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Making Yudhiṣṭhira the King: the Dialectics and the Politics of Violence in the *Mahābhārata***Introduction¹**

One of the fundamental episodes of the *Mahābhārata* is the persuasion of the reluctant Yudhiṣṭhira to become the king of the Bharatas in the wake of the Pāṇḍava victory over the Kauravas. Yudhiṣṭhira's initial resolve then to retire to the forest full of grief and guilt contributes to a widespread perception of Yudhiṣṭhira as a boringly-one-dimensional, ineffectual leader, a less than complete epic hero and king.

But Yudhiṣṭhira is not at all one-dimensional, not at all boring. He and associated anthropomorphic representations of the God Dharma in the MBh actually express a tense, bi-polar *dharma* that pits the old *dharma* of burnt offerings and Lawful, Meritorious Deeds against a newer *dharma* of inner Virtues and living without doing harm (*ahimsā*). Yudhiṣṭhira, as a son of this ambivalent and conflicted Dharma, was a man who loved the truth and wished always to tell the truth; an honourable, patient, self-denying, and kindly, generous supporter of needy brahmins. But at the same time he was the terrifying Dharmarāja ("King of Dharma"),² a psychopomp, a sacrificer of

¹ This paper is an adaptation of part of the *Introduction* to my translation of the *Śānti Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, which will form part of Volume Seven of the complete translation of *The Mahābhārata* begun by J.A.B. van Buitenen (*The Mahābhārata*, 3 vols. [University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1973–78]) — Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 7, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, in press.

Abbreviations used within: EMH — M. Biardeau, *Études de mythologie hindoue*; MBh — *Mahābhārata*; Rām — *Rāmāyaṇa*; ŚP — *Śānti Parvan*.

² An epithet he shares with Yama the lord of the dead, who is fused with the God Dharma at times (see below).

death-dealing battle, and the stealthy Kaṅka,³ and a king capable of the lying and deception necessary for the successful execution of *nīti*.⁴

For many years I have suspected that Yudhiṣṭhira was designed as a refutation, or at least as a rebuttal, of the emperor Aśoka.⁵ Nick Sutton has come to the same general conclusion, that Yudhiṣṭhira is some sort of response to Aśoka, and he nicely puts the general inference, "...it is inconceivable educated brāhmaṇas in the third century B.C. or later would not have this historical figure [Aśoka] in mind when telling the story of a legendary ruler who triumphed in battle and yet hated the violence of warrior dharma and felt only remorse for the victory he won [Yudhiṣṭhira]."⁶ Unlike Sutton, however, I believe with Sheldon Pollock⁷ that the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira at the beginning of the *Śānti Parvan*, in his attempt to renounce the kingship and go to

³ A real lord of the dead. The large, five-foot tall, carrion-eating stork *Leptopilos dubius* (the "Adjutant Stork"), the tallest and largest of the carrion-feeders prowling the field of the dead after the battle. See below, in the last part of this article.

⁴ Not only did Yudhiṣṭhira lie to Droṇa at Kṛṣṇa's behest to demoralize the brahmin; even more perfidiously he suborned Śalya's betrayal of Karṇa. Yudhiṣṭhira is frequently associated with encounters that turn upon falsehood or confusions of identity.

⁵ In 1980 I wrote that "the parallels between the situations of Yudhiṣṭhira and Aśoka, and the contrast at the *doctrinal* level... between the non-violent and renunciatory ideology of Buddhism and the deliberate Hindu sanctioning of violence for *dharmaic* ends and the Hindu attempts to synthesize the renunciatory perspectives of *mokṣa* with the material and social processes of society (in the *āśramadharma* and the *karmayoga*) make it difficult not to see the MBh making some reply to the Buddhist pretense of having an adequate definition of the role of the emperor." James L. Fitzgerald, *The Mokṣa Anthology of the Great Bhārata*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, Chicago 1980, p. 151. I went further than this and suggested a direct connection between Yudhiṣṭhira's escaping *śoka* and Aśoka's having done so in a paper read at the 1982 meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in Chicago ('*śānti*, the *Śānti Parvan*, and the Rhetoric of *śānti* in the *Great Bhārata* of Vyāsa'). Recently Nick Sutton ('*Aśoka and Yudhiṣṭhira: A Historical Setting for the Ideological Tensions of the Mahābhārata?*', "Religion" 27.4, Sept., 1997, pp. 333–341) has developed this connection rather differently than I have — our basic conceptions of Yudhiṣṭhira are radically different — though I fully agree with him when he writes that "the controversy raised by [the Emperor Aśoka's] approach to kingship... may underlie the epic debate on dharma centring on the character of Yudhiṣṭhira" (p. 334).

⁶ Sutton, op. cit., pp. 338–339; see the previous note.

⁷ In writing of the juxtaposition of righteousness to the *kṣatradharma* inscribed in the character of Rāma Dāśaratha, Sheldon Pollock (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: An Epic of Ancient India*, vol. 2, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1986, introduction, p. 68) astutely observes that Yudhiṣṭhira presents a similar ambivalence regarding *dharma*. But Pollock does not see how fundamental and important this ambivalence is to the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira. Quite correctly seeing that Yudhiṣṭhira's reliance upon the newer valuations of *dharma* based on *yoga* and *ahimsā* is partly a *pūrvapakṣa* (a preliminary presentation of an issue which lays the groundwork for the final resolution, the *siddhānta*) for the *siddhānta* the MBh's authors present in the ŚP, Pollock fails to see the depth of the ambivalence programmed into Yudhiṣṭhira by his literary creators. When Pollock says that these newer *dharma* traits are "not consistent and constitutive aspects of his portrait," he has not gone far enough. The bi-polarity, or ambivalence, is a recurrent feature of his portrait. Nick Sutton's argument that Yudhiṣṭhira is

the forest, was deliberately scripted by the authors of the epic to represent what they saw to be wrong with the Mauryan emperor Aśoka, to purge and refute whose rule was, I believe, the principle purpose for the creation of the first generation of our written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Yudhiṣṭhira's attempted renunciation of the Bhārata kingship was made to allow the epic poets to show him being corrected and refuted by his family, by the brahmins led by Vyāsa, and ultimately by Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. The persona of Yudhiṣṭhira was, I believe, primarily constructed to depict the ambivalent quality of the blended *dharma* at the heart of the MBh and its *rājadharmā*, an ambivalent quality glossed over by Aśoka, who wished to emphasize non-violence, but who never actually renounced the *daṇḍa*. Yudhiṣṭhira had to be persuaded to accept the royal *daṇḍa*, but accept he did.

The name his brahmin creators gave to Yudhiṣṭhira actually argues his superiority to Aśoka in this regard. Composed of *yudhi* and *sthiraḥ* (a slightly unusual sort of compound with an inflected case form as its first member), it literally means “steady, steadfast, firm, unwavering in war, or battle”. This surely cannot be intended as a literal description of the eldest Pāṇḍava, because he did not have a remarkable degree of perseverance in battle — Arjuna and Bhīrma did, Yudhiṣṭhira did not. But his name applies more abstractly to the broader issues being argued here regarding the acceptance and employment of violence as Meritorious, Lawful Action (*dharma*). In this regard Yudhiṣṭhira is ultimately “steadfast in war”; he comes to “abide within the war he has waged as a king”; that is he owns up to, accepts, the war he has sponsored, accepts it as good and necessary, as a sacrifice well made. Yudhiṣṭhira was slow to accept these terrible responsibilities, and it is hard to imagine him ever being whole-hearted about them, in spite of the complex and time-consuming processes of the *śānti*⁸ and the expiatory Horse Sacrifice he undertakes after Bhīṣma's

directly patterned upon Aśoka's exemplary assertion of the newer *dharma* errs by failing to note any of the inconsistency, that is, fundamental ambivalence, in the epic's deliberate characterization of Yudhiṣṭhira. Sutton writes, “Analysis of the character and behaviour of Yudhiṣṭhira shows that he acts consistently in accordance with the [pervasively virtuous and non-violent] understanding of dharma outlined in... the Edicts which Aśoka apparently also used as his rule of life” (op. cit., p. 338). This mono-chromatic characterization of Yudhiṣṭhira leaves too much of Yudhiṣṭhira's actual behaviour out of consideration. It leads Sutton to ignore Yudhiṣṭhira's capitulation to Vyāsa and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and his “owning up to the war” (which, as I explain below, is my interpretation of the eldest Pāṇḍava's name) by becoming the consecrated king of the Bhāratas. This reading of Yudhiṣṭhira also ignores many of the other complexities in his character that I have already pointed out or alluded to.

⁸ The *śānti* of the *Śānti Parvan* is first and foremost an apotropaic *śānti* in which the disfunctionally overheated king is calmed and cooled and rendered fit for service (*praśamana*). This is accomplished by the soothing words of Bhīṣma's vast series of instructions. D.J. Hoens has surveyed the ancient Vedic ritual use of this concept (in his: *Śānti: A Contribution to Ancient Indian Religious Terminology*, N.V. De Nederlandsche Boek en Steendrukkerij v.h., H.L. Smits, s'-Gravenhage 1951) and I have used his results to interpret the instructional *śānti* (*praśamana*-

death. But in the end he became true to the *dharmayuddha* that had gone forward in his name, in the end he was *yudhi sthiraḥ*.

I think it fair to conjecture that the authors of this episode were implicitly charging that Aśoka had bought his *aśokatva* (his “being free of grief”)⁹ cheaply, in the currency of “heathen” (*nāstika*) *dharma*, without having taken any real responsibility for it, without any genuine shriving or penance (no *śānti*, no *prāyaścitta*). Yudhiṣṭhira, on the other hand, is shown facing and fully accepting the horrific consequences of his war-making, undergoing the *praśamana* and *anuśāsana* of his betters, and being precluded from saying that he is an *ahiṃsra* man (someone devoted to *ahiṃsā*). Consistent with the fundamental duality written into Yudhiṣṭhira’s basic character, Yudhiṣṭhira, of course, would really like to have it both ways: to be the All-king of the world (his ambition in undertaking the Rājasūya in the first place) like Aśoka, and a kindly father of all creatures promoting peace and universal harmlessness as Aśoka described himself.¹⁰ The *Śānti Parvan* narrative, however, and the instructions of the *Rājadharmaparvan* that follow, demonstrate to Yudhiṣṭhira that he cannot have it both ways, that he must accept the doing of violence, leave *ahiṃsā* to brahmins, and be content with the intermediate, qualified *śīla* (“virtue”) of the newer *dharma*.

-*anuśāsana*) of Yudhiṣṭhira after the great Bhārata war in the introduction to my forthcoming translation of the *Śānti Parvan* (Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 7, op. cit.).

⁹ Aśoka’s Kalinga inscription suggests we understand his name as “he whose grief is gone” (because of some change of mind or heart). We do not know where the name came from and we cannot be certain what it meant to him or his subjects, but its potential significance cannot have been lost on “Vyāsa”. We do know that the Mauryan used the name in one inscription, that at Maski in Kārṇāṭaka (the first inscription where the word *dharma* is used, according to E. Hultzsch (ed. and trans.), *The Inscriptions of Aśoka*, “Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum”, vol. 1, New Edition, Government of India, Oxford 1925, p. 1). Otherwise the name Aśoka is known only in Buddhist and Purāṇic literary sources (Hultzsch, op. cit., pp. 174–175). Buddhist legend records that upon accession to the Mauryan throne, Aśoka killed a number of brothers (including the rightful successor of their father Bindusāra), sparing one whose name is said to have been *vītaśoka*, “he whose grief is gone”. These deeds earned him the appellation Caṇḍāśoka (Aśoka the Cruel), according to the *Aśokāvadāna*. The word itself could be construed as “remorseless” (that is, “remorselessly cruel”), but while that sense is conceivably relevant to the young Aśoka, it would seem to have no relevance to his later career, nor to the brahminic perception of him as indicated in the MBh. See: G.M. Bongard-Levin, *Mauryan India*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi 1985, pp. 81–82; J. Strong, *The Legend of King Aśoka*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1983, pp. 40–43; and R. Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1973, pp. 28–29.

¹⁰ I am describing here what I believe is the brahmin construction of the character of Yudhiṣṭhira as a dialectical response to their notion of Aśoka. In the Thirteenth Major Rock Edict where he expressed great remorse over his brutal conquest of Kalinga, Aśoka did not pledge himself never to use violence, did in fact threaten the use of violence. But Aśoka did advocate non-violence in general; that is, for everyone other than his government. The brahmins writing the *Śānti Parvan* narrative likely found this position — particularly as some of his proscriptions of violent behaviour had been directed fundamentally at them — naïve and simply self-serving.

After his neglect of brahmin primacy and the entailed abandonment of *varṇadharmā*,¹¹ the fundamental problem with Aśoka's rule (from the point of view of brahmins unhappy with it, and to judge from the force with which the MBh insists upon and propounds the necessity of socially sanctioned violence) must have been his rather blithe-seeming embrace of, propagandizing for, and enforcement of a relatively thorough-going observance of *ahiṃsā* (including the proscription of brahmin animal sacrifices) while neither relinquishing nor grounding his own use of judicial and military violence. Aśoka's affirmation of a Buddhist-inspired *dharma* on one side and his continued governance of the empire would have burdened him heavily with the "politically incapacitating bifurcation" P o l l o c k aptly described,¹² had the emperor worried about logical consistency like a pandit.

A ruler may be excused for implementing policy and leaving theory for later, but the brahmin authors of the *Śānti Parvan*, being king-makers rather than kings themselves, took on this issue in the MBh and arrived at the interesting solution set forth with Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Rājadharmaparvan*. They addressed the bifurcation inherent in Aśoka's rule and made a valiant attempt to resolve it by their parsing the different ethical values between the brahmin and kṣatriya *varṇas*, and by trying to infuse the violence which they believed was required for a safe and hierarchically distinguished society with many of the attitudes and habits of the newer *dharma*. The result was Yudhiṣṭhira, who presented the Aśokan "bifurcation" for consideration when he resolved to turn his back on rule, but who was then persuaded of its wrongness and agreed to rule. Then calmed, consecrated, and instructed he performed a Horse Sacrifice as expiation for the wrongs he committed in the war and ruled the Bhārata kingdom for thirty-six years.¹³

General Characterization of the MBh

The Text

I should say what I mean by "*Mahābhārata*". By that term I mean a written, Sanskrit text that 'precipitated out' of wider, mainly oral, traditions of epic and didactic poetry. I believe this written Sanskrit text was provoked by the rise of

¹¹ See below in *The Double Crisis...*

¹² See the introduction to his translation of the *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, op. cit., p. 70.

¹³ Nick S u t t o n (op. cit.), seeing Yudhiṣṭhira's tender side as the whole of his persona, takes no account of these fundamental, defining actions of Yudhiṣṭhira's. Yudhiṣṭhira was sympathetic to the ethical values of renunciators and *nāstikas*, and he was remorseful as Aśoka was, but he abandoned his ethical impulse — which was certainly more radical than Aśoka's in that Yudhiṣṭhira wished actually to renounce the kingdom — and became the king. Yudhiṣṭhira voices occasional dissatisfaction with his lot even after he has accepted it (see for example MBh 12.98.1), but these pangs no longer impede his doing his duty.

the Nandas and the Mauryas, and particularly by the “*dharm*a-campaign” of Aśoka Maurya. I believe it was completed through a deliberate authorial and redactorial effort sometime during or shortly after the times of the Brahmin dynasties of the Śuṅgas and the Kāṇvas; that is, after the middle of the second century B.C. and before the end of the first century B.C., though perhaps even as late as sometime in the first century A.D. This written text then became a major new element operating alongside of and interacting with the oral traditions that preceded it and which certainly persisted after its creation. I believe this written *Mahābhārata* may have been systematically expanded one or more times between this tendentious, post-Mauryan redaction and 400 A.D., thus complicating the traditions of *Bhārata* and, or, *Mahābhārata* further. In addition, during this period there were, no doubt, also additions and excisions in all branches of the manuscript tradition, additions that were neither artistic nor systematic (that is, particular keepers of given manuscripts inserted explanations and clarifications, passages which they thought appropriate to transmit as part of the MBh for one reason or another, and sometimes even whole episodes; or they cut away passages or episodes they thought inappropriate). Many of these non-artistic “improvements” were then preserved when the affected manuscripts were copied. At some point around the time of the Gupta Empire (from Candragupta I in 320 A.D. through Budhagupta in 497 A.D.¹⁴) another written Sanskrit text of the *Mahābhārata* was created and promulgated out of this complex tradition and this ‘Gupta text’ became, *de facto*, the normative written version of the text, a version that served as the ultimate archetype of all later Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Mahābhārata* throughout India for the next 1500 years.¹⁵ This text appears to have absorbed or otherwise eliminated all or most other written versions, though some later variations in the manuscript tradition may represent survivals from pre-normative traditions, written or oral.¹⁶ While demonstrating the existence of this archetype, Sukthankar’s effort to

¹⁴ H. Kulke and D. Rothermund, *A History of India*, 3rd ed., Routledge, London 1998, pp. 81–91.

¹⁵ I believe the actual existence of such an archetype is demonstrated by the fact I argued in 1985, that Sukthankar and company’s unsuccessful effort to establish a critical edition of available Sanskrit manuscripts of the MBh revealed “an overwhelming unity” in the extant tradition that points “conclusively to a single written ‘text’ of a *Mahābhārata* at some point in the ancestry of these manuscripts” (Fitzgerald, *India’s Fifth Veda: The Mahābhārata’s Presentation of Itself*, “Journal of South Asian Literature”, XX.1, 1985, pp. 125–140; reprinted in: Arvind Sharma, *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1991, pp. 150–170, pp. 152–153 in the Sharma reprint).

¹⁶ Those who would argue that this Gupta text pointed to by the Pune edition is the only written Sanskrit MBh text for which we have firm evidence would be correct. My argument for a Śuṅga or post-Śuṅga written redaction of the text is based on an interpretive reading of the MBh against the historical record. It is speculative, though it is, at the very least, plausible. My speculative sketch of a history of the written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* tradition provides a reasonable way to account for systematic artistic changes that seem apparent to me between the postulated early text of the MBh and the approximately known Gupta text. More about these hypotheses on some other occasion.

establish a critical edition of the MBh on the basis of the extant manuscripts proved unable, in the end, to retrieve this archetype, though he and his colleagues went ahead and gave us a conjectual — though very valuable in my judgment — approximation of it.¹⁷ The production and promulgation of this text would have required a major effort and significant expense, so we must imagine the support and financial backing of some prince or princes, or direct imperial support. It is conceivable that this postulated second major redaction of a written Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* was a response to the turmoil, invasions, and foreign imperial control of northwest and north central India in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The General Character of the *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata* is a ‘myth of *avatāra*’, that is a tale of the divine “unburdening” (the original sense of the idea of *avatāra* in brahminic Indian mythology) of the beleaguered Earth who has taken refuge with the celestial Gods.¹⁸ The *Mahābhārata* tells this story, narrating the divinely planned purging the Earth of a demonic *kṣatra* (the stratum of society that wields arms) and the subsequent chartering of proper, *brāhmaṇya* kingship (that is, kingship amenable to the principles and institutions defined by the carriers of the *brahman*, the holy Veda; i.e., *brāhmaṇa* men, “brahmins”).¹⁹ And this story at

¹⁷ See my article *India’s Fifth Veda*, op. cit., and A. Bigger, *Balarāma im Mahābhārata*, Otto Harrassowitz, Bonn 1998, pp. 13–19 and A. Bigger, *The Normative Redaction of the Mahābhārata: Possibilities and Limitations of a Working Hypothesis*, in: M. Brockington (ed.), *Stages and Transitions* (Proceedings of the second Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas), forthcoming. For a recent discussion of some of the limitations and problems of Sukthankar’s editorial practices, see: R. Grünendahl, *Zur Klassifizierung von Mahābhārata-Handschriften*, *Studien Zur Indologie und Buddhismuskunde* (“Indica et Tibetica”, vol. 22, Indica Et Tibetica Verlag, Bonn 1993), pp. 101–130. Grünendahl’s study identified a number of problems and inconsistencies in Sukthankar’s editorial approach, but it does not bring any telling argument against the remarkable results — primarily in terms of excellent ‘difficult readings’ (*lectiones difficiliores*) — yielded by Sukthankar’s policy of using the Śārada tradition, and especially the co-incidence of the Śārada and Malayāli traditions, as a touchstone.

¹⁸ See P. Hacker, *Zur Entwicklung der Avatāralehre*, “Archiv für Indische Philosophie” 4, 1–4, 1960, pp. 47–70. For the basic statement of this ‘hidden understanding’ of the MBh narrative (it is a ‘secret of the Gods’, *rahasyam... devānām*, 1.58.3ab) see chapters 58–60 of Book One, *The Book of the Beginning*, especially 1.58.30–59.7 in: van Buitenen, vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 136ff. This sense of the word *avatāra* is earlier than and somewhat different from the sense of the ‘descent of Viṣṇu’ that became more widespread in the *purāṇas*; this later sense is the one M. Biardeau develops extensively in her ground-breaking studies of the MBh in her *Études de mythologie hindoue*, I–V, “Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême Orient” 54, 1968, pp. 19–45; 55, 1969, pp. 59–96; 58, 1971, pp. 17–83; 63, 1976, pp. 111–263; 65, 1978, pp. 87–238 (abbreviated EMH).

¹⁹ That is, kingship that abides by the appropriately qualified brahmin elite’s formulations of what is *dharma*, that is, of what is “right” for people, first of all the king, to do.

the center of the MBh is an apocalyptic tale, that is a tale of the violent disclosure of divine forces secretly at work in the world for purposes understood by its authors to be holy. Part of the epic's portrayal of the *kṣatra* as demonic are numerous stories of kṣatriyas' high-handed abuse of brahmins, to which the brahmins' responses vary from the seer Vasiṣṭha's repeated attempts at suicide²⁰ to Rāma Jāmadagnya's repeated slaughters of all the world's kṣatriyas.²¹ These stories are part of the constitution of the *Mahābhārata* as we have it, and they provide one ground for the epic's *avatāra* frame-story with its purge of the *kṣatra* and its subsequent call for a proper kingship that will be restrained (*niyata*) and based upon Brahminic principles (*brāhmaṇya*).

Sheldon Pollock's general observation that "the integral theme of Sanskrit epic literature is kingship itself"²² is certainly borne out by my reading of the MBh, although the focus of this concern in the MBh is less the "attendant problems" of kingship, "the acquisition, maintenance, and execution of royal power, the legitimacy of succession, the predicament of transferring hereditary power within a royal dynasty"²³ than the broader conceptions of the *rightful* place and operation of power within society. The "attendant problems" of kingship are not ignored in the MBh, but the MBh is much more driven by themes of *dharma* than themes of *artha*. The MBh is centrally preoccupied with *dharma* and this preoccupation seems to reflect actual historical contention over real issues of who and what is Right. The *Mahābhārata* invokes the idea of *dharma* very frequently, presents debates over which actions are *dharma* and which are not, and undertakes at various times in its didactic sections to define *dharma*, specify what is and what is not *dharma*, and discuss its relation to the other major human goods ("success, power, riches, worldly gain", that is *artha*, and "pleasure", *kāma*). The epic narrative has the son of the God Dharma (Yudhiṣṭhira) as one of its central protagonists, has an incarnate form of the God Dharma (Vidura) as one of the main (though often unheeded) advisors of the Bhārata court, and tells several other stories of God Dharma's incarnations, stories that demonstrate a consistent thematic pattern. I shall return to these narrative embodiments of the "bi-polar *dharma*" shortly.

²⁰ See the entire cycle of 'brahmin-abuse' stories related to the Pāṇḍavas by the Gandharva Citraratha at MBh 1.164–72 in: van Buitenen, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 329–342. Vasiṣṭha's suicide attempts occur in 1.166–67. There are, of course, a number of other 'brahmin-abuse' stories in the MBh, particularly in Book Three, the *Vana Parvan*.

²¹ See my: *The Rāma Jāmadagnya 'Thread' in the Mahābhārata: A New Survey of Rāma Jāmadagnya in the Pune Text*, in: Brockington, op. cit.

²² Introduction to his translation of *The Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, op. cit., p. 10.

²³ Ibid.

The Bi-polarity of *Dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*

Fundamental to the epic's concern with *dharma* is a growing opposition between an older sense of *dharma* which sees *dharma* primarily as "deeds" (*karman*), good, right, 'merit'-bringing deeds that "hold firm" across time and especially death to give people what they most want and need that is beyond the reach of human effort alone (assured prosperity, long life, victory, life in heaven). As early as the *R̥g Veda* a person's deeds are conceived of as having some kind of continued existence beyond the time of their execution.²⁴ Later theories of *karman* are not radical departures from that, but seem rather to be attempts to work out the implications of this old conviction that deeds done have a continued existence. This old sense of *dharma* emphasized the performance of rites and, later, doing one's proper work (*svadharma*) in society.

Beginning in the late Vedic period a newer sense of *dharma* began to surface as a result of the new religious perspectives and values of *yoga* that gradually emerged alongside older Vedic ones in the middle third of the first millennium B.C. in northern India.²⁵ The particular historical details of this movement are

²⁴ See, for example, some of the passages discussed by H. B o d e w i t z in his *Life after Death in the R̥gvedasamhitā*, WZKSA 38, 1994, pp. 33–34.

²⁵ Charting the origin and development of the idea of *ahimsā* and related attitudes and behaviours has proven a vexing scholarly theme. Most recently (and with some discussion of earlier and recent scholarship) H. B o d e w i t z has argued forcefully that *ahimsā* and related attitudes and forms of behaviour developed primarily in the context of ancient India's non-Vedic, ascetic religions: "Asceticism formed the starting-point of *ahimsā* and though it cannot be definitely proved that this asceticism was non-Vedic, its association with the bloody rituals of the Vedic priests is out of the question. One may rather assume that *ahimsā* originally belonged to the ascetic antiritualism, which was especially represented by the heretics (Buddhists and Jains) and only hesitantly obtained a foothold in the older Vedic Upaniṣads... [T]he concept of *ahimsā* started to play a role only in a late phase of Vedism"; H. B o d e w i t z, *Hindu Ahimsā and Its Roots*, in: J. H o u b e n and K.R. V a n K o o i j (eds), *Violence Denied*, Brill, Leiden 1999, p. 41. B o d e w i t z's argument is a strong rebuttal of the widely accepted position of H.P. S c h m i d t that *ahimsā* grew up within the Vedic religious discourse as much as in non-Vedic circles of thought (see: H.P. S c h m i d t, *The Origin of Ahimsā*, in: *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou*, Éditions de Boccard, Paris 1968, pp. 625–655, and a follow-up discussion of his arguments and their reception written in 1989: *Ahimsā and Rebirth*, in: M. W i t z e l (ed.), *Inside the Texts*, Harvard University, Dept. of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Cambridge, Mass. 1997, pp. 207–34). Also important for the history of *ahimsā* and the understanding of its importance in the MBh are: L. Alsdorf's *Beiträge zur Geschichte von Vegetarismus und Rinderverehrung in Indien*, "Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse", Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz, 1961, no. 6, pp. 559–625; I. P r o u d f o o t's *Ahimsā and a Mahābhārata Story: The Development of the Story of Tulādhāra in the Mahābhārata in Connection with Non-Violence, Cow-protection and Sacrifice*, "Asian Studies Monographs", new series no. 9, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra 1987, and M. L a t h's, *The Concept of ānṛsaṃsya in the Mahābhārata*, in: R.N. D a n d e k a r (ed.), *The Mahābhārata Revisited*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi 1990, pp. 113–119. Also critically important for understanding developments in ethical thought prior to and contemporary with the *Mahābhārata* are the important questions and issues involved in the

lost in the past, but what we do know is that there emerged and gradually grew a broad, heterogeneous “discourse of *yoga*”²⁶ which expressed itself in texts and institutions within and without the Brahminic tradition. The disparate trends of thought in this discourse re-focused religious thinking upon the individual and eventually challenged the earlier dedication to priestly and communal sacrificial rites (*karman*, “action”, par excellence) in favour of cultivating some kind of saving knowledge (*vidyā*, *jñāna*) that would lift one permanently and absolutely beyond the vicious circle of action, death, rebirth, and action again, which the thinkers of this discourse came to impute to the older way of rites.

There are traces of this discourse in various later Vedic texts, it is flowering in the oldest Upaniṣads,²⁷ is thoroughly evident in some of the brahmin *sūtra* literature and in the *Mahābhārata*, and has become the most prestigious kind of Brahminism in Manu’s *Teaching of the Laws* by the beginning of the Christian era.²⁸ During this same time, important non-Vedic, non-Brahminic movements also surfaced with *yoga* philosophies and disciplines of their own, following the two grand renunciatory examples of the two kṣatriya princes Vardhamāna²⁹ of the Jñātr clan and Siddhartha Gautama³⁰ of the Śākya clan, both in northeastern India. These two non-Brahmanic traditions successfully established political, social, and economic support for themselves in the new monarchic and imperial polities growing up in the Eastern Gaṅgā valley after 400 B.C.³¹

doctrines of the *āśramas*, the “Religious Patterns of Life”. For an extensive discussion of the development of this ethical theme see: P. Olivelle’s *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993.

²⁶ The word *yoga* may be used as a generic term for this movement and all its historical varieties, and in this sense the word *yoga* basically signifies a (more or less ascetic) regimen in which a person holds the body still and focuses the mind in meditation (*dhyāna*). In the background of this word are old and widespread senses of harnessing some powerful being (a draft animal, an army) and putting it to work (hence the word’s senses as ‘regimen’ and eventually ‘device’ or ‘stratagem’). MBh texts that specifically describe *yoga* (four texts deliberately focused upon *yoga* are 12.188, 289, 294, and 304) emphasise the physical difficulty of the regimen and the strength required to stay with it. Widespread modern explanations in terms of the theological idea of ‘joining’ the soul to God or *brahman* are not ancient and not strictly accurate (for the basic Brahminic teaching is that the soul is *brahman* already, and the later Sāṃkhya teaching critically emphasizes realizing the absolute difference of the complex of mind and body that make up a person and that person’s soul).

²⁷ The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, which we should now (in light of the moving down of the date of the Buddha, see note 31 below) move forward roughly one hundred years to the sixth or fifth centuries B.C. See: P. Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p. xxxvi, esp. n. 21. See too Olivelle’s comments on the prevailing milieux of the Upaniṣadic texts, which suggests a more urban than rural provenance for them; *ibid.*, p. xxix (the urbanism that is relevant is that of the Gaṅgā valley between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.; *ibid.*, p. xxviii).

²⁸ See: H.P. Schmidt 1968, op. cit.

²⁹ He reformed the emphatically ascetic movement that came to be known as the Jainas.

³⁰ He de-emphasized asceticism in favour of insight into the true nature of experience and suffering (*bodhi*) and founded the Buddhist Saṅgha.

³¹ The Nandas (śūdras who became the first imperial rulers of India) rose to power sometime around 340 B.C. (see: Bongard-Levin, op. cit., p. 69) and are regarded in Jain tradition to have

As all these movements developed their particular metaphysical philosophies and their particular disciplines for realizing ultimate beatitude (and the institutions supporting people engaged in the discipline), they also developed practical ethical outlooks that were consistent with their metaphysics and their disciplines. There were certain general ethical trends common to the whole broad discourse and these common trends came to underlie the newer sense of *dharma* that became so important during the Mauryan empire, especially in the ‘Dharma campaign’ of the emperor Aśoka. These general trends tended to value harmonious relations between oneself and others, harmonious relations that might involve sacrifice, even altruism, on one’s own part. Such dispositions as generosity, friendliness, kindness, patience, self-control, avoiding resentment, not being self-centred and proud, etc., were praised, and their opposites were criticized. And “harmlessness”, *ahimsā*, came to be the chief of all these dispositions and attitudes. Deeds that caused pain or harm to others came to be seen as the worst forms of action, actions having a large negative effect on the accumulation of *karman*-energy that animated one and propelled one through life and rebirth.

Many of the authors and redactors of the *Mahābhārata* were highly sympathetic to the new developments of *yoga* and *dharma* and were participants in the development of the Brahminic forms of them.³² At least some of them were

been zealous supporters of the Jains (ibid., p. 70). The Nandas also enjoy a bad reputation as *adhārmika* (“outside Law, Unlawful”) and “destroyer of all the kṣatriyas” in later Brahminic purāṇas (ibid.). It is also the case that recently some expert scholars of early Buddhism have “dethrone[d] the old consensus” regarding the Buddha’s date (the words of L.S. Cousins, *The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article* — posted online on the website “Indology” at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~ucgadkw/indology.html>, originally published in the “Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society”, Series 3, 6.1, 1996, pp. 57–63 — in the “Conclusion” of the online version of this review of H. B e c h e r t’s two edited volumes *The Dating of the Historical Buddha*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1991–92). C o u s i n s concludes that “From the point of view of reasonable probability the evidence seems to favour [that] we should no doubt speak of a date for the Buddha’s Mahāparinibbana (death) of c.400 B.C. — I choose the round number deliberately to indicate that the margins are rather loose” (ibid.).

³² See for example the resolution of the Ruru story, which occurs as part of the MBh’s second beginning:

“Tradition teaches that the very highest Meritorious, Lawful Duty (*dharma*) is Harmlessness (*ahimsā*) toward all living beings, so a brahmin should never, at any time, harm any living beings. An important statement of the *Vedas* says, ‘A brahmin is born in this world *friendly*’. One who knows the *Vedas* and their auxiliaries removes the fears of all beings. Harmlessness, truthfulness, and forbearance of others — these are definitely the Meritorious, Lawful Duty (*dharma*) of a brahmin that is superior even to maintaining the text of the *Vedas*. But the Meritorious, Lawful Duty (*dharma*) of a *kṣatriya* — inflicting punishment, harshness, defending creatures — does not suit you. What you were doing is the deed of a *kṣatriya*...” (MBh 1.11.12–15)

It may be objected that this passage is a relatively “late” addition to the epic, and in some senses that is certainly true. But such sentiments are not at all rare in the Pune text of the MBh, and if my general argument here is correct, we may have to see many of them as belonging to the original, post-Mauryan written redaction of the MBh.

committed to the idea that *ahimsā* and the virtues that were its close ethical and verbal kin³³ were the ‘supreme *dharma*’ (*paramadharmā*). In spite of its often being immersed in violent motives and bloody deeds initiated and inspired by Gods, the *Mahābhārata* also consistently wages a spiritual and intellectual struggle to tame and becalm the urge to violence. The fundamental importance of this struggle to the very nature of the *Mahābhārata* has recently been stated with profound eloquence by Professor Mukund Lath in a short article, *The Concept of ānṛśaṃsya in the Mahābhārata*.³⁴

This fact, this commitment to virtues associated with *ahimsā* on the part of many brahmins, is the source of a profound ambivalence concerning *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*. For at the same time as many aspects of the newer *dharma* had grown up within or been assimilated into Brahminism, the older ideas of *dharma* were obviously still fundamental for many, perhaps most brahmins. Though many facets of the view of the world in Brahminic *yoga* and its ethical perspective may not have been integrated with the older worldview and its ethical emphases — were in fact opposed in some cases (such as the killing of animals for sacrifices) — the newer sense of *dharma* seems to have co-existed peaceably with the older as the newer one developed through the middle centuries of the first millennium B.C. Even where there was direct contradiction between the two understandings and sensibilities, it is not unusual for human communities and, at times, even individuals to affirm opposed values and themes simultaneously, as we will soon see in the story of Tanu just below. The older sense of the world and ethics persisted and assimilated much of the newer sense as it developed, and there seems to have been no great need to resolve the oppositions between the two sorts of *dharma*. But that easy complementarity is gone in the MBh. The MBh, as we have it in the Gupta text, and as I think it probably existed in the Śuṅga or post Śuṅga written redaction, stridently affirms both *ahimsā* and the grotesque, apocalyptic violence of the Pāṇḍava led purge and destruction of the *kṣātra*. This opposition called for a resolution and one of the primary ways the authors of the MBh tried to resolve this tension was through the figure of the ambivalent son of Dharma who must, as king, be both a lord of life and a lord of death.

Before turning to the son of Dharma, however, I would like to present one of the epic’s numerous ambivalent representations of the king’s father, Dharma himself.

³³ Such as *abhaya* (“safety, freedom from danger, freedom from fear”), *adroha* (“not being threatening, menacing, aggressive”), *ānṛśaṃsya* (“gentleness, kindness”), and various expressions for patience, tolerance, putting up with others’ trying behaviour, being long-suffering (e.g., *kṣamā*, *titikṣā*, forms of the verb root *√mrṣ*), and others.

³⁴ In: Dandekar, op. cit., pp. 113–119.

Dharma Conflicted and Dharma Contested

The Story of Tanu

In an eerie and evocative story near the end of the *Rājadharmaparvan* an ascetic named “Skinny” (Tanu), whose body was no bigger in circumference than a person’s little finger, chanced to receive a king named “Manly Force” (Vīradyumna) whom he had known before he took up the ascetic life. At some time in the past Skinny (though that was not his name then), a victim of “fate”, which made him play the fool, had solicited from King Manly Force a water-jug made of gold.³⁵ We are not told whether he got the gold (presumably he did), but we are informed that the king insulted him for asking. Crushed, the brahmin had resolved that he would never take anything from a ruler again (nor from anyone else) and he took up asceticism in order to shrink his expectations (*āśā*, “hope; wish, desire”) for, he thought, “When a man has hope it makes him prattle like a child.”³⁶ Skinny’s asceticism shrunk his expectations and his body, until he was barely visible. But now King Manly Force had happened by Skinny’s retreat in search of his son “Tremendous Force” (Bhūridyumna), who had wandered away from the royal hunting party and gotten lost in the woods. The king was desperate as he searched for his son, and now, in the presence of the ascetic, he vacillated between hope and despair. The ascetic hospitably welcomed the king, who did not recognize the brahmin, and he listened to the king’s dilemma with a certain wistfulness. Skinny then counseled the king against hopefulness, granting that it was difficult to give up, and admitting that he himself had often petitioned kings for one thing and another. King Manly Force listened to Skinny’s sermon with respect and comprehension, but then he pleaded that the ascetic restore his son to him anyway. Using his ascetic power and his wisdom, Skinny granted the king’s wish with a laugh. Then, as all the other ascetics there watched, and as the king’s whole entourage looked on, Skinny showed them all his marvelous divine form as the God Dharma and then disappeared into the woods.

This artificial, didactic parable with Yudhiṣṭhira’s father Dharma as its central character provides an important key to the epic. I suggest that its contrived depiction of royal insensitivity toward *dharma* runs parallel to a basic argument of the epic as a whole, and that its personified representation of *dharma* is complex in very interesting and important ways. As this story focuses

³⁵ It is possible that he was already an ascetic (since it was a water-jug he was asking for, an item even renunciators are allowed to possess), merely a lackadaisical one, but that seems unlikely. This story forms part of a longer episode called “The Song of the Seer Ṛṣabha” at MBh 12.125–6, a text that preaches the value of giving up hope (*āśā*). Our story basically forms the second of these two chapters.

³⁶ MBh 12.126.32.

upon the resentment and self-loathing felt by some brahmin recipients of royal largesse, it calls attention to the imbalance of power in the relationship between royal donors and their beneficiaries. Even more importantly it calls attention to the general issue of brahmins' relations to rulers and it underscores the material weakness of brahmins in the relationship, while it also sharply dramatizes the claim that brahmins' strength lies in their powers and achievements in connection to unseen realms beyond the mundane world.

The portrayal of *dharma* as an insulted and disappointed brahmin who has renounced his dependence upon the king and emaciated himself with forest asceticism seems to imply a bitter accusation against the armed stratum of society, the *kṣatra*. Bitter brahmin accusations against the abuses of the *kṣatra* are, as noted earlier,³⁷ part of the constitution of the *Mahābhārata* as we have it. These accusations provide one ground for the epic's *avatāraṇa* frame-story with its purge of the *kṣatra* and its subsequent call for a proper kingship that will be restrained (*niyata*) and based upon Brahminic principles (*brāhmaṇya*). The hope-less Dharma who so wistfully wanders off after restoring King Manly Force's son is a stroke of symbol-making genius which captures and blends different strands of the complex history of *dharma*. The general narrative of the *Mahābhārata* is an apocalyptic tale that imagines this sad situation being redressed. Those brahmins who framed the apocalyptic tale of a divinely led purge of the *kṣatra* and dramatized the education of a proper king were anything but wistful, resigned, hope-less. And in this contrast between Skinny-Dharma on the one hand and Vyāsa (the brahmin supervisor of the MBh's apocalyptic events, supported by the Gods Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and Indra and Śrī, and the eventual recorder of those events in the epic) on the other lies the powerful tension that gave rise to this particular redaction of the *Mahābhārata*.

The older and the newer senses of *dharma* occur opposite each other in the figure of the God Dharma in the story of Skinny. The older sense of *dharma* (the power of action that connects a person to great goods beyond normal human powers) is manifested and affirmed in the story narratively when the God Dharma, disguised as Skinny, does give the king the great good he desperately wishes for, the return of his son. The older sense of *dharma* is also present in the brahmin's prior history with King Manly Force: priests were given material support for their ritual services, both as part of the rituals and apart from them. The brahmin's current way of life and goals are the result of a disruption in the older patterns of *dharma*, the king's ridicule of him and his resentment of that ridicule, and so the older sense of *dharma* is also present in this story insofar as this past history is remembered by Skinny and still smarts. On the other hand, the newer sense of *dharma* is also represented in Skinny's goal of completely eliminating the desire upon which the older sense of *dharma* was based, a goal of central importance in the *yoga* discourses that were

³⁷ See note 20 above.

gradually developing and gaining ground on a number of fronts during the late Vedic and Mauryan eras of Indian history. In the newer *dharma* personal self-interest is often replaced by a devaluation of one's particular being and a corresponding emphasis on a sense of connectedness to all others, both accompanied by an attitude of kindness toward others. So in our story, Dharma does for the king the sort of good *dharma* always did, but it is a new Dharma who does so and for new reasons. These two themes of *dharma* essentially contradict each other (one is predicated upon the desire for some great good and the other seeks to expunge all desire), but the God Dharma here represents them both simultaneously.

The highest good of the old *dharma* is its power to yield benefits on the other side of death (it is partly for this reason that actions which are *dharma* have the transcendent quality of being “religious”, that is “sacred”, or “holy”). The fundamental association of *dharma* with death is first represented in the story slightly obliquely in the king's being deprived of his son. While the king does not know the boy to be dead, the boy's disappearance suggests his death and is parallel to several stories in the epic that turn upon the death of a son. Dharma's restoration of the boy to his father resembles the boy's being called back to life.³⁸ Another sort of connection of death and *dharma* occurs in Skinny's, Dharma's, emaciation, representing the dwindling of *dharma* in the face of royal abuse.³⁹ And there is here a contradiction within Skinny himself. For, as a number of texts in the MBh make clear, the successful transformation of oneself in terms of the ideals of *yoga* leaves no lingering resentment. But it is this tension at the heart of this representation of Dharma that makes this story an important key to the MBh, its authors, and their construction of the character of Yudhiṣṭhira. The ambivalence of *dharma* evident in this story occurs and reoccurs throughout much of the *Mahābhārata*, both narratively and didactically. This contradiction of *dharma* constituted the spiritual force that drove some brahmins to create the *Mahābhārata* as we now have it, and resolving this tension was one of their most urgent and earnest agendas.

But what provoked the MBh's absolute juxtaposition of the two *dharmas*?

³⁸ Among other instances of this connection of death and *dharma*, I will cite only the episode at the end of the *Araṇyaka Parvan* (MBh 3.295–98; van Buitenen, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 795–805) where Dharma disguised as a *baka* (crane, heron, or stork) kills the four younger Pāṇḍavas who are heedless of his commands. Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma then does heed Dharma's commands, successfully answers his father's riddles and tests, and is allowed to recover his brothers' lives.

³⁹ Obviously some aspects of the ascetic and yogic agenda to eliminate desire can be likened to death as well. I do not pursue these likenesses though, because asceticism and *yoga* have very complicated motivations and representations and if they have some unified way of relating to death that is not yet clear to me.

The Double Crisis of *Dharma* Provoked by the Mauryans

It would seem a crisis occurred for some traditional brahmins⁴⁰ and brahmin-supporters, the *sataḥ*, the “pious”, the “strictly observant people” of the *Mahābhārata*, when the śūdra Nandas consolidated imperial power at Pāṭaliputra in 340 B.C. and became zealous patrons of the Jains.⁴¹ The later traditions of the Purāṇas remember one Nanda ruler as “the destroyer of all the kṣatriyas”, and label the dynasty as *adhārmika* (“Outside Law, Un-Lawful”),⁴² which merely states the obvious from the point of view of the *sataḥ*.⁴³ Different sources, including classical western sources, suggest there was great discontent with the Nandas and their burdensome policies.⁴⁴ Evidently kṣatriya legitimacy was restored when Candragupta Maurya overthrew the Nandas.⁴⁵ But the *sataḥ* could only be partly relieved by this development, for Candragupta and his successors too patronized the “heathens” (*nāstikas*).⁴⁶ Candragupta is supposed to have converted to Jainism and died a Jaina saint,⁴⁷ his son Bindusāra also patronized the new non-brahmin movements, particularly the Ājīvikas, though Buddhist sources stress that he also gave support to brahmins.⁴⁸ And then Aśoka, sometime around 260 B.C. to 255 B.C.,⁴⁹ launched an imperial Dharma campaign that not only endorsed this standing Mauryan ‘abuse’ of brahmins, but criticized some old brahmin practices and even put a halt to certain Brahminic or Brahminically sanctioned festivals. Thus the Nandas and early Mauryans elevated the Veda-denying, brahmin-criticizing movements to positions of imperial honour equal to or superior to that of the Vedas. In doing this, these rulers challenged the claims of brahmins to be the sole ‘seers’ of unseen

⁴⁰ In everything I write below about “brahmins” I do not mean to say “all brahmins”, nor “brahmins in general”, nor even “most brahmins”. I mean “some brahmins” who are animated by their own particular senses of privilege, grievance, and opportunity, all such senses, of course, being related to their own particular notions of Brahmanism. Also, all that I assert about these particular brahmins are inferences based primarily upon my reading of the *Mahābhārata* against what remains of the historical record of India between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D.

⁴¹ According to Jain traditions; see: Bongard-Levin, op. cit., p. 70.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The obvious wrongfulness of śūdras ruling over twice-born people.

⁴⁴ Bongard-Levin, op. cit., pp. 69–70.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 71–72.

⁴⁶ I typically translate *nāstika* with the adjective “nay-saying” or the noun “nay-sayer,” i.e., denying (or, one who denies) the basic unseen realities which Brahminic religion relied upon. This word is not infrequently used in the MBh with the virulence of English “heathen”.

⁴⁷ Bongard-Levin, pp. 109–110 (note 118).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁹ See ibid., pp. 83–84 for a discussion of the dates of Aśoka’s earliest inscriptions, the Minor Rock Edicts. The most cautious dating, of P.H.L. Eggermont (*The Year of the Buddha’s Mahāparinirvāṇa*, in: H. Bechert, op. cit.), puts them after seven to ten years of Aśoka’s reign, which according to Bongard-Levin, op. cit., pp. 89–90, began either in 268 or 265 B.C.

transcendent realms, undermined the clear hierarchy of the *varṇa* model of society,⁵⁰ and severely diminished the status and privileges of brahmins while threatening their livelihoods and, indirectly, their continued existence.⁵¹ The perspectives of *yoga* and the socially sensitive ethics represented in shorthand as *ahiṃsā* were no longer simply a ‘kindler, gentler complement’ to the old sense of *dharma* as a set of (sometimes bloody) obligatory deeds that one did to guarantee a better afterlife. These values had here and now become the emblems of an insulting and dangerous movement.⁵²

About 265 B.C.⁵³ Aśoka came to power as the head of the Mauryan empire, which had been founded by his grandfather Chandragupta forty-nine years earlier at Pāṭaliputra. He became a lay follower of the Buddha and a patron of the Saṅgha, probably seven or eight years after his accession,⁵⁴ evidently before his

⁵⁰ How clear that model might actually have been ‘on the ground’ is, of course, a good question. It is clear from the *Mahābhārata*’s *Rājadharmaparvan* that the *varṇa* hierarchy was regarded as precarious, and that actual circumstances were often much less than some brahmin social philosophers might wish. My general arguments about the MBh and its concerns with social hierarchy draw significant support from the fact pointed out by Wilhelm Rau in *Staat und Gesellschaft im alten Indien nach den Brāhmaṇa-texten dargestellt* (Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1957) that the four *varṇas* appear very differently in the *Brāhmaṇas* than they do in later literature, that earlier there was vertical mobility and not the tight association with birth typical later (p. 63) (a point occasionally met with in the MBh). This point of Rau’s was aptly emphasized by Sheldon Pollock as he made the general observation that “During the three or four hundred years following the middle vedic age (c. 800 B.C.)... the most important social development seems to have been a far more markedly defined hierarchical ordering of society. The pyramidal social organization maintained by institutionalized inequality is now often met with...” Pollock, op. cit., pp. 10–11).

⁵¹ I believe that these are all actual implications of the Nandan and Mauryan elevation of *nāstika* elites to more or less co-equal status with brahmins. How various brahmins in different parts of India (in various kingdoms in the heartland of the Doab, in various *āśramas* and *tīrthas* scattered all across northern India) might have perceived and reacted to this elevation is of course impossible to say. I am suggesting here, however, that the post-Mauryan written redaction of the MBh was due to the artifice of some brahmins who were offended and embittered by these developments and who set themselves to writing history as it should have been.

⁵² “There was a lot of killing in Vedic ritual and often the texts do not regard this as a problem”. Bodewitz 1999, op. cit., p. 25. While they may not have regarded it as a problem “often”, I suggest, with Schmidt, that at least sometimes they did have some concerns about it. But then to have a ‘heathen-sympathizing tyrant’ such as Aśoka forbid the killing of animals in rites transforms the issue in a fundamental political way. See below.

⁵³ As I mentioned just above in note 49, Bongard-Levin (op. cit., pp. 89–90, after a detailed discussion of the dating parameters) gives 268 or 265 B.C. for Aśoka’s accession to the Mauryan throne, with 317 or 314 B.C. for Candragupta’s accession. P.H.L. Eggermont (op. cit., p. 246) puts Aśoka’s accession in 268 B.C. R. Thapar gives Aśoka’s accession date as 269–268 B.C. (op. cit., p. 33), but she herself calls attention to the difficulties in settling the exact chronology of Aśoka. J. Strong offers the more diffident “circa 270 B.C.” (op. cit., p. 3).

⁵⁴ Bongard-Levin, op. cit., p. 85. In the eighth year (261 B.C.) according to Eggermont, op. cit., pp. 245, 246.

bloody conquest of Kalinga in the ninth year of his rule.⁵⁵ In the thirteenth year of his rule he began issuing his 'Major Rock Edicts' in multiple copies in different parts of his empire as part of a concerted effort to teach "*dharma*" to his imperial subjects. These inscriptions and the *dharma* they teach constitute a remarkable infusion of concern for the virtue and the welfare of people and even animals into the goals of government. John Strong has a nice summary of what these inscriptions say under this heading:

"...However he intended [Dharma], in his edicts Aśoka seems to have been obsessed with Dharma. The Aśokan state was to be governed according to Dharma. The people were to follow Dharma. Wars of aggression were to be replaced by peaceful conquests of Dharma. Special royal ministers were charged with the propagation of Dharma. True delight in this world came only with delight in Dharma, and the old royal pleasure-tours and hunts were replaced by Dharma-pilgrimages.

From these and other indications, we may say that Dharma seems to have meant for Aśoka a moral polity of active social concern, religious tolerance, ecological awareness, the observance of common ethical precepts, and the renunciation of war. In Pillar Edict VII, for example, he orders banyan trees and mango groves to be planted, resthouses to be built, and wells to be dug every half-mile along the roads. In Rock Edict I, he establishes an end to the killing and consumption of most animals in the royal kitchens. In Rock Edict II, he orders the provision of medical facilities for men and beasts. In Rock Edict III, he enjoins obedience to mother and father, generosity toward priests and ascetics, and frugality in spending. In Rock Edict V, he commissions officers to work for the welfare and happiness of the poor and aged. In Rock Edict VI, he declares his intention constantly to promote the welfare of all beings so as to pay off his debt to living creatures and to work for their happiness in this world and the next. And in Rock Edict XII, he honours men of all faiths."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Bongard-Levin, op. cit., p. 85. See: Thapar, op. cit., pp. 33–39. Thapar's suggestion that Aśoka would not have undertaken the military conquest of Kalinga after having 'converted' to Buddhism is not persuasive. "The fact that he waged a war immediately after his conversion is no argument at all" (Eggermont, op. cit., p. 245). As Thapar herself points out, speaking of conversion to Buddhism is problematic. I also agree with Bongard-Levin's view that Aśoka's becoming a lay-Buddhist and the expressed remorse he felt after the Kalinga campaign did "not [cause him to] discard the traditional foreign policy of his predecessors" (see: Bongard-Levin, op. cit., pp. 84–85). Many of the interpretations of Aśoka's Edicts (what Bongard-Levin labels the "traditional approach"; *ibid.*) take much too simple an approach to Aśoka, mainly by taking his words univocally at face value. To some extent N. Sutton's reading of Aśoka and Yudhiṣṭhira participates in this traditional approach (*Aśoka and Yudhiṣṭhira*, op. cit.). For a sophisticated, probing examination of Aśoka and the Major Rock Inscriptions, see: *Die grossen Felsen-Edikte Aśokas*, edited and translated by U. Schneider, Otto Harrasowitz, Wiesbaden 1978.

⁵⁶ Strong, op. cit., p. 4.

In my opinion Strong is wrong to say that Aśoka renounced war. The famous Twelfth Major Rock Edict which speaks of his remorse over his bloody conquest of Kalinga not only does not contain a renunciation of war, it actually threatens war, though, it is true, it also states at length the emperor's preference for peaceful conquest (*dhammavijaya*).⁵⁷ The most remarkable element in this inscription is Aśoka's account of his grief over the Kalinga conquest. But it also contains a clear ultimatum directed at the "forest tribes" of the empire. Those peoples are to accept the peaceful conquest of Dharma (*dhammavijaya*) which is "pleasant", or they can expect the same kind of travail the people of Kalinga suffered. The long description of the sufferings of the Kalinga conquest explain to one and all why the emperor favours *dhammavijaya*, why he is so devoted to non-violence generally, but not only does the inscription fail to renounce violence, it threatens it explicitly as well as implicitly. It is true too that while Aśoka recommended forgiveness, he did not forgo judicial procedures and punishments, not even capital punishment.⁵⁸

Aśoka's inscriptions represent a remarkably aggressive policy of the emperor's trying to shape the thinking and behaviour of his subjects. There is a domineering and patronizing tone to many of Aśoka's inscriptions,⁵⁹ and on one occasion he was so bold as to instruct the Saṅgha on what works its members should read and study.⁶⁰ On another occasion he threatened with expulsion from the Saṅgha any monks or nuns who caused dissension.⁶¹ He wrote on several occasions of a pluralistic approach toward the various religious organizations of the day, sometimes juxtaposing brahmins and *śramaṇas* (non-brahmin ascetics and thinkers), claiming to make gifts to various of them,⁶² declaring that all groups were free to dwell anywhere they wished in the land,⁶³ and encouraging all to honour all sects so all sects might "advance their essential doctrines."⁶⁴ Part of the text of this inscription is particularly significant in light of Aśoka's claims elsewhere to support a variety of religious sects:

"But the Beloved of the Gods [Aśoka] does not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the advancement of the essential doctrine of all sects. This progress of the essential doctrine takes many forms, but its basis is the control of one's speech, so as not to extol one's own sect or disparage another's on unsuitable

⁵⁷ See: Schneider's nice analysis of this complex text, op. cit., pp. 172–76.

⁵⁸ See: the Fourth Pillar Edict, Thapar, op. cit., p. 263.

⁵⁹ In the "2nd Separate Edict" we read: "All men are my children and just as I desire for my children that they should obtain welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, the same do I desire for all men". I quote Aśoka from the synthetic and smoothed out translations provided by Thapar, op. cit., p. 258.

⁶⁰ The Minor Rock Inscription of Babhra, Thapar, op. cit., p. 261.

⁶¹ The so-called Schism Edict of Kauśambi-Pāṭaliputra-Saṅci, Thapar, op. cit., p. 262.

⁶² The eighth Major Rock Edict, Thapar, op. cit., p. 253.

⁶³ The seventh Major Rock Edict, Thapar, op. cit., p. 253.

⁶⁴ The twelfth Major Rock Edict, Thapar, op. cit., p. 255.

occasions, or at least to do so only mildly on certain occasions. ...Again, whosoever honours his own sect or disparages that of another man, wholly out of devotion to his own, with a view to showing it in a favourable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. Therefore, concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another's principles and obey them."⁶⁵

We know from Buddhist literature (e.g., the *Tevijja Suttanta*⁶⁶) and from the *Mahābhārata* some of the sorts of targets intended by this strong censure of religious speech in the name of religious diversity!

And while Aśoka was a Buddhist layman (*upāsaka*) and clearly partial to the general "modern" ethics of the Buddhist Saṅgha, he was, by the same token, not neutral toward Brahminic religious practices. He did forbid the killing of animals at sacrifices in the first Major Rock Edict, a prohibition that clearly embraced Vedic Brahminism, at least in principle (though it is difficult to say how common the *paśubandha* might actually have been in 260 BC). He also forbade various unnamed festivals in the first Major Rock Edict and criticized and discouraged various rites in the ninth Major Rock Edict. Some of both types of religious observances might well have been administered by brahmins. But from the point of view of many brahmins this paternalism was probably felt as an insult, for those who know the Vedas and teach *dharma* based on the Vedas do not regard themselves as the children of the ruler, but rather as the source of the ruler's wisdom, policy, and prosperity. And the seemingly genial pluralism would likewise have been unwelcome, for, as I pointed out above, such pluralism denied the hierarchy and the monopoly upon which Brahminism depended. And the ruler's injury of failing to recognize the unique importance of brahmin claims was complemented by his giving equal honour to such "heathens". And the commands that all sects may live anywhere must be seen as at least denying in principle the power of any group to exclude another group from certain general areas such as desirable *tīrthas* and groves, a dictum likely to impinge upon the older groups of brahmins more than upon the younger Jain and Buddhist monks. And the specific admonitions to "guard one's speech" that accompanied Aśoka's exhortation that all sects honour all other sects likely rankled brahmins all the more. In light of some of the criticism that *nāstikas* come in for in the *Mahābhārata*,⁶⁷ this

⁶⁵ Translation of Thapar, op. cit., p. 255. Generally the enemies of the Vedas and brahmins are not referred to by name in the MBh; usually they are referred to simply as *nāstika*, regarding which see note 46 above. See too note 67 below.

⁶⁶ See: *Buddhist Suttas*, translated by T.W. Rhys Davids, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1881; reprinted Dover Publications, New York, 1969, pp. 157–203.

⁶⁷ See MBh 12.34.13–18 for a particularly chilling expression of hatred. Who are the 88,000 wayward brahmins affiliated with the Asuras whom Vyāsa described as "jackals" at 12.34.17? Regarding them, Vyāsa went on to say, "Wicked men who want to do away with Law, who promote what is contrary to Law, should be killed the way the overbearing Daityas were killed by the Gods". (12.34.18).

warning might certainly well apply to disgruntled brahmins, perhaps even to antecedent forms of the *Mahābhārata*.

It seems fair to conjecture that the emergence of the Mauryan empire generally and Aśoka's *dharma* campaign in particular were profound challenges to many pious brahmins; and that these events may well have been a strong stimulus to the creation, development, redaction, and, or, spreading of the apocalyptic *Mahābhārata* narrative.⁶⁸ This narrative depicted violent resistance to the kind of 'illegitimate' political power the Nandas, the Mauryans, and Aśoka must have represented to some, and it depicted a restoration of proper, *brāhmaṇya* kingship, which undertakes to use violence for the protection and support of brahmins. The last Mauryan emperor Brhadratha was overthrown by his brahmin general Puṣyamitra Śuṅga in 187 or 185 B.C.⁶⁹ This deed established the Śuṅga dynasty at Pāṭaliputra over the already weakened Mauryan empire and it saw ten rulers across 112 years.⁷⁰ Puṣyamitra vigorously defended the empire against Mauryan loyalists and Greek invaders and he was famous for

⁶⁸ My argument here obviously sides broadly with earlier discussions of a "Hindu Renaissance", which interprets various developments in nascent "Hinduism" late in the first millennium as, in some measure, reactions against the rise of Buddhism. I think, however, that such discussions have tended to be cast too simply in terms of Brahmin vs Buddhist, oversimplifying these people in terms of doctrinal formulations alone, not attending to the broader social and political goods at stake. I would say the reaction seems to have been less against Buddhism and more against the various social, political, economic, and cultural transformations brought about by the rise of empires that 'stepped out' on the brahmin elite. What I think is most significant for *some* brahmins during these times are the ways there were real and symbolic decreases in the prestige and power of brahmins, *die Entmachtung der Brahmanen*, as Angelika Malinar puts it in a brief summary of this issue in *Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht* (Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 1996, pp. 439–440), her probing examination of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in its historical and literary context. Haraprasad Shastri summed up many of the brahmin grievances in an overly rapid and over-simplified way in a paper entitled *Causes of the Dismemberment of the Maurya Empire*, "Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal" 4, 1910, pp. 259–262. I agree with Bongard-Levin's judgment of Shastri's argument: It was "right when he referred to the reaction of the Brāhmaṇas as a reason for the decline of the state of the Mauryas, although, on the whole, Shastri's [sic] characterisation of the emperor's policy as anti-Brāhmanic is incorrect". R. Thapar's point by point rebuttal of Shastri's views (Thapar, op. cit., pp. 197–203) points out certain factual mistakes of Shastri's, but it evades the clear implications of a number of points of the brahminic principles of culture, society, and polity and is not persuasive. What I write below tries to specify and qualify what I think are the most fundamental and important goods (and injuries) that led, I believe, *some* brahmins to launch a counter-attack that proved tremendously creative in a multitude of ways, even as it wished to be and was profoundly conservative in certain ways.

⁶⁹ The earlier date is given by É. Lamotte, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien des Origines à l'Ère Śaka*, Université de Louvain, Louvain-La-Neuve 1976, p. 388; the later date by Kulke and Rothermund, op. cit., p. 68.

⁷⁰ See: Lamotte, op. cit., p. 388. According to Pāṇini the Śuṅgas were descendents of the seer Bharadvāja, as was the famous brahmin weapons-master of the MBh, Droṇa. See: *ibid.*, p. 389. The Śuṅgas were succeeded in paramountcy in northern India by another brahmin dynasty the Kāṇvas, whose four rulers reigned from 75 B.C. to 30 B.C. (*ibid.*, p. 388).

centuries as a ruler who performed two Horse Sacrifices and re-instituted and patronized brahmin sacrifices generally. He is also famous in some Buddhist sources for having persecuted and killed Buddhists, but after reviewing these accounts the eminent historian Étienne Lamotte concludes, “Puṣyamitra must be acquitted for insufficient evidence.”⁷¹ But even if innocent of wholesale aggressive violence against Buddhists, Puṣyamitra represented a significant reversal of the imperial posture toward brahmins and brahmin religious institutions.⁷²

If one reads the *Mahābhārata* along the lines I have been suggesting, it may seem that the narrative of a divinely led purge of the *kṣatra* and the re-institution of proper *brāhmaṇya* rule fits the tenor of the Śuṅga revolution very well, might well have been a myth inspired by, or even chartering, these political events. I have no doubt that the Śuṅga revolution contributed very much to the development of our MBh, but there is one very important trait of the MBh that does not fit with the Śuṅga era and might well be a reaction against it. I refer to the critically important insistence in the MBh upon rule being appropriate to *kṣatriyas* and not brahmins. The MBh is a Brahminic text which, particularly in its repudiation of some aspects of the brahmin seer Rāma Jāmadagnya’s repeated avenging slaughter of *kṣatriyas*,⁷³ calls for *kṣatriya* kingship operating under Brahminic supervision to guarantee the preservation and welfare of brahmins. The ultimate credibility of brahmins as a religious elite depended upon their disassociating themselves from the direct cruelties of governing, and so the MBh works to correct this excess of the Śuṅgas and Kāṇvas. It is for these reasons that I have suggested that the first major written Sanskrit redaction of the MBh was post-Śuṅga and post-Kāṇva as well as post-Mauryan. For now, I see integral connections between the epic’s narrative of apocalyptic purge and its demand for *kṣatriya* kingship, so I put this redaction of the MBh sometime late during or shortly after the era of the post-Mauryan brahmin rulers of the empire and its dissolved elements.

But regardless of its relation to the actual events and the religious and social politics of Nandan, Mauryan, and post-Mauryan times, the MBh is a tremendously violent apocalyptic narrative. The mere sketching out of this story severely challenged the basic thrust of the newer senses of *dharma*. The MBh challenges the philosophies of *yoga* and *ahiṃsā* both by telling narratives of armed resistance to abusive power and narratives of restorative warfare — often without any expressions of disapproval — and by also arguing the rightness and necessity of such violence, especially in the *Rājadharmaparvan*. Thus this

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 430.

⁷² It is important to observe, however, that Buddhists and Jains not only were not eliminated by hostile rulers, they flourished during this time in significant ways. See the tally of Lamotte, *ibid.*, p. 424.

⁷³ See: Fitzgerald, forthcoming.

narrative solution, whether real or imagined, posed a second crisis for any and all brahmins strongly sensitized to the newer values of *dharma*. While the violent resistance and the final purge depicted in the *Bhārata* probably appealed strongly to some brahmins (such men as might have found the saga of Rāma Jāmadagnya most gratifying), it must have posed a deep crisis of conscience for many others (men represented well by Vasiṣṭha's response to Kalmāṣapāda's horrific assault on his sons, or by the ancestors of Aurva).⁷⁴

Hence the "double-crisis". The events which provoked some to imagine this bloody purge make up the first crisis; the imagination of that bloody purge itself constitutes the second. The *Mahābhārata* had two fundamental agendas: first to assert its narrative of a purge and restoration, and second to find ways to resolve the conflicts between the grotesque, sanctioned violence of this narrative and the newer values of *dharma* that were well established among brahmins and becoming prevalent throughout much of north Indian society in the latter third of the first millennium B.C.

Yudhiṣṭhira the King, Lord of the Dead

There is good narrative evidence in the *Mahābhārata* that suggests that its main apocalyptic vision grew from a deep sense of rage and inner conflict. Besides the "brahmin-abuse" stories already mentioned, the narrative describes the earth as populated by armed rulers who neglected *dharma* in the older senses of the word — that is, they neglected the Vedas, the nurture of the Gods with Vedic rites, and the support of the men who knew *dharma* and who knew and used the Vedas. The epic's depiction of this oppressive *kṣatra* also portrays *kṣatriyas* as regularly violating the newer sensibilities of *dharma* as well — they are frequently depicted as arrogant louts drunk on lust, rage, delusion, and other vices. The *Mahābhārata*, as indicated earlier, tells a story of the genocidal elimination of *kṣatriyas*, one that follows upon and refines Rāma Jāmadagnya's twenty-one earlier *kṣatriya* genocides, one that is narrated within an account of Janamejaya's genocidal assault upon serpents, and within which there are several other genocidal pre-figurings of the epic's main action.⁷⁵ I have already mentioned the different responses of Rāma Jāmadagnya and Vasiṣṭha to serious injuries inflicted upon them by *kṣatriyas*, and a survey of the epic's many stories of brahmin abuse at the hands of *kṣatriyas* would amplify and deepen the evidence that there is deep and bitter political rage at the centre of the *Mahābhārata*.

The attempt to integrate the epic's tremendously violent main narrative and the senses of justification and right upon which it rests with the ethics of *yoga* and *ahimsā* seems to have occasioned a profound tension regarding *dharma*

⁷⁴ See note 20 above.

⁷⁵ See: Ch. Minkowski, *Snakes, Sattras and the Mahābhārata*, in: A. Sharma (ed.), *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1991, pp. 384–400.

in many of those who contributed to the project of the *Mahābhārata* over the time of its active development. This tension is expressed in the narrative with a number of deeply ambivalent or contradictory representations of *dharma*. The *tristesse* of the brahmin Skinny's fusion of the two *dharma*s into one persona joins a number of other images and narratives within the *Mahābhārata* that demonstrate this tension on the part of its authors and redactors. Here there is space to give only a few brief indications of this rich and extensive theme.

Dharma plays an anthropomorphically represented role in the narrative on a number of occasions. He is incarnate as Pāṇḍu's brother Vidura, is the father of Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava, and turns up in the narrative a number of times, often in disguise to test someone's character in terms of the newer values. In many of these appearances one of the main motives of the story is to argue some point of the newer, socially sensitive ethic. One of the fascinating elements of many of Dharma's narrative appearances in the *Mahābhārata* is his association with death. As has been generally known for some time,⁷⁶ and as Madeleine Biardeau has admirably demonstrated and explained at some length in connection with the some of the basic symbolism of the epic,⁷⁷ there is also an assimilation of the God Dharma and Yama, the Lord of the Dead, in the *Mahābhārata*. Dharma and Yama often seem to be the same in some of the stories of Dharma's appearances (especially in the story of Aṇī Māṇḍavya, see below), and Dharma and Yama converge in the figure of Dharma's son, Yudhiṣṭhira.

Yama constantly lurks in the background of this tale of a genocidal blaze within a tale of a genocidal blaze, and which is replete with several other accounts of genocidal vengeance as well. Yama is the deity most often associated with the general destruction depicted in the *Mahābhārata*.⁷⁸ One of the principal ways that Yama is invoked in the *Mahābhārata* is through Yudhiṣṭhira's association with him. Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, shares with Yama the epithet of Dharmarāja. And Yudhiṣṭhira too, the man who undertook to become the Over-King through the Rājasūya of *The Book of the Assembly* (an ambition the interruption of which constitutes the narrative ground of the war), presides over the hatching of the war and the war itself as a brooding Lord of Death.

⁷⁶ See: E.W. Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, K. Trübner, Strassburg 1915; reprinted, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1974, p. 115, and S. Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970, pp. 55–62.

⁷⁷ See: EMH 5, op. cit., pp. 95ff, 160ff.

⁷⁸ See: L. Thomas, *The Identity of the Destroyer in the Mahābhārata*, "Numen", 41, 1994, pp. 255–272. The basic notion of the catastrophic violence of the *Mahābhārata* came often to be seen in terms of the notion of the dissolution of the world at the end of a cosmic span of time (*pralaya*). And often 'the Great God' (Mahādeva) Śiva came to be seen as the ultimate divine president of the violence and destruction of the Bhārata war. But these are, I believe, later, more cosmically systemic reinterpretations of the earlier, more adventitious, more disturbing uses of sacrificial fire for genocidal revenge that are more fundamental to the text.

Yudhiṣṭhira is a Lord of Death too as a king, the one man among men who holds the power of life and death (represented typically with the opposed pair *nigraha* ‘restraint’, and *anugraha* ‘encouragement’), the wielder of the rod of force (*daṇḍa*, an emblem of Yama),⁷⁹ made actual and concrete principally in the king’s power of punishment and his army. And he is so too as the consecrated sacrificer of the epic’s great sacrifice of battle. These images of king and Lord of Death, of Dharmarāja (the judge who scrutinizes the deeds of men and points out their fates), are aptly synthesized in the epic narrative with the figure of the *kaṅka*, the stork, which seems ultimately not distinct from the heron.⁸⁰ During the mandatory year of incognito in the kingdom of the Matsyas as guests of King Virāṭa (the Sanskrit word *matsya* means ‘fish’), Yudhiṣṭhira assumed the ironic guise of dicing master and the name Kaṅka, “Heron-Stork”, which is not ironic, but a declaration of one aspect of his ordinarily veiled nature. The heron was infamous among some in ancient India as a vicious killer, a killer which deceitfully lulled its prey into a false sense of security by its long, patient, utter stillness — the ‘heron’s way’ (*bakavṛtti* or *bakavṛata*)⁸¹. “Looking down, cruel, firmly committed to realizing his own good, deceitful, and falsely polite”, that, says Manu is “a brahmin who follows the heron’s way” and is bound for hell.⁸² This describes the heron’s stealthy hunting in ponds and wetlands where its most preferred food is fish, *matsyas*, and it can also be seen as one possible criticism (an unfair one, its defenders in the MBh would say) of the narrow selfishness of *dharma* done simply as Meritorious Good Deed for oneself alone. During this year as the *kaṅka* lurking stealthily among the *matsyas*, the Dharmarāja’s underlying nature as a cruel Lord of Death was clearly indicated by Vyāsa. And after the war was over and Prajāpati’s altar (Kurukṣetra) was littered with the bodies of the dead, the most prominent figure on that altar was the five to six foot tall *kaṅka*, the Adjutant Stork, feeding upon the flesh of the dead, vying with the women of the dead for the warriors’ remains. Yudhiṣṭhira has long been regarded by literary critics as the most uniform and boringly predictable of the three main Pāṇḍavas. In fact his character is more complex and interesting than any other figure of the epic.⁸³

⁷⁹ See: EMH 5, op. cit., p. 161.

⁸⁰ And, it seems, not distinct either from the *baka* (sometimes *sārasa*), the crane, as a long-legged, long-beaked bird feeding in fields and wetlands. It was B i a r d e a u who first called attention to the connection of these birds as figures of death in the MBh; see EMH 5, op. cit., pp. 96–99, 106–110. See too my own *Some Storks and Eagles Eat Carrion; Herons and Ospreys Do Not: kaṅkas, kuraras, and baḍas in the Mahābhārata*, “Journal of the American Oriental Society” 118.2, April–June, 1998, pp. 257–261.

⁸¹ See Manu 4.30, 192, and 197. The behaviour here described as *bakavṛtti* fits the heron.

⁸² Manu 4.196.

⁸³ Yudhiṣṭhira’s complexity has not escaped everyone’s attention in the past. In chapters nine and ten of his book *The Ritual of Battle* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1976, pp. 229–286), A. H i l t e b e i t e l has a comprehensive and insightful discussion of Yudhiṣṭhira’s sins in the war.

Perhaps the most notable of all the particular stories of Dharma's appearances in the *Mahābhārata* is the Pāṇḍavas' encounter with him as a dangerous riddling local spirit (a *yakṣa*) in the body of a *baka* (heron, crane, stork) at the *limen* between their twelve years⁸⁴ of forest residence and their year of incognito, a time which is both a death and a gestation for them. In this episode⁸⁵ the disguised Dharma laid each of the four younger Pāṇḍavas down in death (they had come to his lake to drink, one by one, and had each refused to acknowledge the lake as the *baka*'s property and answer his questions before drinking) until Dharma's son, Yudhiṣṭhira (his counterpart in death and virtue both, who would soon take on his own disguise as the bird of death, the *kaṅka*) arrived, paid the *baka* proper heed as the owner of the lake, showed nimble wit by answering his many riddles, and then demonstrated magnanimity with kindness and generosity.⁸⁶ Yudhiṣṭhira's actions led his brothers back to life and secured the guarantee from Dharma, the God of 'Firm Continuity', that he and his brothers would survive the incognito year successfully.

Dharma was present at the very end of the entire story when Yudhiṣṭhira once again served as psychopomp, 'conductor of the dead', leading his family to heaven on the Great Journey, during which they dropped dead one by one, starting with Draupadī.⁸⁷ Here Dharma trailed in the form of a dog, a despised animal, testing Yudhiṣṭhira once again, to see if the king was truly loyal to his followers. Yudhiṣṭhira, the only Pāṇḍava alive at the end of the journey to heaven, was invited to mount a chariot to travel the final distance to heaven, but he refused to climb into the chariot since the loyal and devoted dog was barred from accompanying him. Yudhiṣṭhira passed the test with this demonstration of the new-*dharma* value of loyalty to his devotees and they all gained heaven.

And several times in his introductory text *Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962), R.C. Zaehner focused on Yudhiṣṭhira and the agony Yudhiṣṭhira experienced as he fulfilled the obligations of warrior and king while fully informed by values of *dharma* deriving from the discourse of *yoga*, paramount among which is *ahimsā*, "harmlessness". In my opinion, however, Zaehner's view of Yudhiṣṭhira over-emphasizes the personal point of view and unabashedly idealizes the noble side of Yudhiṣṭhira's character while dismissing too hastily its darker side.

⁸⁴ As J.A.B. van Buitenen frequently pointed out, twelve is a representation of unity because the year consists of twelve months.

⁸⁵ It occurs at the very end of *The Book of the Forest*, MBh 3.295–9, van Buitenen, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 795–807.

⁸⁶ In most of the appearances of Dharma as a character in the MBh, both the older and the newer senses of *dharma* are usually present and death is involved. The newer values of *dharma* are usually indicated clearly, the older typically involves some kind of significant acquisition made available by the character of Dharma. In this instance, the good sought — and presided over by Dharma — is water, and the four younger Pāṇḍavas suffer death because they fail to heed Dharma's stipulations about taking water. Yudhiṣṭhira's unexpected and supererogatory generosity is obviously the expression of the newer sense of *dharma*.

⁸⁷ See MBh 17.3.

And there are more stories where Dharma's cheery and progressive values are shadowed by atavistic death, such as, for example, "The Story of the Ungrateful Brahmin", in which Dharma is present again as a *baka*, the "King of Cranes", with the name of Nāḍijaṅgha and the title of Rājadharmā, "King Dharma".⁸⁸ The King of the Cranes, Nāḍijaṅgha, was the direct offspring of the Progenitor Kaśyapa, and a dear friend of Rākṣasas.⁸⁹ In this instance, Dharma offered a fallen, greedy brahmin unstinting hospitality (and — simple expression of the old function of *dharma* — set him up to be honoured, fed, and given a great wealth of gold) and was repaid with the brahmin's murdering him to have his flesh as viaticum. The ungrateful brahmin was tracked down and executed by the Rākṣasas, but no being would eat his flesh, not even carrion-feeders, not even worms. The mother of cows, Surabhi, then appeared over Nāḍijaṅgha's funeral pyre and revived him by dripping milk upon him.

Finally for this brief tour, I mention a different sort of Dharma-story, one in which the figure of Dharma himself is not ambivalent (in fact here he consistently represents what must be one of the constitutive ideas of *dharma* as "firm connection", "rigid continuity", "firm holding"⁹⁰). This story explains Dharma's birth from a śūdra mother as Vidura. Dharma was the harsh judge who insisted that the ascetic Aṇi Māṇḍavya's crime as a boy be requited by a punishment that fit that crime tightly.⁹¹ The boy had skewered insects with the shafts of reeds and grasses, so as an adult he was sentenced to execution by impalement (though not really guilty of any criminal offense). The sage did not die upon the stake, but when he did come before Dharma (who is clearly Yama, the Lord of the Dead, here) he criticized Dharma for making Māṇḍavya's punishment conform too tightly, hold too firmly, to the wrong he did as a child. The sameness of crime and punishment did not take into account the more subjective fact that Māṇḍavya was just a boy when he tortured the insects. Māṇḍavya cursed Dharma to live a life as a śūdra and declared that deeds done by people younger than fourteen shall not be punished.

Part of the indictment the authors of the MBh are making against rulers is that *dharma* had become persistently weak. This is one of the reasons behind Dharma's being incarnate in the epic narrative as the wise Vidura, who often advocated the newer virtues of *dharma*, but who was generally ignored by the Kauravas as a long-winded obstructionist. In the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, the conflict in the very notion of *dharma* as an ideal is evident at the very bottom of his character. The Dharmarāja is said over and over to be

⁸⁸ At MBh 12.162–7, the final text of the *Āpaddharmaparvan*.

⁸⁹ MBh 12.163.19, etc.

⁹⁰ See: W. Halbfass, *Dharma in the Self-Understanding of Traditional Hinduism*, chapter seventeen of his *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1988, pp. 310–333.

⁹¹ See MBh 1.101, van Buitenen, vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 237–238.

dharmātman, “always mindful of Law”, or “always mindful of what is Right”, but, as we noted earlier, Yudhiṣṭhira is more than once enmeshed in issues where truthfulness or identity is seriously compromised in one way or another. Yudhiṣṭhira’s troubles reflect the profound dilemma of *dharma* that the *Mahābhārata* addresses from beginning to end, as Madeleine Biardeau has pointed out so well.⁹² The basic ambivalence of *dharma* is, in part, behind the character of Yudhiṣṭhira and the anguish with which he wages war and weighs the ethical burden of kingship afterwards.⁹³

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⁹² In parts 4 and 5 of her EMH, some of the essential points of which have been briefly made in a short paper, *The Salvation of the King in the Mahābhārata*, “Contributions to Indian Sociology”, new series, 15, 1981, 1–2, pp. 75–97. As noted appropriately above, some of the themes just treated have been discussed at length in Biardeau’s writings and these discussions have opened up whole new avenues of interpretation of the *Mahābhārata*. Readers may see, however, that I am, at least in principle, much more concerned than she is with matters of history. Where Biardeau sees in the *Mahābhārata* some instance of a unified epic-purāṇic cosmogony and theology, I see it as situated in particular circumstances, as a pragmatic utterance which some agents used to some advantage. I also see it as having a diachronic history; that is, as containing within it various later developments of some of its own earlier formulations. In this regard, I disagree with her taking the *Bhagavad Gītā* as a sufficient representation of the *Mahābhārata*’s resolution of the king’s dilemma, showing him how “every sort of impurity could be sacralised and turned into svadharma” (ibid., p. 97). I think there are important indications of historical development on this issue in the MBh. More fundamentally, Biardeau sees the concept of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* — as a whole — as infused with the perspectives and values of renouncers, including, most importantly, ideas of *ahimsā*. As I have indicated above in discussing the growing “bi-polarity” of *dharma*, I see this as an important, relatively new, sense of the word in the *Mahābhārata*; but I also see the fundamental sense of the word (and the actual majority of instances of the word in the epic) as rooted in the old Vedic concepts of *karman*.

⁹³ See note 7 above for a discussion of Sh. Pollock’s and N. Sutton’s views of this aspect of Yudhiṣṭhira’s persona.

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