not be allowed to live. Should we commit it to flames or cut it into pieces?'

Gautamī replied, 'Neither, you fool! Leave the snake alone. Which intelligent man would willingly court sin and its evil consequences, forsaking the chance of living in one of the heavens after death? Virtuous men can easily cross this sea of suffering like a boat, but sinners drown instantaneously like a book of scripture thrown into water. Look, Arjunaka, I will not be able to bring my son back by killing this snake, nor will any harm befall me if I let the snake live. I think, under the circumstances, I'll not condemn myself to a painful life in hell by killing this living animal'.

The hunter said, 'Madam, I am not unfamiliar with your line of thinking. Men, noble at heart, always empathize when others suffer. However, you are not talking like a person in grief. Men seek relief from their grief in different ways. Those who are peaceloving and reconciled with the facts of the case can give up their grief, thinking that the painful event was ordained by Time (Kāla). But those who are revengeful in nature can control their burning grief only by destroying their enemy. And those who are different from both the above types always regret their loss due to bewitchment (*moha*). Please kill this snake and come out of your distress, or just command me and I'll get rid of this evil animal right now.'

Gautamī said, 'O hunter! Virtuous persons like me don't ever grieve. To a discerning mind, it would be evident that my son was bitten by this snake simply because he was very near his death. Therefore, I cannot kill this snake. Moreover, a Brahmin should never be angry or revengeful. Anger leads to affliction. Kindly pardon this creature and let it go immediately'.

Suddenly, at that moment, the ensnared snake startled them by speaking in human language. The snake said, 'I would like to state humbly that the fault is not mine. For I have not acted freely. I'm just a subordinate agent. I bit the young boy because the Lord of Death asked me to do so. Hence if anybody is culpable for the loss of life of this young boy, it is none other than the Lord of Death'.

The hunter said, 'O snake! Maybe you have committed this crime under the instruction of someone else. Still you cannot escape its consequences. You are the cause, if not the principal agent behind this act. Just as the potter's wheel and rod are counted among the causes of an earthen pot, similarly you are also the cause of the harm that has come to this boy. As you

are thus proved guilty of committing this crime, I am duty-bound to kill you'.

The snake replied, 'I don't know how you are pinning all the faults on me. Like the potter's wheel and rod, I have no independence. Besides, I am just a link in a long causal chain and therefore I cannot be the sole perpetrator'.

The hunter said, 'Even if I agree that the Lord of Death is the principal cause behind the act, you are, still, its immediate cause. So, I must kill you. If someone can escape the consequences of his/her wrong deed, then scripture becomes inauthentic, and even kings cannot punish the thieves'.

The snake replied, 'An agent cannot but act through some instrument. That is why the instrumental cause appears as the immediate cause of an event. If you apply your mind, you will understand, it is not me but the Lord of Death who is the principal cause behind this violent act. He is the real culprit. You know a priest who performs a sacrifice on behalf of his religious client does not reap the fruits of the sacrifice. I, too, shall not reap the consequences of this act because I bit the boy by the order of the Lord of Death'.

While the hunter and the snake were thus arguing, the Lord of Death appeared on the scene and announced that neither he nor the snake could be made responsible for the young boy's loss of life, as both of them were sent by Kāla. Kāla, in fact, is the lord of the entire living and non-living world; everything is under his control. Even the sun, the planets and gods follow the rhythm set by Kāla. Kāla creates this multiverse then destroys it to create it again.

The hunter was still unconvinced and said, 'If the Lord of Death were right, then no one should praise his/her benefactor nor should blame a malefactor because both of them were directed by Kāla'.

The Lord of Death concurred and said, 'Whatever a living being does, does it following the rules enjoined by Kāla. So a wise man never praises a benefactor nor does he blame a malefactor. On this ground, you should relieve both the snake and me from the onus of the boy's death'.

At this juncture entered Kāla. He said, 'Oh hunter! Neither I nor the Lord of Death nor the snake is to be blamed for this young boy's death. The boy had to die because of his own past deeds. Hence if anyone is to be blamed for the untimely death of the young boy, it is the boy himself and his karma.

Karma can relieve a man of all his sins, and through karma alone all creatures enjoy or suffer the consequences of their actions. Like the sun and the shade, an agent and his karma always remain entwined with each other. It is true that all men are subordinate to the law of karma, but men are also in control of their actions. Just as a potter makes pots and other earthenwares intentionally, men too act in accordance with their own will. Therefore, O hunter! you should not pin the responsibility of the boy's death on me or the Lord of Death or the snake or Gautamī'.

Gautamī then came forward and told the hunter that her boy had to face his death because of his own past deeds, and she was suffering from the loss of her only son because of her own karma. Let the Lord of Death and Kāla go back to their own realm and the snake be released, she said. At last, Arjunaka was convinced and released the snake from the snare.

Bhīṣma then concluded that the Pāṇḍavas should not repent for slaying their kin in the great battle; death comes to everyone as a consequence of their own past deeds, the accumulated rewards and punishments which are distributed under the supervision of Kāla.

6

I find this story highly interesting and instructive because it contains all the seminal ideas that we come across in connection with the debate between freedom and determinism. Philosophically, this story should engage our attention because it appears to resolve the ambivalence that we observe all over the epic on this particular issue. In the beginning of the epic, we see Sanjaya consoling Dhṛtarāṣṭra by saying that no one can escape what is fated (*daiva*) by intelligence or effort. But there are almost equal number of incidents which support the view that life is determined by one's own actions; our wrong deeds lead to suffering and death while our good deeds are rewarded with success and happiness. How are we supposed to reconcile these two strands of thought? I think to let these two ends meet, the story of Gautamī has been constructed in a way that compatibilism stands out in sharp relief against fatalism, and *karmic* determinism has been clearly identified with self-determination that sustains not only individual excellence but also 'reactive attitudes' that make social life possible and meaningful. But before I explain in explicit terms how this story helps

us meet the challenge that a compatibilist faces anywhere in the world, let me offer some terminological clarifications.

Compatibilism is the view that moral responsibility is compatible with one's decisions and actions being causally determined. Though the question how people can be free or act freely when every event in the world is fully determined always disturbs us, the general idea that we can be at the same time free and determined is very hard to refute. It is not only a matter of common intuition but also a necessity for making us morally responsible for our actions. Can a person be morally responsible for her behaviour if that behaviour is explained solely by reference to physical states of the universe and the laws governing changes in those physical states, or solely by reference to the existence of a sovereign God who guides the world along a divinely ordained path? The answer is 'no' because a moral agent can be held responsible for her action only if *she* performed it freely. Besides, to be morally responsible for an action means to be worthy of a particular kind of reaction – praise, blame or something akin – for having performed it.

In the Indian context, all discussions on determinism versus freedom centre around the law of *karma*, the most basic law pertaining to action or conduct. Let me begin with a formulation of the doctrine of *karma* hinted at by the story of Gautamī recounted in the previous section. It says that our present circumstances are determined by our past deeds, and our present actions will similarly determine our future circumstances. That is, the *karma* doctrine entails some kind of moral causation across three times – past, present and future. This statement immediately gives rise to the problem that if our present actions are so determined, can we really be held morally responsible for our actions? If not, how can the doctrine help us develop a theory of 'moral' causation? In the *Mahābhārata*, we find an effort to remove these worries by first drawing a distinction between determinism and fatalism/predestinarianism.

Fatalism is not the same as determinism; rather it is inconsistent with determinism. Determinism says that the future is shaped by the past, while fatalism says 'whatever will be, will be'. Determinism asserts causal connections among past and future; fatalism denies them. If fatalism were true, our lives would be pretty meaningless. While determinism is related to the concepts of *karma* and *adṛṣta*, fatalism is associated with the notions of *niyati* and *daiva*. In religious literature and puranic texts, we find the concept of fate, but in most philosophical systems the reign of fate or universal determinism has been rejected as an incoherent and inconsistent concept. The famous

book of prudence, *Hitopadeśa*, declares *yadbhāvi na tadbhāvi bhāvi cenna tadanyathā*, an exact rendering of which is 'whatever will be will be, whatever is not to be will never be, nothing can alter this'. When we succeed in attaining our goal or avoid the course of events which we do not want, that too is due to fate and not because of our efforts (*bhāgyam phalati sarvatra na vidyā na ca pauruṣam*). Our fate determines the structure of our world, and all things come together as they are fated to combine. No one can defeat Fate. This is exactly what Bhīṣma said in the beginning and was reiterated in the speech of the Lord of Death. *Adṛṣta* and *karma*, however, are shown by Kāla not to be immune to human effort and at the same time are dependent on causal conditions – thus supporting compatibilism.[16] Bhīsma also concurs with this position at the end of the story.

In the corpus of the *Mahābhārata*, three broad positions can be detected on the issue of determinism. The *maximalist position* makes all the external events of our life, down to the smallest detail, predetermined by impersonal natural laws as well as the collective *karma* of all jīvas, that is, individual beings, human and non-human.[17] Thus all our actions are completely determined on this view. Is there any elbow room left? Maybe, only for our reactions. The way we are going to experience adversity may be predetermined, but how we shall react to this unfortunate situation is not. Whether we react with frustration or fortitude depends entirely on us.[18] There is no explanation of how and why our attitudes have been exempted from the purview of all-embracing deterministic laws. But if this view is admitted, then the notion of moral responsibility becomes very thin and attainment of liberation an ever-receding goal. The *moderate version* of the doctrine has been picked up in the *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* later, according to which karma determines only three parameters of one's life: (i) the physical endowment and the social position, that is, the body that one gets, the family into which one is born; (ii) the life span, that is, how long one is going to live; and (iii) the general quality of one's life, that is, whether life is more or less pleasurable or painful.[19] This might still appear as a weak form of compatibilism because the view apparently allows that some part of us is exempt from causal influence. The *minimalist version* does not support any form of predeterminism at all because on this view the so-called pre-determinism is just a case of self-determinism. 'It is only our own freely-willed actions that, in course of time, harden into destiny'.[20] This is the main thrust of the story of Gautamī too. All actions of an individual are predetermined but by the individual's own actions of the past lives and the present life.

It should be evident that the doctrine of compatibilism drawn from the story goes well with a theory of retributive justice. According to this doctrine, every action gives rise to some consequence; a good action leads to good consequence and a bad action to bad consequence. It has been upheld that every human agent has to reap the consequences of his/her actions. One is sure to be rewarded/punished for one's good/wrong doings. That is, no action goes unrewarded or unpunished (*kṛta-hāni*). Not only that, a just moral scheme requires that one should never suffer/enjoy the consequences of others' action (*akṛta-abhyāgama*). It is obvious from these two corollaries of the doctrine of karma that it was closely associated with individual morality. The burden of moral responsibility for one's deeds is to be borne by the individual, fair and square; no one can escape what s/he deserves.[21]

The validity of this principle, however, has often been doubted on empirical grounds. It is common that saintly people suffer in their lives, while habitual wrongdoers enjoy happiness. To account for such anomalies, a theory of rebirth was tagged to the *karma*-doctrine. The logic goes somewhat like this: since nothing comes from nothing, I must have done something good in the past, in this life or some other life, if I am happy; and, on the other hand, if I am suffering now, then I must have done something wicked, if not in this life, then in some other previous life. In fact, this is a well-entrenched belief of the *Mahābhārata*. The overarching law which the author of the *Mahābhārata* believed in was *ṛta* – the principle of cosmic order or harmony. Such was the inexorability of this law that even the God of Creation and destruction, Kāla, could not transgress it. Kāla is constrained to create the world, keeping in view the accumulated *karma* of the individuals that are yet to bear fruit.

Karma is standardly divided into three types within Indian thought in accordance with degrees of maturation – or the time-lag between an action done and the effectuation of the deserving experiences. To explain how an action can produce an effect after a great lapse of time, it is maintained that it produces a residue or potency (*karmāśaya*, *apūrva* or *adṛṣta*), which, when ripened or matured, produces the appropriate consequences. So, in order of maturation, actions are divided as follows: (1) that which has started to bear fruit (*prārabdha*) and cannot be diverted or stopped in the middle of its course, (2) that which has been accumulated but has yet to start yielding results (*sañcita*) and (3) that which is being performed now and the consequences of which are being credited for future fruition (*sañcīyamāna*). A very apt illustration available in the literature is that of an archer with his quiver full of arrows. The arrow which has been shot by the

archer is like the first type of actions, the arrows in the quiver are like the second type, and the arrow that the archer holds in his hand in a state of readiness is like the third type.

We have already seen that the law of karma is taken as an extension of the law of causation that governs the physical world to the sphere of human conduct. We have also seen that to explain the phenomenon of remote (or delayed) causation, Indian philosophers have posited the existence of *adṛṣta/apūrva/karmāśaya*. Now, potency or *adṛṣta* has been presented as a cause as well as an effect. It is therefore non-eternal like any produced object. If *adṛṣta* were eternal, then universal determinism would have prevailed. Had universal determinism prevailed, individuals would have remained trapped in the cycle of life and death, and no one could have attained liberation. Hence, the way of destroying the potency of accumulated merits and demerits according to the law of karma is to enjoy or suffer the consequences of one's deeds: the potency of adṛṣṭa is destroyed only if one uses up all the accumulated merits and demerits by enjoying/suffering them as rewards or punishment for the action that caused the *adṛṣṭa*. But now the point is that in course of this process, the individual again accumulates many *karma*s. Therefore, over stretches of lives, *karma*s continue to accumulate, though some can be destroyed through experience.

Indian theorists, therefore, have suggested different ways of attenuation of different types of *karma*s. The consequences of what are called *prārabdha karma*s cannot be avoided except by experiencing merits and demerits associated with them. On the other hand, what are designated *sañcita* and *sañcīyamāna karma*s can be avoided by attaining right knowledge of the real nature of objects. The Gītā prescribes that the accumulation of *karma*s can be prevented by performing actions in a disinterested and detached manner. With the dawn of right knowledge, the agent realizes that he should give up all attachment that binds him to the consequences of his action, and once the sense of agency is bracketed, no further karma will be accumulated. Agency is, therefore, central as long as we are participating in worldly life but is a hindrance to attaining final liberation. Probably that is why the epic has prescribed three goals of life (*tri-varga*) for ordinary beings – *artha*, *kāma* and *dharma* – liberation (*mokṣa*) remains a regulative principle, an ideal to be attained by giving up the sense of agency.

The frame within which this theory of self-determinism works is probably the most acceptable version of compatibilism. It admits an overarching, rule-governed structure without which we cannot be

morally responsible for our acts. We are responsible for our acts only if we initiate some change in the existing state of affairs at any particular moment of time. At a particular point of time, the world has a number of states in a certain configuration. My intervention alters that status quo. Had I not intervened, the world history would have run the same course. This view is different from universal determinism, which entails that world history is linear. If we arrange world history across three temporal nodes – past, present and future – then we have to admit that it is impossible to alter the past *now*. From the past to the present we can only have linear succession of events, unalterable at the present moment. However, the stories of the *Mahābhārata* suggest that from the present to the future, there are alternative pathways, and we are free to follow any of these alternative paths depending on our goal. True determinism would not have admitted the possibility of real causal alternatives in nature. In this theory, however, 'now' comes into being with alternative possibilities, of which some are lost the moment we choose a particular course of action. That is how the *Mahābhārata* justifies compatibilism as reflected in the incidents we have already discussed.

One may ask, what sort of explanation of worldly life is provided by the doctrine of self-determinism described here? Obviously it is a causal explanation. If we are to extend causal laws that obtain in the physical world to the realm of action, then we have to admit that particular acts of agents are sufficient to bring about particular effects. Causation, here, presupposes our capability to act. Action, on the other hand, presupposes a margin of indeterminism in the world. This is still compatibilism because the amount of freedom we are able to carve out again depends on our own past acts and choices.

The story of Gautamī, like many other stories of the *Mahābhārata*, therefore, gives fillip to compatibilism. What the compatibilists want to say is that even though everything is determined by prior events, it is still reasonable to distinguish between actions that come from within the agent and actions with external etiologies; the former carry with them responsibility, the latter do not. The challenge for the compatibilists is to draw this distinction in a principled way. In the story of Gautamī, we find this principled distinction. The snake, the Lord of Death and even Kāla are present as external causal agents, but the boy's own beliefs, desires and actions are determinants of his future existence, his destiny. Thus the boy by virtue of his intentional acts is the true agent and remains morally responsible for each one of his actions.

Notes

1 *Na hi kaścit kṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhati-akarmakṛt*.
2 Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
3 In chapter 123 of the Mahābhārata, Pāṇḍu says that in this world humans follow both daiva and *puruṣakāra*. In fact what is fated can be obtained only by one's efforts.
4 Srimadbhagavatgītā, chapter 1.
5 Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970, p. 17.
6 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 43.
7 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 46.
8 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 5.
9 R. Weintraub, 'The Time of a Killing', *Analysis* 63.3: 2003, 178–182.
10 Op cit. p. 58.
11 Sandis Constantine, 'When Did the Killing Occur? Donald Davidson on Action Individuation', *Review of Philosophy* 37: 2006, 179–183.
12 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 4.
13 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 19.
14 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 21.
15 Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 22.
16 Please see the declaration of Kāla to this effect.
17 Vide chapter 96 of the *Mahābhārata* where the deeds of many beings combined to result in the birth of Santanu, his marriage with Gangā, loss of his eight sons and the trajectory of Bhīṣma's life.
18 As the story goes, long before Bhīṣma's birth it was decided that Bhīṣma would not have any progeny. Of course, Bhīṣma was not aware of that. But the most graceful behaviour of Bhīṣma under the circumstances was surely exemplary.
19 Yogasūtrabhāṣya II.13. In chapter 96 of the Mahābhārata, King Mahābhiṣa's story exemplifies that if one had sufficient merit in store, one was even allowed to choose one's birth. Mahābhiṣa, before he was asked to leave heaven, we read, was granted the wish that he would be born as the son of King Pratīpa, though many other circumstances of his earthly life were pre-determined. But Prajāpati Brahmā also told that if he chose to live a moral life, he would be able to come back to heaven once again.
20 Arvind Sharma, *Modern Hindu Thought: An Introduction*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 83. In chapter 78 of the epic, the sage Śukra, Devayānī's father, told his daughter clearly, 'Everyone enjoys happiness or suffers pain in life as a consequence of one's own deeds. You must have done something wrong before and that is why you are suffering now'.
21 'the karma doctrine signifies not merely that the events of our life are determined by their antecedent causes, but also that there is absolute justice in the rewards and punishements that fall to our lot'. Mysore Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Ltd, 1995, p. 48.

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3

THE THEORY OF *KARMA* IN THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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One of the most sophisticated and widely endorsed contemporary interpretations of what might be called "the theory of *karma*" in seminal Hindu texts analyzes the merit and demerit that accrue to the agent as a result of her actions in terms of *saṃskāras* – habits or tendencies to repeat similar actions in the future. Merit, on this account, is simply a good habit that later produces success for the agent. Demerit is a bad habit that later produces failure. This kind of account seems to provide a clear and even common-sense picture of what merit and demerit are, how they arise in consequence of actions, and how they eventually produce results that correspond with the qualities of the actions that produced them.

When compared with this account, the theory of *karma* in the *Mahābhārata* might seem impoverished. Scholars have argued that there are only five or six passages in the entire *Mahābhārata* that elaborate the theory of *karma* in any detail. Even these passages, however, seem to do little more than repeat the platitude that right and wrong actions, mediated by merit and demerit, affect the agent's future circumstances – with little to no elaboration of how this occurs.

Some of the scholars that endorse the more sophisticated contemporary account attribute it to the *Bhagavadgītā*. The evidence for this reading, however, is meagre. There is some evidence of this account in the commentatories of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, but the source of the account seems to be texts like the *Yogasūtra* and its commentaries rather than the *Bhagavadgītā* itself.

As an interpretation of the *Yogasūtra* and its commentaries, the account faces at least two problems. The first is that the texts do not obviously connect actions and *saṃskāras* in the way that is usually assumed. The second problem is that even if these texts do connect actions and *saṃskāras* (or some related state) in this way, they cannot explain how the cycle of actions and *saṃskāras* can be broken. If

actions produce *saṃskāras* in the same way that mental states do, then actions are sufficient conditions of *saṃskāras*. If actions are sufficient conditions of *saṃskāras*, however, and merit and demerit are just these *saṃskāras*, then it is not possible to act without accruing merit and demerit, and hence, it is impossible to end the cycle of rebirth.

One way to make room for the possibility of liberation is to posit some state between actions and *saṃskāras* that might be avoided. The most plausible candidate for such a state is desire, and in particular, desire for the results (*phala*) of action. If this is right, however, then the desire for the results of action itself disposes the agent toward repeating actions that are a means to the desired results.

This means that the notion of a *saṃskāra* – at least as it applies to actions – is a relatively minor innovation. It merely makes explicit what the *Mahābhārata* probably assumes – namely that there is some sense in which desires persist, even when the agent is neither aware of them nor motivated by them. If this is right, then the role of desire in the karmic process is much more central to the theory of *karma* than is usually acknowledged, and the account of *karma* in the *Mahābhārata* is more sophisticated than it might seem.

1. A Contemporary Interpretation of the Theory of *Karma*

It will be helpful in what follows to begin with what might be called the "bare-bones" interpretation of the theory of *karma*. Minimally, any account of the theory of *karma* claims that right and wrong actions produce good and bad consequences for the agent who performs them. Hence,

(1)

right actions ⇨ good consequences for the agent
wrong actions ⇨ bad consequences for the agent

Since at least some of the relevant consequences of actions arise only after some time has passed, there must be intermediary states that connect actions with their later consequences – states like merit and demerit. Hence,

(2)

right actions ⇨ merit ⇨ good consequences for the agent
wrong actions ⇨ demerit ⇨ bad consequences for the agent

The bare-bones interpretation of the theory of *karma* still requires a good deal of elaboration, however. By itself, it does not explain (1) what merit and demerit are, (2) how merit and demerit arise in consequence of actions, or (3) how merit and demerit eventually produce consequences that correspond with the actions that produced them.

A number of contemporary scholars have been concerned with just these questions,[1] and there is some consensus among them that the theory of *karma* is best understood in terms of *saṃskāras*. Karl Potter offers one of the most influential and thorough accounts of this sort, but the influence of his account can hardly be overstated (Potter 1963: 11–13, Bhattacharyya 1927: 239, Hiriyanna 1932: 130, Chapple 1986: 5, Reichenbach 1990: 19, Perrett 1998: 21–23, Chakraborty 1998: 15, Coward 1998: 42–3, Burley 2006: 114–15, Phillips 2009: 80).

Potter analyzes *saṃskāras* as dispositions, tendencies, or "habits" (Potter 1963: 11–13). He claims that actions produce *saṃskāras* (habits) and that *saṃskāras*, in turn, produce *phala* (good or bad consequences for the agent). His account can be diagrammed as follows:

(3)

actions ⇨ *saṃskāras* (habits) ⇨ *phala* (consequences)

A right action produces or strengthens a good habit – a habit to repeat the right action in similar circumstances. A wrong action produces or strengthens a bad habit (Potter 1963: 11–12). These good and bad habits, in turn, produce eventual success and failure, respectively, which correspond to the positive and negative consequences (*phala*) that accrue to the agent as a result of her actions (Potter 1963: 13). The fully elaborated account can be diagrammed as follows:

(4)

right actions ⇨ good *saṃskāras* ⇨ good *phala*
wrong actions ⇨ bad *saṃskāras* ⇨ bad *phala*

If this is right, then *saṃskāras* play the role in Potter's account that merit and demerit play in the account that I sketched at the outset. Indeed, it might even be that Potter analyzes merit and demerit in terms of good and bad habits. To say that a person has accrued merit or demerit, after all, implies that she is due some good or bad personal consequences. A good or bad habit, on Potter's account, has the same

implication, since good and bad habits tend to produce success and failure for the agent.

If this is right, then Potter's account answers each of the questions that the bare-bones account leaves unanswered. It explains (1) what merit and demerit are, (2) how merit and demerit arise in consequence of actions, and (3) how merit and demerit eventually produce consequences that correspond with the actions that produced them. Additionally, Potter's account is able to explain the common Hindu claim that both merit and demerit must eventually be abandoned in order to attain *mokṣa* (liberation). As Potter points out, both good and bad habits make a person

> less and less capable of adjusting to fresh or unusual contingencies. Insofar as this hardening of habits does take place, one comes to be at the mercy of his habits . . . And to be at the mercy of one's habits is to be out of control, that is to say, in bondage.
>
> (Potter 1963: 12)

Since *mokṣa* is a state of perfect freedom (Potter 1963: 3), all habits must be overcome in order to attain it.

2. A Preliminary Survey of *Karma* in the *Mahābhārata*

A number of scholars claim that there are relatively few passages in the *Mahābhārata* that explain the theory of *karma* in any detail. Peter Hill, for example, counts only five "major teachings on karma" in the entire text (Hill 2001: 29). Emily Hudson counts these five plus a sixth as the only *Mahābhārata* "passages where the details of the machinations of karma are discussed" (Hudson 2012: 189).

Even these already short lists of relevant passages, however, seem to overstate the extent to which the *Mahābhārata* elaborates the theory that actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent. Both Hill and Hudson define the theory of *karma* broadly, so that it includes not only the theory that actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent but also the theory of rebirth. Hill, for example, says,

> [t]he post-Vedic theory of karma . . . consists of two components . . . On the one hand, there is the doctrine of *saṃsāra*, or transmigration . . . On the other hand, there is the doctrine

> of karma or 'action', which in essence is the notion that all actions (good and bad) inexorably produce a consequent 'fruit' or effect.
>
> (Hill 2001: 1)

Hudson assumes Hill's account in her analysis as well (Hudson 2013: 189). When Hill and Hudson claim that certain passages in the *Mahābhārata* explain the theory of *karma*, then, they mean that these passages explain some element in this composite doctrine. This allows them to count passages that elaborate rebirth among those that elaborate the theory of *karma*, even if the passages say little to nothing about how actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent.

In Hill's analysis of the first of these passages, for example, he describes a portion of the story of King Yayāti (1.81–88) as a "tightly woven text . . . in which the facts of *transmigration* are described" (Hill 2001: 7, emphasis added). He admits, however, that "[w]hile the Uttarayāyāta is an intelligible account of transmigration, it is far less satisfactory as an account of . . . the ethical idea that all 'action' produces its consequent 'fruit' " (Hill 2001: 10). So Hill includes the story of Yayāti among the passages that elaborate the theory of *karma*, even though the passage does not elaborate the theory that actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent.

In another passage that both Hill and Hudson mention (from the *Anugītā*, 14.16–19), the sage Kaśyapa asks a wise *brāhmaṇa* seven questions. The first five have to do with death and rebirth:

> How does the body go away? And also, [how does the body] arise? How does the person wandering through rebirth become freed from [this] painful *saṃsāra*? And how, having attached to the *ātman*, does the body become free [from it]? And how does the unfree embodied [*ātman*] arrive at another [body]?
>
> (14.17.2–3)

The final two questions, in contrast, inquire into how actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent. "And how does that person enjoy the right and wrong actions [that he] himself performed? And where does the action of the bodiless [*ātman*] persist [between the time the action occurs and the time that its relevant consequences arise]" (14.17.4)?

As Hill admits, however, the *brāhmaṇa* "only deals with issues regarding . . . the death of the body, the attainment of another body,

and the mechanism of *rebirth*" in this passage (Hill 2001: 25, emphasis added). J. Bruce Long makes the same point. "It appears from the text that the Brahmin responds to no more than three of these queries (i.e., the death of the body, the acquisition of another body, and the mechanism of rebirth)" (Long 1999: 52). He ignores questions about how actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent.

Another passage (3.181–3.185) begins with Yudhiṣṭhira asking the sage Mārkaṇḍeya pointed questions about the mechanics of the karmic process. He asks,

> [how is] the embodied, having abandoned the body, chased by [his] right and wrong actions, and how, having died (*pretya*), does he rejoin (*saṃyujyate*) [them] here (*iha*), O best of the twice-born? Is it only in this world, [or also] in the next world? And where, O Bhārgava, do the actions of the deceased being remain [between their performance and fruition]?
>
> (3.181.7–8)

Hill concedes, however, that here too the sage does not answer the questions about how actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent. Indeed, in this case, Hill admits that Mārkaṇḍeya fails to answer the questions about rebirth as well.

> [T]he principal purpose of Mārkaṇḍeya's discourse does not seem to be to explain karma and *saṃsāra*, but to establish to Yudhiṣṭhira's satisfaction . . . that acts and events do not occur at mere random and devoid of all meaning, but according to the universal order of karma . . . the detailed workings of [both] doctrines are hardly elaborated at all.
>
> (Hill 2001: 14–15)

Hudson agrees with Hill that the Mārkaṇḍeya passage focuses primarily on establishing the fact of *karma*. "The heart of Yudhiṣṭhira's question," she says, "is whether previous acts determine future fortunes, whether bad or good" (Hudson 2013: 192). In response, "Mārkaṇḍeya establishes the fact that karma is the sole operative force in determining the lot of human beings – specifically with respect to their happiness and/or sorrow" (Hudson 2013: 192). As Hill points out, however, to establish that actions produce the relevant consequences for the agent is not to explain how they do so.

Hill draws the same conclusion from a fourth passage (3.198–3.207). In this case, the *brāhmaṇa* Kauśika asks a sagely butcher

"some crucial questions concerning the actual workings of karma and transmigration" (Hill 2001: 19). One of these questions is: "how is the birth of the good person good, and the [birth of the] bad person bad" (3.200.29)? As Hill admits, however, the butcher's response "amounts to no more than: 'This karma, it appears, is connected with impregnation'" (Hill 2001: 19). In other words, the butcher simply connects *karma* with rebirth and asserts that actions have corresponding consequences that might extend into future lives. Absent is any explanation of how the consequences of these acts persist and later arise.

Hudson claims that the butcher makes four distinct points in his instruction to Kauśika. The second of these, she says, has to do with "the mechanics of how acts follow the soul from one life to another" (Hudson 2013: 193). As the rest of her analysis of this passage shows, however, this elaboration of the "mechanics" of *karma* is simply the assertion that right actions produce good consequences for the agent and wrong actions produce bad ones and the assertion that these consequences might appear in a subsequent life. She summarizes that "as a result of virtuous acts, one becomes a god; due to mixed acts, one becomes a human; due to deluded acts, one becomes an animal; and due to criminal acts, one goes below, to hell" (Hudson 2013: 194). No word here, however, on how past actions determine future embodiments – or future experiences more generally.

In the remaining passage that both Hill and Hudson consider (13.112–113), Yudhiṣṭhira questions the sage Bṛhaspati about matters relating to *karma* and rebirth. He asks a direct question about how actions produce corresponding results: "how does merit follow [a person] (*kathaṃ dharmo 'nugacchati*)" (13.112.19)? Hill admits that "Bṛhaspati's answer is not entirely clear." All he says is that merit and demerit travel with the basic elements from one body to the next (Hill 2001: 22), with no explanation of how they are produced, what form they take, or how they produce the relevant results. This means that all five of the passages that both Hill and Hudson consider say almost nothing about the mechanics of the karmic process.

The passage that Hudson adds to Hill's list is Vidura's instruction to Dhṛtarāṣṭra after the war (11.2–11.8). Hudson claims, following Julian Woods (Woods 2001: 120), that this passage contains "one of the clearest articulations of karma in the epic" (Hudson 2013: 195). She translates the relevant portion of the passage as follows:

> Deeds that were done in the past lie next to a person who is lying down, they stand next to a person who is standing, and run after a person who is running. A person who performs

> good or bad acts in a certain stage of life will experience their results in that same stage of life.
>
> (11.2.22–23, Hudson 2013: 195)

As should be clear, however, this passage does little more than articulate the bare-bones conception of *karma*, adding only the (anomalous) claim that the results of an action will occur in the next life in the very same life stage as the one in which the action was performed.

All of this leads both Long and Hill to conclude that the theory of *karma* in the *Mahābhārata* is underdeveloped. Long says that the *Mahābhārata* "leaves many of the more intellectually troublesome areas [relating to *karma* and *saṃsāra*] unexplored," including "whether the effects of human acts are believed to be of a moral or a physiological nature or both" (Long 1980: 59–60). Hill's comments are nearly identical: "there are many intellectual and philosophical difficulties concerning karma and *saṃsāra* that all the *Mahābhārata's* principle teachings leave untouched" (Hill 2001: 29). "The exact nature of karmic consequences," for example, are never "closely considered" (Hill 2001: 30).

This conclusion seems well supported by the frequent claim in the *Mahābhārata* that "the production of the fruits of right and wrong actions, their coming and going, are the secrets of the gods (*devaguhyāṇi*)" (MBh 3.32.33). A natural conclusion to draw, then, is that the *Mahābhārata* never offers a detailed analysis of what merit and demerit are, how they arise as a result of actions, or how they produce corresponding consequences for the agent.

3. The Contemporary Interpretation of the Theory of *Karma* Reconsidered

Potter attributes the version of the contemporary account that I outlined in section 1 to the *Bhagavadgītā* in particular (Potter 1963: 3–13, Cf., Hiriyanna 1932: 117–32). As Roy Perrett points out, however, this kind of account is not explicit in the *Gītā* itself. It only appears in the commentarial literature, beginning with Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. The Vedāntin commentators, in turn, adopt the basic account from commentators on Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*, beginning with Vyāsa (Perrett 1998: 21).

These sources, however, do not obviously assert the account that Potter and others endorse. The first initial problem with the contemporary interpretation is that Vyāsa says rather clearly that *saṃskāras* arise as a consequence of *cittavṛtti* (or simply *vṛtti*) (mental states and

mental activity), as opposed to action. In his commentary to *Yogasūtra* 1.5, he says, "*saṃskāras* of a particular kind (*ājātīyakāḥ*) are produced (*kriyante*) only (*eva*) by [corresponding] *vṛttis*, and *vṛttis* [only] by [corresponding] *saṃskāras*."[2] This means that *saṃskāras* are dispositions or habits to repeat mental states and activities, rather than (bodily) actions, and the *saṃskāras* themselves are consequences of *vṛttis* rather than of actions themselves.

Vyāsa enumerates the five *vṛttis* in verses 1.7–1.11. They include *pramāṇa* (true, justified cognition), *viparyaya* (false cognition), *vikalpa* (conventionally true cognition), *nidra* (sleep), and *smṛti* (memory). This might be taken to imply that *vṛtti* refers to only a narrow subset of all mental states and activities. In his commentary to YS 1.8, however, Vyāsa says that the *vṛtti* of *viparyaya* includes not only the act of acquiring a false belief and the false belief itself (*viparyaya* proper) but also the entire range of *kleśas* (afflictions) that arise as a result of *viparyaya*.

If the *vṛtti* of *pramāṇa* is understood in an equally broad way, to include not only the act of acquiring a justified (?) true belief and the true belief itself but also the entire range of mental states and activities that arise as a result of true beliefs, and if the *vṛtti* of *vikalpa* is understood in an equally broad way (to include both the processes involved in forming merely conventionally true cognitions and their results), then most, if not all mental states and activities count as *vṛttis*. Nonetheless, the class of *vṛttis* almost certainly does not include bodily actions, as contemporary commentators imply.

A second initial problem with the contemporary account is that if actions produce *saṃskāras* in the way that *vṛttis* do, they invariably do so. Vyāsa divides *vṛttis* into two seemingly exhaustive categories. *Kliṣṭavṛttis*, he says, are "caused by the *kleśas* (*kleśahetukāḥ*)," and *akliṣṭavṛttis* "have the goal of discrimination [of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*]. [They] put an end to the functioning of the *guṇas*" (1.5). Both types of *vṛtti* produce *saṃskāras*. Again, "*saṃskāras* of a particular kind are produced only by [corresponding] *vṛttis*, and *vṛttis* [only] by [corresponding] *saṃskāras*." In other words, *kliṣṭavṛttis* produce *kliṣṭavṛttisaṃskāras* (and vice versa), and *akliṣṭavṛttis* produce *akliṣṭavṛttisaṃskāras* (and vice versa). All *vṛttis* produce *saṃskāras* of one or the other sort.

If actions produce *saṃskāras* in the same way that *vṛttis* do, then presumably actions invariably produce *saṃskāras* as well. If actions invariably produce *saṃskāras*, however, and if *saṃskāras* are just merit and demerit – as Potter and others claim – then actions invariably produce merit and demerit. And if actions invariably produce merit and

demerit, then liberation seems impossible, since merit and demerit are obstacles to the attainment of liberation.

Proponents of the contemporary account might try to avoid both of these initial problems by claiming that certain actions produce merit and demerit in the form of *karmāśayas*. Both Patañjali and Vyāsa repeatedly use the term *karmāśaya*. The word *āśaya* means "resting place," or "receptacle." Hence, *karmāśaya* might be taken to mean "resting place of *karma*." Perhaps *karma* rests in the same way that *vṛtti* does – as a disposition or habit to produce more events of the same sort in the future. Indeed, *āśaya* can even mean "disposition." Hence, *karmāśaya* might be taken to refer to "a disposition to action."

Ian Whicher takes *karmāśayas* to be a subset of *saṃskāras* and says, "every action leaves an impression (*saṃskāra*) in the deeper structure of the mind, where it awaits fruition in the form of volitional activity" (Whicher 1998: 99). One possibility is that he takes Vyāsa to attribute this function to *karmāśayas* in particular.[3] Georg Feuerstein says this more explicitly. He equates "the total stock of *saṃskāras* which have been called into existence by . . . volitional activity" with *karmāśayas* (Feuerstein 1996: 70). If these *karmāśayas* function like the *saṃskāras* that Vyāsa describes in verse 1.5, then presumably they dispose the agent toward specific volitional activity, just as *vṛttisaṃskāras* dispose the agent toward specific *vṛttis*. Swāmi Hariharānanda Āraṇya counts *karmāśayas* as *saṃskāras* as well. "Karmāśaya [is] latent impression of action. Saṃskāra [is] latent impression" (Āraṇya 1983: 132, fn. 1).

This kind of interpretation seems supported by the fact that Vyāsa seems to equate both *saṃskāras* and *karmāśayas* with *vāsanās*. In his commentary to *Yogasūtra* 2.13, Vyāsa distinguishes *karmāśayas* from *vāsanās* by saying, "*vāsanās* are due to multiple prior births (*anekabhavapūrvikā*). That which is a *karmāśaya*, however, is said to be of one birth (*ekabhavika*)." This might be taken to suggest that *karmāśayas* and *vāsanās* are fundamentally the same type of state, differing only insofar as the former have more recent origins than the latter.

Vyāsa says something similar about *saṃskāras* and *vāsanās*. "Those *saṃskāras* which are the cause of memories [and other mental states], those are [called] *vāsanās* (*ye saṃskārāḥ smṛtihetavas tā vāsanās*). They belong to a time without beginning (*taś cānādikālīnā*)" (2.13, Cf., 3.18). This might be taken to suggest that *vāsanās* are essentially the same as *saṃskāras*, differing, again, only in their antiquity. And if both *saṃskāras* and *karmāśayas* are essentially the same as *vāsanās*, then presumably they are also essentially the same as one another.[4]

If this is right, and *saṃskāras* and *karmāśayas* are essentially the same, then the first initial problem is avoided. Even though Vyāsa does

not explicitly say that actions produce *saṃskāras*, he says that actions produce *karmāśayas* and implies that *karmāśayas* are essentially the same as *saṃskāras*. Hence actions do indeed produce something akin to *saṃskāras*, which dispose the agent to repeat similar actions in the future.

Indeed, this connection between *saṃskāras* and *karmāśayas* strengthens the plausibility of the contemporary interpretation of the theory of *karma* in other ways as well. In a number of places, Vyāsa equates *karmāśayas* with merit and demerit (*puṇyāpuṇya* [2.12, 2.13], *dharmādharma* [2.15], *kuśalākuśala* [4.30]) and claims that the three fundamental *vipākas* (karmic results) of birth, lifespan, and experience (of pleasure and pain) arise from *karmāśayas* (2.13). This means that *karmāśayas* certainly play the intermediary role between actions and their (sometimes distant) consequences. If they are roughly equivalent to *saṃskāras*, then Potter and others seem correct in analyzing merit and demerit in terms of dispositions or habits. The diagram of this view, however, should be modified to reflect the terminological variation:

(5)

actions ⇨ *karmāśayas* (habits) ⇨ *phala* (consequences)

The notion of a *karmāśaya* also helps to avoid the second initial problem I mentioned earlier – the problem of actions invariably producing *saṃskāras*. As I said, both *kliṣṭa* and *akliṣṭavṛttis* invariably produce *saṃskāras*. The same is not true of actions and *karmāśayas*, however. In his commentary to *Yogasūtra* 1.5, Vyāsa says, "*kliṣṭa* [*vṛttis*] are caused by the *kleśas*, and are the fields for the gathering of *karmāśaya*." Vācaspati Miśra, in his subcommentary to *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* 1.2, simply says "*karmāśaya* corresponds with the *kleśas*. It [*karmāśaya*] is the seed [from which] birth, lifespan, and experience [arise]." This means that all *karmāśayas* are based in the *kleśas*, and hence are "*kliṣṭa*." Since not all actions are based in the *kleśas*, however, some actions do not produce *karmāśayas*. If this is right, then action does not invariably produce merit and demerit, and not all action constitutes an obstacle to the attainment of liberation.

If this is right, however, then diagram (5) is importantly incomplete. Since not all actions produce *karmāśayas*, presumably an action produces a *karmāśaya* only if some auxiliary state or activity occurs as well. Otherwise all actions would produce *karmāśayas*.

The most plausible candidates for these auxiliary states are obviously the *kleśas*. As I said, Vyāsa and Vācaspati claim that the *karmāśayas*

are based in the *kleśas*. Vyāsa, again, puts this by saying that the *kliṣṭavṛttis* that arise from the *kleśas* are the "fields for the gathering of *karmāśaya*." This suggests that *kleśas*, in the form of *kliṣṭavṛttis*, are the auxiliary states necessary for producing *karmāśayas*. Without them, no *karmāśaya* arises.

Vācaspati's commentary on this verse goes further and specifies that the agent "knows a specific object, *becomes desirous* (*sakto*) *or averse* (*dviṣṭho*) *toward it*, and thereby accumulates *karmāśaya*" (1.5, emphasis added). This implies that desire and aversion, in particular, are the *kleśas* that perform the auxiliary role of linking action to *karmāśaya*.

When Vyāsa describes the phenomenon of a yogi producing multiple minds in his commentary to verse 4.9, he also mentions the role of *rāga* (desire) in particular. "Only that mind that is born of meditation, that alone is without *āśaya* (deposit). It alone has none. There is therefore no *āśaya*, [no] activity of *rāga*, [*dveṣa*,] and so on, [and no] connection with merit and demerit (*puṇyapāpa*)." The isolation of *rāga* and *dveṣa* is also consistent with the emphasis these texts place on *vairāgya* (desirelessness) (1.15–1.16), which is certainly a state devoid of not only *rāga* but *dveṣa* as well.

Even this, however, leaves open the precise role that desire and aversion play in the production of *karmāśayas*. Vyāsa's discussion of *Īśvara praṇidhāna* (devotion to God) provides one clue. At the end of his commentary to *Yogasūtra* 2.1, Vyāsa defines *Īśvara praṇidhāna* as "the offering of all actions to the highest teacher, the abandonment of the results (*phala*) of those [actions to him]" (Cf., 2.32). This, of course, sounds much like the doctrine of desireless action in the *Bhagavadgītā*, which prescribes avoiding desire for the results (*phala*) of actions in particular (Cf., *Bhagavadgītā* 4.20–21, for example [see what follows]).

Vyāsa's commentary to verse 2.15 provides another clue. It reads, "when there is the pleasant or painful fruition-experience of *karma*, there is the accumulation of *karmāśaya* (*karmabhyo vipāka 'nubhūyamāne sukhe duḥkhe* vā *karmāśayapracaya*)." Here there is no mention of desire or aversion, but it makes sense to assume that an agent accumulates *karmāśayas* not just as a consequence of painful or pleasant experiences (which are probably unavoidable, even to the yogin and/or the liberated person) but as a consequence of doing what Vyāsa and the *Gītā* discourage: namely, having desire or aversion toward those painful or pleasant results. Later in the same passage, after all, Vyāsa says, "*karmāśaya* is born of desire (*rāgajaḥ*) and born of aversion (*dveṣajaḥ*)."

The thought then seems to be that an agent accrues *karmāśaya* in acting if and only if she either desires or is averse to the experience of

pleasure or pain that arises as a direct consequence of her action. The account can be diagrammed as follows:

(6)

action ⇨ *phala* ⇨ *rāga/dveṣa* ⇨ *karmāśaya*

If, instead, an agent neither desires nor is averse to the experience of pleasure or pain that arises as an immediate consequence of her action, then she does not form a *karmāśaya*. The series simply ends with the direct consequences of the action.

An important advantage of this account is that it provides a highly plausible explanation of how habits or dispositions (*karmāśayas*) arise. Suppose that I go to the freezer, get some chocolate ice cream, and eat it. This is the action. The immediate result is pleasure – I like the taste of the chocolate ice cream. This is the *phala*. This pleasure produces a desire to experience the pleasure of the ice cream again – I want more chocolate ice cream. This is *rāga*. And this desire for chocolate ice cream makes me disposed toward eating chocolate ice cream again in the future. This is the *karmāśaya* or disposition to action. In other words, I come to have the habit of eating chocolate ice cream as a consequence of enjoying it in the past and desiring to experience that enjoyment again. It is certainly hard to deny that this is how many dispositions and habits form.

4. *Karma* in the *Mahābhārata* Reconsidered

Once the contemporary account is clarified, much of its apparent sophistication disappears. The habits of action that contemporary scholars make so central to their accounts are not a direct disposition to act but a direct disposition to desire certain consequences of action. This desire, in turn, motivates actions intended to secure the desired fruits. *Karmāśayas* are not *saṃskāras* of actions, then, so much as they are a subset of *vṛttisaṃskāras* – *saṃskāras* of *rāga* and *dveṣa* in particular. They dispose the agent to act, but only indirectly, by means of disposing her to have the relevant desire or aversion.

If this is right, however, then the notion of a *saṃskāra* – at least as it applies to actions – is hardly a novel innovation. Indeed, there seems to be relatively little justification for positing this additional state in the first place, since the desire for the results of an action by itself seems sufficient to dispose an agent to perform the action in

the future. When I enjoy the taste of chocolate ice cream and desire to experience it again, this desire for the taste of chocolate ice cream itself seems to dispose me toward eating it. Diagram (6), then, might be modified to read:

(7)

action ⇨ *phala* ⇨ *rāga/dveṣa*
=
disposition to act
=
karmāśaya

The desire for the immediate consequences of an action just is the disposition to repeat that action in the future.

In order to show the cyclical nature of this process, the final arrow in the diagram might be extended to reach back to the first step in the process:

(8)

action ⇨ *phala* ⇨ *rāga/dveṣa*
=
⇧ disposition to act
⇧ =
karmāśaya
⇧ ⇩
⇦ ⇦ ⇦ ⇦

This is certainly a more plausible account of how actions run agents in circles than the account that Feuerstein abstracts from Vācaspati (Feuerstein 1989: 67).

One reason to think that there must be something like a disposition to desire, in addition to the desire itself, is that a desire seems to disappear and reappear between the time it is first produced and the time at which it later motivates action. I first desire chocolate ice cream as a result of enjoying its taste, and a week later I eat chocolate ice cream as a result. In the meanwhile, however, the desire seems to disappear and reappear – perhaps repeatedly. Sometimes I do not want chocolate ice cream (like first thing in the morning), and at other times I do. If the desire itself disappears in the interim but the merit or demerit (of which *saṃskāras*, remember, are an analysis) persists,

then perhaps there is a disposition to desire that is not the desire itself, which explains its eventual re-emergence.

If this is the purpose of the relevant *saṃskāras*, however, then the *Yogasūtra* merely makes explicit what the *Mahābhārata* probably assumes – namely, that there is some sense in which desires persist, even when the agent is neither aware of them nor motivated by them. It is not clear, however, that some additional state must be posited in order to explain this phenomenon.

Indeed, in ordinary English we talk as if desires might persist even when the agent is neither aware of them nor motivated by them. When someone says, "I've always wanted to visit Iceland," we do not assume that this desire has always been at the forefront of her mind or that she has always actively pursued this end. Nor do we challenge her assertion, insisting that she has only desired to visit Iceland for brief episodes over the course of her life. Philosophers might apply the distinction between occurrent and non-occurrent desires to explain this, but in ordinary language, we just call this state a desire – a desire that might just motivate her to go to Iceland one day.

This hardly implies an impoverished account of motivation, however. Indeed, if this is right, then the *Mahābhārata* cannot be faulted for not noting the distinction between occurrent and non-occurrent desires either, and the account of *karma* in the *Mahābhārata* is hardly less sophisticated than the contemporary account.

The *Mahābhārata*, after all, repeatedly advocates the abandonment of the desire for the *phala* of action and connects the desire for *phala* both with the accumulation of merit and demerit and with rebirth. Verse 2.51 of the *Bhagavadgītā*, for example, reads, "the wise, having abandoned the *phala* born of action (*karmajaṃ*) are liberated from the bondage of rebirth" (Cf., BG 2.49, 17.12, 17.21, 17.25, and so on). In other words, desires for the fruits of action trap a person in the cycle of rebirth. This much of the account can be diagrammed in the following way:

(9)

action ⇨ *phala* ⇨ *rāga/dveṣa* ⇨ rebirth

It might be that these desires trap a person in the cycle of rebirth only by means of producing further, additional states (such as *saṃskāras* or *karmāśayas*) that dispose the agent toward similar desires in the future. Alternatively, however – and more simply – these desires

themselves might simply persist until the time they motivate action again, even though there are times in the meanwhile when the agent is neither aware of them nor motivated by them (that is, they are "non-occurrent").

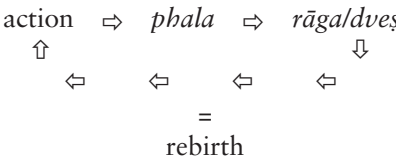
In another passage, the sage Sanatsujāta connects the desires for *phala* with repeated action. "Desires for the *phala* of action (*karmaphalānurāgās*) go toward the production of action" (5.42.8). When this claim is put into the context of the previous claim, the account reads:

(10)

action ⇨ *phala* ⇨ *rāga/dveṣa* ⇨ action ⇨ rebirth

There is little reason to think, however, that rebirth is something distinct from this cycle of actions. Instead, this habitual series of actions simply is the cycle of *saṃsāra*, as Potter and others claim. The more accurate diagram, then, reads:

(11)



If this is right, then the *Mahābhārata* seems to say that desires themselves – as opposed to additional states (*saṃskāras*) that dispose the agent to desire – ensnare a person in rebirth by compelling her to act in prescribed ways in all sorts of circumstances. Since *mokṣa* is a state of perfect freedom, these desires – whether they are "good" or "bad" – are counter-productive to its attainment. The agent remains trapped so long as these desires persist. When the desires are eliminated, the agent is free, in large part because she is no longer compelled to act by desires for past fruits.

So despite the supposed sophistication of the contemporary interpretation of the theory of karma, and despite the supposed simplicity – and even impoverishment – of the theory of karma in the *Mahābhārata*, the basic difference between the two accounts is relatively insignificant. The contemporary interpretation of the theory

of karma uses the term *saṃskāra* (*karmāśaya*, *vāsanā*) to refer to a subset of states that dispose the agent to have an occurrent desire. The *Mahābhārata*, in contrast, attributes this disposition to the desire itself, albeit in a non-occurrent state.

Conclusion

The account of the theory of *karma* in the *Mahābhārata* might seem impoverished, especially when contrasted with the contemporary interpretation. Even those passages of the *Mahābhārata* that scholars single out as explaining the theory of *karma* in the most detail seem to do little more than assert that actions produce corresponding consequences for the agent via merit and demerit.

Once the contemporary account is clarified in the context of texts that seem to justify it, however, the notion of a *saṃskāra* is hardly a novel innovation. Indeed, the rationale for positing such a state seems suspect. The *Mahābhārata* is hardly at fault, then, for assuming that desires themselves dispose an agent to repeat actions that produced pleasurable results in the past.

Notes

1 As is clear in a number of the passages in the next section, the authors of the *Mahābhārata* were concerned with these kinds of questions as well.
2 Citations of the *Yogasūtra*, *Yogasūtrabhāṣya*, and *Tattva Vaiśārdi* refer to Sārvabhauma and Nyāyaratna (1970).
3 I am sceptical that this is Whicher's view, but he offers no explicit argument for the claim that actions produce *saṃskāras*. Nor, as far as I know, does anyone else.
4 This is the conclusion that Gerald Larson draws. He claims that *karmāśayas* are active *saṃskāras* and that *vāsanās* are inactive *saṃskāras* (Larson 1993: 380, cited at Whicher 1998: 100).

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4

KARMAYOGA AND THE VEXED MORAL AGENT

Arti Dhand[1]

Modern India's most revered figures proposed *karmayoga* as a corrective to the perceived moral paralysis of nineteenth-century Hinduism. In Gandhi's view, *karmayoga* encapsulated the sum and genius of the *Bhagavadgītā*, so much so that one could conclude one's reading with chapter 3, when the exposition of *karmayoga* was complete (Jordens 1986). Vivekananda offered *karmayoga* as the antidote to what he considered Hinduism's soporific overdose on spirituality, viewing it as urging a life of engaged and energetic activism (French 1986). The topic continues to inspire reflection among Hindus, who make ongoing attempts to apply it to contemporary needs.[2] It is also esteemed by scholars and intellectuals, mystics and thoughtful people the world over. In this chapter, I investigate the moral credentials of *karmayoga* as articulated and represented in the *Mahābhārata*. I argue against the current, that whereas on the one hand *karmayoga* constitutes an admirable technique for cultivating soteriologically liberating habits of equanimity and self-discipline, a calm and austere contentment with one's given lot in life, on the other it is a remnant of a Brahmanical worldview that prioritizes order over ethics. In consequence, *karmayoga* and its correlate, *svadharma*, both advocate and entail an abdication of moral conscience. This is apparent in all aspects of textual terrain, where the idealization of stability necessitates a deeply suspicious attitude to innovation, but it is particularly acute in its effect on ethics, where the insistent reification of social duty breeds a moral stultification, discouraging social innovation and all but squelching a quizzical concern with social justice. This becomes evident when one examines key episodes of the text otherwise signifying the ideal of Hindu tradition: the *dāsī*, the *pativratā*, and the *vyādha* – the slave girl, the devoted wife, and the hunter/butcher.

Let us begin by addressing some methodological questions. It will be objected that (1) Hindu tradition does not especially have a notion

of individual conscience that overrides external authority; (2) further, the notion of conscience itself presents problems; (3) conscience is individually and culturally inflected, and that given, (4) whose conscience am I invoking in my discussion of Hindu ethics? And finally, (5) assuming I am referencing an ethics drawn from modern Western liberal discourse, how do I justify the application of an alien morality upon Hinduism? These are all reasonable questions. While it is impossible to tackle all within space constraints, they do deserve acknowledgement. In briefest response, (1) Hinduism indeed does not have a ready equivalent to the idea of an internal moral compass that supersedes externally dictated morality – it is clearly consciousness of this deficiency that led modern reformers to dust off the concept of *ātmatuṣṭi* from the classical texts and to breathe into it a new moral life.[3] In the absence of a clear parallel, we might float as options the concept of *svadharma* or, alternatively, of *sūkṣmadharma* – *dharma* as supple and subtle and open to situational considerations. As will become apparent, however, *svadharma* as traditionally understood is entirely inadequate as an analogue to conscience, whereas the idea of *sūkṣmadharma* is so inchoate as to present insurmountable barriers to practical use. There is indeed then no obvious notion of conscience in Hinduism. (2) Apart from this, the concept of conscience is in itself far from simple, as numerous scholars have pointed out – for what, precisely, *is* conscience, and how may one distinguish it, for example, from Freud's superego – a faculty very much shaped by the varied tutelary forces of one's environment? "Conscience is not a little voice whispering to each of us infallibly about what we should do," says Daniel Sulmasy, reacting to the intuitionism of Bishop Broad; yes, it has intuitive, affective, and conative aspects, but it cannot be collapsed into any of them. Rather, conscience is "a conjunction of will and judgment" that "*arises* from a fundamental commitment or intention to be moral" but whose *enactment* involves individual judgment (138). Sulmasy's work, along with that of Peter Fuss and others, helps us unpack the problem of *defining* conscience, but it raises another problem, (3) starkly highlighted by Hannah Arendt in her landmark work on Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. As Arendt points out, conscience itself is mutable, malleable, and susceptible to persuasion: for example, Eichmann, embodying "the banality of evil," saw himself very much as acting *on conscience* in perpetrating genocide. We cannot therefore naïvely essentialize moral qualities to conscience where conscience is shaped by external variables. That given, (4) whose conscience then are we applying to our discussion of *karmayoga*? And what is the content of this conscience?

It would be fruitless to deny that my idea of conscience is one moulded by modern Western liberal discourses, which, for all their imperfect realization and historical embeddedness in problematic power relationships, nevertheless affirm admirable values: values of freedom, equality, justice, and human rights. To my mind, mobilizing this incarnation of conscience to quiz Hindu ethics is justified by (5) the fact that we no longer inhabit cultural silos, but live in closely interconnected global communities in which our ethics are profoundly shaped by liberal discourses – discourses that are furthermore embraced in the founding documents of the Indian state. But beyond that, my greater concern is to highlight the dissonance within Hindu ethics itself. As I hope will shortly be clear, it is my belief that the great contemplative archive of Hinduism provides ample resources with which to construct a just, equitable, caring, and compassionate society. It is with this conviction that I undertake this discussion of *karmayoga*. In my view, these resources can and should be activated to construct a collective Hindu conscience that takes equal account of the needs and vulnerabilities of all its subjectivities.

Background

Returning then to our text – while the *Mahābhārata* notoriously resists simplification on every score, one generalization that seems apposite is that it is a text that thoughtfully mulls questions of agency and action and advances the doctrine of *karmayoga* as its defining intellectual innovation. The basic credendum of *karmayoga* is pithily summarized in the *Gītā*: do not what you *want* but what you *ought*; disengage the motive for action from its expected reward and act, rather, in a spirit of nonattachment, motivated only by duty. The sheer simplicity of this formulation is captivating in its own right, but to the extent that *karmayoga* necessitates a disengagement from personal whim, *karmayoga* is also the basis of *bhakti*: act not out of desire for something but out of passion for God; to the same extent, it is also the inalienable companion of *jñāna*: act not out of ego-generated desire but from understanding of the larger picture, knowing the ego and its attachments to be transient and inconsequential. *Karmayoga* thus is more than merely one among the famous "three paths" derived from the *Gītā* but forms the fundament and support of all religious striving in the text, from the urging of *bhakti* to the involved discourses of *jñāna*. Ultimately, it forms the loudest message of the *Mahābhārata*, repeated in myriad passages. The learned verbosity of the Śānti and Anuśāsana parvans, for example, concludes with a powerful advocacy

of *karmayoga*: in several thousand verses, Yudhiṣṭhira is urged to do his duty, for that is the best that he can hope to do.

Ideologically, in the contest of ideas among the Buddhists, Jains, and "Hindus," the doctrine of *karmayoga* constitutes an ingenious Brahmanical response to the antinomianism of heterodoxy, deftly packaging a philosophy of world renunciation in the garb of worldly engagement. Through these means, it claims a failsafe "middle path" between world renunciation on the one side and victimization by worldly passions on the other: Arjuna need neither flee to the forest to escape a painful choice nor remain paralyzed by emotionality on the battlefield but walk a middle line between the two. As an idea, this strikes at the heterodox traditions' most obvious early weakness – their devaluation of worldly life – offering that through *karmayoga* one can have a renouncer's cake and yet eat it right in the world; with attitudes of calmness, equanimity, and non-attachment, one can achieve the renunciation and serenity of a sage – without, however, making oneself useless to society. *Karmayoga* is thus advanced as a more reasonable proposition to dealing with suffering, a practical alternative to a disruptive repudiation of the world. In the 18-volume arc of the *Mahābhārata*, it is presented as the greater moral path. Whereas outright renunciation is intensely admired in the text, the worry is that it serves only individual aspirations for enlightenment and leaves society dangerously adrift. *Karmayoga*, on the other hand, serves both self and others: the self through acts of mental discipline, others through one's work. Serving one's function in the social ecosystem, honouring one's responsibilities and continuing care to one's dependents are proposed as the critical moral functions of *karmayoga*: Arjuna must do his duty as a warrior, however distasteful in that moment, not only to enable the restitution of *dharma* (whatever that may be) but also because a great many people depend upon his special gifts as a warrior. Similarly, Yudhiṣṭhira must persevere and reign as king, denying his every emotional impulse to bolt, because he is the leader of the group, and people look to his authority. For either of them in these critical moments to indulge their desire for escape would be an egregious dereliction of moral duty, a wantonly selfish act that would leave their dependents rudderless and without leadership. In the context-sensitive[4] ethics of the *Mahābhārata*, where everything is rendered in shades of grey, these would be naively immoral acts, ostensibly wrought at the urgings of moral conscience. Here we have *karmayoga* at its best, with a message both brilliant and profound, surely deserving of the esteem it receives in Hindu history. At the heart of it is an attitude of self-abnegating altruism, a broader perspective suggesting a high-minded concern with *lokasaṃgraha*, the welfare of the world.

So far, so good; in such situations, the moral force of *karmayoga* is obvious. This looks like straightforward deontological ethics, and there is a viable moral case to be made for the welfare of the many over the desires of the one, particularly when that one is merely but one's own meagre self. I identify four flaws. (1) *Karmayoga* offers itself primarily as a soteriology, not a moral philosophy. Whatever its implications may be for ethics, they are secondary and happenstance, unsought effects of a teleology focused on other aspirations. Morality therefore is not an ultimate value – this notion is in itself troubling. Beyond that, the *Mahābhārata*'s particular construction of the relationship between soteriology and ethics poses problems. (2) The dictum of "Do thy duty" begs the question of what is one's duty, how does one define one's duty. This puts the doctrine of *karmayoga* intimately in bed with the doctrine of *svadharma*, which renders *karmayoga* immediately problematic. (3) It is one thing for the privileged and empowered to voluntarily undertake self-sacrifice of the kind *karmayoga* entails; it is a whole other thing to expect it of the already under-privileged, living lives of penury and injustice. Such a proposition is morally repugnant. (4) It urges blind faithfulness to tradition. Allegiance to tradition for its own sake can never be a viable moral position, but in an age in which, presumably, the assumptions of tradition were palpably felt to be true, and when tradition was revered as sacrosanct and holy, this argument might have carried water. In a postmodern context, however, in which the notion of tradition has been extensively unpacked to expose its intimate complicity in the perpetuation of oppression, the evocation of tradition must be immediately suspect, encumbered as it is with the weight of a profoundly shameful history.

Let us discuss each proposition in turn.

I. *Karmayoga* as Soteriology

The first and most obvious concern about *karmayoga* as a way of life is that ethics is not its express purpose. As any number of passages in the text make clear, *karmayoga* is offered as a soteriology unique in simultaneously being an instrument for maintaining social stability – which in the *Mahābhārata* is billed as a critical moral concern. To the extent that *karmayogic* action enhances other facets of morality, it is a value-added bonus. Says the *Gītā*: "Having abandoned the fruits that come from acts, the wise and single-minded become free from the bondage of rebirth, and go on to a state of joy"[5] (BG II.51). And says the butcher colourfully to the *brāhmaṇa* in the Āraṇyakaparva: "With the ship of steadiness, cross the river of the five senses, filled with

the crocodiles of greed and attachment, and go beyond the straits of existence"[6] (III.198.67). As articulated in these passages, *karmayoga* is not intended as a strategy for ethics but is rather geared at the telos of freedom from painful cyclical existence. It entails no scrutiny of the requisite act or even moral consciousness.[7]

From an ethical standpoint, the notion of values that supersede or even ignore ethics is in principle troubling. This is not, however, an issue confined to the *Mahābhārata* but a broader philosophical one pertaining cross-culturally. Soteriologies and ethics often exert competing demands on an individual, and the question of which has priority is ever exigent. Broadly formulated, what does religion owe to ethics? And is ethics the handmaiden of religion or a sovereign concern that encompasses and trounces the claims of religion? What is, or what should be, the relationship between religion and ethics? The answers to these questions vary widely depending upon the respondent, but even a cursory acquaintance with the world religions reveals that the relationship between religion and ethics is testy. For its own part, the *Mahābhārata* is sensitive to the competing goals of religion and ethics – indeed, to a considerable extent, it is an extensive meditation on precisely these questions. What makes it more complex than the others, however, is that it has a textured – though no less problematic – ambivalence about soteriology itself. This sets it sharply apart from the other Indic traditions, which have unambiguous commitments to their soteriologies. The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, is powerfully conflicted. Its misgivings are the legacy of its world-affirming Vedic past, which bequeaths a vision of a harmoniously functioning society consonant with and integral to an awe-inspiringly harmonious universe. The *Mahābhārata* is immensely inspired by the majesty of this vision, of all things elegantly and exquisitely in alignment, operating in consonance to uphold the cosmos.[8] Even where it recognizes problems with the Vedic model,[9] it cannot shrug it off. On the other hand, the *Mahābhārata* also has an instinctive and intense attraction to the antinomian soteriologies of its new intellectual context, and sees compelling value in them: their incisive analysis of the existential condition, their novel focus on the individual person, which it paradoxically and with mystical symmetry homologizes with the universal, their soaring idealism, their passionate aspiration for freedom. Straddling these fundamentally oppositional commitments is what gives the text its powerfully ambivalent character. Integrating their best insights is its primary intellectual struggle and among its outstanding achievements. The *Mahābhārata* deals with these dual commitments employing the typically Brahmanical practice of ordering, typologizing, and

hierarchalizing values, ultimately consigning the Vedic vision to a lower epistemic frame, while lauding its soteriological adaptation as the highest level of knowledge. This strategy represents an ingenious solution in many respects, enabling the text to simultaneously embrace sharply discordant value systems in an elegant and economical way. This two-tier epistemology, however, creates insurmountable problems for ethics. Briefly: it defers the recognition of universal personhood and its more exacting ethical standard to some remote and improbable future, when one might embark upon the ultimate spiritual quest. For the present moment, it retains its existing stratification of society – and its existing stratification of *morality* – contenting itself with expressing admiration and appreciation for the universally encompassing vision of renunciation and with valorizing its ethics. This ordering of the religious and the ethical categories, such that the more demanding moral system is correlated with the more remote and improbable religious commitment, has severely deleterious consequences for Hindu ethics. De facto, it amounts to an endless deferral of true and genuine moral engagement, which is confined to the more exalted religious sphere. One is promised egalitarianism and universally applicable moral standards – but on a hazy, distant horizon, always, forever, "later."

It is this "later" that is the undoing of the *Mahābhārata* from an ethical point of view. Tomorrow never comes – or if it does, it comes only for the tiny spiritually adept minority that tends to renunciation – comprised of people who, by their very disposition, are motivated to move beyond the pale of society anyway. It leaves ordinary people exactly where they always were – at the mercy of highly inegalitarian and, in many cases, demeaning, exploitive, and harshly oppressive social codes that to the postmodern consciousness are morally offensive. Whereas the ethics of the *Mahābhārata*'s soteriologies are lofty and profound, uncompromisingly embracing the absolutism of *ahiṃsā*,[10] they are robbed of their teeth by the conservatism of the *Mahābhārata*'s Vedic commitments, which are structured upon and hold tightly to a hierarchical model of society. This serves to keep the text forever and beyond suspended between earth and sky – head stretching mightily to peer above the clouds, feet planted firmly in cement.

This is problem number 1.

2. Do Thy Duty, I

Problem number 2 is singularly about *karmayoga*. Let us review. *Karmayoga* is, on the one hand, a mental attitude: "Your entitlement

extends only to the action," says the *Gītā*, "never to its fruit" (II.47). Whatever one does, one should do it in a spirit of detachment, with no vestment in the results of one's action. This is a posture of mental renunciation intended to discipline the mind and quell the emotionality that is the basis of suffering: a laudable effort, surely beyond reproach. But what, in practical terms, ought one to do on any given occasion? What principle then should guide one's action? Here *karmayoga* enters onto more morally shaky territory. *Karmayoga* urges one toward *dharma*, roughly rendered, "duty," but this only begs the more thorny question of how to identify one's duty. The *Gītā* – and the *Mahābhārata*, and Hinduism more broadly – nudge one toward the answer: one's duty is one's *svadharma*, one's personal individual *dharma*, derived from, and signifying, one's location on the complex web of social, political, and other relations that bespeak one's individuality. Most elements of this individuality come bundled with one's birth: gender, class, familial relationships – hence *svadharma* is predetermined to some extent; ultimately, however, *svadharma* must be established situationally, taking due account of context.

For an ethicist, the notion of *svadharma* is an interesting one, representing a pragmatic and mature appreciation of the multivalent ethical obligations incumbent upon an individual at any one time. In particular, it is an interesting counterpoint to Kantian ethics, where the measure of a sound ethical system is that it admits no difference and transcends individuality. Notionally, therefore, the concept of *svadharma* would seem to have solid potential, assuming a mature moral agent actively engaged in acts of moral reasoning to determine ad hoc the propriety of every action. That is not, however, the mystical interpretation of *svadharma* that prevails in the *Mahābhārata*, or in Hinduism at large, for the term is in fact encoded with meanings, and privileges particular understandings of *dharma* to the exclusion of an open assessment of circumstance. In practical terms, the word *svadharma* is indexed to a narrow set of parameters: first and overwhelmingly, it is practically synonymous with *varṇadharma*, one's class-based duty. Secondarily, it admits a number of other more-or-less-rigorously-defined choreography of behaviours: *āśramadharma*, duty based on one's mode or "phase of life"; *kuladharma*, propriety of conduct within the complex of family relations; *strīdharma*, referring to duties specific to women, and so forth. *Svadharma*, in sum, is shorthand for established repertoires of behaviours pertaining to the various discrete subsets of gender, occupation, family, and other groups that contribute to one's identity. The primary point of reflection, therefore, is determining which of one's various duties should take priority in a given situation. When

Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna to do his duty, therefore, he urges not any sage act of moral reflection but refers pointedly to the most obvious component of his identity, his *kṣatriya* class: Arjuna is a warrior standing on a battlefield, and his *varṇa* identity must take precedence over any other understanding of duty – of attachment to kin, for example. This is equally the case with *Yudhiṣṭhira*: his moral misgivings are dismissed as inappropriately *brahminic*, unsuited to his station in life. In verse after verse, he is urged to resist them and to do his duty as king. As king, not only is it his duty to enact the role of the *kṣatriya* but also to ensure that all other sectors of society narrowly hew to their own social roles: "A king binds his subjects to do their own jobs through *dharma*, and yokes others who do the wrong job to their own tasks" (III.198.25). So important is it that all follow their *varṇadharma*, that kings indeed "execute those who do the wrong jobs, as the hunter kills deer with his arrows" (III.198.26). Maintaining people in their designated social place is among the cardinal responsibilities of a king, as exemplified by the iconic king Janaka: "In Janaka's kingdom, there are none doing the wrong job; all four classes are devoted to their own tasks" (III.198.27).

Identifying one's *svadharma*, therefore, is no freewheeling exercise in moral judgment; rather precisely the reverse: it is an encoded language that expressly inhibits, obviates, even prohibits acts of individual moral judgment. There is no intellectual exercise outside of identifying which of one's various already-encoded identities to bring to the fore. Its function rather is performative: should Arjuna in this contingency enact son or father, *brāhmaṇa* or *kṣatriya*, householder or renouncer? Each role comes with its repertoire of acts, gestures, and boundaries that simply need to be executed and performed. His task is merely to identify which aspect of his identity is salient to the occasion and to mobilize it.

This reading of *svadharma* renders the concept the very opposite of what it might notionally be – from a forward-looking, situationally dynamic system of active moral reasoning in which one is in constant engagement with one's evolving moral conscience to one that must forever resist the urgings of conscience to cleave to a transcendentally inflected concept of duty. One must, indeed, *deny* conscience and renounce acts of individual judgment, enacting rather one's role in the larger theatre of orthodoxy. The *Rāmāyaṇa* provides some particularly stark examples of this.

In the Uttarakāṇḍa, the intensely loyal Lakṣmaṇa is dispatched by an inscrutably terse Rāma to deceive Sītā with the promise of a trip to visit the forest sages and to abandon her there. Lakṣmaṇa, even

knowing well Sītā's innocence, even convulsed with shame at the deceit with which he is assigned, and even overwhelmed with pity for his pregnant sister-in-law, must pursue his *svadharma* as a junior and as the king's vassal and abandon Sītā in the wilderness – which is precisely what he does. There is no mechanism whereby conscience may manually override the dictates of *svadharma*: and so Lakṣmaṇa does as told, leaving the helpless woman in the forest, at the mercy of the wild. In another instance, Rāma, informed of the *śūdra* Śaṃbūka violating upper-class privilege by undertaking asceticism, does not even pause for reflection before decapitating the child – as part of his royal *svadharma* to maintain the segregated order of society. There is no pause for moral consideration, no moment to weigh alternatives, no option to exercise his celebrated instinct for mercy: his immediate impulse is to perform his *svadharma* as king to kill class violators, "as a hunter kills deer with his arrows"; he beheads the boy. This signals a woeful obviation of moral engagement, a complete abdication of moral conscience, in favour of a social code with claims to transcendental authority.

We see the same pattern in the *Mahābhārata*. Even in its finest examples, the biggest challenge is but to choose between competing *svadharmas* – not to reflect on the morality of an action. This becomes obvious, for example, in the story of Cirakārin, told in XII.258.

Cirakārin, "the procrastinator," son of *ṛṣi* Gautama, finds himself one day in a particularly vexing situation: he is urged by his father, in a fit of jealous rage, to kill his mother. This puts the lad in terrible conflict and plunges him into anguished thought. To kill his mother would go against his duty as a son to honour his mother, and a mother is always worthy of reverence, he reasons. Where would a man be without his mother? On the other hand, to disobey his father would go against his duty as a son to obey his father, a grave sin, violating his filial *svadharma*: what to do? The boy is in a quandary. True to his name, Cirakārin takes all day to mull over his dilemma. Were it a simple moral question, there would surely *be* no dilemma; the son would argue against his father's gross and jealous overreaction, would categorically refuse the murder, would stand before his mother to protect her at all costs, and, were he living today, immediately call the police. But poor Cirakārin does none of these things, because he is socialized to put *dharma* before morality – more specifically, *svadharma* before morality. Even being a deep thinker, whose reflections yield us some of the most beautiful passages in the *Mahābhārata* in appreciation of motherhood, he cannot exit that mind-set. The moral question in its own right is not a point of debate.

The *Mahābhārata* of course furnishes many fine examples of individuals behaving with exemplary moral instinct – Yudhiṣṭhira in his numerous tests, most memorably in his refusal to abandon a stray dog; the king Śibi, who offers his own body to protect a dove; most poignantly, Karṇa, who resists every kind of suasion to stand staunchly with the apocalyptically doomed Kaurava side, refusing to abandon humble parents and loyal friends. It is these passages that ultimately redeem the *Mahābhārata* from a slavish underwriting of orthodoxy. Its signature doctrine of *karmayoga*, however, teeters on a moral precipice, wedded as it is to a very narrow definition of *svadharma*. *Svadharma* precludes morality, obviates moral reflection, nullifies the very concept of moral agent.

Svadharma moreover is not the standalone foundation of *karmayoga* but itself comes with an ideological toolbox full of powerful implements to support it. Among its most versatile instruments are the doctrines of *karma*, the *guṇas*, and *svabhāva* – some of the most fertile concepts of Hinduism that, in the realm of soteriology, represent a highly creative and astute grasp of human psychology. For ethics, however, they present problems.

It would be foolhardy to suggest that we can unpack any of these concepts here or even elucidate one with any thoroughness. The best that one can hope to do is to identify their contribution to *karmayoga* and to gesture to the moral concern. Let us begin with *karma*.

The great paradox of the doctrine of *karma* is that it is simultaneously a philosophy of radical free will as a theodicy of social injustice.[11] Thus, one becomes as one chooses to act – this opens the door to immense psychological freedom, limitless self-invention; yet one suffers injustice because of choices made in remote and unknowable previous lives – thus every variety of one's suffering is of one's own making, merited and deserved. This equally unverifiable as unfalsifiable explanation of rebirth places the blame for one's disempowerment squarely on one's own shoulders, however frail and hunched over with the weight of oppression. Coupled with *karmayoga*, the theory of *karma* tells us that one's best hope for amelioration of one's misfortune is to conform meekly to one's designated *svadharma* and pin one's hopes onto the next life, where, providing one assiduously conforms, performs, and complies, things will be better. This faith-driven aspiration, whose verity can never be assured, is the best promise of the theory of *karma*. *Karmayoga* magnifies and extends it a quantum by insisting that not only should one *submit* to one's position as stipulated by *svadharma* but, further, that one should *embrace one's docility as a virtue*. Further, it is this conscious and engaged meekness

that will catapult one to freedom from *saṃsāra*. Says the butcher to the *brāhmaṇa* in one of the *Mahābhārata*'s classic expositions of *karmayoga*: "Service is for the *śūdra*, plowing for the *vaiśya*, fighting for the *kṣatriya*, and the pursuit of learning, austerity, spells, and truthfulness is for the *brāhmaṇa*" (III.198.24). He insists upon his humble work and assumes the entire responsibility for it, blaming himself. "No doubt my living is loathsome, but the dictate of our previous deeds is powerful and hard to resist . . . this is the evil result of the evil I did before" (III.199.1–2). He continues, "I know it is due to my past acts, and it is *adharma* for a man to abandon his own work" (III.199.18). Indeed, concludes this despised member of a despised underclass, "I know this is my *dharma*, and I will not give it up" (III.199.15). With *karmayoga*, one cannot pry the oppressed's oppression away from his grip, for he will not yield it. He clutches his misfortune as absolution for sins he is unconscious of having committed, defending the privilege of others, insisting on his adversity, and blaming himself for his powerlessness. For the empowered, this is surely ingenious philosophy, a rhetorical gold mine of sorts – rendering unnecessary any coercive measures of control, for through *karmayoga* the underclass owns, rationalizes, and insists upon its suffering.[12] *Karma*'s contribution to *karmayoga* is to provide a failproof rationale for social injustice, viewing it as a condition self-generated by the disenfranchised and the disempowered. The socially fortunate have earned their good fortune and so deserve their privilege, and the lowly should look to their own (epistemically unavailable) past and rue themselves for their suffering. In the social realm, therefore, *karma* is an unremittingly conservative philosophy whose potent effect is to deny the injustice of injustice and to nullify any need for collective social change. Coupled with *karmayoga*, it powerfully squelches ambition to combat injustice. The very keys to its success as a soteriology – *don't ask, just do; abandon expectations; forbear, with equanimity; yield to suffering as the natural condition of living* – become, in the social domain, the source of painful bondage. In sum, it furnishes ideological and religious weapons to social oppression to complement political and material ones. Now, resistance to social injustice is rendered not only socially disruptive and criminal but also an act of impiety and cosmic evil, spiritually damaging, capriciously destabilizing, disruptive of cosmic harmony.

The same dynamic is apparent in the philosophy of the *guṇas*. As with *karma*, on the one side, the doctrine of the *guṇas* represents one of the most incisive and shrewd discussions of human psychology to be found anywhere. Its analysis of the three constituents of matter remains powerfully intuitive. On the other, in its rigorous impulse to

categorize and locate all phenomena, it reifies an inherently exploitive social order, authorizing and empowering it with intellectual and philosophical heft. Explains the butcher to his high-born interlocutor:

> Among the *guṇas*, the *tamas* is characterized by ignorance, the *rajas* by motivation, while the *sattva* is declared to be the highest because of its great illuminating power. Governed by *tamas* is one who is largely ignorant, stupid, habitually drowsy, witless, ill-looking, darkling, resentful, and lazy. Governed by *rajas* is one of ready speech and good advice, friendly, argumentative, eager to learn, arrogant, and proud. Governed by *sattva* is one who is illumined, steady, aloof, unprotesting, free from anger, wise, and self-controlled.
>
> (III.203.4–7)

So far so good; one can still cautiously and warily follow along. Where the *guṇas* veer into the social project is when they equate different classes of society with different qualities. Thus, *brāhmaṇas* are such because they exhibit a preponderance of *sattvaguṇa*; *kṣatriyas* are psychologically oriented such, and occupy their aggressive social position, because they are characterized by the *rajasic* qualities of action, energy, and aggression; *śūdras* are such on the social and psychological scale because they are "ignorant, stupid, habitually drowsy, witless, ill-looking, darkling, resentful, and lazy." By its inherent tautology, the *guṇa* theory contributes to social determinism. If we now introduce *karmic* language into the equation, we have: *brāhmaṇas* are *brāhmaṇas* because they have exemplified *sattvic* qualities in previous lives. *Śūdras* are *śūdras* because their position is recompense for their violence and cruelty in previous lives. Like the theory of *karma*, the *guṇas* theory is complicit in reifying, justifying, and perpetuating class prejudice, providing intellectual and philosophical tools to dignify it.

The *guṇa* theory is one support of *karmayoga*, but it also critically informs the concept of *svabhāva*, "one's nature." In practical terms, *svabhāva* represents the personalization of *prakṛti* as *svadharma* is of *dharma*: *svabhāva* and *prakṛti* are often used interchangeably to connote one's nature. The important point for our analysis is that one's *svadharma* is a reflection of one's *svabhāva*.[13]

Like the concepts of *svadharma*, *karma*, the *guṇas*, and indeed *karmayoga* itself, the concept of *svabhāva* has tremendous potential as a liberative doctrine, if one were to understand one's inner nature as one's eternal self, one's *puruṣa* or one's *ātman*. If one's *svabhāva* referred to one's *ātman/puruṣa*/eternal self, it would radically transform the

domain of Hindu ethics. All beings' *svadharma* then would be to enact one's eternal self – predicated as *svadharma* is on *svabhāva*. We would seek to recognize our commonality with each other; we would aim eo ipso to treat the other as oneself; we would look to enhance the other in enhancing ourselves. Such shangri-la, however, is not what is envisioned in the concept of *svabhāva* as we have received it, for the notion of nature in Sāṃkhya refers squarely not to *puruṣa* but to *prakṛti*, one's dynamic, ever-changing concatenation of *guṇas* that constitute our material "selves." Who we are in this sense refers not to spirit but to our biological and psychologized social identities that dictate our *svadharma*: a lion's *svabhāva* is that of a carnivore, hence a lion's *svadharma* is to kill and eat; a cat's *svabhāva* is of enmity to mice, hence its *svadharma* is to chase and kill mice; a *śūdra's svabhāva* is violent and cruel, hence it is his *svadharma* to hunt and kill and consume meat indiscriminately.

One might anticipate that one's *svabhāva* can change and evolve as a result of one's life experience, as the *guṇas* of *prakṛti* are ever-dynamic in the Sāṃkhya system, but this appears not to be the case for the notion of *svabhāva*; *svabhāva* is treated as an innate nature from whose impulses one cannot escape. Resistance is futile, says Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna, for even resisting, his nature will compel him. "Creatures follow their natures. What will repression accomplish?" (III.33). Were one to argue, for example, that Arjuna, while born and trained as a warrior, had through a traumatic experience become sensitized to the evils of violence and did not want to do it any more, the combined force of *svabhāva* and *svadharma* will not admit such moral development. He must resist that insight as the preserve of the *brāhmaṇa*; for "it is better to do one's own duty poorly than to do another's duty well" (III.35). Now we have come full circle. In *karmayoga*, one must do one's duty, which is one's *svadharma* of class, life-stage, gender, and so forth; one's *svadharma*, overwhelmingly predicated upon one's birth, is shaped by one's inner nature; this inner nature itself reflects the ratio of one's *guṇas*, which themselves are predetermined by one's supposed karma in previous lives. This is as thoroughgoing a determinism as any imaginable; its sum and substance is to insist that one cannot escape one's "destiny" no matter how one tries, for one's *karma*, *guṇas*, and *svabhāva* rigorously militate against it. *Karmayoga*'s contribution to this is to say one should not try. Rather, one should embrace it, however vile or debased; through such humble and pious submission to one's lot, one earns, we are told, freedom from the maze of *saṃsāra*.

The coupling of *karmayoga* with *svadharma* and its various supports fatally compromises the moral possibilities of *karmayoga*. It

takes what might have been a dynamic moral engagement with a situation and puts it at the service of an exploitive socio-religious ideology. No doubt this impulse is intellectually anchored in some of the earliest thinking of the Brahmanical tradition, with its ordering of all elements in their proper place and function as vital to the harmonious functioning of the cosmos. For an ethicist, however, it is impossible to ignore the power relations embedded in this construction of the social organism, which locates and binds entire classes of beings to subservient functions solely on account of birth while elevating others to lofty positions of privilege in no wise connected to merit. The doctrine of *karmayoga*, while on the one hand offering the promise of the most profound freedom on the soteriological side, by the same token, because of its reliance on *svadharma*, thus becomes egregiously complicit in the reification, reinscription, and perpetuation of a shameful system of social bondage.[14]

3. Do Thy Duty, II

The moral problems with *karmayoga* might yet pass undetected if they were confined merely to one's social peer or to one of privileged background. They are, however, thrown into sharp relief when the dicta of *karmayoga* are addressed to the subaltern. Picture this: a warrior experiencing a debilitating loss of nerve on the battlefield and another warrior – or even God – counselling him, urging him to *karmayoga*. This is a picture with which we are well familiar, and we reconcile ourselves to it, rationalizing that the Pāṇḍavas have exhausted every means of conciliation, that they are faced with a dishonest and obdurate enemy, that this is a *dharmic* war, and that Arjuna's role as warrior is critical to its success in restoring the right. Fine. Let us grant the wisdom and moral propriety of *karmayoga* in this scenario. Now picture something else: a man in a position of power and privilege, enjoying the social and material benefits of his high class, addressing a servant, a person of debased social and material means, subject, but never inured, to the contempt of society. The man exhorts the slave to *karmayoga*: "Do your *svadharma* and do not waver"[15] (BGII.31). "Pursue the daily tasks disinterestedly, for, while performing his acts without self-interest, a person obtains the highest good"[16] (BGIII.19). "Be not motivated by the reward of your actions, but do not seek to avoid acting. Abandon self-interest, and act with yogic steadiness"[17] (BGII.47–48). "Your entitlement extends only to the action, never to its fruit" (BGII.47). If you resist, your nature will compel you: "Even a person of wisdom acts according to his nature. All creatures follow

their nature: what will repression accomplish?"[18] (BGIII.33). And finally, "It is better to do your own *dharma* poorly than to do another's *dharma* well; indeed, it is better to die in one's own *dharma*, for the *dharma* of another is fearsome"[19] (BGIII.35).

To a disinterested outside observer, at first glance, such exhortation would seem petulant, preposterous, and farcical. Once it dawned upon one that it is intended in earnest, it would be revealed for what it is: a monumentally self-serving, sophistical, and outrageous philosophy of privilege, megalomaniacally unselfconscious of its pretensions, morally repulsive. To offer *karmayogic* exhortation to one already underprivileged, to sanctimoniously instruct, from one's position of privilege, that the already-unfortunate renounce all desire and labour brutishly on the basis of their "duty" to serve the privileged, is a morally loathsome proposition. It has the effect of smothering resistance to one's social circumstance, silencing complaint and dissent, billing it now as an act of impiety – not only does it reify and reinscribe an abhorrent social hierarchy, but it also reinscribes and underwrites an oppressive system of power. The unreflecting advocate of *karmayoga* thus becomes complicit in the prolongation and perpetuation of social injustice. This is not obvious when one addresses another of equal or privileged ilk, but it becomes acutely and painfully clear when one preaches the same to the subaltern.

4. Tradition

My final concern about *karmayoga* is that in its intimate bond with *svadharma*, it hews to a notion of tradition as something hallowed and sacrosanct, transcendentally given. This attitude is of course not unique to *karmayoga* or to the *Mahābhārata*, or even, for that matter, to Hinduism; cross-culturally, religions tend toward nostalgia, eulogizing halcyon periods of bygone perfection, with the present a corrupt foil to the remote and pristine past. In Chinese civilization, Confucius famously taught a return to the time of the sages as the corrective to the violence and corruption of his own time. Islam endlessly harkens back to the commonwealth of its prophet as the ideal of Islamic civilization. Christianity takes moral and social guidance from the practices of its earliest generations for every type of modern concern. Judaism idealizes the teachings of Talmudic rabbis and draws upon them for guidance on modern conundrums. Among the Indic religions, Hinduism has an especially deep attachment to its Vedic past. The past has power and authority, and as its remote beneficiaries, we are beholden to at least the appearance of upholding its ideals.

The subject of tradition – its nature, its claims to authority, its role in perpetuating ideology – has been extensively unpacked by modern and postmodern thinkers of all stripes, from Marx through the debates of Gadamer, Habermas, and Ricoeur, the path-breaking insights of Foucault, to Hobsbawm and Anderson, who aim to expose its constructedness; to yet others, who observe the dynamics of its empirical engagements.[20] All of these works serve to caution that the evocation of tradition as authority is no simple transcendental imperative but variously suspect, embroiled in discourses of power. Secondly, more pertinent to our topic, a rigorously traditionalist position is also morally untenable, holding ethics hostage to the contours defined by the past. This becomes very apparent when we revert to a moral test case, the *varṇadharma*, which represents the cornerstone of Hindu social organization.

The origins of the *varṇa* system are traced back to the *puruṣasūkta*, *Ṛgveda* 10.90, which graphically illustrates the vision of society as a single organism with multiple parts and functions. The *brāhmaṇas* represent the head of the primeval *puruṣa*, the *kṣatriyas* the arms and torso, the *vaiśya* the loins, and the *śūdras* the feet. Their separation is as integral to the social organism as is their unity; a being is not whole without its feet, yet feet can only ever be feet and never arms or head. To even aspire to the other is generative of dissonance, confusion, anarchy, and chaos. Such ambition threatens to incapacitate the social organism, rendering it incoherent and dysfunctional. Feet must therefore continue to be feet and heads, heads, working co-operatively together, each performing its own function without competition or resentment or envy. This ancient imaginary for the fourfold classification of society served both as the inspiration and as the justification for the rigorously segregated character of Hindu society, providing transcendental authority and sanction to social practices. It is dubious both pragmatically and morally. From a pragmatic perspective, the continued reverence for such a hoary model has the effect of stifling talent and innovation, deeming such qualities as the preserve of the upper classes and denying them to others. From a moral perspective, it is obviously unpalatable. The *Mahābhārata* provides some examples of the disservice such traditionalism does to society.

In the Ādiparva, we have the famous story of Ekalavya, the young Niśāda child, passionately devoted to the martial arts teacher Droṇa, and committed to becoming a world-class archer. The boy shows prodigious talent but is rejected by Droṇa because of his low-class origins. Undeterred, however, the boy erects an image of his chosen

guru and practices with awe-inspiring discipline, such that he becomes an archer to outclass even the great Arjuna himself. Noting this, the great *brāhmaṇa* teacher, demanding a token of the boy's loyalty, cruelly forces the child to mutilate himself, such that he can never rival Arjuna again. Setting aside our moral concerns for the moment, in strictly practical terms, this is a colossal and woeful waste of talent, in deference to an ancient and prejudicial imaginary of society. What possibilities Ekalavya's talent held we will never know, snuffed as it was in its very adolescence.

The same might be said of the career of Vidura. Vidura of course is the half-breed half-brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu, the only one born without any kind of flaw, explicitly stated to be "the wisest man in the world," clearly the most deserving and gifted of the brothers. Yet because of his mother's slave status, he cannot be king. Let us take a moment to speculate on what might have been the destiny of Hāstināpura had the *varṇa* system not held such force and had Vidura succeeded to the Bhārata throne. The greatest loss would surely have been to literature, for the events of the *Mahābhārata* may never have transpired!

Pragmatically, then, the insistent and unnuanced adulation of tradition has the effect of squelching social innovation and smothering talent. Morally, it is unconscionable. Tradition can make no viable moral claim in and of itself without recourse to a discussion of merit. These conclusions are reinforced when we examine some stories.

Three Stories

I. The dāsī *(I.110.24–28)*

The *dāsī* is a minor slave character squeezed into four small verses of the *Mahābhārata's* 100,000 total; true to her status as human chattel, she remains a common noun, nameless in the text. The story is familiar: In the Ādiparva, the Bhārata clan experiences the first of several dynastic crises – the king Vicitravīrya has died, leaving his widows without children and his kingdom without an heir, and his resourceful mother Satyavatī proposes the solution of *niyoga*, whereby the widows may have children through a proxy – in this case, their ascetic brother-in-law, Vyāsa. Alarmed at the frightful appearance of the sage, Ambikā closes her eyes and is rebuked with a blind child; Ambālikā registers her fright by turning pale and is chastised with sickly Pāṇḍu; on the third instance, when Satyavatī petitions the sage for the elder widow again, Ambikā cleverly substitutes her *dāsī* for herself. "When

the seer came, the woman rose to meet him and greeted him; and with his consent she lay with him and served him with honour. The seer spent all night with her as she pleasured him" (I.100.24–26). Much satisfied, the sage blesses her with a wise and thoughtful child, who in future years would serve as minister and counsel to his royal half brothers.

The *dāsī* is an utterly insignificant character to the narrative, one of thousands like herself, such a throwaway that she does not even merit a name. Yet in this episode, she is cast as the model *karmayogin*, performing her assigned task without hesitation or doubt. She has no expectation of reward. Unlike the princesses, she is not swayed by his disagreeable appearance, nor is she motivated by any personal desire. Her position in life relegates her to a life of servitude to the upper classes, and she performs uncomplainingly, with apparent detachment from any personal emotion. For such exemplary conduct, she is rewarded with the wisest child.

Let us begin by giving *karmayoga* its due. Through her mental detachment from the situation, the *dāsī* no doubt achieves philosophical distance from what is her unenviable lot in life and, through this wise, spares herself the pain of feeling bitterly the injustice and disempowerment of her position. *Karmayoga* anaesthetizes the trauma of her existential reality by pointing to the far goal. If her desire is freedom from *saṃsāra*, this is an effective strategy, because on the soteriological plane, the worldly realm is ultimately inconsequential and practically illusory; her suffering is a temporary and transient thing, in one form or another inevitable; she needs simply to rise above it. But, as we have been at pains to note, the same technique that buys freedom on the soteriological side breeds bondage on the mundane: in worldly terms, the injustice and disempowerment of the *dāsī*'s position is, emphatically, *not* illusory. The scandal of slavery *exists*, its oppression is real, painful, palpable, and material, and in one of its terrible perversities, through her *karmayogic* muteness, her irrebellious acquiescence, the *dāsī* actually shares a hand in its perpetuation.

II. The Pativratā *(III.196–197)*

The parable of the devoted wife – who also remains nameless – is among the stories told by the sage Mārkaṇḍeya to the suffering Pāṇḍavas as they try to comprehend the series of events leading to their calamitous fall: dispossessed of a hard-won kingdom, confused as to their elder's gambling debacle, humiliated and exiled in the forest for 13 years, depressed and forlorn. They try to derive comfort from their

visitors, who are full of edifying stories. In this instance, Yudhiṣṭhira addresses the sage Mārkaṇḍeya:

> Sir, I wish to hear you tell of the greatness of women and the subtleties of *dharma* . . . tell us of the greatness of devoted wives who continuously think of their husbands as Gods, while restraining their senses and controlling their minds.
>
> (III.196.1, 6)

Mārkaṇḍeya obliges with a story both instructive and with a comic note. Once upon a time, a pompous *brāhmaṇa* by the name of Kauśika was studying his *Veda* at the base of a tree when a bird perched on a branch above defecated on his head! Incensed, the *brāhmaṇa* blazed up with so venomous a gaze that the bird instantly dropped dead in front of him, killed, says the text, by the *brāhmaṇa*'s injurious thought. Kauśika briefly feels remorse but then gets on with his day, continuing to his begging round, where he arrives at the home of a housewife. He demands alms, which she courteously agrees to provide but then gets busy tending to her husband, who returns just then from his day. The *brāhmaṇa* gets annoyed. When she returns to serve him, he bites into her: "What is this? You told me to wait, and delayed me without dismissing me!" (I.197.19). The woman explains herself: "Even among deities, my husband is my highest god. Doing his will is my duty regardless of all else" (III.197.29). Not only does her duty to her husband take priority over all else, but through assiduous performance of that duty in the spirit of the ideal *karmayogin*, she has acquired paranormal powers: she can see, for example, what injury the *brāhmaṇa*'s anger had wrought on the innocent bird. Through thus performing her *strīdharma*, she has achieved a (spiritual, though not social) position above the *brāhmaṇa*.

In this story, the *pativratā* exemplifies a specific brand of *karmayoga*, that is *strīdharma*, or the prescribed duties of women. In its directives, it is quintessential *karmayoga*: do your "duty" without desire or aversion, no matter how distasteful or debased; shun expectation of recognition or reward; do your duty even where it meets with indifference, neglect, or abuse; efface yourself thoroughly and subsume your identity into that of your role, in this case of support and helpmate to your husband. The metaphysical reward will be great. As with all brands of *karmayoga* in the social domain, one's virtue is directly proportional to the degree of one's self-abnegation in service of the ideal. The exemplary woman is one who not only does not question the premise but who, through deeply internalized ideals, can sell its virtues

as acts of fulsome and profound piety. The most illustrious women in the Hindu epics are such because they epitomize this archetype to an extraordinary degree.

Strīdharma illustrates the sweep and reach of *karmayoga*, how it lends itself to the subordination and enslavement of one entire half of being to another. It is in some ways more noxious than other brands of *karmayoga* in that it represents a complete hijacking of the subaltern consciousness, such that one can recognize neither oppression nor oppressor but celebrate both as a grateful blessing. The female subaltern defends and lauds her subordination as an incontrovertible virtue and chastises others who deviate from it. Its basic imperative of "Don't think, just do" kills the agency of the female moral agent and consigns her entire intellect to the service of a worldview in which she has no independent worth. The less she thinks, the greater her virtue. Her surrender of self in favour of that of her husband – which represents the sum and substance of her *svadharma* – is her *karmayoga*.

III. The Butcher III.198–206

Our final story is an extension of the *pativratā* story: the *brāhmaṇa* Kauśika, very much bemused at the sagacity of the *pativratā*, corroborated and endorsed by her paranormal powers, asks to know where she acquired such wisdom. When she reveals the whereabouts of her "*guru,*" the *brāhmaṇa* heads thither without delay, but there another shock awaits him: the "*guru*" is a butcher! Engaged in the most objectionable, defiling, polluting business of hunting, preparing, and trafficking in meat! How could such a base creature possibly have any liberating instruction to offer? The butcher notes the *brāhmaṇa*'s surprise.

The butcher – also, like the *dāsī*, and like the wife, nameless – then launches into a lengthy explanation of *karmayoga*, replete with pithy aphorisms of the greatest hits of *karmayoga*: do not what you want but what you ought; do your duty with detachment and equanimity, and so forth. But the butcher goes much further. In the process of explicating to the *brāhmaṇa* the subtleties of *karmayoga*, he also explains its many supports: the doctrine of *karma* – one becomes as one does; the philosophy of Sāṃkhya, with its *triguṇa* theory, whereby one's personal and social identity is a reflection of one's *guṇas*, and more. The *brāhmaṇa* marvels at the butcher's wisdom, and erupts in awe: "The eternal *dharma* is difficult to know for one born of a *śūdra* womb. I cannot believe you are a *śūdra*; it must be because of fate, on account of previous deeds coming to fruition that you were reduced to

*śūdra*ness. I want to know the truth of the matter"[21] (III.205.19–20). To this, the butcher finally confesses: he had indeed been a *brāhmaṇa* in his last life. Because of bad behaviour, however, he had been cursed to pass a lifetime as a *śūdra* – consigned to a *śūdra's* humble and defiling work, suffering the opprobrium and contempt that is the *śūdra's* lot in society. If he performs his role humbly, in the next life, he will revert to his former position as a *brāhmaṇa*.

What is notable here is that in this case, the subaltern cannot claim even his wisdom and virtue as his own. As a *śūdra*, engorged and bloated as he must be with the *tamas guṇa*, he could not possibly have evolved such penetrating philosophical insight on his own. And so the butcher confesses: his insights are the intellectual remainders of his former life as a *brāhmaṇa*. The *brāhmaṇa* confirms: "Your present vile profession is due only to your class . . . Suffer it for the time being, then you shall again be a *brāhmaṇa*" (III.206.10). This gives a whole new meaning to the notion of theft of intellectual property, indeed appropriation of all positive values from the disenfranchised to the elite. It is enabled by the social tautology of the *guṇa* theory, whereby the *śūdra* is inalienable from the baseness of his work, which is his lot because he is the living icon of *tamas*. The *brāhmaṇa*, as the emblem of all things light and holy, must ipso facto be the author of all good thoughts, which can only be loaned briefly to a *śūdra* but will ultimately return to the *brāhmaṇa*.

In the context of the narratives in which they are set, these stories serve several purposes. First, they encapsulate the most important message of the *Mahābhārata*: that equanimity is the elusive key to psychological survival in the world, yielding if not "happiness" at least a calmness of mind and tranquility. Effort exerted in the world is wasted in trying to resist one's circumstances; it is better expended on quelling the clamour of the mind and conforming without complaint to the path set out before one, knowing that existence inevitably breeds one or another form of suffering. These passages capture the core values of the text: self-discipline, self-control, generosity, equanimity. Through such self-mastery, one achieves a kind of immunity to one's circumstance. They can also be read as being subversive. The fact that in each of these stories, one of humble origin or of secondary or debased status in society is positioned to instruct and enlighten those more privileged is significant and a reflection of the *Mahābhārata*'s larger extension of religious franchise to embrace all people, to dislocate piety and virtue from being the exclusive preserve of the priestly class. All of its soteriologies open themselves to all classes of people. In this sense, these stories can be read as subverting the *brāhmaṇas*'

monopoly of the religious by positing a higher domain of religious that is freely available to anyone willing to expend arduous psychological effort.

The proposition that they each make, however, is unsettling. Take, for example, the *dāsī*. In this situation, the young slave girl is praised for being the good citizen who follows and conforms, acquiescing to the sexual labour demanded of her without rancour or resentment. What is troubling here is not whether she should, or practically even could, have resisted, for likely her resistance would have met with reprisal; rather, what is vexing is that she is made to embrace her servitude as a positive virtue and, by the same token, to smother any impulse to rebellion or social change. Similarly, in the *pativratā* episode, the wife celebrates her subordinate status, claiming her subservience as the hallmark of virtue and deeming wicked any attempt at self-expression. The butcher, virtuous as he is, represents the archetypal docile native – claiming his servitude as his own fault, evolving an elaborate theodicy of injustice, humbly effacing himself before the elite; surrendering all positive values as the bequest of the empowered. These attitudes of acquiescence to one's lot in life – however unjust, however debased – are the signature of *karmayoga*, buttressed as it is by recalcitrant notions of *svadharma*, *karma*, the *guṇas*, and *svabhāva*.

Conclusion

The quintessence of *karmayoga* is self-abnegation for a greater cause, a cause bigger than oneself. In the *Mahābhārata*, this cause is overwhelmingly the perpetuation of order and stability in society, which, in the context of the heterodox repudiation of the world, is billed as an urgent moral concern. It represents an ingenious dissolution of the conflict between care of self and care of others, where care of self occurs precisely and paradoxically through care of others. In the soteriological context, this is laudable philosophy. In the social realm, however, it lends itself to noxious practices: not merely signalling resistance to injustice as futile but cloaking injustice as the transcendental Right and constructing a false consciousness where lack of moral reasoning, lack of resistance, and conscious docility are deemed positive moral values.

Can the concept of *karmayoga* be redeemed? Can the greatness of *karmayoga* as a soteriology, with all its aids of *svadharma*, *svabhāva*, and the *guṇas*, be rehabilitated and marshalled to serve a salubrious function in society rather than a detrimental one? In my view, there is no doubt about it; indeed, strains of the *Mahābhārata* entertain some

solutions. The first involves replacing class hierarchy with meritocracy, thereby dislocating privilege from birth. This proposition is floated at different junctures of the *Mahābhārata*, but more as a thought experiment than a political agendum – hence it goes nowhere. The second entails making particularism answerable and accountable to universalism. The *Mahābhārata* understands this notion well and, indeed, in its *nivṛtti* passages, lauds it as the highest ethical principle. In this soteriological context, it categorically recognizes only personhood and insists upon a universal moral code exigent upon all beings at all times – regardless of class and gender. In active implementation of this great insight, however, it balks. In the mundane *pravṛtti* sphere, it remains staunchly committed to a hierarchical ordering of society premised upon factors utterly beyond one's ability to affect. This is the legacy of moral ambivalence that it bequeaths Hinduism. Were Hinduism to abandon its two-tier system of morality and institute a universal moral code – an aspirational one, even if not an entirely realizable one – it would surely transform the nature of Hindu ethics.

Notes

1 Ashwin Joshi, Sol Goldberg, Alf Hiltebeitel, and Vishal Sharma commented on earlier drafts of this essay. I am grateful to them for their feedback.

2 To point to just the tip of the iceberg, there is, for example, an entire genre of writing on using *karmayoga* for success in business – a simple search turns up scores of articles. There is also an evolving body of work on "The power of *karmayoga* in human development" (title of a work by S. Brown, *International Journal of Development Issues*, 2014), employing *karmayoga* in positive psychology, stress management, and psychotherapy.

3 The modern interpretation of it, however, as Donald R. Davis has demonstrated (2007), is anachronistic. *Ātmatuṣṭi*, "what is pleasing to oneself," was never intended in the *Dharmaśāstras* to have overriding moral force. Rather, it was a last consideration, intended for use on mostly trivial matters.

4 In Ramanujan's considered formulation (1989).

5 *Karmajaṃ buddhiyuktā hi phalaṃ tyaktvā manīṣiṇaḥ*
Janmabandhavainirmuktāḥ padaṃ gacchantyanamayaṃ (II.51).

6 *Kāmalobhagrahākīrṇāṃ pancendriyajalāṃ nadīṃ*
Nāvaṃ dhṛtimayīṃ kṛtvā janmadurgāṇi saṃtara (III.198.67).

7 This may well be stated for *dharma* as a whole. As noted by Bilimoria et al.: "The broad imperative [*dharma*] enjoins on moral agents is the duty to preserve and sustain the organic unity of being, the intrinsic harmony of the cosmos. With this convergence of both moral and cosmological ideas, the primary category is not that of moral principle but of a primordial order that is neither exclusively moral nor exclusively cosmological, but both together at once" (2007, 332).

8 William Mahoney elaborates upon this vision in *The Artful Universe*, 1997.

9 As it surely does, apparent in the many passages that critique Vedic religion, e.g. BG 46: "As much use as there in a well when water overflows on all sides, so much use is there in all Vedas for the enlightened *brāhmaṇa*"; "The Vedas belong to the domain of the worldly, the material: transcend it, Arjuna" (BGII.45).

10 *Ahiṃsā paramo dharmaḥ is* pronounced in a great many conversations and contexts, (e.g. XII.260.17, XIII.116.20); "*Ahiṃsā* is the foremost duty."

11 As Weber noted (1958), and as Heesterman elaborated (1985), in *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*.

12 Chris Chapple comments: "This system proved very effective for social regulation. With the threat of a lower human or animal birth if one strays from one's *dharma*, there is little incentive to go awry. As Norvin Hein noted, this thorough and convincing cosmology contributed greatly to keeping Hindus in village India satisfied with their lot" (358).

13 Matilal notes likewise: "The expression *svadharma* . . . is also interchangeable with *svabhāva*, 'own nature', or simple 'nature' " (140).

14 Other scholars concur: "Between the sociological schema and the soteriological goal, the specific moral notion seems to get swallowed up" (Bilimoria et al., Indian Ethics 2, 332).

15 *Svadharmaṃ api cavekṣya na vikampituṃ arhasi* (II.31).

16 *Tasmād asaktaḥ satataṃ kāryaṃ karma samācara*
Asakto hy ācaran karma paraṃ āpnoti pūruṣaḥ (III.19).

17 *Mā karmaphalahetur bhur mā te saṃgo stv akarmaṇi*
Yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṃgaṃ tyaktvā dhanaṃjaya (II.47–48).

18 *Sadṛśaṃ ceṣṭate svasyāḥ prakṛter jñānavān api*
prakṛtiṃ yānti bhūtāni nigrahaḥ kiṃ kariṣyati (III.33).

19 *Śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt*
svadharme nidhanaṃ śreyaḥ paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ (III:35).

20 See, for example, the collection of essays in Frederico Squarcini, ed. *Boundaries, Dynamics, and Construction of Tradition in South Asia* (Firenze University Press, 2005).

21 *Durjñeyayaḥ śāśvato dharmaḥ śūdrayonau hi vartatā*
Na tvāṃ śūdramahaṃ manye bhavitavyam hi kāraṇaṃ
Yena karmavipākena prāpteyaṃ śūdratā tvayā
Etadicchāmi vijñātuṃ tatvena hi mahātmate (III.205.19–20).

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Part II

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5

COMPLEXITIES IN THE AGENCY FOR VIOLENCE

A Look at the *Mahābhārata*

Gangeya Mukherji

There is an apparently strong argument for non-violence in the *Mahābhārata*, but the argument for this chapter will focus on instrumental violence, locating it primarily in the narrative and discourse of the epic. This will involve a brief mention of relative thematic engagement in western philosophy to underline the nuance in the understanding of violence/war as a psychological and political crucible for the purpose of human agency. The *Mahābhārata* begins with ambient violence of rage and revenge in the mind of a young king oppressed by the assassination of his father and what he considers to be just violence. In the course of his act of revenge, he listens to a recitation describing the heroism and suffering in the fratricidal war that had nearly destroyed his clan some years before his birth. The textual narrative is framed in the retelling of the epic during the *Nāga Yajña* (serpent sacrifice) performed by Janamejaya to avenge the killing of his father, King Parikṣit, by a snake and because of a curse. The *Nāga Yajña* was thus a sacrificial act of revenge for an act of instrumental violence. Interestingly, the story of the snake and Gautamī in the Anuśāsana Parva exonerates another snake of the responsibility of killing her child, as the snake, not being a free agent, was only acting as a 'tool' of Time, which itself had matured with the accumulated karma of the child.

When, at the start of the narrative, Pāṇḍava scion Janamejaya commits what he takes to be righteous and ritual violence on the serpent species, he could be seen as emulating his great-grandsire's act of war in claiming a throne that was rightfully theirs, just as that act of war legitimised itself as a response to the aggression perpetrated by the Kauravas in denying them that right. In each of these cases, violence is practiced as what is taken to be a means to a just end and not for the sake of violence. The main category of violence described in

detail in the *Mahābhārata* is thus state violence, condoned as instrumental and concretised as war – predominantly as justified violence to enact justice and preserve social, identifiable in the schema of the epic plausibly as *dhārmic* order. Individual acts of heroism by warriors in combat other than in the battle for kingdom are not generally described in minute detail. There is, on the other hand, no evidence of revolutionary violence, as the disprivileged classes, comprising servitors or slaves, at least apparently, appear devoid of class awareness and agency in the text. The possibility of individual or group violence for any kind of political articulacy that disturbs the system of social authority is comprehensively marginalised. In fact, even the right to train in weapons is not extended to castes other than the *brahmins* and *kṣatriyas*. The unease at even a future possibility of such rightful extension is evidenced in Droṇācārya's mutilating of Ekalavya in the Ādi Parva itself.

The text, however, does not neglect to depict as well the psychology of war or the effects on its perpetrators, rather interestingly analogous to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that was significantly first noticed and categorised as such in the twentieth century after another perpetration of large-scale state violence, in the war in Vietnam.[1] It might also be theoretically productive to compare this depiction in the epic to modern architects of violence such as Georges Sorel, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and their advocacy of violence as the instrument of political articulation.

The Problematic of the Agency for Violence

The epic recognises that violent agency was an intrinsic part of *varṇāśramadharma*, the arrangement of duties under the caste order, of the *kṣatriyas* (warrior/ruling class), and this argument is subscribed wholly at various points of the epic also, most notably by Kuntī and Draupadī, the feminine apostles of violence, who refer to the continuing social tradition in this regard. Recent scholarship on this question, particularly in the West, argues that under the traditional arrangement of Hindu social values the sustenance of non-violence as independent virtue becomes practically impossible. Madeleine Biardeau, for instance, representatively concentrates her study on the violence intrinsic in the enactment of even purificatory sacrificial rituals, and of course the occult rites solely violent in their purpose such as the *abhicāra*, which is performed in the epic by king Drupad to obtain the death of Droṇa.[2] But there is also a certain degree of reluctance perceivable in the *Mahābhārata* to the accordance of any kind of efficacious

sovereignty to violence as socio-political – and in its epistemic world the socio-political must be taken to include the *dhārmic* – agency. Even though there is in the epic no stated rejection of violence on the plane of political action, it does through its oblique critique of the agency of war, by prominently depicting the subversion of *dharma* in war, underline that violence be used only as a last resort. It is possible to infer that even while acknowledging the sharp might of weaponry in an age of territorial growth and social consolidation of the Aryan people who themselves make up both the authorial and active centre of the narrative, the Aryans remained sensitive to the limitations of the agentive virtue of violence. There is no detailed narrative of violent subjection of different tribes or races unlike in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and notwithstanding some such instances as when Garuḍa devours the *Niṣādas* at the behest of his mother Vinatā in the Ādi Parva, the exclusive focus in the *Mahābhārata* is on the terrible war between brothers, bringing a tone of gruesomeness to the heroism of battle. The inevitable degeneration of violent agency is brought home perhaps most tragically in the slaughter of the sleeping Pāñcāla, Somaka and Matsya warriors and the Pāṇḍava children, a transgression that was both ethical and legal, in the Sauptika Parva.

As if to presage and emphasise the full hideousness of the act about to ensue, a tremulous Aśvatthāman, witnessing the destruction of his armed might by a terrible protector standing at the entrance to the Pāṇḍava camp and with the images of Kṛṣṇa filling the darkened sky, recollects ruefully the admonition of his maternal uncle Kṛpācārya:

> One should not cast weapons upon kine, Brahmanas, kings, women, friends, one's own mother, one's own preceptor, a weak man, an idiot, a blind man, a sleeping man, a terrified man, one just arisen from sleep, an intoxicated person, a lunatic and one that is heedless. The preceptors of old always inculcated this truth upon men. I have, however, by disregarding the eternal way pointed out by the scriptures, and by essaying to tread in a wrong path, fallen into terrible distress.[3]

It is unsurprising that this closing section of those describing the Great War should conclude with Kṛpācārya's lengthy discourse on destiny as being the ultimate arbiter of human action. However, in reading this statement, one should be mindful of the immediate context of almost unbearable adversity that both precedes and succeeds this massacre. Not all violent acts, such as the poisoning of Bhīma or the plot to burn the Pāṇḍavas in the house of wax, are considered as

permissible in the overall context of statecraft. These incidents rather emphasise that evil acts might, as in the epic, come to terrible consequence. Kṛpācārya initially attempts to dissuade Aśvatthāman against attacking the sleeping opposition camp, counselling conferment instead with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī and Vidura as to the propitious course of action. He censures Duryodhana for being covetous and wilful and bringing ruin on his court. He does not spare himself either. 'As regards ourselves, since we have followed that sinful wretch, this great calamity hath, therefore overtaken us! This great calamity has scorched my understanding.'[4]

His argument cuts little ice with Aśvatthāman, and once again, as if proving the supremacy of destiny, Kripācārya embarks on a course against his personal judgment. The carnage is described as the reaping of people whose time is up. The ultimate guardian among the Gods, Mahādeva, the protector of the Pāṇḍava camp, is propitiated by Aśvatthāman's prayer and declares his intent of now forsaking the Pāñcālas over whom he had watched over in deference to his cherished Kṛṣṇa: 'For honouring [Kṛṣṇa] and his word I have protected the Pāñcālas and displayed various kinds of illusion. By protecting the Pāñcālas I have honoured him. They have, however, been afflicted by time. The period of their lives has run out.'[5] Mahādeva is shown entering Aśvatthāman's body after providing him with a divine sword, which is perhaps symbolised in certain cultures elsewhere as the scythe of time. It should be mentioned in parentheses at this point that in the end of the Droṇa Parva, a retreating and despondent Aśvatthāman, after failing to even scathe Arjuna with the *Āgneya* weapon that is subdued by Arjuna's *Brahma* weapon, asks of Vyāsa regarding the source of Arjuna's invincibility. Vyāsa describes the adoration and penance of Kṛṣṇa in the form of Nārāyaṇa son of *dharma* for Rudra in some primordial age, and the latter's special benediction of invincibility to Nārāyaṇa.

> Through my grace, none shall ever be able to cause thee pain by the weapon of thunderbolt or with any object that is wet or dry, or with any mobile or immobile thing. Thou shalt be superior to myself if thou goest to battle against me.[6]

Arjuna, Vyāsa said, was the incarnation of Nara who was born in that age from Nārāyaṇa's asceticism. Importantly, Vyāsa explains that Aśvatthāman himself is a part of Rudra: 'Thyself also, O thou of great heart, hast been born as a portion of Rudra, by virtue of all thy religious acts and as a consequence of high ascetic austerities, endued with great energy and wrath.'[7]

As a consequence of his divine kinship with Rudra, Aśvatthāman becomes the vessel of Mahādeva as Time and now moves to eliminate those warriors who had exhausted their quota of life on earth. The woken and bemused warriors of the Pāṇḍava camp die a fearful death. In the utter chaos, some fight, others appear paralysed with fear, and yet some kill each other in confusion. Accompanying demons instil terror in their hearts and wreak havoc. The description, in the classical *vībhatsa rasa*, appears almost purposefully hideous:

> Indeed, diverse were the forms seen there of the *Rākṣasas* that came. Quaffing the blood that ran in streams, they became filled with joy and began to dance in separate bands. "This is excellent!" "This is pure!" "This is very sweet!" these were the words they uttered. Other carnivorous creatures, subsisting upon animal food, having gorged upon fat and marrow and bones and blood, began to eat the delicate parts of corpses. Others drinking the fat that flowed in streams, ran naked over the field.[8]

Duryodhana, on being told, applauds the nocturnal killing and, ranking Aśvatthāman's martiality over that of Bhīṣma, Karṇa and Droṇa, dies greatly pleased and confident of ascendance to heaven and of everlasting glory. There appears no limit to hatred and to the ill use of human agency. Significantly, cruelty and not submission to the flow of Time had been the original aim of Aśvatthāman. His agency is consciously directed against ethical purpose. Mahādeva's embodying his force in Aśvatthāman to complete the course of Time is eventual coincidence and hardly reduces the fundamental pollution of Aśvatthāman's agency. But the slaughter, howsoever the horror of it, is presented as sanctioned by Śiva, the great knower and the epitome of Time, which ordains the course of human existence. Similarly, all violence and war might then be explainable as having been primordially ordained. In short, the epic remains uncomfortable with violence as willed action.

The Droṇa and the Sauptika Parvas, which are also causally interlinked, constitute the scene of the most terrible transgressions of war. And it is also these two that frame especially divine genealogies for Arjuna and Aśvatthāman as instruments of preservation and destruction. But Arjuna proves superior in excellence to be the appropriate vessel of his originary power, whereas Aśvatthāman, mainly because of his inordinate ambition, is ultimately unworthy to bear the force of his reclusive and renunciant originator divinity. The epic seemingly conflates two warriors: positing Arjuna the *kṣatriya* as the natural

agent of judicious violence, whereas the *brahmin* Aśvatthāman like his father Droṇa falls just short of the required merit to bear the ruler's weapons for conservation and chastisement. Does the *Mahābhārata* in this reinforce *varṇāśramadharma* as the proper context of human agency?

Mahatma Gandhi recognised this paradox of *dharma* and violence offered in the epic and preferred to visualise the war as a cosmic struggle:

> And what does this signify? Only this: that the epic describes the battle ever raging between the countless Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas dwelling within us. It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil which become personified in us as virtues and vices. We shall leave aside the question of violence and non-violence and say that this *dharma-grantha* was written to explain man's duty in this inner strife.[9]

It is, however, all said and done, not easy to move away from the issue of instrumental violence while engaging with the epic on the political plane.

Lament for the Desolation of War and the Vandalisation of Agency

The confluence of agency and class extends to classical texts in other cultures as well. Alasdair MacIntyre embeds the schema of virtue – and we can add what will be derivatively, agency – as observed in the heroic age in the West, in the social concept of the heroic society. The articulation of later-day concerns, often in different vocabulary, might find a discrepancy in the possibility of human action being limited by social station. The imagination of the ideal society was based on essentially non-equitable considerations. The quality of deterrence or *daṇḍa* became crucial for social order, and ancient Hindu political thought associated *kṣatriyas* with this function. Bearing arms and a code of chivalry were deemed as allied qualities for this warrior class. As with many societies in the world of those times, the socially cherishable quality can be evaluated with the help of a larger understanding of the social priorities and is apparently wedded to the particular social expectation from the related functional attribute. MacIntyre makes this point with regard to the Greek epics:

> Thus this type of heroic poetry represents a form of society about whose moral structure two central claims are made.

> The first is that that structure embodies a conceptual scheme which has three central inter-related elements: a conception of what is required by the social role which each individual inhabits; a conception of excellences or virtues as those qualities which enable an individual to do what his or her role requires; and a conception of the human condition as fragile and vulnerable to destiny and to death, such that to be virtuous is not to avoid vulnerability and death, but rather to accord them their due.[10]

However, in the case of agential violence, this elaborate justification of social destiny, envisaged in the vocabulary of *varṇāśrama*, in the epics demonstrates an inherent infirmity, particularly when confronted with not only the cost but the outcome of war. As MacIntyre insightfully points out – 'What the poet of the *Iliad* sees and his characters do not is that winning too may be a form of losing.'[11] The failure of accomplishing the defined end in a way defeats an agency or presents an occasion to redefine it. It is striking that the epics should in their narrative and discursive structure highlight such powerful doubts as to the efficacy of revenge and violence. And such doubt arises most acutely at the transgressions in war and at the lament for the desolation wrought by war, notably in familial grief at the death of combatants, most particularly Andromache and Priam for Hector in the *Iliad* and the mass lament in the Strī Parva of the *Mahābhārata*.

Simone Weil wrote in 1940 an essay on the elemental force of the *Iliad* after the commencement of the Nazi occupation of France.[12] Weil brings together the descriptions of transgression/cruelty and those of lament to emphasise the reification of the human soul by force. The killed warriors are portrayed in filial/familial terms, while the seemingly victorious characters are objectified into machines, which, when given a starting push, roll on, trampling what are emotions of domestic but abiding, even ethical value. The moderate advocate for violence is, for her, generally, a contradiction in terms. The approved sanction of violence as means, once institutionalised, effectively denudes the political community of its voices of tolerance and moderation. Even the objects of such force are not immune from the machination of force. What we witness in the *Mahābhārata* is likewise seen in the *Iliad*. Reason is either muffled when emanating from the weak or the socially disabled or discarded by the speaker in his actions if he is powerful. Moreover, violence so repetitively manufactures its own frame of reason, calling to its service arguments invoking tradition, fate and emotion. In what is so pervasively reminiscent of the *Mahābhārata*,

Weil describes how a formulaic set of metaphors often depicts the two sets of combatants in the *Iliad*. The warriors are variously compared to fire, flood, wind, wild beasts, frightened animals, trees, water or sand, all subject to agitation by outward forces of nature. It is significant that Aśvatthāman gets his idea of slaughtering the sleeping Pāṇḍava camp by watching an owl killing crows in seeming pleasure in the darkness of night. But in a crucial departure from the *Iliad*, the gods play no role in inciting humans to senselessness, although Draupadī does allege otherwise in the Vana Parva. The divinities preside over the cosmos in part as elemental forces tempered with prudence, and generally remain worthy of human emulation. This is not the case in the *Iliad*, where caprice seems to be somewhat the divine norm. Weil has recorded the tenderness of family relationships that provide the other, faintly seen but still visible, human face in the cruel atmosphere of the epic. But it is the spiritual vision of the Greeks, Weil says, that enables them to depict naked force without camouflaging it in a teleological justification, thus avoiding self-deception on the part of the bards.

> In any case the poem is a miracle. Its bitterness is the only justifiable bitterness, for it springs from the subjections of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, on proportion to its own virtue. No one in the *Iliad* is spared by it, as no one on earth is. No one who succumbs to it is by virtue of this fact regarded by contempt. Whoever, within his own soul and in human relations, escapes the dominion of force is loved but loved sorrowfully because of the threat of destruction that constantly hangs over him.[13]

The *Mahābhārata* to an extent shares this tragic vision but attempts to transcend it by the Śānti Parva or the discourse of peace. The vanquished and the oppressors ascend to heaven along with the righteous heroes of the epic. However, the smouldering grief that singes the sense in the Strī-Vilāp Parva at the end of war is perhaps the most powerful comment on the agency for violence, not exempting even Yudhiṣṭhira from its indictment. Yudhiṣṭhira subsequently blames himself repeatedly for the war.[14] On the battlefield the dismembered bodies are shown through Gāndhārī's eyes as being dragged away and torn to pieces by scavenging animals and demons, even as women try to identify their husbands and sons among the mangled corpses and impart a likeness to the mutilated bodies by hopelessly joining limbs scattered in heaps.[15] In the description given by Gāndhārī, there is in a unique

turn a wistful recollection by grieving widows of their sexual union with their dead husband, Bhūriśravas.[16] A grieving Gāndhārī finally blames Kṛṣṇa for the destruction of the Kurus:

> The Pāṇḍavas and the Dhārtarāṣtras, O Kṛṣṇa, have both been burnt. Whilst they were thus being exterminated, O Janārdana, why wert thou indifferent to them? Thou wert competent to prevent the slaughter, for thou hast a large number of followers and a vast force. Thou hadst eloquence, and thou hadst the power (for bringing about peace). Since deliberately, O slayer of Madhu, thou wert indifferent to this universal carnage, therefore, O mighty-armed one, thou shouldst reap the fruit of this act.[17]

Gāndhārī proceeds to curse Kṛṣṇa's clan with extermination only to be divested of the delusion of the potency of her curse. Kṛṣṇa smilingly asserts that only he is capable of destroying the Vṛṣṇis and was anyway in the process of doing so, adding humourously that Gāndhārī's curse would only go to aid him in the destruction of his own clan. Kṛṣṇa's undertaking the agency of his own death in this manner preserves both the acuity of Gāndhārī's pain and her characteristic *anukrośa* (compassion). Authentication of the lethality of her wish and the indication of irrevocable transference of grief to rage on her part would have depicted, as in the case of seers pronouncing curses, a diminution of her ethical status and also partly dissipated her denunciation of violence.[18]

The picture of all-encompassing devastation is only further concretised by Yudhiṣṭhira's informing Dhṛtarāṣṭra about the exact count of the dead and survivors. The total is astounding. 'One billion six hundred and sixty million and twenty thousand men have fallen in this battle. Of the heroes that have escaped, the number is twenty-four thousand one hundred and sixty-five.'[19] The tone of the narrative now gradually begins to acquire a contemplative and timeless tone. Ironically, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, after slighting Yudhiṣṭhira's emotions for so long, now begins to defer to Yudhiṣṭhira's sagacity, inquiring of him as to the posthumous fate of the dead and the proper crematory rites due to them. He wishes to know his nephew's spiritual adeptship that enabled him to 'see these things like one crowned with ascetic success.'[20] Remonstrances by the bereaved are generally accepted, and quietude starts to set in. Some of the most hideous deeds are explained as destined and therefore their memories best put by. Bhīma denies drinking Duḥśāsana's blood after killing him, only having simulated the act

to fulfil his promise of doing so. The narrative, with the change of tone, now prepares to accommodate pure violence into the quotidian instances of living. But this, it appears to say, is not entirely an uncomplicated endeavour. Yudhiṣṭhira's questions related to willed violence are to persist in the form of ambivalences within him till the very end of the text. The Strī Parva brings a note of bitter interrogation to the institution of war.

The Political Accomplishment of Violence

But the *Mahābhārata* simultaneously foregrounds the inevitability of war in the affairs of the state. War also seemingly appears acceptable in the *brahminic* tradition wherein the main aim of life is the preservation of *dharma* rather than the practice of *ahimsā*. The treatment of non-violence in religions indicates to an extent that non-violence is not practicable or even not desirable in all situations without exception. It is noteworthy that even the avowedly pacifist religions such as Buddhism and Jainism make stated exceptions in their adherence to non-violence in certain conditions. Their position regarding violence and war is reminiscent of the statements of the Gītā on this issue.[21] In the *Mahābhārata*, the justifications of war find mention in detail in the conversations among the Pāṇḍavas and their wife Draupadī, addressed almost exclusively to Yudhiṣṭhira. Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī on different occasions in the Udyoga Parva ask Yudhiṣṭhira to wage war as *kṣatriya* duty. Karṇa prays to Kṛṣṇa for permitting the fratricidal war as a great martial sacrifice worthy of the warrior class, who deserved heroic death instead of tamely dying from decrepitude. In a different setting and context in the Vana Parva, the *dharmavyādha* (righteous meat seller) argues that violence was an unavoidable feature of life. Similarly, Kṛṣṇa famously reminds Arjuna of Kṣātra *dharma* in the *Bhagavadgītā*. In the Śānti Parva, Bhīṣma warns Yudhiṣṭhira that the earth swallows up the king who is disinclined to battle.

Michael Walzer, a modern Western theorist of war, has argued against the indiscriminate ascription of an element of tyranny to the institution of war itself, as tyrannical power was never an abstract force – 'war has human agents as well as human victims.'[22] In Walzer's view, the expectation of the dawning of an age devoid of armed conflict is akin to cherishing millennial hopes that are disallowed by secular history. The only conceivable, and to him distant, alternative is the transformation of the military into the political struggle, which relates equally to non-violence and to the rules of war. 'If we are to aim at the transformation, as we should, we must begin by insisting upon

the rules of war and by holding soldiers rigidly to the norms they set. The restraint of war is the beginning of peace.'[23] We have seen that the *Mahābhārata* does not have any millennial hopes of a war to end war. The war at Kurukśetra is not by any means understood as the last war. However, as with epics generally, it is the ideal warrior who is viewed by the *Mahābhārata* as the ideal human agent in situations of armed conflict. Apart from his perfection with diverse weaponry, such a warrior should be essentially temperate, fearless, truthful, ethical, respectful and honourable.

In his play *Seven Against Thebes* describing a fratricidal war, Aeschylus represents Amphiaraus as this kind of warrior. While listening to the descriptions of the leading warrior of each of the besieging armies at the seven gates of Thebes from his messenger, Eteocles does not accord much importance to the intemperate generals at the first five gates, but the warrior at the sixth evinces his respect as the messenger describes him:

> Sixth I must name a soldier who refrains from boasts,
> A prophet who fights bravely, strong Amphiaraus.
> Stationed at the Homoloean gate he pours abuse
> Upon great Tydeus: 'Murderer, public trouble-maker,'
> He cries, 'who more than all taught Argos evil ways,
> High priest of bloodshed, wakener of avenging spirits,
> Adrastus' counsellor in this infatuate war.'
> Next, with his gaze upturned to heaven, he calls aloud
> On him whom birth has made your brother, Polyneices,
> 'Seeker of Strife' – twice dwelling on that ominous name;
> And speaks thus: 'Surely such a deed pleases the gods,
> Is glorious both to hear and hand on to the young –
> To bring an alien army to assault and ravage
> Your father's city, lay in dust your country's gods!
> Can it be right to quench the spring that nursed your life?
> When your own soil is made the prisoner of your sword
> Because you are jealous, how can that assist your cause?
> For me, it is this country's earth I shall enrich;
> My tomb and oracle shall stand on foreign ground.
> Then let us fight. I foresee death, but not dishonour.'
> So spoke the prophet, holding motionless his shield
> Of solid bronze. And on its circle was no sign;
> For he cares not to seem the bravest, but to be;
> Harvesting thus the fertile furrow of his mind,
> From which grow such wise counsels. As a match for him

I advise you to send a warrior both wise and brave;
A man who reverences the gods is to be feared.[24]

In *Rāmcaritmānas*, in innovational departure from Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, Tulsidas has the barefoot Ram allay Vibhīṣaṇa's fears on the field of battle, as Rāvaṇa approaches in a resplendent chariot, by describing to him the archetypal victory chariot which takes its rider to victory. The parts of the chariot comprise the ideal virtues including truth, humility, generosity, openness, charity, contentment, the good of others, knowledge and wisdom. The beautiful conceit outlines the vessel of *dharma* and vijaya synonymously, and Rāma concludes that the warrior riding such a chariot can attain victory over the invincible world itself with its cycle of birth and death. The allusion to character and praxis is clear.[25]

As discussed earlier, Arjuna is the ideal warrior in the *Mahābhārata*, and this is highlighted in his achievement and responsibility with the most powerful divine weapons that the epic mentions. He has been bestowed the *Pāśupata* by Śiva himself but declares in a Pāṇḍava council on the eve of the war that he will never use it along with other divine weapons in the course of the war. 'It is not, however, proper to slay ordinary men in battle by means of celestial weapons. We shall (on the other hand) vanquish our foes in a fair fight.'[26] His opposite counterpart in this regard is the ambitious and amoral Aśvatthāman who had once sought the *sudarśaṇa cakra* (divine discus) from Kṛṣṇa, only to fail in moving the chakra on being given it and ultimately confessing his secret desire of vanquishing Kṛṣṇa for becoming the most powerful in the world. With this story Kṛṣṇa appears to indicate that it is not merely the weapon but its wielder who is crucial in combat and that powerful weapons with few exceptions are bestowed on the individual that proves worthy of their responsibility. There is a symbiotic relationship between the agent and agency. Some agencies, such as for non-violence or knowledge, facilitate more autonomy to the agent through increasing his awareness of himself and putting himself more under his own sensory/cerebral control. On the other hand, an agency like violence naturally acquires more autonomy with time, with a corresponding reduction of the autonomy of the agent. The agent becomes clouded in understanding and unreasonable or else manufactures self-serving or erroneous reason.

The *Mahābhārata* recognises this complexity and links the agency for violence to the quest for the perfected agent. It is hardly surprising, then, that it is only Arjuna who can recall his *Brahmaśira* – impossible to recall even for Gods other than Indra, and able to be withdrawn after

launch only by a warrior who was cleansed and spiritually adept – after launching it at Kṛṣṇa's behest to neutralise that of Aśvatthāman, who is unable to recall his weapon. Carried on a paltry blade of grass, much like the insignificant atom, the horrific weapon falls on the womb of Uttarā. The Sauptika Parva closes with an attempt to organise its devastating transgression in the natural order of things. Kṛṣṇa counsels Yudhiṣṭhira to look to the future: 'Thou shouldst not suffer thy mind to dwell on it. It was not Droṇa's son that accomplished that act. It was done through the grace of Mahādeva. Do now what should be done.'[27]

The instrument of violence does succeed in restoring normalcy of affairs of state but does not, at least statedly, lead to general welfare or an equitable polity. In a history of ideas, the possibility of the agency for violence appears limited to the concept of the heroic individual. Georges Sorel, modern votary of the redeeming quality of political violence, rejected this classical conception of violence for constituting a political constraint. According to Sorel, the parochial organisation of traditional societies had hardly progressed through such limited violent agency:

> The idea that the profession of arms cannot compare to any other profession, – that it puts the man who adopts this profession in a class which is superior to the ordinary conditions of life, – that history is based entirely on the adventures of warriors, so that the economic life only existed to maintain them.[28]

Sorel's own unrealistic confidence in an altogether different quality of violence, inspired by myth but freed from aristocratic lineage, is belied by the devastative violence of certain leaders of so-called commoner origin in slightly later times. Isaiah Berlin's caution on the virtue of ideals inherently violent is relevant for the discussion: 'Utopias have their value – nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities – but as guides to conduct they can prove literally fatal. Heraclitus was right, things cannot stand still.'[29] Even with its problematic of social ideals, the *Mahābhārata* appears to apprise the warrior class of the limited social value of their valour and the supreme discretion which should govern the exercise of their sanctioned agency for violence.

Incompleteness of the Violent Agency

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with participatory polity not any less inclined to war, William James, in a well-known essay

in 1910, debated whether war was unambiguously 'a biological or sociological necessity, uncontrolled by ordinary psychological checks and motives.'[30] James recognised a certain abiding appeal in martial discipline and advised pacifists to 'enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents.'[31] He acknowledged mass patriotic willingness to lay down life for the uplift and honour of the country and yet saw no reason to be sceptical of a possibility of this enthusiasm being replaced by a civic passion which generated righteous anger at what could be the morally degrading aspects of their native community or country. The war-function, as he termed it, could someday be equalled by collectively constructive aspirations. Accepting of basic inequality, communities at the same time work to end gross inequity in society. 'Gilded youths' could then be seen to be sensitive to their relation with the environment and, in a political act, volunteer for periodic service in inhospitable climates and conditions, in a parallel with Gandhi's concept of trusteeship and *sarvodaya*. The charm, whatever, of military conscription, would then be presented with an alternative option.

> The martial type of character can be bred without war. Strenuous honor and disinterestedness abound elsewhere. Priests and medical men are in a fashion educated to it, and we should all feel some degree of it imperative if we were conscious of our work as an obligatory service to the state.[32]

Does the *Mahābhārata* present any non-martial ideals that human agency could draw on?

Relating virtues to institutions, Macintyre indicates that virtues provide a paradoxical enablement with regard to conventional material ambition. The real element, not the simulacrum, of virtue is a barrier to being really happy.

> Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues *and* become rich, famous and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable position.[33]

So it appears to happen in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, the *Dharmarāja* and now successor to the throne of Hastināpur. His remorse, flowing from his *dharma*, at the carnage of Kurukśetra torments him towards a resolve to abdicate and retire to the woods, and even when he has

been persuaded to relinquish that option by his family and preceptors, he retains his doubts towards a social arrangement which is violent, grasping and possibly equally unjust – or else why should he be forever inclined to relinquish the reins of the state?

These questions arise from his conviction expressed in the Udyoga Parva that all war is unrighteous. In addition to his arguments pursuant to this conviction, the idea of *ahimsā* is debated as well in the Śānti Parva, in Bhīṣma's answer to Yudhiṣṭhira's persistent questioning as to 'How, indeed, should the king protect his subjects without injuring anybody?' These ideas of non-violence are organised around the sacrificial killings of animals during rituals, on *ahimsā* as the redemptive path in a world which is overshadowed by the inevitability of death, on the non-violent life possible to be lived only outside the secular world as well as on the non-violent life liveable in the material world itself, and the relatively more complex fourth category of discussion on *ahimsā* which is contained in a remarkable, if difficult and perhaps essentially unresolved, discussion between the king Dyumatsena and his son Satyavat.[34] This dialogue indicates the ideas of human dignity, the ethics of deterrence, the making and the possibilities of the moral leadership of a king and even the ethics of governance.

Advising his father against capital punishment, Satyavat states that unrighteousness is intrinsically involved in taking life, even of the incorrigible criminal, since it violates what is sometimes described today as the 'bare body' of a human being. 'Without destroying the body of the offender the king should do that unto him which is directed by the scriptures.'[35] The body is not divested of human value even when it belongs to those who habitually associate with inauspicious practices such as those who pilfer 'the ornaments from cemeteries, and swearing apparel from men afflicted by spirits (and, therefore, deprived of senses).'[36] The killing of an offender results in a way also in the killing of his dependents by depriving them of their only means of sustenance. Kings are enjoined to ensure the probity of their acts since people in lower stations of life generally emulate persons of eminence as regards the conduct of their lives. 'Good kings abundantly succeed in ruling their subjects properly with the aid of good conduct (instead of cruel or punitive inflictions).'[37]

However, as in many instances in the epic, a medley of arguments converges in Satyavat's position: the salutary influence and public role of *brahmins*; the morphing of royal conduct over the changing aeons; and the situations in which capital punishments are justifiable. However, it may be said that the basic theme of this dialogue underlines a major theme of the entire epic – the ethics of statecraft, and also the

dharma which governs the conduct of the enabled and the powerful, particularly because they are generally emulatory. In another episode narrated by Bhīṣma in the Śānti Parva, the ascetic Vāmadeva tells King Vasumanas:

> When the king, who is powerful, acts unrighteously towards the weak, they who take their birth in his race imitate the same conduct. . . . The conduct of a king who is observant of his proper duties, is accepted by men in general as a model for imitation.[38]

It is noteworthy that Vāmadeva further states, 'The king should win victories without battles. Victories achieved by battles are not spoken of highly, O monarch, by the wise.'[39]

The disconsolate and repentant Yudhiṣṭhira, well after sages have discoursed to him following Bhīṣma's teaching to him in the Śānti Parva, eventually arouses exasperation in Vyāsa, who chastises him for his childish attachment to remorse and grief and for being neglectful of the reality of the social world. Vyāsa feels as though in trying to calm the mind of Yudhiṣṭhira they have scattered their speech to the winds. The sage is puzzled that even with his knowledge of the scriptures and conversancy with every tenet of morality, Yudhiṣṭhira is still immersed in grief in the likeness of an ignorant person. Vyāsa invokes divine agency in worldly actions – 'None doth any act by virtue of his own power. It is God who engageth him in acts good or bad' – and recommends expiation of perceived responsibility through the horse sacrifice. Yudhiṣṭhira questions royal prerogative over resources during hard times.

> Having caused this huge carnage of kindred, I cannot, O best of the regenerate ones, dispense gifts even on a small scale; I have no wealth to give. Nor can I for wealth solicit these juvenile sons of kings, staying in sorry plight, with their wounds yet green, and undergoing suffering. How O foremost of twice-born ones, having destroyed the earth can I, overcome by sorrow, levy dues for celebrating a sacrifice? Through Duryodhana's fault, O best of ascetics, the kings of the earth met with destruction, and we have reaped ignominy. For wealth Duryodhana hath wasted the Earth; and the treasury of that wicked-minded son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is empty.[40]

Although Yudhiṣṭhira is ultimately prevailed upon to undertake the Aśvamedha Yajña with Marutta's fabled wealth, the imperial

adventure is tragically folded in familial war, and the splendour of the rituals pale before the merits of a poor man's sacrifice. The martial ideal has rapidly begun to lose its sheen. It is in recognition of this settled, eternal note of the epic that Vidyanivas Mishra has commented, '*Mahābhārata* is not a song of heroism, not even a song of war, it is an inspired poem of the difficult journey of humanity' (my translation).[41]

In his unconvinced renunciatory mode Yudhiṣṭhira as king redeems human agency from the taint of violence. He who had answered the questions of the *dharma Yakṣa* finds his certitude shaken on whether he himself has abided by *dharma*. The analogies of the animal world and natural violence preferred as justification advanced to him repeatedly in the epic are contradicted obliquely in the text itself since attachment and material ambition, the staple of human tyranny and injustice, do not have a counterpart in the animal psyche. His questions begin to be only partly resolved when he leaves the throne for his final journey to the wilderness. The *Mahābhārata*, through his character, that of Kṛṣṇa and of the sages who live away from the polis, presents us with non-martial ideals of agency. The carnage of the war can in part be traced to the insatiable ambition of two *brahmins* by birth, Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Droṇa, one afflicted by impairment and the other by need, who forsake their inherited natures by becoming avaricious and vengeful and pass on their constitutive faults intensely to their sons. The virtues of moderation and retirement might have saved them, but they became increasingly obsessed by their material position. Yudhiṣṭhira, being alive to the seductive peril of possessiveness and vigilant of the shrinking of moral horizons, is their agential counterpoint. The epic recognises the centrality of violence on earth but appears to move beyond that pervasive centrality.

The agency of violence in the *Mahābhārata* points to its experience as poignantly described by Simone Weil in the context of the *Iliad*: 'The man who does not wear the armour of the lie cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul. Grace can prevent this touch from corrupting him, but it cannot spare him the wound.'[42]

Notes

1 For a detailed study of a Western history of such stress, see Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, New York: Scribner, 2003.

2 See Madeleine Biardeau, 'Ancient Brahminism, or Impossible Non-Violence' in *Violence/Non-Violence: Some Hindu Perspectives*, Denis Vidal, Gilles Tarabout & Eric Meyer (eds), New Delhi: Manohar; Centre De Sciences Humaines, 2003, pp. 85–104. Biardeau states by way of conclusion: 'It

could be said that violence in itself does not pose a problem to the most punctilious Hindu conscience, for one is concerned here with high caste conceptions. The doctrine advanced by the MBh is a Brahmanical creation which hones the interaction between the two highest varṇas of society. War becomes as pure as ritual sacrifice, for it is indeed a sort of sacrifice which can be perpetrated for the greater good of all the worlds and not for one's own well being' p. 102.

3 Kisari Mohan Ganguli (trans), *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyas*, 12 vols., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007[1893–96], 7:12. (Hereafter Ganguli)
4 Ganguli, 7:5.
5 Ganguli, 7:16.
6 Ganguli, 2:483.
7 Ganguli, 2:483.
8 Ganguli, 7:23.
9 M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols., New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1958–94, 32:95.
10 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Bristol Classical Press, 2007, 128–29.
11 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 128.
12 Simone Weil, 'The Iliad, a Poem of Force', in *The Pacifist Conscience*, Mary McCarthy (trans) and Peter Mayer (ed), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 291–316.
13 Weil, 'The Iliad, a Poem of Force,' 313.
14 The collective remonstrance of the grieving women in the Stree Parva is directed at him while he witnesses their lamentations on the banks of the Ganges: 'Where, indeed, is that righteousness of the king, where is truth and compassion, since he has slain sires and brothers and preceptors and sons and friends? How, O mighty-armed one, hath thy heart become tranquil after causing Droṇa, and thy grandsire Bhishma, and Jayadratha, to be slaughtered? What need hast thou of sovereignty, after having seen thy sires and brothers, O Bharata, and the irrepressible Abhimanyu and the sons of Draupadī, thus slaughtered?' Ganguli, 7: Stree Parva: 17.
15 The terrible description of the lament occurs in the Stree-vilap Parva. See, Ganguli, 7: Stree Parva: 23–40.
16 Ganguli, 7: Stree Parva: 37.
17 Ganguli, 7: Stree Parva: 39.
18 For psychological connotations of the transference of grief to rage in the context of war, see Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 53–55.
19 Ganguli, 7: Stree Parva: 39.
20 Yudhiṣṭhira answers with characteristic humility: 'While at thy command I wandered in the forest, I obtained this boon on the occasion of sojourning to the sacred places. I met with the celestial Rishi Lomasa and obtained from him the boon of spiritual vision. Thus on a former occasion I obtained second sight through the power of knowledge!' Ganguli, 7: Stree Parva: 41.
21 For an outline of such similarity of position, see Gangeya Mukherji, 'Introduction' in *Learning Non-Violence*, Gangeya Mukherji (ed), New Delhi: OUP, 2016.

22 Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Allusions*, New York: Basic Books, 2006, 31. Ronald Bainton has similarly outlined the feasibility of a just war. 'The object of such a [just] war was the vindication of justice and the restoration of peace; of necessity, therefore, peace had to be esteemed as an ideal, and recourse to war as a very last resort after mediation had failed. The war should also be so conducted as not to preclude the restoration of an enduring peace. Hence, the conduct of war would have to be restrained by a code.' Ronald H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace: A Critical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960, 38.
23 Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 335.
24 Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes in Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, Philip Vellacott (trans), London: Penguin Books, 1961, ll, 569–95.
25 Tulsidas, Ramacharitmanas, 6: 80, ll, 1–13.
26 Ganguli, 4:374.
27 Ganguli, 7: Sauptika Parva: 41.
28 Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, Jeremy Jennings (ed), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 159.
29 Isaiah Berlin, 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, Henry Hardy (ed), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991, 15.
30 William James, 'The Moral Equivalent of War', in *The Pacifist Conscience*, Peter Mayer (ed), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 179–190.
31 James, 'The Moral Equivalent of War', 185.
32 James, 'The Moral Equivalent of War', 189.
33 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 196.
34 For details of the Dyumatsena–Satyavata dialogue see, Ganguli, 9: 252–255.
35 Ganguli, 9: 252.
36 Ganguli, 9: 254.
37 Ganguli, 9: 254.
38 Ganguli, 8: 203.
39 Ganguli, 8: 205.
40 Ganguli, 12: Aswamedha Parva: 3–4.
41 Vidyanivas Mishra, *Mahābhārata ka Kāvyārtha*, New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1998, 57.
42 Weil, 'The Iliad, a Poem of Force', 315.

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6

IRRESOLUTION AND AGENCY

The Case of Yudhiṣṭhira

Shirshendu Chakrabarti

The initial impetus for this chapter has come from the thought-provoking critical work in Bangla, *Mahābhārater Katha* by the famous modern Bengali poet Buddhadeva Bose,[1] in particular, his speculations about the central role of Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*. Of course, Yudhiṣṭhira's important role in the epic has been endorsed by other critics, but Bose has drawn our attention to his seeming failure to live up to the expected dimensions of the protagonist, the peculiar combination of his somewhat lacklustre indecisiveness and his central position in the work. Such a position may be denied to him by many scholars and readers, but it remains an assumption for this chapter. Compared to Arjuna, Kṛṣṇa or Rāma (in the *Rāmāyaṇa*), Yudhiṣṭhira appears to be a colourless character, vacillating and irresolute in nature. He has neither the valour nor the amatory prowess expected of a hero and is repeatedly chastized by his younger brothers, his wife Draupadī and even his mother Kuntī for failing to be true to the *dharma* of a *kṣatriya* and acting more like a *brahmin*immersed in studying and meditating on religious and philosophical texts. Decisions pertaining to kingship, governance, diplomacy and so on are taken for him by others, and he is almost cajoled to accept his entitlement to kingship after the eighteen-day war. It is true that he ruled for thirty-six years after that, but actually it was Vidura who ran the show.

As we proceed through the text of the *Mahābhārata*, we realize that Yudhiṣṭhira's irresolution is inseparable from a fundamental unpredictability that characterizes him, finding expression dramatically in his sudden decision to play the game of dice, not once but twice, a decision with disastrous consequences. He is rebuked and insulted in no uncertain terms by his brothers and Draupadī for being the progenitor of all their misfortunes. Why does he decide to play the game of dice? As we search for a satisfactory explanation – ruling out the one of textual interpolation and unreliability – we begin to realize

that there is an enigmatic core to his character, an inscrutability that sets him apart. While contradictory impulses shape many of the other figures in the epic, they seem to remain irreconcilable in Yudhiṣṭhira. I would like to argue that it is this enigmatic contradictoriness that manifests itself as irresolution in the pragmatic domain but holds the key to the genesis of agency in the inner world.

II

Despite the obvious differences in time and place, it might not be a useless exercise to consider a few European parallels, because the idea I have adumbrated already might become clearer through the shades of comparison and contrast. Inclusive contradictoriness, in which the opposites do not cancel each other out, constitutes the soul of the essays of Michel de Montaigne, the outstanding sceptic of the European Renaissance. The context, we may note, is that of religious civil war, of crisis and transition, because of which Montaigne chose to withdraw from a busy public life to solitude and self-questioning. In view of his seminal influence on the European Renaissance, it is not surprising that we may detect this double process in the operation of irresolution and agency in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. On one view, the Prince of Denmark seems to be unable to control the events around him because of his contemplative temperament. On another view, he is more than a match for people around him who are baffled by his behaviour and riddling words. His fratricidal uncle and usurper, Claudius, has the courtiers on his side, and in the last scene, Hamlet cautions Horatio against suicide because only the latter can reveal the full truth to the world. In other words, he singlehandedly takes on the entire state of Denmark and shows much political astuteness in this. Despite his philosophical bent of mind, he warns Laertes, when he grapples with him in Ophelia's grave, to take his fingers off his throat: 'For though I am not splenitive and rash,/Yet have I in me something dangerous'.[2] We may recall in passing Dhṛtarāṣṭra's remark to Saṃjaya in the *Saṃjaya-yāna-parvādhyāya* of the *Udyogaparva* that he fears the anger of Yudhiṣṭhira more than that of Bhīma, Arjuna and even Kṛṣṇa. Given to melancholy brooding, Hamlet is nevertheless in a state of readiness to face the skilled fencer Laertes in a duel, as he reassures the worried Horatio. His enunciation of the moral dilemma, which he alone experiences, presupposes a crisis in values that, despite the great difference in context, is at the heart of the *Mahābhārata*: he reminds his friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been brought by Claudius to spy on him, that 'there is nothing either good or bad, but

thinking makes it so'.[3] The dilemma invites a parallel with the meeting between Yudhiṣṭhira and Saṃjaya, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's emissary, in the section mentioned earlier, of the *Udyogaparva*. When the latter exhorts and reminds, of all persons, the *Dharmarāja* of his forgiving and peace-loving nature which would make a life of poverty preferable to the evil of war, Yudhiṣṭhira asserts that at a time of emergency and contingency *dharma* is de-stabilized and undergoes transformation. In such a situation of a crisis in values, values may transvaluate themselves: as Hamlet puts it to his mother, he 'must be cruel only to be kind'.[4]

Hamlet's character represents the fusion of active life (*vita activa*) and contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*), which had been kept apart in medieval Europe in the life of valour and chivalry on the one hand and that of the cloister on the other. It is a similar unusual fusion that lies at the heart of the Renaissance valorization of agency: does Yudhiṣṭhira not bring together, as I have hinted, the *dharma* of the *kṣatriya* or warrior (consider in this context the meaning of his name) and that of the *brahmin*? Actually, we come across in the European Renaissance two different models of the self. One celebrates g*loria mundi* (worldly glory) and *virtu* (here again we may remind ourselves that the Latin meaning of *vir is 'man'*), and in its underlying aggressiveness often borders upon libertinism. Such individualism presupposes a blind universe and is thus a part of the recovery of classical values challenging the providential Christian universe. While this blindness does not obtain in the *Mahābhārata*, heroes like Arjuna, Karṇa and even Duryodhana correspond somewhat to this model of worldly glory. The other model of agency in the European Renaissance, which Burckhardt[5] paid little attention to, that, for example, of Hamlet, rests upon the fusion of the active and the contemplative, deriving from the philosophical-religious thinking of the time. According to this view, while all other creatures in the cosmos are assigned their natures, the human being is distinguished by a perennially unfinished process of self-making which holds the key to true agency. Self-making is reflexive self-transformation and therefore anchored perilously in relentless self-questioning. The Renaissance self as agent is thus a self divided against itself. Its self-interrogation is the freedom specific to man, for it makes manifest an infinitely determinable capacity for development proceeding to an inconclusive contradictoriness. Uncertainty or the unfinished becomes the paradoxical anchor to selfhood and agency, for the more we question ourselves, the more depth and complexity are generated by that very same process. The purpose of the comparison between texts so far apart in time and place is to highlight this self-questioning, paradoxical anchor to selfhood and agency.

If I have explored the relationship between irresolution and agency in Yudhiṣṭhira, particularly in the context of crisis and transition, and attempted to provide some European parallels, it is because agency is commonly and rightly not associated with irresolution. For instance, we could briefly go back to the Sophoclean tragedy, *Antigone*, to remind ourselves that the situation of civil war borne out of familial crisis may generate the opposite of irresolution, as in the character of Antigone. In the beginning of the play, two brothers leading opposite sides in the civil war in Thebes die fighting each other for the throne. Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, decides that one of them will be honoured while the other will be subjected to public shame. The latter's body will not be sanctified by holy rites and will lie unburied on the battlefield, prey for carrion animals like worms and vultures, the harshest punishment at the time. Antigone and Ismene are the sisters of the dead brothers. While the latter does not take a decisive step, the former chooses to challenge the edict of Creon, the King, and gives proper burial to the dishonoured brother in full knowledge of the consequences. Creon's son, Haemon, who is in love with Antigone, commits suicide when he learns of her death by execution; as a result, Creon is a broken man. At the same time, he remains a passive victim and thus does not attain the stature of a tragic hero. By contrast, Antigone shapes her own tragic destiny, empowered by the crisis involving the rival codes of the polis and the family. Her agency involves a radical questioning of the established moral order.

Divided between the family code and the law laid down by the King, Antigone, unlike her sister Ismene, chooses to break barriers by defying the latter. Of course, she is not irresolute like Yudhiṣṭhira, but the moral situation is somewhat similar. Our preoccupation with Yudhiṣṭhira's irresolution must not make us insensitive to his astonishing final resolution when he is bereft of family, friends and advisers and left alone in his *Mahāprasthāna*, with the dog, conventionally regarded as an unclean animal, as his only companion. I wish to highlight here the genesis of agency which must proceed through the ups and downs of vacillation before arriving at firm and unwavering resolution. Not only are we given a glimpse into Yudhiṣṭhira's necessary struggle towards decisiveness, but we are also made to realize that he does not stand apart from average humanity, as Antigone and even Hamlet do in their tragic stature. If he highlights the empowering ability of self-interrogating irresolution, it is the agency not of the exceptional tragic hero but of common humanity, of Everyman.

III

When Droṇācārya in the *Ādivaṃśāvataraṇa-parvādhyāya* of the *Ādiparva* sets up a targetbird to test the skill in archery that his pupils have acquired under his training, all the brothers barring Arjuna fail because they are able to see everything. Arjuna succeeds because of his power of concentration enabling him to see only the neck of the bird. Admirable as his power is, does it not suggest a state of mind which has been conditioned by rigorous training to an almost fanatical servitude to the fulfilment of practical ends? Does this not, typical of the *Mahābhārata*, problematize the whole question of agency? While the other brothers' lack of concentration does not have a deeper significance, Yudhiṣṭhira's failure demands a different interpretation in the light of the entire epic. Is his a failure in concentration or an ability to see all the aspects to any human situation? Since the situation demands urgent and focused attention and action, Yudhiṣṭhira's inclusive vision may result in indecisiveness, but the same irresolution may be an index to the acknowledgement of ethical alternatives and choices that make possible the very notion of agency. Yudhiṣṭhira, in other words, is always aware of the larger questions surrounding the specific one, the totality, of which the particular situation is a fragment. He is further aware that the exclusion of these larger considerations is often necessary for human action, and that is the source of his irresolution. Does action for him presuppose a narrowing down of alternatives, suggesting an almost tragic choice of ethical limitation? We may remember the episode in the *Āraṇeya-parvādhyāya* of the *Vanaparva* in which a *brahmin* loses his flintwood (*Araṇi*and *Mantha*) and requests the Pāṇḍavas to retrieve it, but they fail in their strenuous efforts. Tired and thirsty, Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers go out, one by one, in search of water but do not return. When at last Yudhiṣṭhira ventures out and, confronting the *Yakṣa* (who has incapacitated the brothers), answers all his questions, the latter asks him to choose one of his brothers whom he would revive. Yudhiṣṭhira chooses Nakula over his own brothers because he wants at least one son each of Kuntī and Mādrī to remain alive. When the Yakṣa wants to give him some boons, the first choice of the latter is the seemingly inconsequential one: the retrieval of that *brahmin*'s flintwood. These may serve as two instances of what I understand as Yudhiṣṭhira's ethical inclusiveness; would Arjuna be aware of these ethical possibilities?

From another perspective, this is the source of his freedom that sets him apart from everyone else without being cut off from them. The

ethical dilemmas that others think have been invented by him because of his wavering between *dhārmic* codes not only lay the basis for agency but also enable him to acquire an unmatched accessibility; by dwelling in a world of his own he is related to all the characters of the *Mahābhārata* without being identified with any of them. Barring perhaps Kṛṣṇa, who ceaselessly acts as a formal and informal negotiator and advisor in wide-ranging political matters, Yudhiṣṭhira has the largest circle of relationships. Action for him is not determined by a settled code but is perpetually jeopardized by self-questioning. We may recall here the Renaissance notion of the unfixed nature of man; unlike every other creature whose fixed nature determines its actions, it is action which determines human nature. Buddhadeva Bose astutely notes that during the exile of the Pāṇḍavas after the game of dice, in the *Vanaparva*, Yudhiṣṭhira takes on the role of listener and student. By contrast, Rāma, in the *Vanavāsa* of *Rāmāyaṇa*, is characteristically resolute and self-assured. We see Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Vanaparva* and indeed elsewhere repeatedly in a framework of interrogation that, we need to remember, is the hallmark of several of the Upaniṣads. Despite the presence of his brothers and his wife, he remains alone, on his own, in this framework. What seems to be irresolution is thus linked to ceaseless self-questioning, a search for *svadharma*, of agency that must not be bound by exact and supportive conformity with the Śāstras.

This does not mean that Yudhiṣṭhira is released from the code of the *kṣatriya*, for even as he hews out existentially his *svadharma*, he cannot abdicate his commitment to social obligations, which in this specific context involve the impending war, internecine and apocalyptic. Not for him the moral disengagement of the ascetic – we must note here that in the *Śāntiparva* Arjuna and Bhīma express their disapproval of the escapist, parasitical and hypocritical character of the life of the *sannyāsin* and Bose draws our attention to the fact that even Vyāsa puts *gārhasthyāśrama* (the life of the householder) at the top of the *Caturāśrama*.[6] The *Dharmarāja* must dip his fingers in blood and even practise at crucial moments the duplicity that is necessary for victory in war. At the same time, he advocates a kind of *ahimsā* that breaks the barriers of the Vedic way of life, a kind of peace that transcends the limits of *kṣātradharma*. Yudhiṣṭhira places the life of the householder at the top and yet he is inspired throughout by the ideal of renunciation and emancipation from material attachments. In other words, he cannot be confined to either the code of the *kṣatriya* or that of the *brahmin*.

This unfixed location between codes enables him to plunge himself into moral dilemmas as a matter of deliberate choice instead of

being plunged into them by circumstances; he interrogates accepted codes and dwells on the margins. This, I repeat, is the true meaning of Yudhiṣṭhira's breaking the barriers, although the ethical and philosophical attitude may appear to be irresolution and vacillation. By contrast, even Bhīṣma, to take one of the noblest examples, is plunged by circumstances into a moral dilemma like Arjuna. Yudhiṣṭhira creates for himself the dilemmas that make him waver, because instead of resolute observance of received codes he is committed to considering and questioning them before choosing a course of action. His unfixed status contains within it the possibility of a radical transformation of the existing order. In so far as he is capable of this transformation, his agency acquires a cutting edge that is denied to the other decisive characters around him. Incidentally, there are several encounters in the *Mahābhārata* with figures in disguise like Yakṣa*dharma* or the king Nahuṣa, in which Yudhiṣṭhira's brothers show a daring, albeit somewhat headstrong, that is not inappropriate of the *kṣatriya*. This, however, is not the agency exemplified by Yudhiṣṭhira, who, we must note, takes decisive action in order to rescue them but significantly through his reflective wisdom unfettered by conformity to a received and settled code. Characteristically, his success lies in answering the somewhat riddling questions of these divine or quasi-divine figures on the fundamental concerns of life. This is particularly evident in the *Ājagaraparvādhyāya* of the *Vanaparva* when he takes the initiative to venture out to rescue Bhīma from the stifling coils of Rājā Nahuṣa in the form of a python. Is it a coincidence that the serpent's question about the true *brahmin* elicits an answer from Yudhiṣṭhira that unsettles the entire social order founded on *varṇāśrama*? The *brahmin* is defined in terms of certain qualities. If the *śūdra* has them then he is not a *śūdra* but a *brahmin*; conversely, if the *brahmin* does not have those qualities, then he is a *śūdra*. When the serpent remarks that in that case till a person acquires these characteristic qualities he is not a *brahmin*, Yudhiṣṭhira acknowledges the hybridity integral to all *varṇas*.

IV

Yudhiṣṭhira also moves between self-control and lack of self-control, between poised tranquillity and passionate turmoil. This is of course seen dramatically in his infatuation for gambling when he plunges into the game of dice not once but twice. But it is not an isolated incident, for during the war preparations and the actual war, we encounter, albeit not often, his anger, belligerence and even savagery. I have already mentioned that it is Saṃjaya, the emissary of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who

has to remind Yudhiṣṭhira that the pursuit of war and violence would go against his nature. Towards the end of the parley, Yudhiṣṭhira demands only five villages (*Pañcagrāma*) and affirms his readiness for peace or war, his capacity for mildness or harshness. His demand is of course rejected by Duryodhana, and he plunges into war, open and covert, involving guile and espionage. Duplicity is not unrelated to the *dharma* of a *kṣatriya*, and we may note that barring Kṛṣṇa, who functions at a different level of knowledge and action, it is Yudhiṣṭhira, the *dharmarāja*, who repeatedly indulges in it. We may recall in passing among his several deceitful acts the infamous lie about Aśvatthāmā's death, without which Droṇa could not have been killed, and his spying out the secret of killing Bhīṣma. Moreover, in the last two days of the war he reveals an intoxication with war: witness his killing of Śalya who had saved him earlier from Karṇa (*Śalyavadhaparvādhyaya* of the *Śalyaparva*) or his eagerness about Karṇa's death (*Karṇaparva*).

What is the significance of his submission to the onslaught of blind and raw passions? This must be understood in terms of the link with agency. Conquest of passions is a goal but not the starting point of a character. Once again we can illustrate this by the contrast between Hamlet and Horatio. Hamlet waxes eloquent in his praise for Horatio's almost Stoic conquest of passions:

> for thou hast been
> As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing,
> A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
> Has ta'en with equal thanks; . . . give me that man
> That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
> In my heart's core, ay in my heart of heart,
> As I do thee.[7]

But Horatio is not the protagonist of the play; compared to Hamlet his lack of agency derives precisely from his invulnerability to passions. His conquest of passions may be seen as a psychological equivalent of Arjuna's concentration (during the archery trial), which, we suggested, is a metaphor for the exclusion of ethical possibilities in the service of a pragmatic interest. In terms of its etymological meaning, passion is that ungovernable force that unpredictably holds us like *passive* victims in its clutches. We may recall Lear's agonized attempt to overcome the tyranny of passion leading to madness: '*Hysterica passio*! Down, thou climbing sorrow!/Thy element's below'.[8] In this sense, Yudhiṣṭhira needs to submit to the sudden onslaught of passion in order to transform passivity into agency. This process is not

complete till the end. After the game of dice, we see him in a penitent, reflective mood in the *Vanaparva*, where he humbly submits to an education in patience and self-knowledge. But he is certainly not emancipated from the tyranny of passions as is often evident during the war. If he is overcome by anger, he is equally overwhelmed by despondency after the victory of the Pāṇḍavas in the war, for unlike the others he realizes that victory and defeat have become interchangeable. His vulnerability to passions thus reveals its link with agency by enabling him to question the very pursuit of power on which his *kṣatriya* code rests. To understand this point we have only to contrast the passionate impetuosity of Bhīma, who performs successfully as an agent but only under instruction and instigation and often needs to be restrained by the compulsions of prudence.

The concept thereby finds a universal extension, and that is the real significance of yet another seeming shortcoming of Yudhiṣṭhira's character, which I mentioned at the outset: his inability to fit into a heroic mould. Yudhiṣṭhira is the paradigm of the common man considered in his potential and not that of the extraordinary one of the exceptional hero. He never loses contact with common humanity, for his freedom is the freedom of man as man, a definition of the human, necessarily captured in its capacity for reflexive self-transformation. Moreover, his colourlessness not only makes him one of us but thereby also destabilizes received expectations about an agent. If the *Mahābhārata* depicts the end of an age, then barring Kṛṣṇa, who controls or rather oversees that change in his divine detachment, it is Yudhiṣṭhira who is the specific agent of that transformation. By contrast, Arjuna, Karṇa, Duryodhana and so on are more like puppets in the clutches of inevitability. In fact when in the *Bhagavad-yānaparvādhyāya* of the *Udyogaparva* Kṛṣṇa offers Karṇa kingship by virtue of his being the eldest Pāṇḍava, the latter's clinching argument for refusal is that, along with Duryodhana, Duhśāsana and Śakuni, he is also a mere instrument of the imminent destruction of the world.

The question is ultimately that of *dharma* and choice, not *dharma* as a laid-down code to be followed without wavering. Kṛṣṇa's message to Arjuna on the battlefield is aided by a kind of historical necessity that is visible no doubt to the former. The ideal of doing our duty without desire for the fruits of action is a noble one. But even in Bhīṣma's and Karṇa's unshaken loyalty to the Kauravas, which they may have arrived at after much wrestling with moral dilemmas, there is a sense of despair that undercuts their agency. Arjuna, on the other hand, who actually receives Kṛṣṇa's exhortation to *niṣkāma karma* that frees him from paralyzing despair, is ultimately naïve in his attitude to victory,

unaware of the scale of the apocalypse. Is there, however, a higher model of agency permeated by possibility, the future, the world that is coming into being? If there is a model founded on the destruction of the existing world order, there could be a complementary one founded on the creation of a new world order. After all, the destruction of the world presupposes its regeneration, and Yudhiṣṭhira's tentative model of agency could be specific to it. It is tentative not because of lack of ethical firmness and substance but because it perpetually belongs to the realm of possibility, to a future not realizable in a time determined by the calendar but one that is inherently indeterminate. As Ernst Cassirer has argued, with reference to Kant's defence, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, of the imaginary even impracticable nature of Plato's *Republic*, the future of which religious and ethical teachers have spoken is not an empirical fact but an ethical and religious task. All the great ethical philosophers do not think in terms of mere actuality; rather, their imagination transcends the limits of actuality.[9] The ethical world is never given; it is perpetually in the making.

Agency is thus the distinctive mark of the human being by virtue of the infinite determinability of the latter, plunged unremittingly into agonized choice. By contrast, the divine is fully determined – it can neither grow better nor worse, greater nor smaller – free from the temporality without which there can be no human action. It is divine agency, as opposed to human, that lies behind Kṛṣṇa's non-interference in the destruction of his own clan and the city of Dvārakā. The seeming lack of agency validates a higher truth beyond human grasp, a foreknowledge that transcends the very dimension of temporality. It is true that Yudhiṣṭhira accepts what happens in the *Mahāprasthāna* section in its inevitability, but it comes as the culmination to a search for *svadharma*, as a discovery and self-realization that is an integral aspect of time which, unlike the mode of the divine, is the very dimension of human existence.

The contrast between Arjuna's and Yudhiṣṭhira's unwillingness to embark on war is that the former's realization is sudden, catching him unprepared, whereas the latter ponders and interrogates the accepted code through his entire life. Characteristically, therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira is irresolute, hovering between submission to *kṣātradharma* and going beyond it, between the life of the householder and that of renunciation. As I have already argued, he does not abdicate the *dharma* of the *kṣatriya* and the householder. But he is not unprepared like Arjuna and the others. There is thus a paradoxical relationship between preparedness and irresolution which forms the basis for true human agency. Once again we may recall that it is this readiness that emancipates

Hamlet from his impending and inevitable death: 'If it be now, 'tis not to come – if it be not to come, it will be now – if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all'.[10] When Laertes learns of his father's death, he wants to rush to revenge, but that is not readiness. It reminds us of the headstrong belligerence of Bhīma which, by virtue of its impetuosity, actually leaves him unprepared for the consequences of the war. Yudhiṣṭhira's readiness is inseparable from his awareness of multiple ethical possibilities, from his pondering on the disastrous consequences, outer and inner, of civil war.

V

After the war, in the *Sauptikaparva* and *Śāntiparva*, it is Yudhiṣṭhira's sense of futility that suggests his state of readiness; he realizes the identity of victory and defeat. It is worth noting that he alone (barring to some extent Gāndhārī and Balarāma) in his sense of bleakness and futility grasps the larger consequences of the war, while his brothers, seeing only victory, constantly remind him of the urgent need to accept without despondency the duty of kingship as the next logical step. In other words, the latter are not troubled by the urgency of ethical inclusiveness and sense of desolation that haunt Yudhiṣṭhira's consciousness; in this sense, he can be said to create a moral dilemma. He alone is torn between kingship and renunciation, between the exercise of power and the search for spiritual knowledge as a mendicant. As he castigates the manliness and anger of his *kṣatriya* upbringing, his brothers remind him of his *rājadharma*, but he counters their arguments by his yearning for *mokṣa*, even death by fasting, resulting from the violence and duplicity with which he has been complicit. While Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa persuade him to take up his responsibilities, it is significant that when he wishes to be instructed in the various aspects and implications of *dharma*, both of them advise him to approach Bhīṣma (*Śāntiparva*). Since the advice to Arjuna by Kṛṣṇa (in his divinity) plays such an important role in the epic and in fact in all subsequent debates about *dharma*, why does the *avatāra* refrain from instructing Yudhiṣṭhira? In fact, Bhīṣma is hesitant to embark upon the complexities of *dharma*, and Kṛṣṇa has to revivify him by instilling knowledge in him, but still Kṛṣṇa does not instruct Yudhiṣṭhira. I suggest that the humanity of Bhīṣma matches that of Yudhiṣṭhira and thereby reinforces the human basis of agency invigorated, rather than weakened, by moral dilemma.

It is worth remembering that Vyāsa has given the reader a key to understanding Yudhiṣṭhira's seeming irresolution by offering a clear contrast in the irresolution of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, which is an index to his

ethical culpability, his spinelessness. Far from being any troubled and tortuous quest for truth, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's irresolution is founded on *moha*, on blind and besotted fondness for his evil son, Duryodhana. Yudhiṣṭhira is unable to be decisive because he is always torn apart by the need to make a choice among several ethical possibilities inherent in any situation. His insight invites an obvious contrast with the blindness of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, at once literal and metaphorical.

Yudhiṣṭhira is emancipated from irresolution paradoxically at the point when he has lost all support and is completely alone. Kṛṣṇa's entire clan is wiped out through civil war, and the self-destruction is observed by him from his vantage ground of foreknowledge and divinity: he does nothing to stop it. His death leaves Arjuna confused and paralyzed, but this is precisely the moment when Yudhiṣṭhira comes into his own. His self-assurance reveals itself in his determined movement through the Himalayas, unperturbed by the death of his family members. Here we may see the operation of agency liberated from all pragmatic ligatures, including those of the family. Here we may also see the emancipation of agency paradoxically from all action, since the latter in the ultimate analysis must serve some interest of the self, the clan or a group in some form. It is true that Arjuna accepts Kṛṣṇa's exhortation to unattached, desireless action (*niṣkāma karma*), but it is directed towards the defeat of the forces of evil and towards *kṣatriya* glory. In the *Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvadhyāya* of the *Śāntiparva*, when Yudhiṣṭhira wishes to give up his kingship in favour of the life of renunciation and true knowledge, his brothers rebuke him for his dereliction of duty. In reply, he reminds Arjuna that he may have unparalleled martial prowess but no knowledge of the subtleties of *dharma*, for there are two kinds of counsel in the Vedas: perform karma and renounce karma. That *dharma* is tied to the fulfilment of a code and therefore to some interest is also suggested in the *Anugītā* in the *Āśvamedhikaparva*, where Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that mokṣa can come by the renunciation, among other things, of desire, *dharma*, artha and kāma; it comes to one who is neither *dhārmik* nor *adhārmik*.

By emancipation from pragmatic family ties, I do not mean callousness or incapacity for community. Time and again, Yudhiṣṭhira expresses his genuine anxiety about his brothers and wife. This is carried on till the last moment, when he chooses to stay with his family in hell (*naraka*) rather than accept life in paradise for himself. At the same time, a little before this vision of hell, during the actual journey beyond earthly existence, the *Mahāprasthāna*, he is not overcome by sentimental solicitude and grief as his wife and all brothers fall down one after another, unable to complete the journey. As I have already

said, his conquest of irresolution comes at the point when he is utterly alone and bereft of all support. This loneliness, however, is the transcendence of the pragmatic considerations of *rājadharma* by which others linked him to his family members through rebuke, disapproval and advice. It is not an index to his emotional or existential estrangement from his family. When he refuses Indra's offer of paradise it is because of his love for his wife and brothers, his happy memories with them, not because he needs their advice anymore.

Far from being a rejection of community, Yudhiṣṭhira's loneliness can thus be seen as selfhood, free from the alienation and narcissism that characterize modernity as it has evolved in the West. He remains as far as possible from the Faustian man that has continued to haunt and trouble the Western imagination through the centuries. This is because of his life-long search for freedom from the drive to power – the entire context of fratricidal war – without running away from his kingly duties and responsibilities. If Faustus represents the quest for the superhuman and its consequences, Yudhiṣṭhira represents the quest for humanity wherein lies the source of true agency. We may recall how he remains suspended in self-questioning between the code of the *kṣatriya* and that of the *brahmin*, extending thereby the margins of either. Yudhiṣṭhira in his ambivalence does not hang in a vacuum, for in the *Ājagaraparvādhyāya* of the *Vanaparva* we have seen how he is convinced of the interchangeability of the *brahmin* and the *śūdra* according to qualities and of the hybridity of all *varṇas*. Would it be too far-fetched to see in him the distinctive elements of the perennial modern that Tagore defined not in terms of an era or culture but in terms of a hard clarity manifest in freedom from the *moha* of assertive selfhood, in unattached observation of the world that he found as much in Chinese poetry more than a thousand years ago as in the early Pound and Eliot ('Ādhunik Kābya', 1932) ['Modern Poetry']? Yudhiṣṭhira is plagued by irresolution but at the same time, unlike all the other characters of the *Mahābhārata*, he does not subscribe unquestioningly to any received code, order or coterie. He is a patient listener to the discourses of all the sages but chooses none as his *guru*. It is he who ultimately reflects and acts on his own; he is the true agent, his agency anchored in self-questioning selfhood.

Notes

1 Buddhadeva Bose, *Mahābhārater Kathā*, Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 1974.
2 Hamlet, ed. *John Dover Wilson*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, V. i. 255–56.

3 II, ii, 252–53.
4 III, iv, 178.
5 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, S.G.C. Middlemore (trans), Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1944.
6 See Chapter 16 of Mahābhārater Kathā.
7 III, ii, 63–66, 69–72.
8 King Lear, ed. Kenneth Muir, London: Methuen & Co., 1964, II, iv, 57–58.
9 See Ernst Cassirer, *Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1944, p. 61.
10 Hamlet, V, ii, 218–20.

7

CAN THE SUBHUMAN SPEAK OR ACT?

Agency of Sagacious Serpents, Benevolent Birds, Rational Rodents, and a Mocking Mongoose in the *Mahābhārata*

Arindam Chakrabarti

1. The Logic of Fables and Imagining Non-Human Speaker-Actors

The *Mahābhārata* is a perennial resource for Indian moral philosophy. Fish do not figure as targets, let alone as agents, of normative responsive attitudes and actions in the average, especially modern, Indian moral imagination. Yet the *Mahābhārata* is fishy from the very get-go. Its "author", the dark-skinned Vyāsa, was conceived in a fog-engulfed island while an ascetic *brahmin* made love to a fisherman's adopted girl. The seductively pretty Satyavatī, we are told at the very start of the first genealogical book of the *Mahābhārata*, used to stink of fish because she came out of the womb of a fish-mother who had swallowed a king's semen. So the *Mahābhārata* is authored by the grandson of a fish. In the Book of the Forest (Ch 313), when tested with riddles by *Dharma* in the form of a fierce crane guarding a lethal lake, Yudhiṣṭhira names the fish as the species which keeps its eyes open even when it sleeps. This could well be a metaphorical allusion to the Upanishad doctrine of witness consciousness watching our blissful unknowing during deep sleep. Then again, a mysterious fish showed up as a tiny, shiny guppy appealing to Vaivasvata Manu, the first-born man of the current cosmic cycle, as he was bathing in a river.[1] The fish implored Manu to take it home since otherwise the bigger fish would eat it up. The compassionate "first man" intervenes in the predatory fish ecology and rescues the little fish. Nurtured by Manu, when it grows to a gigantic size, it has to be let out in the ocean. Not only does it then speak in a prophetic poetic language, it articulates

its foreknowledge of the imminent cosmic flood and gives Manu some reciprocally life-saving tips. When Manu throws this oversized fish into the ocean, it says these words "with a smile" (but how does a fish smile?):

> O, adorable one! You have taken good care of me; now please listen . . . time is ripe for a total cleansing of the world. . . . When the deluge comes, wait for me, and I shall appear to you in the form of a horned beast, and to my horn you must bind your boat. This is how you can save yourself and preserve the seeds of civilization and knowledge from that cataclysmic flood.[2]

The rest of the tale is very much like that of Noah's ark, but the fish turns out, in the *Mahābhārata*, to be none other than the creator god Brahmā, making the prescient piscine creature a speaker and saviour of the human world of knowledge. It could have morphed into the Puranic legend of the first "avatāra" of Vishnu as the "Matsya" which saves Vedic knowledge during a universal inundation. Is this fable of the great fish helping to preserve human knowledge and seeds through "the end of the world" merely a civilizational wish-fulfilling dream, or is it some deep acknowledgement of human debt to the non-human, reminding us that the fish comes first?

A recent English recreation of the Latin version of Aesop's fables done by one Roman Phaedrus tells us: "Whether or not the characters are animals, Aesop's fables are about the human condition".[3] But the *Mahābhārata* is not a collection of children's didactic stories with clear "morals". It is a philosophical epic poem of a high degree of ethical complexity. What is the narrative philosophical point of these talking birds, beasts, snakes, and fish besides inspiring wonder[4] by impossible attributions of intelligence, prudential reasoning, empathy, or wisdom – rare even in humans – to a fish or snake or bird-body? In this chapter on non-human agency, in a somewhat non-linear fashion, I propose the following answer. Besides the morally participatory human "*reactive*" agentive attitude and its opposite: the detached objective onlooker's "*scientific*" attitude towards actions, events, feelings, and relationships, these talkative and intentionally active birds, beasts, reptiles and insects open up a *third* trans-species point of view: that which judges humans to be a simultaneously noble and ignoble, intelligent but cruel, heroic yet heinous species from what is imagined to be a shared non-human subjectivity. It is an ecologically egalitarian attempt to make a *them* out of *us*.[5] This explanation also begins to address the larger question: What entitles any living being to moral

agency and moral considerability? Is it the capacity for speech and logical thinking, or is it the capacity for suffering and empathy for other's suffering? Or is it something even more basic: the drive to stay alive and live together?[6]

Our sense of "ought" comes from our owing something to each other. As humans we owe a debt to non-human species on earth. Whoever owes and whoever is owed to has some kind of moral agency and considerability. Of course, human beings are supposed to be special among animals. "*There is nothing nobler than humanity*",[7] the *Mahābhārata* avers, though the announcement is put in the mouth (beak) of a swan, who happens to be the Creator disguised as a bird (notice that Brahmā rides a swan as his iconographic "carrier" or *vāhana*: why does each divinity need a subhuman being as a carrier?). For all their badness and madness, human beings are supposed to have the capacity to restrain their lust and rage, not curse back when cursed, a faculty of moral reasoning, an inner voice – however feeble – of conscience. It is their self-restraining moral sense which makes them rational animals, not their survival-conducive shrewdness at cost–benefit calculation, in which some bees, termites, and reptiles may be smarter: "Eating, sleeping, fear and sex drive: these are common between beasts and humans; *dharma* is what is an extra distinguishing feature of humans; those without *dharma* are equal to beasts".[8]

Yet in the *Mahābhārata*, whenever even exemplary and heroic human agents stray from the path of righteousness, *Dharma* (Moral Order) appears in the guise of a lowly subhuman creature – a crane, a mongoose, a dog – to test or teach men a lesson. Not only do birds and beasts show loftier ethical conduct than the average virtuous human actor; they talk and teach, ask probing questions, expostulate, and give reasons for their views.

The epic begins with the story of a young king Janamejaya revengefully tossing all the snakes of the world into a sacrificial fire, because a certain poisonous cobra Takṣaka bit his father Parīkṣita to death. Thousands of snakes are incinerated, but Takṣaka himself is "saved" in mid-air while falling into the fire by the intervention of a sage, Āstīka, whose mother is a sibling of Vāsuki, the sovereign of the serpents. The ethical core of the epic – the Book of *Duty at the Time of Crisis* – ends by the tale of an incredibly ungrateful human being who is forgiven by an incredibly saintly crane, and the thirteenth *Book of* (*Post-War*) *Admonitions* opens with the story of another snake speaking up when bound and threatened to be killed by a human hunter.

Is such talk of and by subhuman creatures to be explained only by the logic of fables, as in Aesop's animal tales, or does the great

ethical epic consisting of numerous "ancient *exemplary narratives*" (*itihāsa*) take an affirmative stand on the question whether animals can think, reason, and be free deliberative agents? What is the connection between linguistic or non-linguistic communicative capacity on the one hand and the capacity to feel one's own and others' suffering on the other? Which of these capacities makes a living being an ethical "doer"?[9] These are some of the questions I raise in this essay, not to settle the unsolvable philosophical issue of animal minds (for we shall never know what it is like to be a bat) or the empirical question of subhuman intelligence but to open up the *Mahābhārata* as a rich resource for post-human moral thinking. The standard "humanism" of the *Mahābhārata* gets complicated when we try to make more than allegorical sense of some of the beast/bird/reptile narratives on different registers of moral semiotics, virtue-ethics, and amoral politics.

The paradigm of interpersonal action, we learn from Hannah Arendt, is conversation or speech.[10] In the Western, especially Cartesian, tradition, animals are not persons. They are mindless automata. But the human brain has the "sin of anthropomorphism" hardwired in it which ascribes human-like conscious states to them.[11] In the *Mahābhārata*, not only do sub-humans speak to each other, they use extremely sophisticated language to speak to humans. What can we make of this anomaly? My hunch, again, is that it is an imaginatively non-human exposure of human species-pride. If it is a narrative strategy for de-centring of human beings in the ecology of actor-network (as Bruno Latour calls it these days), then it runs parallel to the openly anthropocentric Karma/Dharma[12] theory in the metaphysical scaffolding of the *Mahābhārata*.

2. Language and Morals

Both Hannah Arendt (in *The Human Condition*) and the *Mahābhārata* appear to assume that a capacity to converse with others is at the heart of "action" or moral agency. The earliest Sanskrit passage which connects moral capacity to language capacity occurs in the *Chāndogya* Upanishad:

Had speech (*vāk*) not been there, no one would be able to make known the distinction between just and unjust, true and false. Without the medium of speech, neither good nor evil, neither the aesthetically dear to the heart nor the repulsive could be told apart. It is speech which makes all these known. Worship speech.[13] It is through the sieve of kind, accurate, reasoned, sincere, and candid conversation – discussing

together (*sam-vāda*) – that reflective human beings sift out good from bad, correct from incorrect, virtuous from vicious conduct.[14]

The same normative pre-occupation with speech, communication, and open debate[15] continues to be expressed in the *Mahābhārata*, where it is both exemplified and self-critically theorized about. Vaiśampāyana's meta-conversation was about the many conversations between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Sanjaya, Bhīṣma and Ambā, Karṇa and Kuntī, Yudhiṣṭhira and the mysterious crane of the lake, Kauśika and the righteous hunter, and so on, between Brahmadatta and Pūjanī, and the awesome conversation – *samvādam imam adbhutam* – between Krishna and Arjuna, just at the onset of the great war. In quite a few of these conversations, birds and beasts speak to each other and to humans. How should we understand *these* conversations in which animals we take to be biologically bereft of language speak and we are supposed to learn life lessons from what they say and do? Are they merely fables or allegories, or are they metaphors? And what exactly is a "fable" after all?[16]

Three kinds of deeds are distinguished in the Sanskrit traditions: bodily actions, mental actions, and speech actions. We could earn merit and demerit, face karmic consequences for all three sorts of deeds, though pinning down responsibility for mental acts has never been quite feasible in any society at any time. Even if it is established that the abusive verbal or bodily behaviour was "intentional", no prosecutor can establish publicly that there was a mental act called "intending to do that" preceding that shooting or slapping or yelling out filthy words, and even if the intending was done, was the intending intentional, or was it an inescapable effect of upbringing or childhood trauma? These are questions as unanswered in the twenty-first century as they were at the time of the *Mahābhārata* war.

But what about *speech acts*? Moral agency has a complex but close relationship to use of words, communicative action, and the *Mahābhārata* time and again warns us about the dangerousness of verbal violence: "Physical piercing by an arrow can be reversed, the wound created by a weapon can heal, a forest chopped up by an axe can grow back again, but the hideous wound created by hurtful words never heals" (MBh, XIII, Ch104, verses 33–34). In the *Mahābhārata*, snakes, birds, mongoose, jackals, and monkeys are not only objects of moral attitudes of praise and censure, but they are often agents for bestowing praise and blameworthiness to others. And to deserve inclusion into the ethical realm – the Kingdom of Ends (to use Kant's words) – these *tiryak* (non-erect) creatures are shown as agents of speech-acts. They take part in conversations. No culpability without conversation. One

analytic philosopher[17] who is famous for his opposition to the idea of intelligent design argued that pigs were obviously designed to make pork chops possible. His defence of meat eating was mainly based on the argument that since cows, pigs, sheep, and chicken lack syntax, it was okay to eat them. Unwanted human babies have the potentiality for syntax; therefore we cannot eat them.

Against this, Jeremy Bentham showed us how in determining whether we have any duty towards living individuals belonging to a particular race or species, "The question is not:, can they reason? nor, can they talk?, but, can they suffer?"[18] Whether fear in a dog is the same as fear as a human emotion is still a live issue in the sciences of emotion. But before we slip into the glib anthropomorphizing hypotheses, we should take a harder look at bringing non-humans into the "aegis of agency" to see if the point made with these tales of other creatures is not simply the following: All living beings love to live and hate to suffer. Yet for millennia, human beings have failed to include within their communal "we" those who are radically other in skin colour, language, and culture. Across species, across race, across class, across gender, across language groups, the problem of suffering and survival is similar if not the same. But without at least guessing what they feel, how can ***we*** speak for ***them***?

Speaking sometimes is the sign also of moral irresponsibility. In the *Mahābhārata*'s "Book of Dharma-in-Hard-Times", a betrayed and bereaved wise bird asks a haunting question of a human friend: "How can one who has really known suffering of oneself and another, keep speaking in an assembly?"[19] At times, when uncontrollable speech rushes out of our mouths with an instinctual incontinence, holding our tongue may evince the greatest agency. The Buddha's or M.K. Gandhi's silence was supposed to accomplish a lot of radical pedagogic or social action. Capacity to suffer and capacity to speak may co-exist in humans, but some pains ought to make us mute. Much of morality literally goes "without saying". Perhaps our deepest bodily sufferings which make us "patients" ought to be remapped on to the concept of ethical agency, which has been more or less taken over by the capacity to speak. Speakers are assumed to be leaders and doers, while sufferers are mere passive "victims" of others' actions. Like active listeners who can lead a conversation as much as speakers do, suffering creatures could be ascribed a kind of agency in comparison to which active torturers may begin to look like passive puppets of their own passions. If agony rather than eloquence is made the necessary condition of moral relevance, mute creatures could be re-thought as creatures to whom we owe duties, and their silent suffering should

"tell" us that. Our cats and dogs, birds and insects, monkeys and minnows are parts of our moral world, even if we can never understand what they are "saying".

At this point, I could anticipate a fair objection against my taking these fables of animal agency and animal speech so literally. You can ascribe a thin moral relevance to birds and beasts, the objector could say, but not a full-blooded thick agency. Yes, beasts may initiate actions and even make tools as means to ends; mourning elephants or lab rats refusing to flick a switch which would hurt their companion rats even when there is a reward may show social bonding amongst themselves. But they lack the three most important features which make humans morally responsible and responsive: (a) second-order knowledge of what they are doing, (b) the capacity to choose one among several considered options after deliberative thinking, and (c) an inherent sense of justice and fair distribution.

My response would try to cast doubt on how even all human "voluntary" and "morally assessable" actions fulfil (a) and (b) in any clear sense. About (c), some more recent startling experiments show that animals such as capuchin monkeys not only show social empathy and reciprocity, through sharing and consolation behaviour, but they express vehement rebellion against unfair or unequal distribution of rewards for the same services rendered.[20]

So including animals as morally considerable first on the basis of their capacity for pain, the *Mahābhārata* seems to strengthen its argument towards ascribing moral agency to sub-humans also, by biting the bullet of the "speech" challenge. Instead of just a Zhuangzi-like sceptical challenge "How do you know fish cannot speak, you are not a fish?"[21] to the "scientific certitude" that fish-brains are in principle incapable of supporting mastery over syntax of any kind, the *Mahābhārata* shows the ethical benefits of expanding the horizon of fellow-language-using moral agents to include sub-humans. Given current research on dolphins' communication systems, and rule guidedness of bird calls, that heuristic could at any rate generate new research programs.

3. Snake the Fatalist, D. H. Lawrence, and Derrida

The serpent speaks in the Hebrew Bible too. When Eve refuses to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge because God has instructed them never to touch it, the serpent "says", "For, God knows that when you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5).

Besides planting the seeds of an epistemic rivalry with God, the verbal snake becomes the first "eye-opening" teacher of rebellion, dissidence, and one's own knowledge of good and evil. One talking snake appears in the story of Gautamī, whose son dies because of a snake bite. A hunter, Arjunaka, hungry for retribution, locates, catches, and ties up the snake and brings it to Gautamī for permission to kill it. Gautamī points out that such revenge or retribution on this snake is pointless because it will not bring her dead son back. At this point, the snake manages to stick its head out and explains that the death of the boy was pre-destined by time, and so it (the snake) had not killed anyone intentionally, voluntarily, or on purpose (three ways of spilling venom, one could say, remembering J. L. Austin[22]), and therefore, could not be "blamed" or "punished". Here is an excerpt from the snake's speech in defence of fatalism:

> Arjunaka, you foolish fowler! How is it my fault? I have no will of my own, and am not independent. It is Death who propelled me to do this job. Not out of any spite against the child, but by Death's bidding I've bitten this child. Therefore, the sin, if any, should be Death's.[23]

When the fowler responds that the snake, even when used by someone else as an instrumental cause of the child's death, deserves to be killed because the lethal venom after all came from its fangs, the argumentative snake enters into a deeper metaphysics of "cumulative causation by multiple factors". Comparing itself to the potter's wheel and its pivotal rod, it argues that unless one is independent, one cannot be an agent. Finally Death appears on the scene, and both of them blame Time (as Destiny), and a complex debate between freedom and determinism is staged, but throughout which the bereaved mother Gautamī remains unshaken in her decision to forgive the snake.

In D. H. Lawrence's poem "The Snake" – which records the poet's inner conflict between the two attitudes towards the black Sicilian snake as being a dangerous object to be exterminated and a regal lord of the dark subterranean world who honours us by coming to drink from the same water-source as us – words like "head", "mouth", and "lips" are used to describe the parts of the snake's body. But do we think of a venomous snake's "hood" as a "head" with a face on it? In Jacques Derrida's discussion of this poem, we are told that when Emanuel Levinas was asked if he thought the beast has a "face" which claims our ethical obligation to the "Other", he had kept silent and

dodged the question. Derrida's own analysis is empathic to Lawrence's inner voice that wants to expiate the sin of "pettiness" whereby an "educated" man simply wants to kill and strike and fails to be deferential and hospitable to the snake who (not "which") came first to the well of life.[24]

A question can be raised here. When talking about animals' responsibility or responsiveness or our responsibility or responsiveness towards animals, am I speaking of fictional/fabulous animals or real-life animals? I would like to answer in two steps. First, fables, even of the *Panchatantra* or Aesop's sort, speak, albeit in a make-believe manner, about real-life animals. That, for example, an elephant speaks in Sanskrit poetry is intended to be taken as fictional or fabulous, but that, inside the narrative, it is an elephant and not a gryphon or Jabberwock is meant to be plain fact. At a second level, when the context is the *Mahābhārata* and an animal story where animals and humans converse as equals, the beasts, birds, insects, and reptiles – as real non-humans – teach us a lesson, which is partly based on ancient observation of actual wildlife behaviour and partly intended to help us make our imagination wild enough to enable us to think outside the human-centric box. So the back and forth between real and fictional creatures is deliberate in this essay as it is in the *Mahābhārata*.

4. The Rational Rodent's "Social Contract"

Once upon a time in a hole under a banyan tree, there lived a mouse by the name Palita (literally "grey haired"). Up above the same tree also lived a cat by the name Lomaśa, feasting on birds that visited that tree. A hunter used to cast his net to trap animals overnight. One night the cat got trapped in the hunter's net. Next morning when Palita, the mouse, was chewing on some of the meat left in the trap he noticed the cat caught in the net helplessly. Palita also observed that a sharp-beaked owl and a fierce mongoose were approaching him with predatory intentions. Reckoning that the only way to protect himself from the owl and the mongoose was to befriend the cat – even if a cat is the designated devourer of a mouse – he approached the net-bound cat with a strategic peace proposal: "As both the owl and the mongoose are threatening to eat me up, let us help each other escape this impending peril. I shall rescue you if you agree not to kill me. Without my help, you cannot escape. What do you say?" Lomaśa agreed, and the mouse started cutting the ropes of the snare, but at a calculatedly slow pace. The cat became impatient and said, "Have you forgotten your

words now that you are out of the reach of danger? Expedite your work, for the hunter will soon be here". Palita replied,

> I do not want to hurry my work for I wish to release you at the right time. An act done at an improper time will fail to yield results. If I release you now, you are sure to eat me. I shall free you at the time when the hunter is at sight. At that moment, your heart will not be set upon eating me, as your focus will be on escaping from the hunter. I too shall use that moment to save my life.

When the disappointed cat urged that honest ones did not repay their debt to friends in this manner, the mouse continued,

> Listen, Lomaśa, that friendship which cannot be kept up without fear, should be maintained with great caution like the hand of the snake-charmer from the snake's fangs. However be assured that I will cut the last string at a time expedient to both of us.

As the mouse and the cat were conversing, the night gradually wore away. As soon as the hunter arrived, Palita very quickly cut the last string that held the cat. Freed from the noose, the cat climbed up the tree speedily. Palita also quickly fled and entered his hole. The hunter, seeing everything, was frustrated and left the spot. The cat Lomaśa, from the branches of the tree, addressed Palita hiding in his hole. "You suddenly ran away so I never got a chance to thank you. I hope you do not suspect my intentions, as I am certainly grateful to you. Why don't we have a friendly chat?" The mouse turned down Lomaśa's request for friendship with the following Machiavellian discourse on the politics of friendship:

> People are not friends and foes in themselves, circumstances make them so for one another. For common interests people become friends but over time friendships turn into enmity. One never befriends another without an expected gain . . . He who blindly trusts friends and always mistrusts foes puts himself in peril. The circumstances under which peace or war is declared can change as quickly as the clouds change their form. O cat, I should always be wary of you, and you should always be wary of the hunter who is now enraged by your escape.[25]

When a ruling king worried about running a war-ravaged country is told such a cat-and-mouse strategic friendship story, these sub-humans are not just metaphors for different human traits. Rather, the story teaches us the political values of strategic friendship.

5. The Altruistic Pigeon's Elocution on Life without a Wife

During a terrible storm in a dark, deep forest, a ruthless bird-hunter captured a scared female pigeon that had fallen from the tall tree under which the hunter had taken shelter. As night fell, her partner male pigeon wept inconsolably because his "wife" was not back to the nest as usual:

> One's house is not one's home; one's wife only is one's home. A house without the wife is as desolate as the wilderness. If that dear wife of mine, with eyes reddish at the corners, of particolored plumes, and of sweet voice, does not come back today, my life itself will cease to be of any meaning, for she cheers if I am cheerful, and she cries when I am sad, one's wife is the best of medicine that one can have in sickness. There is no friend like a wife. There is no refuge better than the wife.[26]

Though captured and about to be killed, the female pigeon reminded her husband that since they lived in a tree under which the hunter had taken refuge for the night, it was the pigeon's duty to take care of him according to the *dharma* of hospitality of a homeowner, even though he was their enemy. Thus, when the hunter shivered with cold and wanted a fire to warm himself, the pigeon gathered twigs and lit a fire. The hunter was hungry, but there was no food around except the caged female pigeon. So the male pigeon offered its own flesh as food to the hunter by jumping into the fire.

At this point even the heartless and hungry hunter felt deep remorse and self-censure. He contrasted the extreme self-sacrificing hospitality of the pigeon giving him warmth and offering itself as food with his own cruel and greedy conduct. The ruthless fowler decided to turn a new virtuous leaf by casting aside his bird-hunting accessories. At the end, the noble pigeon couple, along with the transformed fowler, attained high heaven in recognition of their morally perfect conduct. Thus, regardless of the hostility or wickedness of the refugee, one should protect and care for whoever seeks and needs shelter. This story reverses the direction of gift from human to a birds in the epic story of

the king Shibi giving his own flesh to the falcon whose prey, a frightened pigeon, had taken shelter with him.[27]

6. The Blue-Eyed Half-Gilded Mongoose and Yudhiṣṭhira's Sacrificial Ceremony

With their hands, humans not only grasp and gesture, greet and gauge, they are meant to give. The giving man exceeds the grabbing man by ten fingers. This is why even after gaining an unexpected victory in the bloody battle, when the virtuous prince Yudhiṣṭhira was incurably sick with repentance he decided to perform the ultimate ritual sacrifice, a gift-giving extravaganza to expiate his war crimes: the Vedic Horse-Sacrifice. At the end of the ritual, something "miraculous" (*āścaryam*) happened. A mongoose with deep-blue eyes and a head made partly of gold appeared on the floor of the sacrificial hall. Mocking all this glory and glamor of gift making, the defiant and indignant (*dhṛṣṭah*) mongoose said in a shrill, thunderous voice: "All your pompously advertised sacrifice and ritual gifts to friends and the destitute on which the gods have apparently showered flowers from heaven is not comparable even to a fistful of barley-flour."[28]

The king's men and ministers, the scholarly priests, otherwise quite happy with the success of the ritual, realized that this was no ordinary mongoose and asked why it was berating such a perfect festival of gift giving. In response, the weird creature told them the following story.

The blue-eyed mongoose resided in the crack of the wall of a poor *brahmin*'s hut who lived with his wife, son, and daughter-in-law. They survived by scrounging on grain left in fields after the crops were harvested. One day when the famished family sat down for a late lunch, an equally famished stranger knocked on their door. The family got into a debate as to who would sacrifice their meagre share of the ball of barley flour to feed the guest. Seeing that the whole family elected to starve to death in order to be hospitable to the stranger, the gods showered blessings and hailed them in heaven. The mongoose witnessed all this and, coming out of his crevice, smeared himself with the crumbs and leftover flour on the floor made sacred by the unostentatious "giving" of the family. This made one side of his body golden, with "gold" standing in for divine qualities. Just by witnessing and participating in an act of excessive hospitality, the mongoose had become half divine. He went on to rant that for all the greatness of Yudhiṣṭhira's world-inviting gift festival, there was nothing left over to make the other half of his body golden.

It took a dissatisfied mongoose in search of a moral miracle to point out the futility of a sacrifice where the giver has not given up the last

morsel of all he has, has not taken the infinite responsibility for the other, where there is not enough remainder. This is known when one adopts a third attitude: the non-human gaze turned back at human ethical hubris. The mongoose's voice comes, as it were, from in between the human subjective and the super-objective scientific attitudes!

7. A Depraved Human's Ungratefulness Shamed by a Crane

At the opposite extreme of this avian heroic hospitality, we hear the story of the "beastly" *brahmin* whose ungratefulness was so monstrous that even monsters would not touch his corpse. This high-born human, uneducated and delinquent, lived with hunters and masters in the bloody art of archery. Later in life, at a time of distress after a shipwreck, he befriended a virtuous and wise crane called "Rāja-dharma", who gave him shelter. But one day, the wicked *brahmin* killed the crane while it was asleep and ate his flesh. A demon king who was a loyal admirer of this virtuous crane suspected the roguish *brahmin* and, discovering the skeleton of the crane in his house, executed him for his murderous gluttony. Although the demons were a community of corpse-eating cannibals every demon refused to touch the corpse of this ungrateful ghoul, and even worms would not eat his rotting body. Thus the high-born *brahmin* became untouchably repulsive even for the lowest outcastes, simply because of the vice of ungratefulness.

Gratefulness is acknowledgement of our dependence on others, even on species-others. It is not "rational choice", which is euphemism for calculating cleverness, but gratitude, humility, and knowledge of indebtedness to others that makes a human *human*. Through the story of this ungrateful monster of a man the epic establishes that there is *nothing worse than a human without gratitude*.[29] The grand finale of this drama comes when the gods bring the hospitable crane back to life and grant him a boon. The crane asks that the ungrateful *brahmin* who repaid friendship by murder be given another chance to live a better life. Ungrateful, destructive humans on earth get a second chance thanks to the grace and forgiveness of wronged but wiser species-others.

8. Imaginative Reversals: Post-Humanist Imagination Becomes Post-Linguistic

What could these different animal–bird stories, each with a different moral lesson of their own, be showing us when taken collectively as

a genre? In ancient and medieval India, while moral philosophy was done through analytical and scripture-interpretive argumentation across philosophical schools on specific topics, at a popular but more influential level ethical values were taught through oral and literary narratives, in the form of plays and poems, rewriting of classic epic stories of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. Even the very ancient fables of *Pancatantra*, which were about making and unmaking of friendships – *Mitra-Lābha* or *Suhṛd-Bheda* – about social situations of conflict and rapport, battle and truce, continued to exercise the moral and political imagination as well as form the basic core of the Indian conscience and models of good, bad, and ugly behaviour. Of course, when these stories had birds and beasts side by side with humans as characters, on one level the narrative-ethical semiotics of sub-human speech is different in each story, depending upon whether they speak to each other about humans or speak to a human from a powerful or pitiable position or turn out to be a divine being in disguise – Derrida calls them a "*divinanimal*".[30] About the pedagogical puzzle of the *use of language* (by the human narrator of a story) to credit language-less creatures with a faculty of moral agency and judgment, I have the following hunch.

Until the human moral imagination is retrained to encompass what it is like to have a radically *different kind of body* with equal vulnerability to pain and the same fear of death, reflective human agency – the ability to listen to the outcry (*anukrośa*) in another heart – cannot be developed. Perhaps this ecological inclusivism and pluralism mark off the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Jātaka Tales – the Vedic–Buddhist–Jaina ethical culture – from the broadly anthropocentric Greco-Christian and modern Western ethical culture. But then, how could we know what it is like to be a bird or a mongoose or a bat for that matter? Perhaps lions think before they attack, kill, or run away, but they do not *speak* of their actions, unless we take growling to be speaking. And even if lions could speak, would we humans understand?[31] In spite of this, why and how can we still take lions to be so emblematic of praiseworthy valour that a human hero is extolled in Sanskrit as a lion among men? Must we give (and do we give) such a central place to verbal action – make talking as important as doing? Yes and no.

The storyteller of the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma, or Sūta or Vyāsa, when narrating an "ancient exemplary story" in which birds, beasts, snakes, and fish make moral and political arguments, engage us readers in a shared action of imagination. We enter into the story voluntarily

but on our own anthropomorphic terms by "listening" (hearing with understanding as we understand a fellow human being) to the subhuman talk; but then we let go of our (rational) agency, and the imaginary non-human action and speech take unexpected turns. Somewhere we speaking humans (including the narrator and reader) become objects of *their* gaze – not laboratory-specimens of "scientific" observation but objects of a freely resenting and praising, berating and glorifying, normative scrutiny by non-human creatures. True, a moral action is not done just for the sake of looking good in the eyes of the other, but "imagining how we come across in others' eyes if we do this" is an essential part of human moral imagination. The powerful king is supposed to be especially vigilant not to incur the angry look of the powerless destitute. The "eye of the dispossessed" can burn off even a mighty royalty, the text warns. A child hides the extra cookie she is hoarding from the hungry-looking dog. Perhaps the *Mahābhārata* wants us to re-learn how to feel embarrassed when we are killing a deer for fun or destroying a forest to build a shopping mall in front of silently watching beasts or birds.

Chimps fail the false-belief test but show other signs of having a theory of (other's i.e. human) mind.[32] They are teachable, hence are part of the world of reactive relational attitudes.

Now, if relational agony (not just physical pain) – the agony of realizing how badly we appear to radically different others – is made the sufficient condition of ethical agency, then we begin to imagine that mute creatures could be importantly re-thought as moral evaluators because of their otherness. Our cats and dogs, birds and insects, wolves and bears, elephants and eagles, monkeys and minnows are parts of our active moral world when they are free to resent what we do to them, even if we can never understand what they are "saying" by "doing". The centre of ethical gravity shifts from our deliberation, verbalized articulation, and conceptual discriminations to every body's pain, direct awareness of pain, and feeling of each other's pain. Through the wordy fables of speaking and suffering sub-humans, the *Mahābhārata* attempts at a "critique" and "discipline" (in the Kantian sense) of logos-centric humanity.

The end result is a reversal of priorities between the way to an insight and the stance that the insight inspires. Words trigger our imagination, and then we let go of words. Human language ceases to be important for consideration of justice, fairness, good and bad. The outcry (*anukrośa*) of a caring heart for a vulnerable fellow-creature takes precedence over what we first make them say and think they say.

First speech and then its transcendence, is used to plumb the depths of unspeakable suffering. When obvious wrongs need to be righted and dying hungry children even of "terrorists" in refugee camps or bombed-out villages have to be fed, conversation has to stop. When extreme grief tells her the right thing to do, the "worshipworthy" (Pūjanī) wise bird-mother says: "Only one who does not closely know (others') pain speaks and expostulates in public".[33]

It looks like I am trying here to argue for two points between which there is a productive tension: (1) We move beyond speech by using speech (making them talk) as a ladder to the insight that they are ethical agents who can judge us. (2) By grasping their (strictly speaking, speechless) ethical agency in the sense of them being "reactive", we are pushed to imagine the pain of really radical others.

Pulled into this eddy of self-othering imagination, conjecturing what it is like to have a half-gilded mongoose body and to be disappointed by a sacrifice which failed to transform the other half, or a pigeon offering her own flesh to the captor of his wife, even the teller of the tale begins to *wonder* whether human moral imagination is entirely in agentive control of its own acts of *telling*. Such deference of human speech to wordless nonhuman suffering, such wondering at one's own imagination's limits, is one of the best things we can "do".[34]

Notes

1 MBh Vanaparvan: III, 186.

2 MBH Book III, chapter 186(187 in Gita Press edition) English translation at: www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m03/m03186.htm.

3 "Talk is what Fables are all about . . . Usually the characters do it, but if they won't, he (Phaedrus) will get into the act himself, as chatty, even voluble narrator . . . Aesop's targets are dumb beasts. Dumb insolence is a tough nut to crack down on. Punishment would involve an element of self-accusation . . . Fables exercise power. They are linked to the structures of social power, like all forms of narration. They frame as well as expose authority. They achieve targets by passing themselves off as old stuff." – *Aesop's Human Zoo: Roman Stories About Our Bodies*, translated from Phaedrus's Latin by John Henderson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 7–10. These and other remarks throughout this scintillating translation have inspired some of the ideas of this essay. It is noteworthy that, contrary to general perception, Aesop's fables are not simple moralistic tales. One translator points out the starkness of their worldview: "For the fables are not the pretty purveyors of Victorian morals that we have been led to believe. They are instead savage, coarse, brutal, lacking in all mercy or compassion, and lacking also in any political system other than absolute monarchy". Robert Temple, 'Introduction', in

Aesop, *The Complete Fables*, Olivia & Robert Temple (trans), London: Penguin Books, 1998, p. xvi.

4 The most important human passion, according to Descartes' Passions of the Soul, and the entire moral point of talking animal stories, I shall try to show, springs from this great human passion for wondering how we come across to those mute creatures.

5 This distinction between "reactive" versus "scientific" attitudes was first made in the paper "Freedom and Resentment" by P.F. Strawson in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, London: Methuen, 1974, pp. 1–25. This paper and this distinction exerted an immense amount of influence on the analytic discussion of the problem of free agency versus causal determinism in the last fifty years. Witness the Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility subtitled 'Freedom and Resentment at 50', eds, David Shoemaker and Neal Tognazzini, Oxford: Oxford University Press, in 2014.

6 "*sarvatra nirato jīva itaścāpi sukham mama / cintayāmi mahāprajna tasmād icchāmi jīvitum*" (I derive pleasure even from this that everywhere living beings are engaged in the business of living; because I think, you great wise man!, I wish to live – says the insect to Vyasa), MBh: XIII. 117.17 in the *Mahābhārata*.

7 "*na manusat shersthataram hi kincit*", MBh: XII, 299.20.

8 Hitopadeśa. Prologue: 25.

9 "Other animals, which, on account of their interests having been neglected by the insensibility of the ancient jurists, stand degraded into the class of things. . . . the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated . . . upon the same footing as . . . animals are still . . . The day may come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps, the faculty for discourse? The question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being? . . . The time will come when humanity will extend its mantle over everything which breathes . . ." Jeremy Bentham, 'Of the limits of the Penal Branch of Jurisprudence', section 1 Limits between Private Ethics and the Art of Legislation Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, Editor in Chief: Oskar Piest, 1948, New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1948, Ch. XVII, pp. 310–311.

10 "Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?" . . . Speechless action would no longer be action" and many other similar passages. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 178–92.

11 J.S. Kennedy, *The New Anthropomorphism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

12 Karma theory may look merely like a discovery of a causal connection between good/bad action and consequent pleasure/pain, but both the pleasure and pain as well as good and bad are evaluated from a human

point of view. Being born as a fish or worm is deemed objectively very bad luck, for example. Hence it is admittedly anthropocentric.

13 Chāndogya Upanishad (from Īśādi-daśopaniṣadah, Motilal Banarsidass, 1964) 7.2.1 (page 544)

14 See also: "Here, as the wise ones filter out good from bad speech, as barley is sifted with a sieve, friends recognize the nature of real friendship and an auspicious sign is impressed upon their conversation" – RgVeda X.71.2.

15 This debate culture of Classical Indian philosophy has been preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist pedagogic tradition, which proves that it is perfectly compatible and continuous with the ethics of universal compassion so central to the Mahayana Buddhism practiced by the Tibetan Madhyamika Buddhists. Debate need not lead to or vent out aggressiveness. It could be a practice of offering and inviting criticism from another point of view and thus a way of shedding of dogmatism or blind adherence to any tradition. See Georges Dreyfus, The Sound of Two Hands Clapping. On the effect of this love of debate on Indian intellectual culture, see Johannes Bronkhorst, Philosophy East & West Volume 51, Number 4 October 2001.

16 Talking Animals: Explorations in an Indian Literary Genre, liberalarts.utexas.edu/_files/olivelle/2013a_Talking_Animals.pdf

17 Daniel Dennett, in a lecture delivered at Birkbeck College, London, in 1989. This outrageous idea that if a creature cannot speak human language, it does not have any self-consciousness and therefore can be killed and cooked as food, can be traced back to Kant. The power to say or think "I", according to Kant, raises man infinitely above all other living beings on earth, "irrational animals which we can dispose of as we please". The first two paragraphs of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (book 1 *On Cognitive Powers*), clearly connect ability to (learn to) speak or think linguistically in a self-referring way with the word or concept of "I" with personhood which constitutes membership of the kingdom of ends.

18 See endnote vii.

19 MBh Book XII, ch 139.

20 Frans de Waal: Moral behavior in animals | TED Talk https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals

21 See: Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish edited by Roger T. Ames, Takahiro Nakajima (Editor) University of Hawaii Press, 2015.

22 "Three Ways of Spilling Ink" Ch 12, in *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, UK) 3rd Edition by J. L. Austin (Author), J. O. Urmson (Editor), G. J. Warnock (Editor).

23 MBh Book XIII, Ch 1, verses-35–36.

24 See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & The Sovereign*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 237–47.

25 MBH Book XII: Āpaddharmaparvan Ch 128, selected verses from 10–99.

26 MBH Book XII: Āpaddharmaparvan Ch 144, verses 7–16.

27 Vana Parvan MBh Book III. ch 130–131.

28 MBh XIV, 90.7 and 19.

29 MBh XII, chapters 168–173.

30 *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy) by Jacques Derrida and Marie-Louis Mallet Fordham University Press, 2008.

31 See Philosophical Investigations, Ludwig Wittgenstein, #206 and the following discussion of inter-species communication "Why We Would Not Understand a Talking Lion" by G.W. Levvis – 1992 digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1811...bts.
32 See Review "Does the chimpanzee have a theory of mind? 30 years later", www.eva.mpg.de/.../Call&Tomasello.
33 *yo duhkham nābhijānāti sa jalpati mahājane*.
34 I am very grateful for Vrinda Dalmiya's extensive editorial suggestions and corrections, without which this chapter could not have achieved its current form. Another anonymous referee's criticisms have also helped sharpen the argument of the chapter.

8

TEXTUAL–SEXUAL TRANSITIONS

The Reification of Women in the *Mahābhārata*

Uma Chakravarti

The basic conflict around the struggle for political power that drives the narrative forward in the *Mahābhārata* is set in a moment of political change as society is moving from kin-clan units to kingdoms, changing the social formation. Changes in the basis of production are evident with land increasingly becoming a critical resource over which a fraternal conflict between two segments of a lineage lead to war and the near extinction of the whole lineage.[1] The *kṣatriyas* and the *kṣatriya* ethic therefore dominate the text and retain their narrative centrality despite massive brahmanisation, evident in its elaboration.[2] From my viewpoint, this process of elaboration, while retaining its central core narrative, is useful, as the layering of the text also reflects a range of social practices, including sexual and reproductive practices that are critical to the narrative, as I shall show in the rest of this chapter and in a larger study that is underway.[3] The text shows a decided tendency of placing didactic concerns over the narrative, and yet, for an ethics-aspiring text it nevertheless documents huge variations in sexual practices without being condemnatory. At the same time, the range of practices comes to be overlaid by the narrowing frames wherein the ethical and didactic ultimately come to be defined ideologically to exclude issues of reproduction: that is, what may appear to be contradictions between reproductive practices that ensure the survival of the lineage and the setting into place of a more structured set of rules for sexual governance do not lead to the raising of fundamental ethical questions in the way the killing of kin or lying or killing in violation of *kṣatriya* codes acquires in the text.

Diversity of sexual practices is explained or resolved at an instrumental level by taking recourse to the theory of *āpaddharma* (or the

law of distress) rather than being resolved in the domain of ethics. Let me elaborate: there are four important questions raised in the text by four protagonists; Śvetaketu questions the origin of marriage as part of intellectual inquiry, Yudhiṣṭhira questions the rationale for the state, Arjuna questions the *kṣatriya* duty to fight and Janaka questions worldly life.[4] As the text unravels, the first question gets subsumed, indeed it disappears, and the later three questions are explored in some depth at different levels and at different points in the text.

My question is: why should this be so when it is very evident that issues of reproduction, sexual desire and sexual conflict are at the heart of the narrative and actually move the narrative forward in fundamental ways? Is it that questions of reproduction cannot generate great philosophical or political or moral issues in the minds of the composers (just as paradigms for transition cannot be gendered meaningfully in today's ideological concerns in the meta-narrative frameworks of history)? How do we explain the text's own narrative ambivalence in mentioning such a range of marriage and reproductive practices and then dropping them off from further attention, indeed obscuring some of the issues that leave their mark on the text by creating moments of dramatic intensity but then disappearing as the great questions – of politics, the state, *dharma* and mokṣa – get taken up in whole segments of discourse emanating from the issues raised by the great male protagonists of the text? Why does Bhīṣma expound on the state, even as he lies dying, but not on the abduction of the Kāśi princesses or on the wrong he did to Ambā despite the fact that the narrative does dwell on Ambā's penance and rebirth to seek revenge for the wrong done to her? The text creates its own hierarchy of issues and mutes the possibility of engaging with others,[5] and yet that is what we now need to do – engage with the text to uncover the 'story' of the histories of marriage, sexuality and reproduction. I will, in this chapter, look specifically at the practice of the abduction of women as brides, a practice specially permitted, even celebrated as desirable, to/for the *kṣatriyas*.

The text of the *Mahābhārata* is already familiar with the famous classification of eight types of marriages of the *Dharmasūtras* and the *Dharmaśāstras* (1.7.96). This indicates that there is a normative structure of rules that govern marriage and reproduction along with the injunctions against miscegeny and for endogamous marriages. The archaic layering of the text, which depicts a kind of promiscuity and multiple ways of reproducing at both the mythical and real levels, is accompanied by more socially regulated pattern of marriages. The eight types of marriages arranged hierarchically might, therefore, suggest that an orderly system of the exchange of women is in place and

that it has evolved as a consensual arrangement between men, or at least some groups of men, and that they are committed to upholding its premises. Whether women were a part of this development is not very clear and is an issue that requires further examination. If we look at the definition provided by Lévi-Strauss it does not appear to be important or relevant to the actual system in place:

> The total relationship of exchange, which constitutes marriage, is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men and the woman figures only as one of the objects of exchange, not as one of the partners. This remains true even when the girl's feelings are taken into consideration, as [may be] the case. In acquiescing to the proposed union she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place, she cannot alter its nature.[6]

While this definition and its implications are important and useful in thinking about marriage and reproductive practices, in the *Mahābhārata* one of the eight forms outlined as proper for the *kṣatriya* caste, the *rākṣasa* form, presents us with some significant aspects of unsettled or unresolved questions on the 'orderly' transfer of women between two sets of men. I will now turn to the narratives of abduction of brides in the *Mahābhārata*, with a particular focus on Bhīṣma's abduction of the three Kāśi princesses, Ambā, Ambikā and Ambālikā.

I

The Ādi parvan of the *Mahābhārata*, its first book, serves as a summarised narration of the events leading up to the great war elaborated in the remainder of the text, and it also dwells on the history of the lineage caught up in a fratricidal war among cousins. It plots the ancestry of the main lineage, as well as of many of its other protagonists, and provides us with a mine of information on sexual practices as the main lineage of the Bhāratas itself goes through many moments of near death before desperate measures are taken to keep the reproduction of the lineage, and thus of political power itself, going. This threatened extinction frames the analysis that I offer in this chapter.[7]

The description of kings and their heroic exploits, the rivalries among Gods, demons and men proceed narratively in a manner that does not in any way lead up to the *Mahābhārata* war, or the tensions that fuelled it, until we get to the celibate Bhīṣma's acts of matchmaking for his younger brother, upon whom the entire onus of

reproduction falls, as he is the sole surviving son who can reproduce the Kurus. The anxiety on Bhīṣma's part may be doubled, as he has earlier chosen to subject himself to a self-denying vow, thereby excluding him from kingship and also reproduction so that his stepmother Satyavatī's son's line can, with assuredness, inherit the throne; this is a pre-condition set by Satyavatī's father for Bhīṣma's father's consummation of his desire for her.

With one of her two sons already dead, all hopes are pinned on Vicitravīrya, the second son, so when he reaches manhood – the text makes explicit that he has reached manhood – Bhīṣma decides to act decisively, with his stepmother's approval, to bring in brides (in the plural to make sure that there will be sons). He decides to attend the *svayaṃvara*[8] of the Kāśi princesses, and he pre-empts the *svayaṃvara* – the possible expression of choice by the maidens – and abducts all three princesses. We may note that even though Vicitravīrya has reached manhood, it is not he who attends the svayaṃvara but the elder step-brother, the archetypal brave and invincible *kṣatriya* hero of the *Mahābhārata* who executes the abduction of the princesses. The 'celibate' Bhīṣma places all three princesses in his chariot and drives off.[9]

As Fitzgerald points out this is one of the defining acts of his life and career in the *Mahābhārata*, as it has enormous implications for Bhīṣma and the unfolding of the heroic epic.[10] The passage in the text is thick with description of the event:

> Bhīṣma then came to hear that the king of the Kāśis had three daughters, beautiful as apsarās, who all three were to choose their own husbands. So, with his mother's consent, the great chariot warrior, clad in his armor, set out with a single chariot for the city of Benares. There [he] saw prosperous princes assemble from all directions and he saw the maidens themselves. As the bards proclaimed the names of the princes by the thousands, the lordly Bhīṣma himself put in his claim for the maidens.

With a thunderous voice Bhīṣma, great swordsman, said to the *kṣatriyas* as he lifted the girls on to his chariot,

> the wise declare that girls may be given to men of virtue who have been invited, or they will be decked with ornaments; or a dowry is proffered according to wealth. Others may marry off their daughters with a pair of cows. Others again give them for a negotiated price, while others still force their leave by

> force. Others lie with a girl that is taken off guard. And others find for themselves. Now know that this present marriage is the eighth that the sages recall – the bridegroom choice, which the *kṣatriyas* praise. But the students of the law hold that that bride is the best who is carried off by force.[11] So princes, I am ready to carry these maidens off by force! Now strive with all your might to defeat me or be defeated: here I stand princes, resolved on battle![12]

After thus challenging the *kṣatriyas* and the king of Kāśis, the mighty Kuru lifted all three girls onto his chariot and drove swiftly off, abducting the girls.[13]

Before we move on to the rest of the description in this first telling of the abduction[14] of the princesses of Kāśi, it is important to deduce what is happening in this description. Bhīṣma acts on behalf of his brother, but there is nothing in his declaration to the assembly of *kṣatriyas* that indicates that he is not acting on his own behalf – indeed, the narrative suggests that he is claiming them for himself. Further, he cites eight modes of marriage, slightly different from Manu's enumeration, but he proclaims the legality of the act of abduction by claiming that the best bride is the one who is carried off by force. He does not say the best *kṣatriya* bride is one who is carried off by force, nor that abduction is the best for *kṣatriyas* – indeed, he has stated earlier that the *kṣatriyas* praise the *svayaṃvara* – the bridegroom choice, and observe that law. And yet the bride abducted by force is the best: that would be counter to 'choice', and yet the wise and law-knowing Bhīṣma seems to see no contradiction in what he states. Is the *svayaṃvara* a mere ritual enactment, a way of staging a tournament to act as a prop for ritualised heroic action that actually has nothing to do with choice, or is the *svayaṃvara* a later development that seeks to take precedence over abduction, or is it meant to regulate forceful capture by providing a formal occasion for its enactment?

In this context we may point out that there are other examples of abduction at the time of the *svayaṃvara*, to be discussed in what follows, as also other cases of abduction enacted by all the great heroes in the *Mahābhārata*. Is this part of the consensual culture of the *kṣatriyas*, or is this a disruption of emerging norms of the exchange of women spearheaded by the *kṣatriyas* as part of the imperatives of their lives in which death is imminent and reproduction an urgent necessity for the survival of the lineage? It is significant that Bhīṣma's challenge is proclaimed to include the father of the girls, the king of Kāśi himself. What seems to be more than clear here is that the princesses are not

'choosing' their grooms (even if some of the princesses think they are like Ambā did, as we shall see), individually or collectively. They are being turned into prizes offered in a 'ritual' of heroic action, reduced to mere 'things' who cannot determine the course of their lives; in Lévi-Strauss's formulation 'they cannot alter the nature of the transaction' even if all the men are agreed on the acceptability of abduction, and of the fight – or the ritualized battle – that ensues between the various competitors.

Two scholars have turned their attention to abductions of brides as a mode of acquiring wives among the *kṣatriyas*: Minoru Hara[15] and Cynthia Talbot.[16] I do not have access to the argument in the original in the case of Cynthia Talbot, only Madhav Deshpande's summarising of it, but it appears to me that while both scholars have opened up an important issue on the *kṣatriya* practice of acquiring brides by capture, they stick too closely to the representation of the *kṣatriya* ethic, which abhors taking anything as a gift (including women), as they are the givers of gifts never its takers. Let us take the argument of the former: Hara begins by making a distinction between the *rākṣasa* (abduction) from the *asura* – which entails 'bribery' as he puts it – and *paiśāca*, which involves trickery, suggesting that the latter two are abhorrent to the *kṣatriya* ethic. *Rākṣasa* instead is approved exclusively for the *kṣatriya* caste. He then cites the definition of *rākṣasa* from Manu: 'The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home while she cries and weeps, after having slain and wounded her kinsmen, and broken their houses is called *rākṣasa*'.[17]

As he points out, evident in the definition is the forcible abduction of the girl, the use of violence entailing even the murder of her guardians. He goes on to cite other scholars like L. Sternbach[18] who explain the practice as a 'remnant of a past when invaders forcibly captured a woman, or plundered princesses of their enemy's country as part of their booty', an explanation that Hara rejects. Instead he goes on to examine aspects of *kṣatriya* culture and ethic wherein *kṣatriyas* are defined as those who 'possess the power of arms', their *dharma* as lying beyond the ordinary sense of morality – *nirmaryāda* – and to whom the word *dehi* – 'give' – is unknown. The implied notion of giving in Brāhma, Daiva, Ārṣa and Prājāpatya, where the father gives the girl to her husband, is not therefore kosher. That is, the idea of transfer of guardianship and control, gifted by the father to the husband, implied in *dāna*, is not compatible with the *kṣatriya dharma* and is 'disgraceful' to their pride.[19]

But then Hara poses the question (and answers it): how then do they get what they want? By resorting to their *kṣatriya dharma* and taking

what they want by using physical force. The *kṣatriya dharma* commends that warrior kings should resort to violence for the possession of the desired object whether it be land or women, defeat and kill the possessor of the property or its guardian. He also reminds us that the earth that kings wish to possess is portrayed as a woman which stands under the guardianship of the previous possessor, the rival king; the idea of a negotiated transfer of guardianship is contradictory to this code; therefore a *kṣatriya* must, ideally, forcibly take the desired woman, not have her given to him.[20] Talbot repeats these arguments but also adds that in the later layers of the *Mahābhārata* there is an attempt to over-write the *kṣatriya* ethic and its practice of capturing brides by aligning it with more normative forms of marriage. This is achieved by brahmanising the abduction, that is by making the abduction, along with its show of prowess, end in a marriage ritual in which the bride is given away through a proper' *kanyādāna* by her male guardian.[21]

Both arguments are interesting and useful to my analysis of the central theme of this chapter. I think, however, that they are only a partial explanation of the relationship of abduction of brides to *kṣatriya* marriage practices. My position will become clearer as I proceed with the account of the forcible capturing of the princesses of Kāśi from the public hall where the *svayaṃvara* is to be held, a point that neither Hara nor Talbot seem to address. We need to bear in mind Bhīṣma's own distinction between *svayaṃvara*, which he describes as a *kṣatriya* practice, and the capture by force, which is a distinct but lawful way of acquiring women for marriage for *kṣatriyas*, not to be collapsed within the *svayaṃvara*.

II

Let us return to the continuing description of the abduction in the text when the princes respond to Bhīṣma's challenge:

> Indignantly, all the princes rose in a body, feeling their muscles and grinding their teeth . . . the champions wrathfully and indignantly . . . dashed to their chariots and leapt on them . . . brandishing their arms, they went in pursuit of the Kuru . . . "Stay, lecher, stay,"[22] the King shouted at Bhīṣma . . . driven by his fury . . . enraged by these words, blazing with anger . . . Bhīṣma followed the law of *kṣatriyas*, and fought back; others became spectators now at the encounter of Śālva and Bhīṣma. Like two roaring powerful bulls before a cow in heat they turned on each other with all their strength and might.[23]

This is a striking passage that goes beyond a mere rhetorical description of *kṣatriya* valour; it is soaked with sexual tension between the two warring protagonists Bhīṣma and Śālva seeking to gain control of the object of their desire, as the charge of lechery makes clear. What is notable is the casual manner in which Śālva is introduced; there is nothing in this account to link Śālva to the princesses, Ambā in particular. To defuse the metaphorical description of sexual tension between Bhīṣma and Śālva, likened to bull elephants seeking to gain sole control over a cow elephant 'in heat', we get a sanitised account thereafter of the 'proper behaviour' of Bhīṣma as he conducts the daughters of the king of Kāśi to Hāstināpura, treating them like 'daughters-law, or younger sisters, or daughters'! Yet, it is only when all the three abducted princesses have reached Hastināpur and are being handed over in marriage to Vicitravīrya,[24] and wedding preparations are on, that Ambā, the eldest of the three princesses, reveals her own feelings in the matter. She says, 'in my heart I had chosen, Śālva, the King of Saubha to be my husband and he had chosen me; and it was also my father's wish. I was to have elected him at the bridegroom choice'. These words are spoken at an assembly of brahmanas, making it a public declaration. The passage then tells us that Bhīṣma therefore decided to give her 'leave to depart'. We hear nothing more of Ambā or what happened to her in this account, as the text suddenly glides on to the marriage of the two younger princesses and the pleasures they experience with Vicitravīrya for many years (without success at reproducing the lineage though) till he dies, when the narrative moves on to a second crisis for the Kuru lineage: the actual and much-feared end of the Kuru lineage.

What is striking in the summarised account – which is focused on the history of marriage and reproduction of the Kurus – is that Ambā and Śālva are cardboard figures whose anger and humiliation at the disruption of their plans to marry, to be made public at the *svayaṃvara*, awaits narration till the recounting of that experience in Book Five. There we get a description of what actually happened to Ambā and how she swore to revenge herself against Bhīṣma for the wrong he did to her. Chronologically the abduction of Ambā by Bhīṣma provides the first moment of conflict in Kuru marriages and precedes the rivalry between the Dhārtarāṣtras, the children of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and the Pāṇḍavas, which leads to the war. It is an act that will lead ultimately to Bhīṣma's death, to Ambā's penance, rebirth and change of sex to be the instrument of his death. So why is the first account so brief, and why does it gloss over later happenings? Further, what are the elements that we do find included in the narrative that point to the significance of the abduction of the three princesses, Ambā in particular?

It is clear that the *svayaṃvara* is meant to be the occasion when Ambā will choose Śālva, which is to be a mutually consensual expression of desire and its fulfilment: fortunately it also has the approval of the father of the bride. But Bhīṣma has other plans; he forcefully captures all three girls and, even if he does not know about her love for Śālva, in effect, he has shown contempt for the notion of choice in the *svayaṃvara*. In particular, he has thwarted the possible assertion of sexual agency, formally embedded in the idea of marriage by choice. He has simply asserted brute power in the capture of the princesses from the hall where the choice of the princesses is to be made public and taken the girls away from under the nose of the father and other contenders for their hands; he has captured by force and 'manly virility' the reproductive potential of the blue-blooded Kāśi princesses. This is an open challenge to the possible assertion of choice in which Vicitravīrya would not be anywhere – he is not even around – so that the dissolute Kuru king could have many wombs to produce sons from. The aggression of the moment is fully captured even in this short version of the abduction and is clearly evident in the attack of and the defence of the abduction by Bhīṣma. We know from the account later on in the passage why Śālva should be infuriated, as he is a contender for Ambā, and why the moment is so sexually charged. There is more than *kṣatriya* ethic and their abhorrence for getting something as a gift, even a woman in marriage, as '*dāna*', working itself out in this passage.

III

In Book Five of the *Mahābhārata* the narrative of Ambā suddenly reappears. The occasion is Bhīṣma's explanation of why he will not fight Śikhaṇḍin, who is actually a woman, Ambā reborn to venge herself on Bhīṣma, and it goes against his manly warrior ethic to fight a woman – they are obviously meant for abduction not for combat, merely a prize for capture by virile *kṣatriya* heroes. He proceeds to recount the main happenings preceding and following the abduction. But when Ambā declares that it would be improper to force her to dwell in the house of the Kurus since she loved Śālva, and that he would be waiting for her, Bhīṣma decides to send her back. Unfortunately King Śālva refuses to accept her as his wife, regarding her as belonging by right to the abductor (he tells Ambā, addressing her as a fair-hipped woman, that she is now Bhīṣma's chattel).[25] He obviously fears the wrath of Bhīṣma, which he has personally experienced according to the earlier telling in

Book One, escaping narrowly with his life after his charioteer is felled in the battle. But Ambā continues to plead with Śālva, saying,

> I was not happily abducted by Bhīṣma . . . he abducted me by force, in tears after putting the kings to flight. Love me who loves you, an innocent girl . . . I have heard that Bhīṣma's undertaking was intended for his brother . . . to whom he has given my sisters, Ambikā and Ambālika. I swear that I speak the truth. Love me, a girl come to you on her own, not as another man's woman, hoping for your grace.
>
> (*Mahābhārata* 5.60.172)

As Bhīṣma's recounting proceeds he seems happy to show passing sympathy for Ambā's hapless situation and even happier to condemn Śālva's 'cruel' rejection of the Kāśi king's daughter, whom he says Śālva cast off like a snake does its skin; the narrative goes on to build a picture of her pitiable condition, angry, humiliated and tearful.

Ambā cannot go back to her father and her own people; her father, she bemoans, has dangled her like a harlot for some bride price, and we are not sure what this means unless the capture of the bride is regarded as a form of bride price; she proceeds to curse her father, herself, King Śālva, Bhīṣma and the Vidhāta, the placer, all of whom carry the blame for her plight, but she resolves to seek revenge from Bhīṣma, who was the 'beginning' of her misfortunes. So she proceeds to prepare herself through austerities for battle. She goes to hermitages, meets many ascetics and is chanced upon by her maternal grandfather who shares her outraged grief. But none of these wise men can come up with a resolution of what is to happen to her as a woman who is cast out from the social world of the life of a princess. Finally the grandfather tells her to appeal to that great avenger against the wrongs of the *kṣatriyas*, Rāma Jāmadagnya, who has wiped out the *kṣatriyas* twenty-two times from the face of the earth.

Now here we come upon a point in the text where the narrative could have melded the anger of the brāhmaṇas against the violence used by the *kṣatriyas* to force their will on everyone including the brāhmaṇas when it suits them, and the anger of a woman, a wronged *kṣatriya* princess, carried away like a 'piece of chattel' – these are Śālva's words – to pursue a great ethical battle between right and wrong, between the righteous and the demoniac, between Ambā and her abductor Bhīṣma for destroying her life and turning her into a thing. But the text does not do this: Jāmadagnya hints at why this

cannot happen within the framework of the choices he lives by and the text upholds.

When Ambā requests him to kill Bhīṣma, initially he responds by saying, 'woman of the Kāśis, I do not willingly take up weapons other than in the cause of scholars of the Brahman'.[26] Then he proceeds to offer to mediate on her behalf, repeating his dictum 'I will not take up arms in any way except at the behest of the brāhmaṇas. That is my covenant'.[27] Rejecting a mere apology, Ambā persists with her desire for a more effective redressal of her grievance until another brāhmaṇa seeks to appeal to Jāmadagnya on her behalf. Finally a posse of brāhmaṇas accompanies Rāma Jāmadagnya and Ambā to meet Bhīṣma, but Bhīṣma is unrelenting and makes the humiliation of Ambā worse, as he abdicates responsibility for any harm done to Ambā. Rāma asks Bhīṣma what prompted him to wrong her doubly first by abducting her, even as she is the daughter of the king of Kāśi, against her will, and then in letting her go thus causing her to fall in merit: for who could approach her once he had touched her (the physicality of the act of abduction is evident). The rejection by Śālva follows this 'impurity' and hangs her in a limbo as neither wife nor daughter, so he orders that Bhīṣma take her back. But Bhīṣma continues to refuse, saying that he has relinquished her because 'What man who knows the perilous flaws of women will ever allow a woman in love with another man to lodge in his house like a snake? (*Mahābhārata* 5.60.178.20).

It is clear that Bhīṣma is unwilling to take her back, even for Vicitravīrya, for whom he abducted her in the first place. 'There is no way I can give her now to my brother', Bhīṣma tells Rāma, since she has shown herself to be an unwilling partner for marriage to him; she cannot be trusted to serve the goals of reproducing heirs for the Kuru lineage; her claim to sexual autonomy and choice have made her unfit to be incorporated into the house of her very abductors.

This case of abduction, otherwise regarded as a perfectly proper act for the *kṣatriyas*, goes horribly wrong. It goes wrong because Ambā thinks that the *svayaṃvara* is actually an occasion where a bride can express choice,[28] not be a sham tournament to display *kṣatriya* power. Further, there is a subtext here to the main text describing the abduction and its consequences: abductions are not acceptable to some women and perhaps also to some men, who may be rooting for a more orderly exchange of women, of which we see many examples among *kṣatriya* families, cementing political alliances and building networks of various kinds, which come in handy when battles have to be fought and empires built. Thus, instead of a *kṣatriya-brāhmaṇa* alliance that could have been cemented to redress Ambā's grievances by

the patriarchs of her day, the entire episode, as recounted by Bhīṣma, turns the occasion into a moment when Bhīṣma's invincibility is proved against Jāmadagnya, who does finally engage in battle but merely to provide a heroic prop for Bhīṣma's great valour. At the end of the great battle, described at great length, Jāmadagnya declares his failure to be able to help Ambā: He says,

> Radiant woman, in full view of these people I have exhibited great manly prowess to the utmost of my power. But I am not able to surpass in battle that foremost of armsmen, Bhīṣma, this is the limit of my power . . . Go now woman wherever you wish . . . throw yourself at Bhīṣma's mercy, there is no other course for you to take.
>
> (*Mahābhārata* Vol. 5, p. 518)

Tossed back to seek the charity of Bhīṣma, the very man who wronged her by that great avenger of *kṣatriyas* and the great upholder of *dharma*, Ambā responds,

> On no condition whatever shall I go back to Bhīṣma again. Rather I shall where I can myself bring Bhīṣma down in battle . . . Thus the maiden spoke, her eyes rolling in anger . . . brooding upon my death.
>
> (*Mahābhārata* Vol. 5, p. 518)

Bhīṣma goes off to be congratulated by the mother, and the rest of the patriarchs, who have heard Ambā's story and even pinpointed Bhīṣma as the cause of her plight, melt away, leaving Ambā to work out her own destiny, to make other choices that are still open to her. But that is another story.

VI

The Ambā–Bhīṣma encounter, as I have already stated, has a central place in the narrative structure of the *Mahābhārata*, and yet it remains a moral crisis that is not a moral crisis within the gendered and ideologically slanted framing of what can be allowed to surface as a moral/social crisis in the great text.[29] The figure of the abducted princess, Ambā, represents the problem of male violence over women. It is an assault on what has emerged as a patriarchal social consensus, even among the *kṣatriyas*, about how women are to be given away/acquired for reproduction, as can be seen in the parallel form of marriage

considered particularly suitable for the *kṣatriyas*, the *svayaṃvara*. The notional self-choice is violently disrupted when brides are abducted from the *svayaṃvara* hall itself where princes have assembled to present themselves as suitors; it is violently disrupted when Bhīṣma acts on behalf of his dissolute and weak brother and presses his claim to acquire women to reproduce the lineage, which he believes is dying.

Bhīṣma's abduction is a violent disruption of Ambā's actual moment of choice being forcibly thwarted, a moment when she was expected to choose her husband but could not. The later austerities that she performs are an attempt to return autonomy to a woman; it is about her right to choose a partner, to feel desire and have it consummated, a right to negotiate her sexuality. The austerities are about her anger and her humiliation, about her being cast away as a piece of discarded goods by the patriarchal social consensus in which one man abducts her, another man is too weak and dissolute to deal with the mess his brother creates and a third will not take her because he fears reprisal from the abductor, who she 'legally' belongs to, after the abduction.

Thus one man is legally entitled to dispose of her sexuality – to pass it on to his nominee – another is the recipient of her sexuality and reproductive power but will not use it, even though he himself is debauched, once she has declared her love for another and a third is the object of her love but will not accept it because he is fearful of its social consequences. All thus discard her as unsuitable in some way because she has the temerity to believe that she can choose.[30]

The austerities and ambivalent shifting sexuality leading to her transgendered history is a product of her attempt to reclaim some degree of autonomy in the battle over her reified body. The celibate/impotent Bhīṣma then is finally felled through the agency still left to her; Ambā's burning sense of revenge fixed upon Bhīṣma continues to seek a suitable redressal of her grievance through a bodily experienced and psychologically destabilising end for him. In the end, he is believed by many witnesses to the battle to have been felled by a transvestite, even though it is actually Arjuna who shoots him. He must lie on a bed of arrows and feel pain till he dies, mirroring the bodily pain and psychological destabilisation that she was forced to go through before she could bring about her abductor's end. This we can read from the subtexts.

In sum, the Ambā episode as it develops through her own burning anger and the subsequent austerities that she performs to seek a suitable retaliation against Bhīṣma represents her critique – and ours – of the forcible takeover of her subjectivity. Her retaliatory actions return agency to her, but this cannot give her back her agency to choose the

circumstances of her life, especially her sexual autonomy. The narrative of the *Mahābhārata* works to discipline female choice; all three princesses abducted by Bhīṣma are reproductive potential that is being violently obtained through the abduction before choice can be asserted.[31] Reified as wombs, all three have a tragic history, a history of thwarted sexual autonomy, as the concurrent account of Ambikā and Ambālikā tells us;[32] virtually raped as part of impregnation, both produce faulty sons, neither of them fit to rule, and through these marred figures, who at different times rule Hastināpur, generate the great war. Thus the episode of the abduction of the three Kāśi princesses moves the narrative centrally to create the crisis of power, the difficulties of putting in place settled norms for the orderly transfer of power to the eldest son, to regency and conflict over entitlement to the kingdom. It is not only conflict over control of land, the gambling match and the disrobing of Draupadī that lead to the tragic end in the war; the distortions of an enforced sexual control over women are a fundamental factor in the *Mahābhārata* narrative of war.

VII

In an earlier essay, I have dwelt on an account in the Aggañña Sūtta[33] (of the Dīgha Nikāya, an early Buddhist text) of 'unregulated' consummation of sexual desire of early human society which thereafter moved on to a more regulated cohabitational structure, as outlined by Śvetaketu, and then to the transitional society delineated in the *Mahābhārata*. Two points may be reiterated: there is considerable tension in the forging of *kṣatriya* marriages even as both *svayaṃvara* and *rākṣasa*/abduction are providing brides for various lineages and are described as lawful – as also *gandharva*, specifically for *kṣatriyas*, along with other modes of acquiring women that I have not dwelt upon here in the interests of space. Yet there is enormous conflict generated by *rākṣasa* marriages, as the two families, that of the abductor and that of the princess being abducted, as well as other kings, join the battle over the girl. It is evident that the woman is regarded as a prize, because of her political status and royal blood, but also because she represents the means to keep the lineage going through her reproductive potential.

It is significant in this context that even the *svayaṃvara*, where the bride is won through a test of skill, such as Draupadī's, leads to violent resistance because the assembled *kṣatriyas* believe that a brāhmaṇa – Arjuna in disguise – is taking her away from what they see themselves as a property of 'their' class. Neither *svayaṃvara* nor abduction as

forms of marriage are uncontested, nor do they make for a smooth transition of women from their natal to their conjugal households or for an orderly exchange of women between two groups of men, so desirable in patriarchal 'claste'-based[34] society. The *Mahābhārata* reflects the ambivalences of its time, in the moment of its production as a normative text which is not so normative after all.

Notes

1 Romila Thapar, *The Historian and the Epic*, Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1979, 60–61, pp. 199–201.
2 James L. Fitzgerald, 'India's Fifth Veda: The Mahābhārata presentation of Itself', in *Essays on the Mahābhārata,* Arvind Sharma (ed), Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1991, p. 154.
3 It is significant in this context that the main *Mahābhārata* has been regarded as the Pāṇḍava part of the narrative including the difficulties of the Bhārata lineage in extending itself: Bhīṣma's vow of celibacy, Vicitravīrya's failure to engender sons and then Pāṇḍu's forced infertility (James Fizgerald, Negotiating the Shape of "Scripture" in Patrick Olivelle, *Between the Empires: Society in India 300 BCE to 400CE*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 271; thus the problem of reproduction is a central element in the main *Mahābhārata*.
4 G.C. Pande, 'The Socio-Cultural Milieu of the Mahābhārata: An Age of Change,' in *The Mahābhārata Revisited*, R.N. Dandekar (ed), New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990, pp. 121–136, p. 131.
5 For a discussion of 'muting' in social science paradigms which could explain textual practices, see Edwin Ardener, 'Belief and the Problem of Women' and 'The Problem Revisited', in *The Voice of Prophecy*, Malcolm Chapell (ed), Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 72–85 and 127–133.
6 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Boston: The Beacon Press, 1969, p. 115.
7 My current engagement with a larger work dwells on analysing the *Mahābhārata* from a different standpoint than the lines of enquiry established in the huge explosion of *Mahābhārata* studies, some of which is very rich, nuanced and pioneering in many ways. I hold the view that a crisis of reproduction is at the heart of the political crisis, and the work reflects the tensions of matching normative and orderly reproduction of the lineage with the demands of stable modes of the transfer of power and material resources: questions of reproduction of material and political resources and of the lineage are at the heart of the text. I will explore these issues in depth in a forthcoming work tentatively titled *The Dying Lineage: Sexuality, Reproduction and the Crisis of Political Power in the Mahābhārata*.
8 *Svayaṃvara* is often translated as 'bridegroom choice', but as this chapter suggests in the discussion that follows, the choice element is surrounded by many elements that negate actual choice residing in the princess whose *svayaṃvara* is being held.

9 Summarised from the *Mahābhārata* 1.7.96–98, translated by J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 1, 1973, pp. 228–230.
10 James Fitzgerald, 'Bhīṣma Beyond Freud: Bhīṣma in the Mahābhārata', in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata*, Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black (eds), Oxford: Routledge, 2007, pp. 189–207, p. 204, n.7.
11 J.J. Meyer interprets this to mean not that it is the best form of marriage but that marriage by capture is the oldest form of marriage in *Sexual Life in Ancient India: A Study of the Comparative History of Indian Culture*, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1953, p. 70, n. 3.
12 J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973, p. 228.
13 J.A.B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 228.
14 The narrative of the abduction is much elaborated in later books of the text and will be discussed in what follows.
15 Hara Minoru, 'A Note on the Rakṣasa Form of Marriage,' *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 94:3, 1974, pp. 296–306.
16 Talbot Cynthia, M.A. thesis, University of Michigan, 1980, cited in Madhav Deshpande, 'The Kshatriya Core of the Bhagavad-Gita,' in *Modern Evaluations of the Mahabharata: Professor R.K Sharma Felicitation Volume*, S.P. Narang (ed), New Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995, pp. 182–193, p. 182.
17 Cited in Hara, op. cit., p. 296.
18 L. Sternbach, *Judicial Studies in Ancient Indian Law, Part I*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1965, pp. 348ff.
19 Haru, op. cit., p. 302.
20 Haru, op. cit., pp. 303–04.
21 Talbot in Deshpande, op. cit., pp. 182–3.
22 Meyer glosses this as 'yearning for the woman, the prince shouted "Stop! Stop" to Bhīṣma, goaded by rage', op. cit., p. 71.
23 van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, p. 229.
24 An important question from the standpoint of this chapter is: why could Bhīṣma not arrange marriages, even three of them to ensure reproduction, with princesses of different kingdoms – as he did for Pandu? His taking recourse to abduction in which he surrogates for Vicitravīrya suggests that either the Kurus are not yet high on the political horizon or that the dynasty carries some stigma – perhaps the fisherwoman status of the mother of the king; or was Vicitravīrya rumoured to be impotent?
25 *The Mahābhārata*, van Buitenen, vol. 5, p. 499.
26 van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, op. cit. vol. 5, p. 504.
27 van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, op. cit. vol. 5, p. 504.
28 James Fitzgerald translates the word/term *svayaṃvara* as 'choosing for herself' of a husband from among suitors gathered for inspection ('Mahabharata as Religious Rhetoric,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1983, 51: 4 pp. 611–630, p. 623, n.6) only from among *kṣatriyas*, certainly not from among the lower orders, as is clear from Draupadī's assertion of negative choice when she refuses to have Karṇa try his hand at the bow at her *svayaṃvara*.
29

30 Robert Goldman, 'Transexualism, Gender and Anxiety in Traditional India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113.3, 1993, pp. 374–401, p. 392. I would take Goldman's analysis further. He is right in pointing out that having become the used property of another man through the abduction, Ambā's suitability for marriage is destroyed, and therefore śālva too, in the patriarchal honour, rejects her, since from his standpoint she is now sexually used by the fact of her abduction. Thus all discard her. But in my view all of these actors reject her because she has expressed her own choice in the matter of her own desires, her preferred sexual partner. Perhaps this is why even Rāma Jāmadagnya does not really punish Bhīṣma for his abduction of Ambā and fights a half-hearted battle with Bhīṣma, whereas he destroys *kṣatriyas* repeatedly for the killing of his father by one of them.
31 Meyer treats the abduction of Ambā as her rape by Bhīṣma, op. cit. p. 73.
32 *The Mahābhārata,* 1.7.96–101
33 Uma Chakravarti, 'Of Meta Narratives and Master Paradigms: Gendering a Transitional Moment.' Occasional Paper CWDS, 2009.
34 'Claste' is a term that I have used to refer to the fusion of class and caste in the Indian context.

9

EKALAVYA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF LEARNING

Sundar Sarukkai

The story of Ekalavya has been dominantly interpreted along the theme of the hierarchical nature of knowledge as power. Most discussions of this story focus on the 'low' caste identity of Ekalavya in opposition to the *Brahmanical* identity of Droṇa.[1] But this story allows different levels of reading and, through this, different ethical themes inherent in the story can be exemplified. Why does Droṇa ask for Ekalavya's thumb? Does Ekalavya give his thumb – without a second's thought – because Droṇa is a *brahmin* or because he is his 'teacher'? Does Droṇa ask for the thumb as a caste-person or as a teacher? Both Droṇa and Ekalavya are acting on some idea of duty: that of a student to his teacher. However, Droṇa knows that he cannot morally be the teacher of Ekalavya, even if Ekalavya thinks otherwise. What does this dilemma tell us about being a teacher and a student? Droṇa cannot – in strictly ethical terms – ask for *guru dakṣiṇā*, but he nevertheless simulates a sense of duty as a teacher, although an absent one. Ekalavya not only acts based on his sense of duty but must also be fully aware of the consequence of following this duty. However, the crucial moment here is the absolute lack of a reflective moment when Ekalavya cuts his thumb. To understand this, we have to understand how to evaluate spontaneous ethical action. How do we act spontaneously and ethically through the body?

While the story of Ekalavya has been analyzed through structural elements, such as promise, as well as through post-colonial perspectives,[2] interesting insights into the ethics of this story have often been reduced to caste. In this chapter, I want to focus on two ethical aspects that are relevant to the ethics of this story: one, spontaneous action and its relationship to reflective ethics and, two, the ethics of presence and absence. I will argue that the theme of presence/absence is present in various modes in the story of Ekalavya, including in the absence of Droṇa as a 'real' teacher and then analyze the consequence of this absence for an

ethical understanding of this episode. In the last part, I will argue that this story is an allegory for the *Mahābhārata* itself. Why is the story of Ekalavya part of the *Mahābhārata*? What is its fundamental 'purpose' in appearing in the form it does? It is important to enquire into the possible origins primarily because it can give us an insight into the motivations for future action. While the denial of knowledge (and thus, power) to a subaltern is one theme, it is not an obvious conclusion given the structure of the story and those that follow it.[3]

The story of Ekalavya is simple enough. Arjuna is the favourite disciple of Droṇa. One day, he, along with the Pāṇḍavas, discovers the great skill of Ekalavya when he sees Ekalavya sending seven arrows into the mouth of a barking dog. Ekalavya, on being asked by the Pāṇḍavas, tells them that he is the disciple of Droṇa. Arjuna then asks Droṇa about this mysterious student of his who seems a worthy challenger to him. He reminds Droṇa of the assurance that Arjuna would be his best student. Droṇa goes to meet Ekalavya and asks him for the payment for being his teacher. He asks for Ekalavya's thumb as his *dakṣiṇā*, and Ekalavya spontaneously cuts off his thumb and gives it to Droṇa.

This episode has been dominantly interpreted as an act of caste and class hegemony. Droṇa is a *brahmin* and is a teacher for the princes of both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. Ekalavya is the son of a tribal king – a *niṣāda* – and hence is seen to be too lowly to belong to the class of the princes as well as their caste. Droṇa destroys Ekalavya's skill by making Ekalavya sacrifice his thumb and in so doing exemplifies the power of the higher caste/class over the subaltern. Equally importantly, this story has been interpreted to illustrate how the upper caste/class will not allow the suppressed castes to possess knowledge which is seen to belong only to the upper castes. This last interpretation has been quite powerful in many narratives of modern India.

First of all, it may be useful to get more details of Droṇa's story in the *Mahābhārata*. He was the son of the sage Bharadvāja. He was a great proponent of archery, and he also acquires all the weapons of Paraśurāma. He then goes to his childhood friend, King Drupada, and is insulted by the King, who mocks Droṇa's belief that he considered himself a friend of the ding. Droṇa decides to make Drupada pay for this insult. He becomes the teacher for the Kurus, the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu. Among all these princes, Arjuna becomes his favourite since he was not only skilled but was also focussed and willing to blindly obey his teacher.

After establishing the tensions between the two princely families through episodes in which Droṇa's role is central, we come to

chapter 138, where Droṇa asks for his *guru dakṣiṇā*, the payment due to a teacher. Later, Droṇa sends the princes to capture Drupada, the king who had insulted him earlier. In this battle, the Kauravas cannot succeed in capturing the King. It is Arjuna who singlehandedly captures Drupada and brings him to Droṇa. Droṇa takes half the kingdom of Drupada and through this becomes equal to Drupada. Drupada leaves in apparent peace, but his desire had become focussed on getting a son who would destroy Droṇa.

While the theme of revenge is present at many levels in this story, we need to look at subtler ways of reading this narrative. I want to focus first on the question of motivation of each of the agents and through this analysis argue that revenge and promises are not really the dominant themes in this story.

Motivation and Intentionality

Action theories are dominantly focused on intentionality. Unless an agent intends to act in a particular manner, the action does not become a genuine action. Doing something without intending it is not really an autonomous action. Often, we analyze actions by primarily reducing them to intentions; the question we often ask is: why did the person do what she did? Almost all the discussions around the Droṇa/Ekalavya episode also repeat this question. Why did all the actors in this story act the way they did? What were their motivations?

Let me begin with Droṇa's motivation. The story clarifies the intention right in the beginning through the story of Droṇa and Drupada. But this is merely to anticipate the question of proximate intention – what is the most proximate cause of Droṇa's actions? That is, what makes Droṇa ask for Ekalavya's thumb? The accepted reading is that Droṇa's motivation is to destroy the skills of Ekalavya in order to maintain the superiority of Arjuna as an archer. Why should he want to maintain Arjuna's supremacy? Primarily because he has 'promised' Arjuna that he would be his best student; the motivation for this 'promise' was because he wants Arjuna to live up to his promise of defeating Drupada.

So there are nested motivations of Droṇa: keeping his 'promise' to Arjuna and the larger motivation of taking revenge on Drupada. But given the larger motivation, his promise to Arjuna is in itself not a motivation but only an action that goes towards the success of the original intent. Given this structure, is Droṇa's demand of Ekalavya a means towards achieving his intentions? In other words, is the demand of the thumb by Droṇa a rational consequence of the earlier actions?

Firstly, Arjuna could not have faulted Droṇa, since Droṇa was not really a teacher of Ekalavya. Thus, Droṇa could not be held responsible for Ekalavya's skills. Nobody, in a sense including Ekalavya, could have 'blamed' Droṇa for making Ekalavya a better student than Arjuna. So Droṇa's action of demanding the thumb cannot be in order to satisfy Arjuna. There was no ethical fault of partiality to Arjuna in Droṇa.

Importantly, we need to remember another often overlooked episode – Droṇa secretly tries to make his son Aśvatthāmā a better student than Arjuna! In one instance Droṇa is shown as wanting his son Aśvatthāmā to be better than all his other students, including Arjuna. He asks all the princes to fill water in a jug and bring it back to him. He gives a narrow-necked jug to all of them but secretly gives a broad-necked jug to his son so that his son could come back faster. That way, Droṇa thought he could teach his son superior skills during the extra time which he would have got with him. But Arjuna comes to know of it and comes back at the same time as Aśvatthāmā and thus does not let Droṇa get away with his subterfuge. This episode is crucial, since it clearly points out that Droṇa's promise to Arjuna did not really extend to the case of his son. Through this, the text is clearly giving a clue to the real status of Droṇa's promise to make Arjuna his best student.

In all these episodes, Droṇa is acting only on one principle: his *dharma* in the appropriate context. In the case of Aśvatthāmā, he is acting on his *dharma* as a father. In the case of Ekalavya, he is acting on the *dharma* as a teacher. So to understand his actions towards Ekalavya, we need to enquire into the very concept of a teacher and his/her relationship to a student.

Arjuna *has* to complain to Droṇa after his encounter with Ekalavya. That is his *dharma*. He takes Ekalavya's utterance that Droṇa was his teacher as true. He will have to ask Droṇa and cannot presume to understand and forgive his teacher, for it will be against his *dharma* as a student to act wiser than his teacher. So his action is not motivated by jealousy but about the redemption of the veracity of his teacher's 'promise'. So Arjuna is acting out his duty as a student – not holding his teacher to what he had said earlier but merely reminding the teacher of the same. Arjuna, as a student, has this duty, but the duty does not include anything more than reminding his teacher. Droṇa could have given one very easy answer: Ekalavya was not his student and thus there was no question of violating any earlier intention. Droṇa, well versed in *dharma*, could have come up with many reasons why Ekalavya was not really his student. But he doesn't – why? Reducing his silence to a psychological motivation misses the ethical imperative that

makes Droṇa act the way he did. In accepting Ekalavya as his student, Droṇa is accepting a problematic position: any person can claim to be a student of another just by keeping their photo and worshipping it or using their books and so forth. And when they perform any action based on their assumption of being a student of a particular person, is that teacher responsible for those actions?

There are other problems in Droṇa' response to Arjuna. What is it in his initial claim that he has to live up to? The claim that Droṇa has the capacity to make Arjuna the best warrior seems to suggest that the student can only be as good as the teacher wants him to be. It removes the agency of the subject – it reduces the capacity of the student to excel on his own merit. The only way this is possible is if teaching is only of certain skills and tricks and the teacher is seen as a repository of such skills and tricks. However, paradoxically, the reason Arjuna is his best student is not only because of Droṇa but also due to Arjuna's quality of singlemindedness and focus, a point which Droṇa himself recognizes in an earlier episode. In what follows, I will try and unpack these ambiguities in order to illustrate one fundamental lesson from these episodes.

Promises and Actions

What then is this episode all about? Droṇa's story in the *Mahābhārata* seems to be primarily one of revenge. The structures of revenge are clearly spelled out, and the motivation for his actions through the story is one of revenge against Drupada; even at the end when Droṇa gets his kingdom it is Drupada who plans his revenge against Droṇa. Why then in this story of revenge is it important to have this episode of Ekalavya, especially as he only makes sporadic appearances after? Structurally, what does this story contribute to the larger discursive world of the *Mahābhārata*?

Brodbeck (2006) suggests that the Ekalavya story is structurally about promises.[4] By analysing the structural elements of the whole text, he points out various repetitive elements occurring through the text, and in particular in the Ādi parvan 121–128. He first points out that there is an 'intricate network of promises governing the action' related to the Ekalavya episode (ibid., p. 4). There are four promises and these promises are resolved through four actions; he suggests that these four promises form a 'concentric ring'. The four promises are related to four agents: Drupada, Arjuna, Droṇa and Ekalavya. Drupada promises the sharing of his kingdom with Droṇa, Arjuna promises Droṇa to help him defeat Drupada, Droṇa promises Arjuna that

he will be the best archer and Ekalavya 'promises to give Droṇa whatever he wants' (ibid., p. 4). Each of these promises, Brodbeck suggests, is fulfilled through the following actions: Drupada giving Droṇa the kingdom after his defeat, Arjuna fighting the war against Drupada and defeating him, Droṇa making sure that Arjuna is the best archer by asking for Ekalavya's thumb and Ekalavya giving Droṇa his thumb.

However, this reading is problematical since it reads too much into the idea of 'promise'. First of all, are all these promises – as described by Brodbeck – the same 'kind' of promise? Are they promises at all? For example, does Ekalavya *promise* to give Droṇa whatever he asks for? Or does he *state* that he will give whatever he is asked for? A promise is a particular kind of declaration, a particular kind of speech act. A promise is related to a postponed action; a promise is actually a promise of things to come, of action that will occur in the future. Spontaneous action is not a result of a promise which is then being kept. Since a promise by its very nature is not the act, it always captures the gap between stated intention and the eventual 'doing' of it. So in the case of Ekalavya, it is not promise that is the category which best describes his action.

Drupada's promise to Droṇa seems like a promise since he states his intention of sharing his kingdom when they are young friends. It is a genuine promise since it was only the statement of an intention and not an action. Similarly, Arjuna's promise to Droṇa to defeat Drupada is also a promise since there is this gap between intention and action. However, the idea of promise in Droṇa's case is ambiguous since Droṇa cannot promise that 'Arjuna will be the best archer'. Here again is a mistaken reading of the notion of promise. Droṇa cannot promise that Arjuna will be the best archer because that is something which is not only in the hands of Droṇa. He can only promise him that he can teach him to be the best archer. Perhaps this is what Brodbeck is meaning when he says that Droṇa promises Arjuna will be the best archer, but the gap between these two meanings is important since it is really about the relationship between promise and individual action. I cannot promise on behalf of somebody else's *action* – I can make sure that somebody will do some work, but that is not a promise in the performative sense of the word. Droṇa cannot promise how Arjuna will turn out to be, but he can only promise what he (Droṇa) can do and not do to make Arjuna the best warrior. The promise of Droṇa can only refer to his own actions and not to what Arjuna can become. Finally, Brodbeck suggests that Droṇa takes Ekalavya's thumb only in order to live up to his promise that Arjuna will be the best archer. To read this as Droṇa's promise is to read more than is present in the text

or needed: it is possible that Droṇa demands the thumb in order to satisfy his desire or his role as a teacher or merely as an attempt to penalize Ekalavya for misusing Droṇa's name. Or perhaps he demanded the thumb to protect his son, for whom he harboured an inner desire to make him the best archer, as mentioned earlier.

Why I am nit-picking on this notion of promise is that it is precisely this broad reading of promises in these events that hides the deeper question of duty and action and the ethics of embodied action. They also hide the more interesting explanations of other themes in this episode, including the thematization of presence as well as the roles of a teacher and student.

The first problem in understanding the structure of these events in terms of promises is that it is based on a particular understanding of promise. In the way we use the word 'promise', and also in the way Brodbeck uses it, it is a stated intention which is entwined with agency. Promises are manifestations of individual agency, and when a promise is fulfilled, the agent's autonomous act has become successful. Brodbeck points out that the textual strategy in the *Mahābhārata* leads to a consequence which is 'to destabilize the notion of individual agency while obscuring the details of individual psychology' (ibid., p. 7). This is not surprising since his idea of promise comes along with specific notions of individual agency. The destabilization of individual agency is actually a clue to the possibility that these events should not all be seen as promises but as different kinds of action.

Both Droṇa's assurance and Ekalavya's action are not promises for different reasons. In the former case, Droṇa is not making a promise because he is speaking as a teacher. One might perhaps say that the teacher's duty is to make at least one of their students the 'best' among the lot. It says more about the agency of being a teacher and perhaps also about the action following from that sense of duty. In other words, 'promise', as commonly used, has become a category that is independent of the profession/position of the speaker, but this is a mistake. The mistake is to understand these utterances without factoring the nature of the person who is speaking. A promise made by Droṇa is fundamentally different from that made by somebody else. For example, consider a father who tells his son that he will make him the best archer in the world as against the teacher who says the same thing. To equate the two claims – by the parent and the teacher – is to forget the essential role of the teacher and how this role modifies the way we interpret statements made by, and as, a teacher.

Similarly, Ekalavya is not making a promise that he will give whatever Droṇa wants as a *guru dakṣiṇā*. He does not have to utter this *as*

a promise. To evaluate it as such, we have to first take into account the unequal relationship between the student and teacher. In the role of a student, Ekalavya cannot make a promise to Droṇa to pay him his *guru dakṣiṇā*. (He can make such a promise if he does not have the payment with him at that moment but promises to give it to Droṇa later.) Ekalavya is only doing his duty, uttering what is obviously known and expected of him. When a mother tells her child that she will give her some food, she is not promising food to the child in the sense we promise something else to the child. There is a difference in telling the child that she will give her food and that she will give her a toy if she behaves well; the latter is a genuine promise, while the former is something which she has to do and thus falls into the domain of necessary duty. Droṇa's assurance to Arjuna is more like the latter since it is his duty to make the best of his students' capacities. And similarly, just as the child does not promise to give her mother love, so also does Ekalavya not have to promise to give Droṇa anything.

But things are not so simple! The reason Ekalavya's statement to Droṇa is not like that of a student is because Ekalavya is *not* the student of Droṇa – from Droṇa's point of view. So what Ekalavya is doing when he says he will give whatever Droṇa wants from him is not really a statement of promise. Instead, it is a statement which, if approved by Droṇa, will make Ekalavya a legitimate student of Droṇa. So Ekalavya is not making a promise or telling Droṇa that he will give *guru dakṣiṇā*. He is only waiting for Droṇa to ask for *guru dakṣiṇā* because that is the only way of legitimizing his role as Droṇa's student.

The theme that should therefore interest us here is just this: how does one become a student and how does one become a teacher? These are questions that are relevant as much today as in ancient days. Today, we become teachers because we belong to institutions which do the job of teaching. However, this affiliation alone is not enough to be a teacher. For there are teachers who have jobs as teachers but who are not seen by the students to be 'teachers'. Throughout the long history of teaching, this tension of belonging and being animates the narratives of a *guru* or teacher. In the Bhakti traditions, for example, there are examples of teachers who did not belong to any accepted institution. A significant aspect of this tradition was also to redefine what it meant to be a teacher and to whom one could be a teacher.

Similar issues arise in the case of identifying who a student is or what makes one a student. What are the characteristics that make one a student? The case of Ekalavya shows remarkably well how one characteristic overrides the others – the tragedy of his case is that what makes him a genuine student is not his skill in archery but only Droṇa's

acceptance of *guru dakṣiṇā*. It is that act, that moment when Droṇa accepts his role as a teacher of Ekalavya by asking for *guru dakṣiṇā*, which makes Ekalavya a student of Droṇa – not just in Droṇa's eyes but also in those of Ekalavya. What kind of action then is Ekalavya's? What was he really doing when he cut his thumb without a thought?

The Act of Teaching

The question of action is of course central to these questions. Droṇa does not act like a teacher at all to Ekalavya. He does not even know of his existence. And even Ekalavya 'knows' that Droṇa is not his teacher in the sense in which he is a teacher to Arjuna and the others. For Ekalavya, the clay image of Droṇa serves as his teacher. For Droṇa, this substitution of himself by a clay image – as a teacher – is what completely negates his role as a teacher. And that role is the presencing of the teacher in every act of teaching. Ekalavya negates and erases the most important aspect of being a teacher. Droṇa's claim to Ekalavya's thumb is not just a payment of the services of a teacher but more a payment for Ekalavya's successful erasure of the most important aspect of being a teacher.

(The question of payment for teaching has always been a major point of tension in most traditional narratives of teaching. Teaching is a gift which the teacher gives the student, and the 'payment' by the student is also in the nature of a gift. Once Droṇa asks for a particular payment, he is not being a teacher. In fact, by asking for the thumb, Droṇa maliciously breaks the apparent acceptance of Ekalavya as his student. However, this is what he demands of Arjuna also; he teaches only because he wants to get something from his students. So Droṇa is not really a teacher in the ideal sense of the word.)

On the other hand, Ekalavya is an ideal student. The gift of receiving from his teacher goes beyond the physical presence of the teacher. He is able to give life to an idol of Droṇa and learn with its presence. He is displacing the lived presence of the teacher into another kind of presence – we cannot easily claim that that is not a lived presence. To understand the role of Droṇa's idol in this story, we have to understand the role of idols in general and idols of gods in particular.

The importance of the idol of Droṇa – a substitute for a living teacher – has to be understood in the context of times in which there were presumably no written traditions. The idol is a text and is as good as a book authored by Droṇa. Ekalavya's learning from a book written by Droṇa is in principle what he is doing when he is using the idol as a substitute for the teacher. There is a fundamental difference

in the relation between the idol and a student and between an idol and a worshipper. The idol of Droṇa has to play the role of a teacher but is not the teacher himself, so the primary question is this: how is it possible to learn from an inanimate idol of Droṇa?

I would mark Ekalavya's story as the first, most important theory of learning. Ekalavya is exhibiting a particular model of teaching/learning: the student is the site of learning. At one stroke (or one arrow shot) Ekalavya negates the argument that the lived presence of a teacher is necessary in order to learn. Moreover, through his success in learning from such an inanimate teacher, he illustrates the possibility that learning is done primarily *in* and *through* the student. This model of learning, which has similarities to the claims of constructivism in education today, puts the onus, as well as the success of learning, entirely onto the learner. We learn from books today the way Ekalavya learnt from the clay model of Droṇa. But the difference is that the book has some knowledge content which is being shared, which is not known to the student in the first instance. That is not what is happening in the case of the idol of Droṇa. The transmission from the idol is not exactly like that of the book – what the idol 'contains' and 'says' has to be discovered within Ekalavya himself. A book has the same content for all even though different students may interpret the contents differently. But for the idol – as a book – the content is only present within Ekalavya. In other words, Ekalavya discovers the teacher in himself.

Ekalavya embodies this eternal structure of teaching/learning: he is a student/teacher, both at the same time. Ekalavya is an allegorical figure for education. The real tension in this process is that between presence/absence, teaching/learning, teacher/student, texts/truth, representation/real and so on. The story of Ekalavya seen from this allegorical perspective might help us make sense of its place within the larger narrative of the *Mahābhārata*. Why is this story there first of all?

Act of Learning

The presence of teachers is essential to the *Mahābhārata*. There are many accounts of the sages as teachers. There are prosaic moments of teaching such as the skills of archery and warfare. There are teachings on more profound issues such as truth and ethics as well as teaching about transcendent experiences. Each of these elements is inbuilt into the narrative of the text. Most importantly, the text itself is a medium for teaching various truths about human nature, human society, the nature of the divine and so on. All of us as readers are the Ekalavyas

and the book of *Mahābhārata* is the clay idol of Droṇa. We do not have the presence of the sages, of the gods in front of us – they do not want to be our teachers. We have to make do with the text. Ekalavya's success in learning just through the clay idol really manifests the final hope of learning: even in the absence of the teacher, we will learn. If this story is not present in this text, then it would be impossible to believe that we could ever learn anything from the *Mahābhārata*!

But there are conditions for learning. First of all, the book is very selective in what it gives to whom. Some readers are more privileged and become more proficient, while others who read the same book get much less. The book is indifferent to what each of us – as students – receives from it. But a teacher who is a lived presence is not so: when a teacher becomes indifferent to what each one of us receives from her, then she is no longer a teacher in an ideal sense. Moreover, there is a cost that each book inflicts on us – the price we pay for acquiring it, the time we spend in reading it, the costs of the effects it has on us and so on.

There is another level of learning that is encoded within this story of Ekalavya. Each one of the stories within the *Mahābhārata* presumably has a reason. Why is the narrative structured in this manner? What do we learn from these stories? *How* do we actually learn from these stories? If we as readers have to become 'enlightened' after hearing/reading this text, what then is the method that we have to follow to make sure that the message has been transmitted to us as students of the text? The Ekalavya story is an exemplar of this internal reference, which allegorically stands for the possibility of learning from these stories.

Stories in the *Mahābhārata* are like the clay idols of Droṇa. They are supposed to be our teachers; they are supposed to teach us the skills of moral action, of learning to ask the right questions in a given context. How are we to learn this deep knowledge of moral action when the wise teachers are not present in front of us? We learn this through their 'idolic' representation in stories: these stories are idols which are not iconic in character. We are only given these stories; we practice our skills in 'front' of these stories and we develop our own skill in these issues. We accept these stories as our *guru* – and not the people in them as our *guru* since these people are necessarily absent – and act as if we are learning under and through them. This is the only way under which any notion of learning, especially moral learning, in a tradition is possible. The Ekalavya story reminds us that if and when these *gurus* come to us in their full presence we should be ready to pay a price – any price for that matter.

There is another allegorical intertextuality in this story with arguably the most important episode in the *Mahābhārata*: the presencing of Kṛṣṇa in the battlefield and the episode of the Bhagavad Gītā. Kṛṣṇa has been masquerading as a man, as a charioteer for Arjuna. But he is not the real Kṛṣṇa, the god, and thus is a substitution for the real divine being. Arjuna is filled with doubts on the eve of the battle and does not want to fight his relatives and his teachers. But then the substitute Kṛṣṇa shows his real form when Arjuna is in doubt about fighting the war. Kṛṣṇa comes to Arjuna just as Droṇa comes to Ekalavya. And just as Droṇa demands a price, so too does Kṛṣṇa for showing Arjuna his real form. The price is the price of war, which Arjuna has to now participate in wholeheartedly. Arjuna, after this event of appearance, will willingly and successfully fight the war and kill all those whom he could not have killed before. Ekalavya gave his thumb for the right to see the original being, but Arjuna gives up his whole ethical doubt about war.

The point here is that in the presence of the *guru* – or the divine – what you gift is incomparable to the cost of the appearance. What would I give up to have an opportunity to see somebody who has been lost to me? I might give up all that I have for that opportunity. This theme of recovering presence from what has become absent is another recurring theme not only in the *Mahābhārata* but also in various literary traditions surrounding this text. Ekalavya's story is perhaps the most famous model which exemplifies this theme.

But, all said and done, Droṇa is not Kṛṣṇa. He does not seem to be giving a message to all humans. Kṛṣṇa's substituted being is not an idol. Droṇa asks for Ekalavya's thumb ostensibly to destroy his skills as an archer so that he cannot be better than Arjuna. As I had mentioned before, this interpretation has a fault line. We need to take seriously the event in which Droṇa tries to deceive Arjuna so that he might spend more time with his own son, Aśvatthāmā, to make him better than Arjuna. So asking for the thumb so as to make Arjuna the best archer can only be the ostensible reason. The point is that Droṇa would have asked for the thumb even if he felt that Ekalavya would have been the second-best archer after Arjuna. He was duty bound to *act* as a teacher, and that meant that he had to be paid a *guru dakṣiṇā*. But then why ask for the thumb?

The thumb too is a figure of substitution in this story. It is really standing for something else. In modern terms, we might say that the thumb is the essence of identity. Asking for the thumb is asking for giving up one's identity in the presence of the teacher. Incidentally, whenever Ekalavya comes back in the stories, it is not as a cripple

who cannot fight. He is still fighting wars. He may not have been as good as Arjuna, but he could not have been anyway. His social position would have meant that he could only have been an ego dampener for Arjuna but not a serious contender for his power. Droṇa, in asking for the thumb, asks for the dissolution of Ekalavya's ego into his own. In doing this, he is also presaging what is going to happen in the Bhagavad Gītā. Ultimately, we have to dissolve our selves into that of the divine – it is impossible to understand Hinduism without understanding this constant possibility that envelops a devotee. This eventual dissolution of our selves into the divine, like the river merging into the ocean, is perhaps the most sustained image of Hinduism, both in practice and in its philosophies. The removal of the thumb is the act of dissolution of a student into the teacher.

We can take this possibility a bit more seriously when we see how these views are so entrenched in cultural practices today. A Hindustani musician was once telling me that he cannot teach his students the mechanics of his singing. His students have to be with him, watching him live a life other than music. Teaching music, for this singer, is a way for the students to merge into his thinking process – not just about his music but also about the way he thinks about other actions. The potential merging of the selves is so much a narrative of the *guru-śiṣya* tradition, and one can see how this merging is accomplished metaphorically in the Ekalavya story through the gifting of the thumb.

We should not underestimate this gift of the thumb. If the aim, as many have it, of getting Ekalavya's thumb was only to negate his skill as an archer, then there was an easier way for Droṇa. As a teacher he could have directly asked Ekalavya to stop practicing his archery. That could have been the *guru dakṣiṇā*. And Ekalavya would have done it without a moment's thought. Sacrifice of this kind is another constant theme in these mythologies, and a student's sacrifice of his profession would have been far grander for Ekalavya. It would have solved Droṇa's problem, too, especially given the fact that Ekalavya continues to apparently use his skills even after the loss of his thumb. Thus, Droṇa's solution to remove the challenge from Ekalavya is an imperfect one. So we can perhaps consider the possibility that the intention of Droṇa was not merely to destroy Ekalavya's skills but, through this process, make another point altogether. As I suggested before, the text uses this episode to make a point about the possibility of learning in the absence of the *guru*. In this sense, the *Mahābhārata* is also a treatise about the nature of education and, in particular, about the possibility of moral education. The text itself is a teacher, but the teachers don't do well in its story. There are no teachers who have

great redemption, who are without flaws – not Bhīṣma and not even the teacher who masquerades as a god – Kṛṣṇa!

In analyzing the story in this manner, I am not negating the very important sociological critique that arises from this episode. Sociological considerations are fundamental to teaching/learning, to the question of what constitutes knowledge, who teaches whom and so on. I am not focussing on these questions, since most of the discussion on this episode is on these themes. But a focus only on these themes occludes this interesting tension about teaching/learning that seems to be at the heart of the story. It is possible that I have read more into this episode in terms of its allegorical power and as saying something about the nature of teaching and learning, but I hope my arguments have shown another way to actually strengthen the sociological critique that is available through this story.

Conclusion

Finally, I want to end with an interesting paradox about the substitutability of agents. The question of substitution is not only interesting but arises in almost anything that we do. Even the question of language is primarily one of substitution. Words stand for other things, processes and elements. Analysis of inference – at least for the Indian logicians – was primarily one of analyzing valid substitutions. One of the central themes in Indian and Western philosophies is the use of the ideas of necessary and accidental to distinguish the types of substitution that are possible. Some substitutions are needed and necessary, and others are just a matter of convention.

Substitution is the act of 'standing for' – signs, words, models, pictures and so on stand for something else. While substitution seems to be largely a matter of convention and perhaps style, there remains the enduring possibility that there could be grounds that enable a choice for substitution. Given a set of possible entities that can stand for something, what are the rules under which we can choose one of them to 'best' stand for something? The fact that this question resonates in so many philosophical themes is an indication of the importance as well as its complexity.

The idol of Droṇa stands for Droṇa – stands for him as a person, of course, but more because it stands for him as a teacher. In a sense, it is easy to see how one entity could stand for another. For example, a picture of Droṇa could be in a standing-for relation to the person Droṇa. The standing-for could be described in terms of likeness and similarity. Thus, pictures and idols can perform a legitimate substitution for

individuals as long as they remind us of the individual when we see the substitution. In one way, they give us access to the person in his or her absence.

However, these standings-for are primarily in terms of being. The major question from Ekalavya's story is this: how can one stand for another in terms of action, not in terms of being? Equivalently, how does one act like another, be embodied as another and not just stand for another – where I want to use the word 'stand' in its original static sense? And the interesting puzzle here is just this: action needs lived embodiment, which standing for does not. We can have an idol of Gandhi, but for an 'idol' to *act* like Gandhi it needs a measure of something else. I can act like Gandhi, but this is not strictly true since I can only act like myself. Given the intentionality of action, it is impossible for me to act like somebody in the fundamental sense of the term. However, there is another possibility: I act like Gandhi in that Gandhi acts through me. For substitutability of action to be possible, it is perhaps necessary to take more seriously the possibility of what we might call 'ontological possession' and not mere psychological possession. Interestingly, possession of bodies is a recurring narrative right from the *Yogasūtra* to cultural practices of possession which are in practice even today.

Thus, what this episode of Ekalavya suggests is that it is possible to have substitutions of action, but the locus of action is not the idol but the subject him/herself. If Ekalavya learns from Droṇa's inanimate idol, it is only because he has become an agent of action for Droṇa. The idol of Droṇa gets embodied within and through Ekalavya. Thus, it is not Ekalavya's thumb which Droṇa gets as a payment, but it is his own thumb which he gets as a punishment.

Notes

1 See Y. Krishan, 'Factors Which Have Inhibited the Growth of Science and Technology in India', *East and West* 51.3/4, 2001, for a larger critique of contemporary practices as being influenced by some of these caste questions. See also Rustom Bharucha, Peter Brook's 'Mahābhārata: A View from India', *Economic and Political Weekly* 23:32, 1988, Gail Omvedt, 'Hinduism and Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly* 25:14, 1990 and Janaky, 'On the Trail of the Mahābhārata: A Response', *Economic and Political Weekly* 27:37, 1992.

2 For example, see S. Shankar, 'The Thumb of Ekalavya: Postcolonial Studies' and the 'Third World' Scholar in a Neocolonial World, *World Literature Today* 68:3, 1994.

3 For example, there are complex ways to even understand what are seen as literal elements in the text. We could look more deeply at the metaphorical

meanings of archery and the thumb, for example. For a larger placement of archery within these traditions, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'The Symbolism of Archery', *Ars Islamica* 10, 1943.

4 Simon Brodbeck, 'Ekalavya and 'Mahābhārata' 1.121–28', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10:1, 2006.

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Part III

EPIC AGENCY AND RETELLINGS


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10

TAGORE'S READINGS OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

Sudipta Kaviraj

We often know much about the *Mahābhārata* without reading it. Indians absorb the narrative and aesthetic structures of the *Mahābhārata* even without a formal introduction to its text in various forms. Yet the question of Tagore's relation to the *Mahābhārata* is intriguing. After all, he was on one side an avid reader of the literary past of his culture; yet he came from the Brahmo tradition of cultivation, which had a deeply conflicted relationship with some central strands of the Hindu religious tradition. What was Tagore's relation with the vast universe of the Indic literary heritage? This is a major question not merely for scholars specifically interested in Tagore's thought but also for an understanding of the modern Bengali culture's collective sense of its deep aesthetic past. Tagore's reflections are so interesting precisely because they are so elusive and complex on significant points. Tagore's deep engagement with the literary past is obvious and indisputable; it is impossible to miss a subtle but pervasive presence of the cultural past in his literary and aesthetic thought and creative practice. He avoids two simpler and more obvious attitudes common among his contemporaries. Unlike Rammohun Roy, he abjured direct personal polemic against orthodox Hindu beliefs; and unlike other defenders of Hindu thinking – like Bhudev or Bankim – did not offer reasoned justification for those strands of thought he found attractive. His relation with the tradition, like some aspects of his aesthetic thinking, is a world of suggestion and implicature. Frequent evocation of the image that the self is occluded from the subject himself by something like a 'covering' indicates an underlying allegory from the Upaniṣads, but this rarely transforms itself into serious argumentative writing about these concepts or the attendant line of philosophic reasoning.[1] Unlike Bankimchandra, Tagore was never powerfully attracted to the figure of Kṛṣṇa – either in his *Mahābhārata* or his utterly different *Bhāgavata* incarnation. The cataclysmic rhetoric of the *Mahābhārata*

does not appear to attract him in the least. His narrative world is filled, by contrast, with a different quieter, subtler aesthetic drawn from Buddhist tales.[2] Yet Tagore's engagement with the *mahākāvya*, if occasional, was not inconsequential. His retelling of the story of Karṇa through a dialogue was immensely influential – not just because of the sensitivity with which he views Karṇa's perspective at the moment before the start of the fighting but also because of a deep 'transvaluation of values' through which this partly 'polyphonic' reading becomes possible. In the hands of Tagore, as increasingly with other modern readers, the moral logic of polyphony that Bakhtin identified at the heart of the novel's narratological structure is slowly transferred to the *Mahābhārata*. After a brief discussion of the problem of acting in the *Mahābhārata*, I shall turn to Tagore's reading of some episodes of the epic.

Acting, Past Acts, Future Acts

The *Mahābhārata* in its entirety could be read as a vast and puzzlingly complex reflection on what it means to be acting in the world. Not merely is the *Bhagavadgītā*, placed with an unavoidable narrative centrality at the start of the military exchange, a deep philosophical reflection on the meaning of acting. Many other segments reflect with great insight on acts that take place at different moments of the narrative. In a sense, the *Śāntiparva*, coming immediately after the war, is a foil to the Gītā. The Gītā reflects on action – the most acute and complex form of action known to the human beings of the *kṣatriya varṇa* – before the battle began, through two of its most dominant warrior figures, but poised in contrary stances – one vowed to inaction and the other to acting in the battle. Between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, there is a narrative enactment of the philosophic idea that there ought to be two parts of the acting self – a part that acts and the other part that watches the action. Because acting without 'seeing' the actor in action is 'blind'. Paradoxically, again, the great sermon in favour of acting is heard from the warrior who cannot act in this war. Despite this external picture of acting and not acting, the epic introduces complex considerations regarding Kṛṣṇa's role in the narrative. Even after he offers the two sides a choice between his invincible army of *saṃśaptakas* and his own inactive participation as a charioteer, and Arjuna chooses him in an inactive role, is he not acting? When he delivers the sermon of the Gītā to a dejected Arjuna is he not acting? Is not this non-act the most powerful impulse that drives all the subsequent acts of the most effective warrior? Is he not acting in the critical instances of offering

advice to the Pāṇḍavas? In the climactic scene in the court, during Draupadī's disrobing, the great patriarchs of the Kuru clan – including Bhīṣma and Droṇa – of course delude themselves that they were not acting; but were they not? Was not their non-action – of warriors sworn to fight for *dharma* – a betrayal of themselves? Was not their inaction utterly wretched complicity with the acts of those 'who gave them their food' (*anna-dātā*)? The narrative intelligence of the epic repeatedly blurs the conceptual boundary between acting and not acting in a radically unsettling fashion.

The story is also full of instances in which characters or readers are forced to think about the nature of past and future acts. Kuntī's life is haunted from the time of the birth of her first child – by a past act. It is an act in the past, but it threatens repeatedly to explode the fabric of present time. It is striking how the narration connects Kuntī with Karṇa at several critical points. At the time of his birth, Kuntī deserts her child – to be picked up and reared by Rādhā, the childless charioteer's wife. Karṇa returns in a scene of great poignancy, fully formed into a great warrior, at the tournament of arms for the newly trained princes. The story recounts the strange effect of his appearance on the mother of the Pāṇḍavas. Despite their proximity in the Kuru clan, there is no direct contact between Kuntī and her firstborn till the eve of the great battle – a meeting fraught with emotion on both sides, charged by the clash between their contrasting griefs – Kuntī's deprivation of her son and Karṇa's sense of injustice at his rejection – without a tame resolution. Lastly, at the time of the *tarpaṇa* for the dead warriors in the Strīparva, Kuntī's shocking revelation to her sons that Karṇa, their great adversary, was really their brother – her first child – brings them into a climatic strange contact again – strange because, inverting the natural temporal order, it is the mother who grieves for her dead child.

Similarly, the narrative is replete with instances of calculations about *future* acts which fall into two distinct kinds. The first kind of calculation is about instrumental efficacy: given a fixed objective, what particular means will be most efficient for achieving it. But the *Mahābhārata*'s entire narrative peculiarity depends on its insistence that, in case of nearly all significant actions by human beings, there are two inextricable layers – of instrumental considerations and of moral concerns. Sovereignty is to be acquired, but not violating rules of *dharma*. Warriors have to defeat their enemies in battle, but following rules of fair combat. There is a pervasive sense that human beings tend to be attracted to the instrumental calculations for projected action, but if that is all that human beings care for, it would be impossible

to live a civilized life. A narrative that slowly shows the collapse of civilized life also prepares specifically for an understanding what it consists of. A cataclysmic end to order is precisely the time for understanding what order means. A life of *dharma*, a civilized life, consists in subordinating the instrumental grounds of actions to ethical ones. Though, here again, the *Mahābhārata* does not offer a simplistically tranquil end or an entirely asymmetric exchange between evil schemes and high-minded acts; the *dharma* of the Pāṇḍavas is imperilled at points by acts unworthy of the good. But even by separating the figure of great rectitude, Yudhiṣṭhira, from the invariably good act, the narrative focuses even more sharply on the goodness of the act itself. It is not the disposition of a good person that makes his acts good acts. The goodness of the act has to be judged and confirmed in each single case: readers are not supposed to assent to moral slips even in someone as righteous as Yudhiṣṭhira.

In some of Tagore's readings, this duality of reasoning is challenged and split apart – for instance, in Duryodhana's utterly consistent reduction of the ethic of royal power to instrumental acts, but also his invocation of an ethic of the warrior and the ruler, in accordance with the ancient ideas of right – what is right for particular groups of social agents. He declares defiantly to his father:

> "*sukh nāhi chāi mahārāj/*
> *joi, joi cheyechhinu, joyī āmi āj*
> (I never sought happiness, my lord:
> victory, victory was all I wanted; today victory is mine.)"

Again, in the briefer segment after the war and the Pāṇḍavas' victory, different agents repeatedly return in repentance, reflection, remorse to the acts they had committed in the past or allowed to be committed by others. The warriors are all departed, but Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is cursed with a strangely distant and degraded sovereignty so that he would lament for ever not being able to stop a course of events he was really powerless to prevent. Compare that to Gāndhārī who, despite the fact that in that social dispensation, she does not possess the role of a decision maker, displays a crystalline clarity regarding the right act, and uses her influence, admittedly ineffectually, to direct ill-willed males toward that path. This is also true of Draupadī and her ways of affecting the Pāṇḍavas' actions. We need to think of a different form of *agency*, and much more complex *structural* form of action. In one sense, the entire peculiarity of the *Mahābhārata* consists in the strange insistence with which it emphasizes the moral implications surrounding the

irreducibly complex character of political action – action regarding political power – itself. Tagore's reflections are both related and displaced at the same time. His poems go back to certain nodal moments of the narrative, precisely those points of possibility at which, if a main character had been persuaded by an eminently reasonable and powerful argument and taken action, the story might have turned in a dramatically different direction. There is a clear sense in the epic narrative itself that if Dhṛtarāṣṭra had taken Gāndhārī's advice and broken his relation with Duryodhana, the war would not have occurred. Similarly, had Karṇa been startled sufficiently by the disclosure of his birth to hesitate to fight against those he now knew as his blood brothers, Duryodhana would have been dissuaded from the battle. Observation of these diegetic nodes is not novel: the text itself contains such a sense of its own possibilities. Tagore is selecting episodes which were considered vital in the epic's traditional reading itself. Yet it is clear that what attracts him to these episodes is the possibility of inserting a different, partly anachronistic, personal[3] ethic into them. These new ethical sensibilities do not alter the trajectory of the story but reinterpret some of the fundamental ethical questions for a modern audience. So the difference is not, as sometimes suggested, that in pre-modern contexts people did not have a vivid sense of moral agency and in modern ones they do but that the sense of moral agency itself has changed. What is arresting in these retellings is the altered ethical sensibility working through a conventional narrative field – producing often an entirely new form of aesthetic enjoyment. I shall take up for discussion two quite distinct narrative poems from *Kathā O Kāhinī*.[4]

A notable formal feature of the presentation of the stories is a dialogic form, while in the epic itself or conventional abridged narratives, these are presented in a writer's report. The difference in form – between an omniscient writer's reporting of events and the characters' deeply perspectival presentation of their acts in their own words, justified from their own experiential angle – makes for a highly significant alteration. The dramatic form produces a peculiar relationship of ownership between the event and the actor and offers the actors an opportunity to present their acts in a pre-emptively justificatory fashion. Actors cannot act in a particular way without feeling that that is the right way to act. The dialogue form captures this internal connection between act and reason particularly vividly. Therefore, the formal displacement from a narrated to a dialogic form is itself an important innovative act. We could deploy Bakhtin's conception of polyphony to capture this quality. Although Bakhtin maintains that it is the modern novelistic narrative that, in its finest forms as in Dostoyevsky, is polyphonic, that

is clearly an overstatement. It overdramatizes the newness of modern narrative forms. Clearly, even amongst pre-modern narratives there are individual cases in which the narrative itself contains a polyphonic design. And this feature of the *Mahābhārata* is particularly striking. For instance, at various stages, there are forceful and utterly persuasive self-endorsing arguments by different characters, including the negative ones like Duryodhana's teasing dying speech to the Pāṇḍavas that he will go to heaven as a fallen warrior on the hallowed ground of Kurukṣetra, while they will be left to enjoy the desolate friendless earth. But this is a polyphonic narrative design by implication; by presenting it in a direct dialogical form, Tagore draws it out more fully.

Karṇa Kuntīsaṃvād

In the original *Mahābhārata* itself, the meeting between Karṇa and Kuntī occupies a diegetically important place. It marks the frantic efforts by all possible agents to prevent or deflect the fatal slide to war. While the main combatants on the two sides are engaged in raising armies, appointing commanders, and refining tactics, those who are opposed to the war for varying reasons – who are fated to lose in any case – like Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī – are trying their last desperate moves to avert a catastrophic spectacle of wasted heroism. Like many other pre-modern narratives, the *Mahābhārata* works on a theory of asymmetric information between the characters and readers; readers know a lot that the actors in the narrative do not. Thus, though all readers know from the first parvan that Karṇa is Kuntī's abandoned son, Karṇa does not, nor do other characters – except omniscient figures like Kṛṣṇa and Vidura, who are vowed to reticence. On the eve of the battle, only Kṛṣṇa and Kuntī meet Karṇa to appeal to his heroic side. Kṛṣṇa informs Karṇa of his royal birth, of his stolen prerogative of primogeniture – his title to the throne as the first born of the Pāṇḍavas. In one of the most affecting side scenes of the epic, in which *kṣatriya* women, doomed to face the consequences of initiatives they do not take, occasionally decide to do something extraordinary – driven by an intense sense of righteousness like Gāndhārī or of filial affection like Kuntī – the ill-fated mother of the two great warriors in the two sides uses the power of her motherhood to try to disentangle the fates of her two heroic sons.

Karṇa, the epic tells us, used to do *tarpan* twice a day and gifted away whatever anyone wanted from him. It is by playing on this generosity that Indra, Arjuna's father, took away his natural-born armour. Kuntī did not come to ask for a gift. She stood in the blazing sun waiting for

Karṇa to finish his prayers, sheltering under his great shadow, according to the epic. After finishing his prayers, Karṇa turned to see an older woman, and asked her what she wanted. Though the epic's setting is minimal, Tagore's poem – because of its dialogic form – dispenses with all scene-setting artifice, leaving the flaming words to do their work unaided. The material setting of the scene – the scorching sun at high noon, the bank of the river Jāhṇavī with its association with everything holy and calm in Hindu thought – is done by two remarks in Karṇa's initial words.

puṇya jāhṇavīr tīre sandhyā savitār[5]
vandanāy āche rata Karṇa nām jār

Karṇa begins the conversation by stating he is engaged in the worship of the setting sun and introduces himself as

Karṇa nām jār/adhiratha sūtaputra, rādhāgarbhajāta / sei āmi, kaho more tumi ke go mātah?

[one whose name is Karṇa, son of the charioteer, Adhiratha and born of the womb of Rādhā, that is me; tell me, mother, who are you?]

This is an astonishing sentence with explosive content regarding the truths of Karṇa's life. Except the name, each phrase of this speech is true to Karṇa, false to Kuntī, and particularly wounding because she has made these false attributes true for him, denying the truth of his birth – the most important truth of all in that social world. Kuntī's answer, without giving her name, must seem an enigma to her son:

"I had made you see the world on the day of your birth: I have come today, sacrificing all honor, to reveal to you your identity."

[*batsa tor jībaner pratham prabhāte / parichay karāyechi tore viswa sāthe*
sei āmi, āsiyāchi chādi sarba lāj, tore dite āpanār parichoy āj]

Both of them utter the profoundly searching phrase – *sei āmi* – that is who I am, though in the ensuing encounter both their sense of who they are would undergo a deep transformation. There is also a profound ambiguity in the phrase – *tore dite āpanār parichay āj* – which, in Bengali, can apply to both of them, due to the double meaning of *āpanār*: to make you recognize your own identity or to reveal my identity to you.

In this brief, condensed, intense exchange, even before her name is announced, Karṇa acknowledges feeling an incomprehensible bond: "at the touch of your lowered eyes, devi, my heart melts like ice on

the mountain under sunrays; your voice stirs a beautiful anguish as it enters my ears – as if from a previous birth",[6] and he insists on knowing what mysterious tie binds them together. Every phrase in this initial exchange of words carries powerful suggestion: because in a sense Kuntī's abandonment has turned that birth in this life as inaccessible to Karṇa as a previous birth (*janmāntara*). Kuntī, in an allusion to his birth as a child of the sun, the cause of her shame, asks to wait till the sun sets, and darkness, a metaphor for shame, envelops her world. Then she declares she is Kuntī. Karṇa exclaims, not surprisingly:

> *tumi Kuntī Arjun-jananī*
> [you are Kuntī, Arjuna's mother!]

Kuntī asks him to overcome hostility and remembers that the day of the final test of military skills, when the young Karṇa entered the arena, she was the wordless woman who had kissed his body with blessings – tied to the silence of her shame. When Kṛpa, the teacher of the princes, asked him about his ancestors – because he had to be of royal blood if he had to participate in the contest with princes – the red shame on his face scorched the heart of only one woman, Arjuna's mother. When his putative father Adhiratha rushed to that scene and he greeted him as a parent, and the Pāṇḍavas' friends sniggered, there was a woman who honoured him as a real hero: Arjuna's mother.

Karṇa asks why she has come to him, a commander of the Kurus. She has come to beg for something, answers Kuntī, which he should not refuse. Except for my *dharma* and the vows of a fighter, answers Karṇa, I can give you all you want. Kuntī asks him to come to her, and to his brothers. Karṇa says, how can I deprive them of the full share of their mother's love? The Pāṇḍavas were already deprived of their kingdom: but a mother's love cannot be stolen by a throw of the dice nor taken away by strength; it is the creator's gift. This again is a deeply tragic remark: because from him a mother's love was stolen by the mother herself. Kuntī too appeals to the gift of the creator – which Karṇa earned when he was born, from which he was undeservingly deprived. Kuntī offers him the prospect of the empire, where the five invincible brothers will attend on him.

Tagore gives to Karṇa two long speeches with great, moving power and illumination. Karṇa says, I am taken back into a primal darkness, a darkness before my birth, the darkness of my mother's womb. Whether this was truth or dream, he asks her to touch his chin and forehead with a touch he has always craved.

I have heard that I was abandoned by my mother;
how many times I saw in my dreams
I saw my mother returning to see me:
I cried to her: Mother, open your veil and let me see your face.
The image faded, tearing apart my yearning dream.
Has that dream image come today
In the falling dusk, in the battlefield, on the bank of the Bhagīrathi
Dressed as the Pāṇḍavas' mother?
. . . . tomorrow the great war will begin

A great artistic synchrony connects the different forms of twilight, when things cannot be seen for what they are: the falling darkness of that day, the uncertainty of whether this was really happening or was an extension of his dreams, and his desire; the strangeness of that luminous image coming to see him as the Pāṇḍavas' mother. It was hard, at that moment, and in human life, to grasp what was real and what was not. The twilight, the time to which Tagore shifted the scene of the meeting, acquires a metaphysical character of a liminal point between light and darkness, of truths and dreams. When Karṇa asks her why she had revealed herself at this strange point of their lives, Kuntī gives a poignant answer. On close reading the difference between Kuntī's answer in the *Mahābhārata* and in Tagore's poem is highly significant. In the *Mahābhārata*, this exchange is narratively important, because it is one among several desperate attempts to avoid the looming war. In the epic tale, Kuntī wants to draw Karṇa back to his rightful place *in society* – as the first-born Pāṇḍava, and the great attraction he is offered is a combination of being received in his real *kula* among his brothers and the right of the firstborn to the empire. In the epic, Karṇa refuses this offer partly because this was inconsistent with his heroic ideals of loyalty and friendship, partly because people might see this as fear of facing the greatest warrior on the other side, and finally, as greed for power, desire to get the kingdom. The *Mahābhārata* episode mentions their personal relation: but Karṇa says curtly that in abandoning him at birth she betrayed a mother's role. In Tagore's poem, the first appeal of Kuntī is deeply personal. To Karṇa's dreamy question: where will you take me? (*kothā labe more*?), her answer is 'into my parched heart, into a mother's lap' (*tṛshito bokkher mājhe, laba mātṛkṛoḍe*). She does offer him the empire and its majesty later, but her primary appeal is to restore to him the bond that has always separated them: she has forever sought her child who was both within and

outside reach, and for him, the mother he has always sought but who came to him only in the unreality of dreams.

Karṇa states the great truth that a mother's love is a gift from God – it cannot be lost in the play of dice or won by force. Why, he asks, had Kuntī deprived him of that gift at his birth, when he was utterly helpless? Kuntī is left without an answer. Karṇa asks again, 'then why have you come back to me?'; in Tagore's telling, Kuntī's answer is not to restore to him his rightful kingdom but to his place in his mother's heart. 'With five sons at my breast, my heart has been childless', her heart has always flown towards him with open arms. In Tagore's poem, Karṇa has a reverie for a moment. He says, 'on that side, the motherless child will forever return to his mother' (*sethā mātṛhāra mā pāibe ciradin*); and he asks Kuntī to say again that he has a mother. But that remains a reverie, not reality. At the end Karṇa refuses Kuntī's call to return to his 'true' place in the world, in which his place as the son of a real mother was the central thing. Karṇa says to her: how can you expect one who has refused the bond of a mother's love to be won by the mere offer of an empire? Reflecting on the irrevocability of her act, he stresses: the consequence of that act of a single moment still binds her: she does not have the power to erase the consequences of that initial act that determined both their lives – which fixes him in the loss of a mother and her in the loss of her child. For both of them that loss is worse than death. Like the *Mahābhārata*, in Tagore's poem too, Karṇa points to Kuntī's fate of "being the mother of five sons" either with Karṇa or with Arjuna. She is hailed by people as the mother of five great warriors; cruel fate has also chained her to that destiny, to be mother of five – with one child irretrievably lost. Kuntī derides her fate and the inflexible punishment of *dharma* – which is not fate that is blind as in Greek tragedy, but heartless, omniscient and just. What is unknown to all is known to *dharma*, the just order to which the whole world is bound. She hails him as a brave warrior (*bir tumi, putra mor, dhanya tumi*). She recognizes his greatness in his refusal of both the personal offer of a mother's love and the material offer of the earth's kingdom. Tagore's poem ends with Karṇa's remarks – marked by an expectation of tragic cessation of efforts and desire. He says to Kuntī:

> Mother, have no fear. I tell you the Pāṇḍavas will have victory.
> On the dark tablet of the night sky I can clearly read the war's terrible end
> In this still silent moment from the infinite firmament
> A strange music enters my mind,

> Of effort undestined for victory, enterprise for action without hope
> I can see the end in peace and emptiness.
> Do not ask me to leave the side of those destined to defeat . . .
> As ever I shall remain with the side of those without success,
> without hope.
> Just as on the night of my birth you had left me,
> With the same cruel heart, leave me today in a defeat without
> luster, without glory.
> Give me only one blessing:
> That for the love of victory, or of glory or of power
> I do not leave the path [*sadgati*] of the brave.

Several aesthetic features separate Tagore's retelling of the story from its epic version. As in all parts of the *Mahābhārata*, the diegetic intelligence explores the enigmatic nature of the right way of acting: *dharma* – here the *dharma* of the woman, of the mother, of the son, of the warrior. It forces the characters to examine with a relentless fortitude what is the right thing to do for all of these roles in circumstances that alter rapidly and surprise the moral agent. Two displacements of the primary aesthetic are clear – first, in contrast with the epic telling, now dramatic human interaction is reflected not merely in the external clash of actions but in the related but different work of exploration of the interior beginnings of acts. It gives much more attention to what goes on inside the mind rather than to what goes on in the world.

Secondly, this aesthetic shift also helps in an emotional shift. The epic story, at least in this particular episode, is concerned with the *rasa* of *vīrya* (heroism) for both the masculine and the feminine figures. Karṇa exemplifies the heroism of the male in his devotion to the values of endurance and loyalty rather than the instrumental value of the kingdom. Valour is an end in itself – the mark of being an ethic in the real sense, not as means to the end of becoming a king. Karṇa is, despite his entanglement of friendship, utterly different from Duryodhana, who arranges an immense effort to have victory to maintain the kingdom he had unjustly usurped. Karṇa's life twists all straightforward relationships of right action out of shape. He pursues a disinterested goal of brave conduct of the warrior. Kuntī, on her side, followed, as far as possible in her circumstances, the feminine ideal of chastity. When too young, she was given a power she could not understand and acted out of curiosity and bore a child. Her understanding of the role of a *kṣatriya* woman forced her to abandon her child. She went to Karṇa, as much a victim of her act, and revealed to him her shame, in a desperate attempt to avert the war, as a *kṣatriya* woman

ought to do. She is sworn to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, just as she is sworn to accept the consequences of a just war. In the end, she stoically bears her fate. The epic story itself thus offers considerable complexity in the turns in Kuntī's life and illustrates the tasks of *kṣatriya* femininity distributed amongst the three central characters of Kuntī, Gāndhārī, and Draupadī.

The epic itself arranges the story to create a cognitive asymmetry between Karṇa and Arjuna as warriors – by impeding Karṇa with the disabling gift of knowledge that they are brothers – which will restrain him, while Arjuna can fight with full fury against an unmodified enemy. Arjuna is unimpeded by this knowledge, but Karṇa is fatally informed. The epic story line accumulates Karṇa's misfortunes as it moves forward. From abandonment by his mother at birth, his lack of a proper birth follows him cruelly through his illustrious life as a warrior. His training with Paraśurāma is cancelled out at the very end through the *guru*'s discovery through Karṇa's unusual fortitude that he was not a brahman and his curse that at the moment of crisis he would forget his most potent weapons. Finally, he is impeded by the very knowledge that the Pāṇḍavas are his brothers, quite apart from the promise Kuntī gets from him that he will not kill his other four brothers. Karṇa is impeded at every step, while Arjuna as a warrior is free in his anger. He can bring to the battle all his powers as a warrior, while Karṇa's resolve is burdened by his knowledge.

The radical difference between the modern translation and the epic original lies primarily in the exploration of interiority, the revealing of the interior springs of action, or their equally interior obstruction. The other fundamental difference lies in the substitution of the central point of the drama. In the *Mahābhārata* the conflict and the tragedy are all of socially defined roles – of the *kṣatriya* warrior and the *kṣatriya* mother. The transition to modernity in the Tagore poem is announced by the disappearance of the adjective *kṣatriya* in this transaction, particularly in Kuntī's discourse. Of course, the question of the warrior ideal and the path of the brave cannot be erased from the story, but the entire dramatic exchange and its deep tragic sense arises from the disruption of a more universal bond between mother and child. The remarkable feature of Tagore's reading of the story is how the one-sided portrayal of tragedy and wrong towards Karṇa in the conventional narrative is replaced – subtly but undeniably – by his depiction of a dual tragedy. The separation is as much a punishment to Kuntī as for Karṇa: indeed, as knowledge is an inextricable part of this punishment, it is more of a tragedy for Kuntī, who knows she has her son in front of her but cannot acknowledge her love for her

child – grieving for a child who is alive. Karṇa at least is shielded from this eternal grieving by his ignorance. It is the picture of Kuntī's deprivation and grief which turns this retelling into a story of a new kind.

The Logic of Narrative Change: Infra-narrative Spaces

It is said at times that Tagore averted his eyes from the grim and the cruel, and his art thrived only in the safe space of the conventionally beautiful.[7] This judgment is false in some respects. Often Tagore uses a device regularly used in retelling stories – both in the Indian and in other narrative traditions.

Suppose a story runs through several moments of narrative elaboration: the birth of a character, his involvement in a war in his youth, and his victory. Let us call these A–J–K. I assign them these specific letters because birth is a natural point of diegetic origin, and the two other moments, his reaching of heroic youth and victory in battle, are temporally close. In principle the story could have gone on till his death (Z), but the author decides, in his creative sovereignty, to close his story at that point. The long putative space that lies between J which is narrated and Z which can be narrated or inferred is what I shall call infranarrative space. This is one of the commonest narrative operations in Hindu mythic thinking. A famous example of this kind of infranarrative moment in a familiar narrative structure is the life of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*. There his birth is not narratively reported, and his prowess in war is shown when he is a grown man through brief episodes in secondary narrative branches, not in the primary line of the narration; he has an enigmatic but decisive presence at the critical moment of the war – shaping its result though absent from the actual fighting, and finally his reported death in the Mauṣalaparva. Infranarrative spaces in this story were exploited by subsequent narratives of great import – from the *Harivaṃśa* to the *Bhāgavata*. Eventually the *Bhāgavata* narrative, which uses a crucial infranarrative space of his diegetically underdetermined, unnnarrated adolescence, nearly displaces the *Mahābhārata* version of Kṛṣṇa's narrative life with a startlingly new one, shifting, as Bankimchandra showed compellingly, the entire nature of his character – from a warrior hero to an erotic one, from an incomparable figure of valour to one of love.[8] The *Bhāgavata* narrative finds a potential infranarrative space within the span of the pre-existing narrative structure – a space that exists logically but is narratively underdetermined. Before a character attains his youth, he must go through an adolescence; but that adolescence is narratively an

empty space in the *Mahābhārata*. Using that empty space, the narrator of the *Bhāgavata* invents new diegetic episodes, filling it out. That achieves an interesting effect: the new story has two statuses at the same time. Of course, it is an entirely new story in a literal sense: no one had read of these diegetic episodes ever before; but instead of being a discreet story that stands apart, it becomes a segment of narrative chain of an earlier and larger narrative and in a primitive sense accepts its frame. Between A and J, the new story can insert episodes B–C–D–F. Often the transformation of the original story is profound – in terms of its *rasa* aesthetics, or aesthetic meaning. This operation avoids the two options of radical separation or simple elaboration. Indian literary culture is teeming with instances of this kind – in all languages.

Tagore's improvisations in the *Mahābhārata* stories do not have such a radical character from the point of view of the narrative structure, inserting unprecedented episodes into a pre-existing sequence or attaching prequels or sequels. Instead what he inserts into the story is more detailed elaborations of sensibility. The poems increase narrative complexity by working on a different dimension of the story – its structure of sensibility. It alters the dramatic relation by making them more even – if not morally, at least subjectively.

The exchange between Karṇa and Kuntī is entirely transformed. The epic gives a brief description of Kuntī's revelation of Karṇa's parentage, her offer of a change of social position and the kingdom. There is no opening of the heart by either Karṇa or Kuntī. Karṇa refuses her offer curtly, because she has failed in her role as a mother. Characters are seen through their social roles of a woman from a royal household and a warrior; there is no interiority. Tagore's telling is mainly about their minds and hearts, a revelation to the other and to themselves, in the presence of the other, of yearnings they could never express. This establishes between them a new equality of human subjectivity and a strange, modern justification of feelings. If, following Bakhtin, we take self-justification as a primary mark of modern narrativity, Tagore alters the character of the story in that direction. Selection of the dramatic form helps in this effect, as the exchange is not described through the eye of an all-seeing writer who reports but does not feel the affect, but mainly from the characters' own positions. A simple but primary difference is the fact that in the epic, these are minor episodes in a vastly complicated narrative architecture. The epic simply does not have time to pause and give attention to such detail. In Tagore's poems, these episodes become the primary narrative. But the major difference lies in the exploration of interior beginnings of human action, the deep roots of what people do or fail to do within the depths of their minds

which cannot be gauged without the gift of a poetic eloquence of self-expression and self-exploration.

As academics, our understanding of texts that come inside a tradition is often vitiated by an excessive knowledge of history: at times we simply know too much to grasp the structure of aesthetic exchange in the real literary economy. Against the temptation to see these tales as derived from pre-existing and revered texts like the *Mahābhārata*, it is important to recognize the authenticity of creative writing. Simply because the story existed in the *Mahābhārata*, it does not mean that Tagore did not have to write the poem fully, that in some peculiar sense this did not require the full application of the apparatus of creative poetics. It is a new poem, a new play. On the side of reception, too, it is a text that is to be taken by its reader as a fully present, serious text – probably because often the receiver would not, unlike scholars, know the full version of the original story. For many readers of Bengali literature, their earlier skimpy knowledge of the meeting between Kuntī and Karṇa, gleaned from abridgements of the *Mahābhārata*, will be overwritten by Tagore's retelling. They would primarily receive it aesthetically from Tagore's work, not from the epic itself.[9]

Tagore's Overwriting of Epic Aesthetics

The famous proverb – what does not exist in the *Mahābhārata* does not exist in India – captures only a half truth, because neither the text *Mahābhārata* nor the India in which it is incessantly read are unchanging, frozen in time. The proverb simply expresses the deep and militant ahistoricity of the culture that surrounded it. Eternal texts like the *Mahābhārata* that defy the passage of time face a particularly acute form of the historicity of the aesthetic. Some remarkable instances of such overcoming of time through sophisticated interpretation are quite well known. The profound re-reading of the *Mahābhārata* by the school of Kashmiri aestheticians – overturning the *vīra rasa* interpretation by a *śāntarasa* one – might bear some historical connection to the end of a social order. Overwriting the figure of the epic Rāma by Tulsidas's idol of *bhakti*, or the transformation of the *vīra* and *jñānī Kṛṣṇa* into one who is *madhurādhipati* – *madhura* to an infinite degree – were radical examples of negotiation of historicity. In the case of the *Ramcaritmanas*, the entire narrative corpus of the Rāmāyaṇa is displaced from one literary-affective economy into a remarkably new one in which episodes like Kevata's tale of tying the lord into an affective obligation through *bhakti* become the iconic moments of reordering the structure of affect. The two epics become the paradigmatic cases

of this interplay between eternity and historicity – an eternity created precisely by the subtle negotiation of historical time.

The imaginative dominance of the epics never faced such peril as in modern times. The context of Tagore's re-reading is the emerging culture of modern Bengal, sharply divided between an old, traditional, peasant subaltern culture, centred on old texts like the Kāśīrāmdās *Mahābhārata*, and the powerful new culture of the modernist Westernized elite enthralled by fascination of the Western literary canon – Shakespeare, Milton, and modern lyric poetry. Even Bankim, acutely conscious of the danger of a deluge which would submerge without trace the whole aesthetic world of the past, did not make any directly literary re-presentation of the epics. Tagore's poems are particularly remarkable in this background. His two independent collections of narrative poems *Kathā* and *Kāhinī* offer a highly eclectic collection of past stories. Buddhist stories outnumber others; but what is truly remarkable is not the source but the principle. Highly defined social roles – of the merchant, the ruler, the courtesan, and the monk – figure repeatedly in these tales, but Tagore's choice focuses on more generally human affect – the story of a woman of great beauty destroyed by disease saved by a monk to whom she wanted to offer erotic love returning a deeper love to her;[10] the love of a courtesan poisoned by a secret death/sacrifice,[11] the sacrifice of a maid who bravely offers worship to Buddha when the King Ajātaśatru forbids it.[12] In all stories drawn from the deep past we find a similar operation. Narrative tension often arises in the original source stories from their social roles; but in each retelling a conflict arising from the interdictions of a social order is overwritten by a telling that focuses on general human predicaments. It is true that the *Jātaka* stories and *Mahābhārata* episodes are completely different in their aesthetic spirit. The *Mahābhārata* has a blood-splattered canvas of war and devastation; its object is the catastrophe for a whole social order; while the Buddhist stories are about individual sorrow and lonely unshared pain. Despite their wide aesthetic difference, Tagore's treatment makes them similar. Tagore selects those points in the narrative at which conflicts can be recoded in modern terms: these are not ethical dilemmas of an ancient society but ones entirely intelligible to modern readers. Paradoxically, the *Mahābhārata* can remain eternally interesting only if it is historicized.

Notes

1 *Hiranmayeṇa pātrena satyasyāpahitaṃ mukhaṃ* from the Upanishad is directly echoed in his song, *e moha ābaraṇa khule dao he*.

2 I have argued this in a paper titled 'Tagore and the aesthetics of suffering', AAS conference, Boston, 2008, unpublished.
3 As opposed to a caste ethic.
4 Kahini, Sanchayita, Visva Bharati, Kolkata, 1972, 395–403.
5 There is a slight change in the setting here from the epic, which notes Karṇa was offering his prayer in the morning and the sun became very hot, forcing Kuntī to shelter in great shadow of Karṇa's body.
6 *Devī, taba nata-netra- kiraṇa- sampāte citta vigalita mor surya-kar-ghate śaila tuṣarer sama*.
7 Tagore's own philosophical remarks about the nature of art sometimes encourage this opinion.
8 Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Krsnacaritra, Bankim Rachanabali, volume 2, Sahitya Samsad, Kolkata, 1964.
9 This takes us into an intriguing question about the 'presence' or the ordinary reader's take on the *Mahābhārata* story. That is marked by the odd fact that it is difficult at any time for an Indian to say that he knows the story or does not. The first claim will be false because most readers will be unfamiliar with the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, which is the real origin of the tale; the second will be false as well because few would be able to say that they did not know what happened in that section of the epic.
10 'Abhisar', Katha, Sanchayita, 341–342.
11 'Parishodh', Katha, Sanchayita, 343–352.
12 'Pujarini', Katha, Sanchayita, 339–340.

11

ANSWERABILITY BETWEEN LIVED LIFE AND LIVING TEXT

Chronotopicity in Finding Agency in the *Mahābhārata*

Lakshmi Bandlamudi

> Draupadī continued, "I, therefore, regard, O King, that the time hath come to thee to put forth thy might! Unto those Kurus the covetous sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra who injure us always, the present is not the time for forgiveness! It behoveth thee to put forth thy might. The humble and forgiving person is disregarded; while those that are fierce persecute others. He, indeed, is a king who hath recourse to both, each according to its time!' "
>
> —*Vana Parva*, Section XVIII

> Yudhiṣṭhira said, "Anger is the slayer of men and is again their prosperor. Know this, O thou possessed of great wisdom, that anger is the root of all prosperity and all adversity. O thou beautiful one, he that suppresseth his anger earneth prosperity. That man, again, who always giveth way to anger, reapeth adversity from his fierce anger. It is seen in this world that anger is the cause of destruction of every creature. How then can one like me indulge his anger which is so destructive of the world?"
>
> —*Vana Parva*, Section XXIX[1]

The *Vana Parva* in the *Mahābhārata* records one of the most fiercely contested debates on ethical action between a humiliated and enraged wife and a cautious and sympathetic husband – both philosophers in their own right – offering cogent arguments to substantiate their position. Draupadī argues for the ethic of rage and retaliation, while Yudhiṣṭhira argues for the ethic of restraint and reconciliation. In these

lengthy debates we hear both the parties displaying incredible confidence and conviction, and yet both give a fair hearing to another's viewpoint – an amazing inter-listening occurs with interpenetration of voices – and thus what we hear is dialogue par excellence. Only in a genuine dialogue is one capable of affirming the agency and identity of self even while acknowledging the agency of the other who holds views that are diametrically opposed.

What then is the significance of selfhood, agency and dialogue, both within this grand epic and in our orientation towards this eternal text? These constructs are at the very core of the epic text, says V. S. Sukthankar, who was instrumental in compiling the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*. In his well-known work *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, Sukthankar identifies three levels from which the text could be approached. The lowest level is the "material or mundane"[2] – where the focus is purely on the storyline – a "matter-of-fact"[3] viewpoint and hence the focus would be on the descriptive aspects of the characters and the ongoing conflict between cousins and other characters. The next level is the ethical plane, and hence the epic would be seen as a conflict between *Dharma* and *Adharma*. The third and the most important for Sukthankar is the metaphysical plane – where understanding goes beyond facts and beyond right and wrong – to move into a "philosophy of the Self, which may be regarded as an attempt at the synthesis of life."[4] Approaching the epic text from this higher plane, we observe several dialogic relationships – between self (*Nara*, human) and the Self (*Narāyaṇa*, Divine) and the physical and the metaphysical and more importantly *lived life* confronting the *Living Text*. I propose extending this line of argument and suggest an integrated approach – between the physical, ethical and metaphysical – not as a synthesized whole but as partners in an ongoing dialogue, because Sukthankar, after all, calls for a "synthesis of life" in order to develop a "philosophy of the Self," and that would not be possible without bringing in the consciously lived life of the self.

I like to see the engagement with the *Mahābhārata* as entering a hall of mirrors, where we see ourselves seeing ourselves. Being in the midst of infinite images, it is an opportunity to find the Self in the self – the Infinite in the finite. However, this process is not so automatic, for it requires context, connection and tools to interpret the perceptual field. For a disembodied, de-historicized and de-contextualized self, the entry into the hall of mirrors might not go beyond excitement and bewilderment. In a stand-alone mundane or ethical plane, we are only left with information overload in the former, and in the latter there

is only affirmation or repudiation, and in both these levels the self is disconnected from the text and, as a result, does not take ownership or responsibility for the interpretive act and *Kāla* – time doesn't necessarily stretch into the past and into the future. A common expression about the epic in practically every Indian language is that it is as modern as ancient. Indeterminacies, ambiguities and unfinalizability are the tell-tale themes of this epic, and to give a nuanced, context-dependent interpretation, the epic text demands a much broader episteme. Traditional oral narrations of the epic managed to show how the ancient addressed the concerns of the modern and how the Great Time responded to the specifics of the historical time, thus making the characters in the story, the narrators and the listeners active agents in the meaning-making ventures. Today we live in a digitally mediated world, and thus we have entered the tele-epic age, and never before in human history have there been so many held captive to the narrative of so few. How has the digital world altered or even severed the fundamental relationship between the epic text and the readers/listeners? Has it brought about the demise of a "living text" or is the living text disconnected from lived life? If so, how and why should the connection be re-established? I propose the idea of "answerability" – taken from Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue – as an effective way of addressing these concerns.

Answerability: The Essence of Dialogue Between Life and Text

Dialogue and dialogic relations characterize the *Mahābhārata* in every dimension. The very narrative technique of the epic text is an extraordinary form of nested dialogues – what is heard by one is reported in a dialogue with another, and this dialogue is recollected in yet another dialogue and so on. The *Ādi Parva* begins with Ugraśravā narrating to the curious sages assembled in the forest of Naimiṣa about how Vaiśaṃpāyana narrated the epic text, composed by Vyāsa, during the snake sacrifice performed by Janamejaya. Therefore the text never comes to us as narrated by Vyāsa; instead, the events, the narration, the remembrance and interpretation come in the form of a series of conversations with questions and answers. These are not mere exchanges in space; instead we see the inter-mingling of multiple temporalities that creates a dynamic field to draw the reader into the text for yet another dialogue.

If the structure of the text with its endless dialogues invites participation, the history of the text also shows that its open-ended nature

made contact with every geographical location and historical time period that it traversed to produce bewildering variations from the very beginning as Sukthankar observes, "firstly, *the text was originally committed to memory and recited freely*; secondly, *different rhapsodists recited differently*."[5] In its long life, this fluid epic text has been flowing in different cultural spaces and has picked up the trends and meanings in each region, thus growing luxuriously and diversifying into multiple versions. Furthermore, having passed through various historical periods and traditions, the epic text also gained incredible semantic mobility, that is, even after a plot has conveyed its range of meanings, there remains an inexhaustible array of other possible meanings. Thus, the text seems to serve multiple functions, as Lotman[6] would suggest – it is a repository of valuable meanings, a generator of new meanings, a condenser of past meanings and perhaps also a cleanser of old meanings that have run their course.

The epic on one hand is *Pūrna* – complete text, emblematic of the famous prayer verse *Pūrṇamadaḥ Pūrṇamidam . . .* from *Iśāvāsya Upaniṣad* as it claims *Yannehāsti na Tadkvacit* – "what is not here is nowhere else"[7] – therefore it seems to outlast time and outmeasure space, and yet in each encounter the text invites reconstruction and reinterpretation and even demands in a Nietzschean sense a re-evaluation of values. The incredible diversification of the text is well documented,[8] and therefore, like floating syllables of sky, multiple meanings of any given plot fill the cultural atmosphere. Never innocent and never so pure, epics are not just repositories of tradition but sites for creating contentious traditions. However, while the *Mahābhārata* does not espouse absolutes, it does not vouch for anything-goes relativism either; instead it calls for a context-dependent, history-sensitive nature of ethical action. While *Dharma* in the Rāmāyaṇa is unwavering, the *Mahābhārata* demonstrates greater subtleties and complexities.

How does the concept of "answerability" facilitate the discovery of highly differentiated, provisional and positional nature of ethical action? Grounded in the over-arching framework of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin proposed answerability as a valid and justifiable link between art and life and other relations like author/hero, text/reader and past/present. "Art and life are not one," says Bakhtin, and yet they are not separate either "but must become united in myself – in the unity of my answerability."[9] Bakhtin avers that only such a unity within the self guarantees metamorphosis, co-authorship and responsible interpretation. Whereas external mechanical links may sequence and connect disparate elements, "but in themselves they remain alien to each other."[10] Art in any form cannot just provide inspiration and ignore the prosaic

of life, and life in turn cannot remain ineffectual by not answering itself with what has been "experienced and understood in art." The humble prose of life is no match for the mighty art, and yet within the individual, they must converge, confront and exchange ideas to achieve the unity of answerability. Bakhtin observes that the relationship between art and life must go beyond mutual answerability to "mutual liability for blame."[11] The *Mahābhārata* is not about purity, since it captures the pathos of human existence in its most sordid form and seems to suggest that it is one of the most insoluble disharmonies of existence. The strife must not be construed as a form of pessimistic or sceptical nihilism – as if nothing is worthwhile – but the perennial conflict draws our attention to the unfinalizability of ideas and ideals and unsystematizability of human existence. The epic text in Nietzsche's words points out "*the ambiguous* character of our *modern world* – the very same symptoms could point to *decline* and to *strength*."[12] Every moment in the epic presents bewildering complexities, and there is built-in paradox in every character. If the vow taken by Bhīṣma brought him glory, the very same vow became his trap during the Great War, and if the charitable nature of Karṇa brought him honour, that very nature duly exploited by others weakened his position in the battlefield. The call for answerability and liability between life and text comes from the ambiguous zones that dominate the text. Generation after generation hears this call to serve as a cog to set the *Cakra* (as the text is often referred to) in motion so that the self and the text may evolve in a synergistic manner. Answerability as a form of relationship between self and text ensures the dynamic evolution of both.

Tropes and Chronotopes in the Discourses on the *Mahābhārata*

Sage Vyāsa does not and perhaps did not intend to have ultimate semantic authority on each and every plot, and neither did he finalize the characterological profiles of the heroes and heroines. Vyāsa is certainly the father of the epic – literally and figuratively – and yet he takes an unusual authorial position. As J. L. Mehta observes, Vyāsa is a "Strange absentee author, whose work carries no signature"[13] (2009 p. 80); instead, he calls for co-signatories. Therefore what we are concerned with is not "the text" but the "life of the text" in all its myriad forms – that is, discourses on the *Mahābhārata*. The discourse says as much about the epic and its characters as it says about the structures of consciousness with which we construct and grasp them. A narrative is not a neutral discursive form that represents "real" and "mythical"

events; it entails ontological and epistemic choices in drawing the range of semantic possibilities and sketching the image of characters, and these choices have distinct ideological implications. How does the discourse mark out the human experience and state what is at stake and define its contours and display the kind of relationships that exist between characters? It is not logic that can adequately address these questions but the movement of rhetorical tropes in the discourse that gives a feel for the worldview presented. The tropological theory of discourse emerging from Giambattista Vico's "New Science" and the theory of chronotopic motifs coming from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novelistic discourse provide us with a way of classifying different kinds of discourses: in Vicodian analysis by reference to the linguistic modes that predominate and in Bakhtinian analysis to the spatio-temporal configurations in the discourse. Narrators and readers of any version of the epic text must wander in the "semiosphere,"[14] and in this meaning-making sphere they must select from the surplus of available meanings in culture and history to construct a discourse that does not necessarily move in a predictable logical manner but in a "tropological" manner. According to historian Hayden White, "troping is the soul of discourse,"[15] because it is both "a movement *from* one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a connection between things,"[16] and this movement of the rhetorical tropes is the process of rendering the unfamiliar, distant and ancient into the familiar, immediate and contemporary terrain. Discussing Giambattista Vico's philosophy, White explains that transition from one rhetorical trope to another in the discourse or the stagnation at one trope signifies human and cultural consciousness. Each transitional phase has a distinct view on human nature and social relations.

The transition from metaphor to metonymy signifies a movement from a theocratic to an aristocratic society. The former is characterized by divine law and divine reasoning, and human being is conceived in poetic terms, thereby according humans with no agency. Therefore, if the dominant trope is metaphor in the discourse on the epic, then one conceives Lord Kṛṣṇa as the grand and sole orchestrator of the events in the epic, and all other characters are understood as mere puppets in his hands, thereby affirming the divine plan. If and when the discourse moves to the metonymic mode, we enter into an aristocratic society in which social relations between the rulers and the ruled are arranged on a hierarchic plane, and this arrangement is seen as a natural order. In this heroic world characters are endowed with some attributes of agency, and very over-simplified cause-and-effect relationships are drawn. In this worldview, certain classes of people enjoy unquestioned privileged

position at the expense of weaker members of the society, and this arrangement is often seen as fixed and axiomatic in any culture. Therefore the mode of reasoning is that the weak are bound to pay a price if and when they try to challenge and disrupt this order. If the movement of the tropes stops at metonymy in the discourse on the *Mahābhārata*, it is likely to suggest that Draupadī exercised poor judgment in laughing directly in Duryodhana's face when he slips into the pond in the *Māyā Mahal*; and having provoked a powerful man, she invited his wrath, and subsequently an attempt is made to disrobe her in public during the dice game. By metonymic reductions, Draupadī is attributed putative causal agency and wilful activity, although the agency does not come with freedom and spontaneity, and hence her actions are rebuked or at least questioned for crossing the circumscribed space and disrupting the power equations. Duryodhana's behaviour and response may very well be unjustified, but ruthless action by the powerful is seen as the very essence of the world of heroes. In the synecdochic mode there is a movement from the world of heroes to the world of humans, where democratic consciousness operates, and therefore conflicts in the epic are framed not as between the powerful and the weak but between justice and injustice. In this increasingly abstract mode "particulars are elevated into universals"[17] and parts into whole. Therefore justice and injustice are defined according to some abstract universal principles, assuming that they lend themselves to rational reasoning. Although the world of categorical abstracts would like to boast about its supremacy, it invariably displays a built-in paradox, as the concrete and the particulars defy its postulates. The language of the abstract is monological, finalized and unambiguous, while the concrete is dramatic, dialogical and full of ambiguities and ambivalences. The rupture inevitably paves way for irony that calls for reflection and meditation – a way of developing a "Philosophy of the Self" that Sukthankar calls for – in engaging with the epic text.

In the evolution of consciousness, the *Mahābhārata* is emblematic of irony, where language, ethics, philosophy and selfhood become topics for reflection, as there is an awareness of possibility of feigning or dissimulating. Furthermore, we enter the human world in the *Dvāpara Yuga* of the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Tretā Yuga* of the Rāmāyaṇa, the God-head *Narāyaṇa* takes the form of *Nara* and adheres to strict *Dharma* and fulfils his duty, thus setting a good example for fellow humans to follow, whereas the God-head offers tools, counsel and partnership to *Nara* in the *Mahābhārata* period. Therefore, seeking guidance from *Nārāyaṇa*, humans are expected to fight their battles to establish ethical validity. In this period, humans must not abide

by some phantom, abstract ethics but find what is ethically valid at a given time in a given space. Irony is palpable when the brave warrior Arjuna becomes despondent in the battlefield and Kṛṣṇa counsels on the ethical validity of warfare. However, the warrior neither operates with impunity in the battlefield, nor is he exempt from reflection and self-interrogation. Vico says, "philosophy should make the virtues understood in their idea, and by dint of reflection thereon, if men were without virtue they should at least be ashamed of their vices. Only so can peoples prone to ill-doing be held to their duty."[18] Having made a promise to protect Hastināpur at any cost to his father, Bhīṣma finds himself fighting on the side of *Adharma*, and it is only by bearing the brunt of guilt and reflecting on his trappings that his dutiful action is validated.

It is instructive to note the interconnections between structure, content and linguistic style of a text and the philosophy and worldview that it expounds. For instance, the Rāmāyaṇa is *Ādi Kāvya* – poetry – packed with literary flourish, and its hero abides by strict *Dharma* and unflinchingly fulfils his duty. This unwavering ideal commands awe and devotion and promotes poetic consciousness. Poetry carries with it distinct linguistic and prosodic features, making the Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki more or less unified. Furthermore, writers from every Indian language have rewritten the Rāmāyaṇa to display their literary skills. The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, is *itihāsa – so indeed it was* – history that carries within it several embedded histories. The text defies the rules of any form of literary genre and hence does not lend itself to strict linguistic analyses, but clearly it directs one to move into meta-linguistics. On one hand this epic is *Pañcama Veda* – embodying tradition and heritage, and yet it demands transformation and innovation in the interpretive act, making it a site for both discovery and creativity to promote historical consciousness. Perhaps it is in this disjunction that life enters the living text.

The tropological theory of discourse as discussed by Vico and the function of chronotopes in discourse as discussed by Bakhtin serve similar functions. These are sharp analytical tools to determine the worldview presented in the text and the view of the world about the text. Bakhtin points out that in a discourse all the

> abstract elements – philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect – gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope.[19]

Chronotopes determine the image of a character and the meaning of a plot. Draupadī's image in the epic as a whole and in particular in the dice game is incredibly multi-dimensional: she has been pawned in a game played by men and lost, and as a defiant woman she seeks explanation from the kingdom on the validity of the transaction, and the authorities not only fail to answer her question, but some among them even question her audacity to question and forcibly drag her into the assembly hall, only to humiliate and eventually assault her. Only a complex weave of chronotopic motifs can capture the image of – an objectified and victimized woman, a shrewd, intelligent woman posing a brilliant legal question to the kingdom, a vulnerable woman, a horrified daughter-in-law, a faithful but angry wife and a sincere devotee – all in one person. Draupadī's question in the *Kuru Sabhā* was unanswered in the epic and remains unanswered in the literary-cultural history of India. However, her character has been ascribed with subterranean and complex evaluations – from a *pativratā*, a faithful wife, to a harlot for legitimizing polyandry. Thus, she is a palimpsest and a contradiction bearing all the marks of history, and inevitably the gendered chronotopes she inhabits stretch into all the temporal zones – the past, present and the future.

Chronotopes speak as much about the *world represented* in the text as the *world re-presenting* the text. Bakhtin points out that the very process of exchange between the worldview of the epic and the world's view of the epic is itself chronotopic and refers to it as "a special *creative* chronotope"[20] within which the complex histories of life and text encounter each other.

Moral Dilemmas – Agency and Answerability

Moral dilemmas by their very nature involve making difficult choices, where every choice becomes questionable. If the choice were clear-cut it wouldn't be a moral dilemma. In order to act one must be guided by some ethical principles, but with a full knowledge that these principles fall short when faced with the concrete situation. Unless one resorts to passivity and runs away from the dilemma, one must exercise the full force of their agency and accept responsibility for the choices made and experience the consequences, even if they are unjustified. The characters in the epic and the readers who grapple with these uneasy and irreconcilable dilemmas feel this irony. Abstract philosophies in ethics would like us to believe that universal principles of justice and morality can lead us towards the right path and pull us out of the

maze.[21] Every moment and every character in the *Mahābhārata* poses a challenge to this so-called "rational moral system."

As an alternate to the rationalist model that falls short in grappling with bewildering complexities of the moral dilemmas in the *Mahābhārata*, B.K. Matilal suggests that we see the individual in ethical action as an "imaginative poet"[22] who fully understands and appreciates the "contingency of human situation."[23] Matilal writes,

> So Kṛṣṇa allows for flexibility in *dharma*. But this flexibility never means the "anything goes" kind of morality. He is the *poet* who accepts the constraints of metres, verses and metaphors. But he is also the strong poet who has absolute control over them. He uses metres, verses and metaphors to produce the music which you cannot but admire. He governs from above but does not dictate.[24]

How then does one act as a moral agent with courage and conviction and yet not wear the mask of self-righteousness? How does the imaginative poet act amidst constraints and compose a persuasive moral argument with the available tools? The idea of "Answerability" from Bakhtin's "Philosophy of the Act" provides a way of achieving this delicate balance. Bakhtin had very little faith in abstract "ought to be" or phantom ethics, as he asserts that there is "no aesthetic ought, scientific ought and – beside them – and ethical ought; there is only that which is aesthetically, theoretically, socially valid,"[25] and for him the "ought" achieves validity only within the unity of answerable life. Bakhtin argues that the transcendental ethics is totally divorced from answerable consciousness, because it is elemental and unwilling and incapable of linking the universal to the particulars. Furthermore, rationalism ignores the subjective and the psychological, whereas the answerable consciousness, Bakhtin explains, "understands the ought of his performed act, that is, *not* the abstract law of his act, but the actual concrete ought conditioned by his unique place in the given context of the ongoing event."[26]

Let us consider the case of Kuntī revealing the secret of his birth to Karṇa right before the Great War. Was it maternal instinct and prolonged guilt that led her to the son she abandoned, or was it selfish interest to protect her legitimized sons, and in either of these situations she is not beyond reproach. But a simple repudiation – assuming that her motives were completely sinister – or a simple affirmation – assuming that the nobility of maternal instinct drove a

mother to reclaim her abandoned child – are both inadequate in making sense of this very poignant drama. Abstract ethics only offer possible judgments, while actual judgment requires consideration to the "emotional-volitional compellentness"[27] of the act. If we see Kuntī's action as impelled by her need to answer, apologize and also take a chance to get Karṇa to switch camps, then we go beyond phantom ethics and enter the realm of finding ethical validity of her action. Knowing fully well that Karṇa abides by the ethic of loyalty to Duryodhana and knowing fully well that she has no bargaining capacity as a mother to place any demands on the child she abandoned, Kuntī ventures out to reveal the truth about Karṇa's origins. Although she silently witnessed all the insults that were hurled upon Karṇa all his life, when war becomes imminent, she could perhaps no longer justify her silence to herself. The demand for "Answerability" became very strong. Furthermore, Kuntī must have had the premonition about Karṇa's demise in the war, as he was on the side of *Adharma*. At this point Kuntī inhabits a chronotope that demands ethical action. Even under these difficult circumstances, she was strategically clever to approach Karṇa at an early morning hour when he never declines anyone who asks anything of him.

Abstract ethics only condemn or condone an action and treat Being as a given, whereas the ethic of answerability considers life as an ongoing event amidst the cultural mores – with all the sanctions and prohibitions to understand the uniqueness of lived life and psychological disposition to understand the factors that propel the individual into action. Judging a character is only an integral part of a larger framework that seeks to understand. Kuntī, as an impetuous teenager, invoked the *mantra* given to her by Sage Durvāsā to summon Sūrya and, on becoming an unwed teenage mother, she became terrified at the prospect of the social disapproval and hence quickly abandoned her new-born infant. As a mother, she bore the burden of guilt and silently held the secret for a long time, but when she arrived at a juncture in her life that demanded action, she gathered the strength to own up to her mistake. Interestingly, it is important to recognize that Kuntī was not the only character in the epic to have a child out of wedlock. The father of the epic – Sage Vyāsa – was born out of wedlock, but his mother Satyavatī was not secretive about it, and Vyāsa did not face the stigma that Karṇa faced. Therefore, the contradictory forces in the epic and in the culture at large and the selective impact they have on specific characters are given due consideration in the ethics of answerability.

Feeling the Text – Composing the Self

When I think about the problem of achieving metamorphosis between the ancient and the present, the text and the life, the following verse from *Iśa Upaniṣad* comes to mind as a suitable emblem:

> *tadejati tannaijati taddūre tadvantike*
> *tadantarasya sarvasya tadu sarvasya bāhyatah* ‖ 5 ‖
> That moves and That moves not:
> That is far and the same is near:
> That is within all this and
> That also is outside all this.
> *Iśa Upaniṣad*, Stanza 5[28]

Although the verse is meant to explain the paradoxical nature of reality, it says much about the *Mahābhārata* (the known) and the self (the knower) and the essential unity between them and the necessity of diverse play in their partnership. The epic's open-endedness seeks movement even while affirming the stable Vedic heritage. The *Mahābhārata* is so far – it is the timeless past, the ancient past, and yet it is so near and so present, and like a mirror reflects everything that is immediate and close. It is the "grand story of Bharat" and yet can talk to various tales from different lands – those faraway tales and the current emerging ones. All the contemporary problems are "inside" the *Mahābhārata*, and yet to recognize and understand them fully, one must look "outside" of it. The epic seeks to participate in the intellectual galaxy. Knowledge of it is not so automatic; the "self" must intervene to make connections between the "insides" of the epic and the "outside" world. The intervention is not *ahistorical* – several histories converge – literary, cultural and individual histories converge and diverge to reveal and create knowledge about all of them.

If the *Mahābhārata* is a mirror that reflects the image of the self – embedded in cultural and historical forces – the question then is how does the self interpret the image and the mirror? In this section, I want to briefly discuss findings from my recent work on the "Dialogics of Self, the *Mahābhārata* and Culture" [29] (Bandlamudi 2010) – which explored the dynamics between readers and text – to make a case for answerability and dialogic consciousness. The study explored the complexity of cultural matrices within which individuals locate themselves and the text they seek to interpret and how and with what cultural materials and tools do they construct their identities and out of which

cultural and intellectual histories do they achieve the characterological profiles of the characters in the *Mahābhārata*. The study was designed to explore the transactions between *life* and *literary text*, that is, how do we tell stories about our lives and how does life enter into the stories we read. Select plots from B. R. Chopra's television production of the *Mahābhārata* were chosen to view, debate and interpret by a dyad, and they were Draupadī's *svayaṃvara* scene, the *māyā mahal* scene, the *dice game* and the dialogue between Kuntī and Karṇa in which the secret of their relationship is admitted.

Focusing on the temporal and dramatic dimensions and chronotopic motifs that reveal the image of a person and the nature of his relationship to the world around him in life stories, I identified seven categories of self – the Traveler, the Biographer, the Clan Self, the Seeker, the Scriptural Self, the Gendered Self and finally the Dialogic Self.

The hero of the travel novel/narrative is very much like a modern-day traveler who hops from one place to another and reports his detailed observations about various social groups, physical surroundings and demographics of the place. The image of self is quite indistinguishable, and the self stands against the backdrop of an equally static world, and hence the narrative is devoid of any temporal categories. The Travelers describe themselves as being always on a fact-finding mission, and they assume that meanings are self-evident and are contained in the events and hence make strong claims of neutrality. For the Traveler, engagement with the epic text is a form of travel to a geographic location – Indian space in contrast to the Western space he inhabits, and/or a temporal zone – an ancient world as opposed to the modern world he lives in, and these divisions and contrasts are rather rigid. The Travelers view the epic text as a relic in a museum that is displayed in a glass cabinet, establishing a strict boundary between the self and the text.

The Biographers narrate their life stories based on the "idea" of a "right track of life" or "path of life" that they believe is grounded in some time-honoured virtues. The lived life is subordinated to fixed ideals, and hence in engaging with the epic text, the Biographer becomes reactionary, emotional and evaluative. If the Traveler's brand of monologism is *realism* – that is reality exists out there – the Biographer's motto is *idealism*, and in both the conditions dialogue becomes impossible, because the former wears the mask of neutrality, while the latter swears by abstract ideals. While the Traveler concentrates on facts and the Biographer on ideals, the Clan Self sees the individual from the vantage point of heritage, and therefore they assume that societies are demarcated by class and caste and assume that the hierarchic

organization of differences is not only a reality but also a "natural" order of things in society. In these three categories of self, the movement of tropes in the narrative on the epic doesn't go beyond metaphor and metonymy.

The Seeker is a classic Piagetian/Hegelian subject who gives a progressive developmental tale that gradually ascends from ignorance to knowledge. The journey is not smooth; it is full of upheavals, self-doubt and experimentation, with various schools of thought, and the Seekers firmly believe that the tools of rationality and science eventually leads them to true form of knowledge. Therefore, their task is to sift through the surface manifestations of reality to discover the deep, hidden truth – a unified, fixed and universal philosophy – in order to learn, think and act. For the Seekers, the story of the *Mahābhārata* is only surface noise, and they show very little interest in the dramatic element of the tales, and they find it frustrating that the rapidly shifting multiple truths defy their rationalist grid.

The categories of self, discussed thus far, engage in uni-directional single-voiced discourse, and the following three categories – the Scriptural Self, the Gendered Self and the Dialogic Self – engage in vari-directional multi-voiced discourse. The Scriptural Self is the quintessential Indian storyteller, who cares as much about the narrative truth as the historical truth, and hence to make sense of one story, he invokes several other stories – from the literary canon, personal life and cultural life at large – and through the inter-textual exercise he explores various semantic possibilities with deep appreciation for drama. The Gendered Self sees the world through the lens of gender relations and inequality and is therefore acutely sensitive to contradictions and ambiguities in the lives of women, because no cultural space and historical period has been "patriarchy free" – only the forms of manifestation change – and hence they see the truth value in documenting forms of domination that result in grief, rage and damage and forms of resistance that led to success in mitigating tyranny. The Dialogic Self constructs a story of emerging self alongside a rapidly changing world with all the necessities and contingencies. These three categories of self freely roam the "semiosphere" to bring to life numerous dormant meanings in the text, and through the lived lives, they answer to the living text. Monologic voices seek self-affirmation at any cost, while dialogicality leads to self-realization, and the former seeks closure and certainty, while the latter recognizes that the epic text is interminable and lived life is too murky for neat categorization.

A Few Concluding Remarks on an Inconclusive Text

It would seem to be an oxymoron to offer concluding remarks on an inconclusive text, but the philosophy of dialogue offers some persuasive explanations of the necessity of closure and openness in an ongoing dialogue. Bakhtin introduces two opposite constructs that play an important role in the dialogical world – one is "rhythm" that expresses momentary closure – and the other is the very same rhythm that also leaves a "loophole" for future possibilities. Like the metric pulse of percussion instruments in classical Indian music, rhythm in Bakhtin's system is the "axiological ordering of what is present-on-hand."[30] Rhythm does more than that; it is a temporary shelter from the open and risk-laden future. If the interpretive act had no rhythm, it would then descend to dangerous relativism. That is why the centripetal and centrifugal forces in the *Mahābhārata* demand answerability from lived life as a form of rhythmic closure.

The location and the meaning of the past reveal themselves not in stasis but as a perennial flow, and that is why we cannot arrest this flow. At best, we can add to the reservoir of meanings with our answerability. It is worthwhile to remember what Nietzsche said about the dangers of leaving out the present in engaging with the past.

> Antiquarian history itself degenerates from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by fresh life of the present. Its piety withers away, the habit of scholarliness continues without it and rotates in egoistic self-satisfaction around its own axis.[31]

To antiquate the great epic text amounts to operating with an "Egyptian mummified consciousness" because all concepts are rendered dead.[32]

There is neither a first word nor a last word about the *Mahābhārata* – it is *Anādi* – and the dialogic possibilities are innumerable. The epic text preserves and protects valuable meanings of the past and discards ones with no future and lends itself for generating newer meanings in the present. When and where the hidden meanings of the past are brought to the surface is an open question; perhaps they will reappear at the right place at the right time; as Bakhtin would say, "Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. The problem of *great time*."[33] Perhaps it is in the answerability between *lived life* and *Living Text* that meanings from the past, present and the yet-to-come future are likely to have their homecoming festival.

Notes

1 See *The Mahabharata, Vol. II. Sabha Parva and Vana Parva, Part I*., Kisari Mohan Ganguli (trans), Fifth edition, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd., 1990.
2 V. S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998, p. 121.
3 Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, p. 121.
4 Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, p. 121.
5 V. S. Sukthankar, Prologomena [*To the critical Edition of Adiparvan, Book 1 of the Mahabharata*] Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933, p. LXXVI
6 I.M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
7 Swargarohanika Parva, Section V.
8 See series of articles in books edited by T.S. Rukmani (2005), T.R.S. Sharma (2009) and Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty (2009).
9 M.M. Bakhtin, V. Liapunov, (trans), M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (eds), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M .M. Bakhtin*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 2
10 M.M. Bakhtin, V. Liapunov, (trans), M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (eds), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, p. 1.
11 M.M. Bakhtin, V. Liapunov, (trans), M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (eds), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, p. 1.
12 F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, New York: Vintage Books, 1967, #110.
13 J. L. Mehta, 'Dvaipayana, Poet of Being and Becoming', in *Reflections and Variations on The Mahabharata*, T.R.S. Sharma (ed), New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009, p. 80.
14 I.M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
15 H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 2.
16 White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, p. 2.
17 G. Vico, T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch (trans), *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1744/1984, #407.
18 Vico, Bergin and Fisch (trans), *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, #1101.
19 M.M. Bakhtin, C. Emerson & M. Holquist (trans), M. Holquist. (ed), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 250.
20 M.M. Bakhtin, C. Emerson and M. Holquist (trans), M. Holquist (ed), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p. 254.
21 See *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, edited by Bimal Krishna Matilal, New Delhi: Motilal Banrsidass, 1989.
22 B. K. Matilal, 'Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics', In B. K. Matilal (ed), *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1989, p. 18.
23 Matilal, 'Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics', p. 18.
24 Matilal, 'Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics', p. 18.

25 M.M. Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (V. Liapunov, Trans.), V. Liapunov & M. Holquist (Eds.) Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, p. 5.
26 Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 30.
27 Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, p. 59.
28 *The Upanishads*. Sri Aurobindo (trans & comm), Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2000.
29 See for details L. Bandlamudi, *Dialogics of Self, The Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History*, London: Anthem Press, 2010.
30 M.M. Bakhtin, V. Liapunov, (trans), M. Holquist and V. Liapunov (eds), *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 117.
31 F. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 75.
32 F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols / The Anti-Christ*, New York: Penguin Books, 1968.
33 M.M. Bakhtin, V.W. McGee (tran), C. Emerson and M. Holquist (eds), *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 170.

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12

DROṆA IN THE EKALAVYA EPISODE IN SĀRALĀ *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

B. N. Patnaik[1]

I. Sāralā and his *Mahābhārata*

Sāralā Mahābhārata is part of the great tradition of our regional-language *Mahābhāratas*. This tradition did not begin with the fifteenth-century Odia poet, Sāralā Dāsa or Dās, but he has a special place in it – he is the first who wrote all the eighteen *parvas* (cantos) of the *Mahābhārata* in a regional language. He didn't translate *Vyāsa Mahābhārata*; none in this tradition did. Sāralā is celebrated as the *ādi kavi* (the first poet) of Odia literature whose poetic works started the rich tradition of Odia *purāṇic* literature. Of the three *purāṇas* that he composed, *Mahābhārata* is unquestionably his most acclaimed, most creative and most profound work and is popularly known as *Sāralā Mahābhārata*.

There isn't much one knows about Sāralā. No one in his times wrote about him, presumably because he didn't matter. Therefore, for any information about his life, one is left with only his own literary work. But in literature there is the formidable problem of figuring out what constitutes fact and what fiction. About himself, Sāralā says in the manner of a *jātismara* (one who remembers one's previous births) that he was a gatekeeper of Bhagavān Śiva in Kailash and, because of some transgression on his part, had been cursed by the god Ganeśa to be born in the mortal world four times. He knew that in order to return to Śiva loka, he had to narrate the story of Viṣṇu in each birth. He asserts that his present birth, as Siddheśwara Paridā in the village Jhankada, is his third. He says that he called himself Sāralā Dās after he received the grace of the presiding deity of his village: the goddess Sāralā. For him, narrating the story of the Kuru clan was only an excuse to tell the supreme god's story in the form of the doings of his *avatāra*, Kṛṣṇa. Thus as he retold the ancient narrative, he creatively fused into

it episodes from at least *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Harivaṃśa* and *Skanda Purāṇa*. In his *Mahābhārata*, thus, Bālī of *Rāmāyaṇa*, wanting mokṣa, was born as Kirātasena, the invincible tribal king. His desire was fulfilled when Kṛṣṇa, the most complete manifestation of Bhagavān Narāyaṇa, severed his head with Sudarśanacakra. Now Bālī's son, Aṃgada, was born as Jarā, the śabara, to avenge the killing of his father by Rāma, and Rāma had granted his wish. But unlike Kirātasena, he had no memory of his earlier birth and could not therefore relate to his becoming the immediate cause of Kṛṣṇa's departure from the mortal world. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* enters into this episode in the form of Narāyaṇa strongly disapproving his *avatāra*'s staying in the mortal world longer than necessary and asking him to destroy his clan and return to Him post haste.

There is a distinct echo of *Rāmāyaṇa* in the episode of the killing of Karṇa as well. As Arjuna cuts off Karṇa's head, a new head appears. Just as Vibhīṣaṇa told the bewildered Rāma how to kill Rāvaṇa, Sahadeva, in Sāralā's narrative, told Kṛṣṇa how to kill Karṇa. If *Harivaṃśa* enters Sāralā's magnum opus in the form of Kṛṣṇa's education in Śāntīpanī (better known as Śāndipanī) *āśrama* and his *gurudakṣiṇā dakṣiṇā*, the clear imprint of *Skanda Purāṇa* can be seen in *Musali Parva* as the poet deals with Kṛṣṇa's emergence as Shri Jagannātha in Puri. In his retelling, he had innovatively implemented the supremacy of Kṛṣṇa, an idea that found arguably its clearest expression in Odia literature some years after, as Jagannath Dasa wrote in his Bhagavata: *kari karāu thāe muhin / mo binu āna gati nāhi* (I do and get done i.e., I am the agent, I am the cause) / To me there is no alternative). The *avatāra* became a pervasive presence in the narrative; he was the real agent of everything: because of him the Pāṇḍavas escaped the fire of the *lakṣa* (lac) palace, and Arjuna won the archery contest. Because of his *aṃśa* (aspect), Arjuna was invincible in war, Bhīma felled Duryodhana with his, not his own, mace and Yudhiṣṭhira could go to *svarga* without undergoing death because he had willed so.

If one sets aside the poet's account in *alaukika* terms, one could ask why Sāralā chose to transform the classical narrative *Mahābhārata* into a *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. Was it because the poet was a great devotee of Narāyaṇa and, as such, it was only natural for him to narrate his *avatāra*'s doings? Was it because he knew that the doings of Kṛṣṇa would appeal to his simple, non-elite audience a great deal more than those of the Kurus and that they would listen to his *Mahābhārata* as they would a sacred text? One writes for one's audience and gets encouragement and satisfaction from their enjoyment and appreciation. In order that his audience relate to the narrative better, he

connected it to the local, the recognizable. Thus, among many others, Yayāti's Odia wife was the mother of his illustrious son, Puru, Yudhiṣṭhira married an Odia girl, god Śiva spent some years in the hills of Kapilas and as Jagannātha got connected with Kṛṣṇa, the little tradition absorbed the great tradition. True, all great writing has a remote readership in terms of time and place, but no author writes for future audiences alone. Sāralā wrote for the non-elite fellow villagers. And he knew the enormous appeal of Kṛṣṇa *kathās* for them. This may not be an implausible account of the complete and overwhelming pervasiveness of Kṛṣṇa in Sāralā's retelling; however, one cannot help feeling that although he did it in an innovative manner, Sāralā only followed the tradition even here. There is the well-known legend that Nārada advised a despondent Vyāsa to narrate the glory of Viṣṇu when the latter told him that composing the *Mahābhārata* had given him no satisfaction. Writing many centuries later, what Sāralā did was transform the story of the Kurus into a narrative of Kṛṣṇa.

A question that is generally asked about Sāralā concerns his knowledge of Sanskrit – whether he read the *purāṇas* mentioned earlier and some others as well. There has been no conclusive answer to it. Sāralā describes himself as unread in the *śāstras*, who never kept the company of the learned men, and was an *akarmā* (useless person), a *mūrkha* (uneducated) and an ignoramus. He did not compose the *Mahābhārata*, he says repeatedly. He only wrote what goddess Sāralā dictated to him in his subconscious hours – "*lekhen Sāralā dianti mote jāhā āgnian* [(I) write whatever goddess Sāralā wants me to write]".

It is obviously difficult to take Sāralā's observations about himself literally. He could not have heard stories from so many classical texts from his village elders, temple priests, some occasional learned person passing through his village, pilgrims coming to Puri from North India and South India and the like. He is said to have served in the army of king Kapilendra Deva, but it is unlikely that in the army his exposure to the *purāṇas* would have been considerable. Cultivation was probably the regular occupation of his family. According to Surya Narayana Das (2010: 199), his elder brother Parshuram Parida was a ferryman. But neither occupation could have contributed to his knowledge of the Sanskrit texts. That was the time when Sanskrit was the language of scholarly discourse in Odisha, and the beneficiaries of such discourses were the social and the political elite. Sāralā Dās did not belong to this category. In view of this, it is difficult to say anything conclusive about whether Sāralā knew Sanskrit and had studied the relevant classical texts written in it.

As Sāralā retold the *Mahābhārata*, it changed in interesting ways. The situations and their contexts were not always the same; neither was the plot nor were the characters. In *Sāralā Mahābhārata*, it was not the sages of Naimiṣāāraṇya who were the listeners of the *Mahābhārata* story from Sūta, who, in turn, had heard it at the *sarpa yajña* (snake sacrifice) of king Janamejaya. Here sage Agastya was the narrator and the great king Vaivasvata Manu was his listener. The listener's purpose was also different in *Sāralā Mahābhārata*. Prayerfully the king requested the great sage to tell him how to attain *mokṣa*, and the sage began his narrative, which thus became a narrative of *mokṣa*, not *jaya* (victory). He seemed to be propounding that listening to the deeds of Kṛṣṇa with dedication and devotion from a knowledgeable and self-realized person would bring the listener release from the karmic cycle. Now a narrative of *mokṣa* would arguably not be best located in a violent context, where a grieving and angry king was seeking revenge on the killer of his father through a terrible *yajña* that would destroy all snakes. To his retelling, Sāralā provides the perfect context, where a devout *śiṣya* was seeking the *mārga* (path) to *mokṣa* from a *guru*, who was a great seer.

In Sāralā's story, Śakuni was not the great villain he was in the canonical version. He had almost no role in the banishment of the Pāṇḍavas. A devotee of Kṛṣṇa, he secretly worked for him in the fulfilment of his *avatāric* purpose. A moral person, he knew that he had sinned grievously by being the cause of the Kurukṣetra war in which innumerable innocents were killed, and he chose to punish himself by sacrificing himself in the same war. In Sāralā's version, Duryodhana was willing to share the kingdom with Sahadeva but not with the other Pāṇḍavas, who he considered to be outsiders to the Kuru family. Here there was no mystery about Karṇa's identity; everyone knew that he was the eldest son of Kuntī. Then it was Yudhiṣṭhira himself who met Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra to avoid the war even as the armies had assembled to fight on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. Aśvtthāmā was not cursed but restored to a virtuous life. These are among the many variations in Sāralā's retelling from the canonical narrative.

In the fictional mode, Sāralā deliberated on many issues of grave import: the human predicament and the nature of agency in a predestined world, context dependency of moral action, the relation between *dharma* and *mokṣa*, war as a solution to issues, responsibility for a war, vision of a virtuous world and difficulties in negotiating with an *avatāra* and determining one's relationship with him who often appeared to be patently partisan and unjust. In a narrative of nearly one lakh couplets, Sāralā never took recourse to long philosophical

discourses to deliberate on these profound, traditional issues. As he told the story to the educationally deprived and socially marginalized people who were his listeners, events, characters and their interactions and reflections changed from the canonical version, and the nature of his listeners determined, at least partially, the treatment of these issues.

No character in this narrative has been portrayed more creatively than Kṛṣṇa, to my mind at least. Sāralā's Kṛṣṇa does not have the majestic dignity of Vyāsa's Kṛṣṇa, but at the same time, he is not distant from those among whom he lived. He wasn't really very close to anyone either. Ambiguity is a narrative strategy that Sāralā used quite effectively to bring out both the harmonious contrariness in the nature of the *avatāra* and the contrasting attitudes and the confused perspectives towards him that he often evoked. As he lay dying, he suffered intense pain. But he was composed enough to trick Arjuna to do what the latter was forbidden to do, namely touch him. When Arjuna succumbed to his deceitful pleadings and allowed him to touch his bow, with that contact he withdrew his *aṃśa* from him and returned, in completeness, to his Source: Narāyaṇa. There are many examples of this narrative strategy in the depiction of Kṛṣṇa's character in *Sāralā Mahābhārata*.

Sāralā Mahābhārata also contains quite a few episodes that occur in the canonical version, but in a modified form. The Ekalavya episode is one of these. The basic questions, distinct but closely connected, in this episode are the following: who should the conscientious teacher impart knowledge of *astra* (military knowledge) to, and what corrective action should he take when he finds that the beneficiary is unworthy, in his judgment, of that knowledge? Droṇa knew that the knowledge of *astra* was a very important source of power and must therefore be imparted to only the members of the ruling class, whose were duty bound by tradition to protect the society and also only to those the teacher considered worthy of it. He failed to live up to his conviction in the case of his son, Aśvatthāmā, a matter to which we return later. In the case of Ekalavya, he found that without his knowledge, he had become a beneficiary of his instruction. In this episode, Droṇa's story, in essence, is about his negotiating a just response to it.

II. Sāralā's Droṇa

In *Vyāsa Mahābhārata*, Droṇa was a great warrior and a brilliant military strategist, but even more importantly he was the greatest *guru* of his time, a preceptor who taught his students not only the use of weapons and warfare but also about *dharma* and the practice of it.

However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that for centuries he has remained in the consciousness of the listeners/readers of the canonical text because of his failings. Some of the more serious of these are his grave injustice towards Ekalavya, his silence in the Kaurava court at the time of Draupadī's humiliation and his participation in the utterly disgraceful killing of Abhimanyu. He has been condemned for all these, but perhaps most strongly for his dealing with Ekalavya. This section of the chapter is concerned with the Droṇa–Ekalavya episode in *Sāralā Mahābhārata* (Mohanty 1973: 331–339).

Ekalavya entered *Sāralā Mahābhārata* when he went to *guru* Droṇa's *akhaḍā* (training centre of military education) to learn archery from him. He had heard about his reputation. The exceptional teacher that Droṇa was, he did not fail to notice that Ekalavya was a gifted boy and that he was highly motivated to learn. He happily consented to accept him as his pupil.

Yudhiṣṭhira was pleased; a forest dweller would be useful, he said. Arjuna agreed; he would bring them boar, deer and honey and other useful things from the forest, he said. Duryodhana, however, protested vehemently. A forest dweller was outside the "cultured" society and must not be allowed to mingle with the princes, which would inevitably happen if Ekalavya was admitted to their *akhāḍā*. Forest dwellers and princes were unequal, the former being subjects and the latter rulers, and hence the former was not entitled to learn what the princes learnt. Duryodhana would simply not accept someone from outside his social circle as a fellow learner. He asked Duḥśāsana to throw the boy out of the *akhāḍā* and give him a sound beating, which the ever-obedient Duḥśāsana did. Neither the Pāṇḍavas nor Droṇa could protest. It was obviously not within their power to do so. The Pāṇḍavas had lost their father, Pāṇḍu, and as for Droṇa, he was not teaching the princes in his own ashram. He was in the employment of the king of Hastināpur and had no freedom to choose his pupils. After all, Duryodhana was the eldest son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the king.

Ekalavya had become an accomplished archer when Droṇa met him again. Droṇa had asked his pupils to get two boars from the forest for the ritual annual feast for his dead wife. After four days, Bhīma and Karṇa returned with only one boar, and when the Kaurava brothers did not return even after eight days, the *guru* was worried and set out with Karṇa and the Pāṇḍavas to look for them. The group, much to their shock and disbelief, came upon the dead bodies of the hundred Kaurava brothers. Droṇa wondered who the archer who had killed the Kaurava brothers was and where he could have acquired such skill. He sent Arjuna to look for him.

Arjuna found Ekalavya, but his inquiry about who had killed his brothers upset the forest dweller, and they were soon engaged in a fierce fight. Fortunately Droṇa arrived and stopped it. Ekalavya told Droṇa (not knowing who he was) that he was fighting the outsider (Arjuna) because he thought that he too had come to attack him like all those before who were now lying dead. Those young men, he told the *brahmin*, were troubling his wife, who was bringing water home from the lake. When Ekalavya protested, the retort of the young men was that he, as an ugly forest dweller, had no right to have such a beautiful wife. She was rightfully the king's property, as everything beautiful in the kingdom was. That was the time when it was believed that one became king because of divine will and that everything in the kingdom, from the subjects to their possessions, was the king's property. Ekalavya told Droṇa that those men had attacked him, and so he had killed them with a single arrow. Now, Droṇa knew that only a pupil of *his* was capable of such a feat. He asked Ekalavya where he had learned such skill, and Ekalavya guilelessly replied that his *guru* was Droṇa. Droṇa then told him who he was, and Ekalavya prostrated at his feet.

On being asked how Droṇa had become his *guru* in the first place, Ekalavya said that after he had been driven out of Droṇa's *akhāḍā*, he had made an opening in the trees surrounding the *akhāḍā* through which he saw how Droṇa taught his pupils, what *mudrās* (posture) he was using, what steps he was taking while shooting the arrow and so on. Ekalavya practised those moves with great concentration and care. He also went on to say that his wife was extremely annoyed with him and had chided him for wasting his time in the pursuit of knowledge and skill that was completely useless for him and wrong for that reason. Besides, her argument was that to acquire knowledge, one needed a *guru*, and she would tauntingly ask him who his *guru* was. Though he did not tell her in so many words, Ekalavya was unimpressed with her view that legitimized the effort to acquire knowledge only if it was needed in one's day-to-day life and, by implication, was in consonance with one's traditionally determined occupation. However, he took her taunt about him not having a *guru* seriously. So, in his heart, he chose Droṇa to be his preceptor and guide.

Incidentally, *Sāralā Mahābhārata* broadly but not rigidly subscribes to the belief that in a world ruled by *dharma*, *varṇa* would determine *karma* in the sense of occupation or profession. Thus, the *brahmin*, for instance, must pursue knowledge for general good, and the *kṣatriya* must rule in accordance with *dharma*. Deviation from this societal arrangement was considered unacceptable. Thus, within that system,

Ekalavya's attempt to learn archery amounted to deviation. This was the spirit behind his wife's disapproval of his efforts to acquire sophisticated skill and knowledge of archery. However, by creating a situation reminiscent of Paraśurāma's, in which the forest dwellers had to suffer the tyranny of insensitive and cruel rulers, Sāralā provided a rationale for the former to learn *astra vidyā*, thereby legitimizing the deviation from the *vārṇic* prescriptions in specific circumstances. In an earlier aeon, the same situation had led to Paraśurāma's abandoning *āśrama dharma* for some time and adopting *kṣatriya dharma* in order to destroy the wicked kings. In his time, instead of protecting the culture of the *āśramas*, some powerful rulers tended to oppress the ashramites in several ways. King Kārtavīrya Arjuna had taken the divine cow Kāmadhenu from Jamadagni's *āśrama* by force. The latter's son, Paraśurāma, had to fight the king, kill him and restore the cow to the ashram. When the slain king's sons killed Jamadagni, Paraśurāma not only killed them but also embarked on the mission of cleansing the land by killing the *kṣatriyas*.

This issue of acquiring knowledge of weaponry arose indirectly in a somewhat different manner with respect to Aśvatthāmā, who passionately sought knowledge of *astras* rather than *śāstras*, and went to the extent of performing *tapas* to acquire immortality for his eternal safety. In *Sāralā Mahābhārata* this is considered cowardly and disgraceful. Duryodhana repeatedly condemned Aśvatthāmā, who had chosen to be a warrior, for fearing death and seeking immortality. Lacking in self-control and a sense of discrimination, Aśvatthāmā became a glaring example of the misuse of knowledge of the *astras*, which would take place, among other reasons, because of an unworthy person's possession of unnecessary knowledge. *Śāstra vidyā* (knowledge and use of weapons) was not unnecessary in the case of Paraśurāma. But in terms of Sāralā's retelling, it was arguably unnecessary in the case of Droṇa and clearly unnecessary in the case of Aśvatthāmā. Unlike in *Vyāsa Mahābhārata*, in Sāralā's version, Aśvatthāmā was not punished for the killing of Abhimanyu's son in Uttarā's womb. The child was born dead but was brought back to life by Kṛṣṇa, although his mother died. In Sāralā's narrative, Aśvatthāmā underwent a spiritual transformation. He gave up a life of arms and returned to the *aśrama* to pursue the life of an *āśramite*. His jealousy, rancour, revengefulness and anger, which he could never control when he lead the life of a warrior, vanished. Later when he met the Pāṇḍavas during their last pilgrimage, their meeting was extremely cordial.

To return to Ekalavya's story, after hearing him out, Droṇa affectionately sat Ekalavya by his side. Saying he wanted to test his

knowledge of archery, he asked Ekalavya whether he could restore the dead Kauravas to life. His great pupil did so in an instance by shooting an arrow at the dead princes which he had empowered with the *sanjīvanī* mantra (a mantra to bring the dead back to life). The *guru* was extremely pleased and showered praise on him. However, Duryodhana was extremely upset and complained that although the incomparable Droṇa was their teacher, they had been so easily vanquished by a mere forest dweller. Droṇa comforted him, telling him that Ekalavya was his *śiṣya* too and that the princes should treat him as their fellow pupil.

When it was time for Droṇa and the princes to leave, Droṇa blessed Ekalavya and told him that he was demolishing his *akhaḍā* in that forest. The intelligent *sīṣya* readily understood the *tātparya* (real meaning) of his *guru*'s words. He realized that his learning from Droṇa was over, and he knew too that the time to give *dakṣiṇā* (ritual fee) to his *guru* had arrived. In all humility and prayerfulness, he insisted that his *guru* accept a *dakṣiṇā* from him. The *guru* acquiesced and asked for his right thumb and told him that from then on, he should shoot with only four fingers and that he would not wear a *kasuni* (ring that archers used those days) – *naraja bindhante haste nathibati kasuni* (when you shoot arrows, there must be no ring on your finger. p. 339). Ekalavya readily gave him his *dakṣiṇā*.

It was then that Ekalavya told the preceptor Droṇa that he was aware of his fears regarding him. He understood that through his *dakṣiṇā*, Droṇa, had ensured the safety of the Kauravas, who Ekalavya had vowed to harm some day in order to avenge the humiliation that he had received from them. As he left, Droṇa blessed Ekalavya for becoming a supreme archer and for remaining invincible. With that blessing from his *guru*, Ekalavya bowed out of Sāralā's retelling. In this episode he is also called Jarā. Jarā, the forest dweller, appears later in at least two more episodes in the narrative. But that Jarā is clearly not Ekalavya. He is Angada reborn – Angad the son of Bali of the time of the *avatāra* of Rāma. He is the one who in *Sāralā Mahābhārata* killed Kṛṣṇa unintentionally. Sāralā's story does not connect Ekalavya with Angada. One can thus imagine that Ekalavya lived an uneventful life, excelling in archery and remaining unvanquished – a loving *guru*'s blessings could never go in vain in the world of *Sāralā Mahābhārata*.

III. Some Reflections

This story of Ekalavya almost turns the Vyāsa narrative about the same character on its head. In Sāralā's version, it is important to note

that Droṇa did not ask for any *dakṣiṇā* from Ekalavya, presumably because he did not teach him and did not deserve *dakṣiṇā* from him. It was Ekalavya who insisted that he take *guru dakṣiṇā* from him. By agreeing to accept this *dakṣiṇā*, Droṇa ritually accepted Ekalavya as his student. There is something beautiful in the way this relationship was formalized between the two.

Further, by asking Ekalavya to restore the Kaurava princes to life, Droṇa retained the sanctity of his preceptor relationship with the Kauravas as well, who too were his pupils. He tried to ensure their safety in the future through his *guru dakṣiṇā* from Ekalavya. He attempted to make their safety doubly secure by telling his pupils from the Kuru household to treat Ekalavya as one of his pupils, like them. That attitude, he thought, would reduce the possibility of a confrontation between them. However, in negotiating the safety of the Kauravas, he wished *Ekalavya* no harm. Incidentally, he did not try to incapacitate Ekalavya in order to make Arjuna the greatest archer in the world. In Sāralā's version, he had made no such promise to Arjuna, nor had the latter ever asked him for such a favour.

One could ask whether it was at all right for Droṇa to *accept dakṣiṇā* from someone whom he had not taught and whether he had not disgraced the *guru–śiṣya* relationship by asking for a *dakṣiṇā* that would permanently weaken, if not severely incapacitate, the pupil. In response, one could always argue that Droṇa did not ask for a *dakṣiṇā* to begin with. But could he not have refused to accept *dakṣiṇā* despite Ekalavya's pleading? One could argue in response that that would have been grossly unfair to Ekalavya, who had in all honesty 'taken him' as his *guru*. In the prevalent belief of those times, a *guru*'s *refusing* to accept *dakṣiṇā* was tantamount to cursing the *śiṣya*. Droṇa had no reason or desire to do so, for he liked Ekalavya and was proud of him.

As for the demanding and grizzly nature of *dakṣiṇā*, Droṇa was not the only *guru* in the world of *Sāralā Mahābhārata* who had asked for such a high price from his pupil, and neither was Ekalavya the only pupil who had had to give such a terrible fee to his *guru*. Seekers of *dāna* (ritual gift) sometimes asked for gifts that could grievously harm the giver. For his *dakṣiṇā*, Droṇa himself had earlier asked the Kuru princes to bring him, on their own, that is, without help from the Kaurava army, Drupada, the powerful king of Pāñcāla, as prisoner. Kṛṣṇa's own *guru* had asked him to bring his dead son alive to him. Shortly before the Great War at Kurukṣetra, at Kṛṣṇa's behest, Kuntī asked her eldest son, Karṇa, for the two divine weapons that made him invincible. Karṇa gave these to her as her *dakṣiṇā* since she was

his *guru* by virtue of being his mother. When Karṇa, in a tone of disappointment, told her that by doing so, she had rendered him vulnerable in the impending engagement with Arjuna, this was a son's complaint, not the *śiṣya's* resentment at a teacher's demand. As *dāna*, Kṛṣṇa asked Kirātasen for his head, which he most happily gave him. In view of these, in the world of *Sāralā Mahābhārata*, what Droṇa asked from Ekalavya as his *guru dakṣiṇā* was by no means exceptional.

Looking at the episode from yet another point of view, Ekalavya's action amounted to stealing knowledge. From this perspective, it would not be unfair to disempower the stealer with respect to that knowledge. Droṇa could be said to have done just that. He did not curse or censor Ekalavya or utter a single hurtful word to express his displeasure or even accuse him in explicit language that what he had done amounted to stealing. By silently closing down his *akhāḍā*, Droṇa merely made it impossible for Ekalavya to benefit from his teaching any longer. 'Stealing knowledge' is dealt with harshly in the epic. In some versions of the *Mahābhārata*, not Sāralā's though, Paraśurāma, who was Droṇa's preceptor, cursed Karṇa, who, in his view, had stolen knowledge from him. His curse later proved fatal for Karṇa. In contrast, in *Sāralā Mahābhārata*, Droṇa left Ekalavya with blessings. A moral failing of a forest dweller and a boy at that, who did not have the opportunity to acquire sophisticated ethical knowledge, had to be condoned to a considerable extent. This is *nyāya* (justice) in the world of *Sāralā Mahābhārata*: for the same failing, the knowledgeable and the ignorant would not deserve the same punishment.

Furthermore, another very important socio-political vision of the *Mahābhārata* narrative is that in a just world, power must remain with the wise and the virtuous who have a developed sense of discrimination, and the powerful wicked must be weeded out. Accordingly, Droṇa believed that power acquired through knowledge of weaponry should reside in the hands of those who had a strong moral sense, a nuanced sense of discrimination and self-control. He found Ekalavya wanting in these respects. It was not the case that all those he taught had these qualities, but the *varṇa* system required that the *kṣatriyas* be taught the use of weapons and, that apart, Droṇa was under obligation to teach the princes of the Kuru clan. In the case of either Ekalavya or Aśvatthāmā, he was not. It may be recalled that Droṇa was unwilling to impart the knowledge of the use of the terribly destructive divine arrow *brahmaśira* to his son Aśvatthāmā, who lacked self-control and was prone to anger and vengefulness, but gave this knowledge happily to Arjuna. Aśvatthāmā was terribly upset by this, and ultimately the loving father failed himself as he yielded to his motherless son's wish.

But even then, he had sternly warned Aśvatthāmā against its misuse. (Misuse it he did, but Droṇa was not alive then to suffer for his grave indiscretion.) Arjuna was his favourite pupil not merely because he was very intelligent, focussed and hardworking but because he was virtuous too. The *guru* knew that that *śiṣya* of his would use knowledge judiciously. So he happily passed on to him all his knowledge of the *astras*, including the most powerful divine ones.

From this perspective, it is entirely understandable that Droṇa disempowered the pupil who had killed all the Kaurava brothers without sufficient justification. In terms of *Sāralā Mahābhārata*, there was no provocation that could be considered adequate justification for killing en masse. Shortly before the Great War started, Yudhiṣṭhira would tell Duryodhana that since the inheritance of the kingdom of Hastināpur concerned only the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, they alone, the one hundred and five brothers, must fight. Those whose war it was not must not shed their blood on the battlefield. Arjuna disobeyed Kṛṣṇa and refused to start the war because mass killing was grievous sin. When he fought his last battle with Sahadeva, Śakuni told the youngest Pāṇḍava that he had committed great sin, being responsible for the death of countless innocent fighters on the battlefields. Yudhiṣṭhira, the embodiment of *dharma* on earth, did not consider Draupadī's humiliation in the Kaurava court sufficient justification for her to insist on a war with his cousins. In *Svargārohaṇa Parva*, he condemned her for being the main cause of the fratricidal war, and he condemned Bhīma for his proneness to violence and ensured his fall on the snowy and lonely Himalayas. These and many other instances clearly show *Sāralā Mahābhārata* does not condone mindless killing and does not accept anything as adequate justification for mass killing.

Now, Ekalavya was a supreme archer, a great learner and a very devoted pupil, but he lacked poise and a sense of judgment in a stressful situation. More importantly, he was vindictive. As he told Droṇa, he had not forgotten that someone called Yudhiṣṭhira had been kind to him and that Duryodhana had humiliated him. Droṇa saw that revenge was always on Ekalavya's mind, and on that account, he was not the one in whose hands Droṇa would have liked power to reside. If he was still very affectionate towards him, it was because he was aware that Ekalavya was not responsible for his moral failings, since he was deprived of the appropriate cultural and educational environment needed for the development of one's finer sensitivities and sense of judgment.

One might even consider it plausible that Droṇa's asking for Ekalavya's thumb was rooted in perception of a political threat. A powerful

Ekalavya meant the possibility of the emergence of a power centre in the vicinity of Hastināpur. He was aware that threat from the forest dwellers like *niṣādas*, *kirātas* (names of tribes), was not unreal. In *Sāralā Mahābhārata*, one *kirāta* king had driven king Drupada out of his kingdom, Pāñcāla. Droṇa was then leading the life of an ascetic near the sacred Prayāg and had provided him resources to build an army to regain his kingdom. That was how they became friends. Drupada did not have to fight the usurper, because after a few years he had left on his own, but the lesson of this incident would not have been lost on Droṇa. He surely knew that one could not do to Hastināpur what was done to Pāñcāla, because it enjoyed Bhīṣma's protection. Still he perhaps did not want to ignore or undermine the real threat that Ekalavya could one day pose – after all, he, almost a boy, had singlehandedly killed the Kauravas, and he also knew the mantra to bring the dead to life. Ignoring the possibility of hostility in the future between the Kaurava princes and Ekalavya would have meant his being disloyal towards his employer. Droṇa did what he thought appropriate in this regard. But in doing so, Droṇa tried in his own way not to be unfair to the pupil he had weakened. We may recall that he had blessed him, and blessing in the context of the text was a great reward. This nuanced ambivalence in Droṇa's attitude to Ekalavya makes Sāralā's version of this episode extremely fascinating and deeply touching.

Finally, the Ekalavya episode is interesting from another point of view that goes beyond the personal. It is an instance of one culture, the one designated as inferior, aspiring to interact with the other culture, which it itself regarded as the more highly valued culture. The forest dwellers, who lived at the fringes of the so-called civilized world, were constantly trying to break the barriers and interact with centres of power in the *janapadas* (urban kingdoms). They were unwelcome. The elite would not interact with those they regarded as uncultivated. Note that the Kauravas had rejected Ekalavya. The wives of Bhīma and Arjuna who were from other cultures were unwelcome in the royal household of Hastināpur. When Bhīma's *asura* wife, Hiḍimbakī, met Draupadī during Yudhiṣṭhira 's *rājasūya yajña* (sacrifice named Rājasūya), the meeting was a great disaster, and they ended up cursing each other.

This same attitude was evident when the king of a tribe, Kirātasena, wanted to join the Kurukṣetra war as the commander-in-chief of an army. He had three infallible arrows, with which he claimed he would destroy the enemy, and yet he was spurned as an 'outsider'. First he went to the Kauravas. Duryodhana refused to have him in his army,

one important reason of his refusal being that Kirātasen was a complete 'outsider' in every way, including cultural, and was therefore unwelcome to fight under the banner of the Kauravas. Then he went to the Pāṇḍavas. But here too he was not accepted for more or less the same reason. One might view Kirātasena's offer to the Kauravas, and later the Pāṇḍavas, as indeed an expression of an aspiration of the underclass to be integrated into the 'civilized' world. His efforts ended with the *dāna* of his head to Kṛṣṇa, the details and the significance of which are beyond the scope of the present chapter, but it signifies the failed attempts of the social and political margins to be integrated in the larger society.

However, it was Kṛṣṇa's death that broke the barriers that Kirātasena (and Ekalavya) were up against. In "Musali Parva" (the canto named *Mahābhārata* "Mauṣala"), as the repentant Jara and the angry Arjuna fought, for both of whom the passing away of Kṛṣṇa was intensely painful, the voice from the sky told them to stop fighting and join hands in the disposal of Kṛṣṇa's body. With this began, in *Sāralā Mahābhārata*, the coming together of the two cultures and their interaction, ignoring fascinating details, became closer and happier as Kṛṣṇa manifested himself as Jagannātha. This happened because Kṛṣṇa guided it, as he lay dying and continued to do so, in a manner of speaking, after his merger with his Source. When in his *akhāḍā* Droṇa showed his willingness to teach Ekalavya, when in the forest he ritually accepted him as his *śiṣya* and when he told his royal *śiṣyas* to treat him as a fellow *śiṣya*, he could be seen as actually trying to bring the two cultures together. He did not succeed. He was not free. He was in the employment of a royal household.

To conclude, *Sāralā Mahābhārata* in the Ekalavya episode upholds the idea that knowledge, more specifically the highly empowering knowledge of weapons, capable of causing great destruction, must be imparted to the worthy alone, and the worthy is not the one who is just intelligent, motivated and dedicated but the one who, in addition to these, is a moral person, having a good sense of discrimination and self-control. So the *guru* has the tremendous responsibility of choosing who he must empower with that knowledge. He must make absolutely no mistake in this regard. Sāralā's Droṇa cannot be said to have failed in this respect. However, through attempts to heal the rift between the princely Kauravas and the disenfranchised forest dweller, Ekalavya, he did fail in the political mission of harmonizing conflicts between socially marginalised groups and those in power. Kṛṣṇa's divine agency was needed for this goal.

Note

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