

# CROSSING THE LINES OF CASTE



Viśvāmitra and the Construction  
of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology

ADHEESH A. SATHAYE



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*Alan Dundes (1934–2005)*

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*Adheesh A. Sathaye*

PUNE

## A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION



This book uses two distinct schemes for representing South Asian source texts in Roman script. For Sanskrit texts, I have used the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST), as established in 1894 during the 10th International Congress of Orientalists (Geneva). For Marathi and Hindi materials, I have also adhered to the IAST scheme, but dropped word-final vowels whenever they are not pronounced (e.g., *sam̄skār* in Marathi). I have converted all word-final nasalized vowels (*anusvāras*) to tilde symbols rather than the expected m-underdot (ṁ). Hence, *tyānē* rather than *tyānem* in Marathi, and *haī* rather than *haim* in Hindi. Both adaptations, I believe, allow the transliterated forms to resemble their spoken versions more closely. When English words are used in Hindi or Marathi speech, I have represented them with an asterisk and italics (e.g., *\*cinema*).

Names of authors, artists, and other individuals from the colonial and postcolonial periods are given in their standard English spellings (e.g., P. V. Kane or Balasaheb Panta Pratinidhi), as are names of cities, provinces, and other contemporary geopolitical places (e.g., Pune, Gujarat, or Varanasi), languages, or ethnic categories (e.g., Marathi, Sanskrit, Gujarati). However, I have retained diacritics for names of rivers (e.g., Godāvarī or Sarasvatī) as well as cities when they occur within the storyworld (e.g., Rāma's Ayodhyā or

Śiva's Vārāṇasī). In an effort to minimize what is a common point of confusion, I have used the Anglicized (but phonetically incorrect) “Brahmin” to designate the priestly/intellectual social group (which should more precisely be rendered as brāhmaṇa), “*brahman*” to denote the sacred force that empowers the Vedic ritual, and “*Brāhmaṇa*” to mean the genre of Vedic exegetical texts. All quoted passages and titles of works retain their own transliteration methods.

## ABBREVIATIONS



<i>AB</i>	<i>Aitareya Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>AgP</i>	<i>Agni Purāṇa</i>
<i>Akh</i>	<i>Ambikākhaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa</i>
<i>Āś</i>	<i>Abhijñānaśākuntala of Kālidāsa</i>
<i>AV</i>	<i>Atharvaveda Saṃhitā</i>
<i>Bd</i>	<i>Bṛhaddevatā of Śaunaka</i>
<i>BṛP</i>	<i>Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa</i>
<i>BhP</i>	<i>Bhāgavata Purāṇa</i>
<i>BrP</i>	<i>Brahma Purāṇa</i>
<i>Ck</i>	<i>Caṇḍakauśika of Ārya Kṣemīśvara</i>
<i>DbhP</i>	<i>Devībhāgavata Purāṇa</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>Epigraphia Indica</i>
<i>GaP</i>	<i>Garuda Purāṇa</i>
<i>Gpv</i>	<i>Gaṅgādāsapratāpavilāsa of Gaṅgādhara</i>
<i>HāJ</i>	<i>Hariścandra Ākhyān of Janābāī</i>
<i>HāM</i>	<i>Hariścandrākhyān of Mukteśvar</i>
<i>HRC</i>	<i>Hariścandra Rājāce Caritra of Nāmdev</i>
<i>Hv</i>	<i>Harivanaṇīśa</i>
<i>JB</i>	<i>Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>KKS</i>	<i>Kapiśṭhala-Kaṭha Saṃhitā of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>KS</i>	<i>Kaṭha Saṃhitā of the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda</i>
<i>Kt</i>	<i>Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī</i>
<i>KūP</i>	<i>Kūrma Purāṇa</i>
<i>LiP</i>	<i>Liṅga Purāṇa</i>
<i>Manu</i>	<i>Manusmṛti (Mānava Dharmasāstra)</i>
<i>Mbh</i>	<i>Mahābhārata of Vyāsa</i>
<i>MkP</i>	<i>Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa</i>
<i>MtP</i>	<i>Matsya Purāṇa</i>
<i>Nir</i>	<i>Nirukta of Yāska</i>
<i>Nkh</i>	<i>Nāgarakhaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa</i>
<i>PB</i>	<i>Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>PS</i>	<i>Pāśupata Sūtra</i>
<i>Rām</i>	<i>Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki</i>
<i>RV</i>	<i>Rgveda Saṃhitā</i>
<i>Sā</i>	<i>Sarvānukramaṇi of Kātyāyana</i>
<i>ŚB</i>	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>ŚiP</i>	<i>Śiva Purāṇa</i>
<i>SkP</i>	<i>Skanda Purāṇa</i>
<i>Ssg</i>	<i>Sakalasantagāthā</i>
<i>ŚSS</i>	<i>Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra</i>
<i>SV</i>	<i>Sāmaveda Saṃhitā</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Taittirīya Saṃhitā</i>
<i>VP</i>	<i>Viṣṇu Purāṇa</i>
<i>Vād</i>	<i>Vedārthatāpikā of Śadguruśiṣya</i>
<i>VāP</i>	<i>Vāyu Purāṇa</i>
<i>ViM</i>	<i>Viśvāmitrī Māhātmya</i>
<i>VmP</i>	<i>Vāmana Purāṇa</i>

## ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE



[www.oup.com/us/crossingthelinesofcaste](http://www.oup.com/us/crossingthelinesofcaste)

Readers are encouraged to visit the companion website to *Crossing the Lines of Caste*, which features new, word-for-word English translations of fifteen Viśvāmitra legends from Sanskrit epic and purāṇic literature, along with comprehensive charts detailing the variant forms of each story throughout Hindu mythological literature. Intended for students and general readers unfamiliar with the Hindu mythological tradition, these primary source materials serve both as textual evidence for the cultural-historical claims of the book and as avenues for further comparative research.





## CROSSING THE LINES OF CASTE



## INTRODUCTION

### *Crossing the Lines of Caste*



**W**hat does it mean to be a Brahmin in traditional Hindu society? And what could it mean to *become* one?<sup>1</sup> There has been, over the years, no shortage of answers to the first question, but the latter presents a puzzle, since the normative ideology of caste (*varṇa*) prohibits an individual from becoming a Brahmin without first undergoing a process of death and rebirth.<sup>2</sup> In the world of mythology, however, one notable figure is said to have successfully

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Hindu” was first used by the ancient Persians to refer to the inhabitants of the lands beyond the Indus River, and came to designate a distinct—though still nebulous—religious identity only in the second millennium (Lorenzen 1999). Despite its colonial, missionary, and romanticist baggage (Balagangadhara 1994; Pennington 2005; Bloch, Keppens, and Hegde 2010), I use “Hinduism” to stand for multiple religious identities that are formed dynamically through the historically situated interactions of the producers, performers, and consumers of Hindu mythological texts. That is to say, this book will treat “Hindu” as a cultural label, always under negotiation and attached to a variety of “polythetic” networks of beliefs and practices (Ferro-Luzzi 1989).

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult, today, to detangle caste from the political and economic crises of South Asian modernity, or to observe it without the lenses created by European imperialist and missionary projects (Dirks 1992, 2001). Still, there are definite continuities between contemporary caste-based social order and how Brahmin intellectuals had theorized it in the precolonial past. In this book, I take “caste” to mean this classical, Brahminical ideology, concretized in Vedic times and consisting of four hierarchically arranged categories or *varṇas* (Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra), along with an excluded fifth, a nebulous set of communities whom we may refer to as the Outcaste. I do not use “caste” to denote actual, on-the-ground communities of practice (the complex formations of *jāti*), but simply *varṇa* ideology as it has shaped, and been shaped by, the mythological imagination. I refrain from using the Marxist term “class” as a translation of *varṇa*, in order to avoid positing an unwarranted economic base to this Brahminical superstructure.

crossed the lines of caste without shedding his body: a man named Viśvāmitra, “friend to all.” Born a Kṣatriya (a member of royalty), Viśvāmitra transforms himself, against all odds, into a Brahmin sage (*rishi*), gaining membership into a priestly and intellectual community that has traditionally claimed exclusive place at the top of the Hindu social ladder. The high level of ascetic practice (*tapas*) required to achieve this seemingly impossible feat endows him with great supernatural power that, due to a notoriously bad temper, he is quick to unleash in the form of a curse. These three distinctive character traits—caste change, ascetic power, and irascibility—have made Viśvāmitra into a complex and lasting cultural representation of an alternative form of Brahminhood, while his life-story has challenged generation after generation of intellectuals, poets, performers, and audiences in India to find answers to our riddle: what could it mean to become a Brahmin?<sup>3</sup>

This book is about Viśvāmitra, the development of his mythological persona through literature and performance, and the impact it has had on the cultural history of Brahminhood. Over the centuries, a cycle of legends has grown around Viśvāmitra that consistently highlights his challenges to the boundaries of caste, and in doing so, can help us to appreciate the active role that mythology itself has played in their construction.<sup>4</sup> The Viśvāmitra legends have been transmitted orally, visually, and in writing for well over two thousand years, forming a rich mosaic of texts and performances that, when contextualized to the time and place of their production, tell a remarkable story of how and why this figure has remained, for such a long time, at the margins of Brahminhood, making an appearance whenever these boundaries need to be redefined.

The long historical scope of this study—from 1500 BCE to the year 2000—means that in order to contextualize Viśvāmitra we must balance the analysis of premodern narrative texts, primarily composed in Sanskrit, with

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<sup>3</sup> Because the vast bulk of this book deals with historical periods before Partition in 1947, I use “India” to designate the geographical and cultural region that is today more accurately encompassed by the term “South Asia,” and that includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and portions of Afghanistan and Burma.

<sup>4</sup> Folklorists would call these narratives “myths,” since they are told as true, involve deities and heroes, and are set in a remote, inaccessible past. But as William Bascom notes, myth often flows into legend, and one culture’s myths may very easily become the legends of another (1965: 8). Due to the connotations of false belief that surround the word “myth,” I will use the etic term “legend” when referring to the traditional stories about Viśvāmitra. The most appropriate would be the emic Sanskrit term, *ākhyāna*.

the study of contemporary vernacular-language performances. Our task therefore requires an interdisciplinary engagement between Indology—the study of classical Indic texts—and South Asian folklore studies, and this introductory chapter aims to outline the nature of this approach. But before we do so, we should get to know our sage a little better, and pose a few research questions about the legends that have been told about him over the years. And because this is a book about stories, the best way to do this is with a story.

#### ... THEN ENTERS VIŚVĀMITRA (RĀM 1.17–21)

Perhaps the most well known scene involving Viśvāmitra, which graces the cover of this book, is his initial appearance in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki. The setting is the legendary court of Daśaratha, king of Ayodhyā and father to the epic's hero, Rāma. It is the Treta Yuga, an age of peace and prosperity long before our time. As Daśaratha deliberates with his ministers on the vexing question of his young son's marriage, a mysterious visitor unexpectedly arrives at the palace gates. As soon as he hears that it is Viśvāmitra, the old king rushes to greet him. With great reverence, he offers the sage hospitality: "Today my birth has yielded fruit," Daśaratha declares, "and my life has become well-lived."

You were once hailed as a "royal sage" (*rājarṣi*), but now, resplendent with ascetic practice, you have attained the status of "Brahmin sage" (*brahmaṛṣi*). There are so many ways in which I should honor you... Whatever you wish, just say it, and it will be done for you. I am grateful that you have come, and would like only to fulfill your desires.<sup>5</sup>

Viśvāmitra's request, however, will not be easy to swallow. His sacred Vedic rites are being disrupted by two unruly demons (*rākṣasas*) named Subāhu and Marīca, who keep showering the altar with flesh and blood, and so he has come to ask for Rāma's help, for as he explains, "there is no man besides Rāma who may dare to kill this pair."<sup>6</sup> Shocked at the thought of sending

<sup>5</sup> *adya me saphalam janma jīvitam ca sujīvitam || pūrvam rājarsiśabdena tapasā dyotitaprabhah | brahmaṛṣitvam anuprāptah pūjyo 'si bahudhā mayā || . . . brūhi yat prārthitam tubhyam kāryam āgamanam prati | icchāmy anugṛhīto 'hañ tvadartha parivṛddhaye ||* (Rām 1.17.34ef–35, 37).

<sup>6</sup> *na ca tau rāghavād anyo hantum utsahate pumān ||* (Rām 1.18.11cd).

his uncontested, fifteen-year-old son to challenge the formidable cousins of the Demon Lord Rāvaṇa, Daśaratha literally slips from his throne. He refuses to let Rāma go, and instead volunteers to lead Ayodhyā's vast armies and take care of this problem himself. But this bold proposition only throws Viśvāmitra into a rage. "Having first guaranteed my mission," he asks, "you now wish to renege on your promise? This perversion does not suit someone from the family of Raghu. But since you find it acceptable, then I will go as I have come. Daśaratha, descendant of Kakutstha, giver of false promises, I hope you and your family live happily!"<sup>7</sup>

Concerned about the potential fallout from the sage's anger, Daśaratha's preceptor Vasiṣṭha hastily intervenes. He urges the king to keep his moral obligations, and assures him that Rāma will be fine. "The demons are no match for him," he explains, "as long as he is protected by Viśvāmitra, son of Kuśika, like ambrosia sheltered by fire. With his mental abilities he is supreme in this world, a storehouse of ascetic power. He has mastery over a variety of magic weapons, and among all the animate and inanimate creatures in the cosmos, there is no other man who grasps them—nor will there ever be."<sup>8</sup> Reassured by this endorsement, Daśaratha then summons Rāma and his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa, kisses his boys on the forehead, and sends them off on their first real adventure.

The details of this adventure comprise the bulk of the first book of the epic, the *Bālakāṇḍa*. Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa leave home as boys but return as men, having gained valuable combat experience, lovely new brides, and a prized arsenal of magic weapons. It is their guide, however, who will emerge as the *Bālakāṇḍa*'s most arresting figure, and the stories of Viśvāmitra's past exploits loom especially large in Vālmīki's monumental Sanskrit work (Goldman 1984: 79).

Even in this brief scene, Viśvāmitra's distinctive persona manifests itself. First and foremost, we see Daśaratha marvel at his caste change. Second, we learn of the magnitude of his *tapas*, the ascetic power that enables him to make this extraordinary boundary crossing. This power is further linked to

<sup>7</sup> *pūrvam artham pratīrutyā pratijñām hātum icchasi | rāghavānām ayukto 'yam kulasyāsyā viparyayaḥ || yadi daṇḍ te kṣamām rājan gamiṣyāmi yathāgatam | mithyāpratijñāḥ kākutstha sukhi bhava sabāndhavaḥ ||* (*Rām* 1.20.2–3).

<sup>8</sup> *nainam śakṣyanti rākṣasāḥ | guptam kuśikaputrena jvalanenāmr̥tam yathā || esa vigrahavān dharma esa vīryavatām varah | esa buddhyādhiko loke tapasaś ca parāyanam || eso 'strān vividhān vetti trailokyē sacarācare | nainam anyaḥ pumān vetti na ca vetyanti ke cana ||* (*Rām* 1.20.9b–11).

a supernatural form of weaponry that Viśvāmitra is said to possess. Finally, the episode pivots around his volatile temper, resulting in a curious blend of anxiety and reverence in how both the Kṣatriya (Daśaratha) and the Brahmin (Vasiṣṭha) interact with this ornery fellow. This deep ambivalence, I suggest, reflects the social anxieties of the epic's composers and consumers, and it resurfaces whenever Viśvāmitra's legends appear in Hindu mythological literature and performance. Uncovering the historical significance of these appearances is the primary goal of this book.

The question that this book asks, to put it simply, is: "What has Viśvāmitra meant to Hindu communities over the years?" The answer, on one level, is structural: Viśvāmitra is repeatedly placed in opposition to the normative figure of Vasiṣṭha, forming a paradigmatic binary of Brahmin "Self" and Brahmin "Other" that operates even in this brief scene. Time and again, Viśvāmitra dares to "cross the line" while Vasiṣṭha does not. His fiery temper and penchant for cursing are in contrast to Vasiṣṭha's generally cool and reassuring demeanor, while his proclivities toward celestial nymphs and Outcastes deviate dramatically from his rival's chaste and conservative persona. Ultimately, Viśvāmitra comes to occupy the fringes of the Hindu cultural imaginary as a lonesome master of ascetic practices while Vasiṣṭha presides over the performance of orthodox state rituals at one of its most celebrated political centers. The pair is often shown to be quarreling, and while there is no conflict this time, there is still a palpable tension between them. His rivalry with Vasiṣṭha, along with a second set of conflicts with a king named Hariścandra, have positioned Viśvāmitra as a "counter-normative" figure in Hindu mythology—a celebrated icon of how a Brahmin ought *not* to behave.

Getting a more nuanced grasp of this counter-normativity is this book's second major goal. Are caste-based social norms questioned or reinforced by the Viśvāmitra legends? Or perhaps both? As a Kṣatriya who dares to become a Brahmin, Viśvāmitra is placed at the very edge of Brahminhood, and indeed comes to represent it. Even so, he seldom functions as a socially radical figure, for while the stories of his exploits consistently challenge caste rigidity and hierarchy, they are also deployed to illustrate the volatile but powerful nature of the supernatural forces required to cross the lines of caste. In order to grasp how this paradox could happen, we must first consider the power that myths and legends have had in shaping and reshaping the public understanding of Hindu social order.

## THE STORYWORLDS OF HINDU MYTHOLOGY

How exactly is Brahminical social ideology regulated by the written, recited, and performed versions of the Viśvāmitra legends? One way to assess this is to analyze narrative structure. Consistently, these narratives project caste identities (Kṣatriya, Brahmin, etc.) onto individual bodies (Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, etc.) and domestic spaces (the palace, the hermitage, etc.) within what the narratologist David Herman calls the “storyworld” (2009: 105–8). This is the imagined space that we are asked to manufacture mentally in the course of consuming a narrative, regardless of whether the story is read or heard or viewed. Storyworlds, as Herman puts it, are “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate—or make a deictic shift—as they work to comprehend a narrative” (2002: 9). As any story unfolds, readers and audiences assemble their own versions of its storyworld using “the principle of minimal departure”—the understanding that this imagined world is the closest possible to the reality that we know (Ryan 1980: 403). That is, until we are told otherwise we assume that Viśvāmitra behaves like an ordinary human—though that crucial definition of “ordinary” differs from person to person. Storyworld production is a cumulative process, for as a reader gains more experience with a particular genre of texts, his or her “horizon of expectations” regarding its laws and possibilities grows sharper and sharper. To experienced consumers of Hindu mythology, for example, it would come as no surprise that Viśvāmitra fasts for centuries or curses a nymph into stone; but it would be astonishing if he were ever to shape-shift or eat human flesh—for these are the traits of demons, not sages.

This is not to say that a storyworld must necessarily be fictional, for all narratives require imagined worlds, even if the events they describe happen to be true. As Herman explains, storyworlds are also generated in historical writing, since “interpreting nonfictional (retrospective) narratives entails relocating not to an alternative possible world but to a possible world that is an earlier—and perhaps competing—version of the world deemed actual” (2002: 15). Even if there once had been a real person named “Viśvāmitra” who lived in prehistoric India, the stories about him still conjure up “possible worlds” that have shaped how Hindu communities have historically come to understand this remote past, and in doing so, how they have structured the social world around them.

These innumerable “possible worlds” are personalized imaginary realms that every consumer creates, a product of his or her reception of the story and the mediation of the author or performer. Storyworld construction is, in other words, a fundamentally dialogical process, in which the narrative itself becomes the site of cultural give-and-take.

The storyworlds of the Viśvāmitra legends are idealized versions of the contemporary real world, set before the social, political, and religious corruptions of the present Kali Yuga. In this social status quo, each individual both has a well-defined *varṇa* and occupies a domestic space that is appropriate for this *varṇa*. Abnormality and narrative conflict occur when these *varṇa*-mapped bodies cross boundaries and move out of place, whether by will or by coercion. The resolution of these conflicts generally involves either divine intervention or other forms of extraordinary religious force, such as ascetic power (*tapas*). And so, while the stories of Viśvāmitra’s exploits involve ruptures in the normative, caste-based social order, how they are presented serves to naturalize the ideologies they question. As Jonathan Culler observes about literature in general, we might say that the Viśvāmitra legends “seduce readers into accepting the hierarchical arrangements of society” (1997: 38) by describing a figure who explicitly violates them.

At the same time, we must be cautious against viewing personae like Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, or Hariścandra as natural parts of an authorless and unchanging system of thought. It is not as if mythology is firmware that comes pre-installed in the Hindu mind. No one is born with it. Rather, mythological storyworlds consist of characters, events, and places that must actively be imagined and reimagined—and interpreted and reinterpreted—by every living consumer of myths and legends, regardless of whether or not these personae and events and places are real. There is not, and never was, *one* single, pre-fabricated storyworld of Hindu mythology, but rather, it exists through a complex network of historically contingent mythical imaginaries. This also means that the methods and motives of mythological “seduction” have more dimensions than Culler’s statement implies. Viśvāmitra, to put it more simply, has meant different things to different people over the years, and for very good reasons. This book investigates some of these reasons, with a focus on understanding why Viśvāmitra has been especially important for one kind of social group: Brahmins. By telling stories about this mythological figure, we find, mainstream Brahmin communities have been able to conceptualize and maintain their own social power throughout Indian cultural history.

## CASTE AND THE MEDIATION OF MYTHOLOGY

What precisely do we mean by “Brahmin social power?” For thousands of years, the Indian subcontinent has been home to a social discourse founded upon the idea that communities who deem themselves to be Brahmins, simply by their being Brahmin, ought to be granted a place at the top of the social ladder. This ladder has four well-known rungs, a hierarchical and patriarchal arrangement of categories or “*varṇas*” that encompass all social activity: Brahmins as priests/intellectuals, Kṣatriyas as royalty/protectors, Vaiśyas as merchants/artisans, and Śūdras as laborers. There is also an unincorporated fifth, the Outcaste groups—given various social labels like Caṇḍāla, Śvapaca, or Mātaṅga—whose members find themselves placed beyond the pale of normative society. With this social vision come three stronger arguments: (1) the *varṇa* groups ought to remain strictly endogamous, (2) one’s *varṇa* is a residual consequence of one’s own actions (*karma*) in previous births, and, most importantly, (3) individuals cannot (normally) change their *varṇa* without physical rebirth. The greatest beneficiaries of this ideological framework quite obviously are those who find themselves, always and already, at its top. The actualization of this normative discourse is precisely what we will call Brahmin social power.

As is the case whenever any one group asserts dominance over others, the long history of Brahmin hegemony has undoubtedly involved many localized acts of coercion and collusion, and this study of mythology does not mean to trivialize the impact of their political and economic histories, “on the ground.” At the same time, one must not ignore the role of cultural practices in the construction of this power. One of the most important and overt mechanisms for the large-scale propagation of *varṇa*-based hierarchy in the premodern past has been the production of authoritative theoretical texts (*sāstras*) that sought to regulate social practice through a monological Brahminical discourse of cultural injunction. However, as this book intends to show, caste ideology has also been naturalized in more subtle and dialogical ways through Hindu mythological texts and performances.

Two ideas about caste need to be clarified before we may go any further: (a) how *varṇa* ideology is made to govern social practice, and (b) the mediating role that mythology has played in this process. *Varna* is, simply put, a social label—a verbal handle placed upon a human individual in order

to formalize the behavioral expectations of that individual as well as his or her place within the broader community. Europeans first called this phenomenon “caste,” deeming it to be the essence of traditional Indian society that distinguished it from the modern West.<sup>9</sup> This line of thought has culminated in the work of Louis Dumont (1980), who theorized caste as a paradigmatic social structure that becomes articulated in everyday Indian life through basic oppositions of purity and pollution. Dumont argued that caste hierarchy operates on an underlying mechanics of “encompassment” in which economic and political power is subsumed within—and thereby subordinated to—the domain of the religious. The resulting social order, Dumont argued, forms the essence of the traditional Indian individual, whom he labeled *Homo hierarchicus* in contrast to the modern Western *Homo aequalis*.

Dumont’s structuralism has not been without controversy. While some have worked to modify or extend his findings (e.g., Barnett, Fruzetti, and Östör 1976; Kolenda 1976; Chenet 1989; Dundes 1997), a number of scholars have presented bolder and bolder attacks on his central arguments. Gloria Raheja (1988), for example, critiques the reduction of complex and locally contingent networks of affinity and status to a single, overarching theory; she offers, instead, a multidimensional model.<sup>10</sup> Uma Chakravarti (1985) and others note the impact of Buddhist models of social and political organization in early India. Nicholas Dirks (1989) directs his critique principally toward Dumont’s argument that political power in traditional Indian society is encompassed by religious status.<sup>11</sup> Declan Quigley meanwhile questions the assumption that all Brahmins everywhere are elites, pointing out that in this matter, “authorities in Hinduism have, more often than not, illegitimately fused two very different concepts—*jāti* and *varṇa*—or caste (*Brāhmaṇa*) and function (*brāhmaṇa*)” (1993: 84). In other words, not all Brahmins are priests by occupation, and certain kinds of priests actually have low social rank based on what they do (see Heesterman 1971: 45).

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<sup>9</sup> That is, caste ideology involves ascribing *varṇa* labels to specific *jātis*—on-the-ground communities that are formed organically through everyday social practices, such as occupation, marriage, and commensality. The mechanics of how human agents map *varṇa* onto *jāti* in everyday life has been a “conundrum” central to the work of social anthropologists and historians (Trautmann 1981: 285; for a brief overview, see Marriott 2004); this book’s cultural-historical approach will instead ask how *varṇa* ideology is rendered in practice through the production of texts and performances.

<sup>10</sup> See also Gardner 1968; Fox 1969; Cove 1973; Burghart 1978; Ferro-Luzzi 1986 for other multidimensional approaches to caste.

<sup>11</sup> Dirks is not the first to critique this point—see Berreman 1971; Heesterman 1971; Mencher 1974.

These are only a few of Dumont's critics, and after nearly fifty more years of anthropological, sociological, and historical work, we may state with confidence that caste has never been the *only* way of structuring Hindu society and in fact has been in continuous competition with other theories and models. Still, while *varna* might not *automatically* govern the nuanced social practices that take place on the ground, it has been consistently endorsed as the normal way of conceiving of the Hindu social world. This institutionalization, I suggest, has taken place through the mediation of cultural practices that make it seem as if Brahmins are "always already" in possession of social power.<sup>12</sup>

The most formidable of these mediations came from the Sanskrit intellectual tradition known as the *dharmaśāstra*—the "theory of moral law." Throughout the first millennium and in much of the second, if an author should wish to produce authoritative knowledge on any given topic, he or she was to follow what Sheldon Pollock has described as the "shastric paradigm" (1985: 516, col. 1), in which a text that professed to be a theoretical treatise (*śāstra*) authorized its truth claims by positioning itself as genetically linked, in one way or another, to the transcendent *Vedas* (Pollock 1989: 609, col. 2). To do so, śāstraic works needed to conform to formal rules and methods first established by Brahminical intellectual communities (most notably grammarians and ritualists), even if the author were not himself (or herself) a Brahmin. The result was a thorough ritualization and dehistoricization of cultural practices, combined with a "renaturalization" of the asymmetrical structures of dominance (Pollock 1990: 335). Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the development of the *dharmaśāstra* tradition (see Olivelle 2006b), which came to be a "hermeneutic reference point" for the wider sphere of Hindu legal and social thought (Davis 2007: 242). The "massive authority" that śāstraic discourse gave to the Brahminical intellectual community that had privy to it (Pollock 1985: 500, col. 2) thus depended upon a nexus of knowledge and social power to rival that which accompanies the rise of modernity in post-Enlightenment Europe (Foucault 1978, 1995, 2002).

Sanskrit mythological literature is one site where I suggest that the strength of this nexus was often explicitly put to the test. While the *dharmaśāstras*

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<sup>12</sup> In other words, using the term "Brahmin" tacitly affirms the existence of the Brahminical ideology of *varṇa*, even if one chooses to contest or obliterate it (on Heidegger, Derrida, and "always already," see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's preface to Derrida 1998: xiv).

conceived of *varṇa* as a totalizing system of social order, the Sanskrit epics and purāṇas offered unusual cases that compelled the consumer to wrestle with the real-world applicability of such rules and regulations.<sup>13</sup> These stories usually involve violations, counter-examples, or failures of Hindu social norms, creating sites of slippage and rupture in the storyworld where one could find, at least in principle, cracks within the normative social doctrine.<sup>14</sup> However, their composers did not leave these cracks unattended, but resealed their texts using a kind of scholastic caulk. They introduced various narratological devices, such as framing dialogues, narrative prepositioning, or geographical mapping to turn potentially radical figures like Viśvāmitra into counter-normative personae whose boundary crossings may safely be appreciated and celebrated, but are never to be emulated in real life.

The paratextual features of premodern mythological texts are in many ways comparable to strategies used by folk singers and storytellers today. As they perform before live audiences, such artists also frame their materials in dialogue, weave together different stories, and localize them (Blackburn 1988, Narayan 1989, Flueckiger 1996). In many regions of India, these performance traditions stretch back for centuries and exhibit deep connections with medieval *bhakti* poetry (Lutgendorf 1991, Novetzke 2008). Sanskrit mythological literature was also enveloped in vibrant folkloric traditions (Ramanujan 1991, 1993; Narayana Rao 1993), but this history, for the most part, has remained obscure. All we have now are the physical remnants of a parallel and equally vibrant scribal tradition of creating, copying, and disseminating manuscripts, which reveal the written life of mythological narratives. It is important to reconcile these two modes of cultural production—texts and performances—as we chart the historical significance of Viśvāmitra, and this requires an interdisciplinary method that addresses the dialogical and context-sensitive nature of both.

I will explain this method momentarily, but it is worthwhile to consider first what others have already said about Viśvāmitra, as he has long been an object of study. After reviewing this scholarship, I will sketch out a

<sup>13</sup> Ashok Aklujkar aptly describes the *Mahābhārata* as an “applied *dharmaśāstra*” (personal communication, 2006). I do not mean to argue that the epics and purāṇas are the only texts to do this—for we should note that the *dharmaśāstra* tradition internally tests the applicability of its own legal theory (Davis 2006), while other Sanskrit story literature also has this function (Davis and Nemec 2012).

<sup>14</sup> The situation here is somewhat parallel to what McComas Taylor (2007) has described as a “dis-course of division” within the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra*.

performance-centered approach to the legends of Viśvāmitra. Then, to illustrate the method and to get a thumbnail sketch of our sage, we will look at one episode in the *Mahābhārata* (13.3–4) that summarizes his accomplishments and persona. Finally, I will present the general plan of the book and discuss some broader implications that its findings may have for the study of Hindu mythology.

### STUDYING VIŚVĀMITRA

The Indological subfield of “Viśvāmitra Studies,” if we might call it that, has generally followed the intellectual trajectories of the larger discipline. Indologists of the colonial era were initially attracted to Sanskrit texts as prismatic artifacts of a forgotten prehistory, using them to reconstruct a diachronic account of what may have happened in the remote past. This evolved into a full-scale philological inquiry into the classical literatures of premodern India. Since the 1960s, Indologists have turned to questions of symbolic meaning, whether structural, psychological, or theological, in an effort to gain a broadly synchronic understanding of Indic thought and culture across the ages.<sup>15</sup> Both phases of the discipline have produced valuable studies of our sage.

One of the first to take notice of Viśvāmitra was the Scottish Indologist John Muir (1810–1882). In his seminal work, *Original Sanskrit Texts*, Muir argued that changes to Viśvāmitra’s character reflected a major development in early Indian social history, as the fluid relations of prehistoric times congealed into the classical system of caste. What in Vedic literature was a rather unremarkable case of a prince who was also a priest became, by the time of the epics and purāṇas, an extraordinary and impossible achievement. Here is Muir’s discussion of this transformation (1872: 363):

If we find that later works consider it necessary to represent [Viśvāmitra’s] priestly character as a purely exceptional one, explicable only on the ground of supernatural merit acquired by ardent devotion, we must recollect that the course of ages had brought about a most material change in Indian society, that the sacerdotal function had at length become confined to the members of an exclusive caste, and that the exercise of such

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<sup>15</sup> Inden labels these approaches, respectively, as “authorist” and “contextualist” (2000: 7–9).

an office in ancient times by persons of the regal and mercantile classes had ceased to be intelligible, except upon the supposition of such extraordinary sanctity as was alleged in the case of Viśvāmitra.

Muir's assessment fits well within the Orientalist intellectual climate of the colonial period, when, as Dirks and others have argued, the idea of caste, as we know it, came to be invoked as the natural "essence" of premodern Indian society (Dirks 2001, Inden 1986a, Raheja 1989). The assumption is that caste is a natural reality in India, and, due to its emergence over the "course of ages," any notion of (upward) social mobility in Indian civilization is long gone and can only be returned through Western intervention. Underwriting Muir's five-volume project, furthermore, is the idea that modern India should be educated through texts collected and mined by Western Indologists. This is why, in the preface to the second volume of his work, he expresses the hope that it might "assist the researches of those Hindus who desire to investigate critically the origin and history of their nation... and may facilitate the operations of those European teachers whose business it is to communicate to the Hindus the results of modern enquiry on the various subjects here examined" (Muir 1860: v). Viśvāmitra in this way is made to fit within a colonial discourse that introduced the hoary Indian past, free of caste, to the colonized "Other," for whom it was no longer a memory and therefore accessible only through the eyes of the colonizer (Said 1978, Inden 1990).

Despite this Orientalist undercarriage, Muir's work had a consciously academic purpose that is worth taking seriously: the reconstruction of the earliest possible Indian history based upon textual evidence, especially to the extent that it might shed light on a shared Indo-European prehistory. One of the more productive sites for doing so was the legend of *Śunahṣepa*. Its appearance in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (c. 700–500 BCE) constitutes an early—if not the earliest—complete specimen of Indian storytelling, and Indologists were quite understandably eager to make sense of it. Their focus was on the depiction of human sacrifice in this story, and whether it might reflect genuine Vedic or even Indo-European practices. As for Viśvāmitra, some believed him to represent an Indo-European hero-type, a primitive melding of royal and priestly social traits, which later bifurcated into Brahmin and Kṣatriya *varṇas* in India (Weber 1891: 784–85). Others used the story in producing a positive biography of Viśvāmitra as a Vedic seer. Mostly, however, the *Śunahṣepa* legend raised a

philological conundrum: to what degree did later epic and purāṇic versions distort this old story, and what then might have been the basis for the original? Rudolf von Roth (1821–1895), for example, contended that the original Vedic account was a story of theophany during human sacrifice, not involving Viśvāmitra at all. Only later, in epic and purāṇic texts, under the influence of the priestly concerns of their composers, did it become a story about his daring rescue of a Brahmin boy (Roth 1853: 120–21). Other scholars disagreed, and *Sunahṣepa* became the subject of vibrant scholarly debate.<sup>16</sup>

Influential to this discussion was the “devolutionary” axiom of Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), who maintained that early Indian history was preserved more accurately, albeit in primitive and highly fragmentary form, within Vedic texts (1859: 9). These texts, moreover, constituted the oldest survivals of an Indo-European cultural tradition that had been imported into India in prehistoric times (Patton 2004: 38–39). Over the course of the next millennium, this high poetry became distorted and reconstituted within classical Sanskrit literature. Myths, according to Max Müller, had devolved from pristine expressions of primitive religious thought into indulgent, incoherent, and unreliable fictions.<sup>17</sup> Mythological literature was not to be rejected entirely—as epic recitation played a key role in certain Vedic rituals (Weber 1891: 815–16)—but Indologists seeking to isolate the most ancient forms of Hindu culture were not to trust the antiquity of the extant epic and purāṇic texts, or the veracity of the stories that they told. It became the scholar’s task to separate this mythological chaff from the hidden kernel of historical truth—or, as Max Müller put it, “the clearance, so to say, of the rubbish which passing ages have left on the monuments of the mind” (1859: 8).

This devolutionary axiom received a critical test at the beginning of the twentieth century through a lively debate about Viśvāmitra between two noted Indologists, Frederick Eden Pargiter (1852–1927) and Arthur Berriedale Keith (1879–1944), that transpired in the pages of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* over the course of two and a half years. Keith privileged older and better-preserved Vedic texts for writing the pre-Buddhist history of India,

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<sup>16</sup> The debates on the historicity of Vedic human sacrifice involving Friedrich Rosen (1838), Rudolf von Roth (1849–50, 1853), H. H. Wilson (1852), Max Müller (1859) and others has been usefully summarized by Asko Parpola (2006: 164–5); see also Hämeen-Anttila 2001. Hermann Lommel’s “Die Sunahṣepa-Legende” (1964) constitutes a definitive apex to this line of research (cf. White 1986: 228).

<sup>17</sup> Muir’s work also operates with this degenerative model (1858: 318).

particularly for bona fide Vedic personalities like Viśvāmitra. His position was newly buttressed by the completion of important philological projects at the turn of the century, including his own monumental *Vedic Index*, cowritten with Arthur Anthony Macdonell (1912), from which emerged a far richer picture of early Indian religion than his predecessors had known. Pargiter, on the other hand, viewed purāṇic texts as superior to Vedic sources in reconstructing political history, and as Kunal Chakrabarti notes, he “treated the Purāṇic material with a respect previously unheard of” (2001: 4). To support this, Pargiter proposed a radical theory of Brahminical literary appropriation, arguing that in ancient times a “religious tradition” controlled by Brahmins had seized control over a body of literature that had earlier belonged to an exclusively Kṣatriya “historical tradition.” This Brahminical cultural takeover, he maintained, was responsible for the fanciful style of this literature, as well as its notorious lack of historical consciousness (Pargiter 1922: 59–62; cf. Thapar 1986; Pollock 1989: 603–4). Pargiter ventured to read the purāṇas with a sensitivity to what he felt to be a secular Kṣatriya voice, and in 1913 published a monograph (1913a) that reconstructed the political history of royal dynasties stretching back to the putative Bhārata war (hyperbolically recorded in the epic *Mahābhārata*), based closely on purāṇic genealogical lists and practically ignoring the *Vedas* altogether.

In October of the same year, Pargiter also published a detailed study titled, “Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha” in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1913b), that examined the existence of two distinct subtypes of the same legend, *Satyavrata* and *Triśaṅku*. Pargiter speculated that *Satyavrata*, found only in the purāṇas, belonged to the Kṣatriya historical tradition. Brahmin hands had later tampered with this plain-looking story, he argued, turning it into the fanciful *Triśaṅku* legend, found only in the epics. He then tried to reconstruct what he felt to be the true historical account of a political feud between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha that had taken place at the royal court of Ayodhyā several centuries before either of these stories was written down. The purāṇic *Satyavrata* narrative, he felt, was closest to an original Kṣatriya ballad through which these events had first been recorded in public memory.

Keith wrote a scathing critique of Pargiter’s thesis in the journal’s next issue, accusing him of heaping “conjecture upon conjecture” (1914a: 125) and insisting once more upon the primacy of Vedic sources for positivist historical reconstruction, especially for individuals whose authorial stamp on the

*Vedas* was undeniable. The Vedic Viśvāmitra was the true Viśvāmitra, Keith insisted, and not the one depicted in the far younger *purāṇas*. Pargiter's rejoinder appeared in the following issue (1914a), alongside another lengthy article establishing his historical method (1914b). This would result in yet another salvo from Keith (1914b), juxtaposed with Pargiter's reply (1914c) to his previous objection.

This tête-à-tête between an old, "outsider" academic who had never held a formal academic position (Pargiter) and an accomplished, young Oxford-trained Sanskritist and legal scholar (Keith) would continue into the next year's volume, spreading across more than a dozen articles, letters, and books.<sup>18</sup> It was to have quite an impact on Indology as a discipline, as Pargiter's method of textual interrogation, folded together with the historical materialism of D. D. Kosambi, came to form an important foundation for the Marxist historiography of early India.<sup>19</sup> And even though, as A. D. Pusalker notes, "there have never been in India two such water-tight compartments as the Brāhmaṇa tradition and the Kṣatriya tradition" (1952: 153), the assumption that Brahmin redactors expanded the Sanskrit epics from an original "core" of Kṣatriya ballads is still quite widespread among Indologists (e.g., Brockington 2000, McGrath 2011; for a critique, see Hiltzebeitel 1999a).

Concerning Viśvāmitra, however, Keith's textually grounded arguments appear to have won the day. There is little doubt that Vedic materials yield a portrait of the sage that is older than what *purāṇic* texts may give us. As we will soon see, Vedic texts primarily venerated Viśvāmitra as a powerful seer, and only later did he come to be known for his change of caste. Still, Pargiter's efforts have yielded two points worth keeping in mind. First, in Brahminical literature, we should differentiate between at least three distinct voices—Vedic, epic, and *purāṇic*—that speak of Viśvāmitra, each with its own interests in the sage's career. And second, though the Vedic Viśvāmitra may be older, his epic and *purāṇic* legends speak most directly to the formation of caste boundaries.

A thematic shift took place in how Indologists studied Viśvāmitra after Indian Independence in 1947. In India, a number of scholars endeavored to recover the life history of Viśvāmitra, an enterprise now tinged with a nostalgic

<sup>18</sup> A complete trace of this debate can be had in the following publications: Pargiter 1913a, 1913b, 1914a, 1914b, 1914c, 1915a, 1915b, 1917; Keith 1914a, 1914b, 1914c, 1915a, 1915b.

<sup>19</sup> See Hariyappa 1953: 325–26; Ghoshal 1965: 37–52; Sharma 1975: 6; Thapar 1991: 2–3; Chakrabarti 2001: 4.

interest in the Vedic period as an Indian “golden age.” Motivated perhaps by the nationalist zeal of a newly independent India (Thapar 1968: 326–30), H. L. Hariyappa (1953), V. G. Rahurkar (1964), B. H. Kapadia (1971), and others entered into a field hitherto dominated by European scholars and produced genealogical and text-historical studies of Viśvāmitra that aimed to tell a new story about India’s Vedic origins. In 1975, this stream reached a climax with the publication of U. C. Sharma’s *Viśvāmitras and Vasishthas: An Exhaustive Study*, in which he critiqued the notion that datable Indian history commences with the birth of the Buddha:

Whatever was there before this date is considered as belonging to an age of mythological and legendary tales of childrens’ [sic] interest only. Thus the great heroes of our ancient past like Sudās, Vasishtha, Viśvāmitra, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna etc. are considered, on this false assumption, to be merely legendary figures having no historical significance. (Sharma 1975: 2)

Unlike their European counterparts, whose interests often took them out of India and toward a prehistoric Indo-European past, these Indian Indologists sought to reconstruct “our” ancient history and to appreciate its continuities with India’s newly-independent present (cf. Patton 1994). Sharma, for example, states that he is “grateful to our epic authors and the *purāṇakāras* for presenting us through tradition such a vast data and information about our ancient past” (1975: 12). Still, beyond this new Indocentric outlook, the methods that he and his colleagues employed were not terribly different from European scholarship, and the goal remained the same: to reconstruct a positive history from mythological texts deemed to be “imaginary and far from reality” (Sharma 1975: 28), “a heterogenous mixture” (94), containing “very little material which is historically credible” (93), or sometimes just plain “wrong” (30). In the end, Sharma’s monograph, which remains the most detailed and comprehensive textual study of Viśvāmitra, did little more than expand Pargiter’s thesis, that five distinct historical individuals named “Viśvāmitra” have been conflated into one mythological figure, to say that there were actually six or seven historical Viśvāmitras (Sharma 1975: 102–7, 112).

In the last few decades, scholars have started to ask how Viśvāmitra might facilitate a more holistic understanding of “the Hindu tradition”

(Goldman 1978: 365) or normative Hindu “ideology” (Biardeau 1999b: 2139). Rather than historical reconstruction, the objective is to explain how this character reflects, across time, certain relatively stable features of Hindu religion, psychology, or society. One representative example is Robert Goldman’s psychoanalytic study (1982) of underlying oedipal tensions within Viśvāmitra’s squabble with Vasiṣṭha over a wish-giving cow in the *Kāmadhenu* legend. This article is a follow-up to Goldman’s earlier delineation (1978) of a vast and complex process of Freudian symbol substitution and distortion at work throughout Hindu mythological literature. In the case of this Viśvāmitra legend, Goldman argues that the Brahmin (here, Vasiṣṭha) stands in for the all-powerful father, while the Kṣatriya (Viśvāmitra) is the disobedient son and the magic cow, the nurturing mother figure. The story then becomes a “mini-epic of negative oedipal identification” (Goldman 1982: 128) in which the Kṣatriya/son’s oedipal desire to possess the cow/mother provokes a violent conflict with the Brahmin/father, resulting (initially) in utter defeat. Viśvāmitra does eventually triumph, but this is due to his complete self-abnegation, iconizing him as the “classic Indian self-castrative hero” (131).<sup>20</sup>

Another way to understand Viśvāmitra is to speak of structure, as Madeleine Biardeau has done (1979, 1999b). Biardeau builds on the work of Georges Dumézil and Louis Dumont to argue that the Vasiṣṭha-Viśvāmitra rivalry symbolizes the “strict separation of sacerdotal and royal functions” (1999b: 2140) within the caste system. Rather than reflecting earlier, more fluid Indian social patterns, as social anthropologists had suggested (Ghurye 1932: 45; Hutton 1946: 155), Biardeau argues that Viśvāmitra, paired with Vasiṣṭha, serves as a mythological exemplar of the binary opposition between Brahmin and Kṣatriya castes, in which the former not only trumps but “encompasses” the latter. In other words, Viśvāmitra’s caste change does not necessarily mean that social boundaries were once more fluid than they are now (though this could indeed have been the case); rather, it reinforces the utter functional difference between the two caste categories within classical Hindu social thought and normalizes the superiority of the priestly Brahmin over the royal Kṣatriya. David Gordon White has extended Biardeau’s ideas through a series of articles and essays on Viśvāmitra (White 1986, 1989, 1991: 71–86, 1992, 1996: 304–7), in which he contextualizes our sage to the development

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<sup>20</sup> For further discussion of Goldman’s psychoanalytic approach to Viśvāmitra, see Sathaye 2010a.

of this Brahmin-Kṣatriya social binary in the post-Vedic period. Like U. C. Sharma's "exhaustive" textual study, White's body of work stands as a kind of capstone to the symbolic/structural approach, synthesizing the insights of his forebears and aspiring toward comprehensiveness. And while his reliance on the Dumontian model of caste prevents him from taking us as far as we would like to go, White does steer us in the right direction: toward historical context.

This book would like to build upon these scholars' findings, alongside a particularly useful collected volume of essays (Chaubey 1987a) devoted to the textual sources on Viśvāmitra. It is also indebted to a third, "new historical" mode of scholarship that has recently begun to emerge in Indology. Ronald Inden, Daud Ali, and Jonathan Walters (2000), for example, read premodern texts neither as the monological output of long-forgotten master authors, nor as inert expressions of an authorless cultural system. Texts, from this point of view, come out of dialogic engagements between specific authorial agents and reading publics. A focus on this dynamism reveals how texts have the power to reconstitute the world in which they are produced, and not just to reflect it.

The idea that texts and history are mutually constitutive permits us to ask a more critical set of questions about Viśvāmitra. How precisely did the composers and performers of mythological literature use this figure to engage dialogically with the social, political, and religious world around them? How were Viśvāmitra's legends presented at various points in history, how were they received, and what social ideas did they naturalize? These questions cannot adequately be answered by speculating about Viśvāmitra's own life and times or what he might mean to the dehistoricized Hindu mind. Instead we must ask how mythological literature actively brings into being the world that it imagines—that is, how the storyworld shapes the real world. This requires a greater sensitivity to how a narrative text speaks to the historical context of its composition; and, because written texts were never the only means of transmitting these legends, I suggest that it must be harmonized with the study of performance.

#### THE VIŚVĀMITRA LEGENDS IN TEXTS AND PERFORMANCES

While this book focuses primarily on written versions of the Viśvāmitra legends in the premodern past, it is difficult to ignore the cultural impact of oral, staged, or filmed performances when it comes to understanding the life of

Viśvāmitra in contemporary India. A. K. Ramanujan has famously remarked that in India, “no one ever reads the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata* for the first time” (1991: 46), and the same might be said about the stories they contain. Before coming across written versions, many contemporary Hindus would already have heard of Viśvāmitra stealing Vasiṣṭha’s cow, helping Triśaṅku get to heaven, harassing Hariścandra, and being seduced by Menakā, thanks to the efforts of storytellers, singers, films, television, and other popular media. There is ample evidence to suggest that vernacular modes of Hindu mythological performance have had a continuous presence in the subcontinent for a thousand years, and these can furthermore be linked to traditions of Sanskrit purāṇic recitation that go back a thousand more (Bonazzoli 1983a, 1983b; Rocher 1994; O’Hanlon 2013a: 96–99). The storyworlds of Hindu mythology, it is safe to say, have long been shaped through complex interactions between written narrative texts and live performances.

To analyze how contemporary mythological performance works, it is useful to turn to the wider discipline of international folklore studies and an approach developed in the 1970s by a pioneering group of scholars whom the “greybeard” folklorist Richard Dorson called the “Young Turks” (1972: 45, quoted in Zumwalt 1988: 139). Their work induced a paradigm shift in the field, from simply collecting and archiving folklore toward the analysis of “verbal art as performance”—how stories, songs, and other traditional items are presented live by performers for audiences within specific social and cultural settings.<sup>21</sup> The theory of performance relies on acknowledging its fundamentally “emergent” quality: the idea that when a performer presents an item of verbal art, it is neither a mindless parroting of an original master text nor a purely novel invention, but “a product of the interplay of many factors, including setting, act sequence, and ground rules of performance” (Bauman 1975: 299). As non-textual elements of performance (i.e., its “texture” and “context”) play intrinsic roles in producing cultural meaning, they must therefore be taken into consideration in the analysis of any item of folklore (Dundes 1964).

The performance-centered approach also captures an important dynamic relationship between traditional culture and social power. In evaluating a

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<sup>21</sup> Key works include Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Paredes and Bauman 1972; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975; Bauman 1977. For a useful, South Asia-oriented overview of the field, see Claus and Korom 1991 and Korom 2006.

performance, we may observe how audiences judge the competence of performers and the relevance of their repertoire, and conversely, we may study how performers momentarily gain intellectual and social influence over their captive audiences during the live event (Bauman 1975: 304–5; Abrahams 1971: 28–29). Folklorists have developed three methodological angles for analyzing this relationship. First, there is an emphasis on identifying the “breakthrough into performance”—the moment when ordinary speech stops being ordinary and instead becomes a performance (Hymes 1975). Performers provide subtle “keys” to signal such moments (Bauman 1975: 295–96, following Goffman 1974), while audience expectations of genre, convention, and style also contour how a performance unfolds (Ben-Amos 1969, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1975). Second, the meaning of a text is captured as it emerges through a dialogue between performer and audience (Maranda 1971: 56–57; Bauman 1975: 302–5). Finally, attention is paid to how, borrowing Benedict Anderson’s term, “horizontal comradeships” between individuals within folk groups are forged during a performance by the construction of a normative group identity (Bauman 1971).<sup>22</sup> In other words, folklorists investigate how traditional performance shapes its participants’ perceptions about themselves, about people who are like themselves, and about others who are not like themselves. All three aspects of this theory can be fruitfully applied to contemporary performances of Hindu mythological narratives, and in Chapter 6, we will use them to analyze how Viśvāmitra legends are performed in the Marathi devotional storytelling tradition called *nāradīya kīrtan*.

When we consider the premodern Indian past, however, all we have are written texts. This dichotomy of past and present, written and performed, and Sanskrit and vernacular, raises what is perhaps the most critical question for this book—the biggest elephant in the room, if you will. How can we compare modern performances with premodern texts without automatically regarding the former as being derivatives or deviations from the latter? Practically everything that we know about Viśvāmitra before the nineteenth century comes from rapidly deteriorating handwritten documents composed primarily

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson uses the term “horizontal comradeships” to describe the construction of the nation as a fraternity despite “the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each” (1991: 224). By the term “folk group,” I follow Alan Dundes’s seminal definition of “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor” (1965: 2). Dundes goes on to explain that “it does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reasons will have some traditions that it calls its own.”

in Sanskrit. And while it is reasonable to suppose that singers, storytellers, grandfathers, and grandmothers in premodern India would have told vernacular stories about Viśvāmitra much as they do today, what these performance traditions looked like and how they interacted with written Sanskrit texts are necessarily matters of conjecture, as are their continuities with present-day performance traditions. It is tempting to suppose that the Sanskrit epics and *purāṇas* evolved organically from a preliterate oral tradition (e.g., J. Smith 1989; Brockington 2000; Fitzgerald 2010; McGrath 2011) or, inspired by the Oral Formulaic method of analyzing Homeric epics (Lord 1960), to search for verbal formulae and themes within the textual corpora that reveal them to be “tape recordings” of this preexisting oral tradition (Grintser 1974, summarized in de Jong 1975; Vassilkov 1995; Brockington 1998: 103–16). But as A. B. Keith might say, this involves heaping “conjecture upon conjecture,” and it would reveal nothing about the historical context of these oral-to-written textual captures, if indeed they actually occurred.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, written Sanskrit literature has had an undeniable impact on later performance traditions, especially in recent times, when printed editions and vernacular translations have made the epics and *purāṇas* widely available. And so, we are left with a bit of a quandary.

I believe that a way forward presents itself if we bracket off questions of priority and influence, and instead follow Alf Hiltebeitel, at least momentarily, in treating the Sanskrit epics and *purāṇas* as they now appear: as written works of premodern literature (2001: 20–21) that deliberately dress themselves up with what Pollock calls “faux orality” (Pollock 2006: 79, note 9). Whether they were originally oral or written, at some point, certainly, the Sanskrit epics and *purāṇas* were written down and stayed written down. But what does it mean for them to look oral? Not only does it imply the presence of a living performance tradition when the text was written (for how else could one imitate it?), but that the text has been intentionally furnished with structural features shared by this tradition. It is upon this common structural ground that I suggest we may compare written Sanskrit texts to contemporary vernacular performances, without needing to determine definitively whether or not an oral tradition preceded them, or what it would have looked like if it did.

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<sup>23</sup> For an important challenge to the oral-to-written development models especially for the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, see the writings of Alf Hiltebeitel (1999b: 12–21; 2001: 20–4; 2011a).

The central structural feature that written mythological texts share with oral performances is the dialogic narrative frame, a trait long recognized as being typical to premodern Indian literature.<sup>24</sup> Of course, all writings are to some degree dialogic, in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) sense that any given work carries on a conversation with earlier texts and their authors. But the Sanskrit epics and purāṇas are dialogical in another, more literal sense—they are made up of nested or “emboxed” dialogues between characters that act as textual containers for the myths and legends presented within.<sup>25</sup> All Sanskrit epic and purāṇic texts exhibit this structural trait, which scholars have traced back to the similarly emboxed structure of earlier Vedic rituals (Witzel 1987a; Minkowski 1989).

Whether or not one accepts the argument of Vedic origins, it is important to note that epic and purāṇic emboxment is also homologous to the frame structure of any oral performance in any time period or cultural milieu. It is hard to imagine any live storytelling session—or indeed any act of cultural expression—that is not somehow framed by the external, lived context of the storyteller and listener engaging in dialogue (see Lutgendorf 1989). Narrative frames were also used in written story literature throughout the premodern world. As folklorists have pointed out, the use of a framing narrative “creates an artificial performance context to compensate for the stasis of the written text” (Belcher 1994: 19, cited in Blackburn 1996: 501). The resulting “narrative context” permits premodern written story texts to exhibit a certain heteroglossia—a “multiplicity of social voices”—that Bakhtin argued to be at play in the modern novel but absent from classical epic poetry (1981: 263). It should be noted that this is a *pseudo*-heteroglossia, in the sense that the fabricated frames of the Sanskrit epics and purāṇas are not *real* dialogues, but pieces of writing that are kept fully under the composers’ control. Still, the frame functions as a space where the text may speak reflexively about the narrative materials it carries, generating a springboard with which its consumers can endeavor to leap across the “absolute epic distance” (Bakhtin 1981: 13) that separates the mythological storyworld from their own real-world context.

How exactly does one make this leap toward the storyworld? Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs (1990) suggest that an oral performance involves

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of the *Mahābhārata*'s frame structure, see Hegarty 2001; for an enumeration and analysis of the subnarratives embedded within the epic frames, see Gombach 2000; Hiltebeitel 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Moriz Winternitz calls this process “*Einschachtelung*” (1908, vol. 3: 271), which Witzel translates as “intercalation” (1987: 380).

the “entextualization” of an item of verbal art that the performer had previously heard, and which otherwise exists in his or her mind as an unperformed “mental text” (Honko 1996: 4–5) until it is embedded within a new, historically-situated discursive context the next time the performer tells it. The narrative frames of written story literature imitate this decontextualization-recontextualization process, through which an older story becomes resituated within a new textual environment (see Blackburn 1996). But because readers cannot actively participate in the production of this frame, they are in a sense held captive by its pseudo-performative artifice. For example, when the sage Śatānanda tells Prince Rāma the legends of Viśvāmitra in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the epic’s audiences will place themselves in the position of Rāma, but will be unable to ask any questions apart from the ones that the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s composers have made him ask. Though it creates the semblance of ideological negotiation, the dialogic structure of the literary narrative frame actually provides the composers of Hindu mythological literature a secondary level of interpretive control over its consumers, preventing them from asking the wrong kind of questions, as it were. In the case of Viśvāmitra, as we will see, these dialogic narrative frames have been used to regulate how audiences may or may not interpret his becoming a Brahmin, and what it might mean for the social identity of Brahmins in the real world.

#### THE VIŚVĀMITRA “SUBNARRATIVE” IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA (13.3–4)

As a brief illustration of how the dialogic narrative frame generates a pseudo-performance context for the Viśvāmitra legends, and how it contours their public reception, let us now turn to an intriguing conversation about his exploits that takes place in the *Mahābhārata*. It also happens to give a snapshot of Viśvāmitra’s mythological persona as it would have appeared to mainstream Hindus at the beginning of the Common Era.

The setting is the bloody battlefield of Kurukṣetra. The Bhārata war is over, and the heroic Pāṇḍavas have won. Yudhiṣṭhīra, the eldest of the five brothers, returns to the front lines to pay his respects to Bhīṣma, their venerable patriarch who lies mortally stricken on a deathbed of arrows. Their consultation ranges over two massive books of the epic, whose titles give us a clue as to their intent—the *Sānti* and *Anuśāsana Parvans*, the “Book

of Peace” and the “Book of Teachings.” Bhīṣma instructs the new emperor on how to rule his dominions peaceably, responsibly, and in accordance with the moral principles of *dharma* amidst the corrupt new age that their victory has inaugurated. In one question-and-answer session titled “The Viśvāmitra Subnarrative” (*Viśvāmitropākhyāna*), Yudhiṣṭhira poses the following query:

[1] Mighty King, ruler of men, if Brahminhood is impossible to attain by members of the other three *varṇas*, then how did the mighty Kṣatriya Viśvāmitra attain Brahminhood? [2] This is what I wish to hear, righteous ruler of men. So please tell it to me in detail, grandfather. (*Mbh* 13.3.1-2)

Before Bhīṣma may respond, Yudhiṣṭhira summarizes his knowledge of the sage, reflecting and also regulating what the epic’s audiences were to have known about him:

[3] Grandfather, please tell me how that man of immeasurable valor slew the hundred sons of Vasiṣṭha, entirely through his ascetic power; [4] how, appearing like the end of Time, he created violent demons (*rākṣasas*) and monsters, his body enveloped in hostility.<sup>26</sup> [5] Tell me how, lauded as a Brahmin, that wise man went on to establish in this world the great Kuśika lineage that is replete with hundreds of Brahmin sages.

[6] Tell me how Ruci’s son, the great ascetic Śunahṣepa, was released from the great sacrificial rite in which he had been placed as a victim, [7] and how, during Hariścandra’s sacrifice, he became the son of great Viśvāmitra by gratifying the gods with his majesty. [8] Tell me how, when they did not assent to Devarāta (“God-given”) being the eldest, your majesty, his five hundred sons were summarily cursed to be dog-cooking Outcastes.<sup>27</sup> [9] Tell me how Triśaṅku, the Ikṣvāku, though shunned by his peers, was led gladly into heaven, upside-down, and placed in the south.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> These two verses allude to the *Mahābhārata*’s own telling of the *Kalmāṣapāda* legend.

<sup>27</sup> Verses 6-8 refer to Śunahṣepa as told in its purānic versions, which know the king as Hariścandra and the father as Ruci. Devarāta is a name given to Śunahṣepa after his adoption. The Vedic version knows the father as Ajigarta, while in the *Rāmāyaṇa* the king is Ambariṣa.

<sup>28</sup> The reference to the southern direction accords with the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s version of Triśaṅku.

[10] Tell me how Viśvāmitra's broad river, the Kauśikī, is frequented by blessed and auspicious royal sages (*rājarṣis*), and patronized by throngs of Brahmin sages (*brahmarṣis*).<sup>29</sup>

[11] Tell me how the famous nymph named Rambhā, with her five jewels, acted as an obstacle to his asceticism but was turned to stone because of his curse.<sup>30</sup>

[12] Tell me also how long ago, overcome with fear of him, Vasiṣṭha tied himself up and drowned himself in the waters, but was raised back out, unbound. [13] Tell me how the great river Vipāśā became holy from that time onward, made brilliant by the deeds of the magnificent Vasiṣṭha.<sup>31</sup>

[14] Tell me how he praised the lord Skanda, the general of the gods' armies, and how, gratified, [Skanda] released him from a curse.<sup>32</sup> [15] Tell me about him, the one who shines eternally amidst the constellation of the Brahmin Sages as it revolves around the pole star, Dhruva, fixed in the northern sky.<sup>33</sup>

[16] I am highly intrigued by all of these and other exploits of this Kṣatriya, [17] so please, Kaurava, tell me in detail how this came to be. Mighty Bhārata, how did he become a Brahmin without taking on another body? (*Mbh* 13.3.3–17)

Yudhiṣṭhira's laundry list of incidents and allusions reflects what *Mahābhārata*'s audiences would have known of Viśvāmitra and his deeds—or rather, what its composers deem that they ought to have known. The passage also makes it clear that a full cycle of legends about him had already developed when this portion of the epic was composed. It has therefore been a valuable piece of evidence for assessing the textual history of these stories. However, few scholars have paid attention to how Bhīṣma responds to Yudhiṣṭhira's polite request.

<sup>29</sup> The Kauśikī is associated with Viśvāmitra throughout the *Mahābhārata* (e.g., 1.65.30–32; 3.82.124; 3.85.9). The *Rāmāyana* maintains that his sister Satyavatī became the river Kauśikī (1.33.7–8), but the *Mahābhārata* does not make this connection (Goldman 1984: 349, note 8).

<sup>30</sup> This is a reference to the *Rambhā* legend of the *Rāmāyana*.

<sup>31</sup> These verses again allude to *Kalmāṣapāda*; the river is identified with the present-day Beas.

<sup>32</sup> The references to Skanda are not traceable to any narrative in the extant epic and purāṇic corpus.

<sup>33</sup> Viśvāmitra as one of the Saptarṣi or “Seven Seers” constellation (identified as Ursa Major) is quite customary in Hindu tradition (Mitchiner 1982).

Surprisingly, Bhīṣma tells none of the stories that the prince would like to hear, and instead presents the *Satyavatī* legend to explain “how long ago Viśvāmitra actually (*tattvena*) achieved Brahminhood and thereby became a Brahmin sage.”<sup>34</sup> This is a story that had been told in this epic on three earlier occasions—twice already to Yudhiṣṭhira—and reflects the central importance of genealogical discourse in the *Mahābhārata* (see Brodbeck 2009). He explains how long ago, a Brahmin sage named Ṛcīka had married Viśvāmitra’s older sister, the princess Satyavatī, but that a switch-up of fertility concoctions (*carus*) that Ṛcīka had prepared for Satyavatī and her mother led to the mixed-up birth of both Viśvāmitra—the Kṣatriya who became a Brahmin—and his grandnephew Rāma Jāmadagnya (better known today as Paraśurāma), the Brahmin who behaved like a Kṣatriya.<sup>35</sup> These *carus* had contained the essences of Brahmin and Kṣatriya *varṇas*, and by switching them, their bodies were infused with the incorrect *varṇas*. This would mean that Viśvāmitra didn’t actually change his own caste; rather, he simply became the Brahmin he already was.

Even in this isolated example, we may sense an anxiety about the exclusivity of Brahmins as a social group. Embedded within Yudhiṣṭhira’s fascination with Viśvāmitra’s caste change is the radical implication that anyone might become a Brahmin if he—or she—should try hard enough, and that *varṇa* categories may therefore be not as watertight as the normative texts would have us believe. Bhīṣma’s authoritative storytelling, however, sweeps the rug out from beneath such a premise, and he concludes his narration with the following: “So, King Yudhiṣṭhira, the mighty ascetic Viśvāmitra was *not* a Kṣatriya—for the Brahmin-essence that Ṛcīka had placed within him was superior.”<sup>36</sup> Not only was there no change of caste, we are told, Viśvāmitra’s power arose from a Brahmin-essence (*brahman*) that another Brahmin (Ṛcīka) had created and infused within him. Through its “Viśvāmitra Subnarrative” the *Mahābhārata* thus deflates any radical critique of caste that Viśvāmitra’s exploits might have provoked in epic audiences, while continuing to affirm

<sup>34</sup> śrūyatāṁ pārtha tattvena viśvāmitro yathā purā | brāhmaṇatvam gatas tāta brahmarsitvam tathaiva ca || (Mbh 13.4.1). Bhīṣma’s use of the term *tattvena*, meaning “essentially,” “accurately,” or “truly,” declares that the story he is about to tell should be taken as fact, setting up what might called a “factive discourse” (Sathaye 2009: 146) or a “regime of truth” (Taylor 2008a, 2008b).

<sup>35</sup> Jan Gonda explains the *caru* to be a porridge made from unpounded rice or barley (1987: 149–89).

<sup>36</sup> tan naiṣa kṣatriyo rājan viśvāmitro mahātapaḥ | rcīkenāhitam brahma parametad yudhiṣṭhira || (Mbh 13.4.59).

the discourses of caste hierarchy and exclusivity involved in the consolidation of Brahmin social power. Later in the book, we will take up the historical implications of this episode more fully, but for now we may assert that it was through the pseudo-performativity of the dialogic narrative frame that the *Mahābhārata*'s composers sought to regulate its audiences' interpretation of Viśvāmitra's challenges to caste.<sup>37</sup>

#### THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

Though only a brief example, the *Mahābhārata*'s “Viśvāmitra Subnarrative” calls to mind the central theme of this book: how mythology has been deployed for the construction of Brahmin social power. Yudhiṣṭhira in fact asks the same question that we are asking—what could it mean to *become* a Brahmin? This comes with quite serious implications for the real-world theory of caste: Is *varṇa* ideology really an immutable hierarchy? Are Brahmins always already at its top? If so, then how come? That is, is Brahminhood really as hegemonic as it claims to be? While stories about Viśvāmitra raise these questions, the answers are given, time and again, through their delivery, whether in writing or in live performance. This book aims to tell the cultural history of the Viśvāmitra legends through texts and performances over the course of the last three thousand years, and how this long public conversation has shaped the social ideology of caste.

The first two chapters of the book explore the classical foundations of the Viśvāmitra legends (c. 1500 BCE–300 CE). In Chapter 1, we begin with the most ancient Hindu texts, the *Vedas*, in which he appears primarily as a seer of sacred verses, already competing with Vasiṣṭha over the position of royal chaplain (*purohita*) for an important Vedic king, Sudās. In the late Vedic texts, Viśvāmitra begins to take on another of his typical traits—he is said to be both a prince and a Brahmin. In subsequent years, this social hybridity motivates the formation of a full-fledged cycle of legends in the Sanskrit epics, and this is the subject of Chapter 2. Through numerous stories about his caste change and ascetic power, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* engage in an intertextual debate regarding the function of Viśvāmitra as what I call the “Brahmin

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<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of how the dialogic narrative frame acts as a “textual performance,” see Sathaye 2007.

Other”—a literary figure positioned at the very edge of Brahminhood, to be feared for his violent potential, but not to be emulated by other, “normal” Brahmins, who are instead to behave like Vasiṣṭha.

The next two chapters examine how the Viśvāmitra legends were adapted in Sanskrit purāṇic literature and how this deepened the cultural relevance of the Brahmin Other in first-millennium India. Chapter 3 concerns the political and religious valences of Viśvāmitra in the early purāṇas. In the purāṇic dynastic chronicles (*vamśānucaritas*) (c. 400–550 CE), a new political “spin” was placed on his conflicts with Vasiṣṭha that rebuilt Brahmin social power around the authority of the royal preceptor, who was shown to be a master of both Vedic and theistic practices. In the early *Skanda Purāṇa* (c. 500–600 CE), these same conflicts with Vasiṣṭha—and their resolution—were retold in a way that supported the integration of more transgressive orders of Brahmin ascetics within a lay mainstream of Śiva-worshippers. Chapter 4 concerns a characteristic feature of later purāṇic adaptations: the “geo-mapping” of stories to sacred riverine sites called *tīrthas*. We consider Viśvāmitra’s appearance in the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* of the medieval *Skanda* (c. 1100 CE), which detailed holy sites in and around the northern Gujarati town of Vadnagar, and in the *Gautamī Māhātmya* of the *Brahma Purāṇa* (c. 1300 CE), which catalogued *tīrthas* along the Godāvarī River in Maharashtra. By localizing the Viśvāmitra legends, these texts both asserted Brahmin authority over pilgrimage sites and solidified elite Brahmin status within the burgeoning regional cultures of India in the second millennium. They also developed a softer, compassionate side to Viśvāmitra’s fiery persona, thereby harmonizing the Brahmin Other with the ecumenical religious culture of *tīrthas*.

The final chapters of the book investigate how *paurāṇikas*, poets, and performers have, over the years, confronted the more troubling aspects of Viśvāmitra’s counter-normative Brahmin persona. Chapter 5 focuses on changing cultural attitudes toward his villainous behavior in the legend of *Hariścandra*, charting the development of this story in medieval Sanskrit purāṇic texts and courtly theater (c. 700–1200 CE), and its vernacular devotional (*bhakti*) adaptations by non-Brahmin and Brahmin Marathi poets (c. 1300–1700 CE). In both cases, Viśvāmitra’s antagonism of the noble king Hariścandra positioned him as the “Brahmin Double”—a literary figure designed to deflect the popular critique of Brahmin elitism emerging from the world of medieval *bhakti*. But while Sanskrit purāṇic composers eventually

could solve the problem scholastically, by explaining this villainy away, Marathi devotional poets—and especially Brahmin ones—placed the blame on egocentrism, or *ahamkār*, which became the central criterion for differentiating “good” Brahmins like Vasiṣṭha from villainous ones like Viśvāmitra. This critique was further sharpened in colonial and postcolonial India, a process that is the focus of Chapter 6. Viśvāmitra has continued to live in the Hindu mythological imaginary due to the interventions of a variety of popular media—including theater, film, television, art, literature, and comic books. He also consistently appears in the Marathi devotional storytelling tradition known as *nāradīya kīrtan*, and this chapter asks how these visual and performed versions of the Viśvāmitra legends have been used to negotiate new Brahmin identities over the past century. We first examine published Marathi Viśvāmitra *kīrtans* from the early twentieth century against the backdrop of Ravi Varma’s art and Gandhi’s progressive social thought. Then, to see how Viśvāmitra continues to impact the construction of Brahmin identity in India after Independence, we turn to the *Vishwamitra* TV serial, broadcast in the mid-1990s, and a live Marathi *kīrtan* performance of a complete cycle of Viśvāmitra legends in late 2000.

In the Conclusions, we turn to some broader theoretical implications that this book may have for the study of Hinduism, two of which are worth stating at the outset. First, the focus on performance offers new perspectives on the historical value of Hindu mythology. Viśvāmitra, like any mythic figure—from Viṣṇu and Śiva down to the lowliest of demons—has meant something to Hindu practitioners for at least three thousand years. But that “something” is neither a single, original idea that has evolved organically through Darwinian selection and mutation, nor a universal essence always already present in a Hindu mind. On the contrary, it emerges again and again whenever a text is made to fit within a social context through textual production or live performance. For a tradition to persist, its meaning must be repeatedly negotiated by performers and audiences within their changing social, political, and religious circumstances. It has never been—and can never be—one, monolithic idea. Studying how various configurations of Brahmin social power have over the years emerged dialogically through the telling of Viśvāmitra’s legends allows us to trace a long history of such cultural negotiations.

This book also hopes to make a second contribution. The writings of Sheldon Pollock have emphasized the centrality of elite poetry (*kāvya*) and

theoretical work (*sāstra*) in the construction of political power in premodern India. This was to have taken place through a translocal formation of literary culture that he calls the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” (Pollock 1996), and subsequently replicated on a regional level through the development of “cosmopolitan vernaculars” (Pollock 1998a, 1998b, 2000). Equally significant, I claim, was a mythological culture that was disseminated through popular texts and performances, and today, through popular media. Like high courtly poetry, mythological literature also provided public imaginaries of power, and also regulated how upright members of society ought to behave. But mythological texts and performances went a bit further, giving meaning to religious forces like *tapas*, *tīrtha*, or *prasāda* for their mainstream Hindu audiences. And they did so in a register that anyone could understand, and using media that welcomed upgrades, confrontations, and dialogue. This accessibility and dynamism have permitted Hindu mythology to engage with mainstream audiences in ways that the writings of elite courtly poets and intellectuals could not, generating a public culture whose social, political, and religious importance has seldom wavered over the last two thousand years. Seeking new avenues for appreciating the history of this mythological culture, this book takes up one of its most striking figures—Viśvāmitra, the king who dared to become a Brahmin.



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## FOUNDATIONS





I.

## POET, PRIEST, AND PRINCE

*Glimpses of Viśvāmitra in Vedic Literature*



तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भार्गो द्वेरस्य धीमहि । धिष्ठै यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

*tát savitúr váren̄yam bhárgo devásya dhīmahi |*

*dhíyo yó nah pracodáyāt ||*

Let us place [within us/our minds upon]  
that most desirable radiance of the Lord Savitṛ,  
Who will then stimulate our own insights. (*RV* 3.62.10)

To find the earliest appearances of Viśvāmitra, we must venture into a complex textual archive assembled in northern India over the course of a millennium from 1500 to 500 BCE (Witzel 2003: 68) and called, simply, *Veda*, “Knowledge.” This literature celebrates Viśvāmitra first and foremost as an accomplished *r̄ṣi*, a poet-sage, who is given credit for scores of sacred verses (*mantras*) across all four of its anthologies. The most famous of these is perhaps the most famous Vedic verse of all, the Gāyatrī or Sāvitrī mantra (*RV* 3.62.10, given above), a twenty-four-syllable paean to the deity Savitṛ that orthodox Brahmins are obliged to recite daily as part of the *sandhyā* rites at dawn, noon, and dusk.<sup>1</sup> It is also traditionally the first mantra taught to

<sup>1</sup> For studies of the Gāyatrī mantra and its usage in Brahminical rites, see Kane 1930–58, vol. 2: 302–4; Gonda 1963; Srinivasan 1973.

Brahmin boys during the rites of initiation (*upanayana*).<sup>2</sup> As “one of the holiest stanzas in the *RV*” (Rahurkar 1964: 16), the Gāyatrī has long been subject to mystical speculation, sectarian adaptation, deification, and today, commercialization through pop culture in India and around the world (Lipner 1998: 43). Its popularity has undoubtedly contributed to Viśvāmitra’s own continued celebrity while other Vedic figures have faded into obscurity.

A few characteristics of the Vedic Viśvāmitra are still familiar today. He is often aggressive and hostile, he has a professional and personal rivalry with Vasiṣṭha, and he adopts Śunahṣepa during Hariścandra’s human sacrifice. But many of his more famous accomplishments are nowhere to be found in Vedic literature. He does not steal a magic cow or eat dogmeat. He does not encounter celestial maidens or Outcastes. He does not send Triśanku to heaven, and he does not harass Hariścandra. And there is no clear mention of his becoming Brahmin, though there is, to be sure, plenty of ambivalence about Viśvāmitra’s social status in Vedic literature. Vedic texts very rarely question his Brahminhood, but in some cases, he also appears to maintain a Kṣatriya status. In the *Brāhmaṇas*, for example, he is hailed as a king (*rājan*) or prince (*rājaputra*) of the Jahnu royal line (PB 21.12.1–4; AB 7.17.6), who wished for his son to become a king (JB 2.217, 219).<sup>3</sup> Still, the idea that he willfully changed his own caste is not definitively expressed until the *Brhaddevatā* of Śaunaka, a post-Vedic text that maintains that Viśvāmitra became a Brahmin-sage (*brahmaṛsi*) through ascetic practices (4.95).<sup>4</sup> This would suggest that during most of the Vedic period being *both* Brahmin and Kṣatriya was not such a social impossibility. The Vedic Viśvāmitra could wear both hats, so to speak, and only later would he be required to discard one before donning the other.

This change of opinion about Viśvāmitra’s caste appears to be linked to the development of *varṇa* as a social ideology. The earliest Vedic texts pictured human society as divided into three broad categories: the *brahman*, *kṣattrī*, and the *viś* (roughly, “priests,” “protectors,” and “people”) (Smith 1992: 106–7). This functional trifurcation had a long Indo-European prehistory, but with the inclusion of the *sūdra* or “servant” sometime around 1000 BCE, *varṇa* became a

<sup>2</sup> The Gāyatrī is prescribed for Brahmin initiates, while those belonging to the other twice-born castes (Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas) are given mantras in other meters (Gonda 1963: 285, citing Hillebrandt 1897: 54; cf. Smith 1992: 114–22).

<sup>3</sup> The *Rgveda* also links Viśvāmitra to the Jahnus (*RV* 1.116.19, 3.58.6; see Chaubey 1987b: 26).

<sup>4</sup> Viśvāmitra’s caste change is also mentioned in a number of other post-Vedic texts: e.g., *Manu* 7.42; *Buddhacarita* 1.49; and perhaps also Patañjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* on Pāṇini 4.1.104, where it is said that he becomes a *rṣi* through asceticism, though caste change is not specifically indicated.

systemic feature of classical Vedic thought.<sup>5</sup> As evinced by the Puruṣa myth of the primordial sacrifice of Man by the gods (*RV* 10.90), Vedic thinkers used the four-*varṇa* scheme to order the world around them—not just people, but everything from deities and cosmic bodies to flora and fauna—through an elaborate taxonomical system of homologies and substitutions that undergirded the ritual logic of the sacrificial cult (Smith 1989, 1994). In time, Brahmin ritual specialists came to acquire unprecedented economic and cultural prestige through exclusive control of large-scale public sacrifices—especially the royal consecration (*rājasūya*) and the imperial horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*)—leading to an increased anxieties over social security and exclusivity.<sup>6</sup> It was under these conditions that *varṇa* began to serve as a normative system of social division.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Viśvāmitra's caste hybridity would become a point of focus only in the later layers of the *Brāhmaṇas* and in the post-Vedic ancillaries. The early Vedic tradition instead develops two significant themes around Viśvāmitra's persona—one religious and the other, political. First, there is an interest in his ability to harness the transcendent power of Vedic speech to cross real-world boundaries, whether physical (crossing rivers), political (defeating rival priests), or social (adopting a child and disowning his own). It is easy to see how later texts would have adapted this transformative power to speak to the boundaries of caste. Second, Viśvāmitra participates actively in the early Vedic political imaginary through his role as the preceptor (*purohita*) for King Sudās of the Bharata tribe. These two themes link Viśvāmitra's Vedic legends to public memories of the state-building project of the Kuru kingdom, the first polity to assert supralocal dominance in northern India at the onset of the Iron Age (c. 1000 BCE) (Witzel 1995a, 1995b, 1995c). Concerns about Viśvāmitra's caste status, on the other hand, coincide with the importation of Vedic ritual culture and social institutions into the urbanizing kingdoms of the eastern Gangetic valley (Witzel 1996, 1997) at the beginning of the early historic period (c. 700–500 BCE). It is when Vedic culture goes global, so to speak, that the boundary between Brahmin and Kṣatriya becomes sharpened, bringing Viśvāmitra's hybrid persona under scrutiny for the first time.

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<sup>5</sup> Seminal work on the Indo-European “tri-functional” prehistory of caste was conducted by the comparative mythologist Georges Dumézil (1968–73; see also Littleton 1964; Hiltebeitel 1982; Allen 1999). R. S. Sharma provides primary evidence of the incorporation of the *sūdra* as the fourth *varṇa* in the Vedic period (1958: 30–32), though his speculations rely heavily on the Aryan Invasion hypothesis.

<sup>6</sup> Witzel argues that the institutionalization of Vedic priesthood was a political stratagem of the Kuru royal houses, rather than purely Brahminical self-organization (1995a: 10–11).

This chapter assembles the available materials to form a holistic snapshot of what Vedically educated Brahmins in northern India would have known about Viśvāmitra at roughly 500 BCE, and then peels back its historical layers in order to make better sense of its development. A word should first be said about the necessarily speculative dating of this literature. Based on recent textual and archeological findings, it is convenient for our purposes to speak of three broad phases of Vedic culture: (1) an early period (c. 1500–1200 BCE), consisting of the entire *Rgveda* mantra anthology; (2) a middle period (c. 1200–900 BCE), reflected by the other three anthologies and the *Rgveda* addenda (*khilas*); (3) and a late period (900–500 BCE), in which the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Sūtra* texts were composed (adapted from Witzel 1989: 248–251). This timeline is oversimplified, to be sure, since each Vedic text has its own unique provenance and developmental history, but it is sufficient for assessing broad trends in the Vedic cultural history of Viśvāmitra.

The *Rgveda* offers only fragmentary visions of Viśvāmitra's exploits. Many of these are found in its third book (*maṇḍala*) consisting of sixty-two hymns attributed to Viśvāmitra or other poets in his lineage. More lucid passages occur in the late Vedic *Brāhmaṇas* and *Sūtras*, though these sources are often contradictory, artificial, or downright *unbegreiflich* ("unintelligible," Caland 1919: 284). The most comprehensive accounts are told in the Vedic ancillary texts as back-stories for the earlier materials. As they do exhibit textual "contamination" by the epic and purāṇic traditions, these post-Vedic materials must be treated with caution (Patton 1996: 12); still, their retrospective nature makes texts like the Śaunaka's *Bṛhaddevatā* (c. 100 CE) or Kātyāyana's *Sarvānukramaṇi* (c. 100 BCE), along with its medieval commentary, the *Vedārthadīpikā* of Śadguruśiṣya (1184 CE), especially valuable for filling in the gaps of an otherwise sketchy Vedic portrait.<sup>7</sup>

So what exactly do these sources tell us about Viśvāmitra? His name is explained as "a friend to all" (*viśvasya ha vai mitram*) (AB 6.20) or one "to whom [everyone] everywhere becomes a friend" (*asmai sarvato mitram bhavati*) (ŚB 8.1.2.6), and he is counted as one of the seven principal Vedic seers (*Sā* 9.67, 10.67).<sup>8</sup> The *Rgveda* claims that he was "born from the gods" (*devajā*)

<sup>7</sup> The dating of the *Bṛhaddevatā* is uncertain, but here I follow Muneo Tokunaga's hypothesis (1981) for the first expanded revision of the original *Devatānukramaṇi* of Śaunaka (c. 400 BCE).

<sup>8</sup> The *Aitareya Āranyaka* (1.2.2 and 2.2.1) follows both definitions; similar explications are found also at *Nir* 2.24, *Bd* 2.49 (see Hariyappa 1953: 263, 266, 276, 278; Bhattacharya 1987: 36).

TABLE I.I.

Legendary materials involving Viśvāmitra in Vedic literature

Story	Early Vedic Texts (c. 1500–1200 BCE)	Middle Vedic Texts (c. 1200–900 BCE)	Late Vedic Texts (900–500 BCE)	Post-Vedic Ancillaries (after 500 BCE)
River Crossings	<i>RV</i> 3.33		<i>Rohitakūla:</i> <i>JB</i> 3.183; <i>PB</i> 14.3.11–13	<i>Nir</i> 2.24; <i>Sā</i> on 3.33; <i>Bd</i> 4.105–109
			<i>Indus:</i> <i>JB</i> 3.238–39; <i>PB</i> 13.5.14–15	
Sudās's Horse Sacrifice	<i>RV</i> 3.53		<i>JB</i> 2.392	<i>Bd</i> 4.112–14; <i>Sā</i> on <i>RV</i> 7.32; <i>Vād</i> on <i>RV</i> 3.53
Dāśarājña War	<i>RV</i> 7.18; 7.33; 7.83			
Śunahṣepa Legend	<i>RV</i> 1.24–30; 4.1.4–5; 5.2.7 (traces)		<i>AB</i> 7.13–18; <i>ŚŚ</i> 15.17–27	

(3.53.9a), but the ancillaries offer a more mundane genealogy: His father was named Gāthin, his grandfather, Kuśika, and his great-grandfather, Iśīratha (*Sā* and *Vād*, preamble to *RV* 3). He belonged to the Kuśika family of Brahmins (*RV* 3.26.1), who were renamed the “Viśvāmitras” in his honor (*RV* 3.1.21).<sup>9</sup> But the sage is also associated with two royal clans: the Bharatas, for whom he once served as preceptor (*RV* 3.53.24), and the Jahnus, a house in which he appears to have held an aristocratic seat (*PB* 21.12.1–4; *AB* 7.18).

The Vedic anecdotes about Viśvāmitra follow four distinct narrative arcs: (1) his fording of various rivers for the Bharatas; (2) his conducting a horse sacrifice for Sudās, during which he received the *sasarpārī* mode of speech from Jamadagni; (3) his enmity with Vasiṣṭha and his involvement in the Dāśarājña War (“War of Ten Kings”); and (4) his adoption of Śunahṣepa at Hariścandra’s sacrifice (Table I.I). It is important to keep in mind that apart from Śunahṣepa these are

<sup>9</sup> Chapekar posits that the Kuśikas and Viśvāmitras were “living in separate houses in family groups” (1950: 60), while Rahurkar proposes that the Kuśikas were a larger community inclusive of the Viśvāmitras, analogous to the Vāsiṣṭhas within the Tṛtsu clan (1964: 17, note 17).

not full-fledged story sessions as we find in post-Vedic texts, but rather narrative shards that must be reassembled to make a meaningful whole. And as we do so, we must resist the temptation to read them as authentic glimpses into the life of a man who lived, worked, and died in the Panjab around 1500 BCE. It can never be known for certain if such an individual ever existed, and so, rather than a biography of Viśvāmitra, we wish to tell the cultural history of the stories that Vedic Brahmins told about him, and how and why they did so.

### CROSSING THE RIVERS VIPĀŚ AND ŠUTUDRĪ

Early in his career, Viśvāmitra was the preceptor for Sudās Paijavana, king of the Bharatas (*RV* 3.53.7, 9; *Nir* 2.24). The Bharatas were an offshoot of the Pūrus, one of the five principal Vedic “peoples” (*pañcajana*), along with the Anu, Druhyu, Yadu, and Turvaśa tribes. The *Rgveda* is replete with their exploits, and one is tempted to think, as Michael Witzel does, that “most of the *Rgveda* was composed as the Pūru and the Bharata were moving into the Panjab” from the mountainous areas to the northwest (1995c: 320). Vedic legend has it that Viśvāmitra once helped the Bharatas cross the Šutudrī and Vipāś rivers (the modern-day Sutlej and Beas), using his magical oratory power while “others” (*itare*) were in pursuit. Pieces of this event are captured within a dialogue hymn (*RV* 3.33), while its back-story is given in ancillary texts (*Nir* 2.24; *Sā* on *RV* 3.33; *Bd* 4.105–109).

Travelling east, the party first encountered the Vipāś, whom Viśvāmitra praised as “a river most motherly, swift, wide, and blessed.”<sup>10</sup> The two rivers replied to his invocation in unison (*RV* 3.33.4), and the sage then offered praise to both, comparing them to two unbridled mares and a maternal pair of cows. “Like a cow licking its calf,” he told them, “this pair flows together toward a common home.”<sup>11</sup> The rivers responded to his poetic flattery by explaining that they were only going as the gods had ordained. They asked the sage what he wanted. “Take rest at my gentle request,” Viśvāmitra urged, “and then after just a minute you may go, O faithfully flowing rivers.”<sup>12</sup> The rivers again expressed their fealty to Indra and Sūrya. The former had dug their channels and protected them from the demon Vṛtra, while the latter led them onward (*RV* 3.33.6).

<sup>10</sup> áchā síndhum mātrātamām ayāsam vīpāśam urvīm subhágām aganma | (*RV* 3.33.3ab).

<sup>11</sup> vatsám iva mātárā samrihāné samānám yónim ánu samicárantī || (*RV* 3.33.3cd).

<sup>12</sup> rámadhvāṇ me vácase somyáya śtāvarīr úpa muhūrtám évaiḥ | prá síndhum áchā bṛhatí manīṣávasyúr ahve kuśikásya sūnúḥ || (*RV* 3.33.5).

Politely addressing them as sisters, Viśvāmitra then asked them to allow him and the Bharatas to pass with their carts, laden with riches, while keeping their currents below their axles. The rivers agreed to this, bent low “like a woman nursing,” and yielded to Viśvāmitra “as a girl coming to her lover.”<sup>13</sup>

The medieval commentators Sāyana and Durgācārya felt that the wagons were loaded with riches Viśvāmitra had earned through his priestly services for Sudās, perhaps after the king’s horse sacrifice, and that the “others” who were pursuing him were either his retinue or robbers intent on stealing his wealth. Modern scholars, however, have taken quite different approaches to interpreting this episode (see Sharma 1975: 66; Chaubey 1987b: 14–16). Some have been tempted to see the river crossing as a prismatic relic of the prehistoric eastward migrations of Indo-European peoples—the “Aryans”—into the Indian subcontinent (Griffith 1889–91, vol. 2: 38). According to others, it reflects historical acts of conquest by the Bharatas on their long march to Kurukṣetra in the early Vedic period (Pischel and Geldner 1901, vol. 3: 152; Chattopadhyaya 1924: 375; Chitrav 1964: 876; Witzel 1995c: 334). H. D. Velankar proposes that the Bharatas are returning home from battle, their wagons laden with booty (1942: 3). Ultimately, no matter what their aim was, it is clear that Viśvāmitra’s supernatural ability to speak to the rivers, and to cross them, enabled his royal patrons to do it.

The theme of crossing rivers also appears in two closely related narratives in the *Brāhmaṇas*. The first is a highly elliptical anecdote in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (JB 3.28–9) that plays with tropes and vocabulary from the dialogue hymn (RV 3.33) and features valuable early Vedic geographic and ethnographic data (Witzel 1986). As the story goes, the Bharatas, accompanied by Viśvāmitra and Jamadagni, once found themselves at the western banks of the Indus River under duress (*udbāḍha*) from the Ikṣvākus. The chief of the Ikṣvākus had offended Indra by not handing over two fine horses that he had asked for, and so, at the god’s behest, the two sages advised the Bharatas to steal their rivals’ cows from the other side of the river.<sup>14</sup> Before crossing, Viśvāmitra and Jamadagni requested the Bharatas to discard all of their *palpūlanīs*—a difficult word to translate, but which Witzel convincingly argues to mean bars of lye for washing or tanning

<sup>13</sup> ā te kāro śrnavāmā vācāmsi yayātha dūrād ánasā ráthena | ní te namsai pīpyānēva yósā máryāyeva kanyā śāsvacá te || (RV 3.33.10).

<sup>14</sup> The details of how the Ikṣvāku king had received these divine horses are given in the *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* (4.8.7).

(1986: 190–93). In order to make the river fordable, the two sages then praised Indra with a *sāman* (“melodic verse”) (SV 359/1250, based on RV 1.11.4–6).<sup>15</sup> The waters receded around the Bharatas as they crossed, but one pseudo-Kṣatriya (*rājanyabandhu*) had kept his *palpūlanī* tied below the axle of the chariot. The currents dissolved (*avacicchiduh*) this lye, contaminating the river with alkaline salt and causing a considerable amount of damage to the trees, rivers, and communities of the area. As a consequence, some of the local rivers also crossed the Indus along with the Bharatas.<sup>16</sup>

Upset by this ecological disaster, the Indus River sharply rebuked Viśvāmitra, “Haven’t we heard that your father Gāthin is considered a Brahmin? Where then did you come by this force (*bala*) of a thousand men, Viśvāmitra?”<sup>17</sup> To this subtle jab at his pedigree, Viśvāmitra gave the following cryptic reply: “How about Dīrghatamas, Mamata’s son who was [already] speaking in the womb—that wise fellow was born into it, creating components for the sacrifice. How come you are praising [*me*], O mighty waters?”<sup>18</sup> The Indus could give no reply, and the Bharatas stole the Iksyākus’ cows.

Vedic scholars have long puzzled over this dialogue. Wilhelm Caland found Viśvāmitra’s cryptic reply to be “completely and utterly incomprehensible” (*ganz und gar unbegreiflich*) (1919: 284), while Paul Horsch offers a historical explanation: at the time of the story, Viśvāmitra, in his capacity as the Bharatas’ *purohita*, served as both priest and wagon-driver (*Wagenlenker*) but was in the process of shedding this subordinate status and becoming an independent ruler (1966: 374–5).<sup>19</sup> This would explain why he was later described as both Brahmin and Kṣatriya. Witzel, on the other hand, takes the verb *paṇ* in Viśvāmitra’s retort in its later sense of “barter, set a price” rather than “praise” (1986: 196), contending that the Indus is asking for more salt as a kind of

<sup>15</sup> The *Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa* (PB 13.5.14–15), alluding to this narrative, calls this the *krośa sāman*—the “scream song”—and explains that it may be employed for acquiring cattle. Caland notes that its melody is given in *Grāmägeyagāna* 11.1.24 (1931: 324).

<sup>16</sup> The *Jaiminīya* uses this occasion to etymologize the names of the affected sites and peoples east of the Indus, most of which are now obscure. Furthermore, the miracle of the tributary rivers crossing the Indus might perhaps be a mythological refraction of the practice of reusing old place names when settling new territories (Witzel 1986: 197–200).

<sup>17</sup> *nanu brahmeti śuśruma pitaram gāthinam tava | kutas tvā sahasram āgamad viśvāmitra balam tava || 18 uta putro mamatāyai garbhe dīrghatamā vadān | vipaścit tad abhyajāyata yajñasyāṅgāni kalpayan || kathodvanah paṇāyasi |*

<sup>18</sup> Evidence for this occupational role of the *purohita* comes in the *Jaiminīya* itself: “Long ago, preceptors drove the chariots for kings, in order to oversee that they would not do wrong” (*purā rājabhyah purohīta eva rathān samgrhṇanty aupadr̥ṣṭyāya ned ayam pāpam karavad iti*) (JB 3.94; cf. Oertel 1897: 21–22).

bribe for letting the Bharatas cross (204). Neither interpretation, I believe, is particularly convincing.

To make better sense of the verbal exchange, we may begin with the contrary-to-fact particle *nanu* that communicates a skeptical attitude toward Gāthin being Viśvāmitra's father as well as his being Brahmin. The source of these doubts might indeed be the near-absence of anyone by this name in Vedic literature (Sharma 1975: 32). Gāthin is not found in any of the mantra anthologies, appearing first in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, when the boy Śunahṣepa, after being adopted by Viśvāmitra, is said to have “presided over both the Jahnus and the divine knowledge of the Gāthins,” the “two legacies” (*ubhaya riktha*) of Viśvāmitra.<sup>20</sup> Even in this instance, we might note, Gāthin is not explicitly said to be Viśvāmitra's father, but a forefather. Considering that the same passage also calls them Kuśikas, the term *gāthīn* may not even be a patronymic at all, and may instead refer to this family's authority in composing *gāthās*—non-mantra verses that seem to belong to a bardic dimension of Vedic religion (Monier-Williams 1899: 352, col. 2; Horsch 1966). It is only in the ancillary texts that Gāthin is explicitly said to be Viśvāmitra's father (*Sā*, preamble to *RV* 3; *Bd* 4.95).

In the *Rgveda*, in fact, Viśvāmitra calls himself “the son of Kuśika” (*kuśikāya sūnūḥ*) (*RV* 3.33.5d). The Kuśikas, as the preceptors of the Bharatas, are so closely connected to them that Rahurkar offers that they “originally . . . belonged to the tribe of the Bharatas which included both the warrior-class and the priestly-class, between whom hardly any distinction was made” (1961: 28; cf. Macdonell and Keith 1912, vol. 1: 173). The *Jaiminīya*'s compilers were perhaps aware of this ambiguity in Viśvāmitra's genealogy. For if in the earlier tradition he hails from a clan that was simultaneously engaged in royal and priestly pursuits (the Kuśikas), there is a growing feeling in the late Vedic texts that he belongs to two distinct families—the priestly Gāthins and the royal Jahnus. This bifurcation reflects the late Vedic emergence of a social question that has long surrounded Viśvāmitra's career: how could he behave like a king if he claims to be a Brahmin?

The key concept here is Viśvāmitra's *sahasra bala*, “thousandfold force,” by which is meant a large battalion of soldiers.<sup>21</sup> If his father were a Brahmin, then how did he get this martial power? Viśvāmitra counters by taking *bala*

<sup>20</sup> *jahnūnām cādhitasthire daive ca gāthināḥ* | (*AB* 7.18; *ŚŚS* 15.27).

<sup>21</sup> In this regard, we should note that this appears to be a rare case in Vedic literature in which the word *bala*, usually meaning physical “might,” is expressly used to mean an “army.”

in a rather different sense as the efficacious sacred force (that is, *brāhmaṇa*) that Vedic Brahmins may harness through their powers of speech. This *bala*, I suggest, is the referent of the neuter pronoun *tad* (“it”) in the third line of his reply and the direct object of the verb *abhijan*, “to be born for.”<sup>22</sup> When he states that Dīrghatamas possessed *bala* as his natural birthright, Viśvāmitra is giving a subtle but stern warning that that he, too, possesses it, despite his shadowy pedigree. This signals a cultural differentiation between the *bala* of Brahmins and Kṣatriyas, an issue that will later become central to the Sanskrit epics’ treatment of Viśvāmitra’s caste change.

Why does Viśvāmitra compare himself to Dīrghatamas? This blind and long-lived sage is given credit for a number of hymns, including the famous, riddle-filled *Asya Vāmasya* verse that has challenged its readers for millennia (*RV* 1.164).<sup>23</sup> The *Rgveda* recounts that some non-Vedic *dāsas* (servants), whom later writers take to be his own servants, once tried unsuccessfully to drown him in a river, while one of them, wishing to decapitate him, managed to skewer his own torso instead (*RV* 1.158.5). The *Bṛhaddevatā* (4.21–25) states that the river then whisked him east to the country of Aṅga, where he sired Kṣatriya heirs for the local chieftain with a servant girl (*dāstī*) (Patton 1996: 262–63). This is also where we find the earliest explanation of Dīrghatamas speaking in his mother’s womb (*Bd* 4.11–16ab; Patton 1996: 259–260). His mother, Mamatā, was once sexually assaulted by her brother-in-law Bṛhaspati while she was pregnant, but at the moment of ejaculation, the embryo cried out in alarm, against a potential intermixture of semen (*śukrasaṅkara*), at which Bṛhaspati angrily cursed the boy to be born blind.<sup>24</sup>

This narrative had presumably been popular at the time of the *Jaiminīya*’s composition, and is deployed here to exemplify the magical power of a Brahmin *r̥ṣi*’s speech. Viśvāmitra’s final retort (*kathā... pañāyasi*) may therefore be read as, “How come you’re praising *me* [when his *bala* was so much greater]?” This facetiously self-effacing statement should therefore be taken as a double-edged, sarcastic comeback against the river’s equally subtle dig at

<sup>22</sup> This line and the third line of the river’s verse both contain an extra syllable making them unmetrical, and if *tad* were removed here and *tvā* in the river’s verse, the dialogue would conform to the pattern of the expected *anuṣṭubh* meter of *gāthās*.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of the *Asya Vāmasya* hymn, see Kunhan Raja 1956; Brown 1968; Patton 1994.

<sup>24</sup> The *Mahābhārata* synthesizes the two *Bṛhaddevatā* stories of Dīrghatamas and adapts them to speak to new social concerns over caste intermixture (*varṇasaṅkara*) rather than genetic hybridity through the intermixture of physical semen (*śukrasaṅkara*) (*Mbh* 1.98–99).

Viśvāmitra's Brahminhood. The sage boasts that like Dīrghatamas, he too has the power of Vedic speech and is, therefore, unassailable, despite his unclear parentage and his involvement in Kṣatriya affairs. This terse but remarkably complex dialogue thus highlights the growing concerns about Viśvāmitra's social ambiguities in the late Vedic period.

The Vedic *Brāhmaṇas* include a third anecdote in which Viśvāmitra demonstrates his power over rivers (*PB* 14.3.11–13; *JB* 3.183). Once, while accompanying the Bharatas' supply wagons, Viśvāmitra arrived at the very steep banks of a river (said in the *Jaiminīya* to be “either the Gaṅgā or Yamunā”). He made a wager with a local non-Vedic tribe, called either the Adantis (*PB*) or the Mahāvṛṣas (*JB*), that his pair of red bulls could successfully drive a fully laden cart up the steep slope on the opposite side of the river. His opponents set the terms. “Let us make a wager,” they told him. “If your pair of draft oxen can carry it [up], then you may fill up your wagons with treasure, but if they cannot carry it up, we will win your treasures.”<sup>25</sup> He agreed, and while driving he sang two *sāman* melodies that empowered his red bulls to cross the river and climb up its steep banks (*SV* 129–130, based on *RV* 1.8.1 and 1.7.5).<sup>26</sup> Viśvāmitra successfully won the bet, and the two melodies became known as the *rohitakūlīya sāmans*, the “red riverside songs,” while the site of the contest was also called Rohitakūla.<sup>27</sup> Viśvāmitra does not speak to the river or to a deity in this episode, but still it is through the efficacious power of his two *sāmans* that he manages to cross the river and achieve victory. Like the other river encounters, this anecdote captures the transcendent power of Viśvāmitra's Vedic speech as well as his political value as the Bharatas' preceptor.

#### THE HORSE SACRIFICE OF KING SUDĀS

One particular hymn, *RV* 3.53, can be considered Viśvāmitra's “family hymn” (Velankar 1942, cited by Hariyappa 1953: 245, note 9). It recounts how Viśvāmitra, as Sudās's preceptor, organized a horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*) to consolidate his patron's political power. As part of the rite, the king's horse was released to the east, west, and north, with his armies following behind to quell

<sup>25</sup> *te vā arṇśam avaharāvahai | yadi tava itad anadvāhāv udvahāto vasnya eva tvam anāṁsi pūrayāsai | yady u nodvahāto, vasnyā u vayam tvāṁ jayemeti |* (*JB* 3.183).

<sup>26</sup> Caland notes that the melody for the *rohitakūlīya sāman* is given in *Grāmägeyagāna* 3.2.24 (Caland 1931: 354).

<sup>27</sup> Witzel identifies Rohitakūla as one site where the Kuru kings conducted their newly established “national” rituals (1995a: 18–19).

any resistance (*RV* 3.53.11c). Viśvāmitra and his entourage supported these efforts through prayers to Indra (*RV* 3.53.12–13). As they went south, into the dense Khāṇḍava forest, they encountered resistance from the Kīkaṭas, a community who did not perform *soma* rituals.<sup>28</sup> “What use do you have with the cattle in the Kīkaṭa lands?” Viśvāmitra asked Indra. “They do not yield milk to mix with *soma*, nor do they warm up the sacrificial vessel. Fetch instead the property of Pramaganda [their chief] as we subjugate that low-born man.”<sup>29</sup>

The Vedic ancillary texts help to fill in the details of the rest of the sacrifice (*Bd* 4.112–14; *Vād* on *RV* 3.53). Viśvāmitra’s authority was challenged by Vasiṣṭha’s son Śakti, who completely annihilated the power (*bala*) of Viśvāmitra. In a counter-attack, the followers of Sudās threw Śakti into the fire. According to the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, as he was falling in, Śakti began to chant a *sāman* that would have protected him (*SV* 259, based on *RV* 7.32.26), but only managed to utter the first line. When he heard of his son’s death, Vasiṣṭha completed the rest of the mantra himself (*JB* 2.392; *Sā* on *RV* 7.32).<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, to counter Viśvāmitra’s state of intellectual impotence (*ámati*), Jamadagni gave him a type of speech called *sasarparī* (“moving, serpentine”), produced by either Brahmā or Sūrya, and this revitalized his Vedic powers (*RV* 3.53.15–16; *Bd* 4.113d–14a).<sup>31</sup> Perhaps deploying the *sasarparī*, Viśvāmitra uttered a set of mantras that became known as *vasiṣṭha-dveśinyah*—“hostile toward the Vasiṣṭhas” (*RV* 3.53.21–24; *Bd* 4.23). Due to their malevolent power, Brahmins of the Vasiṣṭha lineage (*gotra*) have traditionally been forbidden even

<sup>28</sup> I follow Witzel’s suggestion for the location of the mysterious Kīkaṭas (Witzel 1995c: 339, note 101). Others have suggested that Kīkaṭa may have been a non-Aryan region to the east (Griffith 1889–91, vol. 2, note to 3.53.14; Macdonell and Keith 1912, vol. 1) or within Kurukṣetra itself (Chattopadhyaya 1940).

<sup>29</sup> kím te kṛṇvanti kīkaṭeṣu gāvo nāśīram duhré ná tapanti gharmám | ḍ no bhara prámagandásya védō naicāsākhám maghavan randhayā nah || (*RV* 3.53.14). Most follow Sāyaṇa’s interpretation of *naicāsākha* as indicating either the Kīkaṭa’s capital or the lowborn status of their king. Chattopadhyaya (1930b) agrees with Jarl Charpentier’s suggestion that it designates worshippers of the banyan tree. Or perhaps the word may denote *soma*, meaning that while the plant grew in Kīkaṭa but its inhabitants did not practice the *soma* rituals (Hillebrandt 1980 [1891], vol. 1: 14–16, cited in Rahurkar 1964: 27).

<sup>30</sup> Śadguruśīya’s commentary on the *Sarvānukramaṇi* expands on this story, explicitly charging Viśvāmitra with being the hostile party (Bhattacharya 1987: 44). But as Hariyappa notes, this medieval writer is “deeply imbibed in the popular tradition” (1953: 284), and here seems to be bringing in details from the *Mahābhārata*’s *Kalmāṣapāda* legend, including Vasiṣṭha’s lament over his son’s death.

<sup>31</sup> The meaning of *sasarparī* has been a site of intense speculation. Sāyaṇa interprets it to be the Goddess of Speech (*vāgdevatā*). Böhtlingk and Roth suggest a “war-trumpet” (*Kriegstrompete*) (1861–75, vol. 7: 850, col. 2), Grassmann takes it to be a “richly effluent dairy cow” (*reichlich strömende Kuh*) (1876–77, vol. 1: 532), and Velankar offers “winged devil” (1935: 42), while S. A. Dange, in rejecting all of them, suggests that it represents “a mysterious power of the sun” (1967: 31). Chattopadhyaya (1972) argues that the *sasarparī* was actually the hymn *RV* 3.62 (which includes the Gāyatrī mantra [3.62.10]), since Jamadagni is mentioned in verse 18 (cf. Dange 1967: 28–30). Jamadagni was this hymn’s original composer, he suggests, and had given it to Viśvāmitra at Sudās’s sacrifice. Witzel

to hear these verses, and the *Bṛhaddevatā* warns of the dire consequences of doing so: “reciting or hearing it will shatter one’s head into a hundred pieces.”<sup>32</sup> The Vedic tradition took this injunction quite seriously, as Durgācārya, thirteenth-century commentator on Yāska’s *Nirukta*, refused to discuss the word *lodha* found in these verses because “the context in which this word is found is a verse that is hostile to the Vasiṣṭhas. I am of the Kāpiṣṭhalas. I am of the Vasiṣṭha gotra,” he says, “and therefore I cannot elucidate it.”<sup>33</sup>

These four mantras are sweeping—and rather mean-spirited—imprecations directed toward an unnamed enemy. “Those who have hatred toward us,” curses Viśvāmitra, “may they crash to the ground, and let life itself escape those whom we hate.”<sup>34</sup> The next graphically describes Śakti’s death throes in the fire: “He is heated like an axe, he is ripped apart like śimbala blossoms; he pours out foam like a boiling, seething cauldron.”<sup>35</sup> With the next verse (*RV* 3.53.23), Viśvāmitra likens the difference between himself and his rival as that between a champion and a sluggish steed, or between a horse and an ass. And with the last, he simply dismisses his foes with a *Gītā*-like detachment from it all: “The sons of Bharata feel neither loss or gain [from their enemies]. They spur on their own steed, and never another’s, and lead him, fast as a bowstring, into combat.”<sup>36</sup>

There is no scholarly consensus about whether these verses are truly aimed at Vasiṣṭha and his family, or if they are all-purpose curses meant for any enemy combatants. Still, we may note that they are bitterly malevolent, they involve the power of Vedic speech, and they are Viśvāmitra’s compositions. In fact, they may have inspired a similar imprecatory verse in Vasiṣṭha’s family book targeting the Viśvāmitras (*RV* 7.104; see Findly 1984: 79). In this way, the episode shows the aggressive power of Viśvāmitra’s speech alongside its persuasive potential that we had seen in the river-crossing episodes, while further entangling this sage in the political career of the Bharata king Sudās.<sup>37</sup>

considers this a case of “spiritual adoption,” but perhaps goes too far in describing Jamadagni as the “teacher of Viśvāmitra” (1995c: 316), as I find no textual evidence to support this.

32 śatadhā bhidyate mūrdhā kīrtitena śrutena vā | (*Bd* 4.120ab, cf. *Vād* on *RV* 3.53).

33 yasmin nigama esa śabdah sā vasiṣṭhadvesinī rk | aham ca kāpiṣṭhalo vasiṣṭhah, atas tām na nirbravīmi | (Durgācārya on *Nir* 4.14, regarding *RV* 3.53.23b); see also Sarup 1998: xxv.

34 īndrotibhir bahulābhīr no adyā yācchreṣṭhābhīr maghavaṇ chūra jīnva | yó no dvēṣṭy ádharaḥ sás padīṣṭa yám u dvīṣmás tám u prānó jahātu || (*RV* 3.53.21).

35 paraśūm cid vī tapati śimbalāmī cid vī vṛscatī | ukhā cid indra yéṣantī práyastā phénam asyati || (*RV* 3.53.22).

36 imā indra bharatāśya putrā apapitvám cikitur ná prapitvám | hinvánty ásvam áraṇam ná nityam jyāvājām pāri ṣayantī ājaū || (*RV* 3.53.24).

37 For a comprehensive study of the triadic relationship between Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, and Sudās in the *Rgveda*, and its refraction in the *Mahābhārata*’s *Kalmāṣapāda* legend, see Lommel 1965–66.

## THE WAR OF THE TEN KINGS

The events at Sudās's sacrifice appear to have fostered a tense rivalry between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha. Though it is not manifest in the *Rgveda*, the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* of the *Yajurveda* explicitly declares that “Viśvāmitra and Jamadagni quarreled with Vasiṣṭha. Jamadagni then saw the *Vihavya* hymn [RV 10.128.1] and with it the two of them injured Vasiṣṭha’s senses and valor.”<sup>38</sup> Despite the alliance with Jamadagni, Viśvāmitra appears eventually to have lost his governmental position with Sudās to his rival as part of a larger political stratagem.

It was a set of events that would lead to the most significant military battle captured in the Vedic corpus, the Dāśarājña War, the “War of Ten Kings.” A number of scholars have tried to piece together what exactly happened in this conflict, and the following description of this obscure set of events largely follows Rahurkar’s reading of key Vedic passages (RV 7.18.4–5, 21–25; 7.33.1–6; Rahurkar 1964: 120). Sudās and the Bharatas, their power augmented by the horse sacrifice and by Viśvāmitra’s guidance, sought to bring under their control the five dominant kingdoms of Vedic India. Needing an ally for the impending conflicts, Sudās turned to the neighboring Tr̄tsus, a minor tribe who were once closely connected to the Bharatas and who were guided by Vasiṣṭha as their priest (RV 7.83.8; see. Chattopadhyaya 1924). As part of the political alliance, Sudās offered Vasiṣṭha his *purohita* post, dismissing Viśvāmitra in the process. The Bharatas and Tr̄tsus merged into a single political unit, led militarily by Sudās and spiritually by Vasiṣṭha. Their rivals meanwhile formed a confederacy of ten kings, and Viśvāmitra seems to have been brought on as their priestly guide, though no text directly states this. The legendary battle between the Bharatas-Tr̄tsus and the Confederacy of Ten Kings is mentioned in nearly every book of the *Rgveda*, and had an impact on Vedic cultural memory not dissimilar to that of the *Mahābhārata* about a millennium later.<sup>39</sup>

Three hymns, all found in Vasiṣṭha’s family book (RV 7), describe the war in detail: RV 7.18, 7.33, and 7.83. The name Dāśarājña refers to Sudās’s ten principal opponents, but it seems that a number of minor tribes and bands also joined the confederation. The theater of combat ranged from the Paruṣṇī

<sup>38</sup> viśvāmitrajamadagnī vasiṣṭhenāspardhetām | sa etaj jamadagnir vihavyam apaśyat tena vai vasiṣṭhasyendriyam viryam avṛṅkta | (TS 3.1.7.3). This may very well be an oblique reference to Jamadagni’s giving him the *sasarpāti* speech at Sudās’s horse sacrifice.

<sup>39</sup> Witzel suggests that the Dāśarājña “served as the prototype of the Mahābhārata battle of Epic fame” (1995c: 335).

River (modern-day Ravi) to the Yamunā, and Vasiṣṭha's supernatural control over river currents and floods played a key role in battlefield tactics. The primary battle took place at the Paruṣṇī in the Panjab. Here fell Turvaśa, the leader of the Yadus, along with the Matsyas, Bhṛgus, and Druhyus (and also their priest Kavaśa, a man of low birth). Also defeated were the tribes of the Pakthas, Bhalānasas, Alinas, and Viṣāṇins, along with the Anus and Pūrus (*RV* 7.18.5–15).<sup>40</sup> A great many of them died when Vasiṣṭha caused the river to flood as they crossed it in pursuit of Sudās. The remainder were slain or routed by the Bharata forces. Ultimately, Sudās emerged triumphant over the confederacy, and the Vasiṣṭha poets compared his stunning victory to Indra “killing a lioness with the help of a goat” (*śimhyām cit pētvenā jaghāna*) (*RV* 7.18.17b).

A secondary encounter took place further east at the Yamunā, where Sudās's armies defeated Bheda, an enemy combatant who had regrouped with another set of tribes—the Ajas, Śigrus, and remnants of the earlier defeated Yadus (*RV* 7.18.18–19). They surrounded the Tr̄tsus and Bharatas who, though limited in number, received Indra's favor and emerged victorious, thanks to Vasiṣṭha's priestly abilities (*RV* 7.33.3–6). After a pitched battle, Sudās defeated Bheda and the war drew to a close (*RV* 7.83.2, 6–8).<sup>41</sup>

Many details of the war remain unclear, and most of all, Viśvāmitra's role within it. It is in fact possible that he was not involved at all, as no text links this sage with either side and his family book (*RV* 3) is one of the few in the *Rgveda* to make no mention of the war. Nonetheless, Edward Hopkins, uncovering subtle allusions to the sage in *RV* 7.18, argued that Viśvāmitra organized the resistance against the Bharatas, and that he did so as “a means of vengeance” against Vasiṣṭha (1893: 265). Most scholars have followed suit, linking the war to the feud between the two sages, but this involves a great deal of guesswork.<sup>42</sup> All we can say for certain is that Vasiṣṭha was Sudās's preceptor

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the sarcasm and wordplay involved in these verses, see Schmidt 1980. Witzel (1995c: 335–37) provides additional geographic and ethnographic contextualization for the hymn.

<sup>41</sup> According to the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, Vasiṣṭha performed the *mahābhiseka* consecration ceremony for Sudās, after which he conquered the four directions and performed a horse sacrifice (*AB* 8.21). However, in the *Rgveda* Viśvāmitra claims to have conducted Sudās's *asvamedha*. We may note that the *RV* does not connect this horse sacrifice to the Dāśarājña War, so the Aitareyins may be conflating two different accounts, or giving a pro-Vasiṣṭha spin by intentionally eliminating Viśvāmitra's role. Another possibility is that Sudās held a second horse sacrifice to commemorate his victory in the war.

<sup>42</sup> Arguing for Viśvāmitra's involvement in the war are Macdonell and Keith (1912, vol. 2: 275), Rahurkar (1964: 23), Findly (1984: 81), Sharma (1985: 27), Chaubey (1987b: 29–30), Witzel (1995c: 334). Chattopadhyaya (1930a) and Hariyappa (1953: 256–57) offer dissenting opinions, while Chapekar suggests that Sudās conducted two invasions, with Viśvāmitra as his first *purohita* and Vasiṣṭha as his second (1957: 14).

during the war and led the Bharata king to victory in the largest military conflict of the early Vedic texts. Viśvāmitra, meanwhile, to the best of our knowledge, was left on the outside looking in.



These Vedic story fragments—the river crossings, the horse sacrifice, and the War of Ten Kings—constitute the oldest narrative materials we have on Viśvāmitra. With the exception of the river crossings in the *Jaiminīya* and *Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇas*, they were composed in the early Vedic period (c. 1500–1200 BCE) and anthologized in the centuries after its close. We may therefore contextualize the Vedic Viśvāmitra within two distinct historical circumstances. First, the *Rgveda* fragments themselves reflect a time when nomadic, cattle-herding communities were in perennial conflict with one another over resources in the Panjab. In this setting, rivers acted as barriers impeding both the physical movement of the Vedic tribes and the expansion of their political power. Rivers also created a conceptual boundary between political “Self” and “Other.” Viśvāmitra’s supernatural ability as a *rishi* to speak to and control rivers—even two at once—supports the Bharatas in their mission to achieve political ascendancy over their enemies. And in the Dāśarajña episode, we learn that his rival, Vasiṣṭha, also possesses this power of *brāhmaṇ*. Whether or not these were historical accounts, they would have sent a clear ideological message to early Vedic communities: just as Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha were indispensable for Sudās in the past, those who presently recite their hymns are indispensable for a tribe’s survival. And while initially this applied only to those priests trained in each family line, upon the anthologization of the *Rgveda* mantras, it became a power that all Vedic Brahmins could access.

Second, during the time of the *Rgveda*’s compilation at the onset of the Iron Age, these stories represent the nostalgic efforts of Brahmin ritualists and their royal patrons to provide historical foundations for the newly developed social and religious institutions of the Kuru state. The Kurus linked themselves genealogically to the Bharata and Pūru tribes. Sudās’s river crossings, horse sacrifice, and triumph in the War of Ten Kings would therefore have conjured up a golden age of their ancestors, and validated the Kurus’ own hegemony over the other Vedic polities. Not only do the events of the horse sacrifice—including Śakti’s attempted murder of

Viśvāmitra, Jamadagni's assistance, and the Bharatas' retributive killing of Śakti—reinforce the centrality of this major Vedic rite in the establishment of early Indian state power, but they also reflect the internal rivalries and alliances of the Brahminical groups whose materials were compiled together in the *Rgveda*. As their hymns were consolidated into a unified Vedic tradition, it would not be surprising to find that the regional priestly lineages who linked themselves to Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, and Jamadagni sought to maintain their own social identities within this new large-scale institution, an anxiety dramatically captured through these narratives of conflict.

In the public culture of the middle Vedic period, it appears that a standardization of priestly practices fostered an elite Brahmin social identity. It was during the Kuru hegemony, Witzel explains, that a nexus between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas for the first time “encapsulated itself” as a social elite with respect to the common public, the Vaiśya, and the newly integrated, non-Vedic Śūdra underclass (Witzel 1995a: 10; cf. Erdosy 1995a: 88). The Vedic Viśvāmitra legends speak consistently to the value of this partnership, in which Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha as Brahmin preceptors work together with Sudās toward ritual and military success. But within this nexus, what makes the Brahmin different from the Kṣatriya? Initially the distinguishing feature seems to be only the presence or absence of sacred power, *brāhmaṇa*, but in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, as the Indus River questions Viśvāmitra's parentage, we begin to hear early murmurs toward heredity being a factor in determining social identity. It is in the last of our Vedic legends, the story of Śunahśepa, that Viśvāmitra first is said to have a doubled pedigree, as both Brahmin and Kṣatriya, thus placing him at a social borderline that he has continued to represent throughout Hindu mythology.

#### ADOPTING ŚUNAHŚEPA

The account of Śunahśepa's sale, sacrifice, and adoption is told at length in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.13–18) and later in the *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* (15.17–27), with few textual deviations between them. Both versions read as complete transcripts of storytelling sessions, as it were, in which terse prose has been woven around seven *Rgveda* hymns attributed to Śunahśepa (*RV* 1.24–30), three independent Vedic mantras (*RV* 4.1.4–5; 5.2.7), as well as thirty-one *gāthās* composed

in a popular narrative poetic style. The result is the earliest bona fide example of an *ākhyāna*, the poetry-and-prose mode of nonfictional narration that is even today a hallmark of South Asian storytelling (Gonda 1975: 181). After these initial literary captures, the legend was to undergo a vast process of post-Vedic development (Narahari 1941; Hariyappa 1953: 184–240), which U. C. Sharma describes in eloquent terms: “The seed of the legend of Śunahṣepa is found sown in the *RV* itself. From this seed the legend grew in the form of a large tree in the *AB* and the *SŚS*. In the Epics and the *Purāṇas* this tree got foliage of different shades and colouring” (1975: 130). Sharma’s metaphor involves a unilinearity that we need not accept, but there is no doubt that the Vedic versions of Śunahṣepa have had an enormous impact on its later tellings (see. Hariyappa 1953). The *Aitareya*’s version may be summarized as follows.



#### [Story 5] **Śunahṣepa: King Hariścandra Sacrifices a Brahmin Boy**

The Ikṣvāku king Hariścandra, son of Vedhas, found himself childless. After hearing a lengthy lecture by the sage Nārada on the merits of having sons, the king entered into a covenant with Varuṇa. The god agreed to give him a son named Rohita on the condition that he be sacrificed, but Hariścandra kept delaying the inevitable through various excuses for why the boy was not yet fit for sacrifice. After finally coming of age, and learning of his father’s promise, Rohita fled into the forest (*aranya*). As a consequence, Hariścandra was seized by a severe case of edema that distended his belly (*jaḍodara*). Rohita was determined to come back to town (*grāma*) and save his father from Varuṇa’s wrath, but for six years, Indra kept approaching him in disguise and convinced him about the spiritual merits of wandering. So it went, until Rohita encountered a starving Brahmin named Ajīgarta who sold him his middle son, Sunahṣepa, to serve as a substitute victim in his father’s sacrifice.

Varuṇa accepted the substitution, explaining that a Brahmin is better than a Kṣatriya, and the sacrifice was scheduled to be a part of Hariścandra’s *rājasūya* rite. Viśvāmitra officiated as the *Rgveda* priest (*hotṛ*), Jamadagni was the *Yajurveda* specialist (*adhvaryu*), and Ayāsyā, as the *udgātṛ*, sang the *Sāmaveda* melodies. Vasiṣṭha served as the silent *brahman* priest. However, an executioner could not be found to perform

the killing of Śunahṣepa, until Ajīgarta, for additional payment, volunteered to bind his son at the stake and to kill him. Bound at the stake, Śunahṣepa desperately recited new mantras (*RV* 1.24–27, 29–30), and the gods heard his prayers. The boy's bonds were released, Indra gifted him a golden chariot, and Hariścandra was relieved of his ailment. Śunahṣepa then took charge of completing the *rājasūya*, reciting a number of other mantras (*RV* 1.28, 4.1.4–5, 5.2.7). The event also had an important ritual consequence: Śunahṣepa introduced a new and improved method of pressing *soma* that became known as *añjassava* (a rapid pressing). Only one problem remained—to whom did the boy now belong?

This is where Viśvāmitra entered the picture. Śunahṣepa's father had sold him off, and the king had sacrificed him. The boy, all on his own, sat down in Viśvāmitra's lap, and although Ajīgarta demanded his son be returned, the sage argued that the gods had given him the boy (and with a new name, Devarāta, “gifted by the gods”). The assembly agreed to the adoption, and Viśvāmitra promised Śunahṣepa that he would be regarded as the eldest. When his fifty elder sons disagreed, he disowned and cursed them to join barbarian tribes. Śunahṣepa was said to have gained both lordship over the royal Jahnus and the eminent sacred knowledge of the Gāthins.

Quite a few Indologists over the years have investigated what this ancient story says about human sacrifice (Parpola 2006: 161–65), filicide (Shulman 1993: 87–107), spiritual wandering (Lubin 1994: 288–304; Olivelle 2007), or the rites of royal consecration, the *rājasūya*, during which the story is to be told (Heesterman 1957: 158–61; Gonda 1975: 395; Falk 1984). Extensive philological scrutiny of the text (Weller 1956, Lommel 1964) has revealed it to have three distinct strata made up of Vedic mantras, popular verse, and terse liturgical prose.<sup>43</sup> And more recently, David Gordon White's structural investigations (1989, 1991) have shed light on the mediating presence of Viśvāmitra in the story.

Our sage comes into the narrative spotlight only during the adoption sequence. Because earlier Vedic texts do not mention it, some have felt the

<sup>43</sup> Virpi Hämeen-Anttila provides a thorough review of this scholarship, along with a novel method of analyzing the narrative tradition as “a network or a gravitational field, something that reflects ‘unity in variance’” (2001: 186, citing Parpola 1992: 300–1).

adoption to have been grafted onto an original story describing only a miraculously averted human sacrifice (Weller 1956: 34–49; Lommel 1964: 155–56).<sup>44</sup> Even so, since it occurs in practically every post-Vedic telling (except, notably, in the *Rāmāyaṇa*), we may surmise that either with the *Aitareya* or at some point in time before its composition, the adoption motif became the standard way to conclude the story. This ending, and Viśvāmitra's appearance within it, is no accident, and I suggest it reflects the crystallization of caste ideology at the onset of the second urbanization of northern India (c. 700–500 BCE), which is roughly when this section of the *Aitareya* is likely to have been composed (Hämeen-Anttila 2001: 185).

At a number of places in the story, we are made aware of the absolute (and hierarchical) difference between royalty and priesthood, and an anxiety about how Viśvāmitra could possess both labels. For example, when Viśvāmitra offers to be his father, Śunahṣepa asks: “Tell us, prince (*rājaputra*), how it could be that I, being of the Āṅgīrasa family, might get to be your son?”<sup>45</sup> The epithet *rājaputra*, “son of a king,” clearly refers to his royal pedigree (with the Jahnus), especially in contrast to the Brahminical moniker “Āṅgīrasa” that Śunahṣepa uses for himself. And as we have already noted, Viśvāmitra promises him a twin inheritance—an aristocratic seat among the (Kṣatriya) Jahnus as well as the sacred knowledge of the (Brahmin) Gāthins.

This inheritance is ratified through what might arguably be considered Viśvāmitra's most provocative deed of all: he curses fifty of his own sons to become Outcastes. Declaring that “your offspring shall subsist on the margins (*antān vah prajā bhakṣīṣṭeti*)”, he exiles them to live with non-Vedic communities located to the east and the south of the Vedic homelands. They are made to become Andhras, Pundras, Śabarās, Pulindas, and Mūtibas, and “many others beyond the pale (*udantyā bahavo*).”<sup>46</sup> In this way, the *Aitareya* explains, “the

<sup>44</sup> The few allusions to Śunahṣepa within the *Yajurveda* (TS 5.2.1.3, KS 19.11, KKS 21.1) also support the idea that the oldest story event was Śunahṣepa's miraculous liberation from Varuṇa's clutches through the power of Vedic mantras.

<sup>45</sup> *rājaputra tathā vada yathaivāṅgrasah sann upeyāṁ tava putratām iti* | (AB 7.17).

<sup>46</sup> The SSS reads *udañco bahudasyavo* (“many barbarians to the north”) rather than the *Aitareya*'s *udantyā bhavanti* (“lived beyond the pale”), indicating that the boundaries of the Vedic homelands had perhaps expanded in the meantime. It also reads “Mūcipas” rather than Mūtibas, suggesting that the identity of this tribe had already grown obscure. We may locate the other communities as follows—Andhra: modern Telangana (Apte 1965 [1890]: 1045); Pundra: Bengal (Shastri 1924: 723–25); Pulinda: western Bundelkhand in Madhya Pradesh (Dey 1899: 72); Śabarās: various locations in central India (Tiwari 2002: 235–37). Witzel remarks that these names are probably of Munda origin (1987b: 187).

descendants of Viśvāmitra formed a majority among the *dasyus* (barbarians)" (*vaiśvāmitrā dasyūnāṁ bhūyiṣṭhāḥ*) (AB 7.18). This incident may possibly serve as an origin myth for such outsider communities (White 1986: 235), or as a way to remove their stigma of being non-Vedic cultures through adoption (Witzel 1997: 323–24). However, it is worth noting that these *dasyu* groups already exist *before* Viśvāmitra's children are cursed to join them, and while these groups are reckoned to be Vaiśvāmitras, they remain social Others of inferior status kept outside of the Vedic sphere. Rather, it is to his younger, obedient sons that Viśvāmitra grants the benefits of living the good Vedic life. While Viśvāmitra's previous speech acts had facilitated the crossing of physical boundaries (rivers) or attacks on his priestly rivals (the *Vāsiṣṭhas*), his supernatural power of speech is now explicitly applied to crossing the lines of caste. The *Śunahṣepa* legend may in this way be understood as a foundational scene for Viśvāmitra's counter-normative persona in later mythology, as for the first time, he clearly straddles Brahmin and Kṣatriya social domains. To put it another way, Viśvāmitra is beginning to look a lot like himself.

To appreciate why caste is so central to *Śunahṣepa*, we must connect this legend to the social history of the late Vedic period, and this can only take place through a closer consideration of narrative context—that is, how the Vedic texts frame their tellings. In both the AB and ŚŚS, an oral performance of *Śunahṣepa* is prescribed as part of the *rājasūya*, the royal consecration rite, as a ritualized storytelling session by the *Rgveda* priest (*hotṛ*), seated on a golden cushion (*hiranyakaśipu*), after the anointing of the king takes place.<sup>47</sup> The legend's precise ritual function is unclear, though one plausible idea is that story was a substitution for an actual human sacrifice in the royal consecration (Weber 1893: 108–10, cited in Parpola 2006: 165). The *Aitareya* itself conceives of the storytelling session as a kind of cleansing process that "releases [the patron] from the taint of criminal behavior" (*pāpād enasāḥ pramuñcati*). The text further suggests that "a triumphant king even if he is not conducting the sacrifice, should have the story of *Śunahṣepa* performed. Then not even the slightest criminality will be left over within him."<sup>48</sup> The *Śunahṣepa* story also helps a sonless patron to have sons, we are told, and for the priests involved it brings an economic

<sup>47</sup> The *Yajurveda* texts, especially the *sutras*, offer variant procedures for telling the story during the *rājasūya*—for further details, see Heesterman 1957: 158–59.

<sup>48</sup> *tasmāt yo rājā vijīty syād apy ayajamāna ākhyāpayetaivaitac chaunahṣepam ākhyānam na hāsmīnn alpam canaināḥ pariśiṣyate |* (AB 7.18). The variant reading of the ŚŚS is quite the same in intent.

reward in cash (1000 for the *hotṛ* storyteller and 100 for the *adhvaryu* respondent) and gifts (the two golden cushions and a bonus mule cart for the *hotṛ*).

Still, it is not clear why this particular story appears in the royal consecration at all. The legend itself does contain a *rājasūya*, but its presence here generates a temporal paradox—Varuṇa instructs Hariścandra to sacrifice the boy through a *rājasūya*, but since he was already king at the time, his consecration rites would presumably have already happened. The case could be made in fact that the *rājasūya* was introduced into the legend to harmonize it with its external context of ritual performance. And so, the prevailing scholarly opinion is that the connection between legend and ritual context is artificial (Weller 1956: 28–32; Lommel 1964: 132–33). Heesterman, on the other hand, has ingeniously argued that the *rājasūya* was originally not a consecration rite but an annual fertility festival organized by the king, “by which the regeneration of the powers of fertility and the renewal of the universe are effected” (1957: 159). This regeneration happens through a symbolic rebirth of the king, and is represented in the story by the motif of Śunahṣepa’s adoption.<sup>49</sup>

If the *Brāhmaṇa* texts are indeed adapting an old Vedic *soma* ritual to serve as a new political ceremony, the *Śunahṣepa* story then provides a publicly accessible narrative sleeve to wrap around its complex and inscrutable procedures. As a storytelling performance, it is told directly to and for the benefit of the consecrated king, in plain language and a popular bardic style. And it is a story that the general public would have already known about, with themes that anyone can appreciate. But at every point, it emphasizes the value of the Brahmin counselor (played by Nārada), the Brahmin priests (played by the four *r̥sis*, including the silent Vasiṣṭha), and the Brahmin father figure, Viśvāmitra. Brahmins have a higher status than Kṣatriyas throughout the story, and Varuṇa accepts Śunahṣepa as a sacrificial substitute for Hariścandra’s son because, as he explains, “a Brahmin is better than a Kṣatriya” (*bhūyān vai brāhmaṇo kṣatriyāt*) (AB 7.15). The only exception, apart from Viśvāmitra’s disobedient sons, is the social horror of the impoverished Brahmin, Ajīgarta, who must sell his own

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<sup>49</sup> Heesterman links Hariścandra’s swollen belly to a symbolic pregnancy preceding this rebirth, but this appears far-fetched, since not only would the sacrificer’s wife normally take on such fertility roles (Jamison 1996), a symbolic rebirth of the sacrificer already takes place during the initial consecration rites (*dīkṣā*) (Lubin 1994: 113). We should note that edema is a standard punishment for breaking a contract with Varuṇa (I thank Tim Lubin for this observation), and perhaps also there is an influence of an *Atharvaveda* cure against edema (AV 7.83) attributed to Sunahṣepa (Hariyappa 1953: 191).

son to survive, and then also to butcher him for a fee, an act that is compared to the wretched things that Śūdras do (*śaudranyāya*) (AB 7.17). Emergent from this story, then, is the complementary but asymmetrical relationship between Brahmin and Kṣatriya *varṇas*, and their absolute difference from the Śūdras and Outcaste groups (*dasyus*). In this way, the late Vedic *Śunahśepa* operates within a slightly different storyworld than the earlier Viśvāmitra legends, but it is still not yet the epic and purāṇic storyworld. Social and political forms of power are now keyed to the ideology of *varṇa*, and *varṇa* has become linked to pedigree; but it is still possible, like Viśvāmitra, to have a foot in both Brahmin and Kṣatriya lineages.



With *Śunahśepa*, we find ourselves deeply in the midst of great social transformations in early India. It is told within a section of the *Aitareya* (6–8) that appears to have been added at a relatively late point in time (c. 500 BCE), and brings eastern and central India within the geographical scope of Vedic culture. Such considerations have prompted Witzel to suggest that the Brahmin specialists of the *Aitareya* school were involved in the wholesale importation of the Vedic ritual complex into polities that lay beyond the Kuru-Pāñcāla heartland. These were kingdoms on the verge of a dramatic urbanization and social and political restructuring, eventually leading to the formation of the early historic Indian states (Erdosy 1985, 1995b). Perhaps in response to these changes, the *Aitareya*'s *Śunahśepa* features a distinct polarization between civilized and wild space (*grāma* and *aranya*), with the latter being negatively conceived for Kṣatriyas (e.g., Rohita's ascetic wandering), Brahmins (Ajīgarta's devastating poverty), or good society in general (Viśvāmitra's exiled sons). Also operative within the story is the increased, almost obsessive concern with pedigree and inheritance, among both Brahmins and Kṣatriyas, that constituted a new strategy for maintaining and affirming status during this time (Erdosy 1995a: 96–97). Finally, the *rājasūya*, together with the imperially minded *aśvamedha* (Witzel 1987b: 187), began to take on a much larger political scope, serving to define a centralized monarchical authority, to sanction social alliances between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas, and to reinforce *varṇa* ideology (Erdosy 1995a: 87). Viśvāmitra's newfound hybridity reflects these historical circumstances.

Lurking in the background of this story is the transition from “sacrifice” to “ritual” that, in Heesterman's view, took place in the late Vedic period. It

was during this time, he suggests, that the violent, life-or-death contests for power between consecrated warriors among itinerant cattle-herding Vedic tribes were transformed into well-ordered but inert public performances (Heesterman 1985). Because these cultural memories of an older nomadic past clashed with the agricultural political economy of the early Indian state, they were drained of their gladiatorial content. Though a number of Heesterman's ideas, and especially his conjecture of a wild, agonistic "broken world" of the early Vedic sacrificial cult (1993), have been critiqued (see Allen 1994; Inden 1986b; Minkowski 1996), his account of the development of public Vedic (*śrauta*) ritual nevertheless remains valuable for making sense of Viśvāmitra's social ambiguity in the Vedic versions of *Śunahṣepa*. As Vedic religious practice transitioned from sacrifice to ritual, Heesterman suggests, one social outcome was the hardening of the line between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas. What used to be two sides of the same coin, the consecrated warrior participating in sacrificial contests, became two different coins, warrior and priest (Heesterman 1995: 653). Kṣatriya warriors now governed the "conflict-ridden world" while the Brahmin priest "turned away to the transcendent realm of ritualism" (1995: 654), working together, as patron and officiants, within the *śrauta* ritual that still bore vestiges of a more violent past. The need for social differentiation required both groups to support their identity claims through genealogy, an issue expressed loud and clear in *Śunahṣepa*, which, as White notes, captures the "movement from non-differentiation to definition through separation" (1986: 257). That is, the story provides a mythic charter for the social bifurcation (and asymmetry) between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas in the late Vedic period. Viśvāmitra's ambiguous membership in both groups made him a structural mediator for resolving the tensions between them.

As Brahminical social ideology continued to develop, it became inconceivable for one individual to belong to two *varṇas*. It therefore became necessary to upgrade Viśvāmitra's persona, and this is precisely what we find in the Sanskrit epics. This is where, for the first time, we hear of Viśvāmitra changing his caste, and come to know about his great ascetic power (*tapas*) that helps him make this change. Leaving behind the Vedic anecdotes of Viśvāmitra's river crossings and magical powers of speech, it is to this new historical setting that we next turn.

2.

## GENEALOGY OF THE BRAHMIN OTHER IN THE SANSKRIT EPICS



**A**t some point in the first century BCE, a north Indian king named Dharaghoṣa minted a silver coin featuring a figure labeled “Viśvāmitra” standing with his right hand raised in a gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya*) and his left planted on his hip (Figure 2.1). His royal clan, the Audumbaras, were a relatively minor group located in the Himalayan foothills who appear to have had a prosperous economy (Sharan 1972: 270–71) and perhaps a republican governmental system, but who disappeared by the first century of the Common Era into the shadows of an expanding Kuṣāṇa empire.<sup>1</sup> We know little of the Audumbaras’ history apart from what can be gathered through obscure references in Brahminical, Buddhist, and Greek texts as well as the few coins that they left behind; why exactly Dharaghoṣa chose to put Viśvāmitra on his currency must therefore remain somewhat of a mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Purāṇic testimony supports the notion that the Audumbara clan claimed genealogical descent from Viśvāmitra, who may therefore have functioned

<sup>1</sup> For the location of the Audumbaras, see Dasgupta 1965: 1; Cunningham 1891: 66–67. Dasgupta disputes K. P. Jayaswal’s theory (1955: 153–54) that the Audumbaras had a republican political structure, and instead argues them to have been a theocratic monarchy (Dasgupta 1965: 22). He also disputes Edward Rapson’s dating of the Dharaghoṣa coin to 100 BCE (1897: 11), and based upon parallels with the type and metrology of Indo-Greek king Zoilus, dates the coin a century later (Dasgupta 1965: 14).

<sup>2</sup> See Dasgupta 1965: 1–5 for a review of the sources for Audumbara history.



FIG. 2.1. Viśvāmitra, on an Audumbara coin of Dharaghoṣa, silver, c. 1st century, BCE. Obverse view. Legends in Kharoṣṭhi: (center) *viśpamitra*; (around) *mahadevasa raṇa* *dharaghoṣasa*; (bottom) *odubarisa*. Image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

as a kind of “patron saint” (Dasgupta 1965: 19; Sircar 1968: 210; Sharan 1972: 261; cf. Pruthi 2004: 55–56).<sup>3</sup> The image on the coin itself is based on earlier Indo-Greek numismatic representations of Herakles, but even a casual glance makes it clear that this is our sage.<sup>4</sup> With gaunt limbs but a muscular torso, the figure captures the paradoxical Kṣatriya-Brahmin blend that had come to be Viśvāmitra’s trademark in the late Vedic period. Though he wears ascetic garb, a sacred thread, and his hair in a topknot, he also carries a lion’s skin—the Indo-Greek symbol of political power—draped over one arm. The reverse of the coin reveals, besides the family emblem of the *audumbara* (ficus) tree, a trident fused with a battle-axe (Figure 2.2). A symbol “with undoubtedly Śaiva association” (Banerjea 1956: 116; see also Srinivasan 1997: 225; Sharan 1972: 259), the trident/battle-axe appears on

<sup>3</sup> The Audumbaras are mentioned as belonging to the Kauśika lineage (*gotra*) in the *Harivanaṇśa* (1.27.48), the *Vāyu* (91.97–98) and the *Brahmāṇḍa* (3.66.70). Their recurring family emblem, the *audumbara* or *ficus*, is the tree that Viśvāmitra’s mother hugs as part of the fertility rites in two of the *Mahābhārata*’s versions of *Satyavatī* (3.115.23; 13.4.27).

<sup>4</sup> For the connection to Herakles, see Dasgupta 1965: 21; Cunningham 1891: 67–68; Sharan 1972: 262–63; and Ghose 2002: 81, who notes the prevalence of the lion’s skin in Indo-Greek coins (see also Bakker 2011a in this regard). Cunningham and others have also taken the figure to be Śiva himself (e.g., Chakravarti 1986: 149–50; Banerjea 1956: 121), but Dasgupta rightly dismisses this conjecture (1965: 19).



FIG. 2.2. Reverse view of Dharaghosa's coin, showing trident/battle-axe and fig tree with a ceremonial base. Legends identical to obverse. Image courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

a number of Audumbara coins, perhaps as a stamp of theistic legitimization.<sup>5</sup> Its hybridity also indicates why Viśvāmitra would have found himself on Dharaghosa's coin: the weapon and the sage both represent a fusion of political and religious power. Without additional historical data, we cannot determine precisely why this royal clan may have chosen to identify themselves with this kind of hybridity, but at the very least the coin attests to the meaningful presence of Viśvāmitra in the north Indian public imaginary at the onset of the Common Era.

As this chapter will demonstrate, Dharaghosa's coin is part of a larger cultural monumentalization of Viśvāmitra's persona that took place during the time between the fall of the Mauryas (c. 185 BCE) and the rise of the Guptas (c. 300 CE), the two largest imperial formations in early Indian history. This time "between the empires" (Olivelle 2006a) was when Brahminical culture entered "an innovative phase" (Lubin 2005: 78), as Brahmin intellectuals began to compose Sanskrit theoretical treatises (*sāstras*) on worldly topics that lay beyond the confines of the Vedic ritual sphere (e.g., *artha*, *kāma*,

<sup>5</sup> The trident as an Indian numismatic convention evolved from an earlier Indo-Greek symbol for Poseidon (Ghose 2002: 78, cited by Perkins 2007: 35, note 6).

*dharma*—power, pleasure, moral law). On a social level, this was when *varṇa* came to be held as a primary and inalienable determinant of an individual's public identity, and when birth thereby became a fundamental argument for Brahmin social power. In the domain of Brahmin religious practice we find the formalization of another lasting concept, asceticism (*tapas*), and the extraordinary ability that it might grant an individual to transcend worldly norms and limits (Hara 1979b, 1997–98). This period also witnessed the composition of the two Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. It was in these texts, and in this historical setting, that Viśvāmitra most clearly came to embody the boundary between Brahmin and Kṣatriya castes and the power required to cross it.

This chapter makes three observations regarding Viśvāmitra in the time between the Mauryas and Guptas: (1) An intertextual debate took place between the two Sanskrit epics over the real-world implications of his caste change. (2) While the *Rāmāyaṇa* celebrated his exploits as virtuosic achievements of asceticism, the *Mahābhārata* explained them away through genealogy and other interpretive devices. (3) Through such efforts to capture, contain, and contour his persona, the epics deployed Viśvāmitra to represent the “Other” kind of Brahmin, as someone to be respected and feared but *not* to be emulated. Brahmins were encouraged instead to model themselves on normative figures like Vasiṣṭha, who were shown to be best suited for elite ministerial positions within the early Indian state. And for non-Brahmin audiences, the Brahmin Other served as a stern warning against disrespecting Brahmins of any sort. Through this binary construction of Brahmin Self and Other, the epics’ legends about Viśvāmitra contributed to the formation of a new and lasting identity for Brahmin communities in the post-Mauryan social landscape.

#### BRAHMIN SOCIAL POWER AND THE BRAHMIN OTHER IN EARLY INDIA

What, precisely, was the nature of this post-Mauryan social landscape, and how did Brahmins fit into it? We have observed that the classification of the phenomenological world into four socially coded tiers or *varṇas* reached maturity around roughly 1000 BCE with the appearance of the Puruṣa hymn in the *Rgveda* (*RV* 10.90). Subsequently, the Vedic *Brāhmaṇa* texts formalized *varṇa*

as a basic discourse of social power based on ritual status, with Brahmins at its head and Śūdras at its feet. And as the Vedic religious complex was replicated across the early polities (*janapadas*) of northern India, *varṇa* went along with it.

The world began to change, however, in the years after 500 BCE. The eastern kingdom of Magadha asserted sovereignty over its neighbors, leading to the birth of the first truly supra-local Indian monarchy.<sup>6</sup> By the time of the Mauryan regime (321–185 BCE), Magadha had become a bona fide empire that subjugated vast areas of the subcontinent under a single regime and acted as a major geopolitical player in the classical world (Thapar 1984; Sadiq 2009: 310–11). Along with these political changes came economic developments—long-distance trade routes, urban lifestyles, and the centralized management of land, resources, and revenue—not to mention a religious cosmopolitanism that required priestly Brahmins to cooperate with ascetic and heterodox orders, especially Buddhists and Jains (Thapar 1975). Moreover, the social privileges accorded to Brahmins based on their exclusive Vedic expertise began to appear hollow as urban life involved other forms of social differentiation based on occupation, skill, or wealth (Chakravarti 1985). Vedic ritualists especially seem to have been devalued under Aśoka's rule as public animal sacrifices were forbidden and a quasi-Buddhist policy of social ethics (Aśoka's *dhamma*) was instituted across his imperial domains (Thapar 1998; Olivelle 2006b).

After the fall of the Mauryans, the political scene became somewhat fluid as regional powers vied for control. Some kingdoms—most notably that of Puṣyamitra Śunga, the Brahmin general who usurped the Mauryan throne—appear to have reinstated the old *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha* rites in grand attempts to solidify political power. Alongside this state-sponsored Vedic revival came a proliferation of a new brand of Hindu scholastic writing: the *śāstras*. In the *Arthaśāstra* (“The Theory of Power,” c. 100 BCE–100 CE), for example, we find an “explosion” of what Mark McClish calls “political Brahmanism” (2009: 311) synonymous with what I am calling “Brahmin power”: the naturalization of extensive social and political advantages for

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<sup>6</sup> Johannes Bronkhorst (2007) argues that Magadha developed a religious culture quite distinct from that of the Vedic texts. This regional worldview survived in Jain and Buddhist traditions, and popped up in mainstream Hindu thought as the Upanisadic theory of *karma* and rebirth. If one accepts his revisionist argument, then the early history of caste as I have given here would need to be adjusted. Still, its fundamental features would remain consistent, at least with regard to Brahminical ideologies of exclusivity and privilege.

Brahmins.<sup>7</sup> Śāstraic works on *dharma*—most notably the *Manusmṛti*—carried out this agenda to an even greater extent, organizing the various forms of legal and illegal behavior hierarchically along the axes of *varṇa* and *āśrama*, caste and life-stage. In theorizing the possibilities of public life, the *dharmaśāstras* consistently argued for the superior qualifications of Brahmins for ministerial occupations, including, most importantly, the office of royal preceptor (*purohita*). They emphasized the subordination of Kṣatriyas to Brahmins in practically all domains. And most of all, these legal texts called for across-the-board social privileges and securities for Brahmins, including tax shelters, greater property rights, and lighter punishments for criminal offenses.

This was the kind of Brahminical discourse operating in the background when Brahmin specialists of *itihāsa* (“historical literature”) compiled the Sanskrit epics and embedded the Viśvāmitra legends within them (Fitzgerald 1983: 613; Hiltebeitel 2001: 17–18). It is likely that the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* were produced contemporaneously, though perhaps the former was completed first (Goldman 1984: 16, 33; Pollock 1986: 43; Brockington 1998: 473). Whether one accepts the *longue durée* model of an oral-to-written evolution over centuries or alternative suggestions that the epics were written down by an individual or a committee between “the mid-second century and the year zero” (Hiltebeitel 2001: 18, regarding the *Mahābhārata*; cf. Alles 1988–89, regarding the *Rāmāyaṇa*), the inclusion of practically all of the narrative materials dealing with Viśvāmitra into their corpora is presumed to have taken place in the post-Mauryan period. Thus according to both epics, when Viśvāmitra tries to steal Vasiṣṭha’s magic cow, his troops are met by the Śakas, Yavanas, and Pahlavas generated by the cow herself. These are to be identified as the Scythians, Indo-Greeks, and Parthians, respectively, suggesting a possible dating of the first century CE, when these foreign groups became politically active in the Indian subcontinent (Goldman 1984: 63; Brockington 1998: 207, 422). Further evidence comes from the Sanskrit poet Aśvaghoṣa, writing around 100 CE, whose description of how a nymph had successfully seduced Viśvāmitra is based closely on a passage found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Buddhacarita* 4.20, based on *Rām* 4.34.6cd–7ab).<sup>8</sup> As for the *Mahābhārata*, the

<sup>7</sup> McClish usefully links the rise of political Brahmanism as a “soft-power” resource for the Śuṅgas, “a rather minor and relatively insignificant dynasty” to compete with the stronger imperial formations of the Śakas, Indo-Greeks, and Sātavāhanas (2009: 313).

<sup>8</sup> Aśvaghoṣa follows Book Four of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in identifying the nymph as Ghṛtācī rather than the expected Menakā. This suggests that Book One, in which the Menakā legend is told, had not yet been

anecdote of Viśvāmitra's eating dogmeat relies upon discussions of this incident in the *Manusmṛti*, which has been dated between 100 BCE and 200 CE (Olivelle 2004: xxiii). In this chapter, I will argue that the *Mahābhārata*'s Viśvāmitra legends were composed as a response to those in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which would mean that they found their way into both epic corpora at the onset of the Common Era (c. 100 BCE–100 CE)—that is, at roughly the same time as, or slightly after, the minting of Dharaghoṣa's coin.

What exactly would the epics' representation of Viśvāmitra have expressed in this historical context? As public narrative projects, the Sanskrit epics pushed a theory of universal kingship that formalized “the acquisition, maintenance, and execution of royal power” (Pollock 1986: 10). Hand-in-hand with the depiction of ideal (and not-so-ideal) polity came a Brahminical social agenda that was consonant with—and frequently borrowed directly from—the *dharmaśāstras*. In the epics, an individual's social status was consistently tied to birth, and we find an almost obsessive fear of caste intermixture (*varṇasaṅkara*), especially in the *Mahābhārata* (e.g., *Mbh* 6.23.39–41) (Biardeau 1979: 115). Courtly occupations—minister, preceptor, *guru*—were almost always filled by Brahmins. Acts of violence against Brahmins were severely repudiated, and continuing the trend that we observed in late Vedic literature, state-sponsored sacrifices like the *rājasūya* and *aśvamedha* were shown to aid Kṣatriyas in consolidating imperial power. The Sanskrit epics, in other words, served to naturalize the Brahmin-centered social vision theorized in the *dharmaśāstras*.

Still, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are replete with characters who do not fit into the śāstraic mold. There are plenty of misbehaving Kṣatriyas, to be sure, but we also find a host of Brahmins who don't behave like good Brahmins should: Rāma Jāmadagnya, Vyāsa, Drona, or Aśvathāman, to name but a few. These are men of passion, normally peaceable but, if provoked, capable of violent, Kṣatriya-like outbursts. As the object of the epic's literary gaze, they represent the “Other” kind of Brahmin, both exoticized and subordinated to the placid and benevolent Brahmin Self.<sup>9</sup> This Brahmin

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assembled, or that Aśvaghoṣa simply chose not to cite it, for he does state elsewhere that Viśvāmitra had attained Brahminhood (*dvijata*), an incident mentioned only in Book One (*Buddhacarita* 1.44; see Patton 2008: 57). For more on the *Buddhacarita* as a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the epics, see Hiltzebeitel 2006.

<sup>9</sup> For discussions of a parallel exoticization and distortion of *rākṣasas*, the demonic “Other,” in the epics, see Pollock 1985–86; Goldman 2001.

Other resides at the outer limits of Brahminhood, but still on *this* side of the border, resulting in an ambivalent relationship of distancing and identification. And in the Sanskrit epics, Viśvāmitra would come to serve as its leading exemplar.

It is no surprise, then, that the epics are where we find the first real concern over how and why Viśvāmitra became a Brahmin. His caste change is now *the* defining feature of his persona, his most remarkable achievement, and one that predicates all of his other deeds. It also leads to an interpretive dilemma: What were the epics' audiences in early India to make of his caste change? Would it mean that anyone can do it? And what could it mean to *become* a Brahmin, as opposed to simply *being* one? These are precisely the questions that Yudhiṣṭhīra poses to Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata* passage that we examined in the Introduction—but as we will see, the two epics provide significantly different answers to them, resulting in an intertextual debate over Viśvāmitra's caste change.

To grasp the intertextual relationship between the two epics, we must make the following three assumptions about their textuality: First, although the epics may have had multiple composers and redactors, these various authorial agents operated with a principle of internal consistency in telling the legends of Viśvāmitra.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, their versions are different, but the epics' composers were trying to tell the same stories. For example, Hariścandra is called Ambarīṣa in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while in the *Mahābhārata*, Triśaṅku is named Mataṅga, but what happens to them is recognizably the same. Similarly, in the *Mahābhārata* we find two different versions of the *Kāmadhenu* legend, and four of *Satyavatī*, but they all are talking about the same sage and the same mythological storyworld. Second, this epic Viśvāmitra is a continuation of the Vedic Viśvāmitra. The presence of Śunahṣepa in both epics assures us of this, as does their use of Viśvāmitra's common patronymic monikers, Kauśika ("descendant of Kuśika") and Gādheya ("son of Gādhi," a deformation of the Vedic Gāthīn), adapted from the earlier Vedic tradition. In other words, we cannot accept Frederick Pargiter's (or U. C. Sharma's) speculation of five (or seven) distinct

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<sup>10</sup> For discussion of the authorship of the *Mahābhārata*, see Fitzgerald 2003: 808–15.

historical Viśvāmitras. The epics' composers are telling stories about a seer of Vedic mantras whom they know to have been the subject of earlier Vedic narratives. Third, based on their multiplicity and integrity across texts, we may be confident that the composers of the two epics did not manufacture these narratives out of whole cloth, but instead adapted pre-existing materials, both Vedic and extra-Vedic, to form new stories. Before the Sanskrit epics were composed, in other words, legends were already being told about Viśvāmitra and his hybrid caste status. Whether or not these pre-epic tellings were transmitted in oral or written form—and there is much to indicate that writing was an integral part of Indian intellectual culture at the time (Hiltebeitel 2011a; Pollock 2003: 87)—they were fluid texts in the sense that definitive, fixed versions had not yet been produced (Doniger 1991). When the epics presented the Viśvāmitra legends, these became “monumental” versions—that is, canonical forms from which others were now seen as variants (Pollock 1984b: 88; 1991: 17; Hiltebeitel 2011b: 39). The notable exception was *Śunahṣepa*, which had already been monumentalized in the ritual context of the Vedic royal consecration (*rājasūya*).

Based upon these assumptions, I would like to propose the following relative chronology. The *Rāmāyaṇa* first assembled one set of Viśvāmitra legends into a “mini-epic” detailing how the king became a Brahmin sage after a long period of ascetic practices. The *Mahābhārata* subsequently introduced these legends at various places in its corpus, disputing some of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s details and supplementing them with other stories that promoted a more conservative vision of Brahmin power and social mobility. Only in two cases, *Śunahṣepa* and perhaps also *Kalmāṣapāda*, do we see evidence of independent development in both epics from common Vedic sources.

Surprisingly, the epics have only two Viśvāmitra legends in common: *Kāmadhenu* and *Menakā* (Table 2.1). Together, these can be said to constitute a mental text about Viśvāmitra's career that the epics' audiences would have expected to hear. Vālmīki supplements this core with *Triśaṅku*, *Śunahṣepa*, and *Rambhā*, placing them all in a coherent, linear timeline. The *Mahābhārata* alludes to all three, but never tells these stories in full; instead, we get a handful of others—*Satyavatī*, *Kalmāṣapāda*, *Sarasvatī*, *Śvapaca*, and *Gālava*—that

TABLE 2.1.

Distribution of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Sanskrit epics (c. 100 BCE–100 CE)

<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i>	Story	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
	<i>Satyavatī</i>	[1] 3.115; [2] 12.49; [3] 13.4; [4] 13.55–56
1.50–55	<i>Kāmadhenu</i>	[1] 1.165; [2] 9.39
7.57.9–34 (no Viśvāmitra)	<i>Kalmāṣapāda</i>	1.166–68, 173.5–24
	<i>Sarasvatī</i>	9.41–42
	<i>Satyavrata</i>	1.65.31–33 (allusion)
1.56–59	<i>Triśaṅku</i>	1.65.34 (allusion); 13.3.9 (allusion)
	<i>Śvapaca</i>	12.139
1.60–61	<i>Śunahṣepa</i>	13.3.6–8 (allusion)
1.62–63	<i>Menakā</i>	1.65.20–66.12
1.62.25cd–63.1–15	<i>Rambhā</i>	13.3.11 (allusion)
	<i>Gālava</i>	5.104.5–5.117

do not occur in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>11</sup> The one exception is *Kalmāṣapāda*, which appears in the final book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but this version does not involve Viśvāmitra at all.<sup>12</sup>

The distribution of Viśvāmitra legends in the epics supports the conclusion that the *Mahābhārata*'s versions are younger, for it is hard to imagine that the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s composers would have intentionally excluded stories from their lengthy biography of the sage, and none more so than *Satyavatī*, the story of his birth. The intertextualities between the two epics are ultimately quite complex, but when it comes to Viśvāmitra, if we were to draw any definite line of influence, it would have to go from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the *Mahābhārata*. In any case, we can be confident that the composers of the two epics had an intertextual debate about our sage, and it touched upon key aspects of Brahmin social identity in early India: pedigree, religious power, and the moral value of non-aggression.

<sup>11</sup> The *Triśaṅku* legend is mentioned during the *Mahābhārata*'s telling of *Menakā* (*Mbh* 1.65.31–33). The cursed king is here named Mataṅga and is said to have cared for Viśvāmitra's family during famine—clearly an allusion to the purāṇic legend of *Satyavrata*. As noted in the Introduction, *Śunahṣepa* and *Rambhā* are referenced in Yudhiṣṭhīra's query to Bhīṣma about Viśvāmitra's caste change (*Mbh* 13.3.6–8, 11).

<sup>12</sup> Neither epic tells the legend of *Hariścandra*, though the *Mahābhārata* does mention the king and his *rājasūya*. Despite his being an ancestor of Rāma, the *Rāmāyaṇa* nowhere mentions the name Hariścandra, even in its version of *Śunahṣepa*.

### “DOING THE UNIMAGINABLE”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE RĀMĀYAÑA

Vālmīki spends sixteen chapters of the *Bālakānda* (“The Book of Boyhood”)—more than twenty percent of the book—giving a detailed life-story of Viśvāmitra. As far as we know, such an elaborate study of this sage’s career had never been attempted before, and would not be repeated until the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* about a thousand years later. But Viśvāmitra’s back-story has little to do with Rāma’s adventures, and it comes as no surprise that practically every other version of the Rāma story will leave it out. These chapters read as a self-contained unit, an epic-in-miniature that celebrates the ancient deeds of young Rāma’s guide (Goldman 1984: 79). As it does so, it also draws the lines of social difference between Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Outcastes, and regulates the ascetic lifestyles through which an individual may potentially cross them.

After the slaying of the demoness Tāṭakā, Viśvāmitra takes young Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa to visit king Janaka of Mithilā, who is conducting a self-choice marriage (*svayamvara*) for his daughter Sītā. Along the way they pass through the abandoned hermitage of the Brahmin sage Gautama. As punishment for her infidelities with Indra, Gautama had cursed his wife to remain there, invisible, until Rāma should happen to arrive there (*Rām* 1.47.28–29). When the party later reaches Janaka’s court, his minister Śatānanda, who happens to be Ahalyā’s eldest son, becomes elated at the news of his mother’s liberation. He tells Rāma how lucky he is to have Viśvāmitra for a guide, and then lists some of the sage’s fabulous qualities in terms that are quite similar to what we had heard in Daśaratha’s court:

Greetings, best of men! How fortunate that you have come with the mighty and indomitable sage Viśvāmitra leading you. This is a man who, with his *tapas*, has done the unimaginable, [becoming] a Brahmin sage of immeasurable glory. Viśvāmitra is a man of great radiant power, and you should know that he is the finest path. There is no one else on this earth more blessed than you, Rāma, since you are under the tutelage of the son of Kuśika, who has performed great austerities.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *svāgatam te naraśreṣṭha diṣṭyā prāpto ‘si rāghava | viśvāmitram puraskṛtya maharśim aparājitatam || acintyakarmā tapasā brahmaśir amitaprabhah | viśvāmitro mahātejā vety enam paramām gatim || nāsti dhanyataro rāma tvatto ‘nyo bhuvi kaś cana | goptā kuśikaputras te yena taptam̄ mahat tapah ||* (*Rām* 1.50.13–15).

He then proceeds to give a biography “of the illustrious Kauśika, to the best of my abilities (*bala*) and as it happened.”<sup>14</sup> Viśvāmitra’s glory, we learn, is a direct result of his “unimaginable” (*acintya*) feat of changing his caste through ascetic power. From the very start, then, the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s composers orient us to the two themes—caste change and *tapas*—that will coordinate Viśvāmitra’s long and winding path from Kṣatriyahood to Brahminhood.

Satānanda’s saga chains together what had likely been independent stories about Viśvāmitra at the onset of the Common Era. The *Kāmadhenu* and *Menakā* legends are built upon motifs—cattle-theft and the seduced sage—that are common throughout Hindu mythology. *Śunahṣepa*, as we have seen, was at least five hundred years old when it was told in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. And, as Adalbert Gail suggests, the purāṇic *Satyavrata* story might indeed predate the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s *Trīśaṅku* legend (1977: 221). The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s originality, in other words, comes not from telling new stories about Viśvāmitra, but from assembling them into a coherently structured saga about caste change and ascetic power.

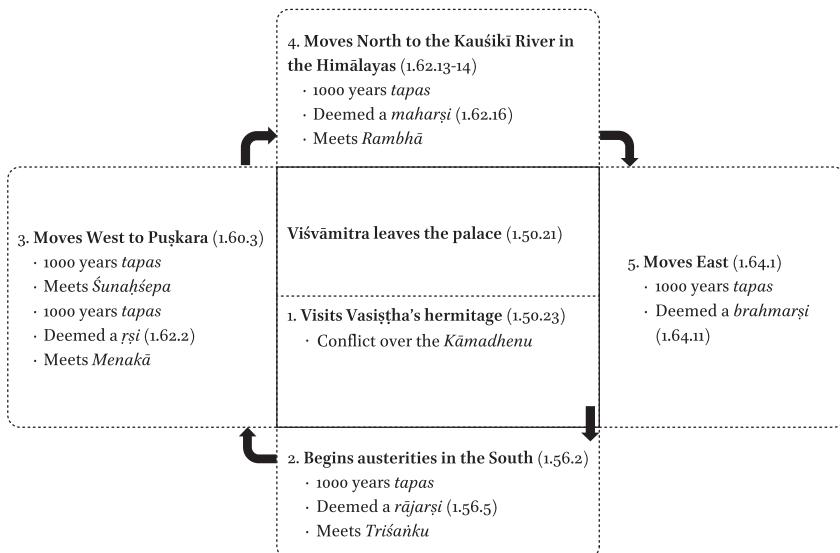
The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s Viśvāmitra mini-epic is organized along two dimensions (Table 2.2). On one level, the stories are contoured by a geospatial imaginary. After failing to steal Vasiṣṭha’s *Kāmadhenu*, Viśvāmitra decides to become a Brahmin sage and first travels south to perform austerities, where he meets *Trīśaṅku*. He then goes west, to the Puṣkara lakes, where he encounters *Śunahṣepa* and *Menakā*. Going north to practice austerities on the banks of the river Kauśikī, he is approached by *Rambhā*.<sup>15</sup> Finally, he moves east, where he succeeds in his quest to become a Brahmin sage.

Viśvāmitra’s ascetic quest is thus mapped clockwise through the four cardinal directions using the *Arthaśāstra*’s model of political power as a *cakravarti-kṣetra*, an “Imperial Field” that evokes the complete and undisputed superiority of the center over the margins (Strong 1989: 44; Pollock 2006: 248–49). Conditioned by the tensions between Brahminical householder and renunciant traditions (Olivelle 1990), the “wild” areas where Viśvāmitra performs his austerities are located on the peripheries of this

<sup>14</sup> *kauśikasya mahātmanah | yathābalam yathāvṛttam* (*Rām* 1.50.16bc). The word *bala* in the adverbial phrase *yathābalam*, which I have rendered as “to the best of my abilities,” also resonates with Viśvāmitra’s quest for *brahmabala*, Brahmin power.

<sup>15</sup> Earlier in the epic, the Kauśikī is said to have been his sister, Satyavatī, in riverine form (*Rām* 1.33.7–8).

TABLE 2.2.

*Geospatial organization of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Rāmāyaṇa*

Imperial Field, while the “civilized” domestic spaces (Viśvāmitra’s palace and Vasiṣṭha’s hermitage) are found in its center. The resulting map implicitly valorizes householder practices (i.e., Vedic sacrificial and domestic rites) that take place in this center, over and above the ascetic lifestyles of the periphery, even as it glorifies the power of *tapas* that the latter involve.

The legends are additionally organized along an axis of social hierarchy. Viśvāmitra begins as a king, a Kṣatriya, but after performing one thousand years of *tapas* he gains the title of *rājarṣi*, “royal sage.” After the *Triśaṅku* and *Śunahṣepa* episodes, and after a thousand more years of *tapas*, he becomes simply a *rṣi*, shedding the Kṣatriya label and entering into a liminal, casteless state. After the *Menakā* episode, and another thousand years of *tapas*, he gets the title of *maharṣi*, “great sage.” Another thousand years of *tapas* follows, and yet another thousand after he curses *Rambhā*, until finally, after a grand total of five thousand years of *tapas*, Viśvāmitra achieves his desired title of *brahmaṛṣi*, “Brahmin sage.” While the *Rāmāyaṇa* here clearly uses the *varṇa* scheme to create a hierarchy of sage-types (*brahmaṛṣi* > *maharṣi* > *rṣi* > *rājarṣi*), on a more subtle level it also requires the tacit acceptance of the social ideology that Brahmins are superior to Kṣatriyas.

Two additional subtexts in these legends further reinforce the normative ideology of caste. First, the storyworld features communities that are already rigidly and completely divided by *varṇa*. This is why Viśvāmitra must first lose his Kṣatriya status before progressing toward Brahminhood—for in the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s worldview, it is inconceivable to be both. Second, the *Rāmāyaṇa* seeks to regulate the potential of renunciation as a means to contest Brahminical social hierarchy. And so, the epic's treatment of Viśvāmitra emphasizes that while *tapas* is indeed a radical force through which an individual may “do the unimaginable” and cross the lines of caste, it is highly volatile, easily squandered, and requires an extreme self-discipline in order to harness its boundary-breaking potential.

Viśvāmitra's quest for this kind of power begins with a fateful encounter with a magic cow.




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[Story 2A] **Kāmadhenu: Vasiṣṭha's Cow of Plenty**

One day Viśvāmitra, king of Kānyakubja, pays a visit to the hermitage of the Brahmin sage Vasiṣṭha, where he and his troops experience the surprising delights of a magnificent feast produced by the sage's wish-giving cow (*kāmadhenu*). The covetous king first tries to buy the cow, and then, his offer declined, determines to take her by force. However, Viśvāmitra and his armies are handed a stunning and decisive defeat at the hands of foreign armies that miraculously pour out of the cow's orifices. The king's hundred sons are slain. A resolute Viśvāmitra, vowing revenge, propitiates Śiva and acquires magic weapons (*astras*)—but in one-on-one combat, they are all neutralized by Vasiṣṭha using just a Brahmin's staff (*danda*). Dejected and convinced of the superiority of Brahmin power, Viśvāmitra relinquishes kingship and takes to the ascetic life in order to acquire it.

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From the very beginning, this legend puts Brahmin and Kṣatriya *varṇas* into a binary opposition. First comes the interjection of Viśvāmitra's violent armies from the city into the placid space of Vasiṣṭha's forest hermitage. To illustrate the

sanctity of this domain, we are given an elaborate description of the sages, mendicants, and other spiritual luminaries who inhabit it:

It was graced by gods (*devas*) and demons (*dānavas*), celestials (*gandharvas*) and demigods (*kinnaras*), full of placid deer and frequented by companies of Brahmins. It was crowded with Brahmin sages (*brahmaṛśis*) and regularly visited by divine sages (*devarśis*). It was always packed with great men whose perfection from ascetic practice made them resemble Agni. And also great men who resembled Lord Brahmā, who lived on water alone, or just air, or who ate only dried leaves. And also others who ate only fruits and roots, who had conquered their passions and subdued their senses, as well as the *vālakhilya* sages, devoted to prayer and sacrifice. Vasiṣṭha's hermitage resembled Brahmā's heaven itself—so observed the mighty Viśvāmitra, foremost of warriors.<sup>16</sup>

Vasiṣṭha's home thus possesses the same Brahminical virtues that he himself is said to exemplify: sacred learning, placidity, and self-control. And on the surface it appears to contain nothing of value to Kṣatriyas: no wealth, luxuries, or physical pleasures. The initial conversation between the two rivals, though friendly, further highlights their caste-based differences. Viśvāmitra inquires about his host's ascetic practices, daily Vedic rites, his students, and the flora of the hermitage (*Rām* 1.51.4cd–5ab), while Vasiṣṭha asks about the king's subjects and servants, armies and treasures, enemies and allies (1.51.7–9). Though their lifestyles are different, the Kṣatriya and the Brahmin nevertheless find themselves in state of friendly equilibrium, which is how it remains until the cow comes into the picture.

Once they do come in conflict, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is clear in asserting the superiority of Brahmins. The wish-giving cow, who is named Śabalā (meaning “spotted” but also a pun for *sabalā*, “possessing power”), states this quite explicitly: “They say that a Kṣatriya’s power (*bala*) is not mightier than the Brahmin’s—for the power of the Brahmin’s essence is sacred, O Brahmin, and stronger than the Kṣatriya-essence.”<sup>17</sup> She does not stop there. “Deploy me,” she

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<sup>16</sup> *devadānagandharvaiḥ kiṁnarair upaśobhitam | prasāntaharinākīrṇam dvijasamghaniśevitam || brahmaṛśiganasamkīrṇam devarsiganasevitam | tapaścaraṇasamsiddhair agnikalpair mahātmabhiḥ || satatam samkulam śrīmad brahmakalpair mahātmabhiḥ | abbhakṣair vāyubhakṣaiś ca śīrṇaparṇāśanaiḥ tathā || phalamūlāsanair dāntair jitāroṣair jitendriyaiḥ | rṣibhir vālakhilyaiś ca japaḥomaparāyanaiḥ || vasisthasyāśramapadam brahmalokam ivāparam | dadarśa jayatām śreṣṭha viśvāmitro mahābalāḥ ||* (*Rām* 1.50.24–28).

<sup>17</sup> *na balam kṣatriyasyāhur brāhmaṇo balavattaraḥ | brahmaṇ brahmabalam divyam kṣattrat tu balavat-taram ||* (*Rām* 1.53.14).

tells Vasiṣṭha, “for I am filled with your Brahmin power (*brahmabala*) and I will decimate whatever pride and power that wicked man might have.”<sup>18</sup> The same sentiment is echoed in Viśvāmitra’s famous dictum that encapsulates the central theme of the story, and which will be repeated in the *Mahābhārata*’s telling:

*dhig balam kṣatriyabalam brahmabalejobalam balam |  
ekena brahmadaṇḍena sarvāstrāṇi hatāni me || Rām 1.55.23*  
 Damn this Kṣatriya power, the power of Brahmin glory is better!  
 For with just one Brahmin’s staff, all of my magic weapons have been destroyed.

The message is clear: though it may not seem like it, the Brahmin actually has more power than a Kṣatriya. As Viśvāmitra is forced to admit, the *daṇḍa* is mightier than the *astra*.

The magic *astra* weapons are unique to the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s version, and have a functional presence in the epic—these missiles, after all, are going to prove indispensable in Rāma’s campaign against Rāvaṇa’s armies later in the story. Jarrod Whitaker has noted the close association between the *astras* and *tejas* (“energy”) in Hindu mythology, asserting that “the divine weapons are explicit and amplified examples of an ancient Indian physics—the principles of *tejas*—which are believed to permeate all forms of life, encompassing both the animate and inanimate worlds, linking the two together by a common property, which charges them, giving value, functionality, and power” (2000: 107). The triumph of Vasiṣṭha’s *daṇḍa* over Viśvāmitra’s *astras* scales this energy using a *varṇa*-based social hierarchy: Brahmin *tejas* is superior to Kṣatriya *tejas*. Furthermore, Vasiṣṭha’s staff “clearly possesses superior quantities of *tejas* and the most potent quality, making it quite capable of neutralizing any *divya astra*” (Whitaker 2000: 97). That is to say, it is a weapon of the utmost caliber. But here we should note that this comes as a complete surprise to Viśvāmitra, and, one suspects, the epic’s audiences as well. The Brahmin’s staff could not possibly have been taken seriously as a weapon in post-Mauryan India, if it were even a weapon at all. One would not expect a stick of wood to do much damage against an average soldier, never mind one armed with a full

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<sup>18</sup> *niyuṅkṣva māṁ mahātejas tvadbrahmabalasaṁbhṛtām | tasya darpam balam yat tan nāśayāmi durātmanah || (Rām 1.53.16).*

arsenal of Śiva's divine weapons. Instead, the *danda* is a symbol of the idea that Brahmins, by virtue of their being Brahmin, possess a natural but hidden energy (*tejas*) that is superior to the Kṣatriya's firepower, even at its most enhanced.

Also iconic of this hidden Brahmin power is the magic cow herself, whose wondrous production of mountains of food and barbarian armies is equally unexpected, and quite unlike the ordinary cows that Brahmins own.<sup>19</sup> Here is the description of the dazzling comestibles served in Vasiṣṭha's otherwise austere home:

There were pieces of sugarcane, sweets, parched grain, liquors, and fine wines. There were other very expensive drinks and snacks of all kinds. There were mountainous heaps of steaming rice, savory dishes and soups, and rivers of yogurt. There were curries of all flavors, and thousands of silver platters piled up with delicious things.<sup>20</sup>

No specific dishes are named—and notably there is no mention of meat—but this is clearly a meal fit for a king, accompanied as it is by alcoholic beverages and fineries.<sup>21</sup> It leaves the troops entirely satiated, and Viśvāmitra surprised, delighted, and more than a little envious of his host.

Equally out of place are the armies that the cow emits to protect herself when the Kṣatriya tries to take her by force. These Pahlavas (Parthians), Śakas (Scythians), Yavanas (Greeks) and Kāmbojas (Eastern Iranians) correspond to ethnic communities who were located beyond India's borders in the northwest, and whose armies made serious incursions into the subcontinent during the post-Mauryan period. Also named are tribal groups like the Hāritas and Kirātas, as well as the generic *mlecchas* (foreigners), all of whom lack Kṣatriya

<sup>19</sup> Biardeau explains that the *kāmadhenu* functions as “the symbol of complete bounty and at the same time the symbol of Brahmin power” (1999a: 1191, col.1).

<sup>20</sup> *ikṣūn madhūms tathā lājān maireyāṁś ca varāsavān | pānāni ca mahārāṇī bhakṣyāṁś coccāvacāṁś tathā || uṣṇādhyasyaudanasyāpi rāśayah parvatopamāḥ | mr̄ṣṭānnāni ca sūpāś ca dadhikulyāś tathaiva ca || nānāsvādurasānāñ ca ṣāḍavānāñ tathaiva ca | bhājanāni supūrṇāni gauḍāni ca sahasraśāḥ ||* (Rām 1.52.2–4).

<sup>21</sup> The mention of *maireya* and *āsava* also supports the dating of this story to the onset of the Common Era, as these spirits are described in the *Arthaśāstra* and the *Caraka Saṃhitā* (see McHugh 2013: 35–39). Furthermore, there does not appear to be definitive archaeological evidence for alcohol production in India prior to the second century BCE (Alles 1988–89: 238; Sankalia 1982: 47–48), though a case has been made for the presence of distillation equipment in Harappa (Achaya 1991: 123; Mahdihassan 1979; and especially Allchin 1979; for a critical assessment, see McHugh 2013: 31–33).

pedigrees.<sup>22</sup> Together they constitute a wholly alien political “Other” that blindsides and overwhelms Viśvāmitra’s homeland forces. Because they are created “to defend brahmanical values” within the story, John Brockington has suggested that the story may have provided groups like the Scythians or Indo-Greeks an official genealogy and a quasi-Kṣatriya status after they established kingdoms within the subcontinent (1998: 207; see also Parasher-Sen 1991: 32). However, in both epics, the foreign armies basically disappear after defeating Viśvāmitra’s armies, with nothing said about where they go afterward. It is therefore equally possible that their appearance in the *Kāmadhenu* legend reflects a perceived threat to early Indian kingdoms rather than an established political presence in the subcontinent. So, while clearly there is an impression of these foreign groups as being fierce and hostile warriors, it is not clear whether this reflects an actual public memory of the Śaka and Indo-Greek incursions of the first century CE, or whether it is playing on fears of such a thing happening at an earlier point in history.

What we can be more confident of, however, is that the story reflects the social anxieties of Brahmin communities throughout the post-Mauryan period. While *astras*, *kāmadhenus*, and perhaps even foreigners were not part of everyday life experience in northern India, Brahmins certainly were. And as we have discussed, their elite social status had grown insecure under the Mauryan regime. Under such circumstances, the *Kāmadhenu* story reinforces the idea that Brahmins ought to be granted social privileges not because of wealth or physical might, but because they possess a natural but hidden superiority based on their symbolic connections to the sacred. And as a last resort, the story shows that Brahmins may seek alternatives outside the Kṣatriya lines by appealing to the mercenary interests of foreigners to protect their assets.

The rest of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s saga continues to reinforce this Brahmin-Kṣatriya opposition, first by narrating a king’s defiance of his preceptor, and then another king’s attempt to sacrifice a Brahmin boy. In doing so, the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s

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<sup>22</sup> The *Mahābhārata*’s versions of the story name different outsider armies. In the *Sālva Parvan*, the cow produces only Śabaras, a tribal group first mentioned in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*’s *Śunahṣepa* legend (Tiwari 2002: 236). The *Ādi Parvan* adds the Dāradas, a northern kingdom, the tribal Pundras (also mentioned in *Sunahṣepa*), as well as the Drāmiḍas and Simhalas (Dravidians and Sinhalese). A number of manuscripts of the Northern recension—those written in Bengali (B), non-Kashmiri Devanāgarī (D), one Nepāli text (N), and a Maithilī version dated 1528 CE (V)—further include the tribal Cibūkas and Pulindas, the Cīnas (Chinese or Tibetans), the Hūṇas (Huns), and the Keralas (*Mbh* 1.165.36\*1770).

versions of *Triśaṅku* and *Śunahṣepa* develop a third dimension to its normative social vision: the Caṇḍālas and other Outcaste communities who lie beyond the scope of *varṇa* and are thereby located in diametric opposition to both Brahmins and Kṣatriyas. In these stories, we also witness the development of a new, compassionate side to our fiery and self-interested sage, beginning with his rescue of the cursed king *Triśaṅku*:



[Story 3B] **Triśaṅku: The Ascension of the Outcaste King**

King *Triśaṅku* of Ayodhyā develops a desire to enter heaven without experiencing death. He asks his *guru* *Vasiṣṭha* to perform a sacrifice to that end, but the Brahmin declares it to be impossible. The king goes to *Vasiṣṭha*'s sons for assistance, but they angrily curse him to become an Outcaste for having the audacity to second-guess his preceptor. Finding that he now possesses a Caṇḍāla body, *Triśaṅku* loses his kingdom and livelihood, and in desperation goes to *Viśvāmitra*. The sage agrees to help and organizes a massive Vedic sacrifice. *Vasiṣṭha*'s sons refuse to attend, and *Viśvāmitra* curses them to become Outcasts. But the gods also refuse to attend, and so *Viśvāmitra* uses his *tapas* to send the Outcaste king flying physically up to heaven. Indra, however, pushes him back down, leaving the cursed king dangling upside-down in the air.<sup>23</sup> *Viśvāmitra* then manufactures an astonishing “counter-creation” (*pratisṛṣṭi*) of new stars and constellations, a second heaven in which the accursed *Triśaṅku* may dwell, despite the firm opposition of *Vasiṣṭha*, his sons, and even the gods.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Triśaṅku*'s eternal, upside-down suspension is the source of a contemporary folk metaphor, “to hang like *Triśaṅku*,” meaning to be faced with an irresolvable impasse (O’Flaherty 1984: 104–6). The expression also exists in modern legal usage—in Hindi, a “*Triśaṅku*” legislature is one in which there is no majority party, and the Marathi term for a hung jury is that the court “remained *Triśaṅku*.” Folk astronomy sees *Triśaṅku* as the constellation of Orion (Hariyappa 1953: 132), and in a similar vein, one medieval commentator had conceived of *Triśaṅku* as a polar star in the southern sky, a counterpart to *Dhruva* in the northern hemisphere (Nāgeśabhaṭṭa on *Rām* 1.60.21).

<sup>24</sup> The topsy-turvy nature of *Viśvāmitra*'s *pratisṛṣṭi* is even today an active folk idea. While conducting research among Brahmins in Pune in 2001, I was given some popular explanations of this counter-creation. According to one account, *Viśvāmitra* made new worlds out of spite, but his creations were flawed due to his imperfect Brahmin status. And so, as a counterpart to the horse, he

The physical pollution of the Outcaste body is a site of great concern for the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Consider, for example, how Triśaṅku physically changes after he is cursed:

Now, as the night passed, the king turned into a Caṇḍāla, black and coarse, wearing black clothes, with wild, unkempt hair. He wore garlands and unguents from the funeral grounds, and his ornaments were made of iron. When they saw he had turned into an Outcaste, all of his ministers left him and ran away, Rāma, along with the citizens who had supported him.<sup>25</sup>

The epic's stereotypes of skin color and clothing reflect the deep disenfranchisement that Outcaste communities faced even in early India. The public shuns the king-turned-Outcaste, and Vasiṣṭha's sons cannot help but ridicule the idea of a Kṣatriya priest (Viśvāmitra) conducting a Vedic sacrifice for an Outcaste (Triśaṅku). Even the gods recoil in horror at the thought of his tainted body entering the gates of heaven. It is only in Viśvāmitra's counter-normative hermitage that Triśaṅku is received with compassion (*kṛpā*), and our sage makes it a point to address him respectfully as "King of Ayodhyā" and "Ikṣvāku," even after learning of his Caṇḍāla status.

Just as the *Kāmadhenu* legend had portrayed the Brahminical hermitage at the apex of the *varṇa* ladder, *Triśaṅku* gives us a glimpse of the physical and social abjection at its very bottom. And like a ladder, we are shown that it is far easier to fall down than to climb up. Not only is Triśaṅku cursed to be a Caṇḍāla, Vasiṣṭha's sons are cursed by Viśvāmitra to become Muṣṭikas, "contemptible eaters of dog flesh, decrepit and disfigured."<sup>26</sup> This is of course the same fate that the sage's own sons meet in the Vedic *Śunahṣepa* story. So what can cause one to fall down the ladder? Disrespecting Brahmins (like Triśaṅku did), disrespecting one's father (like Viśvāmitra's sons did), but, most of all, disrespecting men of extraordinary *tapas*.

The nature and regulation of *tapas* becomes the chief concern in the rest of the Viśvāmitra saga. What exactly is ascetic power, how might it be gained, lost,

created the ass; as a counterpart to the cow, he created the water buffalo; as a counterpart to the July monsoon, his was the weaker October monsoon (cf. Ramanujan 1999a: 32; O'Flaherty 1984: 108).

<sup>25</sup> atha rātryāṁ vyatītāyāṁ rājā candālatāṁ gataḥ | nīlavastradharo nīlā paruso dhvastamūrdhajah | cityamālyānulepaś ca ḥyasābharaṇo 'bhavat || tam dr̄ṣṭvā mantrināḥ sarve tyaktvā caṇḍālarūpiṇam | prādravān sahitā rāma paurā ye 'syānugāmināḥ || (Rām 1.57.9–10).

<sup>26</sup> śvamāṇsanīyatāhārā muṣṭikā nāmā nirghṇāḥ | vikṛtāś ca virūpāś ca (Rām 1.58.20abc).

and controlled, and what is its potential for drastic and violent change? It takes Viśvāmitra a total of five thousand years of austerities to reach Brahminhood, far longer than the unspecified “some amount of time” (*kenacit tv atha kālena*) that it had taken him to acquire Śiva’s magic weapons (*Rām* 1.54.13a). As part of these austerities, he must undertake more and more severe self-abnegating practices—in the beginning “eating only fruit and roots” (*phalamūlāśana*) (*Rām* 1.56.2e), but by the end, “standing alone with his arms raised, subsisting only on air, sitting amidst five fires in the summer, standing outside in the rainy season, in the water in the winter, amassing *tapas* day and night.”<sup>27</sup> None of these practices, we should note, involve the Vedic solemn ritual (*śrauta*) or householder (*grhya*) activities, and therefore lie problematically outside the binary of classical Brahminical life. Instead, Viśvāmitra’s self-mortification resembles what was going on at the time in forests and mountainsides across northern India, as increasing numbers of renunciants, Hindu and heterodox, Brahmin and non-Brahmin, were leading ascetic lifestyles in pursuit of personal spiritual liberation. Viśvāmitra’s *tapas* thereby serves as an allegory for this culture of renunciation, in contrast to the normative religious sphere of Brahminical ritual.

The tension between renunciation and ritual is noticeable when Viśvāmitra forcibly sends Triśaṅku to heaven. Initially, Vasiṣṭha and his sons affirm that it is “impossible” (*aśakyam*) to conduct a Vedic rite that might send Triśaṅku to heaven (*Rām* 1.56.12; 1.57.4). Still, Viśvāmitra uses the threat of a curse to strongarm the Brahmin community into performing one anyway (*Rām* 1.59.6). It is said to be a proper Vedic sacrifice, that “follows the rules and precepts” (*yathākalpam yathāvidhi*) (1.59.9d), but still it does not work, for the gods do not show up to partake in the offerings. Refusing to accept failure, Viśvāmitra then indignantly deploys his own ascetic power to make the king’s wish come true. “Witness the power of my *tapas*,” he declares, “that I have myself earned, King of men. I will force you into to heaven in your own body.”<sup>28</sup> He raises his sacrificial ladle and makes Triśaṅku rise up into the sky and fly off toward heaven, polluted body and all. The story thus illustrates how renunciant practices might permit an individual to do something that ordinary Vedic ritual

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<sup>27</sup> ūrdhvabāhur nirālambo vāyubhaksas tapaś caran || gharme pañcatapā bhūtvā varṣāsv ākāśasamśrayah | sīśire salilasthāyī rātryahāni tapodhanah || (*Rām* 1.62.22c–23).

<sup>28</sup> paśya me tapaso vīryam svārjitasya nareśvara || esa tvāṁ svaśarīreṇa nayāmi svargam ojasā | (*Rām* 1.59.12cd–13ab).

cannot: to bend the will of the gods and the rules of caste through human effort, or *puruṣakāra*.

Renunciation and ritual also come into tension in the next story, *Śunahśepa*. According to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s variant telling, a king named Ambarīṣa (rather than the usual Hariścandra) loses the animal victim of a certain Vedic sacrifice he is conducting. His priest (not explicitly said to be Vasiṣṭha) gives the king two options for completing the ceremony: either to undertake a great deal of expiation (*prāyaścitta*), or to find a human substitute for the sacrificial victim (*Rām* 1.60.8). Ambarīṣa chooses the latter option and purchases Śunahśepa, who is the middle son of the Bhārgava sage Ṛcīka (rather than the usual Ajīgarta). In this version, there is no son who runs away, no stomach illness for the king, and no mention of the *rājasūya*. This divergence from the Vedic version, according to one medieval commentator, is due to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s “embellishment of Vedic literature” (*śrutiāv asmād evopabṛhmānād iti*) (Nāgeśabhaṭṭa on *Rām* 1.61.26).

Also in a departure from the Vedic *Śunahśepa*, Viśvāmitra plays an active role in resolving the story. First he asks his own sons to stand in for Śunahśepa, but they refuse and he curses them to become “dog-eaters” (*śvamāṇsabhojins*), just as he had cursed Vasiṣṭha's sons (*Rām* 1.61.16).<sup>29</sup> Viśvāmitra then compassionately teaches Śunahśepa “two divine verses” (*gāthe dve divye*) that liberate him when he sings them during the sacrifice (*Rām* 1.61.19). As noted in the previous chapter, the term *gāthā* refers to new poetic verses outside of the Vedic ritual corpus that in this case are shown to be fueled by *tapas*. Renunciant practices, in other words, are able to resolve a peculiar social horror resulting from the misguided application of Vedic ritual injunction.

In this way, the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s *Triśaṅku* and *Śunahśepa* legends show how renunciation generates a form of religious power that lies beyond mainstream Vedic ritual. Viśvāmitra's *tapas* leaves the gods “stunned” (*mohita*) and forces them to give into his demands, lest the world should collapse (*Rām* 1.64.6c–f). The triumph of *tapas* over divine will is perhaps the strongest theme running through all of these stories, as seen through Viśvāmitra's counter-creation, his curses, and above all his own impossible social transformation. *Triśaṅku*, after being cursed, rather pessimistically laments that “Fate is supreme,

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<sup>29</sup> The adoption sequence is also missing in the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s version. This is not unexpected, since Viśvāmitra has become a *rṣi* but is not yet a Brahmin at this point in the saga, and furthermore, his sons are, one presumes, still Kṣatriyas. In order to preserve the curse motif, the epic transposes it to an earlier moment in the story and introduces it under different circumstances.

I think, and human effort (*puruṣakāra*) is useless. Everything comes about by fate, and fate is the ultimate course.”<sup>30</sup> But Viśvāmitra is an important counter-example to such fatalism, for his *tapas* permits him to successfully challenge his destiny and to achieve the impossible.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s composers thus appear to accept renunciation as a viable means of bypassing the ordinary worldly processes of *karma* and rebirth, and acknowledge that in some cases it can indeed be superior to Vedic ritual. But still, the epic’s composers place an important caveat upon it. A renunciant’s life must also be regulated, for there are two impediments in the completion of Viśvāmitra’s mission: *kāma* and *krodha*, desire and anger. The arousal of these emotions causes a release of his *tapas*, which then becomes channeled either into sexual potency or a malevolent verbal utterance. Both dangers are illustrated by the final two legends in the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s Viśvāmitra saga, involving encounters with two different women who steer our sage away from the ascetic path.




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[Story 7A] **Menakā: Viśvāmitra Seduced by a Nymph**

Viśvāmitra is deep in meditation in the forest, focused on acquiring more and more ascetic power in order to achieve Brahminhood. Once, while at shores of the Puṣkara lakes, he spies the celestial nymph (*apsaras*) Menakā bathing there, which breaks his meditative focus. Smitten by love, he invites her to live with him in his forest hermitage. After ten years of conjugal bliss, Viśvāmitra regretfully realizes he has strayed from his mission and has lost all of his ascetic power. He renounces domestic life, gently dismisses the nymph, and heads to the north to resume his austerities.

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The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s version of this story, we should note, lacks a number of incidents familiar to modern audiences, not least of which is the birth and abandonment of their daughter named Śakuntalā. This motif is central to the

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<sup>30</sup> *daivam eva parāṇī manye pauruṣāṇī tu nirarthakam | daivenākramyate sarvāṇī daivāṇī hi paramā gatiḥ* || (*Rām* 1.57.21).

*Mahābhārata*'s telling and constitutes an important point of variation between the two epics. The central theme, however, is consistent across both texts: succumbing to Menakā's sexual temptations causes Viśvāmitra to lose his ascetic power. As one medieval commentator explains, this story is introduced here "to describe [Viśvāmitra's] lack of sensual control" (*jitendriyatvābhāvākhyāpanāya*) (Govindarāja on *Rām* 1.62.4), and to show how unregulated *kāma* leads to a loss of *tapas*.<sup>31</sup> A later commentator emphasizes that Viśvāmitra does not in this instance lose his temper, since he dismisses the nymph without a curse (Nāgeśabhaṭṭa on *Rām* 1.62.13). The problem of *krodha* is instead reserved for the sequel, when a second nymph named Rambhā tries to tempt him at the gods' behest, but falls victim to the sage's curse.




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#### [Story 7B] **Rambhā: Viśvāmitra Curses the Nymph**

Feeling threatened by the sage's rising ascetic power, Indra dispatches a nymph named Rambhā to break Viśvāmitra's concentration. To allay her fears of being cursed by the sage, Indra agrees to accompany her as a sweetly singing cuckoo, and also summons the aid of Kāmadeva, the god of love. Viśvāmitra, however, sees through the ruse and resists temptation. But he does succumb to anger, and in a moment of rage, curses her to turn to stone for a thousand years. This results in yet another loss of ascetic power, and Viśvāmitra must restart his austerities.

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Viśvāmitra's reaction to losing his temper in this story is especially revealing. Desperate not to lose his *tapas* again, he takes a vow of silence (*Rām* 1.64.2ab), an act that metaphorically captures the central paradox of the social power of renunciation: it can only be had if one does not engage in the world. The *Rāmāyaṇa*'s Viśvāmitra saga, in this way, is transformed from an account of caste change into the story of one man's long struggle to disengage from anger (*krodha*) and desire (*kāma*). Anger causes him to curse, while desire distracts him from his ascetic quest. Only after he has fully overcome these

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<sup>31</sup> On the historical and theological context of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s medieval commentators, see Rao 2008.

emotions, and when “not even the tiniest blemish can be seen in him,” is he fit to become a Brahmin sage.<sup>32</sup> This striking picture of a silent *muni*, blazing with power but unwilling to deploy it, is consonant with the Brahminical value of non-aggression (*ksama*) with which Vasiṣṭha deals with Viśvāmitra’s assault, and which will be given special attention in the *Mahābhārata*’s versions of these stories. And this self-silencing is what finally allows the Kṣatriya to become a Brahmin, according to the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s composers.

To what extent then might we read the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s Viśvāmitra as a radical figure in early Indian culture? Is he really, in the words of Jayant Thaker, a “revolutionary sage” (1997: 117) who uses *tapas* to challenge social barriers? Not precisely. While a radical questioning of caste is certainly a subtext running throughout Viśvāmitra’s storyworld exploits—changing one’s *varṇa*, helping an Outcaste, cursing Brahmins—the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s composers limit their actionability in the real world. That is to say, the epic validates the activities of renunciant groups who at the time were operating outside the bounds of the Vedic ritual sphere, but it encourages the placement of strict Brahminical regulations upon these practices that effectively limit their potential for radical social change. Sure, Viśvāmitra challenges his personal destiny and crosses uncrossable boundaries, but he succeeds only after a long and painful personal struggle to control his emotions and maintain his ascetic power. Sure, renunciation may grant an individual the power to transcend even the most basic of social laws, but at the same time, according to this epic’s composers, it is difficult to gain, volatile to possess, and easily squandered by ordinary men.

It is a message that spoke directly to the historical circumstances of Brahminical society in post-Mauryan India. Timothy Lubin (1994; 2001: 579) has argued that a central feature of Brahminical householder life in the late Vedic period was the strict, totalized regulation of practitioners’ lives through various kinds of personal “regimens”—consecrations (*dīkṣā*), vows (*vrata*), expiations (*prāyaścitta*), and so forth. The *Rāmāyaṇa*’s portrayal of Viśvāmitra’s *tapas* extends these principles of regimentation to the lives of a much broader, post-Vedic spectrum of renunciant practitioners. Moral limits and guidelines are placed on what they ought and ought not be doing out there in the forest, and an argument is thereby made for why renunciant communities who demonstrate self-restraint should be considered as belonging inside, not outside, of the Brahminical fold. “Other”

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<sup>32</sup> *na hy asya vṛjīnam kim cid dṛṣyate sūkṣmam apy atha* | (*Rām* 1.64.6ab).

kinds of Brahmins, once they learn to control themselves like Viśvāmitra, are to be respected and granted protection by the Kṣatriya political apparatus just as much as normative ones like Vasiṣṭha are.

To wrap up his saga, Śatānanda summarizes for Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa the essence of what Viśvāmitra represents. “This, Rāma, was how this illustrious man acquired Brahminhood. He is the most exalted of sages, he is *tapas* incarnate, Rāma; he is superior moral conduct (*dharma*), and the eternal essence of valor.”<sup>33</sup> As did the preamble to his saga, Śatānanda’s postscript frames how the epic’s audience are to interpret Viśvāmitra’s persona and accomplishments. One feature is made to stand out above all others: this was a Kṣatriya who became a Brahmin through an incredible amount of *tapas* and complete self-control. Caste change thus remains a theoretical possibility in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but as an exception rather than the rule. Functioning as what literary theorists would call an “ungrammaticality” (Riffaterre 1981: 230), Viśvāmitra’s boundary crossings end up reinforcing rather than questioning the existence of these social boundaries in the everyday lives of the epic’s audiences. In the end, upward social mobility is shown to be theoretically possible, but viable only for someone who can become “*tapas* incarnate”—that is to say, practically no one among us.

#### “DO NOT EVER DISRESPECT BRAHMINs”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

The *Mahābhārata* paints a portrait of Viśvāmitra that problematizes his ascetic power, his aggressive personality, and most of all, his volatile intermixture of social categories (*varṇasamkara*). Compared to its sister epic, the *Mahābhārata* takes a socially conservative approach to Viśvāmitra that tries to explain away any radical implications of his challenges to caste. Moreover, while the *Rāmāyaṇa* celebrates Viśvāmitra’s ability to achieve the impossible, the *Mahābhārata* explores the flip side to his audacity—the jealousy, lust, rage, and violence that never leave him. And as the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s composers had done, the *Mahābhārata*’s composers establish this interpretive position through the dialogic narrative frames within which the Viśvāmitra legends are couched and arranged (Table 2.3).

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<sup>33</sup> evam tv anena brāhmaṇyam prāptam rāma mahātmanā || eṣa rāma muniśreṣṭha eṣa vigrahavāḥ  
tapah | eṣa dharmah paro nityam vīryasyaiṣa parāyanam || (Rām 1.64.19cd–20).

TABLE 2.3.

*Distribution of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Mahābhārata*

Book	Subnarrative Title	Legend	Dialogical Frames
[1] Ādi Parvan	<i>Sakuntalo-pākhyāna</i> , “The Story of Śakuntalā” (1.62–69)	<i>Menakā</i> (1.65.20–66.12) <i>Satyavrata</i> (1.65.31–33) <i>Trīśāṅku</i> (1.65.34)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] [Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana tells <i>Mbh</i> to Janamejaya] Frame 3: Anasūyā (Śakuntalā’s friend) tells Duṣyanta the story of Śakuntalā’s birth Frame 4: Menakā tells Indra why she is afraid of Viśvāmitra
	<i>Vasiṣṭhopākhyāna</i> , “The Story of Vasiṣṭha” (1.163–73)	<i>Kāmadhenu</i> (1.165) <i>Kalmāṣapāda</i> (1.166–68, 173)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] [Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana tells <i>Mbh</i> to Janamejaya] Frame 3: The Gandharva king Citraratha tells the Pāṇḍavas about the glories of Vasiṣṭha
[5] Udyoga Parvan	<i>Gālavacarita</i> , “The Adventures of Gālava” (5.104–21)	<i>Gālava</i> (5.104–17)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] [Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana tells <i>Mbh</i> to Janamejaya] Frame 3: Nārada tells Duryodhana about Gālava’s stubbornness
[9] Śalya Parvan	<i>Tīrthayātrāparvan</i> , “The Chapter on the Pilgrimage to Sacred River Sites” (9.29–53)	<i>Kāmadhenu</i> (9.39) <i>Sarasvatī</i> (9.41–42)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana describes to Janamejaya the pilgrimage of Balarāma along the Sarasvatī River

(continued)

TABLE 2.3.

*Continued*

Book	Subnarrative Title	Legend	Dialogical Frames
[12] Śānti Parvan	<i>Rāmopākhyāna</i> , “The Story of Rāma [Jāmadagnya]” (12.48–49)	<i>Satyavatī</i> (12.49)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] [Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana tells <i>Mbh</i> to Janamejaya] Frame 3: Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhīra about Rāma Jāmadagnya’s and Viśvāmitra’s birth
	Viśvāmitraśvacapacasaṃvāda, “The Dialogue between Viśvāmitra and the Dog-cooker” (12.139)	Śvapaca (12.139)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] [Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana tells <i>Mbh</i> to Janamejaya] Frame 3: Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhīra on “emergency law” ( <i>āpaddharma</i> )
[13] Anuśāsana Parvan	Viśvāmitropākhyāna, “The Story of Viśvāmitra” (13.3–4)	Śunahṣepa (13.3.6–8) Trīśaṅku (13.3.9) Rambhā (13.3.11) <i>Satyavatī</i> (13.4)	[Frame 1: Ugraśravas tells <i>Mbh</i> to Śaunaka] [Frame 2: Vaiśampāyana tells <i>Mbh</i> to Janamejaya] Frame 3: Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhīra how Viśvāmitra became Brahmin

As mentioned earlier, only two of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s Viśvāmitra legends are told in detail in the *Mahābhārata*: *Menakā* and *Kāmadhenu*. The former is told within the story of Śakuntalā (*Mbh* 1.65.15–66.17), where the action is focalized not on the sage but the nymph. Indra commands Menakā to seduce the ill-tempered sage, but she initially balks at the orders, explaining her fear by listing his harsh deeds. But with the assistance of Indra and Kāmadeva, Viśvāmitra succumbs to temptation, and the couple produces a daughter, whom they abandon in the forest to be raised by śakunta birds, and who therefore gets the name “Śakuntalā.” The *Mahābhārata*’s composers, it appears, have synthesized the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s *Menakā* and *Rambhā* episodes and added the motif of child abandonment.

The *Kāmadhenu* legend is told twice—first in the *Ādi Parvan* (*Mbh* 1.165) as a glorification of Vasiṣṭha, and then briefly in the *Śalya Parvan* (9.39), where it celebrates a sacred site (*tīrtha*) on the Sarasvatī river where Viśvāmitra is said to have bathed and changed his caste. Two different stories, *Kalmāṣapāda* and *Sarasvatī*, are appended as sequels in each case. Both of these are unique to the *Mahābhārata*, and both continue Viśvāmitra’s antagonism with Vasiṣṭha, magnifying the contrast between his violence and his rival’s placidity. This basic binary opposition permits the *Mahābhārata*’s composers to develop a perspective on Viśvāmitra’s persona that is more critical than what we had observed in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, resulting in a markedly different vision of Brahmin social power.

The longer and more definitive version of the *Kāmadhenu* legend appears in the epic’s first book, the *Ādi Parvan*, when the Pāṇḍava brothers, while travelling through the forest before their marriage to Draupadī, repel a nighttime attack by a Gandharva king named Citraratha (*Mbh* 1.165). After renouncing his own name in defeat, the Gandharva explains why the Pāṇḍavas had seemed vulnerable to him: “You did not have a sacred fire,” he tells Arjuna, “nor did you make offerings under the guidance of a Brahmin—this is why I have assaulted you, celebrated Pāṇḍava.”<sup>34</sup> He explains his reasoning further:

If any Kṣatriya who is sexually active should engage in battle at night, there is no way he can be victorious, mighty warrior. On the other hand, Arjuna, descendant of Tapatī, even a sexually active ruler may prevail in combat against any creatures of the night if he is guided by a preceptor (*purohita*). And so whatever good men should desire here, preceptors with calm minds should be employed for that task.<sup>35</sup>

The Gandharva surmises that the Pāṇḍavas must have successfully resisted his assault because they are still unmarried celibates. Arjuna, perhaps hoping to change this somewhat embarrassing topic, asks his *raconteur* to explain why he has used the matronymic “Tāpatya” when he and his brothers are usually

<sup>34</sup> *anagnayo ‘nāhutayo na ca viprapuraskṛtāḥ | yūyam tato dharṣitāḥ stha mayā pāṇḍavanandana ||* (*Mbh* 1.159.2).

<sup>35</sup> *yas tu syāt kṣatriyāḥ kaś cit kāmaṛitaḥ paramṛtaḥ | naktam ca yudhi yudhyeta na sa jīvet katham cana || yas tu syāt kāmaṛitaḥ ‘pi rājā tāpatya sangare | jayen naktamcarān sarvān sa purohitadhūrgataḥ || tasmāt tāpatya yat kim cin nṛṇāṁ śreya ihepsitam | tasmin karmaṇi yoktavyā dāntātmānah purohitāḥ ||* (*Mbh* 1.159.14–16).

called “Kaunteyas”—the sons of Kuntī. This prompts a side story about how one of their ancestors named Saṃvaraṇa married Tapatī, the daughter of the god Sūrya, through the help of his preceptor, Vasiṣṭha. Arjuna immediately grows curious to hear more about this figure, and the Gandharva responds with the story of the *Kāmadhenu*, followed by three other anecdotes. The epic calls this sequence the *Vasiṣṭhopākhyāna*, “The Subnarrative of Vasiṣṭha,” leaving no doubt about its change of focalization: Vasiṣṭha rather than Viśvāmitra.

This version of the *Kāmadhenu* legend is quite parallel to the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s telling, leading Robert Goldman to state that “despite differences in size and detail, the versions are fundamentally the same” (1978: 351; cf. Biardeau 1999b: 2140). There are, however, three important ways in which they differ. First, Viśvāmitra’s soldiers are actually slain in the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s telling, and along with them, his hundred sons. The *Ādi Parvan*’s version explicitly denies that this happened (*Mbh* 1.165.39), maintaining instead that the troops were simply “driven away for three leagues, wailing and trembling in fear.”<sup>36</sup> Second, Viśvāmitra does not go on a quest for magic weapons in either of the *Mahābhārata*’s tellings. This leads to the third and greatest difference between them: in the version told in the *Ādi Parvan* there is no direct, one-on-one confrontation between Brahmin and Kṣatriya. At the defeat of his armies, Viśvāmitra declares his famous dictum, *dhig balam kṣatriyabalam...* (“Damn the power of Kṣatriyas,...”), gives up the Kṣatriya lifestyle, performs *tapas*, and becomes a Brahmin (*Mbh* 1.165.44).<sup>37</sup>

But for the *Mahābhārata*’s composers, Viśvāmitra’s becoming Brahmin is only the beginning of the problem, as his rivalry with Vasiṣṭha now spills over into the story of *Kalmāṣapāda*.



#### [Story 2B] *Kalmāṣapāda: The Cannibal King*

Once, Vasiṣṭha’s eldest son Śakti encounters Kalmāṣapāda, king of the Ikṣvākus, on a narrow path deep in the forest. Both refuse to give way, and the king arrogantly strikes the young Brahmin with a whip. In

<sup>36</sup> *kālyamānam triyojanam | krośamānam bhayodvignam* (*Mbh* 1.165.40bc).

<sup>37</sup> The second half of the *dhig balam* verse reads differently in the *Mahābhārata*; for a comparative study of two epics’ versions of this verse and the larger legend, see Sathaye 2012.

retaliation, Śakti curses the king to become a cannibal. Viśvāmitra happens to overhear the argument and summons a demon (*rākṣasa*) to possess the king. But Kalmāṣapāda resists, at least for the moment. Later, after being cursed for a second time by a Brahmin ascetic to whom he had offered meal of human flesh, the king succumbs to the demon and becomes a cannibal. He proceeds to eat Śakti, at Viśvāmitra's behest, along with the rest of Vasiṣṭha's one hundred sons. In dejection at the death of his progeny, Vasiṣṭha tries repeatedly to commit suicide, but the rivers and mountains miraculously prevent his death. As he returns home in dejection, he hears the sounds of Vedic chanting coming from the belly of his son's widow—that is, from Śakti's unborn son—and the Brahmin's spirits are revived. Eventually the cannibal king attacks Vasiṣṭha himself, who exorcises the demon from his body and restores the king to his previous form. Kalmāṣapāda expresses his gratitude and remorse, and, finding himself without heir, requests the sage to perform the traditional practice of *niyoga* (Brahmin levirate). Vasiṣṭha agrees and impregnates the queen in order to assure the continuation of the Solar Dynasty.

A few chapters later, we find out why Kalmāṣapāda must ask Vasiṣṭha to sleep with his wife. Once, while possessed by the demon, Kalmāṣapāda kills and eats a Brahmin engaged in sexual intercourse with his wife. The Brahmin's wife curses the king that if he should sleep with his own wife during her fertile period, he too would lose his life. So, even though he has been exorcised and is no longer a cannibal, the king still bears this additional curse, and so must ask for Vasiṣṭha's intervention.

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The *Vasiṣṭhopākhyāna* then goes on to detail the birth of Śakti's son Parāśara, and how this Brahmin swears to kill all of the *rākṣasas* when he learns how his father had died, to which Vasiṣṭha tells him the story of a similarly genocidal Brahmin named Aurva in an attempt to dissuade him. But *Kalmāṣapāda* is the real centerpiece of this saga. In fact, one could argue that the *Kāmadhenu* legend is prepended as a supplement this story, rather than the other way around. For one, *Kalmāṣapāda* is much longer—126 verses told over five chapters (*Mbh* 1.166–69, 173), compared to the 44 verses of the single-chapter *Kāmadhenu* (*Mbh* 1.165). Also, since the lone surviving grandson of Vasiṣṭha happens to

be the father of Vyāsa, who is himself the father of the epic, it is a story of direct relevance to the epic's own genealogy—for without Vasiṣṭha there could be no *Mahābhārata*. Above all, this story is where we find out what makes Vasiṣṭha such a special Brahmin: his complete control over anger and desire permits him to remain compassionate and non-aggressive under the worst circumstances.

The *Mahābhārata*'s *Vasiṣṭhopākhyāna* thus constitutes an intertextual response to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s saga of Viśvāmitra. Whereas the latter had glorified Viśvāmitra's boundary-breaking *tapas*, the former now focuses on Vasiṣṭha's self-control, even at the death of his progeny:

Noble-minded, he did not annihilate the Kauśikas, holding in his extreme rage at Viśvāmitra's transgressions. Though powerful and burning from his attachment for his son, that mighty master did not contemplate any horrible act to destroy Viśvāmitra.<sup>38</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* here directly contradicts the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s statement that the hundred sons of Viśvāmitra had been reduced to ashes when Vasiṣṭha uttered just one syllable, *hum* (*Rām* 1.54.6–7). Furthermore, we learn that “lust and anger (*kāma* and *krodha*), ever indomitable even for immortals, have both been conquered by [Vasiṣṭha's] *tapas* and they wash his feet.”<sup>39</sup> In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra eventually learns to control his emotions and becomes a Brahmin on par with Vasiṣṭha, ending their feud. In this epic, however, Viśvāmitra remains susceptible to his emotions despite his caste change. He continues to inflict harm upon his rival and his family. His behavior remains erratic, and he keeps using his *tapas* destructively. While he does become Brahmin, he stays hostile and unfriendly. This contrast of personality enables the *Mahābhārata*'s composers to place Viśvāmitra, the Brahmin Other, in a social slot that is inferior to Vasiṣṭha, the Brahmin Self.

Why is there this stark contrast between the two sages in this epic? Some reasons may be found in its dialogic frame, where, before telling the *Kāmadhenu* and *Kalmāṣapāda* stories, the Gandharva storyteller emphasizes that kings

<sup>38</sup> *yas tu nocchedanam cakre kuśikānām udāradhīḥ | viśvāmitrāparādhena dhārayan manyum uttamam || putravyasanasamaptah śaktimān api yah prabhuh | viśvāmitravināśaya na mene karma dārunam ||* (*Mbh* 1.164.6–7).

<sup>39</sup> *tapasā nirjitaśaśvad ajeyāv amarair api | kāmakrodhāv ubhau yasya caranau samavavāhatuḥ ||* (*Mbh* 1.164.5).

of the Solar dynasty prospered because they had a Brahmin preceptor like Vasiṣṭha conducting their Vedic rites (*Mbh* 1.164.9–11). He then enumerates the preferred qualities of such a preceptor:

And so, any virtuous Brahmin, whose nature is primarily righteous, who is versed in the Veda and is likable, should be considered for being the preceptor. A man who is Kṣatriya by birth and wishes to conquer the earth should first appoint a *purohita* for the prosperity of the kingdom, Pārtha. A king wishing to conquer the world ought to place Brahmin power (*brahman*) ahead of him, and let some qualified Brahmin be the preceptor.<sup>40</sup>

This discussion is clearly aimed at the historical context of the epic's composition. Its pro-Brahmin agenda is reflected both in the claim that Brahmins should be given the prime governmental jobs, and that Kṣatriyas should place Brahmins ahead of themselves (*purahsaram*) in order to ensure political victory. The problem with Viśvāmitra in this regard is his violence, a non-Brahmin quality that he eliminates in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but which remains a part of his persona in the *Mahābhārata*. His aggressiveness makes the fiery ascetic a poor candidate for the *purohita* post, and the best man for the job is instead the householder Brahmin Vasiṣṭha, peaceable and beneficent, and non-aggressive. Such a message would have been especially meaningful at a time when Vedic Brahmin ritualists were vying with renunciant and heterodox religious orders for bureaucratic and administrative positions within the early Indian monarchies.

Furthermore, Vasiṣṭha's parting message to the cannibal king articulates a cautionary message toward political rulers: "Do not ever disrespect Brahmins, King of men!"<sup>41</sup> That is to say, this story asserts "the immutable paternal authority of the brahmans over the ruling class" (Goldman 1978: 355). The violence of Kṣatriyas is problematized throughout *Kalmāṣapāda* legend, beginning with the initial confrontation of Kalmāṣapāda and Śakti on the forest path, in which the king whips the Brahmin. The king then serves a meal of human flesh to a Brahmin mendicant, kills a Brahmin engaged in sexual intercourse with his

<sup>40</sup> *tasmād dharmapradhānātmā vedadharmavid īpsitāḥ | brāhmaṇo guṇavān kaś cit purodhāḥ pravimṛśyatāṁ || kṣatriyena hi jātena prthivīṁ jetum icchatā | pūrvam purohitah kāryah pārtha rājyābhivrddhaye || mahīm jigīṣatā rājñā brahma kāryam purahsaram | tasmāt purohitah kaś cid guṇavān astu vo dvijaḥ ||* (*Mbh* 1.164.12–14).

<sup>41</sup> *brāhmaṇāṁś ca manusyendra māvamaṇsthāḥ kadā cana ||* (*Mbh* 1.168.9cd).

wife, eats Vasiṣṭha's sons and attacks the sage himself. There are differences, however, in how the Brahmins in the story respond to this violence. While Śakti, the mendicant, and the Brahmin's wife all deliver curses on the king, the good Brahmin Vasiṣṭha does not retaliate but, being sensitive to what is really going on, seeks only to help him. And in the end, it is he who ensures the continuation of the Kṣatriya line. This account of Kṣatriya transgression and Brahmin intervention thereby reinforces normative caste ideology: a king, if he wishes to be a good Kṣatriya, should respect the *a priori* social superiority of Brahmins—for it is the Brahmin alone who may rescue him in times of extreme crisis.

A similar set of messages also appears when the *Mahābhārata* tells the *Sarasvatī* legend in the proximity of its second, shorter *Kāmadhenu*. This occurs in its ninth book, the *Śalya Parvan*, during the account of a pilgrimage of various holy sites (*tīrthas*) along the Sarasvatī River undertaken by Krṣṇa's brother Balarāma as atonement for a Brahminicide. The epic's outer narrator Vaiśampāyana explains to King Janamejaya that Viśvāmitra, along with two other non-Brahmins, had long ago achieved Brahminhood at one of these sites. Unfortunately, because its three boons had been used up, becoming Brahmin was no longer possible at this *tīrtha*. Balarāma nonetheless is shown to have “honored the Brahmins there and gladly gave them clothing and valuables and splendid food and drink.”<sup>42</sup> According to this version of the story, then, the potential for caste change, though once possible, is no longer present in our world, though a power residue still remains in the *tīrtha* and can be accessed by supporting the Brahmin agents who control it. In Chapter Four, we will examine how medieval purāṇic texts used this method of narrative intervention to regulate regional pilgrimage practices; here, however, in the *Mahābhārata*, the discursive concern appears to be the infusion of Brahminical standards of public social conduct (*dharma*) within a sacred geography of the Vedic homelands that had already been established in the *Brāhmaṇa* texts (Ludvík 2007: 99–100).

Perhaps because of this change of emphasis from process to place, this version of the *Kāmadhenu* legend is rather brief and omits many familiar details. There are no friendly greetings between king and sage, no magic feast, and no negotiations for the cow. Instead, Viśvāmitra and his armies come to the hermitage while

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<sup>42</sup> *tathā vastrāṇy alamkāram bhakṣyam peyam ca śobhanam | adadān mudito rājan pūjayitvā dvijottamān* || (*Mbh* 9.39.31). In a later purāṇic version told in the *Saromāhātmya* section of the *Vāmana*, the *tīrtha* is said to continue to grant Brahminhood (18.14–15).

Vasiṣṭha is absent, and his troops commit “many acts of misconduct” (*anayān bahūn*) there (*Mbh* 9.39.18). Upon returning, Vasiṣṭha angrily orders his cow to “release the ferocious Śabarās!” (*sṛjasva śabarān ghorān*) (9.39.20), and these tribal hordes decimate the king’s troops. Viśvāmitra then decides to become a Brahmin, and does so, we are told, after bathing at this particular holy site.

After detailing an intermediary *tīrtha*, Vaiśampāyana then describes a site named *Vasiṣṭhāpavāha* (“The Carrying Away of Vasiṣṭha”), where the Sarasvati’s currents had been turned to blood due to Viśvāmitra’s curse.<sup>43</sup>




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#### [Story 2C] **Sarasvatī: Viśvāmitra Curses the Sacred River**

Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha are engaged in a competition of *tapas* on opposite banks of the Sarasvatī River. Finding that he is losing to his rival, Viśvāmitra jealously orders the river to fetch Vasiṣṭha so that he may kill him. The Sarasvatī is unsure of what to do, unwilling to kill Vasiṣṭha but also afraid of Viśvāmitra. Vasiṣṭha, however, selflessly tells her to do as his rival has ordered. As the river carries Vasiṣṭha along, he sings a poem in praise (*stotra*) of the Sarasvatī, and she compassionately sweeps the sage away just as his rival is about to strike him down. In anger, Viśvāmitra curses the river’s currents to turn to blood. Demon (*rākṣasa*) pilgrims then begin to visit the river’s sacred fords and drink the blood, until other Brahmins eventually come to restore the Sarasvatī’s purity.

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Viśvāmitra continues to be antagonistic and violent in this story, while Vasiṣṭha demonstrates Brahminical respect and mercy toward the river, who, like the *kāmadhenu*, symbolizes Brahmin power. The grisly problem of Viśvāmitra’s blood-curse can only be solved by a group of Brahmin pilgrims who come and re-sanctify the river’s waters, which represent “the flow of Dharma”

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<sup>43</sup> In between these two is the Avakīrṇa (“Poured-out”) *tīrtha*, site of the story of Baka Dālbhya, which further reinforces Brahmin superiority over Kṣatriyas. As the story goes, Baka approaches a king named Dhṛtarāṣṭra for cattle as victims in a Vedic sacrifice, and but king offers him only some dead cows, flippantly addressing him as a *brahmabandhu*—“nominal Brahmin” (*Mbh* 9.40.8). Baka Dālbhya angrily uses the beef as a sacrificial stand-in for Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s kingdom, which starts to wither away, until the king prostrates himself before the Brahmin and begs for forgiveness (*Mbh* 9.40.20–21).

(Ludvík 2007: 99). It is then revealed that the demons who have taken over the polluted river are actually Brahmin-*rākṣasas*, whose means of sustenance is now threatened by its cleansing. As they explain:

By your disfavor, and your malevolent action, our side increases—since we are in fact Brahmin-*rākṣasas*. It is the same with Vaiśyas, Śūdras, and even Kṣatriyas: for those who persecute Brahmins they become *rākṣasas*. Likewise, those who disrespect the teacher, the priest, or the *guru*, as well as elders, or even those who disrespect animals—they become *rākṣasas*.<sup>44</sup>

Brahmins must never be persecuted, even if they happen to be demons, so the sages have placed themselves in danger of becoming *rākṣasas*. They are therefore compelled to make a legalistic judgment to resolve the situation: “Any food that may have been subjected to a fly’s sneeze, or may be left over, or upon which a hair may have fallen, or may be shaken up or broken up, or may have been touched by dogs—this is the *rākṣasa*’s allotment.”<sup>45</sup>

This decree also clearly addresses the historical circumstances of the epic’s composition. Keeping in mind that there was extensive competition for patronage between Brahmins and other religious groups, we might read this story as promoting the regulatory authority of Brahmins over *tīrtha* sites, at least in the Vedic heartlands through which the Sarasvatī flows. Admittedly, such a reading involves the risky speculation that *rākṣasas* in the *Mahābhārata* are allegorical representations of real-world non-Vedic religious cultures, including Buddhists and Jains, instead of fully belonging to the epic’s storyworld (Pollock 1985–86: 280–81; 1993: 283). But even if the *rākṣasas* are no more than fantastic demons, it is still clear that Viśvāmitra’s very human aggressions disrupt normal Brahminical activities at this *tīrtha* and befoul the sacred river, making it a haven for religious practitioners who lie outside of—and beyond the control of—Brahmins. The Brahmin cleanup team then uses its unique legal authority to extend social privilege and a dharmic legitimacy to

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<sup>44</sup> *yuṣmākam cāprasādena duṣkṛtena ca karmāṇā | pakṣo ‘yam vardhate ‘smākam yataḥ sma brahma-rākṣasāḥ || evam hi vaiśyaśūdrāṇām kṣatriyāṇām tathaiva ca | ye brāhmaṇān pradvīṣanti te bhavantīha rākṣasāḥ || ācāryam rtvijam caiva gurum vriddhajanam tathā | prāṇino ye ‘vamanyante te bhavantīha rākṣasāḥ || (Mbh 9.42.16–18).*

<sup>45</sup> kṣutakītāvapannam ca yac cocchiṣṭāśitam bhavet | keśāvapannam ādhūtam ārugnam api yad bhavet | śvabhiḥ saṃsprśtam annam ca bhāgo ‘sau rākṣasām iha || (Mbh 9.42.21).

the Brahmin-like members of these outsider communities and to incorporate them into the sphere of normative Brahminical culture.

One more version of how Viśvāmitra became a Brahmin is found in the opening sequence of the story of *Gālava*, Viśvāmitra's dutiful and intrepid apprentice. Here, too, the *Mahābhārata* contradicts one of the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s central points about Viśvāmitra's becoming Brahmin: that he was in full control of his emotions. In the *Gālava* story, Viśvāmitra does achieve self-control during his quest for Brahminhood, but it is only momentary—for his irascibility resurfaces soon after his change of caste.




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[Story 8] **Gālava: Viśvāmitra's Adventuring Apprentice**

The god Dharma, in order to test Viśvāmitra's mettle as the sage strives for Brahminhood, visits him in the guise of his archrival Vasiṣṭha and asks for a meal. Just as Viśvāmitra is about to serve him freshly made rice gruel (*caru*), the god departs, telling him to wait until he returns. Viśvāmitra stands patiently for a hundred years, with the porridge on his head, and gladly offers it, still piping hot, when the god returns. He passes Dharma's test and achieves Brahminhood. He then dismisses his apprentice Gālava, who has loyally tended to his physical needs, but the devoted pupil keeps insisting on giving a parting gift to his *guru*. Viśvāmitra at first declines, but eventually becomes annoyed at his insistent pupil and asks for eight hundred white horses each with one black ear (*śyāmakarṇa*).

Gālava is disconsolate, but his friend Garuda the eagle comes to his aid, and speaks on his behalf to the famed King Yayāti. Yayāti has no horses, but offers the services of his daughter Mādhavī, who has a special gift—she can remain a virgin after childbirth. The Brahmin then solicits the princess to different kings asking for two hundred *śyāmakarṇa* horses as a fee for marrying the princess for one year and producing an heir. He acquires only six hundred *śyāmakarṇa* horses, but returns to Viśvāmitra and offers him Mādhavī as a substitute for the remainder. The sage accepts the terms, and chides his pupil for not offering him the girl in the first place. Mādhavī gives Viśvāmitra a son named Aṣṭaka, who is installed as his royal heir in Kānyakubja.

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Viśvāmitra demonstrates remarkable restraint in passing Lord Dharma's test, as he patiently waits for the god to return without anger or self-interest, and despite Dharma's being disguised as his archrival, Vasiṣṭha. After achieving Brahminhood, however, Viśvāmitra retains his irascible nature, for he soon "grows frustrated" (*āgatasamārambho*) when his faithful but annoying student insists on giving him a graduation gift, and sends him on a fool's errand of gathering eight hundred *śyāmakarṇa* horses when only six hundred actually exist (*Mbh* 5.104.25–26). Viśvāmitra cannot, it seems, shake his antagonistic image in the *Mahābhārata*, even under positive circumstances.

Compared to the rest of the epic, Viśvāmitra's caste status is treated rather differently in this curious "metamyth" (Goldman 1977: 7–8). At the end of the story, Viśvāmitra accepts the sexual services of the princess Mādhavī, asking his pupil, "How come you didn't give her to me earlier? I could have had four sons to increase my family line!"<sup>46</sup> After a year, she gives birth to a son, Aṣṭaka, whom he installs as his heir at Kānyakubja to continue his Kṣatriya line. Unlike most other post-Vedic depictions of the sage, Viśvāmitra becomes a Brahmin but appears also to continue to maintain a Kṣatriya status, much as we had seen in the Vedic *Śunahśepa*.<sup>47</sup> His son, whom he fathered after already having become a Brahmin, appears to live a Kṣatriya life. Elsewhere, the epic is quite consistent in criticizing such caste intermixture (*varṇasaṅkara*) as being one of the greatest dangers of the modern (Kali) age, but here, it seems, it is a basic reality of Viśvāmitra's career.

The *varṇasaṅkara* problem forms a key element in two other Viśvāmitra legends told in the *Mahābhārata*: *Satyavatī* and *Śvapaca*. The epic tells the *Satyavatī* legend four different times, but only one version specifically focuses on Viśvāmitra. This comes within the *Viśvāmitropākhyāna* ("The Subnarrative of Viśvāmitra") (*Mbh* 13.4), where it constitutes, as we have already seen, the entirety of Bhīṣma's response to Yudhiṣṭhira's questions about Viśvāmitra's caste change and other exploits (*Mbh* 13.3). The other versions of *Satyavatī* (*Mbh* 3.115, 12.49) focus on the birth of his grand-nephew, the equally counter-normative Brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya, seeking to explain how, "and

<sup>46</sup> *kim iyam pūrvam eveha na dattā mama gālava | putrā mamaiva catvāro bhaveyuḥ kulabhāvanāḥ ||* (*Mbh* 5.117.15).

<sup>47</sup> In addition to this parallel with the Vedic *Śunahśepa*, a number of other motifs appear to have an Indo-European prehistory, suggesting that *Galava* may have been cobbled together in the epics using a variety of ancient narrative elements (Sathaye, forthcoming).

for what purpose, Rāma defeated the Kṣatriyas in battle.”<sup>48</sup> The differences between them are minor, mainly concerning the cause of the caste intermixture (Goldman 1970; Sathaye 2010a).



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[Story 1] **Satyavatī: The Birth of Viśvāmitra**

The lovely Satyavatī is the daughter of Gādhi, a Kṣatriya of the Lunar Dynasty and the ruler of Kānyakubja. When the Brahmin sage Ṛcīka asks for his daughter’s hand in marriage, Gādhi requests a seemingly unachievable bride-price: a thousand white horses each having one black ear. Despite the fact that no such śyāmakarṇa horses exist, Ṛcīka is able to procure them through the help of the gods and marries Satyavatī.<sup>49</sup>

After some time, Ṛcīka prepares fertility concoctions (*carus*) for his wife and her mother. The former is infused with the essence of Brahminhood while the latter contains Kṣatriya essence. However—either by accident or intentionally, depending on the version—the two *carus* are switched. Due to this intermixture of castes, Satyavatī’s Kṣatriya mother ends up pregnant with a child who will come to be a Brahmin: Viśvāmitra. As for Satyavatī’s mixed-up progeny, Ṛcīka kindly permits this fate to skip a generation onto his grandson Rāma Jāmadagnya, a Brahmin who behaves like a Kṣatriya, famously slaughtering all the Kṣatriyas on earth twenty-one times over in revenge for the murder of his father by the Haihaya warlords.

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No Viśvāmitra legend more directly captures the *Mahābhārata*’s conservative Brahminical ideological position than the story of Satyavatī. This epic’s take on Viśvāmitra’s genealogy normalizes his mythological career and renders it non-threatening to the Brahminical vision of caste-based society. This is done by (a) nullifying the role of his individual will in his caste change,

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<sup>48</sup> *yathā rāmena nirjitatāḥ | āhave kṣatriyāḥ sarve katham kena ca hetunā ||* (*Mbh* 3.115.8bcd; see also 12.49.1–2).

<sup>49</sup> Aside from being recycled in the Gālava legend, the extravagant nature of śyāmakarṇa horses as a bride-price is reaffirmed by their appearance in a twelfth-century royal inscription in Angkor Wat (see Coedès 1941: 287).

(b) critiquing the insubordination of his Kṣatriya mother, and (c) presenting caste miscegenation as a grave social peril. And once again, this hermeneutic maneuver takes place in the space of the dialogic narrative frame.

First, Bhīṣma tells this story to deflate the radical implications of Yudhiṣṭhira's queries about Viśvāmitra's caste change. Rather than an extraordinary achievement of one man's will, as it had been in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra's change of caste is shown to be the inevitable outcome of something set into motion before he is even born: a mix-up of caste-infused *carus* prepared by a venerable and powerful Brahmin. It is Ṛcīka's power (*prabhava*) that is responsible for Viśvāmitra's becoming a Brahmin (*Mbh* 13.4.46cd), and, as it turns out this is not to be understood as caste *change* at all, since Viśvāmitra is already a Brahmin who happens to have been born in a Kṣatriya body. Bhīṣma states this explicitly: "So, King Yudhiṣṭhira, the mighty ascetic Viśvāmitra was *not* a Kṣatriya, for the Brahmin-essence (*brahman*) that Ṛcīka had placed within him was superior."<sup>50</sup> Contrary to popular opinion Viśvāmitra's *tapas* did not bring about his change of caste, for his *varṇa*—just as it would be for anyone—was predicated upon the circumstances of his birth. His *tapas*, then, only enabled him to become the man he already was.

Second, according to this particular version the *caru*-switch is no innocent mistake, but a deliberate act of Kṣatriya insubordination to Brahmin authority. Satyavatī's mother persuades her daughter to switch the *carus* so that her child may be more special and is powerless to stop the consequences of her disobedience. Ṛcīka, however, is able to use his Brahminical power to delay his own mixed-up progeny. And furthermore, Viśvāmitra's grandson Rāma Jāmadagnya does not *become* a Kṣatriya, but remains a "Brahmin who acts like a Kṣatriya" (*kṣatravṛttir brāhmaṇah*). Through such details, the narration of the *caru*-switch in this version of the legend sends a cautionary message to Kṣatriya audiences against flouting a Brahmin's natural authority and reinforces the asymmetrical relationship between the two *varṇas*.

Third, Viśvāmitra's mixed-up birth connects him to a special obsession of this epic: the perils of *varṇasaṅkara*. As Madeleine Biardeau remarks, throughout the *Mahābhārata*, "whether a man be born from a Brahman

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<sup>50</sup> *tan naiṣa kṣatriyo rājan viśvāmitro mahātapāḥ | rcīkenāhitam brahma param etad yudhiṣṭhira ||* (*Mbh* 13.4.59).

father and a princess or, he, being a Brahman, act as a warrior and a king, or vice-versa, the result is an impending catastrophe for the world" (1981: 81). Caste intermixture occurs repeatedly in the lead-up to the Bhārata War, most noticeably in the lives of Bhīṣma, a Kṣatriya who behaves like a Brahmin, and Drona, a Brahmin who behaves like a Kṣatriya. It is also a common feature in the lives of the Bhārgava Brahmins (Goldman 1977), and it is one of Arjuna's great fears that leads him to contemplate renunciation in the *Bhagavadgītā*: "High-born women will be corrupted under the influence of immorality, Krṣṇa of the Vṛṣnis, and when women are wicked, a miscegenation of caste (*varṇasāṅkara*) will take place."<sup>51</sup> The *Mahābhārata*'s firm repudiation of caste intermixture fits well within the historical context of post-Mauryan India, perhaps acting as a veiled critique of Brahmins like the Śungas, who usurped kingship, or as a warning against Kṣatriya-Brahmin intermarriages that might potentially take place in the cosmopolitan social context of urbanized north India.

The moral and ethical dimensions of caste intermixture are further explored through one final appearance of Viśvāmitra as the Brahmin Other in this epic. Titled, "The Dialogue between Viśvāmitra and the Dog-cooker" (*viśvāmitrāśvapacasaṃvāda*), the *Śvapaca* episode (*Mbh* 12.139) is perhaps this epic's starker depiction of Viśvāmitra's counter-normative Brahmin persona. Told in the *Śānti Parvan*, this anecdote is featured in a narrative bundle that concerns the application of "emergency law" (*āpaddharma*) within crises such as war or famine, and is framed again by a dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma in which the former seeks guidance on what to do if a kingdom completely falls apart (*Mbh* 12.128.1–4; cf. Bowles 2007: 191–92). Bhīṣma outlines a number of strategies, from forging alliances with one's natural enemies to completely decimating them, and gives case studies for each scenario. His final example is the intriguing case of how the prominent Brahmin Viśvāmitra once violated his personal moral code (*svadharma*) during a famine by stealing and (almost) eating dogmeat belonging to an Outcaste. Cited in the *Manusmṛti* as an example of how Brahminical restrictions may be suspended in times of emergency, this episode proceeds as follows:<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *adharmaḥbhavat krsna pradusyanti kulastriyah | strisu dustasu vārsneya jāyate varnasamkarah ||* (*Mbh* 6.23.41).

<sup>52</sup> Because the *Śvapaca* episode includes allusions to several other cases of *āpaddharma* mentioned in the *Manusmṛti*, we may gather that the epic narrative has been woven around the śāstraic data.



#### [Story 4] Švapaca: Viśvāmitra Eats Dogmeat

Having just finished a long course of ascetic practices, Viśvāmitra, who is in this story a full Brahmin sage, searches for food to break his fast. There happens to be a severe drought, and he can find nothing to eat but the hind leg of a dog dangling from the hut of a Švapaca (“Dog-cooker”). Despite the criminality of both stealing and consuming dog’s flesh, Viśvāmitra decides to eat the polluting food anyway. Despite a long and complex legal debate, the Outcaste owner of the meat is unsuccessful in dissuading the Brahmin sage from his intentions. But just as the Viśvāmitra is consecrating the meat in order to eat it, Indra makes it rain and the famine ends.

The unnamed Outcaste in this story is the one, ironically, who articulates the normative legal position in this dispute. Among his numerous arguments, two are worth mentioning here. First, he maintains that the sage will lose his *tapas* by stealing something that he is not allowed to eat (*Mbh* 12.139.55). Second, he argues this to be a case of caste intermixture: “You know,” he tells Viśvāmitra, “that this course of action is not permitted, so please do not make a moral mix-up (*dharmaśaṅkara*). Please do not forsake your own personal moral code, for you are after all, a leading expert in moral law.”<sup>53</sup> Viśvāmitra gives several mythological precedents to justify his actions: Brahmins can eat anything, he explains, since they are equivalent to Agni, the fire god, and in the past, Brahmins like Agastya had eaten even *rākṣasas*. He further reckons that since Brahmins should always be protected, and that he himself is a Brahmin, he has a natural obligation to protect himself, which in this case can only be done by eating the meat.

In the end, the matter is resolved through divine intervention (Indra makes it rain) and Viśvāmitra does not actually have to eat the meat. But the legal message remains ambiguous, since Viśvāmitra dares to break laws that

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<sup>53</sup> *jānato vihito mārgo na kāryo dharmasaṅkaraḥ | mā sma dharmam parityākṣīs tvaṁ hi dharmavid uttamah* || (*Mbh* 12.139.56).

are ordinarily mandatory for Brahmins, and which are here asserted by an Outcaste. Is the *Mahābhārata* trying to tell its audiences to be like Viśvāmitra, or not? In commenting on the function of this story, Adam Bowles notices the epic's discomfort in allowing an Outcaste to articulate dharmic norms (2007: 279):

Through his rigid appeal to the scriptural codes, the outcaste demonstrates his complete misunderstanding of the nature of *dharma*, a misunderstanding that confirms his exclusion from brāhmaṇic conceptions of *dharma*. While Viśvāmitra, through his acute appreciation of the circumstances afflicting him in relation to *dharma*, demonstrates the brāhmaṇa's (self-styled) privilege in properly understanding and applying *dharma*.

Bowles disagrees with David Gordon White's earlier suggestion that Outcastes are shown to live "perpetually in the catastrophic state of *āpaddharma*" (White 1991: 78), and instead feels that the episode reflects the active disenfranchisement of such groups from the Brahminical legal sphere.

Bowles's analysis leads us to consider the dialogic frame in which the *Śvapaca* episode is presented, a lengthy storytelling session between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira. Earlier in this section, Bhīṣma had described a bandit (*dasyu*) named Kāpavya who followed Kṣatriya *dharma* and attained success (*Mbh* 12.133; Bowles 2007: 234–40). And prior to that, Bhīṣma had explained how a king in distress might gain power by seeking refuge with bandits, by keeping them in check, or by establishing reciprocal relationships with them (Bowles 2007: 227). There is a contrast here between the *Śvapaca*, an Outcaste who is denied dharmic authority because of his lowly, impure status, and Kāpavya the *dasyu*, a rogue figure who is not part of the Brahminical social sphere but still a political force to be reckoned with.<sup>54</sup> The social differences between Outcaste and outsider, though subtle, would have been keenly felt in the post-Mauryan political milieu in which Śakas, Indo-Greeks, and other foreign forces were establishing kingdoms in northern India (Parasher-Sen 2006: 418–19), and in which unassimilated tribal kingdoms still held power in the forests and mountains. If Bhīṣma's two *dasyu* anecdotes outline how and why one should negotiate with foreign forces, then the *Śvapaca* legend explains how and why one ought not to

<sup>54</sup> For the evaluation of the term *dasyu* as an "outsider" to mainstream (*varṇa*-based) Hindu society, see Parasher-Sen 2006: 430–31.

negotiate with communities within one's political domains that fall outside of the four *varṇas*, and highlights the active role that the Brahmin Other might play in establishing legal authority over them. Brahmins like Viśvāmitra, who have the power to cross social boundaries, may engage with Outcastes in more politically expedient ways than, say, a normative one like Vasiṣṭha.

Bhīṣma's takeaway message in the frame story highlights another early Indian social dilemma—the conflict between personal physical security and moral obligations (*dharma*). He declares to Yudhiṣṭhira:

In this way, a wise man whose spirit is great, and who wishes to survive in the midst of adversity, should, aware of his options, rescue his wretched self by any possible means. Using the intellect, one should always keep on living. Only a living man gains merit and experiences good things. Therefore, having used his intellect to determine what is moral and immoral, a wise man should keep living in this world with self-restraint, Yudhiṣṭhira, son of Kuntī.<sup>55</sup>

From Bhīṣma's explanation, we may gather that the *Mahābhārata*'s *Śvapaca* episode articulates two distinct ideological positions for its audiences. First, it reaffirms the idea that Brahmins may be forced to resort to unethical behavior in times of crisis, and outlines how this may be done. The other message, directed at Kṣatriya leadership, tacitly sanctions unethical behavior for kings to ensure the security of Brahmins. The king must act by any means necessary to prevent a nightmare scenario of the kind that Viśvāmitra faces, for as Bowles notes, “the privileged position of brāhmans is always affirmed, and indeed is considered an important gauge of the standard of a king’s rule” (2007: 281). In doing so, the episode exposes a key paradox of Brahmin social power: it requires the political protection of Kṣatriyas, or otherwise one may be forced to become the Brahmin Other in order to survive.

If we assemble the *Mahābhārata*'s legends together, a portrait emerges of Viśvāmitra that is quite distinct from his depiction in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His story is no longer one of triumph, of achieving the impossible; instead, in many stories he is a powerful but dreaded antagonist to the good Brahmin Vasiṣṭha.

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<sup>55</sup> evam vidvān adīnātmā vyasanastho jijīviṣuh | sarvopāyair upāyajño dīnam ātmānam uddharet || etām buddhiṇ samāsthāya jīvitavyam sadā bhavet | jīvan puṇyam avāpnoti naro bhadrāni paśyati || tasmāt kaunteya viduṣā dharmādharmaviniścaye | buddhim āsthāya loke 'smīn vartitavyam yatātmanā || (Mbh 12.139.92–94).

This dread is something that the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s composers had expunged in glorifying Viśvāmitra's virtuous traits, but the *Mahābhārata*'s composers insist upon it. The *Sarasvatī*, *Kalmāṣapāda*, and *Gālava* legends show our sage to be easily angered, violent, and quick to curse. In the *Satyavatī* legend, he is shown to be a product of caste miscegenation, and in the *Śvapaca* episode, he cavalierly indulges in mixed-up personal behavior. Viśvāmitra becomes in this epic an exemplar of how *not* to behave as a Brahmin, except perhaps in the most extreme circumstances when one may do anything to survive.

James Fitzgerald's historicization of the *Mahābhārata* as a "deliberately constructed social and political parable" (2004b: 100) in a post-Mauryan milieu is particularly helpful for understanding the broader implications of this epic's portrayal of Viśvāmitra. Fitzgerald suggests that this epic represents "a Brāhmaṇ-inspired response to the tremendous damage (as seen from the point of view of some Brāhmaṇs between approximately 300 and 100 BCE) wrought by the rise of empires at Pāṭaliputra and the 'heathen' (*nāstika*, Jainism and Buddhism, particularly) religions these empires promoted" (2004a: 54). These external challenges to older Vedic authority, coupled with new post-Vedic modes of religiosity (e.g., renunciant practices, theistic *bhakti*, and *yoga*), led to a certain crisis of Brahmin identity and power in the wake of the Mauryan collapse (for a full discussion, see Fitzgerald 2004b: 100–42). In such a context, the *Mahābhārata*'s normative vision of social order privileged Brahmins as the purveyors of legal knowledge in addition to Vedic religious authority (Fitzgerald 2004b: 103–4). At a fundamental level, this required a political engagement with Kṣatriya rulers, and Fitzgerald's explanation of this epic's role in this negotiation is worth quoting in full (2002: 118):

One of the fundamental messages of the *Mahābhārata* seems to have been that legitimate 'kṣatriyas' should employ the violence they exercise for the protection of brahmins as a distinct elite and thus guarantee the existence of the hierarchical *varṇa* society. Of course the essence of the *varṇa* hierarchy—as distinct from social classes based simply upon power and wealth—is the existence of the brahmin elite, whose entire social capital consists of its monopoly on specifying *dharma*; a monopoly that had been challenged by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka.

Through the epic, its Brahmin composers represent themselves as a social elite possessing religious and intellectual capital but not economic or military

capital, and therefore requiring the Kṣatriya protection and patronage. This self-understanding necessarily involved the abjuring of physical violence—for as Fitzgerald succinctly puts it, “in this bargain, the brahmins gave up all claims to violence on their own behalf” (2002: 118). Shorn from the Brahmin Self, this violence is remapped onto the figure of the Brahmin Other, and kept at the margins of Brahminhood.



How did the epics’ portrait of Viśvāmitra impact the early Indian public imagination? One way to assess this is to look at his appearances in classical Sanskrit poetry (Bhardwaj 1987). For the elite courtly poets and playwrights of the first millennium, he was a ready-made literary persona: the dreaded irascible sage. In the tenth century, a playwright named Kṣemīśvara makes him the central antagonist of the *Caṇḍakauśika* (“The Fierce Kauśika”), a play based on the *Hariścanda* legend that we will examine in Chapter 5. Prior to this, he appears in the background of a number of theatrical adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, including those of Bhavabhūti (eighth century), Murāri (eighth to tenth century) and Rājaśekhara (late ninth). In most of their works, Viśvāmitra is a two-dimensional character—compassionate but also hot-headed. In Bhavabhūti’s *Mahāvīracarita* (“Chronicles of the Great Warrior”), for example, Viśvāmitra gives Rāma magic weapons and also actively arranges the prince’s marriage. But later, Viśvāmitra angrily confronts his kinsman Rāma Jāmadagnya when he comes to challenge Rāma’s breaking of Śiva’s bow and rushes to dole out a curse. Likewise, in Murāri’s *Anargharāghava* (“Priceless Rāma”), young Lakṣmaṇa wonders, upon seeing Viśvāmitra, “This fellow here, whose body looks so calm and reassuring, how could he be that sage who also has moments of rage that terrify the world?”<sup>56</sup>

An earlier theatrical appearance of Viśvāmitra comes in Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (“The Recognition of Śakuntalā”), likely composed in the fourth century CE (Thapar 2002: 46). In the opening act of this play, an attenuated version of the *Menakā* legend is told to King Dusyanta in order to clarify the pedigree of Śakuntalā, the object of his romantic desire. This is

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<sup>56</sup> *ayam ayam īdrśapraśamaviśvasanīyatatanur bhuvanabhayamkārīḥ katham adhatta ruṣo ‘pi munih |* (*Anargharāghava* 1.48ab).

based on the *Mahābhārata*'s version, for as Romila Thapar (2002) has demonstrated, Kālidāsa has consciously adapted this epic's Śakuntalā legend as the basis for his play.<sup>57</sup> When Duṣyanta asks about Śakuntalā's parentage, her friend Anasūyā informs him that "There is a certain extremely powerful royal sage (*rājarṣi*) who has the family name 'Kauśika'... You should know that he is the father of our dear friend."<sup>58</sup> Anasūyā then explains how the seduction took place: "A while ago, the gods, getting rather anxious of that *rājarṣi* as he was engaged in harsh austerities, dispatched the celestial nymph named Menakā to the banks of the Gautamī to serve as an impediment in his self-restrictions."<sup>59</sup> The nymph's listing of Viśvāmitra's harsh deeds, which may have appeared to be too distracting from the extremely romantic (*śringāra*) nature of this scene, are left unexplored.

Kālidāsa also does not explicitly state that Viśvāmitra changed his caste, but calling him a *rājarṣi* would have made it known that the sage was still a Kṣatriya, and consequently, that his daughter must have Kṣatriya status. This is a vital element to the plot, for as Thapar explains: "Duṣyanta has to enquire into the *varṇa* of Śakuntalā as he is the protector of the *varṇāśramadharma*, and it would be inappropriate if he himself broke the social code. Therefore he is relieved that she is Viśvāmitra's daughter, thus ranking as a Kṣatriya" (Thapar 2002: 52; cf. Biardeau 1979: 117–18). In the epic, this realization comes after the king is told the *Menakā* anecdote (*Mbh* 1.67.1), but in Kālidāsa's play, Duṣyanta has already guessed her *varṇa* when spying on her, reckoning that she must be a Kṣatriya because his heart tells him so. As he explains, "For noblemen, the activities of the inner consciousness serve as the authority whenever there are matters that are subject to doubt."<sup>60</sup>

Rather than revealing her caste, then, Kālidāsa's synopsis of *Menakā* instead explains to the king (and the play's spectators) why he has found

<sup>57</sup> Later in the play we find an allusion to the *Mahābhārata*'s *Trīśāṅku* as Duṣyanta's friend, the clown (*vidūṣaka*) makes fun of him being caught between love and his royal duties, telling him to "dangle between them like *Trīśāṅku*" (*trīśāṅkur ivāntara tiṣṭha* ||) (Aś ad 2.16).

<sup>58</sup> asti ko 'pi kauśika iti gotranāmadheyo mahāprabhāvo rājarṣih | . . . tam āvayoh priyasakhyāḥ prabhavam avagaccha | (Aś ad 1.22).

<sup>59</sup> gautamītre purā kila tasya rājarṣer ugre tapasi vartamānasya kimapi jātaśānkair devair menakā nāmāpsarāḥ presitā niyamavighnākāriṇī | . . . (Aś ad 1.22).

<sup>60</sup> satāṁ hi sandehapadeṣu vastuṣu pramāṇam antahkaraṇapratyayāḥ || (Aś 1.20cd).

Śakuntalā so irresistible, for the girl is “descended from a celestial nymph” (*apsarahsambhavā*). He breaks into verse to explore this further:

How, indeed, could such a beauty take form among mortals?  
For lightning, with its flash of light,  
does not rise upward from the surface of the earth.<sup>61</sup>

Why this subtle change? Why does Kālidāsa shift the emphasis from Viśvāmitra’s not yet being a Brahmin to Menakā’s being a nymph? To shed light on this issue, we might consider the performance context of this play. For if we keep in mind that Kālidāsa was staging it for the viewing pleasure of his royal patron—who some argue to have been Candragupta II (c. 375–415 CE), the Gupta emperor who traced his ancestry to Duṣyanta himself (Miller 1984: 9–12)—then it would be crucial to present his protagonist in the best possible light. Having him fall in love with an ascetic Kṣatriya’s daughter, even if technically permissible within the Brahminical laws of caste, would still have been less than glamorous for a king of Duṣyanta’s stature. The daughter of a celestial nymph, on the other hand, conjures up the highest of amorous pleasures, one that is explored more directly in another of Kālidāsa’s plays, the *Vikramorvāsiya* (“On the Victory over Urvaśī”), in which the royal protagonist also romances an *apsaras*. Even if his patron were not Candragupta II, Kālidāsa’s Duṣyanta still captures a classical Sanskrit vision of an ideal and sophisticated king, naturally perceptive and genteel, sensitive to the nuances of both *dharma* and *kāma*, of virtue and desire.

What can these poetic depictions tell us about Viśvāmitra in the cultural imagination of early India? Kālidāsa and the other Sanskrit poets touch upon the same themes of caste change and ascetic power that are so richly developed within the epics’ portrayals of the sage, and which had jumped out at us from Dharaghoṣa’s coin. Positioned on the boundary between Brahmin and Kṣatriya castes, Viśvāmitra maintains connections to both, but he cannot *be* both. And so, he stands for the boundary itself, perpetually in the state of *becoming* rather than being Brahmin.

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<sup>61</sup> *mānuṣīṣu kathāṇ vā syād asya rūpasya saṃbhavaḥ | na prabhātaralaṁ jyotiḥ udeti vasudhātalāt ||* (AŚ 1.23).

This liminal condition enabled courtly poets, as epic bards and coinmakers before them, to use Viśvāmitra as a cultural icon who captured the anxieties of Brahminhood in early India. It was in this historical milieu that Viśvāmitra first came to represent the Other kind of Brahmin, dreaded but respected, and never to be emulated, in opposition to Vasiṣṭha, the normative Brahmin Self.



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## ADAPTATIONS





## SPINNING THE BRAHMIN OTHER IN THE EARLY PURĀNAS



Viśvāmitra's connections to caste only deepened in the centuries after the composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. If the epics' legends about him had inscribed the boundaries of Brahminhood by differentiating *being* Brahmin (like Vasiṣṭha) from *becoming* one (like Viśvāmitra), the social value of being inside this line faced a critical test with the emergence of theistic, astrological, and esoteric Hindu traditions in the mid-first millennium CE (c. 300–700). Increasing numbers of practitioners were able to worship Śiva, Viṣṇu, and other deities directly through *pūjā* rites in temples and at home (Willis 2009), while various spiritual orders offered lucrative new pathways for those seeking liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Such developments posed a threat to the elite status of Brahmins, based as it was on claims of exclusive authority over Vedic speech and ritual, a religious culture that grew increasingly detached from such public needs (Inden 2006a: 90–91). Adding to Brahminical insecurities were the bureaucratic administrative structures and land-grant schemes of the Gupta kings, which fostered an increased competition between diverse religious communities for royal patronage or courtly employment (Thapar 2002: 290–93; Bisschop 2010). Brahmin intellectuals of the mid-first millennium responded to these historical realities through a time-honored method: the production of Sanskrit texts that extended their scholastic authority to encompass these new domains of practice.

One prominent site where we may observe this process at work is the Sanskrit *purāṇas* (“ancient chronicles”)—comprehensive archives of narratives, concepts, procedures, and other materials concerning the worship of the major Hindu deities, particularly Śiva and Viṣṇu. The *purāṇas* actively reconciled the theistic beliefs and practices of the first millennium with older Brahminical traditions already established through Vedic, śāstraic, and epic literature (Srinivasan 1980: 210). As cultural vehicles for delivering normative ideology to mainstream audiences (Narayana Rao 1993), the *purāṇas* provided intellectual capital for Brahmin specialists (*paurāṇikas*), who expounded them through live recitations at temples, royal courts, and other public settings (Bonazzoli 1981). However, as one would expect with any public repository in active usage, these texts have been repeatedly expanded and upgraded to keep pace with changes in mainstream religious culture and to engage effectively with local contingencies and concerns. As a result, practically every major Sanskrit *purāṇa* today is philologically complicated, and it is sometimes challenging even to identify a text, much less its date, provenance, author, or audience. In the case of the *purāṇic* Viśvāmitra legends, the best that we may do is to place their extant versions in northern India at a time during and after the rise of the Gupta kings (c. fourth to seventh centuries), though they are likely to have had older versions that are now lost.

Though the *purāṇas* told fewer stories about him, Viśvāmitra was to remain a counter-normative representation of Brahmin social power. He and Vasiṣṭha continued to capture the dichotomy between the normative Brahmin Self and the transgressive Brahmin Other, but it was now upgraded for the social realities of the mid-first millennium. The Viśvāmitra legends thereby served as mythological mooring through which *purāṇic* composers could extend the reach of Brahminical authority, previously limited to Vedic and śāstraic domains, over the emergent instruments of theistic and esoteric Hindu practice, especially the professional activities of the royal preceptor (*purohita*). That is to say the *purāṇas* used the Vasiṣṭha-Viśvāmitra binary to reinscribe the boundaries of Brahminhood for a new era and to reemphasize the value of being inside them.

This chapter investigates two different textual sites in order to appreciate the interpretive “spins” that *purāṇic* composers put on the Viśvāmitra legends: (1) the dynastic chronicles (*vamśānucaritas*) found across a number of *purāṇic* texts (c. fourth–fifth centuries), and (2) the *Skanda Purāṇa*

(sixth–seventh centuries). Our method of analysis will be similar to how we approached the epics—assessing how the dialogical narrative frames of purāṇic texts contour their audiences’ reception of Viśvāmitra’s crossing the lines of caste in the storyworld. However, purāṇic narrative frames, being considerably thinner, are far more difficult to historicize than those of the epics. In many cases, we will therefore be restricted to comparing the narrative materials themselves and offering conjectures about their relevance for a historical context that we can know very little about. Still, based on the available evidence, we may make the following observations: First, within the purāṇic dynastic chronicles, Viśvāmitra’s counter-normative persona contributed to the construction of an elite political identity for Brahmin officiants within the Gupta-era monarchical state by showing them to be masters of both Vedic and extra-Vedic religious powers. Second, a set of Viśvāmitra legends told in the early *Skanda Purāṇa* were designed to contribute to the large-scale integration of the transgressive Pāśupata orders of Śaiva ascetics within the wider “lay” community of Śiva-worshippers.

#### “IN SPITE OF VASIṢṬHA AND THE GODS”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE EARLY PURĀNIC GENEALOGIES

Several Viśvāmitra legends appear in the royal dynastic chronicles found in a number of early purāṇas: *Satyavatī* (with a synopsis of *Śunahṣepa*), *Satyavrata*, and *Kalmāṣapāda* (Table 3.1).<sup>1</sup> Conspicuously absent are the *Kāmadhenu* and *Menakā* legends, which had been so prominent in the epics. The story of *Trīsaṅku* is also nowhere to be found in purāṇic literature, though the wide presence of the complementary *Satyavrata* legend, which tells of the king’s exploits as a youth, means that the *paurāṇikas* were undoubtedly aware of it, but chose not to tell it in detail. At the end of this chapter, we will revisit this issue and offer some reasons why they might have done so.

The *vamśānucaritas* consist of long lists of kings and princes divided into Solar and Lunar lines (*sūrya-* and *somavamśas*), occasionally peppered with notes and legends about their deeds, beginning with their earliest mythic origins and continuing through historical times up to the Guptas. The stories

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<sup>1</sup> The *Vāmana Purāṇa*, within its *Saromāhātmya* section (18.14–5), also includes a version of the *Sarasvatī* legend that is practically identical to the *Mahābhārata*’s telling.

TABLE 3.1

*Organization and distribution of the Viśvāmitra legends in the purānic genealogical chronicles*

Lunar Dynasty ( <i>somavamśa</i> )	Solar Dynasty ( <i>sūryavamśa</i> )		
<i>Satyavati</i>	<i>Śunahṣepa</i>	<i>Satyavrata</i>	<i>Kalmāṣapāda</i>
<i>Hv</i> App. 1, 6B, 24–89	<i>Hv</i> App. 1, 6B, 90–120	<i>Hv</i> 9.88–10.23	<i>Hv</i> 10.70cd, *223–224
<i>BrP</i> 10.64–68	<i>BrP</i> 7.97–8.23		<i>BrP</i> 10.23–63
<i>VP</i> 4.7.7–36	<i>VP</i> 4.7.37–39	<i>VP</i> 4.3.21–24	<i>VP</i> 4.4.40–72
<i>BhP</i> 9.15.5–12	<i>BhP</i> 9.7.7–26; 9.16.28–36	<i>BhP</i> 9.7.5–6	<i>BhP</i> 9.9.19–39 <i>KūP</i> 1.20.12–13
<i>BdP</i> 66.32–63	<i>BdP</i> 66.64–68	<i>BdP</i> 63.77–114	<i>BdP</i> 2.63.176–177
<i>VāP</i> 91.62–91	<i>VāP</i> 91.92–96	<i>VāP</i> 88.78–116	<i>VāP</i> 2.10–11
		<i>LiP</i> 1.66.3–10	<i>LiP</i> 1.64.1–5
		<i>ŚiP</i> <i>Umāsamhitā</i> 37.47–38.18	

they tell have an unadorned, matter-of-fact feel, lack extensive supernatural elements, and are reproduced in nearly verbatim fashion across a number of purāṇas. These characteristics make the *vamśānucaritas* appear to the modern eye as more historically reliable than other Brahminical literature (Pargiter 1922: 5). After Pargiter's early efforts to reassemble a common original (1913a), Willibald Kirfel demonstrated that the chronicles found in the *Harivamśa*, considered a sequel or appendix to the *Mahābhārata*, are the closest to a putative archetype (Kirfel 1927: xlv), while Walter Ruben later argued that this text would have borrowed materials from the epic itself (1941: 248, 350).<sup>2</sup>

Based upon this philological model, we may postulate that the *Harivamśa*'s versions of the Viśvāmitra legends are older than those of the other purāṇas and are informed by the *Mahābhārata*'s portrait of the sage. There are, however, two points we should note about such a hypothesis. First, the *Rāmāyaṇa* will prove to have played a larger role in this process of adaptation than we

<sup>2</sup> André Couture (1992) offers a date of the second or third century CE for the *Harivamśa*.

might be led to believe. And second, since *Satyavrata* is noticeably absent from the epics except for one brief, oblique reference (*Mbh* 1.65.31–33), it may very well be a remnant of a bardic tradition distinct from both epics. We must therefore keep in mind that purāṇic textual development was never an entirely one-dimensional process. For as Ruben remarks, “the original varṇa of the [Mahābhārata], the later interpolations, and all the material added in [the *Harivamṣa*] have been taken from the inexhaustible stream or, as we may say, the different streams of oral tradition (*purāṇam*), current in the different countries of Northern India” (1941: 350). Orality is an assumption we need not make—as there is no reason to insist that purāṇic bards were illiterate—but the fluidity of such narrative “streams” is something worth taking seriously. Just like their appearances in the epics, when the Viśvāmitra legends were included in the purāṇic dynastic chronicles, they served as fixed anchors that stabilized future tellings, whether oral or written, within an otherwise dynamic culture of storytelling.

When would these textual anchors have been laid down? Because the Solar and Lunar lines end with the early Guptas, it is reasonable to suppose that the *vamśānucaritas* were finalized during the ascendancy of this dynasty in the fourth century CE. This would also make historical sense. The authority of the Gupta-era state was in no small part dependent on the public understanding of a monarch’s power as being rooted in his unique hereditary links with divinity. Royal epigraphy was one medium through which this genealogical discourse had developed around the beginning of the Common Era (Visvanathan 2011), while the two Sanskrit epics provided what we might call a “genealogical imaginary” with which myths, legends, and narrative materials were used to flesh out the idea of political power based on and perpetuated through pedigree (Brodbeck 2009, 2011; Hegarty 2011; Hiltebeitel 2011c). The purāṇic *vamśānucarita* materials synthesized these two domains, serving as “a political charter for future claims” (Thapar 1991: 36). Like royal inscriptions, purāṇic texts, beginning with the *Harivamṣa* (Austin 2011), provided lists of king after king that established a chain of being from contemporary rulers to the primordial sources of political power, while at the same time, like the epics, they included numerous myths and legends to illustrate the norms and range of this power.

Romila Thapar (1991) has identified three distinct strata of cultural memory within the purāṇic chronicles. The first layer involves a set of primordial

kings before Viṣṇu's incarnation as a fish (*matsya*), while the second traces various royal lines until the Bhārata War, through which we may recover a mythologized memory of the clan-based polities of the Vedic period, in which “descent groups are more central than institutions” (Thapar 1991: 20). The third layer, written in the future tense and covering the historical rulers of the early Indian states (the *janapadas*) until the rise of the Guptas, memorializes the political turbulence of the time between the empires, when non-Kṣatriyas held power across northern India and Brahmins found themselves in perpetual social insecurity (Thapar 1991: 22–23). The Viśvāmitra legends are found in the second layer, brimming with nostalgia for a utopian age when Brahmin pedigree alone would have assured privilege, protection, and patronage. The events they describe, however, anticipate the chaos of the third layer, as they involve near-disastrous interruptions in the Kṣatriya patrilines due to the violence of insubordinate Kṣatriyas or the interference of Other kinds of Brahmins. In both cases, the threats to the royal patriline—and the stability of the classical state—are resolved by the work of normative Brahmins.

This pattern of Kṣatriya disruption, Brahmin Other interference, and normative Brahmin intervention governs the two Viśvāmitra legends we find in the chronicles of the Solar dynasty. Both *Satyavrata* and *Kalmāṣapāda* are accounts of Kṣatriyas who disrespect Brahmins, especially their preceptor Vasiṣṭha, generating crises of succession for a dynasty in which “patrilineal descent is heavily underlined, as also the unchallenged right to succession of the eldest son” (Thapar 1991: 15). In the case of *Kalmāṣapāda*, the *Viṣṇu* and *Bhāgavata* follow the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s version in stating that Vasiṣṭha himself had cursed the king to become a cannibal because he had tried to feed his preceptor human flesh during a sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> The king-turned-cannibal then proceeded to devour a Brahmin who was copulating with his wife—a motif adopted from the *Mahābhārata*'s version—and he was consequently cursed to die should he sleep with his own wife. The king being without heir, Vasiṣṭha then intervened and fathered a son with Kalmāṣapāda's wife through the act of *niyoga* (Brahmin levirate) in order to continue the royal lineage. By bringing both epics' versions together, these two purāṇas castigate the Kṣatriya's

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<sup>3</sup> This also means that Vasiṣṭha does not use mantras to exorcise the king, since the curse is slated to end after a fixed twelve-year duration.

anti-Brahmin crimes and at the same time honor the Brahmin's rescue of the Solar line. They are also the only ones to tell the story in detail; Kalmāṣapāda is included in many genealogical lists, but those that bother to say anything about him mention only that Vasiṣṭha fathered his heir and do not describe any Brahmin-Kṣatriya conflicts (*Hv* 10.70cd, \*223–224; *BdP* 2.63.176–177; *KūP* 1.20.12–13).

The *Viṣṇu* and *Bhāgavata* also remain silent about Viśvāmitra's involvement in the story. Our sage does, however, appear in the versions of two Śiva-oriented purāṇas. Both, we should note, are quite brief and told outside of the context of the dynastic chronicles, but do indicate an important difference in how early Śaiva communities conceived of the role of a Brahmin preceptor. The *Vāyu Purāṇa*, describing the Naimiṣa Forest, claims this to be the place “where Vasiṣṭha’s son Śakti had cursed the king Kalmāṣapāda, as there had been hostilities between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha.”<sup>4</sup> The *Liṅga*’s version meanwhile comes in its account of the various lineages of Brahmin sages, and explains that Kalmāṣapāda had eaten Vasiṣṭha’s son Śakti because he had been possessed by a demon summoned by Viśvāmitra (*LiP* 1.64.2–3cd). Neither text has much more to say about Viśvāmitra’s involvement, but it is evident that the concern here is not with royal succession but with Brahminical fears of Kṣatriya violence and the malicious tendencies of the Brahmin Other. The implication is that normative Brahmin preceptors must be able to protect kings against such threats; however, because the *Liṅga* and *Vāyu* do not explain how Kalmāṣapāda’s demon was exorcised, we cannot say much more about the esoteric Śaiva practices that these purāṇas may have been advocating, other than to note their absence—and of Viśvāmitra as well—in the *Viṣṇu*-oriented versions.

In all versions of *Kalmāṣapāda*, Vasiṣṭha’s ministrations to restore the Solar patriline are ultimately successful, demonstrating the political value of the *purohita*. The legend of *Satyavrata*, however, presents a situation that is quite the opposite: the preceptor’s efforts fail, and the patriline must instead be sustained through the intervention of Viśvāmitra, the transgressive Brahmin Other.

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<sup>4</sup> *kalmāṣapādo nrpatir yatra śaptas ca śaktinā | yatra vairam samabhavad viśvāmitravasiṣṭhayoh ||* (*VāP* 2.10).



[Story 3A] **Satyavrata:** *The Misguided Prince*

Satyavrata, prince of Ayodhyā, interrupts a wedding and steals the bride. He defends his actions by pointing out that the ceremony was still incomplete, but still he is exiled by his father, Trayyaruṇa, the Ikṣvāku king. Satyavrata is forced to live in disgrace among the outcaste Śvapākas (“Dog-cookers”). Meanwhile, his father retires to the forest and his preceptor, Vasiṣṭha, takes charge of the kingdom as regent.

A twelve-year famine then falls on the land, during which time Viśvāmitra goes to the coastal marshes to perform austerities. Desperate to survive, his wife puts up her youngest son (named Gālava) for sale, bound at the neck. Satyavrata sees this family in the market and compassionately intervenes. He begins to look after Viśvāmitra’s wife and children, providing them game that he has hunted in the forest. One day, harboring a deep grudge against Vasiṣṭha, and finding no other meat, Satyavrata brashly kills his *guru*’s wish-giving cow (*sarvakāmadhuk*) and serves it to Viśvāmitra’s family for dinner. For his three crimes—dishonoring his father, killing his preceptor’s cow, and then eating it without ritual sanction—Vasiṣṭha gives Satyavrata the nickname Triśaṅku: “three thorns.”

Grateful upon his return that the prince has looked after his family, Viśvāmitra grants Satyavrata-Triśaṅku a boon; the dishonored prince requests that Viśvāmitra become his *guru*. The sage then restores him successfully to the throne. In some versions, it is said that Viśvāmitra also helps the king enter heaven in his own body.

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*Satyavrata* captures the Brahminical fears of Kṣatriya aggression in terms that are by now quite familiar. The prince is an unrepentant sexual predator who disrespects his father and the Brahmin preceptor, and according to most versions, he continues to harbor animosity toward both while in exile. He feels that his father has unfairly punished him, since “marriage rites become finalized only at (taking) the seventh step,” and he claims to have abducted the girl

before this ceremony was complete.<sup>5</sup> Since Vasiṣṭha does nothing to intervene, the prince suspects the Brahmin to be taking advantage of his governmental position as the chief administrator (*upādhyāya*) in a bid to usurp political power. Driven by this grudge, the Kṣatriya commits a shocking anti-Brahmin act: he slaughters Vasiṣṭha's magic cow—which, as we had seen in the epics, is the embodiment of pure Brahmin power—and feeds it to Viśvāmitra's unsuspecting Brahmin family. This Kṣatriya-on-Brahmin violence is the driving force of the narrative, and also cleverly refracts Viśvāmitra's attempt to steal this same cow in the epics' *Kāmadhenu* legend. But ultimately, the message is ambivalent. For despite being a quintessentially degenerate Kṣatriya, Satyavrata manages to regain the throne through Viśvāmitra's assistance, apparently without repenting his sins or acquiescing to Vasiṣṭha, who in fact loses his own position of honor as the *purohita*.

Were purāṇic audiences supposed to sympathize with Vasiṣṭha or Satyavrata? Pargiter argues it to have originally been the latter, taking it to have been a historical “fact” that “Vasiṣṭha deliberately connived at the ruin of Satyavrata and of the king, got the kingdom in his own hands, turned it into a priestly regime, and evinced no intention of relinquishing it soon” (1913b: 896). The purāṇic composers, however, present this as Satyavrata's own misguided opinion, and employ various storytelling devices to exonerate Vasiṣṭha. Pargiter dismisses this as a case of Brahmins later rewriting history, but still, it is worth examining more closely how it would have happened. The *Harivamśa* and the *Brahma Purāṇa*, for example, explain that the preceptor had not remained silent, but had in fact virtuously muttered secret prayers (*upāṁśu*) in support of Satyavrata when he was exiled (*Hv* 10.9; *BrP* 8.9). He knew that the prince would have to undergo twelve years of hardships, but that this could become a rite of passage (*dīkṣā*) to restore the glory of his dynasty (*Hv* 10.10–11; *BrP* 8.11). Furthermore, we are told, Vasiṣṭha intended only to hold power temporarily until Satyavrata's son came of age—and this was why “Blessed Vasiṣṭha did not prevent him from being forsaken by his father, for the sage had the opinion that ‘I will consecrate his son.’”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *pāṇigrahaṇa mantrāṇām niṣṭhā syāt saptame pade* | (*Hv* 10.7ab).

<sup>6</sup> *na tam vasiṣṭho bhagavān pitrā tyaktam nyavārayat | abhiṣekṣyāmy aham putram asyety evam matir muneh* || (*Hv* 10.12; cf. *BrP* 8.12).

Vasiṣṭha's mastery over *dīkṣā* and *upāṁśu* connects his authority as the *purohita* with special religious abilities. But what are these forces, exactly? Both terms had a place in older Vedic ritual culture, but continued to take on extra-Vedic connotations in the mid-first millennium. In the older public (*śrauta*) sacrifices, *dīkṣā* had been a procedure in which the sacrificial patron (*yajamāna*) was required to undergo certain privations (celibacy, vegetarianism, etc.) in order to be consecrated for the sacrifice, and thereby gain a ritual rebirth "in the world of sacrifice" (Tull 1996: 227; see Lubin 1994). Unbeknownst to Satyavrata, Vasiṣṭha transforms his political exile into such a purificatory rite of passage, of which the prince himself is both agent and subject, while the Brahmin remains purely an instrument to ensure its success. The secret efficacious prayer through which Vasiṣṭha does this, his *upāṁśu*, is also an older Vedic technical term, denoting a technique of recitation (*japa*) in which mantras are to be uttered inaudibly and internally on the *madhyamā* (median) level of speech, "in the middle ground between outside and inside, and heard by the practitioner but not by others" (Timalsina 2005: 216; see also Patton 2005: 29; Renou 1949: II). That is to say, Vasiṣṭha acts in congruence to the function of the Vedic *brahman* priest of the *śrauta* ritual complex, who was to oversee the patron's sacrificial rites, protecting it against bad omens, pollution, and procedural mistakes while keeping his mantras to himself.<sup>7</sup>

As an embodiment of both the *brahman* and the *purohita*, Vasiṣṭha reflects key transformations to Brahmin priesthood that transpired in the first millennium CE (Inden 2006b: 125), when, among other things, we find a fusion of these positions within the *Atharvaveda* tradition for use in the courtly context (Inden 2006b: 117–19). Vasiṣṭha, in this sense, exemplifies the Atharvan *purohita*, whose ritual practices are extensions of older Vedic ritual techniques (*dīkṣā* and *upāṁśu*), but reoriented toward what Marko Geslani calls a new "overarching rhetorical scheme" that "seeks to naturalize *śānti* [appeasement] as the fundamental determinant of welfare for the royal person and his realm" (2011: 79). That is to say, as the *purohita*, Vasiṣṭha doesn't simply perform rituals for their own sake, but uses his mastery of the *Vedas* to transform

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<sup>7</sup> In this regard, he perhaps more precisely resembles a Brahmin specialist envisioned by the pragmatic Vedic *vidhāna* literature (c. 400–200 BCE), which delineated the efficacious real-world application of mantras so that "the brahmin himself, through the mere utterance of mantras, can change any situation in which he might find himself" (Patton 2005: 27).

Satyavrata's struggles into a remedy against the misfortunes that have beset the prince and his kingdom—without his even realizing it.

However, Vasiṣṭha's efforts are unsuccessful, and the prince turns his time of privation into a rather different sort of *dīksā*, one that anticipates the usage of this term in the tantric traditions, in which it becomes ubiquitous as the initiation of a practitioner into an order (Gonda 1977: 70; Brunner 1994: 450).<sup>8</sup> During the drought, Satyavrata dedicates himself to caring for the family of his new *guru*-to-be, “with devotion (*bhakti*), with mercy (*kṛpā*), and with assurance (*pratijñā*), remaining ever respectful.”<sup>9</sup> And it is said that he does this “as a means to propitiate Viśvāmitra, and also to gain his compassion.”<sup>10</sup> These are not the traits of a consecrated Vedic sacrificer, but an initiate of a *guru*. When the *vamśānucaritas* were likely to have been composed, the formalization of the Śaiva “Mantramārga” (Sanderson 2009, 2010) and professionalization of the tantric Brahmin royal chaplain, who would come to supplant the Atharvan *purohita* (Sanderson 2004), were still centuries away. We might therefore surmise that Viśvāmitra’s appearance in the *Satyavrata* legend reflects the extent to which a political demand for this Other, transgressive type of preceptorship was already present within the Gupta-period political sphere, and which induced the Atharvan tradition to incorporate astrological and divinatory forms of ritual practice (Geslani 2012) as well as certain features of Pāśupata Śaivism in due course (Bisschop and Griffiths 2003: 323).

The *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* go one step further in coming to terms with Vasiṣṭha’s failures in the *Satyavrata* legend. They state that the preceptor had intended to reinstall Satyavrata himself—and not his son—to the throne after his tribulations had ended (*VāP* 88.102; *BdP* 2.3.63.101). They also insist that Satyavrata had actually stolen the bride *after* the seventh step had been completed, making it perfectly reasonable that Vasiṣṭha did not prevent his exile, since the prince’s actions were patently illegal (*VāP* 88.97; *BdP* 2.3.63.96). Pargiter had noticed this variation and speculated that these two texts had been subjected to additional Brahmin “tampering” of the original historical account of the Kṣatriya bards, “so as to exaggerate Satyavrata’s guilt and

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, we may also note the adaptation of *upāṁśu* within tantric traditions as a method of inwardly directed efficacious recitation of mantras (Timalsina 2005: 215).

<sup>9</sup> *satyavratas tu bhaktyā ca kṛpaya ca pratijñayā | viśvāmitrakalatram tad babhāra vinaye sthitāḥ ||* (*Hv* 10.1).

<sup>10</sup> *viśvāmitrasya tuṣṭyar�am anukampārtham eva ca ||* (*Hv* 9.99cd).

consequently to justify Vasiṣṭha's want of pity" (1913b: 894). Though we need not accept Pargiter's hypothesis of separate Brahmin and Kṣatriya historical traditions, it does seem likely that the composers of the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* had been especially uncomfortable with Vasiṣṭha's passivity as the *purohita* and felt the need to exonerate him further. However, the tension between Vasiṣṭha's failure and Viśvāmitra's transgressive triumph still remains.

This is perhaps why the *Śiva* and *Liṅga Purāṇas*—both Śiva-oriented texts—use strategic textual erasures to skirt entirely around the issue of Vasiṣṭha's non-interference in Satyavrata's exile. They both eliminate the narrator's assertion that Vasiṣṭha did nothing to prevent it (cf. *Hv* 9.93; *BrP* 7.103; *VāP* 88.84; *BdP* 2.3.63.82), which makes the prince's personal grudge appear less credible. The *Liṅga* further removes all traces of the prince's conflict with Vasiṣṭha, including even the slaughter of the wish-giving cow, wrapping up its telling simply by saying that Viśvāmitra had restored the prince to the throne. As it had done with *Kalmāṣapāda*, the *Liṅga*'s excisions reduce the inter-caste tensions in this story to a minimum and turn it into a straightforward account of a decadent Kṣatriya who gains personal redemption through recourse to a transgressive Brahmin *guru*.

Clearly, the hinge on which this narrative turns is Viśvāmitra's appearance as both Satyavrata's savior and Vasiṣṭha's adversary. As Vasiṣṭha's troubles rise, so does Viśvāmitra's power. Pargiter explains that "as soon as Viśvāmitra, who combined in his person both famous kingship and brahmanical eminence, advocated Satyavrata's right, Vasiṣṭha's dominance crumbled to pieces" (1913b: 900). It should be noted, however, that the *paurāṇikas* themselves make no mention of Viśvāmitra's Kṣatriya past, though they undoubtedly are aware of his caste change in the *Satyavatī* legend. Here, he is a Brahmin, through and through, but one of the Other kind, an ascetic who abandons his family to perform severe austerities, alone, in the uninhabited coastal marshes, away from domestic or courtly life. This marginality, and the transgressive power that it yields, are precisely what make Viśvāmitra a viable threat to Vasiṣṭha's authority as the royal preceptor. And so, when Viśvāmitra successfully reinstalls Satyavrata as king and sacrifices on his behalf, it is said to be "while Vasiṣṭha and the gods just blinked [helplessly]."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *miśatāṁ devatānāṁ ca vasiṣṭhasya ca kauśikah* || (*Hv* 10.20cd).

The purāṇas do not reveal exactly how Viśvāmitra restores the prince. However, the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* add a verse at the end of the story that glorifies his supernatural powers, which presumably play a part: “The *paurāṇikas* cite the following verse as an example in this regard:

Triśaṅku shines in heaven by the grace (*prasāda*) of Viśvāmitra,  
United with the gods with the help of the great energy (*tejas*)  
of that learned man.<sup>12</sup>

This verse clearly alludes to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s *Triśaṅku*, betraying the influence of this particular epic on the purāṇic tradition and implying that the *Satyavrata* legend is meant to be a “prequel” to that story, which otherwise goes untold in the purāṇas. It also describes Viśvāmitra's power in terms that carry weight in both Vedic and theistic traditions. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra's *tapas* alone had done the trick, but here Triśaṅku is sent to heaven by his *prasāda* and *tejas*. A subtle difference, to be sure, but one that reflects the changing theological and sociopolitical climate of the Gupta period. Paolo Magnone (1993, 2009b) has argued that *tejas*, which had been a “substance-power” within Vedic and epic literature (cf. Whitaker 2000, 2002), was later theologized in the purāṇas to represent the transcendent energy of the divine (Magnone 2009a). Similarly, *prasāda* had come to encompass a wide range of efficacious forces in theistic Hinduism—as an emotional property of deities like Śiva or Viṣṇu (Bisschop 2010: 479), as an efficacious force in tantric discourse, or in later medieval practices, a material gift given to participants in temple-based *pūjā* rites (see Pinkney 2008; 2013). By using these terms, the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* equate Viśvāmitra's power to send Triśaṅku to heaven to the kinds of forces that Hindu practitioners of the mid-first millennium were themselves hoping to experience.

The genealogy of this transcendent power, as well as the genesis of Viśvāmitra himself, are explained through two other legends—*Satyavatī* and *Śunahśepa*—that are fused together in the chronicles of the Lunar dynasty. As the *Mahābhārata* had done, the purāṇas connect Viśvāmitra's change of

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<sup>12</sup> *atrāpy udāharantīmam ślokam paurānikā janāḥ || viśvāmitraprasādena triśaṅkur divi rājate | devaiḥ sārddham mahātejānugrahāt tasya dhīmataḥ ||* (*BdP* 2.63.113cd–114). The *Vāyu*'s version is identical, except it reads “*imau* ślokau [these two verses]” instead of “*imam* ślokam [this one verse]” (*VāP* 88.112cd–113).

caste to the *caru* (fertility porridge) that his mother ingests, but which is really meant for his sister, Satyavatī, who had married the Brahmin sage Ṛcīka. This motif, however, comes with a new theistic spin. For not only do the *carus* contain Brahmin and Kṣatriya essences (*brahman* and *kṣattria*), according to the purāṇas they are also Śiva-oriented (*raudra*) and Viṣṇu-oriented (*vaiṣṇava*) substances. And so, besides the intermixture of caste, the *caru*-switch also produces a theological displacement that eventually leads to a new partial incarnation of Viṣṇu.<sup>13</sup> The *Harivamśa*, for example, states somewhat elliptically, “Long ago, when there was a switch between Bhṛgu’s Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava *carus*, Jamadagni was born into this world (*jagat*) as a partial Vaiṣṇava incarnation (*amṛta*).”<sup>14</sup> The *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* offer clearer explanations, reworking the third quarter of this verse to etymologize Jamadagni’s name: “Long ago, when there was a switch between Bhṛgu’s Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava *carus*, Jamadagni was born due to the ingestion (*jamana*) of the Vaiṣṇava flame (*agni*).”<sup>15</sup> The *Viṣṇu* rephrases the passage to explain that Jamadagni’s son, “called Paraśurāma, was the slayer of the entirety of Kṣatriyas and a partial incarnation (*amṛta*) of Lord Nārāyaṇa, the *guru* to the whole world.”<sup>16</sup> This statement is echoed in the *Bhāgavata*, where he is deemed a partial incarnation of Vāsudeva (*vāsudevāmṛta*) (*BhP* 9.15.14a). This would mean that the Śaiva orientation of the *caru* is what turns Viśvāmitra into a transgressive Brahmin, while the other one induces a partial incarnation (*amṛta*) of Viṣṇu amidst a family of Brahmins who regularly propitiate Śiva (Gail 1978: 154; Magnone 2002: 197).<sup>17</sup> This way of understanding the *caru*-switch comes with some historical implications. First, rulers are tacitly being encouraged to be Vaiṣṇava devotees, since the *caru* originally meant for the queen had been a Vaiṣṇava one. The Gupta kings, as we know, were great sponsors of Viṣṇu temples. The intermingling

<sup>13</sup> For discussions of the literary significance in the epics of the theological notion of partial incarnation (*amṛtāvatāra*), see Pollock 1984a; Goldman 1995; Austin 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *bṛhgō caruviparyāse raudravaiṣṇavayoh purā | jagatyāṁ vaiṣṇavo ‘thāṁśo jamadagnir ajāyata ||* (*Hv App. I*, 6B, 78–79).

<sup>15</sup> *bṛhgō caruviparyāse raudravaiṣṇavayoh purā | jamanād vaiṣṇavasyāgner jamadagnir ajāyata ||* (*VāP* 91.86; *BdP* 2.66.57).

<sup>16</sup> ... *paraśurāmasamjñam bhagavataḥ sakalalokaguror nārāyaṇasyāmśam... (VP 4.7.36)*. The name Paraśurāma is also a purāṇic innovation, as it is not used in the epics (Goldman 1972).

<sup>17</sup> There is here, perhaps, a connection to the ritual role of the *caru* as a burnt offering, transplanted from the domestic Vedic rites into the public setting of temple-based *pūjā* in the Gupta period (Willis 2008: 8–11), though we should note that Ṛcīka’s *carus* in the *Satyavatī* legend are clearly meant for personal consumption, not offering. Still, they do here possess the same kinds of forces that would empower the *caru* used in *pūjās*.

of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava *carus* might also potentially reflect the marriage alliance between the Guptas and the Vākāṭakas, who called themselves Śaivas in their inscriptions. Because the story exposes the problems that may arise from such intersectarian marriages, the *paurāṇikas* could perhaps have been giving a subtle admonition of the Gupta-Vākāṭaka alliance, though this is admittedly quite speculative.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, in the religious sphere, we may say with more certainty that the story enables the Bhārgavas to retain their premier status as Śaiva Brahmins, while the appearance of Paraśurāma as a Viṣṇu incarnation also cements their prestige within the Vaiṣṇava community.

The further development of this Bhārgava identity is the most striking aspect of the purāṇic versions of *Satyavatī*. The *Mahābhārata*'s versions, as we have seen, had primarily been concerned with social ideology—Viśvāmitra's challenges to the lines of caste—and therefore emphasized that Viśvāmitra didn't just become a Brahmin because he wanted to, but because the wrong power-substance was placed in his body. In the purāṇas, the basic motivation for telling the story is not genetic but genealogical: these texts emphasize the connections of Viśvāmitra and his offspring to the Bhārgavas, a Brahmin family long associated with sorcery, genocidal violence, and transgressive social practices (Goldman 1977) as well as purāṇic textual production (Thapar 1991: 30–31). Several purāṇic texts specifically state that Viśvāmitra was born due to “Bṛgu's grace” (*bhruguprasāda*) (*Hv* App. 1, no. 6B, 95a; *BrP* 10.57; *VĀP* 91.93; *BdP* 2.3.66.65). These same texts also assign Śunahṣepa to be the middle son of R̥cīka—and thus Viśvāmitra's own nephew—a detail that is taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s version, and which further binds the new Kauśika lineage to the Bhārgava Brahmins. The *Harivāṇī* reinforces these family ties by stating explicitly that Śunahṣepa “was a Bhārgava who achieved Kauśika status” (*bhārgavah kauśikatvam hi prāptah*) (*Hv* App. 1, no. 6B, 116; cf. *VP* 4.7.37). The *caru*-switch doesn't just turn Viśvāmitra into a Brahmin, but transfers onto him—and by extension the many Brahmin families that trace themselves to him—the power and authority of the Bhārgavas.

For this reason, the purāṇic composers make efforts to connect various contemporary Brahmin lineages to these mythological personae, giving the names of quite a few *gotras* descended from Viśvāmitra. This explains why we find the Śunahṣepa legend consistently appended to the purāṇic *Satyavatī*,

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<sup>18</sup> On Gupta-Vākāṭaka matrimonial relations, and their eventual dissolution, see Bakker 2006, 2011b.

a narratological connection that had not been made before.<sup>19</sup> *Śunahṣepa* is, in some sense, out of place in the Lunar chronicles, since the sacrificial patron, Hariścandra, is a king of the Solar line. Many purāṇas do include Hariścandra in the Solar chronicles after Satyavrata, and several even state that “he is famous for having performed a *rājasūya* (royal consecration) and then become an emperor (*sāmrāj*).”<sup>20</sup> But his human sacrifice is mentioned only in the Lunar chronicles to explain why Śunahṣepa was made to change his *gotra* and become a Kauśika (*Hv* App.1, no. 6B, 118; *BrP* 10.65; *VāP* 91.94; *BdP* 2.66.66). This provides the occasion for the purāṇic composers to give a long list of contemporary Brahmin groups who are traceable to Viśvāmitra and Śunahṣepa (*Hv* App.1, no. 6B, 103; *BrP* 10.60–61; *VāP* 91.97; *BdP* 2.66.69)—including, interestingly enough, the “Udumbaras” (*VāP* 91.98; *BdP* 2.66.70) or “Audumbaras” (*Hv* App.1, no. 6B, 109; *BrP* 10.62cd), the tribal polity whose ruler Dharaghoṣa, as we have seen, had put Viśvāmitra on his coins around the beginning of the Common Era. Were the Audumbaras a non-Kṣatriya royal clan, perhaps of foreign origins, who exploited the confusion of Viśvāmitra’s line to connect themselves to the Lunar dynasty? Or perhaps were they Brahmins who found themselves running a small kingdom in the Himalayan foothills and used the hybrid status of Viśvāmitra to justify their Kṣatriya-like rulership? If either scenario were true, the purāṇic *Satyavatī* would have served to accommodate non-Kṣatriya rulers into the Lunar dynastic line, which, as Thapar points out, was “particularly prone to fanning out or incorporating new groups as they are said to have spread over large areas of western and central India” (Thapar 1991: 16). Any further links between the storyworld and the real world must remain a matter of conjecture, but the Audumbara case does reinforce the notion that Viśvāmitra’s social hybridity—as well as his access to Śaiva power—made him into a kind of genealogical socket within the Lunar dynastic network, so that historical rulers who plugged themselves to him could claim both Brahmin ancestry as well as political legitimacy.

In this way, the purāṇic *Satyavatī* legend evaluates the theistic aspects of Viśvāmitra’s caste change and maps out the genealogical entanglements

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<sup>19</sup> *Satyavatī* is not found in either Vedic literature or the *Rāmāyaṇa*, while the *Mahābhārata* does know both stories, but does not connect them together.

<sup>20</sup> *āhartā rājasūyasya sa samrād iti viśrutah* || (*Hv* 10.22cd; cf. *BrP* 8.25cd; *VāP* 88.118cd; *BdP* 2.63.116cd, each with minor variations). Several other purāṇas name Hariścandra as the son of Satyavrata Triśaṅku, but give no narrative details (*AgP* 273.26; *GaP* 1.138; *KūP* 1.20; *LiP* 1.66.11; *MtP* 12.38; *VP* 4.3.25).

between Brahmin and Kṣatriya lines. However, his ability to change his own caste clearly remained problematic for purāṇic audiences—a fact that may be appreciated by examining an addendum to the *Satyavatī* legend found only in the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa*, the same texts that, in Pargiter's opinion, had earlier “tampered” with *Satyavrata*. It is worth a closer look, as this is one of the rare moments in these texts where we do find an extended, outer-frame dialogue between the purāṇic bard (*sūta*) Lomaharṣaṇa and his audience, a group of sages attending a sacrifice in Kurukṣetra.

The sages ask Lomaharṣaṇa the same sort of question that Yudhiṣṭhira had asked Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata*, “Was it by their traits, by their good conduct (*dharma*), asceticism (*tapas*), or sacred knowledge (*śruta*), that kings like Viśvāmitra achieved Brahminhood?”<sup>21</sup> The bard, crafty in his response, acknowledges that there have indeed been individuals who physically possessed Kṣatriya-essence (*kṣatropeta*) but who gained a supernaturally potent state through *tapas* (*tapahsiddha*) (*VāP* 91.112ab; *BdP* 2.66.86ab), but he is careful *not* to call them Brahmins, referring to them instead as “twice-borns (*dvijātī*),” a moniker that could conceivably also refer to Kṣatriyas (and Vaiśyas) who have undergone Vedic initiation (*upanayana*). And after giving a list of other kings who “had become sages by their ascetic power (*tapasā ṛṣitāṁ gatāḥ*)” he declares, “They are all royal sages (*rājarṣis*), who have acquired the most extreme supernatural potency (*siddhi*).”<sup>22</sup> Notice, again, that they are not said to have become Brahmins, but rather “sages” (*ṛsis*), and royal ones at that (*rājarṣis*), whom the *Rāmāyaṇa* has already classified as inferior to true Brahmin sages (*brahmaṛṣis*). And so, while the *Satyavatī* legend does claim that Viśvāmitra had become a Brahmin, the composers of the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa* use the dialogic narrative frame to deny this caste change. Their use of the term *siddhi* (“supernatural potency,” see Einoo 2009: 18), further evokes an esoteric (tantric) discourse that reimagines Viśvāmitra’s transformation from being a social one into a spiritual one.

On the whole, we may conclude that the purāṇic dynastic chronicles presented the Viśvāmitra legends in such a way as to place a new religio-political spin on the epics’ already polarized construction of Brahminhood. The narrative context

<sup>21</sup> *kim lakṣaṇena dharmena tapaseha śrutena vā || brāhmaṇyam samanuprāptam viśvāmitrādibhir nrpaīḥ |* (*VāP* 91.104; *BdP* 2.66.76–77ab).

<sup>22</sup> *ete rājarṣayaḥ sarve siddhim sumahatīṁ gatāḥ ||* (*VāP* 91.118bcd; *BdP* 2.66.89bcd)

of the *vamśānucaritas* provided a political dimension to this identity, in which the stories of Viśvāmitra's conflicts with Vasiṣṭha demonstrated how both kinds of Brahmins, when serving as *purohitas*, had the power to mediate against the political instabilities of a monarchical state. And this power came from their command over theistic and esoteric religious practices, not simply Vedic authority.

While the *paurāṇikas* did tend to favor Vaiṣṇavism for kings and link the Brahmin Other to Śaiva practices, the Viśvāmitra legends in the dynastic chronicles are not overtly attached to a sectarian position. This may reflect the cosmopolitan nature of public religious culture in the fourth and fifth centuries, during which time we may observe a thriving religious sphere in which diverse groups of sectarian (Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva) and orthodox (Śmārta) specialists, as well as heterodox (Buddhist and Jain) orders all received extensive royal patronage from Gupta and Vākāṭaka rulers, leading to what Hans Bakker has described as “an atmosphere of religious tolerance throughout the realm” (2010: 464). The *paurāṇikas*, I suggest, were sensitive to this diversity when they fashioned the dynastic chronicles, though they were sure to emphasize the supremacy of Brahmins regardless of sectarian orientation. In subsequent centuries Śaivism was to gain preeminence within the religious marketplace as the primary recipient of royal patronage, and, as Alexis Sanderson has demonstrated, “all the other religious traditions competing for patronage were colonized or profoundly influenced by it” (2009: 44–45). The *Skanda Purāṇa*, composed in the early phase of this “Śaiva Age,” offers a lengthy and striking treatment of Viśvāmitra that reveals the social anxieties involved in integrating the transgressive practices of the early Śaiva ascetic orders into a purāṇic package that would be suitable for the lay mainstream community. It is to this text that we now turn.

#### “THE POWER OF TAPAS AND YOGA”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE SKANDA PURĀΝA

An old Nepali manuscript (dated 810 CE) has permitted scholars to reconstruct the earliest extant version of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, long before it was recast into the distinct sections (*khaṇḍas*) that characterize its massive medieval incarnation.<sup>23</sup> Datable to the late sixth or early seventh century (Bakker 2007: 6), this early *Skanda* features three Viśvāmitra legends, *Kalmāṣapāda*, *Sarasvatī*, and

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<sup>23</sup> This text is currently being edited by a team of scholars at Groningen (Adriaensen, Bakker, and Isaacson 1994; Bakker and Isaacson 2004; Yokochi 2013).

TABLE 3.2

Viśvāmitra legends in the *Skanda Purāṇa* and their source texts

<i>Kalmāṣapāda</i> SkP 15–18	<i>Sarasvatī</i> SkP 19	<i>Triśaṅku</i> SkP App. 5 [ <i>Revākhaṇḍa</i> ]
Adapted from <i>Mbh</i> 1.166–168	Adapted from <i>Mbh</i> 9.41–42	Adapted from <i>Rām</i> 1.56–59

*Triśaṅku*, woven together into a story sequence that it calls “The Start and End of Enmity between Vasiṣṭha and Kauśika” (Table 3.2).<sup>24</sup> In their language, characterization, and plot details, the *Skanda*’s versions accord quite closely with those told in the epics, but with an added interpretive filter that glorified Śiva’s grace (*prasāda*). As we will see, however, the primary motivation for telling these legends about the conflicts between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha was to address a social tension between competing orders of Śaiva Brahmin renunciants who sought liberation through a union (*yoga*) with Śiva.

The *Skanda*’s versions of *Kalmāṣapāda* and *Sarasvatī* are based on the *Mahābhārata*’s versions of these legends, while its take on *Triśaṅku*, appearing in a later recension labeled the *Revākhaṇḍa*, is an adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s telling.<sup>25</sup> Central to this sequence of stories is the Viśvāmitra-Vasiṣṭha rivalry, a sentiment that is expressed in the dialogical narrative frame by Vyāsa, who, in a bit of a departure from the purāṇic norm, is the listener of the purāṇa, while Sanatkumāra, a son of Brahmā, is the raconteur. After Sanatkumāra finishes telling the *Kalmāṣapāda* legend, Vyāsa asks, “How did the enmity between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha arise? And how did it later go away? This I would like to know.”<sup>26</sup> Sanatkumāra responds with the *Sarasvatī* legend, in which Viśvāmitra tries to drown his rival in the river and then curses it to turn to blood for failing to comply. The malicious nature of our sage—already evident through his murder of Vasiṣṭha’s sons and his curse of the river—is noticeably enhanced by a curious episode that the *Revākhaṇḍa* and *Ambikākhaṇḍa* recensions insert here.<sup>27</sup> These texts maintain that Viśvāmitra physically enters the

<sup>24</sup> *vasiṣṭhakauśikābh्याम् ca vairodbhavasamāpanam* | (SkP 2.9ab).

<sup>25</sup> The influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* on the *Revākhaṇḍa* reflects the scholastic urges of the *paurāṇikas* that prompted the expansion of the *Skanda* after the twelfth century (Törzsök 2004; Yokochi 2004).

<sup>26</sup> *katham vairam samabhavad viśvāmitravasiṣṭhayoh* | *katham cāpagatam bhūya etad icchāmi veditum* || (SkP 19.14).

<sup>27</sup> For discussions of the historical development of these two closely related texts, see Adriansen, Bakker, and Isaacson 1998: 36–38; Bisschop 2002; Harimoto 2004.

body of the god Indra and unleashes his thunderbolt in a bid to shatter his rival to pieces (*SkP* 19, App. 4, 29–30). Viśvāmitra’s violence is put on stark display, as is the fact that he possesses a power that yogic adepts sought to acquire—the ability to “enter the body of another” (*parasārīrāvēśa*) (see Smith 2006: 286–289; Bloomfield 1917: 6–7). To be sure, this is an interpolated passage added to the text at some point before the ninth century (Bakker and Isaacson 2004: 54); but even if we were to leave it aside, it is quite evident that the *Skanda* views Viśvāmitra to be aggressive and angry throughout these stories, while Vasiṣṭha is consistently peaceful and kind. This is just as it was in the *Mahābhārata*. Vasiṣṭha shows no anger at the death of his sons (18.3), treats the Sarasvatī with kindness (19.19), and tolerates all of his rival’s murderous assaults without retribution. This tremendous forbearance, we are told, is what eventually permits their hostilities to come to an end once Viśvāmitra finally gains the self-restraint to appreciate it (19.24–25).

We may gather, then, the *Skanda* includes these legends for their allegorical value in representing the two-sided nature of Brahmin identity, valorizing Brahmins who behave like Vasiṣṭha and keeping Others who are like Viśvāmitra at the margins. However, this binary opposition is adapted using a distinctive Śiva-oriented theological framework in which two religious concepts become particularly significant: (1) Śiva’s *prasāda*, which is responsible for miracles in the world, such as Viśvāmitra’s caste change; and (2) *yoga*, which is theorized within early Śaiva soteriology as a state of “union between self and the Lord” (*ātmēśvarasaṃyoga*) that provides the spiritual seeker (*sādhaka*) with various kinds of supernormal powers (*siddhis*)—like entering the body of another—along the way to his ultimate goal, the complete cessation of suffering (*duḥkhānta*) (Hara 2002: 35). The *Skanda*, as its editors note, “contains numerous references to ‘Pāśupata-yoga’ or a Pāśupata *vrata* and concludes with a section on Pāśupata *yoga*” (Adriaensen, Bakker, and Isaacson 1994: 327). In the Viśvāmitra legends, however, the soteriological value of *yoga* has been backgrounded, and instead it functions in a kind of “harnessing” capacity, through which an ascetic may control the raw power of the *tapas* he has acquired. The presence of this *yoga* is the most important property that distinguishes Vasiṣṭha from Viśvāmitra, and this is how the *Skanda*’s composers differentiate the Śaiva Brahmin Self from the Śaiva Brahmin Other.

The *Skanda* describes Vasiṣṭha and his family as great devotees of Śiva and eminent Brahmin sages as well. Vasiṣṭha offers an eleven-verse hymn at the

start of the story sequence (*SkP* 15.19–29), in which he praises the glories of Śiva’s aniconic icon, the *linga*. Among a long list of entities and concepts that the *linga* represents, he includes the *purāṇas*, the four *Vedas*, sacrificial ritual, and Brahminical essence itself (*brahman*) (15.20, 27, 28). Orthodox Brahminical ideas and practices, in other words, are all declared to be manifestations of—and therefore subordinate to—Śiva’s divinity. This praise prompts the Lord to grant Vasiṣṭha a “supreme efficacious harnessing power (*yoga*) that is subtle, undiminishing, and satisfying all desires.”<sup>28</sup> He also bestows upon Vasiṣṭha his famous personality traits: “self-restraint and peacefulness, fame and joy, and non-anger.”<sup>29</sup> Reinforced here is the lay theistic formula for worshipping Śiva: ardent propitiation of the Lord, who, through his grace, makes the devotee’s wishes come true.

Śiva’s blessings run throughout Vasiṣṭha’s family. His son Śakti, devoted to Śiva right from birth (*SkP* 16.3), is also “endowed with the power of *tapas* and *yoga*” (*tapoyogabalānvita*) (16.2d). This same epithet is then used to describe Vasiṣṭha’s grandson, Parāśara, who, the Lord guarantees, “will be divine like you, possessing the power of *tapas* and *yoga*.”<sup>30</sup> Eventually Śiva’s blessings also provide Parāśara with a son, Vyāsa, who is described as “a fountainhead (*yoni*) bringing forth Vedic and śāstraic knowledge due to his ascetic power (*tapas*).”<sup>31</sup> Later, Vyāsa’s own son Śuka is also to be described as the “foremost of *yoga* experts” (*yogavidām varāḥ*) (19.13b). This genealogy thereby connects Vyāsa, who functions as a cultural godfather to normative Brahmin communities (and who explicitly represents the *Skanda*’s audience), to a long and well-respected line of powerful Śaiva Brahmins, while further connecting their prestige to Śiva’s *prasāda* and the Śaiva *yoga*.<sup>32</sup>

The extraordinary nature of this *yoga* is demonstrated throughout these legends. For one, it gives this whole family the ability to generate efficacious mantras. Vasiṣṭha uses mantras to freeze the king Kalmāṣapāda and force the demon to exit his body.<sup>33</sup> His grandson Parāśara also employs mantras for a rite

<sup>28</sup> *yogam ca paramam sūkṣmam akṣayam sarvakānikam* || (*SkP* 15.31cd).

<sup>29</sup> *damaḥ śamas tathā kīrtis tuṣṭir akrodhā eva ca* | (*SkP* 15.32ab).

<sup>30</sup> *pautraṃ tvatsamam divyam tapoyogabalānvitam* || (*SkP* 15.32b).

<sup>31</sup> ... *tapasā yonim śrautasmārtapravartakam* || (*SkP* 19.12cd).

<sup>32</sup> Note here that Vyāsa, the listener of the *Skanda*, is the only one who lacks *yoga*; it is no surprise then that in the very last chapters of the *purāṇa* he asks Sanatkumāra to teach him the “Pāśupata *yoga*.”

<sup>33</sup> This is, to be fair, also what happens in the *Mahābhārata*, where it is said that the king’s exorcism took place using “water infused by mantras” (*mantrapūtena . . . vāriṇā*) (*Mbh* 1.168.4ab). Neither the

that would potentially consume five hundred million *rākṣasas* (*SkP* 18.25–26), until the gods persuade him only to sacrifice the ones that Viśvāmitra had summoned to eat his father. As he does so, Parāśara makes the following dramatic declaration (18.35c): “Any evildoer—whether Brahmin or Kṣatriya—who should side with the demons and try to prevent [the sacrifice], I will angrily strike him down and offer him into this burning fire through the harnessing (*yoga*) of my ascetic power (*tapas*), filled as I am with the power of *tapas* and *yoga* (*tapoyogabalānvita*).”<sup>34</sup> It is important to notice the relationship that the *Skanda* draws between *tapas* and *yoga* in this instance: Parāśara’s *yoga*, in the ablative case, is the principal cause of his enemy’s demise, while *tapas*, taken in the genitive case, has a subordinate connection to its “harness” (*yoga*). That is to say, a mantra becomes efficacious when it is fueled by *tapas* that has been harnessed through *yoga*.

The *Skanda*’s composers repeatedly use this formula “endowed with the power of *tapas* and *yoga*” (*tapoyogabalānvita*) to describe Vasiṣṭha, his son, and his grandson (*SkP* 15.31–32, 16.2, 18.36–37). Viśvāmitra, on the other hand, is never described in these terms, except in one interpolated section discussed below. He does possess supernatural abilities, for he is able to summon demons to possess kings and curse rivers to turn to blood. But this happens not through *yoga*, but simply “by the power (*sakti*) of his tremendous asceticism (*tapas*),” a power that also helps Viśvāmitra “realize, after a great deal of time, that Vasiṣṭha has forgiven him,” leading him to cease his hostilities against his rival.<sup>35</sup> This *sakti* appears to designate a raw form of supernatural power that is generated directly through *tapas* and lacks the regulating mediation of *yoga*. This is why Viśvāmitra’s power has the tendency to be so destructive—he lacks the requisite (Śaiva) *yoga* to bring it under control.

This condition is further demonstrated within a third legend (*Triśaṅku*) told only in the *Revākhaṇḍa* recension. It comes in response to another question

epic nor the *Skanda* offer any details regarding the nature of these mantras, but in the epic these are likely to have been Atharvan, and there is evidence to indicate that early Śaiva orders also operated within the scope of the *Atharvaveda* tradition (Bisschop and Griffiths 2003; Sanderson 2007). The *Skanda*’s version may therefore reflect a cultural overlap between Atharvan and early Śaiva traditions.

<sup>34</sup> ya esām brāhmaṇo vāpi ksatriyo vā durātmavān | rakṣasām paksam āsthāya pratikaram karisyati || tam apy atrāpi samkruddhas tapoyogabalānvitah | vihatya tapaso yogād dhosye dīpte vibhāv asau || (*SkP* 18.36–37).

<sup>35</sup> mahatas tapasaḥ śaktyā kālena mahatā tadā | vasiṣṭhasya ca tāṁ kṣāntim jñātvā sa ṛṣipumgavah || (*SkP* 19.24).

that Vyāsa asks about Viśvāmitra, which happens to be the same one that everyone always asks about him: “How did Viśvāmitra gain Brahminhood through power of asceticism (*tapobala*)? How did he let go of his Kṣatriyahood and go to heaven in his own body? And how did that man of great ascetic power (*mahātapas*) lead Triśaṅku to heaven and immortality?”<sup>36</sup> Here, too, note that Viśvāmitra is said to possess *tapobala* and not *tapoyogabala*. Without mentioning the *Kāmadhenu* legend, the *Skanda* then describes briefly how Viśvāmitra had attained Brahminhood through harsh austerities, first “having placed in his heart that Mahādeva Bhūvaneśvara, who pervades everything.”<sup>37</sup> In answer to his prayers (*ārādhayataḥ*), Śiva grants Viśvāmitra supernormal power (*siddhi*), so that his wishes may come true (*SkP* 19, App. 5, 15–17). Sanatkumāra then glorifies Viśvāmitra’s superior level of *tapas* that compelled the gods to accept the polluted Triśaṅku into heaven. The *Skanda* closely follows the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s telling of *Triśaṅku*, but at several points emphasizes that Viśvāmitra’s counter-creation was due to Śiva’s *prasāda*, and not simply his own *tapas* (19, App. 5, 94, 113, 118). And ultimately, the Lord personally pays a visit to Viśvāmitra and grants him “overlordship” (*ādhipatyam*) over the other sages (19, App. 5, 144–5).

The *Skanda* does describe Viśvāmitra as “possessing the power of *tapas* and *yoga*” (*tapoyogabalānvita*) once, but this passage is found only in the *Revā-* and *Ambikākhaṇḍa* recensions, and may therefore be taken as a later addition to the text. In a scene reminiscent of the conclusion of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s Viśvāmitra saga or the Mārkanḍeya’s *Ādi-baka* legend, the gods urge him to cease his hostilities against Vasiṣṭha, proclaiming them both to be “immortals, whom aging has abandoned, and who both have the power of *tapas* and *yoga*.”<sup>38</sup> It functions, in other words, as a perlocutionary utterance that turns Viśvāmitra into Vasiṣṭha’s equal by purāṇic decree. If we consider that everywhere else Viśvāmitra is said to possess “the power of *tapas*” (*tapobala*) alone, then it is conceivable that later redactors had added this passage to bring Viśvāmitra into the fold, as it were, and to show him to be Vasiṣṭha’s equal. But even so, this would only reinforce the idea that Śaiva Brahmins who possess both *tapas* and *yoga* are superior to those who merely have ascetic power.

<sup>36</sup> viśvāmitrah katham yāto brāhmaṇatvan tapobalāt | ksatriyatvam samutsrjya svadehena divaṇ gataḥ | triśaṅkum anayat svarggam amaravtam mahātapāḥ || (*SkP* 19, App. 5, 2–4).

<sup>37</sup> kṛtvā hṛdi mahādevam sarvvagam bhuvaneśvaram | (*SkP* 19, App. 5, 13).

<sup>38</sup> amarau jarayā tyaktau tapoyogabalānvitau | (*SkP* 19, App. 4, R 57–8, A 37ab).

The story sequence thus resolves the rivalry between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha, but what impact would this have had in the wider religious and social milieu of the *Skanda Purāṇa*? In reconstructing the history of early Śaivism, scholars have noted the development of two distinct domains of religious practice—a lay tradition of “Māheśvara” householders who worshipped the deity through *pūjā* rites at home or in temples, and a more esoteric path consisting of numerous ascetic orders who sought spiritual union (*yoga*) with Śiva.<sup>39</sup> The most prominent of these were the Pāśupatas, whose philosophy appears to have been particularly influential in the *Skanda*’s composition.<sup>40</sup> As one of the five foundational categories (*pañcārthas*) of the Pāśupata tradition, *yoga* was understood to involve a merger (*samyoga*) between the individual (denoted as *paśu*, “beast”) and the Lord (*pati*).<sup>41</sup> This *yoga* was to be pursued through formal procedures (*vidhi*), and would lead to the cessation of suffering (*duḥkhānta*) for the practitioner (Hara 2002: 34).<sup>42</sup> However, the transgressive nature of some of these *vidhis* appears to have earned the Pāśupata ascetics some degree of notoriety in the social sphere. One had to be a Brahmin in order to be initiated as a Pāśupata, but their practices involved a regimen known as the “Pāśupata *vrata*,” which included smearing oneself with ashes, speaking in tongues, laughing, trembling, making cackling noises, engaging in sexual harassment, and other bizarre tactics designed to shock members of the uninitiated public and earn their derision (Sanderson 1988: 664–66). Doing so, it was believed, would induce a transfer of the public’s merit (*sukṛta*) toward the practitioner and that of his own evil (*pāpa*) toward his false accusers

<sup>39</sup> Sanderson describes these early Śaiva communities as belonging to the Atimārga, the “Extreme Path,” a term used by later tantric writers of the Mantramārga, the “Path of Mantras,” in order to differentiate the earlier modes of celibate renunciant practices from their own (largely) household traditions (1988: 264; for a synopsis of the differences between them, see Sanderson 2006: 147–48).

<sup>40</sup> The Pāśupata Śaiva doctrine is represented through a handful of early texts as well as a section of Mādhaba’s fourteenth-century *Sarvadarśanasaṅgraha* (see Hara 1958; Bisschop 2013; Sanderson 2006). The Pāśupata school is likely to have developed between the second and fourth centuries in Gujarat (Sanderson 2006: 148), and then spread eastwards through Ujjain, Kurukshtera, Kannauj, and then likely Varanasi (Bakker 2011a: 31; for connections between this Śaiva geography and the *Skanda*, see Bisschop 2006).

<sup>41</sup> The term *pañcārtha* is used to describe these five categories within the *Pañcārthabhāṣya* of Kaundinya (c. fourth–fifth century), though there appear to have been earlier Pāśupata usages of this term prior to his seminal doctrinal text (Bisschop 2013).

<sup>42</sup> The Pāśupata *yoga* is in this sense distinct from its formulation in the Yoga school of philosophy as a restraint of cognitive activity (*cittavṛttinirodha*); still, “there is no doubt that the Yoga supplied the basic framework (Grundgerüst) for the formation of the Pāśupata theology” (Hara 2002: 46; see also Brunner 1994).

(Hara 1966: 3–4).<sup>43</sup> So, if we follow Bakker’s hypothesis that the *Skanda* was composed by “a senior brahmin member of the Māheśvara community in Vārāṇasī, well-versed in Sanskrit literature, an expert on the epic tradition, initiated in the Pāśupata sacred texts” (2013: 4), and whose target audience was “the uninitiated laity” (Sanderson 2009: 52, note 25), it would not be surprising if the *Skanda*’s purāṇic community were to have harbored anxieties about the attempted integration of such un-Brahminlike behavior into the Māheśvara mainstream. This is where Viśvāmitra, Vasiṣṭha, and *yoga* came into play.

First, it is clear that the Pāśupata doctrine of *yoga* was of utmost importance to the *Skanda*’s composers. In the closing chapters of the *purāṇa*, Vyāsa asks to be taught “the supreme form of knowledge that is the holy Pāśupata *yoga*,” to which Sanatkumāra gives him a long and detailed “overview of the Pāśupata *yoga*” (*pāśupatayogavṛṇana*) (*Akh* 174–82).<sup>44</sup> He first instructs him in the basic philosophical tenets of the school (*dhyāna*) and the procedures (*vidhi*) that a spiritual seeker should follow, of which the most important is to smear oneself with ashes.<sup>45</sup> The Pāśupata ascetic who engages in these observances eventually achieves *yogaiśvarya*, a “majesty of *yoga*” that permits him to escape the cycle of rebirth as well as enter into Śiva’s heavenly city (Śivapura).<sup>46</sup> This state of yogic majesty is precisely what the *Skanda* glorifies through its Viśvāmitra legends.

To understand why, we may look to the social history of the Śaivas at the time of the *Skanda*’s composition. It is evident that a number of distinct ascetic groups existed beneath the overarching umbrella of the Pāśupata movement, each with their own competing doctrines (Bisschop 2010: 485–86; Sanderson

<sup>43</sup> Minoru Hara has studied Pāśupata practices from a philological perspective (1958: 25–29) and provides a detailed explanation of the mechanics of the “transfer of merit” (1979a). Diwakar Acharya (2014) provides an alternate reading of these passages, connecting them with earlier Vedic parallels and explaining the *vṛata* as imitating a bull, rather than simply insane behavior (cf. Oberlies 2000). Ingalls conjectures an influence of the Greek Cynics (1962: 294; see Hara 1979a: 435) and suggests that Herakles may have been imported as Lakulīśa, the legendary founder of the movement (Ingalls 1962: 296, note 30; see also Bakker 2011a: 23–7).

<sup>44</sup> ... param yogañ jñānam pāśupatam subham | (*Akh* 174.3ab).

<sup>45</sup> The *dhyāna* sections are adapted from the Sāṃkhya school of philosophy, while the *vidhi* sections feature techniques parallel to the theistic Yoga traditions (Oberhammer 1977: 57, as cited in Bakker *forthcoming*). This is not especially surprising, as the canonical Pāśupata texts also exhibit Sāṃkhya and Yoga influences (see Hara 2002: 17–32, 33–46; Brunner 1994).

<sup>46</sup> The *Skanda*’s descriptions of Śivapura are adapted from an earlier purāṇic tradition (Bisschop 2007: 53–4), and offer further indication of how this text has synthesized esoteric Pāśupata doctrines within the lay Śaiva worldview.

1988: 664–67). The identities and history of these groups are still poorly understood, but amidst this nebulous Pāśupata world, it has been suggested that one sect, initially called the “Mausulas” but later involving other groups, had distinguished themselves from the other Pāśupatas in that they “chiefly engaged in ritual (worship) activity, forsaking the more rigorous portion of the Pāśupata praxis” (Bakker 2000: 7). They traced their lineage through a certain disciple of Lakulīśa named “Musula” or “Musulendra” but, like the other Pāśupatas, revered Lakulīśa as the founder of the movement and an incarnation of Śiva (Bakker 2000: 5).<sup>47</sup> However, Bakker has proposed that this group also held up a certain Brahmin of the Atri *gotra* named Somaśarman, in whose house Lakulīśa was born, as the true “fountainhead” of their order (2000: 15). A copper-plate inscription from Malhar (Madhya Pradesh), dated 650 CE, gives testimony of the Mausula lineage (Bakker 2000: 7–10), and the earliest available version of the birth story is also told in the roughly contemporaneous *Skanda*. As per Bakker’s translation, the *Skanda* passage reads, “That lord, i.e., Śamkara, blessed/initiated that *brahman*-knowing brahmin belonging to Atri’s lineage together with his (whole) family by bestowing upon him perfection in *yoga*.<sup>48</sup> This *yogasiddhi*, I suggest, is identical to the *yoga* that Śiva bestows upon the “*brahman*-knowing Brahmin” Vasiṣṭha and his family within the *Skanda*’s Viśvāmitra legends.

If we were to make this correlation, we might then conjecture the *Skanda* to be using Vasiṣṭha as a mythological stand-in for Somaśarman, and by extension, the ritualistic adherents of his doctrine, which Bakker has identified with the otherwise obscure “Somasiddhānta” (2000: 12). Meanwhile, Viśvāmitra would represent the more transgressive Pāñcārtha schools.<sup>49</sup> This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that the *Skanda* makes a special mention of a “Kauśika” as the first of the four primary disciples of Lakulīśa (Bisschop 2010: 483), not to mention the existence of epigraphical evidence from as early as 380 CE that points to the Pāñcārtha affiliation of persons named Kuśika

<sup>47</sup> For a synoptic discussion of Lakulīśa, see Bisschop 2009: 752–3; for textual sources for the history of the Pāśupata subsects, and an especially cogent discussion of the differences between the so-called Lākulās and Mausalas and their connections to the later Mantramārga schools, see Sanderson 2006.

<sup>48</sup> *sa tam brahmavidam vipram ātreyam sakulam vibhuḥ | yogasiddhipradānena anujagrāha śamkaraḥ* || (*SkP* 167.125, as cited in Bakker 2000: 14; cf. *Akh* 167.135cd–136ab).

<sup>49</sup> In a forthcoming study, Bakker takes note of the sharp contrast between Somaśarman’s householder status and the celibate lifestyle demanded of Pāñcārtha ascetics. In this regard, we may also point to the parallel between the householder Vasiṣṭha, whose lineage is charted for five generations, and the celibate Viśvāmitra, who has no family in the *Skanda*.

or Kauśika (discussed in chapter 2 of Bakker, *forthcoming*). And so, when the *Skanda*'s composers narrate “the rise and cessation of enmity between Vasiṣṭha and Kauśika” (*vasiṣṭhakauśikābhyaṁ ca vairodbhavasamāpanam*) (*SkP* 2.9ab), it would have spoken to the internal differences between ritualist and ascetic subgroups within the Pāśupata fold, offering a way to integrate them both into a coherent cultural package for consumption by the larger Śaiva mainstream. The *Kalmāṣapāda* and *Sarasvatī* legends make it conceivable, and indeed laudable, for Brahmin householders to pursue the kind of Pāśupata *yoga* that is presented at the end of the *purāṇa*—since Vasiṣṭha's entire family possesses it—and demonstrate how those who do pursue it may more effectively control their powers. It is worth noting that the *Skanda*'s composers have “cleaned up” this doctrine rather noticeably, for while Sanatkumāra does emphasize the role of bathing in ashes as part of the Pāśupata observances, there is no mention of the more corporal injunctions (*niyamas*) given in the *Pāśupata Sūtra*, such as laughter (*hasita*), song and dance (*gītanṛtta*) and making drumming noises with the mouth (*humḍumkāra*) (*PS* 1.8). Moreover, he completely ignores the transgressive activities that Pāśupata aspirants are asked to undertake in public as part of their regimen, e.g., to “snore, tremble, limp, and play the lecher” (Hara 1966: 3–4, in reference to *PS* 3.8–II). In this way, the *Skanda*'s composers give its lay Śaiva audiences a palatable, sanitized, and mythologically enriched version of what had previously been a harsh and challenging path restricted to celibate Brahmin ascetics.

By resolving the conflicts between Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, then, the *Skanda* may be read as bringing contrasting orders of Śaiva Brahmins—one that was rigidly ascetic and antisocial and the other that had taken up ritualist and pedagogical roles in society (Sanderson 2013: 232)—under the umbrella of a single, comprehensive identity. This is in keeping with a general pattern that Bakker notices as having taken place on a geo-cultural level in the city of Varanasi, where there was at this time a harmonization of “two mutual permeating but nevertheless contrasting religious spheres... one devotional catering for emotional needs, for the benefit of those pursuing happiness and religious merit, the other geared to the transmundane aims of ascetics and the moribund” (1996: 36–7). It is possible that the *Skanda*'s Viśvāmitra legends project the anxieties involved in the convergence of these “contrasting religious spheres” onto the mythological plane, so that the resolution of the sages' enmity in the storyworld could be used to imagine a real-world

reconciliation of actual Pāśupata orders. If Viśvāmitra can end his hostilities against Vasiṣṭha, in other words, then Pāñcārthins and Somasiddhāntins may coexist as intrinsic parts of a two-sided Śaiva Brahmin identity.



Based on the evidence we have examined in this chapter, we may make two basic observations about Viśvāmitra's legends in the early purāṇas. First, the purāṇic dynastic chronicles used the binary vision of Brahmin identity generated by the opposition of Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra to demonstrate the intellectual authority of the *purohita* as a master of both Vedic and extra-Vedic practices within the Gupta-era monarchical state. And second, the *Skanda*'s composers adapted these legends to evaluate this same binary within the early Śaiva milieu, in order to reconcile the differences between two distinct types of Pāśupata Brahmins. The result of these purāṇic endeavors, on a broader level, was to ensure that the highest prestige should be accorded to Brahmins within both multi-caste domains (the royal courts and the lay Śaiva mainstream)—for as the *Skanda*'s composers themselves explain at the end of telling their sequence of Viśvāmitra stories, “He who might always listen this story, or who should tell it to Brahmins, will cross difficult mountains, possessing undiminishing vigor (*pauruṣa*).”<sup>50</sup> Brahmins, the composers and broadcasters of purāṇic literature, are to be kept front and center.

While investigating the process whereby Sanskrit mythological literature facilitated the construction of this religio-political authority for Brahmin communities, I have used an analogical concept rather casually in this chapter that ought to be more carefully explained: “mythological mooring.” The analogy is straightforward enough—these myths and legends functioned much like ropes, cables, and anchors would for a sailing ship, providing a narratological apparatus through which a purāṇic author could secure his otherwise free-floating ideas within the Hindu tradition—but it comes with some implications that are worth noting before we conclude this chapter.

If myths and legends were the mooring, then Vedic, epic, and śāstraic literature served as the pier or anchorage for the Sanskrit purāṇas. By the mid-first millennium, these Sanskrit texts clearly carried the cultural weight

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<sup>50</sup> ya imāḥ śṛṇuyān nityam̄ brāhmaṇāñ chrāvayīta vā | sa dustarāṇi durgāṇi taraty aśrāntapuruṣah || (SkP 19.26).

of the Brahminical tradition, as is evident through two simple observations of how our *paurāṇikas* approached Viśvāmitra. First, almost all of the purāṇic Viśvāmitra legends are retellings of stories from the epics. We find only one “new” narrative—*Satyavrata*—which is in fact a prequel that complements the epics’ *Triśaṅku*, relying upon its popular existence (as well as various motifs culled from the other epic Viśvāmitra legends) for its own coherence. If purāṇic audiences weren’t already aware of the *Triśaṅku* legend, in other words, what would be the point of saying that Vasiṣṭha gave Satyavrata the nickname “*Triśaṅku*” because of his three sins? Furthermore, as we have seen, there is evidence that our *paurāṇikas* had known the *Kāmadhenu* and *Menakā* legends, but did not tell these stories that focus on Viśvāmitra’s struggles to become Brahmin.

One reason for this could be that the epics were so widely available in royal courts and temples in the mid-first millennium that these particular stories simply did not need retelling. A *paurāṇika* might easily look up the definitive versions of these stories in his own copy of the *Mahābhārata* or *Rāmāyaṇa*, or consult well-stocked Brahminical libraries. This would not, of course, stop anyone from telling oral variants, but within the Brahminical intellectual sphere of the mid-first millennium, and at the centerpoints of political and religious culture in northern India, the dominant versions of the Viśvāmitra legends continued to be those that were embedded in the two Sanskrit epics. And so, *paurāṇikas* either told the same stories but with new theistic interpretive spins (e.g., *Satyavatī*) or did not bother to tell them at all (e.g., *Kāmadhenu* or *Menakā*).

In the coming centuries, however, political and religious changes across the subcontinent would cause a tectonic shift in the modes and purposes for composing Sanskrit purāṇas. A breakdown of the pan-Indian empire of the Guptas into shifting “imperial formations” across the subcontinent signaled the advent of regionalized political power, while in the religious sphere, *tīrtha*-pilgrimage became a thriving religious industry. As *paurāṇikas* sought to secure the elite status of Brahmins within both of these contexts, the texts they produced were more localized in scope and increasingly “unmoored” from the Vedic and śāstric traditions. As we will discover in the next chapter, it is when medieval purāṇic literature begins to address more regionally-oriented religious and sociopolitical concerns that we see the appearance new Viśvāmitra legends, as well as major variants of older ones.

## GEO-MAPPING THE BRAHMIN OTHER IN REGIONAL PURĀNIC LITERATURE



Throughout the Indian subcontinent, we find places like the one shown here (Figure 4.1), where it is said that Viśvāmitra achieved Brahminhood, aided Triśaṅku, or performed some other extraordinary feat. This charming little lotus-covered pond is called “Viśvāmitra-*kunḍa*” and is located in Vadnagar, a sleepy, dusty town in northern Gujarat. According to a medieval Sanskrit purānic text as well as contemporary local oral tradition, this is the exact spot where Viśvāmitra became a Brahmin, and where he encountered Menakā as well. On its shores lie the ruins of a temple that our sage himself is said to have built, and it is not far from another site where he is said to have helped Triśaṅku get to heaven. But this is not the only place in India where such claims are made, and one is sure to find a number of Viśvāmitra-*kunḍas* or Viśvāmitra-*tīrthas* dotting the religious landscape of the country, each claiming to be the site where one or another of his legends had taken place, and where pilgrims may access the supernatural power that Viśvāmitra himself had harnessed.

This growing concern for “geo-mapping” storyworld events onto real-world sites motivated *paurāṇikas* in the early second millennium (1000–1400) to retell nearly all of the older legends of Viśvāmitra, while adding a few new ones along the way. Their adaptations continued to glorify his power to transcend social boundaries, but particularly highlighted the compassion with which he



FIG. 4.1. Viśvāmitra-*kunḍa* in Vadnagar, Gujarat, with ruins of Ganeśa/Saptarṣi temple in background. Photograph by Adheesh Sathaye, May 2012.

shared it with the downtrodden at these sacred sites. This chapter investigates the nature of such purāṇic geo-mappings, and how Viśvāmitra's role as the transgressive but merciful Brahmin Other was once again adapted in medieval Sanskrit literature (1) to extend Brahminical authority onto pilgrimage sites across the subcontinent and (2) to construct new, regionalized inflections of Brahmin social power.

Crucial to these maneuvers was the fixed presence of *tīrthas* in the natural landscape—sacred riversides, pools, or ponds where diverse populations of pilgrims sought to experience a spiritual “crossing over” in their quest for worldly benefits or liberation (Eck 1981; Bharati 1963; Bhardwaj and Lohntfeld 2004). Aside from possible continuities with purificatory bathing practices conducted after Vedic sacrifices (Grünendahl 2002: 324–25), *tīrtha* practices largely fell outside of the Vedic ritual complex (Bharati 1963: 137; Eck 1981: 334). Moreover, while temples were often built at *tīrthas*, the sites themselves were natural bodies of water where anyone, regardless of caste, gender,

or level of purity, could access the kind of transcendent power that enabled Viśvāmitra to change his caste (Eck 1981: 338). As such, *tīrthas* offered an open and pluralistic space of public culture in which diverse religious groups could participate (see Eck 1998). By locating the Viśvāmitra legends at some of these sites, we will find that medieval *paurāṇikas* sought to recast these sacred *spaces* as Brahminical *places*.

Admittedly, the purāṇic ambition to link Viśvāmitra to the power of *tīrthas* is nothing new. The earliest discussions of *tīrtha* pilgrimage take place in the *Mahābhārata*'s “gazetteer”-style discussions of Hindu sacred sites (Bhardwaj and Lochtefeld 2004: 485), and, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the epic geo-maps the *Kāmadhenu* and *Sarasvatī* legends to two *tīrthas* on the Sarasvatī River near Thanesar. These geo-mapped stories permit the *Mahābhārata*'s composers to deploy a geographical imaginary in making sense of the mythological past—as James Hegarty puts it, the epic “uses *tīrtha* to ‘flesh out’ and comment upon the significant past” (2012: 151; cf. Hegarty 2009). The medieval *paurāṇikas*, I suggest, were aiming for something quite the opposite: the older legends of Viśvāmitra and other well-known figures were used to “flesh out” the public imagination of local holy places, to comment upon their religious and social significance for pilgrims on a pan-Indian scale, and to construct, on a regional level, a positive social identity for the Brahmin officiants who administered these sites.

This new geographical dimension to purāṇic composition came on the heels of a historical “proliferation” of *tīrtha* pilgrimage culture in the Gupta and post-Gupta period that is reflected in the inclusion of extensive *tīrtha* lists in the purāṇas (Bhardwaj and Lochtefeld 2004: 485; Nath 2007: 46). Historians have attributed this proliferation to an advancement of agrarian economy into peripheral regions outside of the Gangetic valley toward the end of the first millennium (Nath 2007), and the ensuing migrations of Brahmins into these areas (Chakrabarti 2000).<sup>1</sup> By connecting local sacred sites, deities, and modes of worship to a mythological storyworld that would have already been familiar to the wider Hindu mainstream, purāṇic writers operating in this time of cultural expansion could assert Brahminical authority over these outlying pilgrimage destinations. They gave their mainstream

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Salomon further notes the formation of a hierarchy of pilgrimage destinations within medieval Brahminical texts, with peripheral *tīrthas* ranked lower than the major central temple centers (Varanasi, Gaya, etc.) (1979: 124).

audiences reasons to visit these remote sites, naturalized the “sacred paths” on which they were to travel in order to get there (Stoddard 1987), and authorized the Brahmin officiants who would supervise their on-site activities and accept their donations once they arrived: the oft-neglected *pāṇḍās* (Bharati 1963: 144). And *paurāṇika* writers also positioned themselves as literary surrogates to this *tīrtha* culture, to the extent that hearing the Sanskrit stories that they had composed about a particular holy site could provide the same merit as visiting it.

At first glance, the purāṇic composers would appear to be cultural agents of a pan-Indian, Sanskritic Hinduism and speaking to (and for) a relatively homogenous Brahminical elite. Meanwhile, *tīrtha* sites that they describe represent the many highly localized and diverse religious traditions being absorbed into this larger mainstream through the sponge-like purāṇic textual project. It is thus tempting to see the interfacing of normative Sanskrit texts and local religious practices as an encounter between the “Great Tradition” and “Little Traditions” of Hinduism, using Robert Redfield’s theoretical model of folk and urban culture (1956: 70–76; cf. Marriott 1955: 191–202, as cited in Bhardwaj 1987: 24). We might therefore regard the purāṇic treatment of *tīrthas* as reflecting what Diana Eck calls “the geographical equivalent of Sanskritization” (1981: 336). Such a conclusion, however, would overlook the internal crises of social identity among the Brahmin groups who produced and used the Sanskrit purāṇas—most starkly expressed in the binary opposition of Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra—as well as the development of regionalized inflections of Brahmin identity in the second millennium.

In fact, there is good evidence to suggest that medieval Sanskrit purāṇic texts operated in a kind of regional-level middle ground between an imagined, pan-Indian Brahminical tradition and concrete modes of local beliefs and practices.<sup>2</sup> As Kunal Chakrabarti explains, purāṇic literature served as a “cultural resource which enabled little communities to transform themselves into a regional community which could be culturally identified and territorially demarcated” (2000: 16). As we will discover in the next chapter, this bears

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<sup>2</sup> See, especially, the work of Kunal Chakrabarti (2001) on the formation of Bengali regional identity through medieval Sanskrit purāṇas, Anne Feldhaus (2003) on the connections between riverine sacred imaginaries and regionalized religious identities in Maharashtra, and Elizabeth Rohlman (2007, 2011), who has examined how medieval purāṇic literature in Gujarat operates on all three levels—local, regional, and pan-Indic.

great similarity to what the *bhakti* poets, working in the early vernacular traditions, were doing at roughly the same time. For example, as Anne Feldhaus so eloquently puts it, the writings of the Old Marathi Mahānubhāv poets reflect a process “by which people began to think of the regions *as* regions... began to identify themselves as *belonging* to the regions, and began to take pride, not just in the languages or deities of the regions, but in the regions themselves” (1986: 532, emphasis in original). Brahmin *paurāṇikas* engaged in similar modes of identification, albeit in the elite register of Sanskrit, but nevertheless based on regionalized evaluations of the binary opposition between being Brahmin and becoming the Other kind of Brahmin. These notions were, as we know, central to earlier versions of the Viśvāmitra legends, and so it comes as no surprise to find that they are retold at great length in medieval purāṇic literature.

Two medieval Sanskrit texts appear to have been especially interested in connecting Viśvāmitra’s exploits to regional *tīrtha* sites: the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* of the *Skanda Purāṇa* (c. twelfth–thirteenth centuries) and the *Gautamī Māhātmya* of the *Brahma Purāṇa* (c. fourteenth century). They detail twelve different Viśvāmitra legends as having taken place either at *tīrthas* in the Gujarati town of Vadnagar (in the *Nāgara*) or along the Godāvarī River in Maharashtra (in the *Gautamī*).<sup>3</sup> These geo-mappings, as we have come to expect, took place largely within the pseudo-performance context of their dialogic narrative frames. Analysis of these frames will suggest that Viśvāmitra’s counter-normative persona was instrumental in the consolidation of Brahminical authority over religious practices at *tīrthas* (in the *Gautamī*), and in the construction of a regionalized Brahmin identity (in the *Nāgara*). Crucial to both was the further development of Viśvāmitra’s compassionate side, balancing his transgressive personality with a charitable outlook that carved out new place for the Brahmin Other within medieval Indian *tīrtha* culture. The Brahmin officiants at *tīrthas*, though they may have been seen as inferior to landowning Brahmins, and though they engaged in transgressive practices, represented a way for outcast, afflicted, and otherwise downtrodden populations to “cross over” and reach worldly prosperity or spiritual liberation (*bhukti* or *mukti*), by providing them access to the salvific power of *tīrthas*.

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<sup>3</sup> The *Gautamī Māhātmya* and *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* include geo-mapped versions of all of the Viśvāmitra legends except for *Kalmāṣapāda*, *Ādi-baka*, *Satyavrata*, and *Hariścandra*.

“BY THE GRACE OF THE GODS”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE  
GAUTAMĪ MĀHĀTMYA

Included in the *Brahma Purāṇa* are eight Viśvāmitra legends, two of which are found nowhere else in Sanskrit literature (Table 4.1). Though it has an undeniably ancient pedigree (Rocher 1986: 154–55; Hazra 1940: 146), the text we find today is a “conglomeration of portions belonging to different periods and written by different hands” (Trivedi 1968–69: 74, cited in Rocher 1986: 155) that received its final redaction in Odisha in the fourteenth century (Söhnens and Schreiner 1989: xxxi; Wilson 1839: 71). The Viśvāmitra legends appear in two different historical layers of the *Brahma*’s motley corpus. One familiar set—*Satyavatī*, *Sunahṣepa*, and *Satyavrata*—comes in its older core of dynastic chronicles (*vamśānucaritas*) that are likely to have been adapted from the *Harivamśa* (Söhnens and Schreiner 1989: xxiv; cf. Pargiter 1910: 9, note 1). The rest are found in a lengthy section called the *Gautamī Māhātmya* (“The Wonders of the Gautamī”) (*BrP* 70–175), which describes the divine origins of the Godāvarī River that runs through Maharashtra and northern Andhra

TABLE 4.1.

*Sources and geo-mappings of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Brahma Purāṇa*

Dynastic Chronicles (c. fourth–sixth centuries)		<i>Gautamī Māhātmya</i> (c. fourteenth century)				
<i>Satyavatī</i>	<i>Satyavrata</i>	Śvapaca	Śunahṣepa	Jīgarti	Menakā	Two Nymphs
<i>Sunahṣepa</i>	7.97–8.23 10.23–68	93	104	150	147.1–8	147.8–23
<i>Part of</i> <i>purāṇa-pañcalakṣaṇa</i> (adapted from Hv, VP)		Adapted from Mbh	Adapted from AB	New story	Adapted from Mbh	New story
<i>Geographical mappings:</i>						
Viśvāmitra- tīrtha, near Nashik	Hariścandra- tīrtha, etc., near Paithan	Paiśāca- tīrtha, near Nanded	(Haridwar)	Apsaroyugala- tīrtha, near Nanded		

Pradesh, and sequentially identifies numerous holy sites from its source near Tryambakeshwar, west of Nashik, to its delta in the Bay of Bengal. Our investigation will focus on how these five stories have been geo-mapped onto *tīrthas* along this river, and why the *Gautamī*'s composer would have done so.

Interjected rather abruptly within a larger gazetteer of the holy sites of Odisha, the *Gautamī Māhātmya* is a self-contained unit that “must have originally been a distinct book” (Rocher 1986: 156). While R. C. Hazra offers a tentative lower limit of the tenth century for its composition (1940: 155), I find evidence that can further push its *terminus post quem* to the fourteenth century, shortly before the final redaction of the larger *Brahma* corpus.<sup>4</sup> In conformity with the rest of the *purāna*, the *Gautamī*'s composer has adopted a broadly Viṣṇu-centered perspective, though as we will see, he is often quite comfortable in accommodating Śiva worship.<sup>5</sup> And given its geographical focus, we might imagine this composer to have hailed from somewhere on the Godāvarī itself (Hazra 1940: 155).<sup>6</sup>

It is less clear, however, whether the target audiences of this text were also living along the river. The *Gautamī* provides very few purely local accounts, in favor of localized retellings of pan-Indian myths and legends. Furthermore, the sequence of *tīrthas* moves strictly downstream from source to sea. There are no inventories of sacred regions (*kṣetras*)—which is in sharp contrast to the thick description of the *Puruṣottama-kṣetra* of Odisha that immediately precedes it—and there are no detours along the Godāvarī's numerous tributaries. We may therefore surmise that *Gautamī* has been organized for pilgrims interested in going on a tour of the Godāvarī, rather than those already living there. These target audiences most likely would have been located at the great religious centers of the Gangetic valley, like Varanasi, where similar

<sup>4</sup> In chapter 117, the *Gautamī* describes a Śiva image named Jñāneśvara located at a *tīrtha* named Ātma-*tīrtha*, which can be placed with confidence at a village named Apegaon on the Godāvarī outside of Paithan, said to be the birthplace of the Marathi poet-saint Jñāneśvar (1275–96) and where today we find a memorial shrine for him (Ranade 1983: 43–44). Moreover, aside from the usual “liberation and great prosperity” (*muktim ca bhuktīm ca vipulām*) this *tīrtha* is also said to grant “knowledge of the Self” (*ātmajñānam*) (BrP 117.19ab), a characteristic feature of Jñānadev's philosophy and not found at any other *tīrtha* described in this text. More research is necessary to solidify this connection, but if we conjecture that the *Gautamī* has mythologized Jñāneśvar's shrine at Apegaon, it would suggest the turn of the fourteenth century as the earliest possible date for the composition of the text.

<sup>5</sup> The uniform structure and style of the *Gautamī*, and its comparative brevity, makes it likely that only one *paurānika* was responsible for its composition—though for the purposes of this study, it matters little whether one or more composers were ultimately involved in its writing.

<sup>6</sup> Considering that most of the *Gautamī*'s *tīrthas* are clustered near Nashik, Paithan, or Nanded, it is likely that the author hailed from one of these Maharashtrian towns.

*tīrtha* guides were being produced at this time (Fleming 2009: 62). In this context, the *Gautamī* would have served as a kind of medieval travel brochure for potential pilgrims interested in going on a Godāvarī tour, as well as a trav- elogue through which others could vicariously experience some of its spiritual benefits without actually making the journey.

Also worth noting is the balanced theological framework used by the composer of the *Gautamī Māhātmya*. Though Viṣṇu is valorized as the supreme deity, many *tīrthas* are clearly dedicated to Śiva. A certain amount of sectarian compromise was therefore required to account for the sacredness of the sites. For example, it is stated that Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu (as well as Gaṇeśa and the Goddess) were equally responsible for creating the Godāvarī (Feldhaus 2000: 22), and both Śiva and Viṣṇu are involved in the establishment of many of its *tīrthas*. Hand-in-hand with this pluralism is a markedly scholastic outlook toward earlier Vedic and epic literature. As its editors note, the composer of the *Gautamī* has drawn upon Vedic materials to a much higher degree than the rest of the *Brahma* corpus, often quoting scripture verbatim (Söhnern and Schreiner 1989: xxxi–xxxii). These literary connections to Vedic culture ground the pilgrims' experiences at *tīrthas* to a Brahminical tradition that conceives of itself as transcending but accommodating Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva theological frameworks.

The *Gautamī* establishes such connections between storyworld and real world through its dialogic narrative frame. The *Māhātmya* begins with sage Nārada saying to Brahmā:

I know of the purificatory nature of asceticism (*tapas*), Vedic rites (*yajña*), donation (*dāna*), and holy places (*tīrtha*)—I have heard it all from you, Creator and Master of the World. How many *tīrthas* are there in heaven, earth, and the underworld, and what is always so special about all of these *tīrthas*?<sup>7</sup>

In response, Brahmā describes the significance of the Godāvarī River. He explains that while the holy Gaṅgā has only one celestial form, it actually has two earthly manifestations—the first brought down to earth by the Brahmin sage

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<sup>7</sup> *tapaso yajñadānānāṁ tīrthānāṁ pāvanāṁ smṛtam | sarvam śrutanāṁ mayā tvatto jagadyone jagatpate || kiyanti santi tīrthāni svargamartyarasātale | sarveṣām eva tīrthānāṁ sarvadā kim viśiṣyate ||* (BrP 70.14–15).

Gautama, and the second by Bhagīratha, the Kṣatriya (Feldhaus 2000: 23). The former, we are told, is the Gautamī (i.e., the Godāvarī), while the latter is the more famous Gaṅgā of the north. The subtle use of caste hierarchy here, however, argues for the superiority of the Godāvarī over the Gaṅgā (since Brahmins are higher than Kṣatriyas within *varṇa* ideology) while also implicitly sanctioning Brahmin pilgrimage to the Godāvarī *tīrthas*, since she has a Brahmin “father.”

Nārada’s questions seem to reflect the medieval “mass proliferation of *tīrthas*” (Nath 2007: 46), and while undoubtedly there would have been a professional interest in Brahminizing these peripheral sites of religious practice, we may also notice an underlying worry whether *tīrtha* practices might really be better (*viśisyate*) than other time-honored Brahminical practices. Not only would this fear grip pilgrims planning on going to these *tīrthas*—who would want to know what they are getting themselves into—but also temple-going, mainstream audiences who would not or could not make such a long and arduous journey, and above all the Brahmin *paurāṇikas* whose own livelihoods were threatened by the success of this competing religious industry. This ambivalence of glorification and apprehension toward *tīrtha* culture is perfectly captured by Viśvāmitra, whose transgressive persona is again on display in the *Gautamī*, but carefully balanced with a spirit of mercy and compassion. The power of a *tīrtha* may indeed be volatile, like Viśvāmitra, but also like Viśvāmitra, it can rescue those who find themselves in abjection.

The *Gautamī*’s version of the *Śunahṣepa* legend provides a good illustration of these processes in action. It follows the authoritative Vedic version (of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*) more closely than earlier texts, but weaves in some curious new details that (a) valorize Viṣṇu above other deities, (b) highlight the transformative power of the Godāvarī’s *tīrthas*, and (c) emphasize Viśvāmitra’s compassion. When the prince Rohita refuses to be a sacrificial victim to Varuṇa, for example, he does not run away to the forest, but audaciously vows to sacrifice the Vedic god to Viṣṇu himself (*BrP* 104.38cde). It is in response to this challenge to his divine authority—and not for breaking his promise—that Varuṇa curses his father to be stricken with edema (*jaḍodara*) (104.39). Similarly, the power of Vedic ritual is subordinated to the sacred value of the Godāvarī. Hariścandra initially propitiates Varuṇa at the banks of the river (104.19), and his human sacrifice is also staged at this same site after a disembodied voice in the sky instructs the king to perform it there (104.67). The rite is completed without any violence, again “by the grace of the *tīrtha*” (*tīrthasya*

*tu prasādena*) (104.82c). As soon as everyone bathes in the river and worships the deities involved in the sacrifice (104.79–80), they are gratified and agree that the sacrifice may be ended without slaughtering the boy.<sup>8</sup>

The conclusion of the story explicitly connects these events to a site on the Godāvarī outside of Nanded, where bathing is declared to yield tangible rewards equivalent to a Vedic human sacrifice (*naramedha*) (104.89). To this, a footnote is added to explain how the *Śunahṣepa* story itself can provide the merit of visiting the *tīrtha*: “Anyone who should read it, or sponsor its reading, or anyone who might listen to it through devotion (*bhakti*), will obtain a son—if he should be without progeny—or whatever else held dear in his heart.”<sup>9</sup> This series of functional replacements, from Vedic ritual to *tīrtha* bathing and then to storytelling performance, first establishes the authority of on-site ritual officiants—the *tīrthapurohitas* or *panḍās* in contemporary parlance (van der Veer 1984: 61)—and then supersedes it with that of *paurāṇika* Brahmins, who are able to provide temple-going audiences an experience of this transcendent power remotely. Also found in the *Mahābhārata*’s descriptions of *tīrthas* (Hegarty 2009), this strategy of double displacement enables the purāṇic text to be both a travel guide and a travelogue.

The most intriguing aspect of the *Gautamī*’s *Śunahṣepa*, however, is how empathetic Viśvāmitra is shown to be. In Vedic versions of the story, Viśvāmitra plays a part only during Śunahṣepa’s adoption, and in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Śunahṣepa had gone to him seeking refuge. In the *Gautamī*’s version, when Śunahṣepa is just about to be executed, Viśvāmitra on his own intervenes in the proceedings. He asks the gods to show their favor on those involved in this abominable rite and proposes an alternative to dissecting and offering this boy’s body parts into the fire:

Eminent sages, let us go to the Gautamī, bathe there, and then, as we praise each god, one by one, with formulae (*mantras*) and hymns (*stotras*), they (the gods) shall be pleased, enjoying this auspicious act. May the sages protect him (*Śunahṣepa*), and the gods enjoy their oblations.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> We are told that there 8014 *tīrthas* at this location (BrP 104.88), and the names of some of the *tīrthas* reveal who these gods were: Varuṇa, Brahmā, Agni, Indra, the Moon, Śiva, Mitra, Viṣṇu, Yama, and the Aśvins (BrP 104.1cd–2ab).

<sup>9</sup> *yah pathet pāthayed vāpi śrūyād vāpi bhaktitah | aputraḥ putram āpnōti yac cānyān manasāḥ priyam ||* (BrP 104.89–90).

<sup>10</sup> *gautamīṇ yāntu viprendrāḥ snātvā devān prthak prthak || mantraiḥ stotraiḥ stuwantas te mudam yāntu śive ratāḥ | enāṁ rakṣantu munayo devāś ca haviṣo bhujāḥ ||* (BrP 104.76cd–77).

The sages and the king heed his advice, bathe at the *tīrtha*, and perform acts of worship, upon which the gods declare the rite to be ended without the need for murder (*BrP* 104.80). It is true that in the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s earlier version, Viśvāmitra had shown mercy by giving Śunahṣepa two *gāthās* that freed him from the sacrifice. However, this act of compassion was tempered by his curse of his own sons—a motif that is absent in the *Gautamī*. There, it was also connected to his *tapas*; here, it is tied to the sacred properties of the river, which, by extension, can benefit a pilgrim even today. In this way, Viśvāmitra reflects the Brahmin officiants who regulate bathing and ritual practices at the Godāvarī *tīrthas* in a positive light—they, too, make use of transgressive forms of power, certainly, but like Viśvāmitra they show mercy toward the downtrodden, and especially other Brahmins. This respect for Brahminhood is reinforced through one additional feature of the story. When Rohita initially presents Śunahṣepa to his father as a sacrificial substitute, Hariścandra refuses, declaring that he would rather just die than sacrifice a Brahmin (*BrP* 104.65), as they are “the most elite caste” (*varṇānāṁ guravah*), and “more worthy of honor than even Viṣṇu” (*viṣṇor api hi ye pūjyā*) (104.62cd–63a). It is only when a disembodied voice in the sky commands the king to do so, and guarantees that it will not involve murder, that he agrees to perform the sacrifice (104.66–69).

Viśvāmitra is not the only compassionate Brahmin in the *Gautamī*'s take on *Śunahṣepa*. Later in the text, we are told what happens to Śunahṣepa's father, who is here called Jīgarti instead of the usual Ajīgarta. Viśvāmitra is not involved in the story of *Jīgarti*, so perhaps it is not quite accurate to call this a “Viśvāmitra legend,” but rather a sequel to *Śunahṣepa*. Still, because it recuperates the Brahmin Other through the redemptive power of *tīrthas*, the story is worth examining a bit more closely.




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[Story 5B] **Jīgarti:** *Śunahṣepa's Father in Purgatory*

Because he sold his own son for ritual sacrifice, and then volunteered to be the executioner, Śunahṣepa's father Jīgarti is doomed an afterlife of tremendous suffering. Śunahṣepa happens to run into him while on

a stroll through the underworld, and sees his father suffering tremendously. Feeling great grief, Śunahṣepa helps Jīgarti get to heaven by bathing at a *tīrtha* on the Gautamī and praying to Viṣṇu and Śiva.

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The *Gautamī Māhātmya* is the only purānic text to explore the harsh penalties placed upon this Brahmin for the inhuman act of selling his own son. Though Śunahṣepa's father is condemned for his actions, the *Gautamī*'s composer is somewhat sympathetic to his plight, to the extent that audiences are permitted to hear his plaintive cries of suffering and Śunahṣepa is able to rescue him from his hellish (*paiśāca*) existence. We are shown how even the most extreme form of the Brahmin Other, at his most degraded and reprehensible, may still gain redemption and be brought back into the Brahminical fold. This redemption comes not through asceticism or Vedic ritual, but through "the power of the Gautamī, as well as Viṣṇu and Śiva, and Brahmā the Creator," for it is to these deities that Śunahṣepa appeals in order to save his father.<sup>11</sup> Here, too, we may note the presence of the *Gautamī*'s pluralistic theological framework, aside from the obvious geo-mapping to the *tīrtha*. The *Jīgarti* story also features the same kind of doubled functional displacement as we had seen in *Sunahṣepa*. The *tīrtha* where this took place, the *Paiśāca-tīrtha*, is located on the Godāvarī just outside of Nanded, a town in central Maharashtra that this text calls "Nandītaṭa" (*BrP* 152.1). The *Paiśāca-tīrtha* is described as a famous site that can "eliminate the demonic condition" (*paiśācanāśa*) and "cure great illness" (*mahāgada*), while "the worst sins are absolved of men who simply bring it to mind."<sup>12</sup> For physical purification, in other words, one must journey to this *tīrtha*, while for moral purification, one may simply listen to the *paurāṇika* and think of the site.

Viśvāmitra himself takes center stage in a curious variant of the *Śvapaca* episode that the *Gautamī* places at the "Viśvāmitra-*tīrtha*," a site located upstream from the Maharashtrian city of Nashik, near its suburb of Govardhan-Gangapur. Though undoubtedly influenced by the *Mahābhārata*

<sup>11</sup> *gaṅgāprabhāvāc ca hareś ca śaṅghor vidhātūr . . .* (*BrP* 150.20cd). The *Gautamī* uses *gaṅgā* here to refer to the Godāvarī.

<sup>12</sup> *tataḥ prabhṛty etad atiprasiddham paiśācanāśam ca mahāgadām ca | mahānti pāpāni ca nāśam āśu prayānti yasya smaranena pumsām ||* (*BrP* 150.21).

(cf., Söhnen and Schreiner 1989: xxx–xxxi), the *Gautamī*'s variant does not have Viśvāmitra steal the dogmeat from a Śvapaca. In fact, there is no appearance of an Outcaste in this story at all. Viśvāmitra dispatches his students to look for food during a famine, and they dutifully bring back the only edible thing they can find, the corpse of a dog. The sage orders them to prepare it ritually, and as they are about to offer a portion to the gods, Agni urges Indra to take the form of a hawk and steal it, lest the gods be forced to eat the polluted offerings.<sup>13</sup> Viśvāmitra angrily sets about to curse him, but Indra changes the dogmeat into honey and offers it to the sage as food. Viśvāmitra, however, insists that all the people should be fed, not just he alone; Indra is therefore obliged to make it rain nectar on the world and end the famine.

The *Gautamī*'s take on the *Śvapaca* story thus entirely elides the anxieties of caste intermixture and emergency law that were so central to the *Mahābhārata*'s version. Rather, the spotlight is placed squarely on Viśvāmitra's fiery will and ascetic power, again accompanied by a compassion that leads him to end the famine for everyone, not just himself. The Vedic gods Indra and Agni are shown to be ineffectual and subordinate to Viśvāmitra's power, and at the end of the story this power is also infused within a sacred riverside location: “a *tīrtha* arose there, a place that is free from meat and which gives merit to men; bathing and donation at that place yield the results of all ritual offerings.”<sup>14</sup> Here, too, the *Gautamī* advocates visiting the *tīrtha* as a valid substitute for Vedic ritual, though we should note that telling the story is *not* said to be equivalent to visiting this site.

The themes of transformative power and Brahminical compassion motivate the telling of one additional Viśvāmitra legend found nowhere else: the failed seduction of the sage by *Two Nymphs*. This legend is told to explain the origins of the “Pair of Nymphs” or *Apsaroyugala-tīrtha*, very close to the *Paiśāca-tīrtha* in the Nanded area where the *Jīgarti* story had been told. We may locate it with great confidence at a town named Vishnupuri just to the southwest of Nanded. In telling the story, the *Gautamī* begins with a cursory, four-verse synoptic adaptation of the *Mahābhārata*'s version of the *Menakā* legend (*BrP* 147.5–8). Once, we are told, back when “there had been a dispute between

<sup>13</sup> The “Indra as a hawk” motif can be traced to a Vedic myth reworked in the *Mahābhārata* (Feller 2004).

<sup>14</sup> *samjātamī māṁsavarjam tu tat tīrtham puṇyadaṁ nṛṇām | tatra snānam ca dānam ca sarvakratuphalapradam ||* (*BrP* 93.26).

Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha,” Indra had sent Menakā to seduce Viśvāmitra, “as he practiced austerities at Gaṅgādvāra [Haridwar] for the purpose of achieving Brahminhood.”<sup>15</sup> After succumbing to Menakā’s flirtations, and after having a daughter with her, Viśvāmitra then travels south to the Godāvarī to resume his austerities, settling down at a spot next where Śiva stood as “Kālañjara” (*BrP* 147.8cd–9ab). This Kālañjara Śiva is presumably identical to the Kaleshwari temple in Vishnupuri located prominently at the confluence of two small rivulets and the Godāvarī. What happens next is summarized as follows:




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[Story 7C] **The Two Nymphs: Viśvāmitra Turns a Pair of  
Nymphs into Rivers**

After Menakā’s seduction fails to deter Viśvāmitra in his quest for Brahminhood, Indra again seeks the help of his nymphs in order to distract the sage and eliminate his ascetic power. They all decline, except for a rather self-confident pair named Gambhīrā and Atigambhīrā (“Deep” and “Deeper”). Both fail in their efforts, however, and are cursed to become rivers by the sage. The conjunction of these two rivers with the Godāvarī becomes a sacred *tīrtha*.

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The *Gautamī Māhātmya* praises this site as having a special level of potency. At the start of the anecdote, it is said that men who bathe will be liberated (*BrP* 147.2ab), while even a barren woman, if she should bathe at the site during her menstrual period, will conceive within three months (*BrP* 147.2cd–3ab). At the story’s conclusion, the *tīrtha*’s rewards are spelled out in more concrete terms. If the pilgrim should bathe at the *tīrtha* and worship at the nearby Śiva temple, he may have both worldly success (*bhukti*) and spiritual liberation (*mukti*) (*BrP* 147.22–3).

In addition to the Śaiva denomination of the temple at this location, Viśvāmitra is also described as being “like Śiva, with his matted hair standing on earth” (*bhūmistham iva dhūrjaṭīm*) (*BrP* 147.15b). As we had seen in the early

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<sup>15</sup> *spardhāśīn mahatī brahman viśvāmitravasiṣṭhayoh | tapasyantam gādhisutam brāhmaṇyārthe yatavratam || gaṅgādvāre samāśīnam preritendrena menakā |* (*BrP* 147.5–6ab).

*Skanda*, he embodies the fearsome but compelling aspects of Śaiva religious culture, but now with the addition of a softer, compassionate dimension. At first, Viśvāmitra quite literally “liquidates” the nymphs—cursing them to have “liquid form” (*dravarūpa*)—but he then shows mercy and permits them to regain their divine forms by merging with the holy Godāvarī (BrP 147.19–20). It may have been that this two-dimensional construction of Viśvāmitra, as both angry but compassionate, allowed the *Gautamī*’s composer to package this Śaiva site for safe use by Vaiṣṇava pilgrims, while also emphasizing the spiritual value of the (nonsectarian) *tīrtha* over that of the Śiva temple. And, as was the case with the site of the *Śvapaca* legend, it is not enough just to hear the story—one must actually visit the *tīrtha* and bathe there to gain its supernatural benefits.<sup>16</sup>

In this way, the *Gautamī Māhātmya*, as both travel guide and travelogue, uses Viśvāmitra to connect local sacred sites to a pan-Indian mythological storyworld that would have been familiar to its mainstream audiences. In his capacity as the transgressive but compassionate Brahmin Other, Viśvāmitra embodies the power of the Godāvarī *tīrthas*—and the Brahmins who officiate at these sites—to cause an individual to transcend his socially or physically degraded condition. As part of this geo-mapping, Viśvāmitra’s caste hybridity and the forces involved in his becoming Brahmin are tied to sacred sites across central Maharashtra. However, perhaps because its audiences were not located there, this text does not appear to have significantly impacted the construction of Brahmin social power on a regional level. The *Nāgarakhanḍa*, in contrast, does precisely this—and it is to this text that we now turn.

#### “A FRIEND TO THE WORLD”: GEO-MAPPING VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE NĀGARAKHĀNDA

By the twelfth century CE, *paurāṇikas* had begun to produce texts claiming to be *khaṇḍas* or sections of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, but having little or nothing to do with its earlier incarnation (Bakker 1996: 43, 56, note 45). One such

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<sup>16</sup> It is unclear why some *tīrthas* in the *Gautamī* have narrative substitutions and others do not. If, however, we consider that *tīrthas* have been spaces of contestation for patronage and resources between different religious groups (Bhardwaj and Lochtefeld 2004: 495–96), one possible explanation might be that sites where visitation was unfeasible were given narrative substitutions. Alternatively, the *Gautamī*’s author may have had a partisan interest in directing pilgrims to destinations controlled by his own religious order (I thank Katherine Ulrich for suggesting this latter idea).

work, calling itself the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*, takes a special interest in Viśvāmitra. Composed (at least in part) before the late thirteenth century, the *Nāgara* serves as a kind of caste purāṇa for the prominent Nāgar Brahmin community of Gujarat (Dalal 1902: 17; cf. Bailey 2011: 333–35), who trace their ancestry to Vadnagar, a small northern Gujarati town, variously known as Ānarta, Ānandapura, or Camatkārapura in premodern inscriptions and texts.<sup>17</sup>

Numerous epigraphical records and literary works testify to the prestigious position of Nāgar Brahmins in medieval Gujarati royal courts, their fierce competition with Jains and other Brahmin groups for royal patronage, and their specific domains of expertise: Sanskrit literature, Vedic rites, and royal funerals (Majumdar 1956: 178–79). The Nāgars especially gained regional and ultimately pan-Indian fame as *tīrtha* officiants, coming to be regarded as “among the noblest Brahmin groups” (Bharati 1963: 144). The *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* offered a grand Sanskrit articulation of their social identity. As it integrated the local holy sites of Vadnagar into the complex and pan-Indian *Skanda Purāṇa* tradition, this text provided recognition and authorization, on a transregional scale, for the community of Brahmins who hailed from this town. The degree to which these efforts were successful is reflected by an inscription of the Solaṇki king Kumārapāla (r. 1143–74), dated to 1152, which commemorated the building of its city walls for the protection of the Nāgar Brahmins, and declared Vadnagar to be a “Brahmin town” (*viprapura*) (*EI*, vol. 1: 300, line 33; Majumdar 1956: 387).<sup>18</sup>

Viśvāmitra plays a central role in the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*’s construction of Nāgar Brahmin identity. Stories about him are imported in wholesale fashion from the *Mahābhārata*, but his persona is recast almost entirely in a positive light. Throughout the text, there is great admiration for Viśvāmitra’s caste change. Equally lauded are his abilities to bend the will of the gods and to resist the sexual advances of a celestial nymph. But most of all, the *Nāgara* celebrates Viśvāmitra as a paragon of compassion toward those who have been excommunicated, afflicted, or otherwise maligned—to a greater degree than the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Gautamī Māhātmya*, or indeed, any other Sanskrit text. This allows

<sup>17</sup> The *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* is referenced by the noted pandit Hemādri at the court of the Yādava king Mahādeva at Devagiri in Maharashtra around 1270 (Adriansen, Bakker, and Isaacson 1998: 10). R. N. Mehta argues that the *Nāgara* knows the reconstruction of Vadnagar’s city walls in 1633, but this is on highly speculative grounds (1968: 110; cf. Rocher 1986: 234, who accepts Mehta’s dating).

<sup>18</sup> For further description of Vadnagar under the Solaṇkis, see Subbarao and Mehta 1955: 19–20.

our sage to serve as an icon for the specific sub-community of the Nāgars who both composed the text and were likely to have been its target audience: the so-called “Bhikṣu” Brahmins of Vadnagar.

The success of Nāgar Brahmins in the Gujarati royal courts (Dalal 1902: 458) appears to have created an economic class divide within the community. Mehta (1968) describes the difference between the Gr̥hasthas or “landed gentry”—that is, those who received royal land grants and who therefore did not need to work as priests—versus the Bhikṣu or “alms-taking” Nāgars, who earned wages conducting rites on behalf of others.<sup>19</sup> In the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*, the two groups are denoted in geo-spatial terms as *nāgaras* who lived in the city and *bāhyas* who were forced to live outside, often due to excommunication (Dalal 1902: 452). The text is replete with cases of Brahmins who are exiled or shamed for performing rituals and taking on the pollution of others, but they are presented through a consistently pro-Bhikṣu discourse, leading Mehta to conclude that “it appears this work was written by a *Bhikṣu Nāgara Brahmin* from Vadnagara, who was a devotee of *Hāṭakeśvara* and who composed this work as a *Tīrtha Māhātmya* of *Hāṭakeśvara* and *Jñāti Purāṇa* for the *Nāgaras*” (1968: 107).

Within such a context, the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* appears to have had a twofold agenda: to establish the authority of Nāgar Brahmins over the *tīrthas* of this region—most of which lie outside the city walls—and to resolve the internal rivalries between Bhikṣus and Gr̥hasthas. These local and regional concerns were furthermore couched within the overarching Śaiva theological framework of the *Skanda Purāṇa* tradition. The centripetal force of this cultural identity would have proved especially valuable for preserving the integrity of the Nāgar Brahmin community as it fanned out across Gujarat and southward to the Narmadā River.<sup>20</sup> And the recognizable persona of Viśvāmitra made for a convenient cultural calling card for Nāgars who served as *tīrtha* officiants across the subcontinent, while hearing his stories—all set in Vadnagar—permitted these migrants to maintain imagined connections to their ancestral hometown and thereby to develop a common cultural identity.

<sup>19</sup> Anthropologists have theorized such internal Brahminical bifurcation to result from a collision of *varṇa* ideology and the *jajmānī* system of labor, in which priestly Brahmins are reckoned as spiritually superior to but economically dependent on landowning patrons (see Quigley 1993, Parry 1980, Fuller 1979, van der Veer 1984: 62).

<sup>20</sup> We have good historical evidence for Nāgar migrations in the early second millennium (Hoernle 1904: 646; Dalal 1902: 453), and Hemādri’s usage of the text at the Yādava court attests to the textual migration of the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*.

How does one make a mythological character whose stories are at least a thousand years old speak to contemporary realities of a small town in Gujarat? The *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*'s composers brought Viśvāmitra home to Vadnagar by geo-mapping older stories about him to actual places around town that one may visit even today. The narrative lens of this text is firmly fixed on the wondrous events that happened at these locations, and right from the start, Viśvāmitra has a major role to play. In the opening chapter, the *Nāgara* describes how Śiva established a *linga* known as Hāṭakeśvara underground beneath the city, involving an adaptation of the myth of Śiva in the pine forest (*dāruvana*). The storytelling bard (Sūta Lomaharṣaṇa) then immediately plunges into a long rendition of the *Triśaṅku* legend to illustrate the power of this *linga* (*Nkh* 2–8). “There was a king named Triśaṅku who turned into a Caṇḍāla,” he explains, “but after he bathed there [at Hāṭakeśvara], he regained a body suitable for a king.”<sup>21</sup> The purāṇic audience, an anonymous group of Nāgar Brahmins, expresses curiosity about how a king could become an Outcaste (*Nkh* 2.4), and so Lomaharṣaṇa presents an elaborate version of an old story that he claims “cleanses all sins” (*sarvapāpaharā*) (2.5), just as the Hāṭakeśvara *tīrtha* itself does (2.1e).

Five other Viśvāmitra legends appear in this text—*Kāmadhenu* (*Nkh* 167–71), *Satyavatī* (165–66), *Sarasvatī* (172–73), *Menakā* (43–44), and *Śvapaca* (90) (Table 4.2). Each deals with caste change, the purification of the physical body, and *tapas*, linking these phenomena in one way or another to *tīrthas* in and around Vadnagar. The *Nāgara* tells no new Viśvāmitra legends, and the ones it does include are all, in large part, embellishments of the epic versions, with clear verbal parallels and borrowed imagery. Still, its composers add their own peculiar points of variation that are worth a closer look, as they reflect their regionally oriented political and religious concerns.

For example, there is a major new twist to the *Triśaṅku* story: the king's Caṇḍāla body must be purified—and his Kṣatriya status restored—before he may enter heaven. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Viśvāmitra forces the gods to accept his polluted body, albeit in a different sector of heaven that he himself has created; but the *Nāgara* insists that Triśaṅku's body be cleansed of its Outcaste status before any ascension may occur, and this could only happen by bathing

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<sup>21</sup> triśaṅkur nāma rājendraś caṇḍālatvam̄ samāgataḥ | tatra snātah punar lebhe śarīram̄ pārthivocitam || (*Nkh* 2.3).

TABLE 4.2.

Sources and geo-mappings of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Nāgarakhaṇḍa

Triśaṅku	Menakā	Śvapaca	Satyavatī	Kāmadhenu	Sarasvatī	Kāmadhenu
6.2–8 <i>Adapted from Rām</i>	6.43–44 <i>Adapted from Rām</i>	6.90 <i>Adapted from Mbh</i>	6.165–66 <i>Adapted from Mbh</i>	6.167–71 <i>Adapted from Mbh</i>	6.172–73 <i>Adapted from Mbh</i>	6.214.19–40 <i>Adapted from Mbh</i>
Geographical Mappings						
Hāṭakeśvara-tīrtha	Viśvāmitra-kuṇḍa	Agni-tīrtha	Sarasvatī River (Gujarat) / Śarmiṣṭhā lake (Vadnagar)		Viśvāmitra-kuṇḍa	

at the Hāṭakeśvara *tīrtha*. This feature may reflect changes in Brahminical caste ideology in the medieval period, as anxieties of physical pollution and untouchable bodies came to govern what had earlier been a matter of pedigree. Caste grew to be seen as a substantive aspect of the body, in other words, and not simply of birth.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, the *Triśaṅku* legend had always captured the physicality of caste. The *Rāmāyaṇa*'s version describes the king as “manifestly having the form of a Cāṇḍāla” (*sākṣāc cāṇḍālarūpiṇam*) (*Rām* 1.58.1d), but what precisely is meant by “form” (*rūpa*) became a matter of debate among the epic's second-millennium commentators. Govindarāja (fourteenth century) argues that *Triśaṅku* only bears “the marks of a Cāṇḍāla” (*cāṇḍālacihna*), and that Viśvāmitra's sympathy toward him is proof that he is not a “Cāṇḍāla by birth” (*jāticāṇḍāla*) but “Cāṇḍāla by action” (*karmacāṇḍāla*). The later commentator Śivasahāya disputes Govindarāja's reading and maintains that *Triśaṅku* never turned into a Cāṇḍāla—“neither by action nor birth” (*karmaṇā jātyā ca sa na cāṇḍāla iti*). Rather, he explains that the compound “form of a Cāṇḍāla” ought to be read as “an adjectival construction” (*cāṇḍālarūpiṇam viśeṣaṇam*) and not as a noun, meaning that *Triśaṅku* has not actually become a Cāṇḍāla but only looks like

<sup>22</sup> Similar ideas of bodily pollution are discernible in the tenth-century drama *Cāṇḍakauśika*, which we will examine more closely in the next chapter, when the king Hariścandra agrees to work for the Cāṇḍāla master of the cremation grounds, but only “while standing at a distance” (*dūrataś tiṣṭhan*), while the Outcaste also gives his payment “from a distance” (*dūrāt*) (Ck ad 3.35).

one.<sup>23</sup> The *Nāgara*'s composers were similarly uncomfortable with Triśaṅku's Cāṇḍālahood, but instead of explaining it away through clever argumentation, they changed the plot itself, adding a *tīrtha* bath as a way to cleanse his body of its polluted condition.

Alongside this transformative power of the *tīrtha* comes the power of the Brahmin priest who knows about it, who can control it, and who therefore can help the afflicted to access it. And so we are made to know about the compassion of Viśvāmitra, whom Triśaṅku calls "a friend to the world" (*jaganmitra*) (*Nkh* 4.20). He greets the accursed king with reverence, and agrees to sacrifice on his behalf, as Bhikṣu Nāgars are also shown to do repeatedly in the *Nāgara*. Viśvāmitra guides his patron on a tour of famous *tīrthas* across northern India, but in the end his purification may only take place at the Hāṭakeśvara *liṅga*, the site where the town of Vadnagar will later come to be. This role as a *tīrtha* guide also would presumably resonate with the professional activities of the Bhikṣu Nāgars.

The power of the *tīrtha* then generates a peculiar social problem—after hearing of Triśaṅku's miraculous ascension, throngs of pilgrims begin to visit the *tīrtha* to take advantage of its extraordinary cleansing abilities. People begin to enter heaven "despite committing hundreds of sins" (*kṛtvā pāpaśatāny api*) (*Nkh* 8.10d), and the *tīrtha* now poses a threat to the Brahminical status quo:

As people started happily going to heaven by the power of this *tīrtha*, the rituals like the *agniṣṭoma* all fell apart, eminent Brahmins. No man sacrificed, no man took vows. No one gave charity, and no one toured the other *tīrthas*. They simply bathed and meditated at the split-*liṅga* and went off to heaven seated on excellent aircraft.<sup>24</sup>

The heavens are faced with an overpopulation crisis, forcing Indra to plug up the underground location of the Hāṭakeśvara *tīrtha* using a mountain named

<sup>23</sup> Śivasahāya supports his interpretation by taking the word *sākṣat* not to mean that Triśaṅku was a Cāṇḍala "before one's eyes," but rather that Viśvāmitra addressed him "face-to-face"—something that would be śāstraically prohibited if he were a Cāṇḍala. The discussion can be found in volume 1, page 333, of the Gujarati Printing Press edition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, in which the passage under question appears as *Rām* 1.59.rd.

<sup>24</sup> evam tasya prabhāvena tīrthasya dvijasattamāḥ | gacchamānesu lokesu sukhena tridivālayam || agniṣṭomādikāḥ sarvāḥ samuccedam gataḥ kriyāḥ | na kaścid yajate martyo na vratam kurute naraḥ || na yacchati tathā dānam na ca tīrtham niṣevate | kevalam kurute snānam liṅgabhede samāhitāḥ || tataḥ pragacchatī svargam vimānam varam āśritaḥ || (*Nkh* 8.11–14).



FIG. 4.2. Panoramic view of Vadnagar, Gujarat, with Šarmiṣṭhā lake in foreground, Arjun Bari Gate on the right. Photograph by Adheesh Sathaye, May 2012.

Raktaśrīṅga, “Red-top.” The town of Vadnagar is said to have been built atop this hillock, accounting for the mound of red earth on which the city rests today (Figure 4.2). The geocultural identity of Nāgar Brahmins is thus quite literally founded on Viśvāmitra’s erasure of Triśanku’s Caṇḍālahood through the power of the *tīrtha* that is sealed beneath their feet, and now accessible only through the Hāṭakeśvara temple that is today the primary site of Śaiva worship in the city.

A number of other local *tīrthas* are also linked to Viśvāmitra. The most significant of these is one we have already seen—the manmade pond located just to the northeast of the town called the “Viśvāmitra-*kunḍa*” (Figure 4.1). Viśvāmitra’s connection to the site is explained on two different occasions in the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*. In chapter 212, when the purāṇic audience expresses a curiosity in knowing how the pond got its name (*Nkh* 212.2), the bard replies that Viśvāmitra had “created a tank at that spot entirely by his own hands—he first dug a hole there without any tools, and then meditated and summoned the

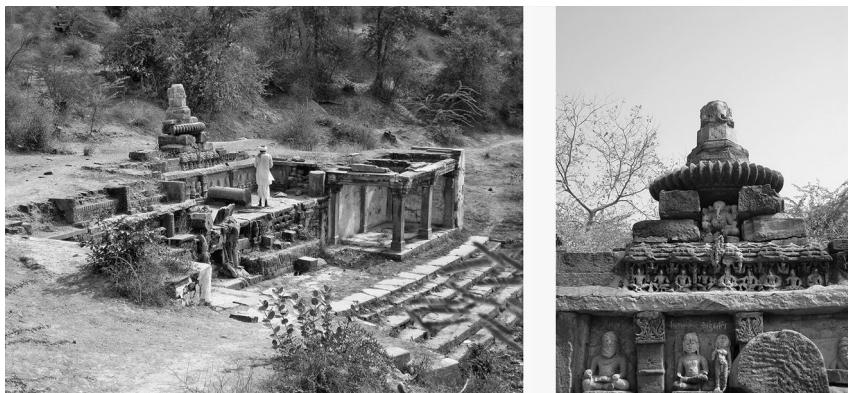


FIG. 4.3. Details of Ganeśa/Saptarṣi temple ruins adjacent to Viśvāmitra-*kūṇḍa* in Vadnagar, Gujarat. Photographs by Adheesh Sathaye, May 2012.

Gaṅgā from underground.”<sup>25</sup> It is said that Viśvāmitra then established temples to Surya and Ganeśa at that location, and indeed, even today there are ruins two medieval constructions adjacent to the pond, including a reconstructed shrine located at its northern edge where we find images of the seven sages (*saptarṣis*) and a sandstone Ganeśa image matching the description given in the *Nāgara* (Figure 4.3).

The *Nāgara*’s composers juxtapose this story with a local legend about how a king named Ratnākṣa was once cured of leprosy by bathing at the Viśvāmitra-*kūṇḍa*. The precise identity of this Ratnākṣa is unclear, but he is likely to have been a king from the historical rather than mythological past. This account is followed by the story of how Viśvāmitra had worshipped this Ganeśa to help him achieve Brahminhood, including a brief version of the *Kāmadhenu* legend (*Nkh* 214.19–40).<sup>26</sup> As they had with *Triśaṅku*, the *Nāgara*’s composers connect Viśvāmitra’s caste change to the transformative powers of a local *tīrtha*—a claim that is further strengthened through the account of the king being cured of leprosy.<sup>27</sup> This narratological process might be analyzed

<sup>25</sup> *tena tatra kṛtam kūṇḍam svahastena mahātmānaḥ | śāstram vināpi bhūprsthām pravidārya samantataḥ || tatra dhyātvā samānīta pātālaj jāhnavī nadī |* (*Nkh* 212.8–9ab).

<sup>26</sup> The *Nāgara* here follows the *Mahābhārata*’s version rather than the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s, in that the cow is named Nandinī and not Śabalā, and Vasiṣṭha does not command her to release the barbarian armies, but to “do whatever is necessary” (*yuktam samācara*) to defend herself (*Nkh* 214.30d).

<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that the outer dialogic frame involves the sage Mārkaṇdeya telling the story to Rohitāsva, the son of king Hariścandra. The *Hariścandra* legend is not told in the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*, though the king and his *rājasūya* are mentioned.

as follows. First, the *Nāgara*'s audiences would already have known that Viśvāmitra changed his caste and sent the Outcaste king Triśaṅku to heaven. That is, these events would have been part of a common mythological imaginary among mainstream Hindu practitioners in the early second millennium. But it would not have been clear *where* these events took place. By asserting that Viśvāmitra's caste change happened at this very pond, and that Triśaṅku's Outcaste status was eliminated at the Hāṭakeśvara *tīrtha*, the *Nāgara*'s composers connect Vadnagar and its inhabitants to a Hindu mythological past that is already familiar on a pan-Indian level. At the same time, by associating the Bhikṣu Nāgars, who would supervise ritual activities at these *tīrthas*, with the widely respected but transgressive persona of Viśvāmitra, the text bolsters their professional authority and public standing within the city and also wherever its manuscripts might travel, despite their own uncertain social status within Vadnagar itself.

Earlier in the text, the *Nāgara* had geo-mapped another Viśvāmitra legend to this very pond: *Menakā*. The story is told to describe the origin of the *tīrtha*, where it is said that:

If a man should bathe there on the third day of the waxing moon in the month of Caitra, he takes on a divine appearance—as if he were another Kāmadeva before your eyes, eminent Brahmins. And a woman, having faithfully bathed there, may become fertile and endowed with good fortune, and become most desirable in the world.<sup>28</sup>

The *Nāgara* inverts the standard epic version, for it is now Menakā who at first sight falls madly in love with the sage. She flirts with him, but Viśvāmitra does not give in to her seductions, cursing her instead to become old and decrepit. She angrily doles out the same curse upon him, and the two then bathe in the pond in order to restore their youthful beauty and health. As with the *Kāmadhenu* legend, and with Triśaṅku's cleansing at the Hāṭakeśvara *tīrtha*, the *Nāgara*'s composers locate the *Menakā* legend at the physical site of the Viśvāmitra-*kunda*, and thereby fuse pan-Indian mythological memory to local historical memory. But the story here is inverted in such a way that

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<sup>28</sup> *tatra caitratṛtīyāyāṁ kṛte snāne bhaven naraḥ | divyarūpadharah sāksāt kāmo ‘nyo dvijasattamāḥ || nārī vā śraddhayopetā tatra snātvā prajāvati | bhavet saubhāgyasamyuktā sprhaṇīyatamā kṣitau ||* (Nkh 42.2-3).

entirely eliminates the motif of Viśvāmitra's sexual desire. If he is taken to be a mythological representation of the Bhikṣu Nāgars, his unwavering celibacy can be interpreted as further contributing to a positive social identity for this community, as had his kindness toward Triśanku.

On another occasion, the *Nāgarakhanḍa* presents a variant of the *Śvapaca* episode, located at a nearby sacred site called the Agni-tīrtha. It has received this name, we are told, because after Viśvāmitra steals the Outcaste's dogmeat, he first makes an offering into the sacred fire before eating it. Horrified by receiving this polluting offering, Agni disappears from the earth, and must be coaxed out of hiding by the other gods. He goes from hiding spot to hiding spot, until finally they catch up to him at water reservoir located to the northeast of Vadnagar (*Nkh* 90.36–37).<sup>29</sup> Though he agrees to return to his job of delivering the Vedic offerings, Agni complains to Brahmā that he has not properly been fed for twelve years because of the famine. To correct this, Brahmā assures him that "some Brahmins who live here [at the *tīrtha*] will feed you, continuously, pouring in streams of ghee every night and day."<sup>30</sup> The localization of this Viśvāmitra legend thus also sanctions Brahminical activities at this particular Vaḍnagar *tīrtha* and enhances the prestige of the officiants who are authorized to perform them.

The Agni-tīrtha is said to be to the northeast of the town and serves to extend the scope of Bhikṣu Nāgar authority to *tīrthas* beyond the immediate township. A special target of the *Nāgara*'s claims was the Sarasvatī River that runs through the old Solaṇki capital of Patan. The Gujarati Sarasvatī river valley became a region of intense cultural and religious activity in the medieval period, especially after the reign of Jayasimha Siddharāja (c. 1096–143).<sup>31</sup> Perhaps in order to establish mythological linkages between Vadnagar and this regional cultural sphere, the *Nāgarakhanḍa* features a narratological movement from Vadnagar to the Sarasvatī, and then back again, through an intricate synthesis of three Viśvāmitra legends with a local anecdote about a Brahmin named Caṇḍaśarman. This story sequence is worth examining more

<sup>29</sup> The *Nāgara* has incorporated here the Vedic motif of Agni disappearing from the earth, which was also adapted into the *Mahābhārata* (cf. Feller 2004, Doniger 1975: 97–114).

<sup>30</sup> *atra ye brāhmaṇāḥ kecī nivasanti hutāśana | vasor dhārāpradānena te tvāṁ naktam̄ dinaṁ sadā ||* (*Nkh* 90.72).

<sup>31</sup> The Gujarati Sarasvatī is not to be confused with the ancient Sarasvatī described in Vedic and epic literature and identifiable with the modern-day Ghaggar. For an analysis of how medieval purāṇic texts shaped the cultural sphere of the Gujarati Sarasvatī river valley, see Rohlman 2007.

closely to get a sense of how the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*'s composers used Viśvāmitra to create a regional identity for Nāgar Brahmins.

This Caṇḍaśarman, we are told, is excommunicated by the Gr̥hastha Nāgars for assisting a ruler named Puṣpa in performing rituals of atonement (*prāyaścitta*) after the latter inadvertently kills a Brahmin. Exiled from the town, Caṇḍaśarman moves northwest to the banks of the (Gujarati) Sarasvatī, where he, his wife, and Puṣpa each establish *tīrthas*. Both Gr̥hastha and Bhikṣu Nāgars then begin to frequent these holy sites in great numbers, and the area grows and flourishes to such an extent that “it became regarded as superior to Camatkārapura [Vadnagar] in terms of knowledge and wealth.”<sup>32</sup> However, after Viśvāmitra curses the Sarasvatī to turn to blood, these *tīrthas* as well as the Brahmins who supervise them are forced to relocate to the Narmadā River far to the southeast. The *Sarasvatī* legend thereby becomes a mythological charter for Nāgar Brahmin communities to reside in the Sarasvatī-Patan region as well as in locations outside of Gujarat. Furthermore, the purāṇic text fixes Vadnagar as the true point of origin for all of these different branches of Nāgar Brahmins, constructing a unified social memory—and regional identity—that is rooted not to the medieval political center of Patan, but to an original, mythic hometown, the “Brahmin town” of Vadnagar.

While doing so, this chain of stories also captures an important set of internal rivalries between the Gr̥hastha and Bhikṣu subgroups. Like the Bhikṣus, Viśvāmitra's lifestyle is threatening to the lifestyles of normative Brahmins—after all, he does turn the holiest of rivers into blood. The *Nāgara*'s composers endeavor to explain why Viśvāmitra would do such a thing through the dialogic narrative frame, where we find that even the purāṇic audiences are shocked by his behavior. “How come the Sarasvatī was cursed by the mighty Viśvāmitra?” they ask. “What offense had that great river committed against him?”<sup>33</sup> Until this moment Viśvāmitra has been portrayed as a quick-tempered, powerful, but ultimately compassionate sage. The audience can only assume that the river must have done something to offend the Brahmin. To sort out the matter, the *Nāgara*'s composers present a carefully assembled set of three Viśvāmitra legends detailing the rivalry of the two sages: *Satyavatī*, *Kāmadhenu*, and *Sarasvatī*. “Long ago,” the Bard explains,

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<sup>32</sup> *camatkārapurasyāgre yaj jñātam vidyayā dhanaiḥ* || (Nkh 165.2cd).

<sup>33</sup> *kasmāt sarasvatī śaptā viśvāmitrena dhīmatā | mahānadyā ko 'parādhas tayā tasya vinirmittah* || (Nkh 165.6).

“there was a great conflict between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha, Brahmins. It concerned his Brahminhood and resulted in a great loss of life.”<sup>34</sup> At this point, the audience interjects another question about Viśvāmitra, the same one that Yudhiṣṭhira had posed so long ago: “How did Viśvāmitra become a Brahmin, even though he was a Kṣatriya, wise sir?”<sup>35</sup> Viśvāmitra’s caste change remained as provocative of a feat as ever, but the sages follow up with a third question that connects the story to a more contemporary concern for the Nāgar Brahmins: “How come Vasiṣṭha didn’t admit this, if it was declared by Brahmā himself?”<sup>36</sup>

The historical nuances of these three questions, as posed in twelfth- or thirteenth-century Gujarat, are handled quite differently than what we had observed in the epics. In earlier times, the Vasiṣṭha-Viśvāmitra rivalry reinforced the basic opposition of Brahmin Self and Brahmin Other, while differentiating both from Kṣatriyas and Outcastes. The *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*’s composers remap this mythological binary to regional inflections of Brahmin identity, so that the Vasiṣṭha-Viśvāmitra-Triśaṅku triangle now resonates with the relationships between the Brahmins of Vadnagar and political rulers like the Solankis in Patan, as well as the internal tensions among the landed gentry and wage-earning Nāgar Brahmins. That is to say, the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*’s composers sought to connect the storyworld to the real-world context in which they lived.

For one, the dialogic narrative frame sequences the three stories in such a way that the each legend preconditions the audience’s interpretation of the subsequent one.<sup>37</sup> If, upon hearing the *Sarasvatī* story, one should wonder why Viśvāmitra would have cursed the river with such un-Brahminlike aggression, the prepositioned *Kāmadhenu* legend has already clarified it to be part of his ongoing hostilities with Vasiṣṭha who had refused to acknowledge his Brahmin status. And if one should regard Viśvāmitra’s caste change to violate the fundamental laws of caste, the *Satyavatī* story has already explained how a *varṇa* intermixture within Viśvāmitra’s body had made him a Brahmin to

<sup>34</sup> āśit purā mahad vairam viśvāmitravasiṣṭhayoḥ | brāhmaṇyasya kṛte viprāḥ prāṇāntakaraṇaṁ mahat | (Nkh 165.7ab).

<sup>35</sup> kṣatriyo ‘pi kathām vipro viśvāmitro mahāmate | (Nkh 165.9ab).

<sup>36</sup> vasiṣṭhena kathām nokto yah prokto brahmaṇā svayam || (Nkh 165.9cd).

<sup>37</sup> In the next chapter, we will examine this narratological strategy of “recursive elaboration,” typical to epic and purāṇic literature, in more detail (Hegarty 2006: 108; Brockington 1999; Sathaye 2009: 139).

begin with. In this way, the potentially radical implications of the audience's questions are rendered inert.

The *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*'s composers also contour these three legends to speak to the social and political conditions of medieval Gujarat. For example, its version of *Satyavatī* stresses the Kṣatriya distrust of Brahmins. We are explicitly told, for example, that Gādhi's bride price was a "ruse" (*vyāja*) to prevent the "poor and old" Brahmin R̄cīka, who was "not from the same caste" (*asavarṇa*) from marrying his daughter (*Nkh* 165.28). The *caru*-switch is made out to be a more defiant act, for R̄cīka tells both Satyavatī and her mother exactly what kind of sons each will have *before* giving them their fertility porridges, with an explicit warning: "Please do not mix up my directions" (*Nkh* 166.18). Given that they already know this information, their *caru*-switch then becomes an intentionally disobedient act of Kṣatriya egocentrism, as Satyavatī's mother wants the "more outstanding son, who is skillful in regal tasks, courageous, and a torment to his enemies' forces," and tells her daughter that her son, "though only a Brahmin, will still make you happy."<sup>38</sup>

This Brahmin-Kṣatriya tension then turns into outright combat in the subsequent *Kāmadhenu* legend.<sup>39</sup> The *Nāgara*'s composers amplify the perils of anti-Brahmin violence through a rather unique plot twist at the story's conclusion. After the cow's foreign armies destroy Viśvāmitra's troops, chaos ensues. The king is suddenly surrounded by the foreign (*mleccha*) armies and is about to be overwhelmed. Seeing that Viśvāmitra will be slain, Vasiṣṭha intervenes and orders the cow to protect the king rather than to attack him. But when the *kāmadhenu* comes to help, Viśvāmitra raises his sword to strike her down. At this point Vasiṣṭha "paralyzes" (*stambhayati*) Viśvāmitra's arm and the king is humbled: "Please save me, great sage, for I am about to be killed by these ruthless foreigners. Please free my arm from its paralysis. My entire vast army has been decimated due to my own transgressions, so I will go back to my palace, there is no need for this warfare."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *kriyatāṁ ca mahābhāge yena me syāt sutottamah || rājyakarmaṇi dakṣaś ca śūraḥ parabalārdanah | tvadīyo dvijamātro 'pi tava tuṣṭam karisyati ||* (*Nkh* 166.23cd-24).

<sup>39</sup> The *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* is, somewhat surprisingly, the only text to blend the *Satyavatī* and *Kāmadhenu* stories together. The *Mahābhārata* and *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* do include both stories, but they tell them separately and on different occasions.

<sup>40</sup> *rakṣa mām tvam muniśreṣṭha vadhyamānam sudārunaiḥ | mlecchaiḥ kuruṣva me bāhūṇi stambhenā to vivarjitam || mamāparādhāt sannaṣṭam sarvan̄ sainyam anantakam | tasmād yāsyāmy aham harmyam na yuddhena prayojanam ||* (*Nkh* 167.64-65).

Both legends resonate with the socio-political realities of Gujarat in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The outsider armies that help to defeat the Kṣatriya, though initially described as “Śabaras, Pulindas, and *mlecchas*” (*Nkh* 167.54), are eventually reduced to just *mlecchas*, foreigners. These *mlecchas* do not disappear after defeating the Kṣatriya’s armies, but instead threaten to overwhelm him and destroy the social order unless they are stopped. For as Vasiṣṭha tells his cow, “The king should be protected by all means, since it is through his grace (*prasāda*) that the world goes on the right path, and does not fall to the wrong path.”<sup>41</sup> The term *mleccha* is found in the Sanskrit literature and epigraphy of the medieval period to refer to Turkish invaders (Parasher-Sen 1991), and the eleventh century had seen several dramatic incursions of the Ghaznavids into Gujarat (Commissariat 1938: lvii–lviii). A lone Kṣatriya surrounded by hordes of foreign warriors may not be necessarily referring to these Turkish incursions, but it would have surely been a striking cultural image given this political context. More importantly, however, a Brahmin magically freezing the whole situation through his superior sacred power sends a powerful social message to such threatened rulers, and gives a new historical immediacy to Vasiṣṭha’s admonition to the king, echoing what he had told Kalmāṣapāda in the *Mahābhārata*: “Do not ever again make hostilities with Brahmins.”<sup>42</sup> The *Nāgara* thus envisions a way for medieval Gujarati rulers to resist the chaotic onslaughts of foreign armies: rather than attempting to co-opt the resources of Brahmin communities, good kings should ensure their autonomy and work to protect their livelihood. This is precisely what the Solaṇki king Kumārapāla appears to have done in sponsoring the building of protective walls for the Brahmins of Vadnagar in 1152.

A new social issue, internal to the Brahmin community, arises at the conclusion of the *Nāgara’s Kāmadhenu*. The foreign invaders eventually do disappear (though it is still unclear where they go), and now, Viśvāmitra wishes to turn himself into a Brahmin. If, in the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira’s amazement at Viśvāmitra’s caste change had reflected a crystallization of caste boundaries in post-Mauryan times, the reaction of characters in the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* suggests that by the start of the second millennium, these boundaries had become

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<sup>41</sup> *rājā hi yatnato rakṣyo yat prasādād idam jagat | sanmārgे vartate sarvam na cāmārge pravartate ||* (*Nkh* 167.60).

<sup>42</sup> *mā kārṣṭṛ brāhmaṇaiḥ sārdham virodham bhūya eva ca |* (*Nkh* 167.69ab).

adamantine. The purāṇic audience is puzzled by Viśvāmitra's wish to become a Brahmin, and the gods are also quite taken aback. Brahmā expresses his shock as follows: "How can one born as a Kṣatriya become a Brahmin? How can you express a desire that is contrary to Vedic lore and law (*śruti* and *smṛti*)? That which has never before happened on the earth will never happen."<sup>43</sup> Indra wonders, "How could a Kṣatriya in his own body become a Brahmin, who is born with two sets of twenty-four physical refinements (*samskāras*)?"<sup>44</sup> As in the Triśaṅku legend, the discourse of caste has been displaced from birth to body.

The concern over caste change is so great that it interrupts the story and must be resolved before the narration can move forward, just as the question of Triśaṅku's polluted body had to be resolved before he could ascend to heaven. As Viśvāmitra performs austerities, a debate transpires in the divine world regarding whether Viśvāmitra should be deemed a Brahmin. Rcīka then steps out from the crowd of sages gathered there and explains the details of Viśvāmitra's conception and birth—of how his wife Satyavatī had switched the *carus*, and how his brother-in-law is already "a Brahmin who has had a Kṣatriya birth."<sup>45</sup> Brahmā accepts this argument and declares him to be a Brahmin. The other gods and sages all follow suit—all, that is, except for Vasiṣṭha, who insists, "I will never say this, Grandfather, even though I know him to be a Brahmin born from a Kṣatriya through Rcīka's power, and even though you have said so, Lord."<sup>46</sup> This stubborn refusal to accept Viśvāmitra's Brahminhood, we find out, is why the rivalry spills over into the events of the *Sarasvatī* legend.

Like all of the *Nāgara*'s legends, *Sarasvatī* is also geo-mapped to the Vadnagar area. Vasiṣṭha sets up his hermitage at a place called Brahmaśilā, located at a site named Śaṅkha-tīrtha on the banks of the Sarasvatī (*Nkh* 168.31–32). The Gujarati Sarasvatī flows nowhere near Vadnagar, but the *Nāgara*'s composers contend that the large lake adjacent to the city, today known as Lake Śarmiṣṭhā, is in fact another manifestation of the Sarasvatī.<sup>47</sup> And on the northern

<sup>43</sup> *ksatriyena prajātasya dvijatvam jāyate katham | śrutismṛtviruddham hi kim evam vadastipsitam || yan na jātam dharāprṣthe na bhaviṣyatī karhicit ||* (*Nkh* 168.18–19).

<sup>44</sup> *anena śarīreṇa kṣatriyāḥ syāt kathaṇ dvijah | caturviṁśatisaṁskārair dviguṇair yaḥ prajāyate ||* (*Nkh* 168.9abcd).

<sup>45</sup> *tenaiva kṣatraljanmāyam brāhmaṇaś caturānana |* (*Nkh* 168.22c).

<sup>46</sup> *nāham vakṣyāmi karhicit || brāhmaṇam kṣatriyāj jātam jānann api pitāmaha | rcīkasya ca dākṣinyat tathā tvam vadasi prabho ||* (*Nkh* 168.28d–29).

<sup>47</sup> This strategy echoes that used by another regional Sanskrit purāṇic text, the *Sarasvatī Purāṇa*, in which the river jumps from site to site in order to construct a unified geographical imaginary of Gujarat as a cultural region (Rohlman 2011: 144).

shore of this lake, one finds today a site called Śāṅkha-tīrtha (described in *Nkh* 209–11). It is not far from the Viśvāmitra-kūṇḍa, and the two sites are connected by a medieval canal. The *Sarasvatī* legend thereby involves a double geo-mapping—first a projection of the mythological *Sarasvatī* onto the regional Gujarati River, and then a re-projection of this river into the local geography of Vadnagar. This enables the conflict between Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, pan-Indian in its mythic scope, to be homologized to the local conflicts between the landowning Gr̥hastha Brahmins living inside the city and wage-earning Bhikṣu Nāgars living outside of its walls. This contrast is noticeable even today—inside the town is a dense and bustling maze of elegant, well-built townhouses (including the ancestral home of the BJP leader Narendra Modi), while outside, one finds dirt roads, ramshackle huts, and piles of rubbish.

Vasiṣṭha's refusal to acknowledge Viśvāmitra's Brahminhood surely would have resonated with the Bhikṣus' struggle to gain respect from the landed Gr̥hasthas, a recurring motif throughout the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* (Mehta 1968: 109). Just as foreign invaders had appeared when he had stolen Vasiṣṭha's cow, Viśvāmitra's attack on his rival brings *rākṣasas* to the *Sarasvatī*. This presents another possible symbolic reference to the arrival of Islamic “Others” into medieval Gujarat, but even if the *rākṣasas* are no more than *rākṣasas*, the image of demons drinking blood and dancing on the banks of the *Sarasvatī* nonetheless expresses a fear that utter social catastrophe may ensue from Brahmin-on-Brahmin conflict.<sup>48</sup> The sacred river becomes uninhabitable for all Brahmins—both city-dwellers and outsiders (*Nkh* 172.18)—and this reinforces the idea that internal class conflicts within the Brahmin community result in more damage to Brahminical life than the external pressures of Kṣatriyas or foreigners.

The only way to fix this “eco-social” problem is to go to its source. The famed Mount Abu, mythic point of origin of the Rajputs (as we will discuss in Chapter Five), now becomes a theater for Vasiṣṭha's repairs to the ecological and social damage done by Viśvāmitra. He splits the earth at the base of the fig tree (*nyagrodha*) from which the *Sarasvatī* originates, so that pure water once again begins to flow. The splitting of the ground also creates a second river

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<sup>48</sup> For the identification of Muslims as *rākṣasas* in the medieval Indian political imaginary, see Pollock 1993: 287.

called the Sābhramatī, since it has been produced through Vasiṣṭha's forceful movement (*sambhrama*). This narrative element—unique to the *Nāgara*'s version—thus etymologically accounts for the genesis of the modern-day Sābarmatī River that flows through Ahmedabad. In doing so, the purāṇic text expands the domain of Brahminical authority to include this river valley, a region that would only recently have been brought under the control of the Solaṇki ruler Karṇa, who defeated the Bhil tribal chieftains of the area in the eleventh century (Majumdar 1956: 60). While the *Sarasvatī* legend had given license to Nāgar Brahmins to move to the sacred Sarasvatī river valley, this motif sanctions Nāgar settlements at new destinations along the Sābarmatī, which is now proven to be just as sacred of a river, since it has the same source.

In this way, the *Nāgara*'s geo-mapping of Viśvāmitra into the medieval Gujarati landscape captures a number of Nāgar Brahmin concerns of the time. On the one hand, the valorization of *tīrthas* around Vadnagar increased this town's reputation within regional Gujarati religious culture as a site for physical healing, especially from leprosy, thereby justifying the generous financial and physical security its Brahmin residents received from Solaṇki rulers. The Viśvāmitra legends provided narrative-based justification for why Bhikṣu Nāgars would have the authority to administer these *tīrthas*. The *Nāgara*'s composers also used the Viśvāmitra legends to resolve the internal socio-economic struggles between these wage-earning Bhikṣus and the wealthier landowning Gṛhasthas. Audiences are asked to imagine a singular but two-sided understanding of Nāgar Brahminhood, an identity that the geo-mapped legends of this text connect fundamentally to the sacred power that permeates their hometown.

#### RELOCATING A REGIONAL ICON: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE VIŚVĀMITRĪ MĀHĀTMYA

One indicator of the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*'s success in geo-mapping Viśvāmitra to Gujarat is the production in the seventeenth century of a copycat Sanskrit text, the *Viśvāmitrī Mahātmya* or “The Wonders of the Viśvāmitrī River,” by a Brahmin hailing from the southern Gujarati city of Vadodara (Thaker 1997: 117). The *Viśvāmitrī* describes the origins of the Viśvāmitrī river at Pavagadh, a mountain about fifty kilometers to the northeast of Vadodara, as well as the numerous *tīrthas* on its shores as it flows through the city and joins

with the Dhādhar River on its way to the Arabian Sea. The deep influence of the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa* on this short text is readily apparent: aside from numerous word-for-word borrowings and textual parallels, its larger narrative structure is also organized around the *Triśaṅku* legend.<sup>49</sup> In the *Nāgara*, Viśvāmitra had taken the Outcaste king to the *tīrthas* of Vadnagar in order to purify his body; here, the same mission brings the sage to southeastern Gujarat, where he is shown to be responsible for the creation of the Viśvāmitrī River, the transplantation of Pavagadh Mountain from the Himalayas, and even the establishment of the city of Vadodara, which is said to have developed around a banyan tree (*vatā*) that the sage had blessed, giving it the power to make benevolent anyone who should sit in its shade. This *māhātmya* also describes how Viśvāmitra had achieved Brahminhood at Pavagadh after establishing his hermitage on the broad plateau on its summit, near a lake that he had also created called the Viśvāmitra-saras. This Viśvāmitra-saras is mentioned three times in Gaṅgādhara's *Gaṅgādāsapratāpavilāsa* ("The Power Play of Gaṅgādāsa"), a Sanskrit play composed and performed atop Pavagadh circa 1449 that detailed the triumph of the local Rajput king Gaṅgādāsa over the Ahmedabad Sultan, Muḥammad II (Sandesara and Bhojak 1973: i).<sup>50</sup> This lake is still observable on the Mauliya plateau atop Pavagadh, though it has lost its embankment and no longer holds water (Figure 4.4).<sup>51</sup>

By remapping of the Viśvāmitra legends to Pavagadh, the Viśvāmitrī's composer advanced the same kind of transgressive-but-compassionate identity for *tīrtha* officiants in the Vadodara-Pavagadh region as the Nāgar Brahmins had earlier developed for themselves in Vadnagar. It also gave them a central role

49 Consider, for example, the following parallels from the first chapter of the *Viśvāmitrī*: *Nkh* 2.12ab ~ *ViM* 1.12ab; *Nkh* 2.13ab ~ *ViM* 1.13ab; *Nkh* 2.16cd ~ *ViM* 1.14cd; *Nkh* 3.7 ~ *ViM* 1.2i; *Nkh* 3.11ab ~ *ViM* 1.24cd; *Nkh* 4.22 ~ *ViM* 1.43; *Nkh* 4.31 ~ *ViM* 1.48; *Nkh* 4.34 ~ *ViM* 1.52. The *Viśvāmitrī* accords with the *Nāgara*'s narration until *Triśaṅku*'s *tīrtha* pilgrimage begins, but relocates the events to the Vadodara-Pavagadh region.

50 In Acts 2 and 3, the protagonist (Gaṅgādāsa) is playing dice on the banks of the Viśvāmitra-saras with his friend, the *vidūṣaka* (*Gpv* p. 22, 24), while in Act 7, during a topographical description of Pavagadh, it is said that this mountain "features the Viśvāmitra-saras, which resembles an ocean of sweet water" (*madhurāṁbhāḥsamudrābhaviśvāmitrasaroyutam ||*) (*Gpv* 7.23cd).

51 There is some debate regarding which of the numerous bodies of water at Pavagadh is actually the Viśvāmitra-saras. Today, a pond at the foot of the mountain is called "Viśvāmitra-kunda," but the editors of the Sanskrit play are convinced this is a false attribution, and suggest instead that the lake was at Machi village atop the mountain, where presently there is a site called the "Viśvāmitra-āśrama." (Sandesara and Bhojak 1973: iv). Meanwhile Jayant Thaker, the editor of the *Viśvāmitrī*, agrees with R. N. Mehta (1979: 20) that it is a dried-up lake "to the west of the remnants of the ancient Jaina temple of R̥ṣabhanātha" (Thaker 1997: 77). I tentatively follow Mehta and Thaker here, though further research is required to make a definitive identification.



FIG. 4.4. Panoramic view of Pavagadh Mountain, near Vadodara, Gujarat, with dry bed of the Viśvāmitra-saras lake visible in center. Photograph by Adheesh Sathaye, May 2012.

to play in what by that time was a thriving, multi-religious pilgrimage industry on this mountain. This two-dimensional strategy reflects, I suggest, major shifts that had taken place in the socio-economic life of Vadodara Brahmins in the centuries before its composition.

While Vadodara—and especially its suburb of Akota—had been a regional trading center since at least the Gupta period, the local seat of political power was undoubtedly the Rajput stronghold at Pavagadh to its northeast. On November 21, 1484, Jayasimha Rāval, the last of Pavagadh's Rajput rulers, was dramatically defeated by the Sultan of Gujarat, Maḥmūd Bīgara, after a twenty-month siege. The victorious sultan built a new fortified capital at Champaner, a market town located at the base of the mountain, renaming it Maḥmūdābād. It grew into a thriving, sprawling city, and would be a hub of regional cultural activity—as well as the Gujarat Sultanate's royal mint—until a stunning and rapid decline only a few decades later, precipitated by Humāyūn's raid in 1535, after which the capital was shifted to Ahmedabad (Commissariat 1938: 197). In 1573, Akbar comprehensively brought Gujarat

under Mughal rule, and the independent Sultanate was over. Commissariat notes that by 1611, Champaner was in ruins, and “in the same desolate condition it remains to this day” (1938: 198). The regional seat of Mughal administrative authority was established downstream at Vadodara, eventually to be taken over by the Maratha Gaekwads in the eighteenth century.

The *Viśvāmitrī* is likely addressing the social and professional concerns of Brahmins at Vadodara within this context of Sultanate and Mughal rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While there would have been a decline of large-scale political support for monumental Hindu temples and courtly ritual practices in the area, the Gujarat Sultanate also contributed to a “stabilization of the religious marketplace” and ensured safe passage along pilgrimage routes (Sheikh 2009: 169), so that a thriving religious economy formed around Hindu, Jain, and Muslim pilgrimage destinations in Gujarat (Sheikh 2009: 153–58). The *Viśvāmitrī Māhātmya* provided Vadodara Brahmins, who would have found themselves without political or temple-based support, the textual authority through which they could fashion a new professional profile, and a new social identity, that was connected to this pilgrimage economy. First, we may note that all the *tīrthas* it describes, including the spot where Triśaṅku ascended to heaven, are located outside of the fortified city, creating the same insider-outsider dichotomy that we observed for Vadnagar in the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*. That is to say, the production of this Sanskrit text professionalized those Brahmins who found themselves as “outsiders” to the Islamic Vadodara court, to serve as *tīrtha* officiants within the thriving regional pilgrimage industry, especially atop Pavagadh, where visitation to the Mahākālī temple and other shrines continued unimpeded even though both the Rajput and Sultanate fortifications lay in ruins. And as he had for the Bhikṣu Nāgar Brahmins several centuries earlier, Viśvāmitra acted as a transgressive but compassionate icon through which these groups could connect their own social identity as Brahmin Others to the transformative powers of local *tīrthas*.



If the Sanskrit epics and early purāṇas had secured Viśvāmitra’s position at the outer limits of Brahminhood, medieval purāṇic literature, as this chapter has examined, cemented his counter-normative persona at sacred sites within the physical geography of Hinduism. Through these geo-mappings, Viśvāmitra came to represent the open-ended nature of pilgrimage, the socially

transformative power of *tīrthas*, and above all the compassion of the “Other” kind of Brahmin officiants who administered them. Though the texts that we have analyzed—the *Gautamī Māhātmya* and the *Nāgarakhaṇḍa*—did not address it directly, this emphasis on Brahminical mercy toward the downtrodden may also have been responding to a new critique of Brahmin social power emerging from the popular *bhakti* movements of the second millennium, and most starkly captured in the legend of *Hariścandra*. Neither the *Gautamī* nor the *Nāgara* tell this story; but the medieval Sanskrit texts that do tackle it must confront Viśvāmitra’s abusive behavior toward the noble king. As we will see in the next chapter, these cultural confrontations transform Viśvāmitra from the transgressive but compassionate Brahmin Other into a villainous and egocentric “Brahmin Double.”

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## CONFRONTATIONS





## ENCOUNTERING THE BRAHMIN DOUBLE IN MEDIEVAL INDIA



**A**t the end of the eleventh century, a poem was inscribed onto a stone slab at a Śiva temple in Madhya Pradesh in praise of Udayāditya, the successor to the great Paramāra king Bhoja of Dhar (1011–55).<sup>1</sup> Aside from celebrating the deeds of his forefathers and providing a clear genealogy of the Paramāra line, the Udaypur *praśasti* also tells the so-called “Agnikula” myth of the origins of the Rajput kings from Vasiṣṭha’s sacrificial fire altar. While the fire-pit motif appears to have its origins in South India (Hiltebeitel 1999b: 439–75), the earliest full version of the story is told in a Sanskrit courtly epic composed in Malwa, the *Navasāhasrāṅkacarita* of Padmagupta (c. 1000) and is echoed in two other contemporary Paramāra inscriptions at Arthuna (1080) and Nagpur (1104–5).<sup>2</sup> These differ in only minor details from the poem at Udaypur (Figure 5.1):

<sup>1</sup> The Udaypur *praśasti* is currently housed in the Archaeological Museum in Gwalior; Muzaffar Ansari has convincingly argued that it was originally located at a Varāha temple in the village of Muratpur located five kilometers to the south of Udaypur (2012: 31).

<sup>2</sup> For details of the Arthuna *praśasti* see Kielhorn 1893: 80—its date has been incorrectly rendered as 1060, first by Hoernle (1905: 21), and then by Hiltebeitel (1999b: 443). For the Nagpur *praśasti* of Naravarman, who was the son of Udayāditya, see Kielhorn 1892: 182.



A. Führer, Ph.D., fecit.

Scale 1-3rd of original.

W. Griggs, Photo-Litho.

FIG. 5.1. Udayapura Grant of Mahendrapala, late eleventh century. *Kāmadhenu* legend told in lines 5–7, beginning at *puspikā* symbol. Photographed by A. Führer, photolithography by W. Griggs. Image reproduced from *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. 1, ed. by J. A. S. Burgess (Calcutta, 1892), p. 234.

In the West there is a lofty mountain named Arbuda, a son of the Himalaya,  
a place where celestial *siddha* couples find perfection,  
and which grants the rewards hoped for by the wise.  
It is where Viśvāmitra forcibly stole a cow from Vasiṣṭha,  
and from [Vasiṣṭha's] power, a lone warrior emerged from the fire-pit,  
who brought destruction upon his enemy's forces.

After killing his enemy [the warrior] brought back the cow, and so the sage [Vasiṣṭha] declared, “You will be a glorious king called Paramāra, the ‘slayer of foes.’”<sup>3</sup>

This inscription offers material evidence of Viśvāmitra’s significance in the wider Indian cultural imaginary at the beginning of the second millennium. He still straddles the boundary between Brahmin and Kṣatriya castes, but now this hybridity conjures a feeling of social terror that we had not witnessed in earlier legends. His antagonistic relationship with Vasiṣṭha is of course nothing new, but Viśvāmitra exhibits no redeeming qualities in this poem—no compassion, generosity, or ascetic fortitude. No longer a positive emblem of hybrid power, he is simply a hostile enemy “Other” (*para*) who must be killed off (*māra*) in order to ensure the welfare of good Brahmins. Viśvāmitra has become, in other words, a villain.

This chapter investigates how this villainous side to Viśvāmitra’s mythological persona developed in the medieval period (c. 700–1300) as a response to the shifting configurations of Brahmin social power during this time. We will focus on one particularly harrowing story that is entirely absent in earlier mythological literature, but which comes to be one of the most famous of the Viśvāmitra legends: *Hariścandra*. One reason for its popularity, I will argue, is Viśvāmitra’s role as what Christian Novetzke (2011) has called the “Brahmin Double”—a literary figure through which Brahmin participants in Hindu devotional culture (*bhakti*) could join in a public critique of Brahmin elitism, but internally maintain a positive Brahminical self-identity.

It was in the numerous Sanskrit and vernacular tellings of the *Hariścandra* legend that Viśvāmitra was transformed from the Brahmin Other of early India into the medieval Brahmin Double. In order to trace the history of this cultural change, this chapter first examines three Sanskrit renderings of this narrative: in the *Mārkanḍeya Purāṇa* (c. seventh century), the drama *Candakauśika* (tenth century), and in the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* (c. eleventh–twelfth centuries). These three texts take increasingly critical perspectives on Viśvāmitra’s cruelties toward the noble king Hariścandra, and each recuperates his

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<sup>3</sup> asty urvīdhraḥ pratīcyāṁ himagiritanayaḥ siddhadampatyasiddheḥ, sthānaṁ ca jñānabhājām abhimataphalado kharvvitaḥ so 'rbudākhyāḥ | viśvāmitro vasiṣṭhād aharata balato yatra gāṇ tatprabhāvāj, jajñe vīro 'gnikuṇḍād ripuvalanidhanāṁ yaś cakāraika eva || mārayitvā parān dhenum ānīnye sa tato munih | uvāca paramārākhyā pāṛthivendro bhaviṣyasi || (EI 1: 234, lines 5–7).

counter-normative Brahmin persona using methods that are more and more subtle. We then turn to the medieval vernacular adaptations of *Hariścandra*, which, for the first time, reveal how non-Brahmin consumers of Hindu mythology viewed our sage's position at the edge of Brahminhood. There are many threads to follow in charting the vernacular life of *Hariścandra*, but this chapter will focus on one in particular: *bhakti*-oriented Marathi renditions by the non-Brahmin poets Nāmdev and Janābāī in the early fourteenth century and by the Brahmin poet Mukteśvar in the mid-seventeenth. There are subtle but significant differences between the Sanskrit and vernacular portrayals, and still others between those of the Brahmin and non-Brahmin Marathi poets; but in all cases it appears that he reflects—and deflects—a popular critique of Brahmin elitism that emerged from the cultural sphere of *bhakti* in medieval India.

#### BHAKTI PUBLIC CULTURE AND THE BRAHMIN DOUBLE IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Not without controversy, modern scholars have used the term *bhakti*—with its many connotations ranging from “sharing” or “partaking in” to “devotion,” “loyalty,” “adoration,” or “love”—to lump together a broad set of developments within medieval Hindu religious thought and practice. As we discussed in Chapter Three, the mid-first millennium (fourth to sixth centuries) witnessed the growth of temple-based worship of the principal Hindu deities—Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the Goddess—through rites of adoration (*pūjā*) that involved the direct, personal experience of divine grace (*prasāda*). In subsequent centuries, this theistic Hindu “mainstream,” which continues to thrive to this day, was coupled with a growth of a vibrant regional pilgrimage culture rooted in the place-based power of *tīrthas* that we observed in Chapter Four. Incorporating the motility of pilgrimage and the experientiality of *pūjā* came a third, “embodied” phenomenon (Prentiss 1999): the production and performance of poetry, song, theater, and other expressive forms in the regional vernaculars that gave voice to a personalized experience of the divine—that is to say, *bhakti*. Itinerant *bhakti* poets travelled from village to village and town to town, performing their works in local tongues before live audiences and thereby generating diverse but dedicated regional “publics” (Novetzke 2007) across the subcontinent, in which poets and audiences of all social backgrounds—men, women, high-castes, low-castes—could participate. The

unbounded and populist nature of *bhakti* as a public culture, in contrast to the self-circumscribed elite “Cosmopolis” of the Sanskrit and vernacular literary cultures (Pollock 2006), contributed to the formation of dynamic social networks that were predominantly non-Brahmin in their constituency (Novetzke 2011: 235).

Given its pluralistic social context, it is not surprising to find that the turn toward *bhakti* often involved a questioning of Brahmin elitism and the practices that supported it—from the professional (textual production, temple authority, and ritual) to the quotidian (diet, language, and dress) (Lorenzen 2006: 18). Vernacular poets like Kabīr or Tukārām challenged the Brahminical establishment on religious grounds by lampooning the self-aggrandizing attitudes of priests and scholars, though it should be emphasized that this did not necessarily form part of a radical social movement (Hawley 1988: 16; Lorenzen 1987: 295; Ramanujan 1973: 35; all cited in Burchett 2009).

That is to say, as Patton Burchett suggests, “egalitarian *bhakti* ideology has consistently not translated into egalitarian *bhakti* practice or reform” (2009: 116). Rather than calling for the annihilation of caste, vernacular *bhakti* poets pointed out that the path to ultimate liberation did not require the mediation of Brahmins and their institutions. This soteriological devaluation of Brahminhood, while it ultimately may not have induced a radical social politics, did nonetheless have serious implications for Brahmin social identity. For if an individual, regardless of his or her caste, gender, class, or other social markers, may achieve prosperity and liberation (*bhukti* and *mukti*) through a direct engagement with God, then touting oneself as being somehow closer to the divine simply because of one’s birth would be interpreted as a mark of arrogance and self-delusion. Consequently, being Brahmin in the public sphere of medieval *bhakti* became an impediment to, rather than an instrument of, liberation—“a liability rather than an advantage” (Novetzke 2011: 233).

How, then, might a Brahmin participate and gain intellectual authority in this religious milieu? Novetzke suggests that some *bhakti*-minded Brahmins adopted a new rhetorical strategy to do so, which he calls the Brahmin Double. This literary construction might be thought of as a “bad” Brahmin character who oversteps his bounds, abuses his social power, and causes others to suffer. In the vernacular performance traditions of medieval India, Novetzke argues, such a figure, whether mythological or historical, served as a villainous foil to

stand in as the target of public censure while actual Brahmins could represent themselves as “good” devotees. This bivalent discursive construction permitted “the Brahmin performer or composer to maintain a position of importance as a Brahmin in the world of *bhakti* and the larger premodern public sphere” (Novetzke 2011: 232). By absorbing anti-Brahmin critique, in other words, the storyworld Brahmin Double allowed Brahmins to project a positive self-identity in the real world.

We may therefore think of Novetzke’s Brahmin Double as a medieval analogue to what I have called the Brahmin Other in early Indian mythology. It is, however, worth noting a few differences between these two concepts. The Brahmin Other, as we have seen, simultaneously inscribed the boundaries of being Brahmin and argued for the superiority of those inside the line (Brahmins) over those outside (non-Brahmins). Any potential critique of caste was either muted (e.g., in the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s handling of Viśvāmitra) or precluded altogether (e.g., in the *Mahābhārata*’s). As a social symbol, such a mythological figure announced to non-Brahmins the dangers of disrespecting Brahmins. That is, the Brahmin Other belonged to a *monological* discourse of Brahmin power. On the other hand, medieval Brahmins wishing to participate in the predominantly non-Brahmin world of *bhakti* performance were obliged to deal with the problematization of Brahmin elitism. To this end, the Brahmin Double functioned as a bivalent symbol: he was a bad Brahmin who abused his power, from whom good Brahmins distanced themselves as they told stories about him. This effectively declared to their *bhakti* audiences, who were suspicious of the elitism of Brahmins, “Here is an example of a villainous Brahmin, but that’s not me.” This give and take generated a discourse of social power that was fundamentally *dialogical*.

Novetzke argues that the Brahmin Double proved especially productive in medieval Marathi performance traditions. In a scenario that holds true today, Brahmin performers could not ignore their audiences’ opinions as they physically stood before them during a live devotional performance and were communicating in the everyday linguistic register of Marathi. At the same time, they would naturally wish to represent themselves positively in order to succeed as performers. The Brahmin Double allowed them to do both—“to speak both outside and inside their fold, to criticize their caste superiority while suggesting a way to maintain status within public discursive networks, especially those of *bhakti* performance” (Novetzke 2011: 236). However, because

Novetzke sees the Brahmin Double as an essentially vernacular phenomenon, Sanskrit texts understandably take a back seat in his analysis. While he does offer the *vidūṣaka* (clown) of Sanskrit theater as a possible precursor to the vernacular Brahmin Double, the shoe does not quite fit. As a jester figure, the Sanskrit *vidūṣaka* is never particularly malicious or aggressive, and instead is consistently made to be the butt of jokes that play on stereotypes of the uncultivated courtly Brahmin. It is a role meant to generate humor on the Sanskrit stage, not meaningful social critique. On the other hand, more threatening Brahmins do appear on occasion—especially those, like Viśvāmitra, who had earlier served as the Brahmin Other. Changes in the portrayal of these counter-normative Brahmins reveal the extent to which the shadow of the Brahmin Double fell upon the composers of Sanskrit literature in the second millennium. There is no better place to observe this than in the famous story of *Hariścandra*.

#### HARIŚCANDRA AND THE CRITIQUE OF BRAHMIN POWER

*Hariścandra* would become by far the most popular of the Viśvāmitra legends in the second millennium. In the early thirteenth century, the Kannada poet Rāghavaṇka (c. 1230) adapted it into what may have been the first vernacular “narrative-poem” (*ākhyān-kāvya*) in South Asian literary history (Mugali 1975: 60–63). In Marathi, *Hariścandra* would receive no less than ten major literary renderings between 1300 and 1800.<sup>4</sup> Major medieval adaptations of the legend are also found in Bengali, Braj, Tamil, and Telugu.<sup>5</sup> In the colonial period, the story was frequently staged within the flourishing Hindi, Marathi, and Parsi urban theaters (Yajnik 1933: 89, 97, 106; Hansen 1983), and served as an allegory for nationalist resistance within the social politics of M. K. Gandhi

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Nāmdev’s *Hariścandra Rājāce Caritra* (“The Life-story of King Hariścandra”) and Janābāī’s *Hariścandra Ākhyān* (“The Legend of Hariścandra”), D. B. Bhingarkar mentions that adaptations were also composed in Marathi by Visobā Khecar, Viṣṇudās Nāmā, Kṛṣṇa Yājñavalkī, Mukteśvar, Śridhar, Moropant, Jagajīvan Prabhū, and Kṛṣṇadās (1989: 170).

<sup>5</sup> Dinesh Chandra Sen discusses *Hariścandra* in the Bengali *māṅgala* literature (Sen 1954: 161–63). Sukumar Sen notes the inclusion of a *Hariścandra* narrative in the fifteenth-century Bengali *Dharmapurāṇa* (Sen 1960: 55). In Tamil literature, we have the *Ariccandirapurāṇam* (1524) by the poet Vīrakavirāśar (see Jesudasan and Jesudasan 1961: 209–10), and in Telugu, there are the *Hariścandrōpākhyānam* of Gaurana (c. 1440), as well as Rāmarāja Bhūṣaṇa’s *Hariścandrānalopākhyānam*, an important *prabandha* poem composed in 1574 that simultaneously tells the Hariścandra and Nala legends (see Rajagopala Rao 1984: 64, 118–19; Sitapati 1968: 34–35).

(Seshagiri Rao 1990: 2). And in 1913, it was adapted into the first Indian-made feature film, D. G. Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*. The popularity of this legend has hardly waned since that landmark event.

There are many variations to its plot, but the earliest extant version of the story (as told in the *Märkandeya*) may be summarized as follows:




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[Story 6] **Hariścandra: Viśvāmitra Torments the Noble King**

Hariścandra is the noble and celebrated king of Ayodhyā. One day, he accidentally disturbs the austerities of the Brahmin Viśvāmitra in the forest, just as the sage is about to master great tantric powers. As compensation, Viśvāmitra asks for Hariścandra's entire kingdom, which he gives without hesitation. The Brahmin then demands an additional gratuity, for which the king must sell his wife and his only child into servitude to a Brahmin in the marketplace of Vārāṇasī. Selling himself to an Outcaste, Hariścandra then begins to work in the burning grounds, enduring a life of terrible suffering that culminates in the death of his only son. Finally, at this total *nadir* of human existence, the gods intervene, restoring his son back to life and inviting Hariścandra and his wife to come to heaven.

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What made this story so popular in the second millennium? David Gordon White calls Hariścandra the “Job of medieval India” (White 1991: 84) and the thematic similarities to the biblical narrative have not gone unnoticed (Clines 1983). Like the story of Job, it poses a universal question about the human condition: why do bad things happen to good people, and what can they do about it? The source of abjection in this case is neither God nor Fate, but a malicious Brahmin.<sup>6</sup> Folded into the story, therefore, is an unavoidable critique of caste that prompts White to suggest that “an old and uneasy alliance between the sacred authority of the *brāhmaṇa* priesthood and the temporal power of *kṣatriya* royal sovereignty is the source of narrative tension” (White 1996: 305).

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<sup>6</sup> Viśvāmitra's Brahminhood is almost never questioned in the many versions of *Hariścandra*, and his caste change plays no obvious role in its narration. He is treated as a Brahmin, albeit a terrifying one, through and through.

TABLE 5.1.

*Distribution and titles of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*

Hariścandra	Ādi-Baka
<i>Draupadeyotpattikathana</i> (MkP 7) “The Story of the Origin of the Draupadeyas”	<i>Hariścandropākhyāna</i> (MkP 8) “The Legend of Hariścandra”
	<i>Ādibakayuddhavarṇana</i> (MkP 9) “The Account of the Battle of the Ibis and the Crane”

However, I would like to make a bolder proposition: beyond structural differences between the sacred and the profane, the real issue is one of social justice. Isn’t what Viśvāmitra did, after all, a clear abuse of his social power as a Brahmin? Did Hariścandra really deserve the mistreatment he received? And what might an upright individual do to resist such wrongs? Poets, *paurāṇikas*, storytellers, and saints over the years have given different answers to this question by adding subtle twists and turns to the basic plot of the story. The earliest of these, so far as we can determine, is found in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.

#### “WHAT HEAVENLY WORLDS WILL HE POSSIBLY REACH?”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE MĀRKAṄDEYA PURĀṄA

The portion of the *Mārkaṇḍeya* containing the *Hariścandra* legend appears to have been incorporated into its older textual corpus sometime in the seventh century in the vicinity of the Narmadā River.<sup>7</sup> It is told, along with the *Ādi-baka* episode, in three chapters (MkP 7–9) as a reply to the last of four trivia questions about the *Māhābhārata* (Table 5.1). The conversation takes place between the sage Jaimini, a pupil of Vyāsa, and four talking birds who, in a previous life, had been Brahmins present on the battlefield of the Bhārata War. Jaimini asks the birds: “How come those illustrious Draupadeyas, the Pāṇḍavas’ mighty sons, were murdered before having wives, as if they had no one to protect them?”<sup>8</sup> Oddly enough, the birds respond with the story of *Hariścandra*.

<sup>7</sup> The *Mārkaṇḍeya*’s date has been the subject of much Indological speculation (Rocher 1986: 195–96), and here, I accept the opinions of D. R. Bhandarkar (1914: 74) and N. Y. Desai (1968), as cited by Rocher, who connect the final redaction of the purāṇa by the dating of its *Devī Māhātmya* section. For its provenance, see Pargiter 1904: xx.

<sup>8</sup> *kathāñ ca draupadeyās te kṛtadārā mahārathāḥ | pāṇḍuṇāthā mahātmāno vadham āpur anāthavat ||* (MkP 1.16). Jaimini’s other three questions: (i) “Why did Viṣṇu, the agitator of men, though he is formless,

Draupadī's sons, we learn, were once the five Viśvedeva deities (the Vedic “all-gods”), who were cursed by Viśvāmitra to a short human existence for criticizing his mistreatment of Hariścandra. When the sage shockingly beats the king’s wife with a stick for leaving Ayodhyā too slowly, the Viśvedevas cry out from heaven: “This very evil Viśvāmitra, who has uprooted this esteemed sacrificial patron from his own kingdom—what heavenly worlds will he possibly reach?”<sup>9</sup> The gods here give voice to what must have been a popular feeling of dissent. But this only leads Viśvāmitra to an even more audacious display of his power: he curses these five gods to become Draupadī’s five ill-fated sons, while offering them some reprieve by decreeing that they will die young and quickly regain their divinity. This answers Jaimini’s question (*MkP* 7.65cd–66), but the story has only just begun.

The next chapter is titled, “The Legend of Hariścandra” (*hariścandropākhyāna*) (*MkP* 8, colophon), and begins with Jaimini insisting that the birds finish the story: “That which you told me was sufficient to answer my question,” he says. “However, I am very interested in Hariścandra’s story. It’s incredible how that exalted man experienced such unsurpassed suffering! Sagacious birds, did he ever experience that level of happiness as well?”<sup>10</sup> Jaimini’s interest (*kautūhala*), like the Viśvedevas’ outrage, is meant to mirror the feelings of the purāṇic audience. Through the figure of Jaimini, the *Mārkanḍeya*’s composers give voice to the public opinion against Brahmin corruption and also show sympathy toward the victimized non-Brahmin. This would be in keeping with Novetzke’s observations of the Brahmin Double. However, while later Marathi poets would have engaged in a face-to-face dialogue with their audiences’ opinions during performance, the *Mārkanḍeya*’s composers were not themselves standing in front of a purāṇic audience, but had fashioned a hypothetical one within the text. The narrative frame, after all, has a *pseudo*-dialogical structure, and while Jaimini’s questions do reflect

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take on a human incarnation?” (*kasmān mānuṣatām prāpto nirguno ‘pi janārdanah* ||) (1.13ab). (2) “How come Kṛṣṇā, daughter of Drupada, was a wife to all the five sons of Pāṇdu?” (*kasmāc ca pānduputrānām ekā sā drupadātmajā | pañcānām mahiṣī kṛṣṇā* || 1.14abc). (3) “How come the mighty Baladeva, wielder of the plough, made a remedy for Brahmin-murder by engaging in a *tīrtha* pilgrimage?” (*bheṣajam brahmahatyāyā baladevo mahābalah | tīrthayātrāprasaṅgena kasmāc cakre halāyudhaḥ* ||) (1.15).

<sup>9</sup> *viśvāmitraḥ supāpo ‘yam lokān kān samavāpsyati || yenāyam yajvanām śreṣṭhaḥ svarājyād avaropitāḥ* || (*MkP* 7.62cd–63ab).

<sup>10</sup> *bhavadbhir idam ākhyātām yathāpraśnam anukramāt | mahat kautūhalam me ‘sti hariścandrakathām prati || aho mahātmanā tena prāptam kṛcchram anuttamam | kaccit sukham anuprāptam tādrg eva dvijottamāḥ* || (*MkP* 8.1–2).

the concerns that live audiences might potentially have when *paurāṇikas* were to recite them aloud, they remain fully under the textual control of the *Mārkanḍeya*'s Brahmin composers.

Still, Viśvāmitra's abusive behavior cannot be neglected, and so we find a sequel that addresses it by showing how his villainy really isn't villainy at all. This time without any prompting from Jaimini, the four avian raconteurs follow up their narration with the "Account of the *Ādi-Baka* Battle" (*ādibakayuddhavarnana*) (*MkP* 9, colophon):




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[Story 2D] **Ādi-Baka: The Battle of the Warbirds**

Because Viśvāmitra has harassed Hariścandra so cruelly, his preceptor Vasiṣṭha confronts his rival and protests his villainous deeds. He curses Viśvāmitra to turn into a gigantic crane (*baka*) but then Viśvāmitra returns the favor, turning Vasiṣṭha into an equally massive ibis (*ādi*).<sup>11</sup> The two sages-turned-warbirds then engage in a protracted and bloody battle until the whole world begins to crumble. Brahmā is forced to intervene at this point and settle their dispute. He explains to Vasiṣṭha why Viśvāmitra behaved the way he did, exonerates him, and asks both Brahmins to cease their hostilities and get along.

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Vasiṣṭha echoes here the Viśvedevas' earlier protest. He is described as feeling "compassion toward the king and a great rage toward the sage Viśvāmitra."<sup>12</sup> So much so that good Vasiṣṭha now sheds his normally peaceable demeanor and violently intervenes against his rival. In doing so, he articulates the moral outrage of the general Brahmin public against such corruption. The *Mārkanḍeya*'s composers themselves adopt a mediating position, and it is

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<sup>11</sup> K. N. Dave (2005: 384) identifies the *ādi* as the black ibis and the *baka* as the white ibis, noting the linkage of the black ibis to Brahmin power or *brahmavarcas* in the *Pāraskara Gṛhya Sūtra* 1.19. But he notes also that the name *baka* "includes in a wider sense also the Herons, Storks, and even the Flamingo" (2005: 386), and so for stylistic purposes, I have taken *baka* to be a crane. The *baka* may also denote the gigantic, carrion-feeding Adjutant Stork, *Leptoptilos dubius*, which James Fitzgerald (1998) has argued is meant by the term *kaṇka* in the *Mahābhārata*, and which seems more appropriate here.  
<sup>12</sup> *prītimān avanīpatau | cakāra kopam tejasvī viśvāmitram ṛṣiṇ prati ||* (*MkP* 9.4bcd).

developed not through the figure of Vasiṣṭha, but the god Brahmā. Through a passage worth examining in full, Brahmā adopts an apologetic stance toward Viśvāmitra:

Please stop this, dear Vasiṣṭha, and you, too, exalted Kauśika—cease this type of rivalry that you are conducting, having plunged into a dark (*tāmasa*) existence. This is all a consequence of King Hariścandra's *rājasūya*, this conflict between you two that is bringing about the end of the earth. Moreover, the eminent Kauśika here has not transgressed against the king. You see, dear Brahmin, he's the one who brought about [Hariścandra's] ascension into heaven, and so he stands as being a benefactor. You two have brought about an obstacle to your own austerities, and have entered into the bondage of desire and anger. If you don't mind, please let this go; Brahmin power is quite plentiful.<sup>13</sup>

Brahmā's authoritative monologue defuses a critique of Viśvāmitra on moral grounds. What happened is now explained as being the unavoidable consequence of a grand and venerable Vedic ritual, for it was obligatory for Hariścandra to undergo twelve years of suffering—a condition that any king who performs the *rājasūya* ritual must endure. In other words, the *Mārkanḍeya*'s composers are arguing that this is a Kṣatriya problem, not a Brahmin one. Also, we are told that Viśvāmitra is actually helping Hariścandra get to heaven. This teleological reassessment salvages Viśvāmitra's character, and, combined with the equally selfless sensibilities of Vasiṣṭha, reinforces the general virtues of Brahminhood. And so, Brahmā concludes, Brahmin power is plentiful (*pracura*) for those who are self-restrained—recapitulating the *Mahābhārata*'s older position on the matter.

In this way, the *Mārkanḍeya*'s treatment of *Hariścandra* reflects an early stage in the development of Viśvāmitra as the Brahmin Double. We sense, for the first time in the Sanskrit legends of Viśvāmitra, the presence of a public critique of Brahmin power in the voices of the Viśvedevas and the sympathetic Brahmin Vasiṣṭha. But the *Mārkanḍeya*'s composers, through the authoritative

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<sup>13</sup> *jahi vatsa vasiṣṭha tvam tvañ ca kauśika sattama | tāmasam bhāvam āśritya īdrg yuddham cikīrtitam || rājasūyavipāko ‘yam hariścandrasya bhūpateḥ | yuvayor vigrahaś cāyam prthivikṣayakārakah || na cāpi kauśikāśreṣṭhas tasya rājño ‘parādhyate | svargaprāptikaro brahmann upakārapade sthitāḥ || tapovigh-nasya kartārau kāmakrodhavaśam gatau | parityajata bhadram vo brahma hi pracuram balam ||* (MkP 9.26–29).

voice of Brahmā in the *Ādi-baka* legend, ultimately argue this critique to be hollow. Rather than engaging in public dialogue, then, the *Mārkanḍeya* continues the monological discourse of the Brahmin Other of the epics and early *purāṇas*.

#### “TO HELL WITH YOUR TAPAS!”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE *CANDAKAUŚIKA*

We may observe the further evolution of Viśvāmitra’s villainy in the *Hariścandra* legend through a Sanskrit theatrical adaptation, the *Caṇḍakauśika* (“The Fierce Kauśika”) of Ārya Kṣemīśvara, composed around 915 CE at the court of the Gurjara-Pratihāra king Mahīpāla I of Kannauj.<sup>14</sup> Viśvāmitra is the antagonist of the play, a character whose onstage presence is designed to produce the *rasas* (emotional flavors) of fury (*raudra*) and terror (*bhayānaka*) for its audiences.<sup>15</sup> Viśvāmitra, we should note, is *not* the *vidūṣaka* of this play. A different Brahmin serves as the king’s comic sidekick in its first act, but quickly disappears in Act Two when Viśvāmitra appears and the action gets more serious. Indeed, there is nothing funny about how our sage treats the king, and every onstage action of this angry Brahmin produces only anxiety and suffering for the non-Brahmin protagonist.

Capturing this image especially well is a verse that Viśvāmitra utters “in anger” (*saroṣam*) when Hariścandra accidentally disturbs his austerities:

From a rage welling at the interruption of the rite that I had started,  
this right hand of mine races to make a curse.  
But, still remembering my birth I had left behind long ago,  
my left hand is reaching for my bow!<sup>16</sup>

This verse uses the familiar split-image of Viśvāmitra as a volatile blend of two unlike social categories, Brahmin and Kṣatriya, to manufacture a striking

<sup>14</sup> Shibani Dasgupta provides a number of textual parallels to demonstrate Kṣemīśvara’s indebtedness to the *Mārkanḍeya*’s telling of the legend (Dasgupta 1962: lxv–lxvii; see also Dasgupta 1953).

<sup>15</sup> This conforms to this playwright’s larger aesthetic interests in the “unpleasurable” *rasas*, which carry over into his second play, the *Naisadhañānanda* (“The Bliss of the Niṣadha King”), an adaptation of the equally harrowing legend of Nala (Sathaye 2010b).

<sup>16</sup> *prārabdhasādhanavighātavivṛddhamanyoḥ śāpāya dhāvati karo mamadakṣiṇo ‘yam | jātiṇī smarann api cirāya samujjhitām tām, savyataras tu mama cāpam upaiti pāṇīḥ ||* (Ck 2.23).

poetic image that captures the terror involved in the power of the former (the curse) and the valiant glory of the latter (the bow). In this regard, Kṣemīśvara is clearly indebted to Bhavabhūti's earlier portrait of the sage in the *Mahāvīracarita* (3.43) that we examined in Chapter 2. In that play, Viśvāmitra had assumed a protective, nurturing role toward young prince Rāma, but here he is nothing but a hostile adversary to King Hariścandra—a one-dimensional embodiment of fury.

Viśvāmitra's hybrid social status, bad temper, and indomitable pride make our sage the perfect theatrical villain. But what did Kṣemīśvara, who was in all probability himself a Brahmin, think of this Brahmin's villainy, and how did he want his courtly audiences to appreciate him? One clue comes from his depiction of the gods' protest. This motif is a clear borrowing from the *Mārkaṇḍeya*, for there is no apparent aesthetic purpose for including it in the play, and Kṣemīśvara moves it from the outskirts of Ayodhyā to the slave market of Vārāṇasī. The Viśvedevas' objection, however, is the same:

To hell with your *tapas*, to hell with your vows!  
 To hell with this learning of yours, and your great fame!  
 Since you've led Hariścandra into this condition, Brahmin.<sup>17</sup>

Viśvāmitra, however, responds somewhat differently in the play than in the purāṇa. "Argh!" he cries out, "Now who's slandering me with these four-letter words (*dhikśabda*)?"<sup>18</sup> He then barks out a furious curse at the gods: "Damn you, self-deluded fools! You are partial to lowly Kṣatriyas, and so:

All five of you will have a Kṣatriya birth,  
 But still the Brahmin son of Drona will slay you as children.<sup>19</sup>

In the *Mārkaṇḍeya*, Viśvāmitra had forced the gods to experience human existence, but here, the Brahmin commands them to become Kṣatriyas and die at the hands of a Brahmin. This elitist attitude includes the dismissal of Kṣatriyas

<sup>17</sup> *dhik tapo dhig vrataṁ idam dhig jñānaṁ dhig bahuśrutam | nītavān asi yad brahmaṇa hariścandram imām daśām ||* (Ck 3.28).

<sup>18</sup> *āḥ ke punar amī dhikśabdena mām garhayanti |* (Ck ad 3.28).

<sup>19</sup> *dhig anātmajñāḥ | are re kṣudrakṣatriyapakṣapātinaḥ | pañcānām api vojanma kṣatrayonau bhaviṣyati | tathāpi brāhmaṇo drauṇi kumārān vo haniṣyati ||* (Ck 3.29).

as being “lowly” (*kṣudra*, likely a pun on *Śūdra*), and is compounded with a thrill (*harṣa*) that he feels at seeing the gods falling from heaven. There is no easing of the curse, no sympathy or compassion, and instead, we find only the wicked glee of a gloating Brahmin who has succeeded in striking fear into the gods:

Slipping down from the air that is filled with the ringing of bells  
that are trembling and shaking in fear of my eye’s gaze,  
They are falling from their celestial car, their heads turned upside-down,  
their earrings knocked off by the edges of their crowns,  
which have been slapped off by the flapping cloth of their  
banners.<sup>20</sup>

The variation of the play’s ending is also revealing. Instead of the *Ādi-baka* sequel that we observed in the *Mārkaṇḍeya*, Viśvāmitra simply disappears in Kṣemīśvara’s play, which instead focuses on how the god Dharma comes to Hariścandra’s rescue.<sup>21</sup> Viśvāmitra’s villainy thus escapes scrutiny, as the dramatist maintains the theatrical spotlight on his virtuous and emotionally sensitive Kṣatriya protagonist, who he shows to be noble in conduct and also capable of experiencing all eight classical *rasas*. We might therefore understand Kṣemīśvara’s Viśvāmitra as having moved one step closer to becoming the Brahmin Double—he turns into a one-dimensional antagonist, flattened into the background in order to bring the multidimensional non-Brahmin hero into sharper focus.

#### THE REST OF THE STORY: VIŚVĀMITRA IN THE *DEVĪBHĀGAVATA PURĀṆA*

It is in the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* that Viśvāmitra is fully deployed as a Sanskrit version of the Brahmin Double. This Goddess-centered (Śākta) *purāṇa* is thought to have been composed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and R. C. Hazra proposes that its author was “a Smārta Śākta Brahman

<sup>20</sup> *maddr̥ṣṭipātabhayakampitalolaghāṇṭāṇkārapūritaviyatshkalato vimānāt | velladdhvajāṁśukavidaṣṭakirīṭakoṭiprabhraṣṭakunḍalam avāṁmukham āpatanti ||* (Ck 3.30).

<sup>21</sup> Kṣemīśvara does allude to the *Ādi-baka* battle when Hariścandra first meets Viśvāmitra and states: “You made the human world tremble during the *Ādi-baka* battle” (*āḍibakapradhanakampitajīvalokam*) (Ck 2.25c). This further indicates Kṣemīśvara’s reliance on the *Mārkaṇḍeya*, but he places the event anachronistically before the *Hariścandra* episode (see Dasgupta 1962: lxix–lxx).

TABLE 5.2.

*Distribution of the Viśvāmitra legends in the Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*

Book Three	Book Six			Book Seven				
Kāma-dhenu	Śunah- śepa	Hariś- candra	Ādi- baka	Satya- vrata	Śvapaca	Triśaṅku	Śunah- śepa	Hariś- candra
3.17	6.12.37 -13.30	6.13.30 -33	6.13.33 -51	7.10- 12	7.13	7.14	7.15 -17	7.17 -28

of Bengal [who] migrated to Benares (probably because it was the best place of residence for a Devī-worshipper), lived there for a long time, and then wrote the *Devī-bhāgavata*" (1963: 359; see also Hardy 1993: 178). The *Devībhāgavata* exhibits a noticeable scholasticism in how it synthesizes earlier mythological materials (including from the *Mārkanḍeya*) within its Goddess-oriented interpretive framework (Brown 1990: 161; Lalye 1973) for the purpose of furthering Brahminical interests in eastern India (Chakrabarti 2001: 34). It is through this scholasticism that its composers come to terms with Viśvāmitra's villainous behavior in the *Hariścandra* legend.

The *Devībhāgavata* presents *Hariścandra* twice, in both cases alongside the *Śunahśepa* legend (Table 5.2). Surprisingly, this is the only Sanskrit text to connect these two clearly complementary narratives. The first telling is very short—only two verses—and comes during a discussion of sacred *tīrthas* in Book Six. A more elaborate version comes in Book Seven within its chronicles of the Solar dynasty, at the tail end of a long series of Viśvāmitra narratives: *Satyavrata*, *Śvapaca*, *Triśaṅku*, and *Śunahśepa*. In chaining these five stories together, the *Devībhāgavata*'s composers have methodically assembled elements from Vedic literature, both epics, the early purāṇic genealogies, and the *Mārkanḍeya*, offering the most detailed saga of Viśvāmitra ever produced, rivaled only by Valmīki's in its length.<sup>22</sup>

The *Devībhāgavata*'s composers hold nothing back in documenting Viśvāmitra's abusive behavior in the *Hariścandra* legend. And in the abbreviated version told in Book Six, they even try to intervene narratologically.

<sup>22</sup> Book Three of the *Devībhāgavata* also includes an isolated telling of the *Kāmadhenu* legend (3.17), adapted from the *Mahābhārata*'s *Ādi Parvan*.

The story itself is wrapped up in two verses that state that Viśvāmitra divests Hariścandra of his kingdom while he was out hunting in the forest (*DbhP* 6.13.31–32). Then, before the king can experience any further suffering, Vasiṣṭha accosts Viśvāmitra in the forest and expresses his outrage:

You low-rank Kṣatriya! You silly fool, who wrongly wears the guise of a Brahmin, you behave deceptively like a crane (*baka*)! Why do you have such arrogance, you hypocrite? Hey scoundrel, how come you cause this exalted king, who is also my patron, to experience such incredible suffering for no offense?<sup>23</sup>

To match his crane-like behavior, Vasiṣṭha curses his rival to become one, and he returns the curse, turning Vasiṣṭha into a black ibis (*ādi*). Interrupting the normal course of the *Hariścandra* legend, the narration thus jumps into the *Ādi-baka* episode, again adapted from the *Mārkanḍeya*, with both sages clawing at one another as gigantic warbirds until Brahmā has to come and put a stop to it. In the dialogic frame, it is explained that the whole story sequence is meant to be a cautionary example showing how even celebrated Brahmins like Vasiṣṭha can let their emotions get the best of them (*DbhP* 6.13.48–49), and that religious practices are useless if one does not first have a purity of the heart (*cittasuddhi*) (6.13.50–51). In Vasiṣṭha’s passionate exclamation, however, we hear something else—a real measure of protest against Viśvāmitra’s un-Brahminlike behavior and sympathy toward the victimized king, so much that it interrupts the course of events before his real suffering may begin.

These twin features of dissent and distancing are characteristic of the Brahmin Double, but the *Devībhāgavata* adds a third, distinctly scholastic feature in its longer version of *Hariścandra*: the composers have chained together a series of legends to tell us “the rest of the story,” to borrow a phrase from the American radio broadcaster, Paul Harvey. That is to say, the *Devībhāgavata* tells a number of stories *before* getting to Viśvāmitra’s infamous harassment of Hariścandra that are designed to change public perceptions of this villainy. These four prepended stories—*Satyavrata*, *Trisaṅku*, *Śvapaca*, *Śunahṣepa*—demonstrate how this Brahmin, contrary to popular belief,

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<sup>23</sup> *kṣatriyādhama durbuddhe vṛthā brāhmaṇavesabhr̥t | bakadharma vṛthā kim tvam garvam vahasi dāmbhika || kasmāt tvayā nrpaśreṣṭho yajamāno mamāpy asau | aparādham vinā jālma gamito duḥkham adbhitam ||* (*DbhP* 6.13.34–35).

had actually had a long history of sympathy and charity toward Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Outcastes. They also show how the king was not quite as noble as people think he was, and that his father had also misbehaved. The chronological arrangement of these stories—which no earlier writers had attempted, so far as we know—generates an internal, pro-Brahmin discourse for the *Devībhāgavata*'s Sanskrit readership that explains how the “bad” Brahmin was really good, while the “good” Kṣatriya had actually behaved quite badly.<sup>24</sup> While the *Mārkandeya*'s composers had done this monologically, by having Brahmā give a speech to pardon Viśvāmitra, the *Devībhāgavata*'s sequencing of Viśvāmitra legends reflects a scholastic dialogue that has taken place between its composers and their target audiences. On a superficial level, the *Devībhāgavata*'s version of *Hariścandra* affirms the public perception of Viśvāmitra as a corrupt Brahmin, but in response, the purāṇic composers recuperate his persona by providing “the rest of the story.” The resulting double-sided discourse, I suggest, constitutes the full emergence of a Sanskrit “Brahmin Double.”

The details of how the *Devībhāgavata* both villainizes and valorizes Viśvāmitra are worth a closer look. Negative epithets are used throughout the text to describe the sage and his actions, and several new instances of aggression are documented. At the start of the story, Viśvāmitra is shown to be physically abusing (*dehapīḍana*, *DbhP* 7.18.11b) a young girl in the forest as part of his austerities (*DbhP* 7.18.7–8). This is parallel to Act Two of Kṣemīśvara's *Candakauśika*, where the king runs into three girls screaming in terror, who are incarnate forms of the three tantric power-goddesses (*vidyās*). In the *Devībhāgavata*, however, this young girl is said to be simply a “lovely and desirable woman” (*kamanā kāntā*) (*DbhP* 7.18.8c), whom the sage is tormenting (*bādhate*) as part of his secret rituals. Hariścandra nobly puts a stop to it by forbidding anyone to perform “fierce ascetic practices that hurt other people” (*lokapīḍākaram ghorāṇ tapah*) in his kingdom (*DbhP* 7.18.12–13). In retaliation for the ban (*DbhP* 7.18.14–15), Viśvāmitra dispatches a *rākṣasa* in the form of a giant boar to destroy the king's gardens and lure him into the forest (*DbhP* 7.18.16–18). This motif also is found in Kṣemīśvara's play, but there,

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<sup>24</sup> The only other comparable assemblage of the Viśvāmitra legends comes over a millennium earlier, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, and its saga involves a different set of stories: *Kāmadhenu*, *Triśaṅku*, *Sunahṣepa*, *Menakā*, *Rambhā*. The *Devībhāgavata* is the only text to give detailed versions of *Satyavrata* and *Triśaṅku* side-by-side, as well as *Sunahṣepa* and *Hariścandra*.

it had been orchestrated by the deity Vighnarāj, the Lord of Obstacles, in order to interrupt Viśvāmitra's austerities before he could master the tantric arts. Once Hariścandra is lured into the forest, in addition to innumerable taunts and rebukes, Viśvāmitra tricks him into giving away his kingdom as a gift for the marriage of the sage's son and a young bride—both of whom he has conjured up as illusions (*DbhP* 7.19.15–27). On top of that, he demands a gratuity (*dakṣinā*), explaining that the law-giver Manu has decreed it in order for donations to become fruitful (*DbhP* 7.19.28). This entire sequence is repeatedly called a deception or a trick (e.g., *DbhP* 7.19.7, 17, 22, 37), and Viśvāmitra is said to have hoodwinked the king “like bandits in the forest” (*vane pāṭaccarair iva*) (*DbhP* 7.19.35d).

When the action shifts to Vārāṇasī, Viśvāmitra directs his aggressions toward Hariścandra's wife, Śaivyā. He assumes the guise of the old Brahmin who purchases her and drags her by her hair (*DbhP* 7.22.15), beats her (7.22.36) and also her son (7.22.19). Later, Viśvāmitra murders this boy in secret by sending the snake that kills him, and then, still disguised as her Brahmin master, refuses to let Śaivyā go tend to the corpse. Mercilessly, he “debases her over and over with cruel words: To hell with you, wicked woman! You take my payment but neglect your work? If you couldn't do it, then why did you accept my money?”<sup>25</sup> Only after midnight, after completing her chores, including “giving him drink and a massage” (*pānābhyaṅgādikarmaṇā*) (*DbhP* 7.25.28d), does Viśvāmitra permit her to go and tend to her son's corpse, warning her to come back straightaway to him, “so that the early morning housework shall not be neglected.”<sup>26</sup> The psychological and physical abusiveness of the Brahmin master is noticeably enhanced by the shift of focalization from Hariścandra to his wife—a feature also found in many vernacular versions that is perhaps reflective of the female-centered interpretive framework of this Śākta purāṇa.

The *Devībhāgavata* articulates the public disapproval of Viśvāmitra's abusive behavior through voices in the narrative background, as the *Mārkaṇḍeya* earlier had, but it is now in a much more direct fashion. The protest against the king's exile, for example, comes from the citizens of Ayodhyā themselves—who are said to belong to all four castes (*DbhP* 7.19.58)—rather than the Viśvedeva

<sup>25</sup> *dhik tvāṁ duṣṭe krayaṁ grhya mama kāryaṁ vilumpasi || aśaktā cet katham tarhi grhitām mama tad dhanam | evaṁ nirbhartsitā tena krūrvākyaiḥ punah punah ||* (*DbhP* 7.25.15cd–16).

<sup>26</sup> *na lupyeta yathā prātārgṛhakarma mameति ca |* (*DbhP* 7.25.30ab).

gods up in heaven: “Everyone in town, including the Brahmins and so on, were pained with grief and protested against that evil-doing Brahmin, saying, ‘He is a scoundrel!’”<sup>27</sup> The *Devībhāgavata* here does not displace the question of social justice into some tangential bit of trivia, as the *Mārkaṇḍeya* had done by linking the Viśvedevas’ protest to the early deaths of the sons of Draupadī. Instead, the townspeople articulate—in terms that are impossible to ignore—a critique of Brahmin corruption resonant with the discourse emerging from the regional *bhakti* publics at the turn of the second millennium.

The *Devībhāgavata*’s composers deal with this anti-Brahmin critique, as already noted, through a scholastic maneuver: they give a series of prequels to *Hariścandra* that renders such a critique hollow and naïve. By the time we get to this story, the *Devībhāgavata* has already revealed three important details: (1) Viśvāmitra’s malice was a premeditated act to test Hariścandra’s nobility, (2) Viśvāmitra has previously been deeply compassionate toward Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and even Outcastes, and (3) the king has not been quite as noble as he seems. Once the *Devībhāgavata*’s audiences are made to know “the rest of the story,” it then becomes hard to criticize Viśvāmitra’s treatment of Hariścandra.

The saga begins with the crimes of Hariścandra’s father Satyavrata, who steals a Brahmin’s daughter from her wedding (*DbhP* 7.10.12), kills Vasiṣṭha’s cow, and then feeds the beef to Viśvāmitra’s Brahmin family (7.10.51–53). All three are crimes against Brahmins, earning him the name Triśaṅku and a curse from Vasiṣṭha to become an Outcaste. The prince is redeemed through the grace of the Goddess, who intervenes when he attempts suicide (7.11.13–19) and restores his Kṣatriyahood (7.12.12–13). His father accepts him back, and before installing him as king and retiring to the forest, gives him a long set of lessons on how to run a kingdom, where some familiar pro-Brahmin sentiments are expressed: “One should never offend a Brahmin” (*na kartavyam kvacid vīprāvamānanam*) (7.12.49), for “Brahmins are gods on earth” (*brāhmaṇā bhūmidevāś*) (7.12.50), and “Kṣatriya power derives from Brahmin power” (*brahmaṇāḥ kṣatram... utthitam*) (7.12.51).<sup>28</sup> But these teachings are to

<sup>27</sup> *ninindur brāhmaṇam tam tu durācāraṁ puraukasah | dhūrto 'yam iti bhāṣanto duḥkhārtā brāhmaṇādayo ||* (*DbhP* 7.19.59).

<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, this power is not fully absolute—for only well-educated Brahmins should be consulted in matters of *dharmaśāstra*, and suitably shown honor (*DbhP* 7.12.46–47), while “no uneducated Brahmin should ever be given honor. To such a fool, nothing should be given aside from mere sustenance, under any circumstances” (*avidvān brāhmaṇāḥ ko'pi naiva pūjyāḥ kadā cana | āhārād adhikāṇ naiva deyāḥ mūrkhyā karhi cit ||*) (*DbhP* 7.12.48).

no avail, for Triśaṅku soon gets the audacious idea of going to heaven in his own body, and, after offending Vasiṣṭha by threatening to find another preceptor to assist him (7.12.27–28), the king finds himself again cursed to be an Outcaste (7.12.32).

Before narrating the further adventures of Triśaṅku, the *Devībhāgavata*'s composers here interject the *Śvapaca* episode as a first-person memorate that Viśvāmitra tells his wife upon returning home. In accordance with the *Mahābhārata*'s telling, the dog-eating Outcaste tries to dissuade our Brahmin sage from committing a “sin of *caste* intermixture” (*varṇasaṅkaradoṣa*) (*DbhP* 7.13.21a). However, rather than rebuking him for daring to challenge a Brahmin, Viśvāmitra is here surprisingly respectful. “You speak truly, law-knowing Outcaste,” he tells him, “And your mind is pure.”<sup>29</sup> He acknowledges that he is behaving “in the manner of a thief” (*cauryadharma*) (7.13.25a), but that he will do so anyway, blaming it on the fact that Indra has not made it rain. It is then that Indra releases the rains and ends the famine.

Feeling indebted toward the prince for having cared for his family during his absence, Viśvāmitra visits the maligned and miserable Triśaṅku in his meager hut. In a moving scene, the Brahmin sage compassionately lifts up the Kṣatriya-turned-Outcaste lying prostrated before him, and vows to fulfill his desires (*DbhP* 7.13.52–56). In contrast to the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s version, Viśvāmitra's goodwill here is not motivated by vengeance toward Vasiṣṭha—for example, he does not curse Vasiṣṭha's sons—but by a sense of honor, obligation, and compassion toward Triśaṅku.

The next story, *Śunahṣepa*, further enhances these positive traits of Viśvāmitra, while also exposing Hariścandra's own misdeeds. It is closely adapted from Vedic sources, but with two major deviations. First, the king himself—rather than his son—procures the boy as a sacrificial substitute. This accords with the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s version. Second, Viśvāmitra actively intervenes and attempts to dissuade Hariścandra from performing such an “abominable act” (*anāryavat karma*) (*DbhP* 7.16.51), which parallels the *Brahma Purāṇa*'s version. Along with emotional and legal appeals, the sage offers a clever ritualistic argument: because the rite is part of the *rājasūya* sacrifice, the king is legally obligated to give the Brahmin whatever he asks for—in this case, it is Śunahṣepa's release. “How could you not realize the transgression

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<sup>29</sup> *satyam vadasi dharmajña matis te viśadāntyaya ||* (*DbhP* 7.13.21cd).

that arises from not heeding this request?" he asks. "In this kind of rite, one should always give whatever is asked, eminent ruler—otherwise, there is no doubt that you will take on sin, King."<sup>30</sup> But Hariścandra only thinks to save himself, and Viśvāmitra, "overcome with mercy" (*dayātura*) then furnishes Śunahṣepa with a Vedic mantra that will liberate him (*DbhP* 7.17.1–2). After the rite is concluded, the question of adoption comes up, as it had in the Vedic version, but here it involves a protracted debate. It is Vasiṣṭha who suggests that Viśvāmitra should adopt the boy, since he had protected him during his time of adversity (7.17.34). The sage then "lovingly" (*premapūrita*) accepts Śunahṣepa as his own, raising no issue of primogeniture and no curse of his own sons (7.17.36–37).

The *Devībhāgavata* next reports that Hariścandra performed a royal consecration (*rājasūya*), which accords with the *Mahābhārata* (2.11.47–65) but contradicts its own timeline, since Viśvāmitra had earlier claimed the sacrifice of Śunahṣepa to be part of the *rājasūya*. The successful performance of this consecration ritual prompts Vasiṣṭha to praise his patron in Indra's court: "There has never been and will never be a king like Hariścandra—a speaker of truth, charitable, brave, and incredibly righteous."<sup>31</sup> After everything that has happened, these boasts arouse Viśvāmitra's anger, and when he makes the following brash wager with his longtime rival, we now know exactly where it comes from:

You praise this king so? This speaker of lies, who is devoted to fraud, who tricked Varuṇa though he had promised him a boon? Against the virtue that I have gained since birth through my renowned *tapas*, please stake yours, which has also arisen through extreme *tapas*, exalted sir. If I do not immediately show that king, whom you praise so highly, to be a true speaker of lies, a man who gives nothing—an incredible villain—then may all of the merit I have accumulated since birth be lost. Otherwise, may it be the merit you have earned—let us make these stakes.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *prārthanābhāṅgajam dosaṁ katham tvam nāvabudhyase | prārthitam sarvadā deyam makhe'smin nrpasattama || anyathā pāpam eva syāt tava rājan na samśaya |* (*DbhP* 7.16.55–56ab).

<sup>31</sup> *hariścandra samo rājā na bhūto na bhaviṣyati || satyavādī tathā dātā śūrah paramadhārmikāḥ |* (*DbhP* 7.18.53cd–54ab). The first half of the verse is a direct borrowing from the *Mārkaṇdeya* (8.266), revealing how this purāṇa is reworking the older version (for further discussion, see Sathaye 2009).

<sup>32</sup> *evam stausi nrpaṁ mithyāvādinām kapaṭapriyam | vañcito varuṇo yena pratiśrutya varāṇ punaḥ || mama janmārjitaṁ punyaṁ tapasah pathitasya ca | tvadīyam vātitapaso glaham kuru mahāmate || aham cet tam nrpaṁ sadyo na karomy atisaṁstutam | asatyavādinaṁ kāmam adātāram mahākhalam || ājanmasañcitaṁ sarvam punyaṁ mama vinaśyatu | anyathā tvatkṛtam sarvam punyaṁ tv iti pañāvahे ||* (*DbhP* 7.17.55–58).

When Viśvāmitra mercilessly tortures the king in the chapters that follow, we already know that it is because Hariścandra earlier had shown no mercy. And we already know how Viśvāmitra had rescued Śunahṣepa and also aided Hariścandra's own misbehaving father, Triśaṅku. His behavior cannot then be reasonably interpreted as abusive or corrupt, for as anyone can see, the king had it coming. By telling the "rest of the story," the *Devībhāgavata* reaffirms for its Sanskrit-speaking medieval audiences the virtues of even the most antagonistic of Brahmins, and demonstrates the unscrupulousness of even the noblest of Kṣatriyas. But its composers do so without challenging the public critique of Brahmin power that arises through Viśvāmitra's actions in the story itself. The result is a double-sided discourse, through which Viśvāmitra functions as a full-fledged purāṇic version of the Brahmin Double.

The evidence we have considered so far has shown how, in the five centuries between the composition of the *Mārkaṇḍeya* and *Devībhāgavata Purāṇas*, Viśvāmitra's villainous role in the *Hariścandra* legend made him into a mythological magnet for the public critique of Brahmin elitism. As this critique gained momentum in the predominantly non-Brahmin *bhakti* setting, the composers of medieval Sanskrit literature sought to forestall it through methods that grew increasingly dialogical. Within the diverse vernacular performance contexts of medieval *bhakti*, however, the situation was somewhat more fluid, and Viśvāmitra's villainy was generally presented without the scholasticism that we have observed in the *Devībhāgavata*. To get a sense of the differences between Sanskrit and vernacular *Hariścandras*, and in order to arrive at a pluralized conceptualization of the Brahmin Double, we now turn to Viśvāmitra's appearances in medieval Marathi poetry.

#### "A PETITIONER LIKE VIŚVĀMITRA": HARIŚCANDRA IN MEDIEVAL MARATHI LITERATURE

The earliest Marathi treatments of *Hariścandra* offer a rare glimpse of what non-Brahmins in premodern India thought of Viśvāmitra's counter-normative persona. Nāmdev (1270–1350), a tailor, and Janābāī (d. 1350), his disciple, composed their works for the oral performance environment of the early Vārkarī devotional tradition. This was a multi-caste, itinerant network of devotees focused on the ecstatic worship of Viṭṭhal of Pandharpur, a regional deity in southern Maharashtra taken to be a manifestation of Viṣṇu. In keeping with

their devotional interests, the Vārkarī versions of *Hariścandra* kept questions of social justice muted in the background, emphasizing instead how the king and his wife (named Tārāmatī in the Marathi versions) manage to overcome some of the worst tragedies imaginable through devotion to God (*bhakti*) and by being good (*sattva*). There is textual evidence to suggest that Janābāī based her version (*HāJ*) on Nāmdev's telling (*HRC*) (Irlekar 2002: 124–25), though her devotional message is less reliant on divine intervention. And, as we will see, Janābāī also appears to have been a bit more critical of Viśvāmitra's cruel behavior.

Since Nāmdev and Janābāī were not themselves Brahmins, Viśvāmitra by definition does not function as a “Brahmin Double” in their versions of *Hariścandra*, and appears instead as a flat villain of almost cartoonish proportions. In both versions, the Brahmin sage magically enters Hariścandra's dream to demand his entire kingdom as a gift and then, on the following day, appears in person to request an additional monetary gratuity (*HRC* 2256.1–3; *HāJ* 300–1). When the king balks at making the payment, Viśvāmitra impatiently beats both Hariścandra and his wife with a stick (*HRC* 2256.12; *HāJ* 301.10). He refuses to accept payment from wealthy citizens on the king's behalf (*HRC* 2256.28–31; *HāJ* 301.23–26), and rushes Hariścandra and his family out of the city.

Nāmdev's version begins rather abruptly with the dream scene (*HRC* 2256.1), but Janābāī includes a preamble that adds more cases of the Brahmin's persecution of the king. Her version begins with a wager between Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha that is in some ways parallel to the opening of the *Devībhāgavata*'s version. At Indra's court in heaven, the sage Nārada praises Hariścandra as being “an ocean of *sattva*” (*HāJ* 295.2) to the delight of the king's *guru*, Vasiṣṭha. Viśvāmitra disparages Vasiṣṭha for “pumping up his own disciple” (*kaisā vādhatitā śiṣyālā*) (*HāJ* 295.4), and swears to torment the king until he loses his *sattva* (*HāJ* 294.5–6). Should he fail to do so, Viśvāmitra promises to give all of his *tapas* to the king (*HāJ* 294.8). This is quite similar to the start of the *Devībhāgavata*'s version, but while the *paurāṇikas* had prefixed a full explanation of the events leading up to this oath, Janābāī offers no reason for Viśvāmitra's anger, apart from, presumably, his longstanding enmity with Vasiṣṭha—though even this is not explicitly stated. The rest of her preamble then documents how Viśvāmitra uses his tantric powers to create wild beasts (*śvāpadas*) that overrun

the countryside, luring Hariścandra out of his palace to eradicate them (*HāJ* 297). The sage then sends beautiful damsels to seduce the king (*HāJ* 298.13–19), before coming to him in his dream and demanding his kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

The centerpiece of these Marathi devotional tellings is how Viśvāmitra harasses Hariścandra and his family on the road to Vārāṇasī—a scene undeveloped in most other versions, both Sanskrit and vernacular. The sage first orders the sun to grow hotter, Varuṇa to hold back the rains, and the wind to stop blowing on Hariścandra’s path (*HRC* 2256.33–35; *HāJ* 306). He then comes in the guise of an old Brahmin pilgrim and asks the trio for their shoes for his own (fictitious) family (*HRC* 2256.40–42; *HāJ* 305). Next, he creates a forest fire and separates Tārāmatī from the others, torturing her by showing her two corpses that he claims are her husband and son (*HRC* 2256.47; *HāJ* 303). And finally, to test their resolve he creates an illusory roadside rest area where he tempts each of them with water, food, and other delights (*HRC* 2256.81–82; *HāJ* 307).<sup>34</sup> These incidents are unique to the Marathi versions, and may reflect both the hot and arid climate of central Maharashtra and also the devotional valuation of walking in the annual Vārkari pilgrimage, in which “it is the walk, the pain of the walk, that is fruitful and productive” (Olivelle 2007: 186).

Viśvāmitra’s persecution of the trio continues in Vārāṇasī, even after the king has successfully repaid the Brahmin’s fee. When Hariścandra is put to work carrying water for the Outcaste’s wife, Viśvāmitra breaks his water-pot every day (*HRC* 2256.164–65; *HāJ* 311.27). And every evening, as Hariścandra sets about to eat his meager rations, Viśvāmitra comes disguised as an old Brahmin mendicant and asks for half of his food, but then eats all of it, leaving the king to starve (*HRC* 2256.174–75; *HāJ* 312.8–11). The sage’s harassment of the king’s wife is even more vicious. Finding Tārāmatī lamenting over the corpse of her son Rohidās, who has died of a snakebite, Viśvāmitra urges her to hide in a temple because there is a witch (*lāv*) on the loose.<sup>35</sup> While she is asleep, he tears open the boy’s stomach and smears his blood and guts across

<sup>33</sup> After the preamble, Janābāī breaks out of the narrative frame and states that “the story gets juicy ahead” (*pudhē rasāla ahe kathā*) (*HāJ* 299.11a); the rest of her version accords with Nāmdev’s rather closely in both form and content. This reflects the multi-episodic nature of Janābāī storytelling performance and also suggests that she is building off of Nāmdev’s earlier composition.

<sup>34</sup> Perhaps because her version focalizes on Tārāmatī’s devotional character, Janābāī switches the order of these incidents on the road to Vārāṇasī. First comes the forest fire, then Viśvāmitra deprives them of their sandals, makes the road hot, and then finally conjures up the false rest area.

<sup>35</sup> In Janābāī’s version, Viśvāmitra also magically becomes the snake that bites Rohidās (*HāJ* 313.8).

Tārāmatī's face (*HRC* 2256.229–33; *HāJ* 314.9–13). He then runs through the town screaming that a *lāv* is hiding in a temple in the cremation grounds and eating a baby, prompting the Outcaste master of the cemetery to arrest Tārāmatī and to order his servant, Hariścandra, to put her to death.

Throughout all of these ordeals, Hariścandra, Tārāmatī, and their son Rohidās are shown to be paragons of goodness (*sattva*). Both Nāmdev and Janābāī glorify Hariścandra as “an ocean of *sattva*” (*sattvācā sāgara*) (*HRC* 2256.1, 209; *HāJ* 295.2), and at the end Nāmdev declares, “When a person hears how firm this king was in *sattva*, and about the glory of this *sattva*, all his flaws and errors will just go away.”<sup>36</sup> Various incidents in the story illustrate the specific traits that this *sattva* involves. In Ayodhyā, Hariścandra is truthful in honoring his promise to Viśvāmitra, even though he had done so in a dream. In Vārāṇasī, he shows his sense of duty by following his master’s orders without hesitation, even when he is asked to kill his own wife. In between, when they are on the road, Hariścandra is selfless and compassionate in giving away his family’s sandals as soon as he is asked, with no thought to his own well-being (*HRC* 2256.43–44). Tārāmatī shows complete dedication to her husband and son, though she finds herself all alone in the forest fire. And at Viśvāmitra’s paradisal oasis, all three have great self-restraint in turning down its luxurious pleasures, explaining to Viśvāmitra that “this is not our *dharma*” (*navhe āmucā hā dharma*) (*HRC* 2256.84, cf. 97, 103). Truthfulness, honor, selflessness, and dedication are shown to converge into the moral ideal of Hariścandra’s *sattva*. As Tārāmatī explains, “The eastern sun might rise in the west, and the ocean may spill over its shores. These kinds of things could very well happen at some point, we’ll see. But Hariścandra would never waver from being good.”<sup>37</sup>

Hand-in-hand with *sattva*, the Marathi poets also emphasize the value of devotion to Viṣṇu. In Janābāī’s version, it comes in the form of prayer, as Hariścandra calls out for God’s help after his bad dream (*HāJ* 300.13), and as Viśvāmitra is harassing him on the road (*HāJ* 308.10–11). Nāmdev places greater emphasis on this *bhakti*. Throughout his descriptions of their ordeals, Hariścandra and Tārāmatī meditate again and again on Viṣṇu (*HRC* 2256.108, 169, 179, 246–48) and on their spiritual *guru*, Vasiṣṭha (*HRC* 2256.78, 90, 106,

<sup>36</sup> *sattvadhīra rājā sattvācyā hyā kīrti | aikatāci jātī doṣa bhanīgā ||* (*HRC* 2256.263).

<sup>37</sup> *pūrvēcā hā sūryā paścime ugavela | samudra sāñḍila maryādestī || aisehī ghadela kaṭela koṇakālē | pari sattvāst na dhaṭle hariścandra ||* (*HRC* 2256.92–93; cf. *HāJ* 309.9–10).

108, 247). This discrepancy also plays into the most significant plot difference between Nāmdev and Janābāī: the ending. In Nāmdev's version, Hariścandra offers his wife the opportunity to make one last prayer to Viṣṇu before her execution. Tārāmatī then makes the following dramatic wish:

May Hariścandra be my husband, Rohidās, my son,  
and Viśvāmitra, my adoring petitioner!  
May Vasiṣṭha be my spiritual guide, that ocean of mercy,  
and may his feet ever be at my head.  
Just give me this, my dear Nārāyaṇ, in each and every life—  
I long for nothing else.<sup>38</sup>

At this extraordinary merger of *sattva* and *bhakti*, Viṣṇu miraculously appears and embraces the king just as he is about to strike his wife dead (*HRC* 2256.250–53). In Janābāī's version, however, it is Viśvāmitra himself—and not the god Viṣṇu—who rushes to grab Hariścandra's sword in mid-swing when he sees that the king will not disobey his orders (*HāJ* 315.8–9). The sage then asks Tārāmatī to make a wish, and in Janābāī's version, this is where she utters her prayer:

A son like Rohidās, a husband like King Hariścandra,  
And a petitioner like Viśvāmitra—just give me this in each  
and every life, dear Lord!<sup>39</sup>

The prayer is the same as Nāmdev's (with the elision of Vasiṣṭha), but the placement reveals Janābāī's stronger interest in the interpersonal aspects of religious practice—for it is not God who stops the execution of innocent Tārāmatī, but the Brahmin himself, who is finally made to feel compassion for the man he is tormenting. Viśvāmitra bestows all of his *tapas* on the king (*HRC* 2256.260; *HāJ* 315.13) and then, unlike the Sanskrit versions in which the king ascends to heaven, the sage reinstalls Hariścandra to his throne in Ayodhyā, where he rules for another sixty thousand years (*HRC* 2256.261; *HāJ* 316.3–7).

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<sup>38</sup> bhrātara hariścandra rohidāsa bāla | māgatā snehāla viśvāmitra || śrīguru vasistha krpecā sāgara | aso tyācā kara mastakī hā || hēci janmojanmī de gā nārāyaṇā | nāhī̄ he vāsanā ānikācī || (*HRC* 2256.46–48).

<sup>39</sup> rohidāsā aisā putra | hariścandra rājā bhrātara | yācaka viśvāmitrā aisā | janmojanmī de jagadīśā || (*HāJ* 315.11–12).

Despite the differences in how they spin the story, Nāmdev and Janābāī both treat Viśvāmitra as a straightforward, one-dimensional foil for their non-Brahmin protagonists. These poets, for the most part, choose to skirt around a critique of Brahmin corruption and keep their thematic focus squarely upon the positive virtues of the king and queen. Nāmdev appears particularly hesitant to criticize Viśvāmitra's Brahminhood, while Janābāī does offer one editorial statement on the matter. When Viśvāmitra kicks Hariścandra out of Ayodhyā, the townspeople cry out: "Look, what kind of Brahmin is this? He is an eclipse for the moon that is our king!"<sup>40</sup> But Janābāī goes no further in criticizing the Brahmin, and like Nāmdev, turns instead to the task of explaining the value of *sattva* and *bhakti* as "weapons of the weak" through which anyone might endure social abjection in the world.<sup>41</sup>

Viśvāmitra does function as the Brahmin Double when later Brahmin poets composed their own Marathi adaptations of *Hariścandra*. The most significant of these was by Mukteśvar (1609–60), said to be the grandson of the noted saint Eknāth (1533–99) and best known for his Marathi rendition of the *Mahābhārata*. S. G. Tulpule has noted Mukteśvar's literary sophistication, explaining that "he was the first poet to take inspiration from the Bhakti movement of the poet-saints and employ it for purely literary purposes" (Tulpule 1979: 370; see also Gore and Ok 1977: xvi; Deshpande and Varhadpande 1963: 17). Mukteśvar's shift from devotional to aesthetic values is evident in his lavish and colorful, 608-verse *Hariścandrākhyān*, an adaptation based primarily on Janābāī's version and included as part of the *Vanaparvan* of his Marathi *Mahābhārata* (Nandapurkar 1956: 730, as cited in Deshpande and Varhadpande 1963: 11–12; cf. Bhingarkar 1989: 203–19).<sup>42</sup> Mukteśvar, like Nāmdev and Janābāī, presented his compositions before multi-caste audiences in *kīrtan*, *gondhaḷī*, and other live performance settings (Gore and Ok

<sup>40</sup> *kaisā brāhmaṇa pahā ho | nrpacandrālāgī rāhō ||* (*HāM* 3.02.13).

<sup>41</sup> Though I use the terminology of James Scott (1985), we should note the contrast between the valuation of personal endurance within medieval *bhakti* culture and the idea of active political resistance in Scott's assessment of peasant culture in modern Southeast Asia (I thank Christian Novetzke for this observation); in the next chapter, we will examine Gandhi's earlier and rather different treatment of "weapons of the weak."

<sup>42</sup> Mukteśvar's literary skills are displayed in his lengthy descriptions of Viśvāmitra's hermitage (*HāM* 1.81–84) and the oasis on the road to Vārāṇasī (*HāM* 2.199–203). His predilection toward aesthetic flavor (*rasa*) (Tulpule 1979: 368) is demonstrated in his terror-inducing (*bhayānaka*) narration of Viśvāmitra's tantric rites (*HāM* 1.59–61) and the Outcaste slums (*vos nagar*) of Vārāṇasī (*HāM* 3.291–92), along with valorous (*vīra*) descriptions of Hariścandra's armies (*HāM* 1.71–73) and the eroticism (*śrṅgāra*) of the Outcaste maidens whom Viśvāmitra sends to seduce the king (*HāM* 1.92).

1977: xv), and so he, too, would have been compelled to confront Viśvāmitra's Brahminical villainy.<sup>43</sup>

Mukteśvar's acknowledgement of the public dissent against Brahmin corruption is most starkly articulated by the reactions of the citizens of Vārāṇasī when Hariścandra is put up for sale in the marketplace. As the poet explains, "The women and men who lived in the city cascaded water out from their eyes as soon as they saw him. 'This great sage,' they said, 'This fellow who has put the king up for sale, is a Cañḍāla!'"<sup>44</sup> Alongside this dissent, Mukteśvar also distances himself from Viśvāmitra's malevolent Brahmin persona. During the opening wager scene in heaven, after Nārada praises Hariścandra's virtues and Vasiṣṭha applauds him, Mukteśvar captures Viśvāmitra's angry reaction through the following memorable imagery:

The winds of Nārada's words stoked the anger of fire  
 in the pit of Viśvāmitra, son of Gādhi,  
 And with the *ghee* of Vasiṣṭha's words atop it,  
 its flames embraced the sky.  
 His eyes were like glowing charcoals,  
 and from his mouth that he shaped into a bow,  
 He launched the sharp, fiery, glowing arrows  
 that were his words.<sup>45</sup>

Viśvāmitra's arrow-words then expose his distinctive egocentrism (*ahamkār*), a trait that becomes the central point of leverage through which Mukteśvar manages to distance himself from the mythological figure he is describing. Viśvāmitra is angry because Nārada has praised the virtues of a mere mortal in front of the gods (*HāM* 23a), and brags about his own ability to prevail over the king. "If I harass someone in this world," declares the sage, "who could possibly guard that fellow's back? Compared to me, Viśvāmitra, that king's

<sup>43</sup> Evidence of these performance contexts is found throughout Mukteśvar's text—for example, Nārada's praise of Hariścandra is called a *kīrtan* (*HāM* 15), while at the end of the first chapter, Mukteśvar indicates that his text was performed in the setting of a *gondhalī* (*HāM* ad 104).

<sup>44</sup> *nagaravāst nārī nara | dekhatā nayanī ḥālītī nīra | mhaṇatī cañḍāla ṛṣīvara | vikāyā nrpa ghātalā ||* (*HāM* 334).

<sup>45</sup> *nārada vacanāciyā vātē | gādhija-kunḍī krodhāgni cete | vari vasiṣṭha-vākyāciyā ghṛtē | śikhā gaganātē kavalitī || khadirāṅgarā-tulya nayana | karūnī vadana-cāpīhūna | soditā jālā ati tīkṣṇa | vāgbāṇa suteja ||* (*HāM* 19–20).

*sattva* is so feeble! In an instant, I can drive him insane!”<sup>46</sup> As the modern editors of this text note, “the egotistical character of Viśvāmitra is made to stand out immediately and starkly before the reader’s eyes, as someone who finds the praise of others to be unbearable” (Deshpande and Varhadpande 1963: 20).

This egocentrism—*ahamkār*, in Marathi—is what drives the Brahmin to engage in increasingly cruel attacks on the trio, until finally he undergoes a moral rehabilitation at the end of the story. Here, Mukteśvar synthesizes Nāmdev’s and Janābāī’s endings. On the urging of her husband, Tārāmatī makes her prayer to Viṣṇu, before he is to execute her—in accordance with Nāmdev’s version. But as soon as Viśvāmitra hears her declare that “Kauśika should be her petitioner” (*yācaka aso kauśika*) (*HāM* 455d) in her next life, he comes running to grab Hariścandra’s sword, just as in Janābāī’s version. This synthesis has the effect of decentering Hariścandra and his wife, and making the story now about Viśvāmitra. His heart is filled with affection (*prem*), and tears well in his eyes. He embraces and comforts the family (*HāM* 462) and bestows his ascetic power, as he had promised, to the king (*HāM* 463). And then, when the gods invite Hariścandra to heaven, he gives this remarkable confession:

By the power of *tapas*,  
 all of the permanent rewards of heaven’s delights  
 Have been tied to his clothes [i.e., *are guaranteed*],  
 But the flames of this physical suffering  
 has burned his body and made it decrepit.  
 And I also have acquired this great stigma of making the king suffer—  
 So please let me cast both of these aside  
 and restore this fellow back to where he belongs.<sup>47</sup>

Mukteśvar’s ending thus strives to rehabilitate Viśvāmitra, and more broadly the Brahmin Double as well. His corrupt behavior, which earlier had been diagnosed as a symptom of the problem of egocentrism (*ahamkār*), is

<sup>46</sup> *mhe* mī yā *chalitā* sṛṣṭī | *rakṣitā* pāṭhī kona ase || *maja* viśvāmitrāpuḍhē | *bhūpāla-sattva* kāyase bāpuḍe | *ksanamājī* karīna vedē | (*HāM* 27cd–28abc).

<sup>47</sup> *svarga-sukhācī* acala phaṭē | āñcalī bāndhilī tapo-balē | *parī* śarīra-duḥkhācyā analē | *deha* jhālē jarjara || *rāja-hānīcī* kaṭimā | lāgalise *maja* uttamā | *te* sārūnī svakīyā dhāmā | ārūḍhavīna yayātē || (*HāM* 465–66).

described literally as a moral stigma or literally a “black spot” (*kālimā*) that needs to be scratched off, so that he may become again a good Brahmin.

In this way, Mukteśvar’s Marathi version of the *Hariścandra* legend offers a striking illustration of how Viśvāmitra came to function as the vernacular Brahmin Double. He is villainous and behaves with shocking cruelty toward good people, but by the end of the story, the source of the problem—his *ahamkār*—is identified and neutralized. Above all, he is kept at a conscious distance from actual Brahmins in the real world: the poet/performer of this narrative-poem and other Brahmins in the *bhakti* audience during its live performance. While Mukteśvar’s discourse is certainly dialogical—as he incorporates and synthesizes earlier, non-Brahmin perspectives on Viśvāmitra’s villainy—it is rather different from the scholasticism that we had observed in the *Devībhāgavata*. There are plenty of allusions to other Viśvāmitra legends, but we are given no revelation of the “rest of the story,” and no narrative sequencing to de-villainize him and to reveal Hariścandra’s hidden flaws. The presence of such scholastic maneuvers, we may surmise, is what distinguishes the Sanskrit Brahmin Double from his vernacular avatar, at least in the case of Viśvāmitra.

What might have been the larger historical significance of Viśvāmitra’s role as both a Sanskrit and a vernacular Brahmin Double? Novetzke suggests that the (vernacular) Brahmin Double was an important medieval precursor to the calls for caste reform on the part of Brahmins in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (2011: 233). The great social changes of modern India, in this sense, can be seen to have significant roots within an indigenous literary-performative cultural milieu, and cannot be regarded simply as inflections of European, post-Enlightenment ideals sparked entirely by the colonial encounter. I believe Novetzke is right in making these claims—and in the next chapter, we will see that Viśvāmitra continued to have an important part to play in colonial and postcolonial social reform and how modern Brahmins have imagined their own continuities with a precolonial Indian past. But at the same time, this chapter has exposed a second, longer set of roots that extend into the Sanskrit writings of the early medieval *paurāṇikas*, in which we also find the presence of the Brahmin Double, clad in a richly scholastic garb, whose own origins stretch further back to the Brahmin Other of early India.

## 6.

# BECOMING A NEW BRAHMIN IN MODERN INDIA



In the more recent past, we find that Viśvāmitra's presence in Hindu culture has expanded in a "horizontal" rather than "vertical" dimension. The Viśvāmitra legends remain at the margins of public awareness, so that the average Hindu practitioner will have heard of Viśvāmitra but is likely to know only a few stories about him. Still, the advent of new forms of media in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from printed texts to the Internet—has led to a massive proliferation of their tellings. In colonial and postcolonial India, we might say, Viśvāmitra has occupied the public imagination in ways that were impossible before. To get a better picture of how and why this occupation has occurred, this chapter will examine a wide range of modern "texts": oil paintings by Raja Ravi Varma, Gandhi's memoirs, a television serial, and oral performances in the Marathi devotional storytelling tradition known as *nāradīya kīrtan*.

A comparative study of these new texts reveals that Viśvāmitra's mythological persona has changed, once again, to reflect new disruptions to the formation of Brahmin social identity and power. Colonial policies and postcolonial electoral politics have had a deep impact on the social fabric of India, leading to, among other things, serious and sustained movements for caste reform. The development of an Indian modernity has had a kind of kaleidoscopic effect on the public reception of Viśvāmitra's caste change, ascetic power, and villainous persona. For some cultural agents—especially in the colonial period—this mythological figure has served as an object of nostalgia, and for

others, a subject to be reformed. And more recently, for traditional Brahmins trying to cobble together meaningful social identities amidst the postmodern chaos of India's rapidly expanding cities, Viśvāmitra's hybrid persona has come to serve as a reflection of their own fragmented subjectivities.

In 1890, the Keralan artist Raja Ravi Varma unveiled a large oil painting entitled *Viswamitra and Menaka* at the court of Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda. Today it is prominently on display at the Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum within the grounds of the Lakshmi Vilas Palace in Vadodara, while the Wellcome Library in London possesses the chromolithographic rendering pictured below (Figure 6.1). At the time, this princely state was home to

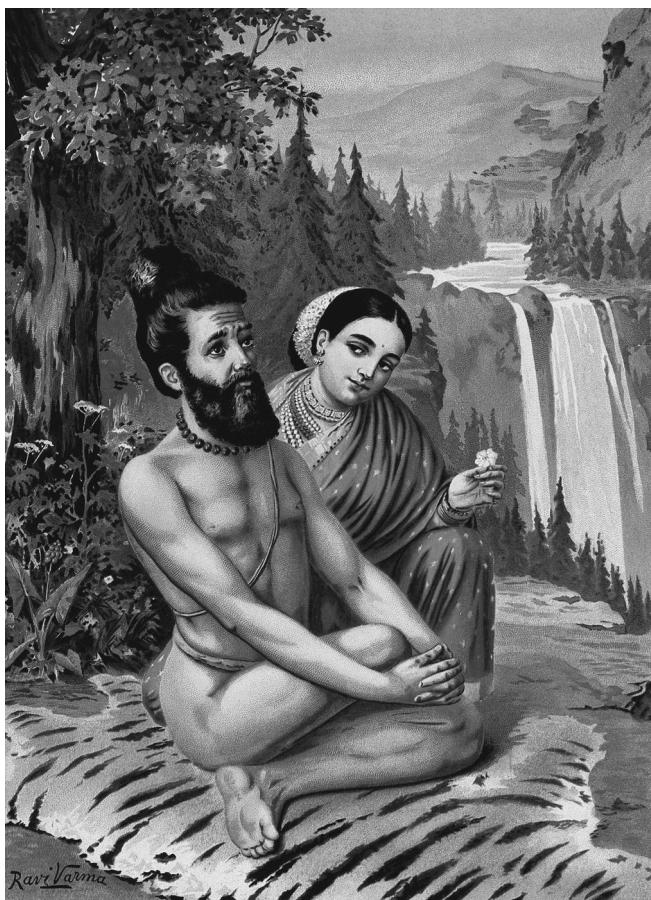


FIG. 6.1. *Viswamitra and Menaka* by Raja Ravi Varma, oil painting, Vadodara, Gujarat, 1890. Pictured here: printed chromolithograph version, courtesy of Wellcome Library, London.

a number of progressive initiatives encouraged by this visionary ruler: educational institutions, social reform, an extensive railway system, and—according to popular rumor—the first successful Indian unmanned flight in 1895 by Shivkar Bapuji Talpade, over a decade before the Wright brothers (see Swamy 2003). Whether or not this event actually happened, it shows the extent to which the small princely state of Baroda—known today as Vadodara—found itself at the cutting edge of Indian cultural life in the late nineteenth century.

Few images articulate the anxieties and hopes of this Indian modernity as profoundly as *Viswamitra and Menaka*. Through the medium of oil, Varma uses nostalgia for the remote past as a tool for expressing what it means to exist in the present. He directs our gaze upon the physical body of Viśvāmitra, naked and glistening, placed front and center in his large canvas. Soft and tender, but betraying an underlying musculature, Viśvāmitra embodied the aspirations of the modern Indian man: a virile political power lying barely concealed beneath an austere, cross-legged spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Viśvāmitra’s near-naked body becomes the unavoidable first object of the viewer’s gaze, which is remarkably averted in this case from its usual target, the feminine body of Menakā. Instead, she is modestly concealed behind both the sage and her demure Maharashtrian *sari*—a surprising fact given that celestial nymphs have been objects of an intense and persistent erotic fixation throughout the history of South Asian art.

Perhaps the most striking element of Varma’s painting, however, is Viśvāmitra’s own gaze, which eventually captures ours and leads us not toward the waiting visage of the celestial nymph—to whom, as his wrinkled brow tells us, he will eventually succumb. Rather, we are taken upward to the heavens and toward destiny, as we are made to experience the sage’s futile efforts at self-control (Dinkar 2010: 181). In the background lurks a European Romantic landscape, its rushing waterfalls and evergreens offering a different kind of aesthetic temptation to the viewer, who is asked to resist the lure of Western naturalism in following Viśvāmitra’s eyes toward a higher Indian destiny of self-governance outside of the tableau.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the appearance of “fierce” (*ugra*) male musculature in twentieth-century print media with the rise of aggressive Hindu nationalism, Varma’s depictions of the male body, it has been argued, build upon the humanistic ideals of Western realism and the desire to “make the gods more accessible and more ‘serviceable’ to political ends.” (Jain 2001: 198–200, citing Kapur 1993a, b).

<sup>2</sup> Linking the “masculine poetics” of asceticism in Indian art to the early nationalist movement, Niharika Dinkar suggests that “it was through the proper disciplining of male desire in the figure of the *brahmachari* (ascetic) that the male body was resuscitated from its emasculated state and claims to nationhood were posed” (2010: 181).

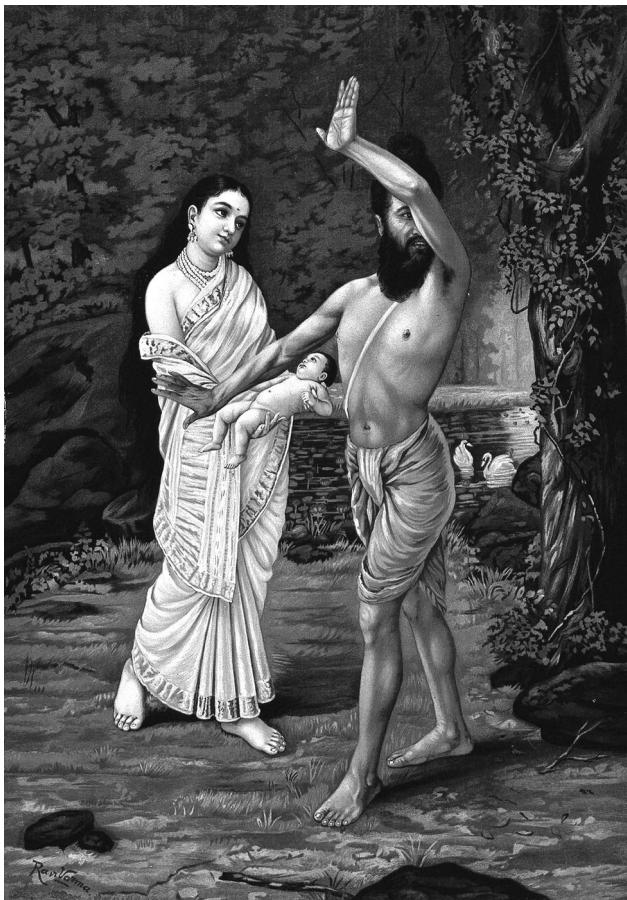


FIG. 6.2. *The Birth of Shakuntala* by Raja Ravi Varma, oil painting, Jatprole, Andhra Pradesh, after 1892. Pictured here: printed chromolithograph version, courtesy of Wellcome Library, London.

As powerful as this painting is, *Viswamitra and Menaka* should be interpreted alongside another of Varma's works, *The Birth of Shakuntala* (Figure 6.2), produced sometime after 1892. The original oil-on-canvas painting is today part of a private collection in Jatprole, Andhra Pradesh; pictured above is a chromolithographic rendering of the painting belonging to the Wellcome Library, London. This scene yields a rather different vision of Viśvāmitra's masculinity. The sage's rigid upright stance, along with his bold gesture of abjuration, capture the viewer's gaze, showing us a man unwilling to take on

his worldly responsibilities, and who violently rejects his paramour's gentle display of their newborn daughter. Now clad in a simple Keralan *sari*—reflecting the attire of Varma's home state—with her face weary and her hair unadorned, Menaka's eyes speak no longer of seduction but of a feeble plea for help (see Arunima 2003: 72, who argues that the feminine figure in Varma's paintings "embodies the nation"). Viśvāmitra again averts his eyes—but this time leading the viewer off to the side of the canvas rather than upward—rejecting both the domestic situation that he himself has created as well as the classical, Sanskritic garden of swans, lotuses, and creepers that have replaced the European landscape in the background.

When viewed in tandem, Varma's Viśvāmitra paintings capture the peculiar conundrum of the affluent and educated Indian elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were torn between aspirations toward the ideals of modernity, progress, and self-determination—and toward participating in the new global fraternity of learned and sophisticated elites from the Americas to Japan—and a nostalgic desire to cultivate a sense of belonging to their regional Indian traditions. Varma's Viśvāmitra falls victim to the seductions of tradition in the first image, but cruelly rejects his domestic responsibilities in the second, thereby capturing an inherent tension within the self-imagination of the modern Indian man. Preventing the resolution of this tension, according to the modern understanding of Viśvāmitra's persona, is egocentrism, *ahamkār*.

This same problem of *ahamkār* undergirded Mohandas K. Gandhi's theorization of "truth" or *satya* as a political maneuver, which he was developing in South Africa at roughly the same time as Varma was painting at the Baroda court. Gandhi took *satya* to be the fundamental connective tissue through which the individual may be linked to the nation. Placing the responsibility of social consciousness squarely on the individual, Gandhi begins his autobiography with an explanation of its title, *My Experiments with Truth*. "The instruments for the quest for truth," he suggests, "are as simple as they are difficult. They may appear quite impossible to an arrogant person, and quite possible to an innocent child." Gandhi then illustrates the problem of arrogance through the example of Viśvāmitra (1948: 7, emphasis added):

The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should be so

humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not until then, will he have a glimpse of truth. *The dialogue between Vasishtha and Vishvamitra makes this abundantly clear.* Christianity and Islam also amply bear it out.

Though Gandhi does not elaborate on what precisely he means by the “dialogue between Vasishtha and Vishvamitra,” it likely refers to their confrontation over the *Kāmadhenu*. What had once been a conflict between martial power and ascetic force has now been recast as one between Viśvāmitra’s arrogance and Vasiṣṭha’s triumphant humility. A few pages later, Gandhi mentions seeing a theatrical performance of *Hariścandra* that “captured [his] heart.” He describes the value of this play to his own understanding of truth:

“Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra?” was the question I asked myself day and night. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal it inspired in me. (Gandhi 1948: 17)

Viśvāmitra’s egocentrism is placed in opposition to Hariścandra’s truth, giving Gandhi a classical mythological allegory for conceptualizing *satyāgraha* or “truth-force” as a tool of modern political mobilization. As is evident in his *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Gandhi was careful to distinguish his movement from “passive resistance,” a notion that had come into vogue at the turn of the century as a political “weapon of the weak” (1928: 174–81). Objecting to the latent violence of passive resistance—Gandhi argued that this technique implied a willingness to commit violence if one had the capability or the freedom to do so—he instead conceived of *satyāgraha* as a way to engage with oppressors that did not seek to overthrow them, or to strike back against them, but to force them to participate in the public suffering of the oppressed and thereby to relent, just as Viśvāmitra had at the end of *Hariścandra*.

Gandhi saw Hariścandra’s suffering as a potential template for political action, but only after it was extracted from its traditional mythological base. “I literally believed in the story of Harishchandra,” Gandhi explains:

The thought of it all often makes me weep. My common sense tells me today that Harishchandra could not have been a historical character. Still

both Harishchandra and Shravana are living realities for me, and I am sure I should be moved as before if I were to read those plays again today. (Gandhi 1948: 17)<sup>3</sup>

This “common sense” clearly reflects Gandhi’s Western, post-Enlightenment education, which would lead him and many other Indian intellectuals of his day to dismiss the historicality of Hindu religious narratives. But rather than relegating them to the private world of emotion, Gandhi projects Hariścandra, Viśvāmitra, and other mythological characters into a “living reality” that allows them to serve as cultural symbols or moral examples of his notion of individual truth, of *satya*, even though they may not themselves possess historical truth. For both Varma and Gandhi, then—and for other literati and intellectuals of the day—what made Viśvāmitra important was his blend of egocentrism and Brahminhood, a combination that proved to be especially potent during the colonial period, as longstanding configurations of Brahmin social power were subjected to unprecedented change.

#### BRAHMIN POWER AND BRAHMIN REFORM IN COLONIAL-PERIOD MAHARASHTRA

Social relations across the Indian subcontinent were subject to dramatic intervention under English rule. Historical and anthropological scholarship has suggested that British administrative policies, cultural attitudes, and educational institutions succeeded in freezing what had been nuanced and relatively fluid sets of sociopolitical registers into a totalized and universal system of stratification and rank. Caste, as we know it, was forged through the colonial encounter (Cohn 1987; Bayly 1999: 1–63; Dirks 2001: 5), to the extent that Brahminical ideology was held forth as a self-validating foundation for Hindu customary law, leading to the production of what Prachi Deshpande terms “new vocabularies of identity” (2004: 8) among Indian intellectuals in the nineteenth century. British administrators then critiqued this “caste system”—which they and their Brahmin interlocutors had themselves largely constructed from Sanskrit textual

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<sup>3</sup> Shravana (Skt. Śravāna) here refers to an anecdote in the *Rāmāyaṇa* in which Rāma’s father, King Daśaratha, shoots and kills a young ascetic boy, Śravaṇa, mistaking him for a deer. The boy, it turns out, is fetching water for his blind parents, whom he has been taking on a pilgrimage, carrying them in slings on his back (*Rām* 2.57–58).

sources and missionary testimonia—as a medieval social problem requiring intervention if India were to become fully modern (Inden 1986a: 403). By the late nineteenth century, most Europeans and English-educated Indian intellectuals operated with the idea that the essence of Indian civilization was an all-encompassing, watertight, and exploitative system of caste (Bayly 1999: 154), and even now this remains part of the basic storyline that schoolchildren around the world are given when first learning about India.

In Maharashtra, the scenario was somewhat unique. Colonial administrative policies magnified ruptures within a social fabric that had already exhibited fault lines in the century of Peśvā rule before the British takeover in 1818. During this time, the Marāthā kings at Satara were turned into mere figureheads while elite Brahmins in Pune cemented themselves and their associates into prime bureaucratic positions. These maneuvers led to the consolidation of a Brahmin social and political hegemony that would reap the economic benefits of successful military campaigns across the subcontinent throughout the 1700s (Bayly 1999: 67–69; cf. Gordon 1993).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the rigorous enforcement of *varna*-based law under the Peśvās meant social deprivation and exploitation for disenfranchised non-Brahmin caste groups even as it conjured up a “golden era” for the Brahminical orthodoxy that has persisted in the public memory, especially among Brahmins living in the old Peśvā capital of Pune (see Fukazawa 1968; Desai 1980; Deshpande 2004: 11–12; O’Hanlon 2009; Rao 2009: 40–43). After the handover to the British in 1818, though they no longer had political autonomy, Brahmin communities in Maharashtra continued to profit under the rule of the colonial Raj (O’Hanlon 1985: 6–7). Not only were Brahmins first in line for administrative and bureaucratic employment, they had better access than non-Brahmins to a Western liberal education and had more opportunities to engage culturally, socially, and intellectually with Europeans, both in India and abroad (Pandit 1979: 427–28). Like Varma’s Vishvamitra staring up and out of the canvas, we might envision a young Brahmin man in Mumbai or Pune gazing intently into the future, finding himself caught between a Westernized landscape, the seductive pressures of tradition, and modern dreams of self-determination.

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<sup>4</sup> We should note that the Peśvā hegemony consolidated various Brahmin power networks that had formed through contestations with other intellectual and scribal communities during a period of “early modernity” in Maharashtra that stretched back to the sixteenth century (O’Hanlon 2010, 2013b; O’Hanlon and Minkowski 2008).

Also emergent within the colonial setting was an important voice of Brahminical self-critique, embracing a spirit of social reform that—as Novetzke points out (2011: 246–47)—reached back toward medieval ideas about the Brahmin Double. In the late nineteenth century, the efforts of Jyotirao Phule and other non-Brahmin social activists led to the emergence of anti-caste (i.e., anti-Brahmin) protest movements in Maharashtra (see Omvedt 1976; O’Hanlon 1985; Shinde 1988; Rao 2009: 39–80). In response to and sometimes in solidarity with the ideas of Phule and others (Omvedt 1971: 1970), a number of educated, urban, and affluent Brahmins advocated for social reforms, including the liberalization of widow remarriage, the education of women, and the eradication of untouchability and temple-entry prohibitions (see Tucker 1976; Pandit 1979). Reformist Brahmins like B. G. Tilak, G. G. Agarkar, or M. G. Ranade often disagreed about the terms with which a new India ought to be shaped, but on the whole, they advocated apologetic but ultimately conservative reforms that would eliminate the more problematic aspects of caste, such as untouchability or taboos on widow remarriage, without giving up the prestige and privileges of being Brahmin. One tangible result of such concerns was an emphasis on the development of altruistic and philanthropic dimensions to modern Brahminical life, at least among a set that D. D. Karve has called the “New Brahmins” (1967).

So it was that at the onset of the twentieth century, a central question came to the fore: “How, *now*, should we be Brahmins?” As we will see, Viśvāmitra served as a convenient mythological allegory for this question, in his capacity as the Brahmin Double. Viśvāmitra’s *ahamkār*, the wedge through which the medieval poet Mukteśvar had distanced his own positive Brahmin identity from the antagonistic sage, was now extended beyond the legend of *Hariścandra* to cover the rest of Viśvāmitra’s life-story. And Viśvāmitra’s power of will, previously celebrated, now became his biggest problem. Sure, it brought him Brahminhood, it took Triśaṅku to heaven, and it allowed him to resist Menakā’s temptations; but now, this same ego motivated this Brahmin’s arrogance and malicious temperament and became a source of social injustice. This interplay of villainy and egocentrism in Viśvāmitra’s persona came to reflect the anxieties of the modern Brahmin, caught in the double-bind of being seen as casteist if he behaved according to the received Brahminical tradition, but self-centered if he were to adopt a fully Westernized life.

“HE MAKES ARROGANT NOISES”: VIŚVĀMITRA  
IN COLONIAL-ERA MARATHI KĪRTAN

Alongside Raja Ravi Varma’s oil paintings and oleographs, Viśvāmitra also appeared in colonial-era Marathi and Parsi urban theater (Hansen 1983) and the first indigenous Indian feature film, D. V. Phalke’s *Raja Harishchandra* (1917). These new forms of public media did much to solidify Viśvāmitra’s place in the Maharashtrian cultural imagination, at least among the urban populations who could access it. It is important to note, however, that the print shops, theater houses, and film studios of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were competing with older and more deeply embedded traditions of live, folkloric performance that had enormous followings across the urban and rural landscape—including more “secular” theatrical traditions like *lāvaṇī* and *tamāśā*, as well as temple-based genres like *paurāṇik* recitation or *kīrtan*. These performance traditions have all played significant roles in the shaping of modern Maharashtrian history (see Rege 2002), but among them, the cultural space in which Viśvāmitra has had the greatest presence, and which therefore will be our chief point of focus in this chapter, is *nāradīya kīrtan*.

As a genre of performance, Marathi *kīrtan* or *harikathā* is generally classified into two structural types: *vārkarī* and *nāradīya* (Schultz 2013: 23–25). The older *vārkarī* style features a simple arrangement of singing and explication of devotional (*bhakti*) poetry that works as a kind of musical preaching. It is an ecstatic affair, involving a large chorus, two loud *pakhāwaj* drums, clapping, and dancing, the main purpose of which is to share in the embodied experience of the saints’ poetry. This type of *kīrtan* has flourished since the fourteenth century as part of the avowedly egalitarian and casteless Vārkarī devotional tradition (Damle 1960: 79–81; Bhagwat 2005: 165–66). *Nāradīya kīrtan*, in contrast, is divided into two separate “acts”: first, a devotional sermon based on Marathi *bhakti* poetry, called the *pūrvvaraṅga*, followed by an intermission and then a poetry-and-prose narration of a purāṇic legend, the *uttarvaraṅga*. The focus on storytelling makes it a much more controlled and sedate affair, with little audience participation during the performance, apart from a few *bhajans* and *āratis* at the start, intermission, and close of the *kīrtan*, in which audience members sing along and clap (see Schultz 2008: 39). *Nāradīya kīrtan* was not formalized until the eighteenth century, when it acquired its distinctive

two-act structure (Pathak 1980: 166).<sup>5</sup> This style also exhibits a key sociological difference from the *vārkari* tradition: its performers were, and still are, predominantly Brahmins. And perhaps also because of its linkages to Peśvāī courtly culture, *nāradīya kīrtan* places a greater emphasis on textual learning and stylistic repertoire than does the *vārkari* form.<sup>6</sup>

During a *nāradīya* performance, the *kīrtan* performer (*kīrtankār*) stands before his seated audience and is flanked by melodic and rhythmic accompanists—ordinarily a harmonium and a *tablā*—seated on daises.<sup>7</sup> After preliminary prayers and an opening *bhajan*, the *kīrtankār* begins the *pūrvvaraṅga* by singing a devotional poem he has selected from medieval Marathi devotional literature (most often, it is an *abhaṅga* of Tukārām), and then explicates it through a sermon-like discourse. After an intermission in which another *bhajan* is sung and certain formalities conducted, the *kīrtankār* commences the *uttararaṅga*, consisting of an entertaining myth, legend, or hagiographical narrative (*ākhyān*) in a mixed prose-and-poetry style.<sup>8</sup> This *ākhyān* is typically announced beforehand and advertised in local Marathi-language newspapers. For the most part, it is a myth or legend sourced from the Sanskrit epics and purāṇas, though the tellings themselves are Marathi variants that often have been transmitted over generations from *kīrtankār* to *kīrtankār*.<sup>9</sup> The formal separation of sermon and storytelling in *nāradīya kīrtan* has meant that the performer has to homologize the Marathi *bhakti* poetry of the first half of his performance to the Sanskrit purāṇic narrative of the second (Pathak 1980: 30–36). Indeed, it is often said that a good *kīrtan* is judged by two

<sup>5</sup> Schultz suggests that the nineteenth-century *kīrtankār* Govind-buvā Hoshing is to be credited for the *pūrvvaraṅga-uttararaṅga* bifurcation (2013: 30). In either case, it is clear that the formalization of *nāradīya kīrtan* occurred long after the advent of the *vārkari* style.

<sup>6</sup> We should also note the existence of a third, *vaiyāsik* tradition, described in the *Kīrtanācāryakam* of Vishnushastri Bhagavat, a Sanskrit manual for *nāradīya kīrtankārs* composed in the early twentieth century, and kindly pointed out to me by V. L. Manjul, ex-Librarian of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (personal communication, January 7, 2004), as one kept alive in his family in Pandharpur until quite recently. For further analysis of *kīrtan* structure and performance, see Damle 1960, 1985; Ranade 1984; Schultz 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The *tablā* as percussion instrument is noticeably more quiet and tonal than the *pakhāvaj* used in *vārkari kīrtan*, further highlighting the self-perception of the *nāradīya* form as being more refined.

<sup>8</sup> While these days younger *kīrtankārs* are increasingly reciting memorized *pūrvvaraṅgas* and *uttararaṅgas*, more conservative critics emphasize the aesthetic value of extemporaneous narration (Koparkar 1982: 57).

<sup>9</sup> Hagiographical accounts of medieval *bhakti* saints are also popular as *ākhyāns*, while an important subgenre of *nāradīya kīrtan*, known as *rāstrīya kīrtan*, involves telling historical anecdotes about Śivājī, the seventeenth-century Marāthā emperor, other Marāthā soldiers and rulers, and nationalist leaders of more recent times. For more on the cultural role of *rāstrīya kīrtan* in the formation of Indian nationalism, see Schultz 2002, 2008, 2013.

things: whether or not the story has *raṅga* (“color”)—that is, whether the audience has been entertained aesthetically—and whether or not the *kīrtankār* has successfully tied together his *pūrvvaraṅga* and *uttararaṅga*.<sup>10</sup>

Besides providing ancient evidence for the religious, ethical, or political lessons that the *kīrtankār* is hoping to deliver, this story/discourse homology also gives older myths and legends an edificatory value in the everyday lives of *kīrtan* audiences. This is what distinguishes the more popular genre of *kīrtan* from the *paurāṇik* tradition, in which Sanskrit purāṇic narrative texts are simply read aloud at temples. In contrast, the interaction of performer and audience in Marathi *kīrtan* gives social meaning to the story as it emerges, allowing myths and legends to become a “living reality” just as the theater had done for Gandhi. As Anna Schultz has argued, the development of a *rāṣṭriyā* or nationalist subgenre within colonial-era *nāradīya kīrtan* allowed such “living realities” to take on a political significance that was simultaneously national and regional, so that Marathi-speaking communities in Maharashtra could participate within larger, pan-Indian nationalist movements while working with a regionalized set of interests (Schultz 2013).<sup>11</sup> As we will find, a similar process also took place on a social level—at least among some Brahmin circles—whereby *kīrtankārs* and *kīrtan*-goers could engage with in the growing public rhetoric of caste reform in Maharashtrian cities while continuing to maintain a traditional Brahmin identity. This was the “New Brahminhood,” and as he had before, Viśvāmitra served as its mythological representation.

This is not to suggest that all *kīrtankārs* of the colonial period took socially progressive approaches to Viśvāmitra’s persona. The highly popular anthology *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī* (“River of *Kīrtans*”), for example, includes rather conservative adaptations of two Viśvāmitra legends: *Satyavatī* in Volume 1 (edited in 1935 by Pandurang Abaji Moghe and Vaman Eknathshastri Kemkar), and *Hariścandra* in Volume 2 (edited in 1936 by Kemkar and Damodar Ganesh Joshi). As its title indicates, “The Account of the Birth of Lord Paraśurām” (*Śrī Paraśurām-janmākhyān*), the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī*’s version of *Satyavatī* pays more attention to Viśvāmitra’s grand-nephew, who has been of central

<sup>10</sup> For a sociological study of *kīrtan* that includes a survey of audiences’ criteria for judging good performances, see Damle 1960.

<sup>11</sup> For an investigation of the musicological mechanics through which such mobilization takes place within the dialogical space of performance, see Schultz 2008.

importance in the construction of Chitpāvan Brahmin identity. Viśvāmitra is only briefly mentioned once: “Relentless Viśvāmitra, son of Gādhi, performed a lot of austerities. And everybody knows about his focus on ascetic practice.”<sup>12</sup> Viśvāmitra does play a more prominent role in the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī*’s version of *Hariścandra*, which is based heavily on Mukteśvar’s narrative poem, quoting many of its verses verbatim. But even here, Viśvāmitra’s persona is underdeveloped in comparison to the protagonists of the story. He is a merciless tormentor of the king and queen, but is rehabilitated after Viṣṇu intervenes. The *kīrtan* follows Nāmdev’s version, stating that “Viśvāmitra appeared and held Hariścandra to his chest; he embraced Tārāmatī, and picked Rohidās up in his arms.”<sup>13</sup> But there is no mention of his *ahamkār* that, according to Mukteśvar, had prompted the sage to harass the king in the first place. We may surmise that the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī*’s authors had adapted Viśvāmitra’s role as the medieval Brahmin Double, but were hesitant to raise the underlying critique of Brahmin elitism.

This attitude toward Viśvāmitra might be better understood if we consider the historical context of the publication of the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī*. This four-volume anthology was meant as a kind of “teach yourself” manual for performing *nāradīya kīrtans*. As B. S. Devasthali explains in the foreword to the first volume, “For any individual who has a basic knowledge of Sanskrit and even a slightly melodic throat, it is possible with the help of this book to perform a *kīrtan* without the assistance of a *guru*.”<sup>14</sup> Devasthali’s statement exposes a key historical rupture that would have necessitated the production of such self-instructional materials—the loss of the courtly patronage (*rājāśray*) of the eighteenth-century Peśvā rulers, leading to the demise of older *kīrtankār* lineages (*sampradāy*). This sense of nostalgia belies a more pressing anxiety: the economic uncertainties of colonial life, in which the *kīrtankār* was now obligated to earn his own livelihood without the security of *guru* or patron. The resulting concern for commercial success, as Devasthali asserts, led *kīrtankārs* to change the discursive focus of their performances from the “attainment of the Absolute” (*paramapadaprāpti*) to

<sup>12</sup> gādhiputra tapī phār, viśvāmitra anivār | tapaścaryecā vicār, sarva janā ṭhāukā || (Kt vol. 1: 66).

<sup>13</sup> viśvāmitrē rūpa prakaṭilē, hariścandrā hṛdayī dhari�ē | tārāmatīs āliṅgilē, kade ghetalē rohidāsā || (Kt vol. 2: 54).

<sup>14</sup> jyālā sādhāraṇ samskrtajñān āhe va thodēsē kanṭhamādhurya āhe, asā koṇāhi manusyālā gurusahayyāvācūn yā pustakāce madatnē kīrtan karaṇe śakya āhe (Kt vol. 1: 6).

an aesthetics of “impermanent pleasures” (*nāśavanta sukh*) that public audiences would find more entertaining. Amidst this conflict between tradition and modernity, there arose a fear that the “authentic” *kīrtan* tradition was dying out.

Published anthologies like the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī* sought to repair this rupture and to rescue this art form by regulating its content, especially of the sermon-like *pūrvvaraṅga*.<sup>15</sup> The *pūrvvaraṅga* for *Satyavatī*, for example, argues for the importance of the moral virtues of fair-mindedness (*samadr̥sti*) and compassion (*dayālūtā*) by explicating a verse by a rather obscure Marathi *bhakti* poet named Śivrām Svāmī. The economic anxieties of professional *kīrtankārs* appear in the very first line:

Look how compassionate are the saints,  
for whom a king is the same as a beggar! [refrain]  
As soon as you meet them, illusions are broken,  
as they take you along and show you their own footsteps.  
They nourish your ears with ambrosial speech,  
and show your eyes the source of pure consciousness.  
Śivarāma has brand-new jewelry,  
which they have put on me with complete mercy.<sup>16</sup>

The rest of the *pūrvvaraṅga* then homologizes the equanimity and mercy of the *bhakti* saints to the virtuous character of Satyavatī’s Brahmin husband (here said to be Cyavana, instead of the usual R̥cīka), who gives both his wife and her Kṣatriya mother equally powerful fertility preparations (*carus*) and compassionately agrees to delay the consequences of their *caru*-switch for one generation (Kt vol. 1: 71).

In the *pūrvvaraṅga* for *Hariścandra*, Kemkar and Joshi explain how it was that the king’s unwavering devotion (*bhakti*), accompanied by truth (*satya*), goodness (*sattva*), and patience (*titikṣā*), induced the divine intervention of Viṣṇu (Kt vol. 2: 54). To illustrate how Viṣṇu regularly saves people who

<sup>15</sup> For discussions of the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī* and other *kīrtan* anthologies, see Schultz 2013: 34–36; Pathak 1980: 190–212.

<sup>16</sup> *santa dayālī kase ho, rājā rañka jayā sarise ho || dhr° || deuni bhetī toditī māyā, neuni dāviti nijapadaṭhāyā || 1 || śravaṇī pājuni amṛtavāṇī, nayanī dāviti cinmayakhāṇī || 2 || śivarāmāce abhinava lenē, lāvavilē majā pūrṇa kṛpenē || 3 ||* (Kt vol. 1: 55).

possess such qualities, they explicate the following verse by Rāṅganāth Svāmī, a sixteenth-century Brahmin poet:

When all respect is gone, then who will save you besides Hari?  
 That self-existent Rām, who acts to fulfill his devotees' desires,  
     and who does not ever let adversities affect them.  
 With a sincerity of the heart, if one should seek shelter in Hari,  
     then where would there be death and rebirth?  
 So let us take pleasure in that self-beautifying God,  
     and let us also make *kīrtans* to him,  
     for only then can this life have any meaning.<sup>17</sup>

In both cases, Viśvāmitra is conceived to be part of a Hindu mythological imagination that has become unmoored from public consciousness through the historical ruptures of colonial modernity. The *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī*'s editors have designed both *uttararaṅgas* to give contemporary *kīrtan*-goers a nostalgic experience of this premodern tradition, while its *pūrvvaraṅga* sermons act as connective tissue to help them relate this experience to their own spiritual and moral lives. The live *kīrtan* performance would thereby serve as a bridge between the storyworld and the real world. The print publication of the anthology concretized this bridge by giving it textual foundations in the precolonial past, in which the *kīrtan* tradition, with its systems of royal patronage and lineage still intact, was shown to be more fully "alive." Like other cultural institutions of modernity—museums, encyclopedias, zoos, and so forth—the *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī* represents an attempt to keep Viśvāmitra and other mythological figures inside a cultural box and simultaneously to portray the wielders of that box, that is, Brahmin *kīrtankārs* who would purchase and use the anthology, as professionalized purveyors of this authentic past.

One colonial-period *kīrtankār*, however, adopted what we might consider a more progressive approach to Viśvāmitra, in which he directly interrogated our sage's *ahamkār*. In 1929, Bhavanrao Shrinivasrao (Balasaheb) Panta Pratinidhi's version of the *Kāmadhenu* legend was published in a collection of his *kīrtans* titled

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<sup>17</sup> gelā māna sāvarīla koṇa hariviṇē || dhr° || bhaktācā pūrṇa kāma kartā nijamūrti rāma, paḍo nedī sarvathā uṇē || śarana manobhāvē tayā harīlāgī jāvē, maga kaicē yenējāṇē || nijaraṅgī raṅga jado, kīrtanahī hēci ghaḍo, sārthakatā tarica hē jinē | (Kt vol. 2: 32).

*Kīrtan-sumanāhār*. Panta Pratinidhi (1868–1951), a Deśastha Brahmin, was the ruler of the Princely State of Aundh from 1909 until 1948. He was a charismatic and liberal public intellectual, whose work resonated with the progressive spirit of the New Brahmins, while stressing the need for cultural continuities with the past. For example, among other projects “calculated to stimulate research, advance knowledge, and enhance Indian prestige” (Sukthankar 1933: ii), Panta Pratinidhi donated one hundred thousand rupees in 1918 toward the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune—a publication for which he provided his own original artwork as well (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute 1919: 34–35). A man of many talents, Panta Pratinidhi also happened to be an accomplished *nāradīya kīrtankār*. His *kīrtans* were infused with ornate Sanskrit verses and citations, Marathi devotional poetry, Hindi poems by Tulsīdās and Kabīr, and even English literature, adopting a multilingual approach in the hopes that *kīrtankārs* using his anthology “may more effectively preach to people educated in the new fashion” (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: ii).

Entitled “*Ahamkār*,” Panta Pratinidhi’s *kīrtan* on the *Kāmadhenu* legend leaves no doubt about the focus of his interpretive interest: Viśvāmitra’s egocentrism. The story is told from Vasiṣṭha’s point of view, and Viśvāmitra is depicted as the hostile and violent Kṣatriya Other, an invader of a Brahmin’s peaceable home. Panta Pratinidhi has here quite overtly adapted this story from the *Mahābhārata*, but repackaged it in such a way that emphasizes that Viśvāmitra became a Brahmin by overcoming his *ahamkār*. The mighty king, he explains, had originally embarked upon his quest out of self-interest. However, “a true Brahmin—and a true Brahmin sage (*brahmarsi*)—is someone upon whose mind [a] feeling of equality (*samabhāvanā*) has been impressed.”<sup>18</sup> And so, because Viśvāmitra had selfish motivations, he did not initially achieve his goal. “In the end,” states Panta Pratinidhi, “only after Viśvāmitra’s pride was gone, and the feeling of equality had pierced his mind, did he acquire the title of Brahmin-sage” (1929: 318–9). This is illustrated through a folk narrative that Panta Pratinidhi affixes onto the end of the story, and which proceeds as follows:

One night, while still trying to acquire Brahminhood, Viśvāmitra sneaks into Vasiṣṭha’s hermitage, carrying a large stone. He climbs a tree, intending to murder his rival by dropping the stone on his head as he is sleeping

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<sup>18</sup> *hī samabhāvanā jyācyā antahkaraṇāt bimbali toc khārā brāhmaṇ āṇī khārā brahmarsi* (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 305). He uses the *Bhagavadgītā* (5.19) to support his claim.

underneath. Vasiṣṭha's wife Arundhatī, while massaging her husband's feet, expresses her wonder at the thousands and thousands of stars that are visible in the night sky. Vasiṣṭha shares in her excitement, and remarks, "It's truly like Viśvāmitra's *tapas*!"<sup>19</sup> Viśvāmitra is startled upon hearing this, and wonders to himself: "I hate this Brahmin, and I am sitting here because I want to murder him. But in his mind he only feels great respect toward me."<sup>20</sup>

Arundhatī, too, is puzzled, and asks why her husband had so adamantly refused to call Viśvāmitra a Brahmin. He tells her,

I've known from the start how much glory Viśvāmitra has. But if I had straightaway called him a Brahmin-sage, then would he have acquired the fitness (*yogyatā*) that he now possesses today? Due to his power of being able to produce the counter-creation (*pratisṛṣṭi*), he has become the equal of Lord Brahmā himself. Then what's to say about Brahmins like me, compared to him?<sup>21</sup>

Reasoning the king to be like a son to him, he explains that he never intended to insult Viśvāmitra by calling him a royal sage. For, he wonders, "would a Brahmin ever have these feelings toward his own child?"<sup>22</sup> Instead, he declares, that egocentrism (*ahamkār*) and "the materialistic urges born from it" (*tadutthit vaiṣayik vāsanā*) are what hinder the development of "a feeling of equality" (*samabhāvanā*), which is to say, "truth" (*satya*). Viśvāmitra grows remorseful as he hears this, falls at Vasiṣṭha's feet, and begs forgiveness. Vasiṣṭha embraces him, hails him as a Brahmin sage, and praises his ascetic power (*tap*), his lengthy efforts (*dīrgha prayatna*), and his fitness (*yogyatā*) (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 319).

This anecdote of Viśvāmitra trying to brain his rival with a stone is commonly told in Maharashtra today, though I have not found it in earlier Marathi or Sanskrit literary sources.<sup>23</sup> In his *kīrtan*, Panta Pratinidhi fuses this folk

<sup>19</sup> *kharēc viśvāmitrācyā tapaścaryēsārakhē!* (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 317).

<sup>20</sup> *yā brāhmaṇācā āpan dveṣ karaō. yālā thār mārāvā yā hetunē mī yethē basalō. paṇ yācyā manāt tar āpalyāviṣayāt atyanta ādār ahe* (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 317).

<sup>21</sup> *viśvāmitra atyanta tejasvī āhe hē malā pahilyāpāsūn māhit āhe. paṇ mī prathamac tyālā "brahmaṛsi" mhaṭalē asatē tar āj tyācī jī yogyatā āhe tī tyālā prāpta jhālī asatī kā? pratisṛṣṭi nirmāṇ karanyācyā yogānē to pratyakṣa brahmaṇācyā barobarīcā jhālā āhe. mag tyācyāpuḍhē majā sārakh्यā brāhmaṇācī kathā kāy?* (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 318).

<sup>22</sup> *āpalyā lekarāviṣayāt aśt bhāvanā brāhmaṇācyā manāt asel kaśī?* (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 318).

<sup>23</sup> I was able to collect a number of oral versions of this anecdote from consultants in Pune in 2001.

legend into what had until this point been a faithful Marathi adaptation of the *Mahābhārata*'s Sanskrit telling. The addition of this folkloric anecdote permits Panta Pratinidhi to develop the modern discourses of equanimity and compassion, as the self-aggrandizing view of Brahmin power that we observed in the Sanskrit epic would not accord with the progressive views of Brahmin social reformers in the colonial period. By repackaging the story, Panta Pratinidhi allows it to serve as a self-critique of Brahmin egocentrism (*ahamkār*).

Panta Pratinidhi addresses this issue of egocentrism in his *pūrvvaraṅga*. Connecting the elimination of *ahamkār* to devotional practices, he chooses to explicate a Marathi verse by Tukārām, the seventeenth-century non-Brahmin *bhakti* poet:

You should eliminate that barrier called egocentrism,  
for it is vile and reviled in this world;  
He who leaves it aside is truly rich,  
a beacon burning bright in this life.  
It causes self-destruction,  
and prevents you from arriving at eternal truth;  
Tukā says, he makes arrogant noises,  
hoisting his [false] superiority on his own head.<sup>24</sup>

Panta Pratinidhi's masterful sermon explicates this verse line-by-line, quoting a number of literary sources that attest to the perils of self-centeredness: Jñāneśvar and Bābā Gärde in Marathi, Śaṅkarācārya and the *Bhagavadgītā* in Sanskrit, Tulsidas in Hindi, Ruskin, Hazlitt, and Ogilvie's *Imperial Dictionary* in English, and even the Bible. Using these references to support his points, Panta Pratinidhi argues that egocentrism is at the heart of the vices of lust, anger, and avarice (*kām, krodh, lobh*), and that controlling it ought to be a primary objective of *bhakti*. As to the question of *how* one might do it, he takes recourse to the *Gītā*'s *karma yoga* philosophy, as well as Jñāneśvar's thirteenth-century Marathi

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<sup>24</sup> *ahamkāra to nāsā bheda, jagī ninde ḫovalā | nātale to dhanya yāstī, jālā vamśī dīpaka || dhr° || karavito ātmahatyā, nedī satyā ḫatalō || tukā mhane gurugurī, māthā thorī dharoni ||* (Tukārām *Gāthā* 3193).

commentary and its modern nineteenth-century explication by a devotional *guru* named Bābā Gārde. From these sources, he gathers that:

The essential idea is that whatever action might be carried out by one's own hands ought to be done for the Lord's purpose or rather for his sake, so that egocentrism might not arise in regards to it. When egocentrism exists, it means that a difference has arisen between myself and all of animate and inanimate creation.<sup>25</sup>

In an attempt to connect Viśvāmitra to these spiritual ideals, Panta Pratinidhi concludes his *kīrtan* with a rather revealing statement. “No one,” he claims, “may achieve success while actively holding on to egocentrism and material attachments. And only a person who gives up self-centeredness and toils for the betterment of the public, no matter his caste or station, will become successful.”<sup>26</sup> Panta Pratinidhi’s *kīrtan* thus argues for a responsibility toward social ethics and a public-oriented selflessness, through which he is able to frame a modern understanding of Brahminhood.

Advocating a liberal “feeling of equality” or *samabhāvanā*, it is clear that Panta Pratinidhi was targeting the progressive ideals of the New Brahmins of colonial Maharashtra, following the lead of “Lokhitawadi” Deshmukh, M. G. Ranade, R. G. Bhandarkar, and other Brahmin intellectuals. At a time when many were publicly calling for the reform of caste, if not its annihilation altogether, Panta Pratinidhi wished to infuse egalitarianism and the abjuring of self-serving politics into the traditional definition of Brahminhood. And to do so, he adapted the *Mahābhārata*’s *Kāmadhenu* legend to speak to the modern, colonial condition, in such a way that *nāradīya kīrtankārs* could still base their own Brahmin identities within the mythological tradition while also adapting it to this new social discourse. This progressive approach, we should note, was markedly different from that of the conservative *Kīrtan-taraṅgiṇī*, whose editors also upgraded the Peśvā-period Brahminical tradition to fit into the cultural space of colonial modernity, but kept this past safely within a box of nostalgia. Panta Pratinidhi,

<sup>25</sup> tātparya jē kāhī kṛtya āpalyā hātūn ghaḍel tyāviṣayī ahaṅkār utpanna hoṇār nāhī asā rītīnē tē paramēśvarācāyā hetūnē athavā tyāsāthīc kelē pāhije. ahaṅkār jhālā kī, mī āṇi carācar sr̄ṣṭi yāmadhyē bhed ālā. (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 303).

<sup>26</sup> ahaṅkār āṇi viṣayavāsanā hī jāgrt thevūn koṇālāhī siddhi prāpta vñāvayācī nāhī. varṇāśram koṇatāhī asalā tarī svārthatāyāg-pūrvak samājācyā uddhārāsāthī jo khaṭpaṭ karīl toc dhanya hoṇār. (Panta Pratinidhi 1929: 319).

in contrast, embarked on a more complex engagement between tradition and modernity that embraced the spirit of social reform and upgraded older religious ideals. Other *kīrtankārs* appear to have fallen in line with one or the other position, and so it would go until Independence, after which a new set of social and political anxieties began to impact the formation of Brahmin identity.

#### BRAHMIN SOCIAL POWER IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIA AND VIŚVĀMITRA ON TELEVISION

Since 1947, caste has become an increasingly divisive and volatile “specter” in the electoral politics of India (Dirks 2001: 17). The colonial-period development of regional caste associations and their subsequent alignment with political parties has produced formidable voting banks that have generated new forms of sociopolitical power and upward mobility for non-Brahmin communities (Mines 2009: 42–46; Srinivas 1957; Dahiwale 1995; Deshpande and Palshikar 2008), but which have also left certain groups, especially Dalits, vulnerable to brutal acts of violence (Rao 2009: 275; Bayly 1999: 353–56). For Brahmins in Maharashtra, this new era has brought feelings of social and economic uncertainty due to land reforms, Nathuram Godse’s assassination of Gandhi, and the 1989 implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations (Bayly 1999: 359–61; Deshpande and Palshikar 2008; Omvedt 1990).

Regardless of whether or not these feelings are justified, it is clear that being Brahmin in twenty-first century Maharashtra no longer yields social privileges and benefits quite as readily as it did under colonial or Peśvā rule. While Brahmin groups have generally been able to maintain economic interests across the state, and especially so in Pune, political control over these resources has been ceded to non-Brahmin leadership (Palshikar and Deshpande 1999: 2409, col. 3). Furthermore, as Brahmin families continue to migrate to North America and adopt cosmopolitan lifestyles, their social power has necessarily developed transnational dimensions. Back in India, the economic liberalization of the 1990s and 2000s has brought late capitalism and global consumerist culture into the urban bustle of Pune, Mumbai, and other burgeoning metropolitan areas within the state, and has encouraged greater numbers of NRIs (“non-resident” Indians) to repatriate back to Maharashtra to take advantage of this economic growth. Together, such changes have turned Brahmin self-understanding into a kind of postmodern pastiche—an uneasy juxtaposition of traditional (or traditionalistic)

beliefs and practices with the shifting realities of globalized and technologized everyday lives. Being Brahmin in today's Maharashtra, we might say, must necessarily involve a certain degree of cultural hybridity.

Viśvāmitra has come to reflect this hybridized Brahminhood. Since 1947, the legends about our sage have been disseminated through a number of mass media channels: television, magazines, comic books, and now, the Internet. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is the Hindi television serial *Vishwamitra*, starring Mukesh Khanna in the title role and first broadcast on the national channel Doordarshan in 1995. It was directed by the noted Telugu filmmaker and politician, Dr. Dasari Narayana Rao, currently a member of the Congress Party, but who in the past had been aligned with N. T. Rama Rao's Telugu Desam Party (Srinivas 2006: 39).

Dasari's works often tackle contemporary politics and social issues, and *Vishwamitra* is no exception. Broadcast in sixteen episodes, the serial weaves together the following Viśvāmitra legends: *Kāmadhenu*, *Triśaṅku*, *Menakā*, *Śakuntalā*, and *Hariścandra*. Most striking is Dasari's politicized treatment of Viśvāmitra's caste change in the *Kāmadhenu* legend (Episode 2). Dasari criticizes Viśvāmitra's egocentrism (*ahamkār*) as we had seen in Pratinidhi's colonial-era *kīrtan* and in Mukteśvar's medieval narrative-poem. But this *ahamkār* is now allegorized to represent the deplorable state of Indian national politics. And so, when the Kṣatriya Viśvāmitra threatens to steal the Brahmin Vasiṣṭha's cow, the scene can be read as a referendum against despotic and corrupt political leaders. When Viśvāmitra assaults Vasiṣṭha's hermitage having acquired magic weapons through asceticism, the Brahmin admonishes him:

Your ascetic practice has only caused your darkness to grow, and you have returned more self-centered than before. It is the duty of the king to protect the property of his subjects. You are not a king, you are a looter (*luṭere*). And opposing you is the duty of every citizen. You cannot cheat the people just because you have become a powerful king (*rājarṣi*).<sup>27</sup>

Dasari's use of the term *nāgarik* here exposes his subtext. He is no longer talking about ancient kings and sages, but modern-day "goonda" politicians

<sup>27</sup> āp ke tap ne āpkī tamas baḍhā dī. āp pehele se adhik ātma-kendrit hokar lauṭe haī. rājā kā yeh kartaṇya hai, kī jan-samudāy kī sampatti kī rakṣā karē. āp rājā nahī, luṭere haī. aur āpkā virodh karanā har

who are looting India. Like Vasiṣṭha, it is the duty (*kartavya*) of India's citizens (*nāgariks*) to stand up against such corruption. Instead of lining their own pockets, India's political leaders bear a responsibility to the nation. "Use your power for the welfare of humanity," Vasiṣṭha admonishes Viśvāmitra, "Your subjects are not there for your sake, King, you exist for your subjects."<sup>28</sup> Again, rather than criticizing a ruler of ancient Kānyakubja, this statement captures the common public dissatisfaction with high-level political corruption in today's Indian government.

Dasari's *Vishwamitra* serial also develops a reformist attitude toward caste mobility, floating the idea that being Brahmin is not a privilege granted by virtue of birth, but by one's moral character. In determining to change his caste, Viśvāmitra angrily asks, "Do only Brahmins have the authority to become *r̄ṣis*, *mahar̄ṣis*, or *brahmar̄ṣis*?"<sup>29</sup> Vasiṣṭha's calm response encapsulates Dasari's message:

No, King, no. Every human being is a descendant of Lord Brahmā, so how could there be any distinctions of birth? The proof of caste is not one's birth, but one's deeds. Every child that is born is a Śūdra, because his basket of deeds (*karma kī jholī*) is empty. A Brahmin's son could become a Śūdra, and a Śūdra's could become a Brahmin. And so don't be so proud of your being born Kṣatriya—put your deeds upon the scales of Law (*nyāy*) and see if you are a Kṣatriya or not.<sup>30</sup>

Echoing a position that is commonly expressed in contemporary public discourse, Dasari's *Vishwamitra* serial successfully repackages Brahminhood as a mode of upright public behavior that anyone in India may aspire to, regardless of caste or class, and which many contemporary Indian political leaders (who act instead like Kṣatriyas) clearly do not. In adopting this framework to understand Viśvāmitra's caste change, the *Vishwamitra* television serial uses the

<sup>28</sup> *nāgarik kā kartavya hai. āp rājar̄si bankar jan-samudāy ko dhokhā nahī de sakate, rājan.* (*Vishwamitra*, Disc 1, 1:26:18).

<sup>29</sup> *apnī śaktī kā prayog kījye, mānav-kalyāñ ke liye. āp kī prajā āp ke liye nahī hai rājan. āp apnī prajā ke liye hai.* (*Vishwamitra*, Disc 1, 1:28:10).

<sup>30</sup> *kyā r̄ṣi, mahar̄ṣi, brahmar̄ṣi hone kā keval brāhmaṇō kā adhikār hai?* (*Vishwamitra*, Disc 1, 1:37:43).

<sup>30</sup> *nahī rājan, nahī har mānav param-pitā brahmā kā vamsajā hai. phir jātibhed kaisā? jāti kā ādhār janma nahī karma hai. janma lenevālā har bālak śūdra hotā hai. kyōke uske karma kī jholī rikta hott hai. brāhmaṇ putra śūdra ho sakatā hai. śūdra putra brāhmaṇ. isliye āp apne kṣatriya hone par garva na kījye. apne karma ke nyāy ke tūlā par tol kar dekhiye, kī āp kṣatriya hai hī yā nahī.* (*Vishwamitra*, Disc 1, 1:37:49).

mythological imaginary to speak allegorically to today's debates on social reform. In an effort to align the Brahminical worldview of Hindu mythology with the egalitarian social ideals that have come to define the public discourse on caste, Dasari makes a rather bold proposition: being Brahmin is, in fact, impossible, as we all are Śūdras at birth. Rather, we must all, like Viśvāmitra, *become* Brahmin.

#### “KNOWLEDGE COMES FROM INSIDE”: VIŚVĀMITRA IN CONTEMPORARY MARATHI KĪRTAN

While the *Vishwamitra* TV serial may thereby reflect certain mainstream attitudes toward Viśvāmitra's mythological persona, it is not the only way that contemporary Hindus have understood his caste change, ascetic power, and hostile demeanor. More complex interpretations tend to arise dialogically, through the give-and-take of performers and audiences, whenever legends about him are presented in live settings such as *nāradīya kīrtan*. In the year 2000, I was able to attend and record a month-long set of *kīrtans* on Viśvāmitra performed in Pune by a *kīrtankār* named Vaman V. Kolhatkar, the son of the acclaimed nationalist (*rāṣṭrīya*) *kīrtankār* Vasudev S. Kolhatkar, a Chitpāvan Brahmin who moved from Goa to Pune in the early twentieth century.

Like his father, Kolhatkar-*buvā* was educated for ten years in a traditional Vedic school (*pāṭhaśālā*).<sup>31</sup> Eschewing the more cosmopolitan and socialite lifestyles that many Puneri Brahmins lead, Kolhatkar-*buvā* devotes his energies to the intellectual and religious life, maintaining a traditional household where Vedic knowledge and practices may continue to be pursued in an orthodox setting. His primary goal, he is careful to say, is to keep alive the traditions that religious practitioners like his father and his Vedic *guru* had worked so hard to establish, though as he laments, they are rapidly disappearing within the Brahmin community around him. And so in the most interior space of his home in the affluent Prabhat Road neighborhood of Pune, adjacent to the kitchen, there is an altar-room (*devghar*) in which he privately conducts daily Vedic *sandhyā* rituals at sunrise and at dusk, giving the Kolhatkar home an air of timeless and orthodox Brahmin tradition.

But there is a lot more to this fascinating individual. In the 1960s, after completing his Vedic studies, Kolhatkar-*buvā* attended a public college in Pune,

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<sup>31</sup> It is customary to apply the suffix *buvā* (“Mister”) to a *kīrtankār*'s name as a term of respect.

where he became friends with my father and eventually earned postgraduate degrees in mathematics. He has traveled through Europe, and has spent time in the United States as a visiting scholar at Purdue University in 1981–82. These days, for his livelihood, he and his wife run a physics laboratory for high school students named Ganit Mandir (“Temple of Mathematics”) in the front rooms of his home, while within the interior rooms he carries out his daily Vedic observances, studies religious texts, and offers daily Marathi *pravacans* (sermons). The collision of all of these activities has turned Kolhatkar-*buvā*’s home into a remarkable pastiche of scientific and mathematical textbooks, computers, and laboratory apparatus, juxtaposed with weathered Sanskrit and Marathi religious scriptures, while teenagers wearing jeans and t-shirts buzz about doing their practical experiments as he sits amidst them, clad in a simple *dhotar*, editing various poetic and philosophical works of his late father that he has been publishing privately for the last several years. It is not surprising to find that comparisons between India and the West and the conflicts of tradition and modernity tend to be recurring themes in his *kīrtans*.

In late 2000, hearing that I was researching Viśvāmitra for my doctoral work, Kolhatkar-*buvā* offered to perform for my benefit a set of *kīrtans* about the sage that he pulled together from his father’s repertoire and his own earlier performances. These took place in the lunar month of Mārgaśīrṣa (November–December) as part of his annual residency at a temple in Pune called Nārad Mandir. Since its founding in the early twentieth century, this temple has been dedicated to the professional practice of *nāradīya kīrtan*, and houses the offices, classrooms, and library of the Harikīrtanottejak Sabhā, an organization that promotes, teaches, and supports this performing art in Pune. Practically every evening at 6 pm, about forty to fifty people gather in its open-air outer hall and listen to a ninety-minute *nāradīya kīrtan* performance. Nārad Mandir is the epicenter of the *nāradīya* tradition in Pune, and also happens to be located in the heart of the city’s Brahmin orthodoxy—the neighborhood of Sadashiv Peth (Omvedt 1974: 202). These *kīrtans*, in other words, were presented to audiences who were mostly Brahmin, elderly, middle class, and urban, and it should therefore be emphasized that his stories may have been performed differently in other settings.<sup>32</sup>

The first four days of his month-long session were spent on an unconnected story of Gaṇeśa’s birth, and the last week covered the legendary accounts of

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<sup>32</sup> See Damle 1960 for an assessment—albeit outdated—of the typical demographics of *nāradīya kīrtan* audiences. A more recent discussion can be found in Schultz 2013.

the medieval Rajput ruler, Pr̥thivīrāj Cauhāṇ. In between, over the course of nineteen days, Kolhatkar-*buvā* presented the major epic and purāṇic legends of Viśvāmitra, and explained their significance for contemporary Hindu religious belief and practice. In his *uttararaṅgas*, he told the legends of *Satyavatī*, *Kāmadhenu*, *Satyavrata*, *Trīśaṅku*, *Śvapaca*, and *Śunahṣepa*, as well as a very brief synopsis of *Hariścandra*.<sup>33</sup> At his invitation, I sat in the crowd and recorded his live public performances with a minidisc recorder, using small, inconspicuous condenser microphones.

For the most part, I tried to remain a passive member of the audience, though inevitably my American clothing and appearance made me conspicuous. And because he and I would have extensive discussions on a daily basis before and after each *kīrtan*, my presence undoubtedly affected these performances, both for the *buvā* and the *kīrtan*-goers. A case in point: while summarizing the *Hariścandra* legend, Kolhatkar-*buvā* broke out of the storytelling frame to tell the audience about a conversation we had had about the scene in the cremation grounds:

A horrific scene—such a horrific scene, and [Hariścandra's] life in it has been described, it has been told in the *Devībhāgavata*, and an even more horrifying description is narrated in the *Mārkandeya Purāṇa*, and, [pausing and looking at me, seated in the audience] which play did you say? ["*Caṇḍakauśika*," I replied.] A small play called *Caṇḍakauśika*—I haven't looked at it, but [gesturing toward me] he's told me that such a description is also found there. Such a horrifying scene is described that it makes us shiver. It's such a terrifying description of the funeral grounds—in the burning grounds. (December 14, 2000)

Of course no one in the audience would have known about Kṣemīśvara's tenth-century play, and this interjection was clearly directed at me, both as a scholarly citation and as a public extension of an earlier private conversation. Still, it had the effect of opening an obscure literary world to the interested Nārad Mandir community, and at the end of this day's *kīrtan* an elderly listener turned to me and asked for more details about the play, jotting down the bibliographical reference in his personal notebook.

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<sup>33</sup> Kolhatkar-*buvā* also alluded to *Menakā* and *Gālava*, without telling them in detail, and in the first two *kīrtan* sessions, presented the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s account of the naming of the city of Kānyakubja, which had been Viśvāmitra's royal capital.

Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s knowledgeable, erudite, and humorous performances allow us to see how Sanskrit texts and vernacular performance intertwine in the formation of Brahmin culture in contemporary Pune. First, as Ramanujan has observed in folkloric tellings of classical Hindu myths (1999b: 504–7), Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s storytelling style “domesticated” and “contemporized” the epic and purānic Viśvāmitra legends. He took contemporary urban stereotypes and mapped them onto the *varṇa* categories of Brahmin, Kṣatriya, and Outcaste in ways that were often anachronistic—and therefore highly amusing—but which also made the storyworld readily graspable for his audience. He also applied a more esoteric philosophical lens toward Viśvāmitra's *tapas* and caste change so that they spoke to contemporary Puneri contexts. He questioned the idea of Brahminhood based solely on birth, as Dasari's *Vishwamitra* TV serial had done, but then went one step further by problematizing a character-based or behavioral definition as well. Instead, Kolhatkar-*buvā* maintained that being Brahmin today needs to involve the diligent maintenance of an interiorized, purified “core” that—though he didn't explicitly state this—must necessarily coexist with a cosmopolitan and transnational exterior persona. As we will see, his *kīrtan* performances used Viśvāmitra's pursuit of Brahminhood through *tapas* as an analogy for this kind of internal purification.

Here it should be emphasized that Kolhatkar-*buvā* is not a typical *kīrtankār*. He makes frequent use of Sanskrit source texts that he keeps stored in an extensive personal library at home, which means that his Marathi versions seldom deviate in their plot from these “original” texts. He often recites Sanskrit verses, which he has either memorized or brought with him on note cards, and, as we have just seen, he regularly provides citations to Sanskrit texts for the benefit of his audiences. His performances are, in this sense, highly scholarly. Still, because he aims to keep his audiences engaged and entertained, Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s storytelling is also peppered with long, impromptu digressions, witty topical interjections, and off-the-cuff poetic embellishments. Such rhetorical flourishes, common in oral performances, effectively filter the purānic narratives in such a way that they “tip mythology, a public form, toward a more domestic genre” (Ramanujan 1999b: 504), rendering them more accessible and memorable to live audiences. And on a broader cultural level, I suggest that they also yield an “analogical” power, through which *kīrtankārs* like Kolhatkar-*buvā* may engage with contemporary issues and debates by asking audiences to imagine the mythological past *as if* it were like the present, but not really.

Let me explain what I mean more carefully. Most of Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s descriptive digressions took place when describing two kinds of storyworld spaces: the homes of Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Outcastes, or the inner spaces of their private thoughts. Brahmin domiciles were austere, sacrosanct, and strict, and radiated an air of timeless nonmodernity. Consider, for example, the everyday life of the erstwhile princess Satyavatī after her marriage to the Brahmin R̄cīka:

She has woken up before her husband, has cleaned the house, the floor is mopped with manure—she doesn't go "*Eeee!*"—the manure is spread, the yard is clean, sprinkled with water, the *rāṅgolī* (rice powder) designs are drawn, the *gopadma* (cow's hoof) decoration is made. The various grasses and so on needed for her husband's daily offerings are brought, the sacrificial space is made very pure, because the fire is brought inside the house after marriage and is supposed to be tended for one's entire lifetime. (December 2, 2000)

Kṣatriya homes, on the other hand, were hedonistic and disorganized, and their thoughts were occluded by personal ambitions and impulsive behavior. Anachronistically, modern technologies and pastimes were injected into their lifestyle. For example, when R̄cīka came to ask for Satyavatī's hand in marriage, Kolhatkar-*buvā* took us into her father Gādhi's thoughts:

But, he is a Brahmin, and I am a Kṣatriya. His eating and drinking are different, my eating and drinking are different. His ways of having pleasure (*viśayopabhog*) are different, my ways of having pleasure are different. When he sits for ascetic practices, he'll sit for thousands and thousands of years, and for us being Kṣatriya means that today we go here, tomorrow see that \*cinema, see this play, take a stroll here, parade around on that elephant, do these battles—this is our worldly life. (December 2, 2000)

On the one hand, the anachronism here is clearly meant to be funny, and not to be taken seriously. But as Alan Dundes once remarked, "people joke about only what is most serious" (1987: viii, cited in Kolenda 1990: 116). So while it is amusing to imagine elephant-riding warriors going to the movies, Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s humor plays on Brahmin anxieties regarding the moral

boundaries of contemporary Brahmin social identity—after all, these activities reflect the self-indulgences of today’s middle-class urbanites of any caste, including Brahmins.<sup>34</sup>

What then, ultimately distinguishes Brahmins from Kṣatriyas? In Kolhatkar-*buvā*’s portrayal, the Kṣatriya’s self-centered focus on power and pleasure (*artha* and *kāma*) is what leads to moral corruption. For example, in his telling of *Satyavrata*, while describing how the prince kidnaps a bride from the marriage altar, Kolhatkar-*buvā* interjected an aside that brought this story to bear on modern Indian politics. “Princes *do* act like this,” he noted.

When I was in Delhi, the prince at that time was Indira Gandhi’s son. He would always do this. [Murmurs in the audience.] I have firsthand experience—I met people there whose daughters had these kinds of things happen to them! But this king was not one to cover these sorts of things up. This is the difference. Tendencies (*vṛtti*) are universal, but the tendency to straighten out these tendencies—these must be ripe and ready (*tājyā-tavānyā*). (December 8, 2000)

The juxtaposition of Satyavrata’s sexual transgressions in the Treta Age to those of Sanjay Gandhi in the 1970s induces another cross-temporal analogy. The son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was rumored to have acted *as if* he were a modern-day Satyavrata, but while his power-oriented mother “covered these sorts of things up,” Satyavrata’s noble-minded father had not. The contrastive analogy helps the audience relate to and appreciate the mythological past, but also mobilizes the mythological past as political commentary on the present—the immediacy and relevance of which was indicated by the audience’s audible reactions.

While such storytelling embellishments domesticized and contemporized the Viśvāmitra legends in his *uttararaṅga* sessions, Kolhatkar-*buvā* designed his *pūrvvaraṅga* discourses to orient these legends toward the spiritual interests of the Nārad Mandir audience. Taking up the concept of the “*rṣi*,” his *pūrvvaraṅgas* were largely impromptu lectures on various topics concerning Vedic literature, which the *kīrtan* audiences especially appreciated because of his established reputation as an expert in the field. It is rare for a *kīrtankār* to be fully trained

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<sup>34</sup> Here and in the rest of my transcriptions, I have indicated Kolhatkar-*buvā*’s use of English words with an asterisk and italics.

in Vedic ritual practice and theory, so whenever Kolhatkar-*buvā* went on long explanations on the differences between Vedic and *purāṇic* texts, or between Vedic *r̥ṣis* and the medieval *bhakti* saints, they would eagerly soak it in, some furiously taking notes and others asking questions after the performance.

It was during his *pūrvvaraṅgas* to *Satyavatī* that Kolhatkar-*buvā* addressed that perennial, burning question about Viśvāmitra that has captivated Hindu audiences for over two thousand years: how could a Kṣatriya actually become a Brahmin? To answer this, Kolhatkar-*buvā* adopted an internalized, spiritual perspective toward Viśvāmitra's asceticism (*tap*), emphasizing that his becoming Brahmin involved a gradual purification of his inner consciousness (*antahkaraṇ*). The *antahkaraṇ* of every individual, he explained, is continually impacted by the transformative effects of external influences (*samskārs*), and to illustrate, he gave several personal examples. "Our JAWA motorcycle," he announced, "it sounds like a chariot. But once, I was struck in the foot by its \*backstroke, and that will give me problems when I am 70. *Karma* has accumulated there. The *samskārs* on our body accumulate, the *samskārs* on our mind accumulate, the *samskārs* on our intellect accumulate" (December 4, 2000). To illustrate the meaning of the word *samskār*, he playfully teased a member of the audience, Suresh Kothari, a mathematician at Iowa State University, who is a close friend of both Kolhatkar-*buvā* and my father. Kothari happened to have been in town for the winter holidays, and had brought his college-age daughter along to see the *kīrtan*. "One forgets that *pīṭhala* (chickpea gravy) tastes good," he began.

But then, when our friend Kothari here returned after seven years, he said, "Mother, make *pīṭhala* like back then. Don't you remember how it was on the day after my birthday? We had gone on a trip, I came home late, I was in a hurry, with five or six of my friends..." And now, he's come back from America and he might have eaten all sorts of things out there, but what he wants is his mother's *pīṭhala*. This is *samskār*. (December 4, 2000)

Through such domestic and personal imagery of mothers, *pīṭhala*, and JAWA motorcycles, Kolhatkar-*buvā* sought to explicate, in everyday terms, the rather abstruse philosophical notion of the inner consciousness and the effects that everyday *samskārs* have upon it. Once he felt that his audience had sufficiently

understood his analogies, he brought their newfound understanding to bear on Viśvāmitra. The ancient *rṣi*, he argued, was the kind of individual whose inner consciousness had been freed of these external transformative forces through the power of *tapaścaryā*, of ascetic practice. And this is precisely what Viśvāmitra had to do in order to become a Brahmin sage, a *brahmarṣi*.

In order to explain how *tapaścaryā* transforms ordinary people into *rṣis*, Kolhatkar-*buvā* took recourse to the Upaniṣadic theory of *kośas* (“sheaths”). For this reason, during his *pūrvvaraṅgas* for the *Kāmadhenu* legend, instead of the usual Marathi *bhakti* poem he chose a Sanskrit verse from the *Pañcadaśī* of Vidyāranya Svāmin, the noted fourteenth-century Vedānta philosopher, about the metaphysical cave within every individual:<sup>35</sup>

*dehād abhyantaraḥ prāṇāḥ prāṇād abhyantaram manāḥ |  
tataḥ kartā tato bhoktā guhā seyam paramparā ||* (*Pañcadaśī* 3.2).

Nestled within the body is the life-breath,  
nestled within the breath is the mind;  
Then there is the active agent, and then the consumer—  
this sequence is “the cave.”

Vedānta philosophy is a topic of great interest in contemporary Hindu practice, but can quickly become impenetrable for the general audiences who attend *nāradīya kīrtans*. To counteract this, Kolhatkar-*buvā* again made use of analogical methods that illustrated how each of these internal physical faculties belongs to five distinct metaphysical *kośas* or sheaths made of food (*anna*), breath (*prāṇa*), mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), and bliss (*ānanda*), but which themselves are inversely layered outward, like an onion, to make up the material world. As before, his analogies came from everyday contemporary experiences, not textual sources: a water-soaked blanket, a man who has eaten garlic, nostalgic memories of home for an individual who is visiting America. In each of these cases, one element (water, garlic, memories) is absorbed inside the other (blanket, man, America), but paradoxically is able to extend beyond the thing that appears to contain it. Once we understand the world to be structured by these five *kośas*, he argued, then spiritual practice (*adhyātma*) consists

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<sup>35</sup> Vidyāranya Svāmin was “said to have been the Head of the Śringeri Māṭh (one of the four principle Māṭhs established by Bhagavān Śankarācārya himself) from 1377 to 1386 A.D.” (Mahadevan 1967: iii).

of purifying them internally, one sheath at a time, until we attain the enlightened state (*viveka*) within “the cave.” This process of purification, he declared, is precisely what *tapas* is:

The attempt to detangle our experiences from falsehood becomes successful through ascetic practice (*tapasćaryā*), through the disciplinary observances (*vrat*) of purifying the *kośas*. How? Eating, drinking, getting up, sitting down, the nature of our thinking, bathing, modes of sitting, getting up, greeting people. What relationships are to be kept with people? Through solitude, our relationships automatically stop... A person engaged in *tapas* becomes detached, and then many things automatically stop. Other things he must make stop through observances—as a result, he purifies his *kośas*, one by one. (December 5, 2000)

Using this analogy, Kolhatkar-*buvā* interpreted Viśvāmitra’s march toward Brahminhood as a progressive purification of his inner consciousness. “It is a struggle with one’s self,” he concluded. “We always look to the outside world, but we must learn to look at the inside world. Only then am I able to understand my *kośas*.” On the last day of his *Kāmadhenu kīrtan*, pressed for time, he reduced this to a final takeaway message: “You will all become *brahmaṛsi* (Brahmin sages) after you perform *tapas* and purify the five *kośas*” (December 5, 2000). In subsequent *kīrtan* sessions, he would explain the concept of *brahmaṛsi* in more detail, linking the state of being a *rṣi* to possessing the uniquely transcendent and efficacious power of the Vedic mantra, and how this differs from the equally valuable but terrestrial knowledge available in Sanskrit *purāṇas* and Marathi *bhakti* poetry. Ultimately, Kolhatkar-*buvā*’s Viśvāmitra *kīrtans* operated with an orthodox but hybridized understanding of Brahmin identity. From this perspective, an ideal Brahmin is one who by necessity must engage with modernity, technology, and globalization on the outside, and he should do so in an upright manner using the authoritative knowledge provided by *kīrtans* and *purāṇas*. But on the inside, through ardent spiritual pursuit, he should strive to nurture the delicate essence of what makes a “true” Brahmin.

Kolhatkar-*buvā*’s *kīrtans* illustrate how, within the dialogical setting of a live performance, the old stories of Viśvāmitra’s exploits are brought to bear upon feelings of cultural loss, flux, and uncertainty that Brahmin communities

have developed in contemporary urban India. These are perhaps most acutely felt by the elderly *kīrtan* audiences, many of whose children now live in the United States, Canada, or other Western countries, who are forced to remain mute witnesses to a crumbling world of Puneri tradition around them, as they struggle every day to walk this city's overcrowded streets just to make it to Nārad Mandir in time for the performance. How, in the midst of this chaos, can one maintain the old Brahminical traditions? Kolhatkar-*buvā* uses the Viśvāmitra legends to advocate a process of interiorization, so that the unstoppable cultural flows of the external, globalized world may coexist side-by-side with a traditional Brahminical inner space. And so, Kolhatkar-*buvā* asks his audiences to become *as if* they were Brahmin sages, just as Viśvāmitra had done in the mythological past.



As variegated as they may be, the many visual and performative representations of Viśvāmitra in colonial and postcolonial India do offer some tentative conclusions about how and why our sage has continued to be part of the Hindu mythological imagination over three millennia after stories were first told about him. If, in the early twentieth century, Viśvāmitra had iconized the reformed “New Brahmin,” then, at the onset of the twenty-first, he has come to reflect a distinctively *postmodern* understanding of Brahmin identity. Frank Korom notes that in contemporary South Asia, “selves, like sponges,... soak up a variety of often conflicting and certainly ironic influences to create an unending variety of new identities and cultural expressions that mark the current era in which we are all living” (2006: 142). Motivated by the fear that the old ways are quickly vanishing, Brahminhood in the twenty-first century has necessarily become a pastiche—an uneasy and ironic juxtaposition of traditional ideas and practices with an egalitarian social mindset, a disenchantment with Indian electoral politics, and the adoption of consumerist and globalized lifestyles.

This pastiche of Brahminhood, as we have seen, is captured in the post-Independence representations of Viśvāmitra. In Dasari’s *Vishwamitra* TV serial, Viśvāmitra did not become a pure Brahmin, he became a “Kṣatriya-Brahmin,” a fundamentally hybrid construct. In Kolhatkar-*buvā*’s *kīrtans*, Viśvāmitra’s becoming Brahmin analogically illustrated how one may become a Brahmin on the inside—that is, achieve spiritual purification—while

remaining an active participant in the hypermodern public culture of today's urban India. As this public culture keeps evolving, it is certain that new configurations of Brahmin identity and power will emerge over the next thousand years—or perhaps even after the next round of elections. However, based on what we have seen over the past three thousand years, it is a safe bet that Viśvāmitra will continue, in one way or another, to play a part in defining the outer limits of Brahminhood.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Texts, Performances, and Hindu Mythological Culture*



What does it mean to be a Brahmin in traditional Hindu society? And what could it mean to *become* one? These were the questions that had launched our journey, and now, as we reach its end, we may ask them once more to see where we have arrived. The distinction between being and becoming is one of social ontology—how an individual who belongs to one social group is to be differentiated from another who is in the process of joining it. With the advent of modern educational and economic institutions, for example, this differentiation often involves formal modes of certification, such as college degrees, club memberships, or the color of one's credit card. Within the Hindu tradition, the ideology of *varṇa* has long provided, in principle if not always in practice, a traditional mode of certification for Brahmins, so that being Brahmin is argued to come with a certain measure of social power while becoming one is deemed to be practically impossible without undergoing death and rebirth. Yet, as we have learned, there was a fellow named Viśvāmitra, who, in the remote past, was known to have done exactly that. The legends about him consistently highlight the desires and anxieties involved in crossing the lines of caste—whether up or down, in or out—and for this reason, they have had an important role to play in the cultural construction of Brahmin social power.

Viśvāmitra's counter-normative persona, we have found, has changed as the historical contexts of Brahmin power have changed. His roots are in Vedic mythology, in which he came to be regarded as both a priest and a prince, noted for his ability to cross various kinds of uncrossable boundaries through the efficacious power of Vedic speech. It was in the Sanskrit epics, however, that he first came to be known for changing his caste. This unique achievement would solidify his role as the Brahmin Other—a Brahmin at the very edge of Brahminhood, who could challenge caste boundaries by deploying an ascetic power (*tapas*) that was both awesome and dangerous. By placing him in opposition to the normative figure of Vasiṣṭha, the epics generated a split-image of Brahmin identity in such a way that would ensure a place of privilege for Brahmins in the urban political centers of post-Mauryan India (as priests and consultants) as well as in the forest (as renunciants), while warning non-Brahmins of the dangers of disrespecting Brahmins of either sort.

In purāṇic literature, Viśvāmitra's persona was adapted to speak to new developments within the Hindu mainstream of the Gupta period and beyond. First, the early purāṇas placed theistic spins on the Viśvāmitra legends, demonstrating how divine grace (*prasāda*) empowered his social boundary crossings and also how Brahmin preceptors (*purohitas*)—whether normative like Vasiṣṭha or transgressive like Viśvāmitra—had special access to this grace and to other, more esoteric powers. Second, medieval purāṇic texts geo-mapped Viśvāmitra's exploits to certain riverine holy places (*tīrthas*) in order to assert Brahminical authority over a thriving pilgrimage industry, while also generating regionalized inflections of Brahmin identity. Third, in response to a growing critique of Brahmin elitism within the vernacular public spheres of *bhakti*, Viśvāmitra began to assume the role of the Brahmin Double—a villainous literary figure from whom normal Brahmins distanced themselves, but whose actions were made justifiable for those who knew the rest of the story. In the Sanskrit purāṇas this resulted in a bifurcated Brahminical social discourse that publicly acknowledged the egalitarian ethos of *bhakti* but internally maintained an elite Brahmin identity.

As the traditional Brahminical institutions of caste were subjected to more radical interventions in the colonial period, the legends of Viśvāmitra yet again experienced an upgrade. For artists, writers, thinkers, and *kīrtankārs*, he came to represent the New Brahmin, who evoked a modern spirit of progress and self-determination, but who also carried the medieval baggage of an

egocentrism (*ahamkār*) that threatened to tear everything apart. Various treatments of Viśvāmitra produced after Independence have imagined him as a hybridized Brahmin, analogically reflecting how traditional Brahmins might carry on amidst the hypermodern urban chaos of today's India: obligated to behave like Kṣatriyas, materialistic and egocentric, on the outside, but striving to keep a traditional Brahmin identity on the inside through a long process of spiritual self-purification.

So, as we can now say with more confidence, Viśvāmitra has meant different things to different people over the years, and for very good reasons. Our investigation has shown that these meanings have always been historically contingent, always plural, and always in a process of creation, adaptation, and confrontation. And they have always emerged through the production of storyworlds—imagined realms in which legends take place, but which are brought into being by the legends themselves. Storyworld production lends itself to the formation of a public mythological culture, one that I have argued to be fundamentally *dialogical*. Whether this dialogicity involves the give-and-take of performers and their live audiences during fluid storytelling events, or the *pseudo*-heteroglossia of the fixed dialogic narrative frames of epic and purāṇic texts, there is always a process of negotiation through which the meaning of a particular story arises. In the case of Viśvāmitra, as we have discovered, this negotiation has largely concerned the nature and limits of Brahminhood.

In the rest of these concluding remarks, I would like to consider these two ideas—storyworld production and the interplay of texts and performances—from a more theoretical perspective, so that we might arrive at some broader implications for the study of Hindu mythology. In the spirit of heteroglossia, I will also present the ideas of our *kīrtankār*, Vaman Kolhatkar, who also touched on these issues during his Viśvāmitra *kīrtan* performances in Pune in late 2000. My intention in making this juxtaposition is not to set up an artificial opposition between religious insiders and outsiders—for if our study has shown one thing, it is that social boundary lines are perpetually being redrawn through every cultural performance, including the writing of this book. We are all, like Viśvāmitra, outsiders who are perpetually in the process of becoming insiders. Rather, I present Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s ideas in order to reflect how, in fact, my own understanding of Viśvāmitra's legends has emerged through years of conversations with those who hold different opinions—just as it has for him and for any other consumer of Hindu mythology.

## STORYWORLDS AND THE CULTURAL “WORK” OF HINDU MYTHOLOGY

This study has revealed that mythology “works” as a cultural practice through the production of storyworlds by means of texts and performances within specific historical contexts. Here, I have in mind Gananath Obeyesekere’s analysis (1990) of the “work of culture” as a psychological process of symbol-making, through which unconscious desires and anxieties are reshaped into myth, ritual, and other public cultural forms, and which can therefore be interpreted as a public extension of the Freudian “dream work,” but “in the vigilance of daylight, not in the poorly guarded dream time of the night” (1990: 56). Especially valuable in Obeyesekere’s approach is his illumination of the agency and intentionality of individuals in this cultural process (1990: 285), which he achieves through an interdisciplinary engagement between ethnography and psychoanalysis. Through close readings of case studies, Obeyesekere asks how the symbolic content of myths and ritual practices enable individuals either to progress or regress from buried personal desires and anxieties. In this study, I have set aside questions of symbolism and have chosen instead to focus on historical context, so that we may learn how Brahmin desires and anxieties of social power at various times and places have fueled—and have in turn been shaped by—the telling of traditional stories. This is what I mean by the “work” of mythological culture.

To put it more succinctly, the cultural work of Hindu mythology is to bind storyworlds to the real world. Despite the supernatural aspects of the settings, characters, and powers that are found in myths and legends, these genres of traditional narrative operate on an underlying belief that the storyworld is more or less identical to the one we live in, only set in the remote past, “when the earth was different from what it is today” (Bascom 1965: 4). Myths and legends are told as true, even if the teller does not believe it to actually have happened, and are often said to have happened at geographical sites that one can still visit, and to involve sacred forces that one might still experience through ritual, spiritual practices, or pilgrimage. This linkage between storyworld and the real world—which I have earlier expressed metaphorically as mythological “anchors” or “mooring”—does not take place in the story itself, but through paratextual devices, whether these are the structural aspects of a live performance or the dialogic narrative frames of written mythological literature. This

is where a myth or legend acquires its truth value, as well as sacrality. Without this binding process—that is to say, without meaningful contextualization—a mythological narrative would cease to have cultural significance. And it would, in due course, die out. In some domains of Hindu religious culture, the bond between mythology and the real world has appeared so strong and permanent that colonial Europeans simply deemed the Indian tradition not to possess a historical consciousness at all (see Pollock 1989). But of course this timelessness is only an illusion, for as we have readily observed with Viśvāmitra, the discursive glue that binds the storyworld to the real world has been refreshed and refurbished time and again as the context of its production has changed. This refurbishment, carried out dialogically within the space of the live performance or the written narrative frame, results in new understandings of the supernatural forces involved in these stories, like *tapas*, *tīrtha*, or *prasāda*, allowing the stories to remain believable and relevant for their mainstream consumers.

#### FIXING THE STORYWORLD WITHIN *NĀRADĪYA KĪRTAN*

To establish this kind of discursive glue during his Viśvāmitra *kīrtans* at Narad Mandir, Vaman Kolhatkar often went on tangential digressions on the spiritual power of Vedic mantras—a topic that his audiences knew almost nothing about, but which arouses great curiosity within the *nāradīya kīrtan* community due to the great prestige that all things Vedic receive in modern Hinduism. And as one of the few living *kīrtankārs* to have received traditional Vedic training as a youth, Kolhatkar-*buvā* has made it a mission to educate his audiences about this religious culture. This is precisely what he tried to do during his *pūrvvaraṅgas* to the Viśvāmitra legends.

Vedic mantras, Kolhatkar-*buvā* explained, are not necessarily better or more powerful than purāṇic stories or Marathi *bhakti* poetry—which constitute the stock material covered in *nāradīya kīrtan*, and which he called *purāṇa-mantra*. But Vedic mantras are extremely fragile and highly specialized forms of knowledge, and therefore require expertise in how they are handled:

In order to recite the *veda-mantras*, you have to do the rites of *snān-sandhyā* [daily ritual bathing at dawn and dusk]. If someone, even a Brahmin, doesn't do *snān-sandhyā*, he has no authority to utter the *Vedas*. The *veda-mantra* is

not just “Rām Rām, Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa” or the *Viṣṇu-sahasranām* [the “Thousand Names of Viṣṇu”]. It is very delicate. I’m not saying that the power of the *Vedas* is greater or lesser. Anything can have greater or lesser power. But it is very delicate. And so it should be taken care of. (December 9, 2000)

As a way to make this fragility readily graspable in everyday terms, and to give it a sentimental value, Kolhatkar-*buvā* analogized the Vedic mantra to a newborn baby:

If you had a son, a piece of your heart, then in order to protect him, you have to keep him in the home for the first three months. . . The birthing room was like the womb, in the old days. In other words, the birthing room [is to be built] as if it’s hiding inside the inner quarters [*mājghar*]. It’s different in foreign countries. There is no sun there, and so everyone is wide open. The sun is not there. How can we make a comparison with that? It’s a different world. And so they can’t see the sun’s rays there. Here, the sun’s rays penetrate everywhere they want. They’ll go into quilts, they’ll go into blankets. Their effect keeps going and so the birthing room is placed deep, deep inside, because it is like the inside of the womb. (December 9, 2000)

Because they are as delicate as a newborn child, and susceptible to damage by the elements, Vedic mantras must be kept secure within the interior spaces of Brahminhood in order to remain sacred and potent. But, Kolhatkar-*buvā* lamented, this is not at all what has happened in contemporary Indian society, as it gets more and more drawn to the lifestyles of “foreign countries,” where even their birthing practices are so dramatically different. He gave as an example what has happened to the most famous of Viśvāmitra’s contributions to the Vedic corpus, the *Gāyatrī* mantra, due to its commercialization and mass-marketing in film and cassette recordings. In one of the more impassioned moments in his *kīrtans*, Kolhatkar-*buvā* decried what he considered to be a great travesty to the Vedic tradition:

Hey, these days the *Gāyatrī* is even recited in the \*cinema. \*Cassettes of the *Gāyatrī* mantra are set to different tunes. The *Gāyatrī* mantra is put in different melodies—in different *rāgas* like Bhairavī, Kedār, Nanda—but how is this the *Gāyatrī* mantra? Some incredibly crazy business is going on! Such a disgrace has never been seen in the world! These mantras ought to be

virtuously and respectfully kept secure—but you'll encounter them even if you go to the bathroom, or even at the *pānwālā* [betel-nut seller]! Once, there was this *pānwālā*'s store, next to a \*Xeroxing shop. I gave two pages to that \*Xeroxing shop, and in the morning, that cassette was playing. Here, he was \*Xeroxing, and over there, the Gāyatrī mantra. (December 9, 2000)

The sympathetic *kīrtan*-goers were audibly gasping and shaking their heads in dismay throughout his oratory. The Gāyatrī is a mantra that in contemporary Hindu practice may be chanted by anyone, including those traditionally forbidden even from hearing Vedic mantras, such as women, Śūdras, and Dalits. Its public proliferation over the last century has, therefore, reflected both the progressive spirit of caste reform and the formation of a modern pluralistic Hindu identity. But for many traditional Vedic specialists like Kolhatkar-*buvā*, it is a rather lamentable development, not because of the impact it has on Brahmin status, but on what he believes happens to the mantra itself. He even declined to recite the Gāyatrī during his performance, saying, "I am not able to sing it for you, because I am respectful of it. The Gāyatrī mantra is not some song from a \*cinema. Not at all! It is not meant to be uttered all twisted around. How could it?" (December 9, 2000). This refusal effectively reinforces the gap between contemporary Hindu public culture and the ancient Vedic tradition. That is to say, it emphasizes the radical distance between the real-world context of twenty-first century India and the storyworld into which the *kīrtankār* is transporting his audiences.

So how might ordinary *kīrtan*-goers, untrained in the Sanskrit *Vedas*, come to comprehend and access the sacred force of these Vedic mantras? Kolhatkar-*buvā* argued that a better way for the general public to acquire such spiritual knowledge was through the study of purāṇic mythology and *bhakti* poetry, which, he suggested, would actually prove more useful for their lives than the Vedic texts themselves. As he explained,

The *Veda* is not a subject to study in order to gain knowledge. It is \*specific. It is \*specific. The *Veda* is extremely \*specific. It is like this: Allarakha plays *tablā*.<sup>1</sup> His *tablā* has never been taught in a school—how could he

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<sup>1</sup> Allarakha was the leading proponent of the Delhi school (*gharāna*) of classical *tablā*, and, because he lived in Bombay until his death in 2000, has been an enormous influence on the Maharashtrian classical music scene. Himself trained as a *tablā* player, Kolhatkar-*buvā* often makes references in his *kīrtans* to the musical culture of this Hindustani percussion instrument.

teach it? It is *\*specific*. For that [*tablā*] you need to be born that way. [In the same way], the Vedic knowledge that is taught in our *gurukul* [school] is [also] *\*specific*. (December 6, 2000)

Because of the specialized and delicate nature of Vedic knowledge, he argued, it is basically useless for public edification. On the other hand, the *purāṇas* contain the same kind of religious knowledge, “through the power of which a man is able to survive in the world, and is able to contemplate the world, life, and the higher existence (*paramātmā*).” And moreover, they deliver it “in a language that people can understand.” For this reason, Kolhatkar-*buvā* urged his audience to pursue the *purāṇic* tradition rather than seeking Vedic knowledge. “You can only learn things through the *purāṇas*,” he declared, “You cannot learn things through the *Vedas* . . . I have gone through that course, and I am not lying to you. The *Vedas* won’t teach you a thing. The *purāṇas* do. Trust me. I have actually learned the *Vedas*, you see, as you may already know” (December 6, 2000).

The discursive glue with which Kolhatkar-*buvā* binds the mythological storyworld to the real world might in this way be better thought of as double-sided tape: on one side, the storyworld of Hindu mythology is firmly infused with the age-old Vedic tradition, which yields great sacred power that sages like Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha embody, but which is accessible in the real world only to specialists. For the general public, there is *purāṇic* mythology, through which, on the other side of the tape, the same sacred forces are brought to bear on quotidian realms. This mythological culture, Kolhatkar-*buvā* noted, has persisted in the world through a robust tradition of performance:

In each of our villages, both large and small, in every village, whether small or large, in the temples from three to five in the afternoon, the *purāṇas* would be recited. Even in Pune, up until my childhood there were almost 30 to 35 *paurāṇiks* in Pune, like our Gurjar-*guruji*. And their sole occupation was to recite the *purāṇas* in the many temples of Pune. The knowledge contained within these *purāṇas* is boundless—in the *purāṇas* there are geography, astronomy, and the issues that I have been discussing with you; there are discussions of *sattva-rajas-tamas* [the three *gunas*, or metaphysical qualities], there is *yoga*. There is that which you always call *bhakti*, devotional worship of God. There are many different types of histories, many kinds of

stories about kings, the stories from the *Rāmāyaṇ* and the *Mahābhārat*. In the purāṇas, there are at least ten subjects that even today are not taught in our universities—and this list is given in the *Bhāgavat*. And in our temples, from ancient times these purāṇas used to be told for free—and anyone, Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, Śūdra, Cāṇḍāl—anyone could come and sit. Be they women, men, young children, there was no prohibition. And each of us has witnessed these stories in our youth. I have listened to many purāṇas when I was young—they were told in our Dharmacaitanya.<sup>2</sup> There was a purāṇa at Khunya Murlidhar temple, there was a purāṇa at Tulshibag.<sup>3</sup> I'm telling you something local here. Purāṇas took place at two temples in Tulshibag, and there was one purāṇa at Belbag. Even nowadays you can find *paurāṇiks*, and the few *paurāṇiks* that are still around tell them according to their own ability—but not to worry about that, times have changed. (December 6, 2000)

Dripping with nostalgia, the temporal and social representation of this purāṇic tradition reveals a key ingredient of Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s discursive glue: purāṇic literature as a public cultural space that is accessible to everyone, whether Brahmin or non-Brahmin, male or female, young or old, rich or poor. Purāṇic culture involves a knowledge system that, as he explains it, provides foundations for all kinds of intellectual pursuits, such that they may maintain a rich continuity with the ancient past. But at the same time, there is a fear that it will not last much longer. Phrases like “up until my childhood,” “in our youth,” or “times have changed” conjure up a nostalgia for this vanishing tradition that finds itself endangered by the pressures of modernity, globalized culture, and social change. And so Kolhatkar-*buvā* endeavors to reinvigorate the bonds between Vedic and purāṇic culture, and in so doing, binds the mythological storyworld of Viśvāmitra to the real world of his *kīrtan* audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Dharmacaitanya was a charming and serene temple built by Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s father, the *rāṣṭrīya kīrtankār* V. S. Kolhatkar, inside the courtyard of their home in Sadashiv Peth. It has now been absorbed into a larger building complex that the Kolhatkar family has constructed on this site.

<sup>3</sup> Khunya Murlidhar is a Kṛṣṇa temple in Sadashiv Peth, Pune, so named (“murderous Flute-bearer” temple) due to a murder that had taken place in the intersection directly across from the temple entrance. Tulshibag is one of the oldest Śaiva temples in the city, located inside the famous street market of the same name in Guruwar Peth. For a historical study of Pune's shrines and temples, see Preston 2002.

## MYTHOLOGICAL CULTURE THROUGH TEXTS AND PERFORMANCES

Kolhatkar-*buvā*'s detailed explanation of the continuous tradition of reciting the *purāṇas* at temples in Maharashtra leads us to consider a second theoretical issue: the interface between written texts and oral performances in the shaping of Hindu mythological traditions. Throughout his numerous writings on folklore, mythology, and classical literature, A. K. Ramanujan has argued that in South Asia oral and written modes interpenetrate one another, leading to an "oral-written complex" (Ramanujan 1999c: 541), in which "the relation of written to oral variants is a complex, many-phased interlacing" (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986: 5). This would mean that it is not possible to completely detangle the lines of influence between a premodern written version of a story, the nebula of oral forms that existed around it in the past, its later written versions, and the oral forms that one collects today. And as V. Narayana Rao has argued, intellectuals, poets, Vedic experts and other elite cultural agents in South Asia pride themselves in possessing an "oral literacy"—that is, they work within an entirely oral medium, but create texts that are transmitted with only minimal degrees of variation (Narayana Rao 1993: 94; cf. Ramanujan 1999c: 539–40).

Despite these dynamics between oral and written modes, it is difficult to get away from the idea that orality is a more elementary form of communication than writing (Ong 2002), and that cultures that come to possess literacy become rewired to think in a way that is fundamentally different from those that still lack it (Goody 1977). There is, in other words, an inherent hierarchical asymmetry between orality and writing. Before the advent of the Sanskrit epics and *purāṇas*, then, we are forced to presume either that Hindu mythology was in a stage of purely oral development, as has been proposed for the Homeric epics (Foley 1988), or to imagine that the Sanskrit texts were created as purely written works that subsequently developed a performance tradition around them (see Hiltebeitel 2011a). As we discussed in the Introduction, neither option is entirely satisfactory, and both probably require heaping "conjecture upon conjecture." In order to avoid stepping in this quicksand, we had left this issue bracketed off for the duration of the book, which focused instead on making structural comparisons between the narrative framing devices of written mythological literature and their live oral performances. But as the book draws to a close the time has now come to revisit the question.

If the distinction between orality and writing is especially problematic in the context of South Asia, how then, are we to make any theoretical generalizations about them? As a way forward, Wendy Doniger suggests that “it makes far more sense to mark the distinction between fluid texts, whether written or oral, and fixed texts, again whether written or oral, than to go on making adjustments to our basically misleading distinction between oral and written texts” (1991: 31–32). In making this move from oral versus written to fluid versus fixed, it is important to consider Philip Lutgendorf’s observation that both textual and performance traditions involve some amount of intermixture between fluid and fixed forms (1991: 124–27). Thus we might theorize the composition of mythological narratives—whether they are written, oral, acted, danced, painted, or sung—as active “fixings” within a fluid narrative tradition. That is to say, every “active tradition carrier,” to use Carl von Sydow’s folkloristic term (Dundes 1999: 139), creates a fixed, stable version of a given myth or legend, whether it is through an oral storytelling session, a written document, a work of art, a film, and so on. Each of these fixed versions exists in relation to one another, as well as to a vast, fluid network of other versions residing in the minds of the “passive tradition carriers,” who know the stories but do not themselves tell them. The differences between these oral or written (or painted or televised) versions is a matter of technology, not motivation or skill—for written texts often have a greater temporal and geographical reach than purely oral materials, while electronic and digital media offer a scope that is greater still. But all of them are, to various degrees, attempts to “fix” the story, with all of the semantic nuances that this word carries. This is precisely what we have seen in the case of the Viśvāmitra legends.

The massive dynamism between different versions of the same legends induces an asymmetry of cultural power. Some versions, in other words, are deemed to be better than others, and, by extension, so too are their producers and consumers. To discover how and why this happens requires a consideration of historical context, of when and where and why and how a particular version of a legend is told, and its relationship to the social desires and anxieties of its producers and consumers. In the case of Viśvāmitra, contextual analysis has allowed us to understand how Brahmin communities for over two millennia have used the legends of a Kṣatriya who became a Brahmin to solidify and maintain their own social power. But similar studies could be done with other myths and legends, and concerning differences of gender, religion, class,

ethnicity, or any other social category. It is when we move beyond simple, linear investigations of sources and influences and start to ask how fixed versions of narratives interact with one another within fluid networks of tradition that we may truly begin to appreciate and historicize the cultural power and scope of Hindu mythology.

## CATALOGUE OF VIŚVĀMITRA LEGENDS



Presented here is an inventory of the fifteen principal legends of Viśvāmitra found in Sanskrit epic and purāṇic literature. No single text tells them all, but in arranging them into a list, I have largely relied on the chronological sequencing of the “mini-epics” found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*, which tell most of them. Furthermore, I have clustered together stories that are complementary (stories 3A and 3B, 5 and 5B) or that involve the same theme (stories 2A–D, 7A–C). These are *not* to be considered as genetic “subtypes” of one formal type, but as affine groups brought together simply to facilitate comparative study. In addition to a précis for each story and a list of its epic and purāṇic tellings, I have indicated where the reader may find a longer summary version in the body of the book. For full translations of the legends, as well as comparative charts of their variants, the reader may consult the companion website to *Crossing the Lines of Caste*.



### 1. *Satyavatī*: The Birth of Viśvāmitra (Chapter 2, p. 97)

How Viśvāmitra’s caste change resulted from a mix-up of fertility preparations (*carus*) given by the Brahmin sage Ṛcīka to Satyavatī (Ṛcīka’s wife and Viśvāmitra’s sister) and her mother.

*Variants:*

Epic: *Mbh* 3.115; *Mbh* 12.49; *Mbh* 13.4; *Mbh* 13.55–56

Early Purāṇas: *Hv* App. 1, 6B, 24–120; *VāP* 91.62–96; *BdP* 2.3.66.32–68; *BrP*

10.23–63; *ViP* 4.7.7–39; *BhP* 9.15.5–12

Medieval Purāṇas: *SkP* (*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.155–56

## 2. Conflicts with Vasiṣṭha

Accounts of Viśvāmitra's numerous struggles, both as a Kṣatriya and as a Brahmin, with his rival, the orthodox Brahmin sage Vasiṣṭha.

### 2A. *Kāmadhenu*: Vasiṣṭha's Cow of Plenty (Chapter 2, p. 72)

How the Kṣatriya Viśvāmitra acquired Brahminhood through ascetic practice (*tapas*) after he and his troops were soundly defeated by Vasiṣṭha as the king tried to steal the Brahmin's magic cow (*kāmadhenu*) from his hermitage.

*Variants:*

Epic: *Rām* 1.50–55; *Mbh* 1.165; *Mbh* 9.39

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 3.17; *SkP* (*Brahmakhaṇḍa*) 3.39.24–33; *SkP*

(*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.167–68, 171; *SkP* (*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.212–14

### 2B. *Kalmāṣapāda*: The Cannibal King (Chapter 2, p. 88)

How Viśvāmitra summoned a demon to possess the king Kalmāṣapāda, turning the Kṣatriya into a cannibal and leading the king to devour Vasiṣṭha's sons and Vasiṣṭha to make numerous unsuccessful attempts at suicide.

*Variants:*

Epic: *Rām* 7.57.9–34; *Mbh* 1.166–68, 173.5–24

Early Purāṇas: *Hv* 10.70cd, \*223–24; *BdP* 2.63.176–177; *KūP* 1.20.12–13; *VP* 4.4.40–72; *BhP* 9.9.19–39; *VāP* 2.10–11; *LiP* 1.64.1–49; *SkP* 16–18

### 2C. *Sarasvatī*: Viśvāmitra Curses the Sacred River (Chapter 2, p. 93)

How Viśvāmitra ordered the Sarasvatī River to carry his rival to him so that he could kill him, and how, when she refused, the angry sage cursed the river to turn to blood.

*Variants:*

Epic: *Mbh* 9.41–42

Early Purāṇas: *VmP* (*Saromāhātmya*) 19

Medieval Purāṇas: *SkP* (*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.172–73

### 2D. *Ādi-Baka*: The Battle of the Warbirds (Chapter 5, p. 187)

How, after hearing of Viśvāmitra's persecution of his patron, the king Hariścandra, Vasiṣṭha curses his rival to turn into a giant crane, Viśvāmitra counters by turning Vasiṣṭha into an equally monstrous ibis, and a fierce battle ensues.

*Variants:*

Early Purāṇas: *Hv* 115.18; *MtP* 47.44; *BhP* 9.7.7; *MkP* 9

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 6.12.23–34; *DbhP* 13.33–51

3. The Restoration of Satyavrata Triśaṅku

Two accounts of Viśvāmitra's involvement in the troubled career of Satyavrata Triśaṅku, the headstrong prince of the Solar Dynasty who is cursed to become an Outcaste.

3A. *Satyavrata*: The Misguided Prince (Chapter 3, p. 118)

How the libertine prince Satyavrata is exiled by his father, how he vengefully slaughters Vasiṣṭha's magic cow and feeds it to Viśvāmitra's family during the subsequent famine (earning him the nickname "Triśaṅku"), and how Viśvāmitra aids in restoring the prince to the throne.

*Variants:*

Epics: *Mbh* 1.65.31–33

Early Purāṇas: *Hv* 9.88–10.23; *BrP* 7.97–8.23; *VāP* 88.78–116; *BdP*

63.77–114; *ŚiP* (*Umāsañhitā*) 37.47–38.18; *LiP* 1.66.3–10; *VP* 4.3.21–24;

*BhP* 9.7.5–6

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 7.10–12

3B. *Triśaṅku*: The Ascension of the Outcaste King (Chapter 2, p. 77)

How Triśaṅku, desiring to enter heaven without death, is cursed by Vasiṣṭha's sons to become an Outcaste, and how Viśvāmitra performs a sacrifice on his behalf, and through his ascetic power sends the cursed king into a new set of heavens that the sage himself creates.

*Variants:*

Epics: *Rām* 1.56–59; *Mbh* 1.65.34, \*598–99; *Mbh* 13.3.9

Early Purāṇas: *SkP* App. 5

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 7.12.16–64, 7.14; *SkP* (*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.2–8

4. *Śvapaca*: Viśvāmitra Eats Dogmeat (Chapter 2, p. 100)

How, during a famine, the Brahmin Viśvāmitra, dying of hunger, enters an Outcaste's home and steals a piece of dogmeat to eat, but the rains come just as he is consecrating the polluting food.

*Variants:*

Epics: *Mbh* 12.139

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 7.13; *SkP* (*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.90; *BrP* (*Gautamī*

*Māhātmya*) 93

**5. Šunahśepa:** King Hariścandra Sacrifices a Brahmin Boy (Chapter 1, p. 52)

How King Hariścandra offers a Brahmin boy named Šunahśepa as a substitute for his own son Rohita during a human sacrifice to the god Varuṇa, and how Viśvāmitra intervenes and adopts the boy at the end of the sacrifice, cursing his own sons in the process.

*Variants:*

Vedic Texts: *AB* 7.13–18; *SSS* 15.17–27

Epics: *Rām* 1.60–61; *Mbh* 13.3.6–8

Early Purāṇas: *Hv* App. 1, 6B, 90–120; *VāP* 91.92–96; *BdP* 2.3.66.64–68; *BrP* 10.64–68; *VP* 4.7.37; *BhP* 9.7.7–26; *BhP* 9.16.28–36

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 7.15–17; *BrP* (*Gautamī Māhātmya*) 104

**5B. Jīgarti:** Šunahśepa's Father in Purgatory (Chapter 4, p. 150)

How Šunahśepa later encounters his natural father, Ajīgarta, suffering abjectly in hell for the crime of selling off his own son, and compassionately helps to purify him at a holy bathing pool (*tīrtha*) on the Godāvarī River.

*Variant:*

Medieval Purāṇas: *BrP* (*Gautamī Māhātmya*) 150

**6. Hariścandra:** Viśvāmitra Torments the Noble King (Chapter 5, p. 184)

How the Brahmin Viśvāmitra mercilessly harasses the king Hariścandra, demanding his entire kingdom as a gift along with an additional Brahminical gratuity (*dakṣinā*), for which the king must travel to Vārāṇasī and sell his wife, his son, and himself into slavery, forced to work in the burning grounds for an Outcaste master.

*Variants:*

Early Purāṇas: *MkP* 7–8

Medieval Purāṇas: *DbhP* 6.13.30–33; *DbhP* 7.17–28; *SkP* (*Ayodhyākhaṇḍa*)

2.8.7.32–68; *ViM* 33 (Appendix A)

**7. Encounters with Nymphs**

Narratives of Viśvāmitra's various encounters with celestial nymphs (*apsarases*) who repeatedly tempt him away from the celibate path of asceticism during his quest for Brahminhood and spiritual power.

**7A. Menakā:** Viśvāmitra Seduced by a Nymph (Chapter 2, p. 81)

How Viśvāmitra, while practicing austerities, falls in love with a nymph named Menakā, and, abandoning the ascetic path, lives together with her in conjugal bliss for some time, and in some versions resulting in the birth of a daughter, Śakuntalā.

*Variants:*

Epics: *Rām* 1.62–63; *Mbh* 1.65.20–66.12

Early Purāṇas: *BhP* 9.20.13

Medieval Purāṇas: *SkP* (*Nāgarakhaṇḍa*) 6.42–44; *BrP* (*Gautamī Māhātmya*) 147.5–9

**7B. *Rambhā*:** Viśvāmitra Curses the Nymph (Chapter 2, p. 82)

How Indra dispatches a nymph named Rambhā to seduce Viśvāmitra and cause him to lose his ascetic power, but the sage resists her temptations and curses her to turn to stone.

*Variants:*

Epics: *Rām* 1.62–63; *Mbh* 13.3.11

Medieval Purāṇas: *SkP* (*Brahmakhaṇḍa*) 3.39.38–68

**7C. *The Two Nymphs*:** Viśvāmitra Turns a Pair of Nymphs into Rivers (Chapter 4, p. 153)

How Indra sends two nymphs to seduce Viśvāmitra as he is practicing austeries on the banks of the Godāvarī, and again he resists their advances, cursing them to become a pair of rivers that meet with the Godāvarī near Nanded.

*Variant:*

Medieval Purāṇas: *BrP* (*Gautamī Māhātmya*) 147.8–23

**8. *Gālava*:** Viśvāmitra's Adventuring Apprentice (Chapter 2, p. 95)

How a loyal but obstinate student of Viśvāmitra named Gālava takes care of the sage as he is being tested by the god Dharma on his way to becoming a Brahmin, and how, when his *guru* subsequently demands a graduation fee of eight hundred white horses, each with one black ear (*śyāmakarṇa*), the young Brahmin goes on a quest with Garuḍa the eagle, using the sexual services of a princess named Mādhavī as a bargaining chip to acquire the rare horses.

*Variants:*

Epics: *Mbh* 5.104–5.117

Medieval Purāṇas: *SkP* (*Ayodhyākhaṇḍa*) 2.8.5.1–17



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