Primary Sources and Asian Pasts

Beyond Boundaries

Religion, Region, Language and the State

Edited by
Michael Willis, Sam van Schaik
and Lewis Doney

Volume 8

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Edited by
Peter C. Bisschop and Elizabeth A. Cecil

DE GRUYTER

Published with support of the European Research Council
Beyond Boundaries: Religion, Region, Language and the State
(Project No. 609823)

ISBN 978-3-11-067407-1
e-ISBN (PDF) 978-3-11-067408-8
e-ISBN (EPUB) 978-3-11-067426-2
ISSN 2510-4446
DOI https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110674088

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020947674

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de.

Cover image: “Lintel,” circa 475 CE, in Sārnāth, Uttar Pradesh, India. Photograph by Michael Willis. Used with permission.
Typesetting: Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printing and binding: CPI books GmbH, Leck

www.degruyter.com

James L. Fitzgerald

Why So Many 'Other' Voices in the 'Brahmin' *Mahābhārata*?

1 Introduction

Most scholars agree that the "Great Epic of Ancient India," the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*), an epic story with a dynastic war over land and succession at its heart, manifests the influence of authors and redactors who were affiliated with the Brahmin traditions of ancient India.[1] The Brahmin traditions of India were a heterogeneous mix of intellectual traditions that were notionally centered upon the Vedas – ancient collections of orally transmitted poetry worshiping the Gods – and the employment of the Vedas in fire sacrifices directed to the Gods. But among the priestly families who knew and used the Vedas, different traditions branched out into a whole raft of ancillary concerns from phonetics and grammar to astronomy, philosophy, and statecraft. The minimal Brahmin ideal in ancient times was the priestly ideal – maintaining at least some part of the Veda in memory and conducting at least the most modest of the sacrifices – but it seems that even in the most ancient times, there were men who did not meet

1 The Brahminic religious cast of the *MBh* is so extensive that C. M. Bowra's comprehensive comparison of heroic epics – C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952) – excludes it, for in the MBh "a truly heroic foundation is overlaid with much literary and theological matter" (p. v). For standard handbook accounts of the origins and composition of the *MBh*, and the role of Brahmins and Brahminic literature in it, see Edward Washburn Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 363–85; Moriz Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1908), 1: 311–25 and 387–442; and more recently and comprehensively, John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 19–21, 45, 132, 155–56, etc. For a brief account of the creation of the *MBh* in terms of the sociocultural politics of Brahminism, see James L. Fitzgerald, "Negotiating the Shape of 'Scripture': New Perspectives on the Development and Growth of the Epic Between the Empires," in *Between the Empires*, ed. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 257–87, and James L. Fitzgerald, "No Contest between Memory and Invention: The Invention of the Pāṇḍava Heroes of the *Mahābhārata*," in *Epic and History*, ed. Kurt Raaflaub and David Konstan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 103–21. For an extensive general discussion of the history of Brahminism in ancient India and the rise of Brahminic social and political ideology to the position of being the dominant discourse across most of India, see Johannes Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won: From Alexander to the Guptas* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). Bronkhorst discusses Brahminic influences upon and authorial contributions to the *MBh* at the end of chapter 2, 233–40. See too James L. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata: 11. The Book of the Women; 12. The Book of Peace, Part One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 100–42.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110674088-002

this standard, who were criticized for being "brahmins by birth alone."[2] It is important to realize that the social reality of brahmins "on the ground," as it were, was more complicated than thumbnail sketches of ancient Indian society might lead one to believe.

My understanding of the history of the *MBh* is that it descended from an older, non-Brahmin, oral epic tradition that told tales of the recurrent rivalries between the Bharata dynasty and the neighboring Pañcāla dynasty. I suggest the earlier form of our epic was simply the *Bhārata*, "the story of the Bharatas."[3] Sometime around 500 to 400 BCE, the *Bhārata* story became a supercharged account centered upon a previously unknown, semidivine phratry of five heroes that was grafted into the Bharata family – the five sons of the king Pāṇḍu, the five Pāṇḍavas – who became alienated from the Kaurava phratry that treated them as interlopers. The Pāṇḍavas allied themselves with the Pañcālas through marriage, and then effected the defeat of the Kaurava Bharatas. The injection of the five semidivine heroes into the story was, I believe, the accomplishment of Veda-inspired brahmins entering somehow into the creation and dissemination of popular epic narrative. This new *Bhārata* story was told, in part, to ensure protection from the armed stratum of society for the inspired elite that claimed the ability to see and understand the Gods and other important unseen realities (e.g., *dharma*) – that is, the brahmins[4]– and secure that elite's socioeconomic position in a world that was being radically transformed by the imperialism and cosmopolitanism of the eastern hegemons and by the successful new religious movements they sponsored (especially Jainism and Buddhism).[5] These religious movements rejected Vedic revelation and ritual and the brahmin advocates of those exclusive, esoteric

2 See chapter 2 of Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won*, 109–240.

3 See Fitzgerald, "No Contest between Memory and Invention," 104–16, for a fuller account of my inferences and speculations on this matter. For quite a different understanding of the *MBh*'s history, see Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1–31 and 154–76; Hiltebeitel argues that the *MBh* was the work of a directed assembly of brahmins (a "symposium") that spanned "at most [. . .] a couple of generations" (20).

4 I write the anglicized "brahmins" when referring to actual people, the members of the first of the four canonical social groups as defined in Brahminic normative texts. (I merely transcribe the labels for the other three groups: *kṣatriya*s, *vaiśya*s, and *śūdra*s). When I refer to generalized features of the society or culture of brahmins, I use the adjectives "Brahmin" or "Brahminic."

5 For comprehensive accounts of these political and cultural developments, see Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) and G. M. Bongard-Levin, *Mauryan India* (New Delhi: Stirling Publishers, 1985).

texts and rites in favor of universal reasoning and one or another kind of "soul therapy" for individual persons.[6]

The eldest Pāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhira, is portrayed in the epic as a pious student of brahmins, a patron of brahmins, and a favorite of brahmins. He is in fact, so infused with certain Brahminic values (particularly their adoption of the Jain ideal of "complete harmlessness," *ahiṃsā*) that initially he refused to take the crown after he won the bloody, internecine Bhārata war. Yudhiṣṭhira was eventually persuaded that violent kingship was truly necessary when he was told the myth of the first great human king Pṛthu, who was fashioned – fully grown and fully armed – by a group of brahmins out of the right hand of the wicked king Vena, whom the brahmins had slain because, they said, he erased the distinctions between the four canonical orders of society (the four *varṇa*s), a socio-economically threatening form of *varṇa* confusion (*varṇasaṃkara*).[7] Pṛthu paid obeisance to the brahmins immediately upon his creation and asked for their commands. The brahmins ordered him to be restrained in his behavior (*niyata*; no small point, as many stories of kings' interactions with brahmins in the *MBh* emphasize);[8] also, to do what is Lawfully Right – that is *dharma* – in all circumstances; to be equitable toward all; to punish with force of arms those who violate *dharma*; and, lastly, to bend all his efforts to elevating the Vedas as maintained by Vedic brahmins (*MBh* 12.59.109–112). One of the central points of the *MBh* narrative is to charter Yudhiṣṭhira, the victorious new king of the Bharatas, as a new Pṛthu preserving *dharma* with force and protecting brahmins. This episode attests

6 See the discussions "Newer Senses of Dharma: The Rise of the Yoga Discourse and Values of Social Harmony" and "The Double Crisis of Dharma Provoked by the Mauryans" in the introduction to my translation of the *Rājadharmaparvan* of the *MBh*'s twelfth book, the *Śāntiparvan* ("The Book of Peace"): Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*: 109–23.

7 The term *varṇasaṃkara* also refers to the inappropriate marriages of people of different *varṇa*s: basically the word describes the general breakdown of the old Brahminic social and economic order. The story of Pṛthu is told to Yudhiṣṭhira near the beginning of his instruction in kingship after the war, in *MBh* 12.59 (see in particular stanzas 95–129): Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 309–11.

8 There is a pronounced strain of brahmin-led revolutionary violence in many of the epic's supplemental narratives, numerous narratives representing the abuse of brahmins by loutish rulers, and a number of expressions of horror at *varṇasaṃkara*. One thematically based selection of these is analyzed in my paper, "The Rāma Jāmadagnya Thread of the Mahābhārata: A New Survey of Rāma Jāmadagnya in the Pune Text," in *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical Frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature*, ed. Mary Brockington (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2002), 89–132. I have cataloged a longer list of them in an unpublished paper I read at a conference entitled "Whose Veda," hosted by Prof. Vasudha Narayanan in Gainesville, Florida, in February 1996: "The Making of the King: Brahmin Resentment and Apocalyptic Violence in the *Mahābhārata*."

to the *MBh* as a story based on Brahmin ideology and advancing the claims of brahmins to be the sole determiners of right and wrong in the polity and the society – claims that were certainly not generally accepted at this time. The teachings of the Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas and the edicts of Aśoka positively attest to the bare fact; the many Brahminic registrations of grievance over slights to Brahmin dignity and the many stories in the *MBh* demonstrating the power of brahmins attest to the pain felt as a result of it.

One of the principal ways that the distinctions between the canonical orders of society were felt by some to be subject to erasure in northern India about 400 BCE was the perceived maldistribution of patronage to unqualified brahmins of poor Vedic learning or low standards in selecting their ritual patrons; or, worse, the patronage of non-brahmins such as Buddhists or Jains. Properly educated brahmins believed that they had a monopoly on knowing and teaching *dharma* (and receiving patronage for doing so) and one of the main points in fashioning Yudhiṣṭhira as the new Pṛthu and setting him at the center of the *Bhārata* narrative was to propagate this vision of a society and polity headed by a king dedicated to and guided by brahmins. The only way an elite that produces no material goods can thrive, or even exist, without outright begging, is through a transfer of wealth to them effected by the armed stratum of society and the consequent honor and protection of them by the armed rulers. One of the goals of the *MBh* was to argue the world should have an honorable and secure place for brahmins – which was not at all a "done deal" in ancient northern India in 400 BCE – and it seems that the *MBh* was persuasive in this regard for significant portions of the subcontinent across the following centuries, given the widespread patronage of brahmins and Brahmin literary and intellectual pursuits across northern India,[9] and beyond, in the stressful centuries following the demise of the Mauryan empire and leading eventually to the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century CE.[10]

But while I think this gloss of the *MBh* as a reactionary document is true as far as it goes, the burden of my argument in this paper is that some of the

9 The two major manifestations of this support are the vast proliferation of the genre of *purāṇa* – see James L. Fitzgerald, "History and Primordium in Ancient Indian Historical Writing: *Itihāsa* and *Purāṇa* in the *Mahābhārata* and Beyond," in *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 49–53 – and the voluminous support afforded to properly Brahminic disciplines (*śāstras*) and the composition of Sanskrit poetry. For an extended discussion of these latter expressions of what he has called the "Sanskrit cosmopolis," see Sheldon Pollock's *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

10 See Fitzgerald, "No Contest between Memory and Invention," 116–17 and Bronkhorst, *How the Brahmins Won*, 404–12.

cosmopolitanism of the non-brahmin Mauryan emperors and the universalism of the Buddhist and Jain rivals of brahmins seeped into the epic – something that is evident from the very fact that the *MBh* includes a large number of supplemental narratives teaching *dharma* in one form or another that depict life outside the courts of the Bharatas and their rivals: life in the wilderness and in various kinds of sacred settlements that dot the wilderness, and life in towns and big cities. And though the majority of these stories present or examine the status and position of brahmins, they often do so in oblique ways, employ an unexpected diversity of voices, and include some harsh criticism of brahmins and Brahminism.

I shall take a sampling of these supplemental *dharma* teachings, noting particularly their settings and the casts of their characters. Perhaps befitting a culture with significant memories of nomadic transhumance, there are long journeys involved in many of these episodes: some of the discussions take place on the road, some even in the road, as my first examples show.

2 Mańki and *Mokṣadharma* in the Town Square

I begin in the middle of the road in an unnamed city with the voice of Mańki,[11] an enterprising member of the third canonical order, the *vaiśya*s, the propertied producers of Brahminic society, not the armed, land-based rulers, the *kṣatriya*s. After failing at many ventures, Mańki sank the last of his wealth into a pair of young oxen only to watch them carried off in a freak accident. As Mańki led his two calves out for training, yoked together with a brace, they bolted impulsively into the town square and ran up on either side of a camel that was sitting on the ground. The irritated camel sprang to its feet under their brace, lifted the two calves off the ground and ran off with them – each of them bobbing on one side and the other of him like two ear baubles. Mańki was in absolute despair at first; but then he came to radical disaffection from the world, *nirveda*, and spoke movingly about no longer being the plaything of his desires. This hapless businessman-turned-philosopher underwent a spontaneous conversion to the *mokṣadharma*, which is living with a view to one's release from the painful

11 *MBh* 12.171. References to the *MBh* are to its critical edition: V. S. Sukthankar, S. K. Belvalkar, and P. L. Vaidya, eds., *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–66); John D. Smith's electronic version of the critically constituted text is available at Professor Smith's website: "The *Mahābhārata*," *bombay.indology.info*, accessed November 1, 2019, http://bombay.indology.info/mahabharata/welcome.html.

contingencies of endless rebirth, all of which, of course, are based on one's desires and the actions one undertakes to fulfill them.

In our *Mahā-Bhārata*, the "Great, Full, or Universal" *Bhārata*, a number of brahmins espouse *mokṣadharma* in various forms, and today we take for granted the *mokṣadharma* belongs there. But the *mokṣadharma* had no place in the original narrative of the *Bhārata* war. Also, the *mokṣadharma* contains elements of strong antagonism to the ancient Vedic commitment to ritual action. Epic *mokṣadharma* is a hybrid philosophy with roots in both the cosmic universalism of the Vedas and Upaniṣads – by which persons sought to align themselves with the underlying powers of the world – *and* the therapies of mind and soul used to escape the world by the non-Brahmin religions that were patronized by the eastern emperors. *Mokṣadharma* did eventually become integral to much of classical Brahmin thought, *in part, it would seem, because of the prominence it came to have in the* MBh. It represents a slow leavening of Brahminism with the person-centered perspectives of the non-Vedic religious movements.

3 A Jackal Preaches *Sādhāraṇa Dharma*s to a Brahmin Laid Low

My next example comes from right down in the dust of the road.[12] A wealthy, arrogant *vaiśya* riding along in his chariot knocked a scrupulously ascetic brahmin off his feet. At first the brahmin was furious; then he despaired and planned to kill himself. He cried out, "I'll just die. There's no point in a poor man's bothering to live."[13] His cry of despair occasioned a lengthy sermon to him by a jackal who had witnessed his misfortune, a sermon pointing out to him that not only did he enjoy all the advantages human beings have over animals – such as being able to pick bugs off his body – he was, as a learned brahmin, in the top position among humans. The jackal encouraged him to complement his Vedic piety with some of the virtues of the *sādhāraṇa dharma*, that is, the habits and attitudes that are right for all people universally, such as self-control, non-resentment, contentment, kindness, and generosity – *universal dharma* as opposed to one's *particular dharma*, *svadharma*, that is set by one's

12 *MBh* 12.173.
13 *MBh* 12.173.5–6.

situation in the world, especially one's sex and one's *varṇa*. The brahmin got up, dusted himself off, and praised the jackal's speech as wise.

This little colloquy also participates in the larger cultural tensions that concern us. While no one tradition or people has a monopoly on advocating kindness, generosity, and self-control – and these virtues *are* praised in some of the old Vedic texts – these habits of behavior were centrally emphasized by the non-Brahmin movements of the Jains and the Buddhists. The Jains in particular made the value *ahiṃsā* – which is "harmlessness in all aspects of one's behavior" – the paramount category for the ethical evaluation of all actions. Holding *ahiṃsā* to be the paramount value seems to have spread from them to the Buddhists and then to the brahmins and, all across the board, helped encourage the focus upon the subjective experience of individual persons that became one of the major threads of all the therapies pursuing release from suffering and rebirth.

After showing this brahmin being scolded – while in fact praising Brahmin hierarchy – this episode includes a coda that praises Brahminism pointedly while criticizing its learned critics, the "Naysayers," *nāstikas*, those who explicitly deny the holiness of the Vedas and the effectiveness of Brahmin sacrifices. At the end of his pep talk to the brahmin, the jackal revealed that he himself had been a brahmin in an earlier life, but he had been a treasonous brahmin, a logic-chopping pedant, who spoke in public assemblies making arguments based on reason and criticizing Vedic religion and brahmins and their rites.[14] His current birth as an animal was the unwelcome fruit of that evil behavior. Of course, the rationalism and skepticism labeled evil here were often associated, in the Brahmin tradition, with Buddhist philosophy's criticism of Brahmin reliance upon transhuman revelations and rituals, as the Buddhists advocated the same radical disaffection from action as Maṅki's *mokṣadharma*. This coda attests to the enduring ambivalence of the Brahmin tradition toward the new religions.

4 The *Ahiṃsā-Sadācāra* Pair

Promoting the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s came to be one of the major messages of the *MBh* in its central epic narrative as well as in these supplemental narratives. In both these realms of the text, *ahiṃsā* became emblematic of the whole set of norms. *Ahiṃsā* came to be an ethical hot point in Indian society because the old Brahmin ritual tradition sometimes prescribed the slaughter of animals and

14 *MBh* 12.173.45–47.

that practice became a toxic emblem of the Brahmin tradition for many. Two of the most interesting *dharma*-instructions of the *MBh* are initially focused on attacking or defending the tradition and its sacrificing of animals. The attack comes from one Tulādhāra, a produce-merchant in the northeastern city of Banaras; the defense, from an unnamed butcher in the northeastern city of Mithilā. Both of these texts move from the matter of *ahiṃsā* to the fundamentally important philosophical principle of whether animal sacrifice does or does not invalidate the argument that the general behavior of the Brahminically loyal and pious community is to be considered a default standard for knowing what is right behavior, that is *dharma*. The Brahminic tradition that theorized and systematized *dharma* argued definitively that the behavior of the community of the pious, what was called the *sadācāra*, *can* be taken as an indication of what is *dharma* generally, so long as it does not contradict anything explicitly prescribed in the text of the Veda or in the other normative texts of the learned Brahmin tradition. Our two episodes are further interesting because both of them – both the attack and the defense – use voices and arguments that stand squarely in the cosmopolitan world ushered in with the eastern empires of the fourth century BCE. That is, both of them come from and are addressed to people from well outside the narrow pathways of the strictly Vedic Brahmin tradition.

5 A Temporary Detour into the *Āpaddharma*

But before I turn to these stories, I will observe that the issue of whether the behavior of the community of the Brahminically pious is intrinsically normative is the source of another extremely important and related topic the *MBh* takes up and "discusses" in some of its most important stories of the road: the *āpaddharma*, *dharma* for those times when, it is argued, the norms of *dharma* behavior cannot be observed because of some exigency. This argument implies that the pious retain their status as human exemplars worthy of respect and, in the case of brahmins, patronage (*arhat*s, to borrow a Buddhist term that the *MBh* does not use[15]), even when they may indulge in demonstrably substandard behavior.[16] There is a rebuttal to this kind of self-interested compromise,

15 The Brahminic term for one who is worthy to receive donations that will produce merit for the donor is *pātra*. I bring up the Buddhist term because the concept of worthiness lies upon its surface.

16 See Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 152–64.

at least for brahmins, in the *MBh's* exaltation of the saintly brahmin who refuses to abandon his *svadharma* of Vedic ritual and recitation in the face of severe economic hardship – the *uñchavṛttin*, one who survives by gleaning, whose *modus vivendi* frequently amounts to slow starvation. Besides a series of texts that argue the importance of the *āpaddharma* in the twelfth book of the *MBh*,[17] there is a set of three powerful road stories contesting these matters: two that advocate the acceptance of degraded brahmin behavior in exigent circumstances[18] and one that glorifies the uncompromising *uñchavṛtti* as the most excellent way for brahmins to live.[19] These stories are interesting and important, but they are more highly focused upon infra-Brahminical issues than those I am currently presenting and even a short reprise of them here will take us too far away from the themes of the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s and the 'other voices' of the *MBh*. So I will present these road stories on the theme of *āpaddharma* in an appendix to the main paper and I turn now to the merchant of Banaras and the butcher of Mithilā.

6 Back to the *Ahiṃsā-Sadācāra* Pair of Stories

Both these stories are elaborately constructed multi-episode sermons. In the first of them, a typecast produce-merchant in Banaras, Tulādhāra ("one who holds a balance or scale"), delivers a scathing criticism of the practice of sacrificing animals to a somewhat hapless brahmin ascetic, Jājali, and then argues to Jājali that, because of such practices, the *sadācāra* cannot be taken as an indication of *dharma*. This attack occasioned another elaborately constructed narrative that offers a considered response to this attack, one that upholds the basic goodness of the *sadācāra* in general and in regard to animal sacrifices in particular. Taking the bull by the horns, so to speak, the text responding to the Banaras grocer is put into the mouth of a butcher in Janaka's city of Mithilā and preached to a pious Kauśika brahmin who is deficient in his adherence to the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s. Interestingly, both brahmins have traveled to the two cities from the hinterland, having had their virtue and their knowledge of *dharma* criticized by beings inferior to them – in terms of the Brahminically defined sociopolitical hierarchy – and having been urged in each case to seek out *dharma*-

17 Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 505–7.

18 12.139–140 (Viśvāmitra's eating of dog flesh during a famine and Bhīṣma's defense of it) and 12.162–167 ("The Story of the Ungrateful Brahmin").

19 12.340–353 ("The Account on Gleaning as a Way of Life").

instruction from men who were not brahmins. Also, both these brahmins are specially marked in the narratives by the way they treated animals: Jājali, the wilderness ascetic, had been kind to a family of birds, but the Kauśika, a village brahmin, had killed a she-crane that had pooped on his head while he recited the Vedas under a tree outside the village.

7 Tulādhāra-Jājali

In the first of these stories,[20] the brahmin ascetic Jājali thought he had done a wonderfully heroic deed when, with a kind heart, he had fostered a generation of sparrows nesting in the piles of uncut hair coiled on top of his head, as he stood perfectly motionless performing asceticism at the sea-shore. But then some local Rākṣasas told him that his paltry understanding of *dharma* would be expanded if he would journey to Banaras and take instruction there from the merchant Tulādhāra.

Tulādhāra is a *vaiśya*, but he is explicitly established as having mental powers commensurate with many Brahmin seers by a description of his clairvoyant knowledge of Jājali while the latter is traveling to Banaras for the purpose of interviewing him. Further details establish Tulādhāra as a city-dwelling produce-merchant conversant with the philosophy of *dharma*. He tells Jājali that the best actions are always those that do the least harm to other beings, and further, that always being solicitous of the welfare of others is the highest *dharma*. His own way of life conforms to these principles and is characterized by other virtues of both the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s and the *mokṣadharma*.[21] He then launches into criticism of the principle that *dharma* can be known from the behavior of the community of the pious because those communities were observed to engage in various forms of cruelty, starting with the sacrificing of cattle and extending all the way to slavery.[22] He also makes the obvious, logical point that such a principle is circular.[23] The arguments in "The Dialog of Tulādhāra and Jājali" are complicated and sometimes opaque; the language is

20 "The Dialog of Tulādhāra and Jājali," *MBh* 12.252–56.

21 *MBh* 12.254.1–20.

22 Slavery is described at *MBh* 12.254.38cd: "Humans even exploit other humans by using them as slaves" (*mānuṣā mānuṣān eva dāsabhogena bhuñjate*).

23 *īdṛśān aśivān ghorān ācārān iha jājale / kevalācaritatvāt tu nipuṇān nāvabudhyase* // 12.254.49. The word *nipuṇāt* ("because of cleverness") is ironic: "Because you are so clever, Jājali, you fail to realize that these horrible cruelties are 'normative forms of behavior' here only because they are actually done."

often elliptical; and the text has been subject to many perturbations, as Ian Proudfoot showed more than thirty years ago.[24] But it is one of the most interesting and important of the epic's supplemental narratives because of the glimpse it gives us into the Brahmin tradition negotiating the complexities of imperial and postimperial cosmopolitanism. In the end, Jājali is converted to Tulādhāra's views as the birds he had nurtured earlier now circled about his head and praise Tulādhāra's ethical points to him – a constructed scene of good cheer and harmony among members of the hierarchical society and the animal realm that is a recurrent narrative emblem of the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s the *MBh* has come to value.

8 The Butcher of Mithilā

All the same points can be made about the text that answers Tulādhāra-Jājali. That answering text is the "*Brāhmaṇa-vyādha-saṃvāda*" that is found in book 3 of the *MBh*. It was translated by J. A. B. van Buitenen under the title "The Colloquy of the Brahmin and the Hunter."[25] While the word *vyādha* frequently does mean "hunter," this story makes clear that the *vyādha* here is a butcher in the city of Mithilā, a commercial meat vendor who works in a slaughterhouse (*sūna*, 3.198.10) in the city, selling the flesh of various kinds of animals (venison, buffalo, boar [*mṛga*, *mahiṣa*, 198.10; *varāha*, 198.31]) – that he himself has not killed (198.31). It is quite clear that this text was constructed as a response to the Tulādhāra-Jājali text: it too begins with a pious brahmin's encounter with a bird that reveals a defect in him – violent irascibility; this defect is pointed out by a social inferior, here a housewife who lectures him at length on *dharma* and sends him on a journey to Mithilā to take *dharma* instruction from a Brahminically loyal *śūdra* butcher there. Thus the birds, the pious but defective brahmins, the criticism of them from inferiors, their journeys from the hinterland to the cities, and, finally, the vesting of serious *dharma*-teaching authority with inferior men who embody the essence of the arguments they speak: these elements show that the texts really do form an intentional pair that demonstrates the Brahmin tradition's high sensitivity to the criticism of its claimed monopoly

24 Ian Proudfoot, *Ahiṃsā 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 9 (Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, 1987).

25 *MBh* 3.198–206. J. A. B. van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 617–38.

on the teaching of *dharma*. The story of the Mithilā butcher's teaching of *dharma* is too rich and complicated to present all its significant details here, so I offer only a rapid review of its highlights.

First, its brahmin foil is orthodox and pious – he was doing his daily Veda recitation when a she-crane shat upon his head. The spontaneous rage that led to his killing the crane is a recurrent, if unfortunate, meme in the profile of ancient brahmins, as is his killing the offending bird with a baleful glance, a direct expression of the brahmin's inner power. He does immediately regret his burst of rage as he goes on his way into the village to beg his daily alms, but he fails to learn any lesson from the incident, as we shall see.

At a familiar house on his round, he encounters a housewife, who refuses to interrupt her serving her husband's meal in order to give the brahmin his alms. He berates her angrily for neglecting him, but, unlike the unfortunate crane, she lives and she answers him smartly. She defends herself with an emphasis upon her doing her *svadharma* as a wife. She scolds him for being less than a good brahmin and preaches him a sermon that is an interesting mixture of *sādhāraṇa dharma* – self-control, mastering anger, *ahiṃsā*, etc. – and Veda-based practices, referring to the brahmin's *svadharma*. She concludes by pointing out that *dharma* is often quite subtle and his understanding of it is rather deficient. (One of her points to him was, "Those who know *dharma* never kill women," 3.197.42cd.) She directs him to travel to Mithilā for further *dharma*-instruction from a pious *śūdra* butcher there (3.197.30–44). The text now works hard to legitimate this butcher's piety and his authority: he does not kill or eat the meat he sells, and he engages in various forms of virtuous behavior (some of the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s) as a means to counteract the evil of his hereditary profession. But most importantly, his piety toward his elderly parents is presented at length as a demonstration of his being a *dharmātman* person.

Just as the woman did earlier, the butcher defends his life as being his proper *dharma*, *svadharma*. His proper work is part of the division of labor ordained by God (the system of the four social orders, the four *varṇa*s) and it enables Vedic knowledge and royal government to effect the prosperity of the worlds. He is not at all resentful, and he never castigates anyone more powerful than himself (3.198.19–30). In making this general defense of Brahminic hierarchy, he strongly defends the king's use of violence (*daṇḍa*) for coercing everyone to perform his *svadharma* – that is, preventing the mixing of *varṇa*s in terms of who gets paid to do what – which, as said earlier, is one of the brahmins' principal complaints and the whole point of the hierarchy in the first place. As to the violence of the sacrificial ritual, it does not harm its pious performers as long as their motives are only to do *dharma*, and it enables the animals killed to get to heaven (3.198.55–68 and 199.6–9). He argues that *sadācāra*

is a legitimate way to know *dharma*, because – and this argument is remarkable – the community of the pious is generally characterized by their virtues and the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s *are the virtues that legitimate them*. Overall, his instruction to the brahmin is laced with exhortations to the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s. Furthermore, this *śūdra* butcher teaches *mokṣadharma* as well, and at great length!

It was an ingenious stroke of rhetoric to fashion the authoritative voice in this story as an urban butcher from the lowest of the four Brahminic social orders – to use such a type in order to address the criticisms of people like Tulādhāra and subsequently present a comprehensive defense of the Brahminic social hierarchy and its reliance upon royal violence. The genius of the Mithilā butcher's defense of Brahminism becomes clear if we contrast it with another spirited defense of cow sacrifice that was put into the mouth of a cow about to be sacrificed (the *Gokāpilīya*, 12.260–62). The cow belonged to the old Vedic creator God Tvaṣṭṛ and it was king Nahuṣa, an ancient ancestor of the Bharatas, who planned to kill her. A number of the arguments made by our butcher in Mithilā are put into the mouth of Tvaṣṭṛ's cow, who is shown answering criticisms put by one of the emblematic sages of *mokṣadharma* philosophy, Kapila.[26] As with the *śūdra* of Mithilā, this fanciful defense of Brahminic violence also co-opts the voice of a victim of orthodox ideology. Also, its constructing a mythic royal setting for the debate would seem to attest to the great force of the cultural energy coming from the cosmopolitan urban environment. The text featuring Tvaṣṭṛ's cow at the site of a Vedic sacrifice in a mythic time epitomizes the conservative tradition's occasional flat-footedness, its lacking *upāyakauśalya*, "persuasive skill," to borrow another Buddhist term. The story of the butcher of Mithilā, on the other hand, shows the kind of Brahmin adaptability and skillful creativity that is characteristic of the transformation of the old *Bhārata* into the *Mahā-Bhārata*.

9 The Anchorage of the *Sādhāraṇa Dharma* in the Epic's Main Narrative

But what justifies our seeing this emphasis upon *sādhāraṇa dharma*s as genuinely part of the *MBh* proper and not just an occasional feature of the supplemental narratives? The answer is that the main narrative of our "*Great Bhārata*"

26 Actually, it is the otherwise unknown *ṛṣi* Syūmaraśmi who speaks from within the cow, having entered into her when Kapila began criticizing the sacrifice.

features the *sādhāraṇa dharma* in some strategic ways, most of which revolve around embodiments of the God Dharma in the narrative, in addition to his embodiment in his son Yudhiṣṭhira. First among these is the *śūdra* steward of the Bharata court, Vidura, who is an actual incarnation of the God Dharma. Vidura has more to say of *dharma* at the Bharata court than any other figure in the main narrative. Second is a series of challenges presented to Yudhiṣṭhira by his father, the God Dharma, to test him at strategic junctures of the main narrative – exactly at points where Yudhiṣṭhira is conveying his brothers between life and death (which underscores the fact that the God Dharma is an alter ego of the Vedic God Yama, the God who conducts the dead from this world to the next). These tests are called *jijñāsā*s – something that "seeks to 'know' or ascertain something"; it is the character of the terrestrial son of Dharma that is under scrutiny and it is what pleases his father, Dharma, as a result of these tests that tells us something important about the value perspectives of the *MBh* as a whole.

In the first of these tests (*MBh* 3.296–298), Dharma disguises himself as a spirit, a *yakṣa*, that presides over a marsh in the body of a *baka* (a long-legged wading bird that could be a crane, heron, or stork; in light of Yudhiṣṭhira's later disguising himself with the name *Kaṅka*, "Stork," in the Pāṇḍavas' year of incognito, we should opt for "stork" here). Yudhiṣṭhira then solves a series of riddles the stork puts to him and is thus able to bring his four brothers back to life – the stork had taken their lives because they refused to submit to his authority. Having answered the stork's riddles successfully – and without knowing the creature's true identity – Yudhiṣṭhira is offered a series of wishes. In each instance, Yudhiṣṭhira makes choices that exemplify *sādhāraṇa dharma* virtues – generosity, kindness, loyalty. His disguised father is delighted and reveals his identity as the God Dharma, predicting that Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers will make it through their incognito year without being discovered. This encounter with the God Dharma occurs just as the Pāṇḍavas are about to enter into the stipulated year of total incognito – itself a kind of death. It is during this year that Yudhiṣṭhira, the terrestrial stand-in of the celestial Dharma, aka Yama, adopts the incognito name *Kaṅka*, "Stork," a striking emblem of kingship as a lord over death.[27]

27 The key to understanding Yudhiṣṭhira's curious choice of name lies in the fact that the *kaṅka* bird is the largest animal feeding upon the carrion of the battlefield in the wake of the great Bhārata war on Kurukṣetra. Previously misidentified as a "heron," the bird in the after-battle book 11 of the *MBh* (*The Book of the Women,* the *Strīparvan*), the *kaṅka*, must be the Indian adjutant stork (*Leptopilos dubius*), for it is the only long-legged wading bird that feeds on carrion. Standing five meters tall, it is a gigantic and ugly bird that underscores the darker side of the king's presiding over the violence of war and punishment – the fundamental

At the very end of the entire epic, Yudhiṣṭhira leads his brothers and their wife Draupadī on a march up to heaven (*MBh* 17.1–3). A dog trails after them (17.1.23, 32, 2.11, 26). After each member of his family drops dead in succession, Yudhiṣṭhira is left with just the dog. Indra, the king of heaven, climbs on his chariot to bring Yudhiṣṭhira into heaven bodily. But Indra will not allow the dog to accompany Yudhiṣṭhira, and Yudhiṣṭhira refuses to mount the chariot without the dog, because of its devotion to him. The dog then reveals himself to be Yudhiṣṭhira's father Dharma in disguise once again, and he tells his son that he has passed another test of his virtue by this demonstration of loyalty and kindness.

Yudhiṣṭhira faces one other such test upon entering heaven. There he finds his enemies – all the war dead of the evil Kaurava phratry – celebrating; but the members of his family, who have recently died on the journey to heaven, are all in hell because of their sins. Yudhiṣṭhira insists on joining his family and he journeys to the horrible hell where they are. When finally he encounters the members of his family, they take some comfort from his presence. He then excoriates the Gods, including his father, Dharma, and sends back the messenger of the Gods who had guided him there. But shortly after the messenger informs the Gods of Yudhiṣṭhira's final decision on the matter, all the Gods appear before Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas and the hell they are in suddenly turns into a paradise. The God Dharma points out to his son that this was a third test of his virtue and that his choosing to stay with his family members has completely purified him and qualified him for heaven. The stint in hell had been necessary for him because of his fatal lie during the war, when he told his guru Droṇa that Droṇa's son had been killed.[28] I would point out that this lie was not just a falsehood, but one directed against the social bonds at the core of the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s.

So, Brahmin "liberalism" in the *MBh* was *not* a peripheral theme of the epic. It occurred on a number of fronts even as it often met with resistance. But it *is* present, the result of a complex Brahminism that has gone well beyond its Vedic core, that has absorbed and begun to cultivate the waves of thought that were emanating from outside the Brahmin tradition while it also capitalized upon themes found within itself.[29]

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reasons Yudhiṣṭhira was ambivalent about accepting the kingship conferred by the Pāṇḍava victory in the war. See James L. Fitzgerald, "Some Storks and Eagles Eat Carrion; Herons and Ospreys Do Not: *Kaṅkas* and *Kuraras* (and *Baḍas*) in the *Mahābhārata*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 2 (1998), 257–61, and Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*; in particular, chapters 16 and 22 of book 11, pp. 54–57 and 64–65.

28 See *MBh* 7.164.60ff., esp. 93–110.

29 Once again, a fuller account of these matters focused upon the idea of *dharma* is available in my *Mahābhārata*, 100–128.

Appendix: Three 'Road Stories' of *Dharma* during *Āpad* ("Exigency")

Bhīṣma's Defense of Viśvāmitra's Eating Dog Flesh

A *MBh* story found in the *Śāntiparvan* (12.139, with commentary from Bhīṣma in 12.140)[30] makes use of violent caricature and scathing sarcasm to argue a liberal "situation ethics" against the conservative pandits of the *dharmaśāstra*, the Brahminic science for determining right and wrong behavior. During a prolonged period of famine and widespread starvation, the brahmin Viśvāmitra, like many others, wanders far and wide in search of food. He ends up in a repulsive hamlet of dog-eating Caṇḍālas, a tribal people outside the orders of Brahminically conceived society. This story egregiously exaggerates the "otherness" of these people to paint Viśvāmitra's violation to be as outrageous as can be imagined. As he moves about the hamlet, Viśvāmitra eventually spies meat hanging from the rafters of one "dog-cooker's" hut. It is meat from the hindquarters of a dog, but this fact does not deter him any more than where he found it in the first place. The brahmin reasons that taking the property of a lower-order person during such a life-or-death crisis would not be theft. In spite of having dismissed the idea he might be a thief, he waits until the dead of night, when the Caṇḍāla is asleep, and sneaks into the hut to take the meat down.

But naturally the Caṇḍāla wakes up and a most interesting conversation ensues. The Caṇḍāla cites one argument after another from the *dharmaśāstra* in order to dissuade Viśvāmitra from eating the meat: it would be a great sin and he would ruin the accumulated merit of his asceticism; he would be mixing standards of behavior not suited to his nature; etc. But of course Viśvāmitra has an answer for every argument: he insists that survival takes precedence over forbidden foods and he can purify himself later if he survives. They argue back and forth, over and over, with the Caṇḍāla quoting *dharmaśāstra* to the brahmin and urging him to accept death by starvation. The brahmin answers with reinterpretations of what things might look like on the surface – like the dog here would be the equivalent of a deer, etc. – all to the effect that it would not be a very serious wrong (139.50–85).[31] In the end, Viśvāmitra eats the dog meat

30 Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 534–44.

31 Relying upon what the *MBh*'s philosophy of *āpaddharma* calls *vijñānabala*, "the power of understanding," to see *dharma* in apparent *adharma* and vice versa. See my introduction to the *MBh*'s treatment of *āpaddharma*: *Mahābhārata*, 152–64, especially 153–58.

and later purifies himself, eventually attaining full perfection in heaven (139.85–90). I should add here that there was never any suggestion that the Caṇḍāla had any self-interest in making these arguments: he wasn't trying to hang onto his meat; he was simply piously suggesting the brahmin starve to death for the brahmin's own good! Given the discussion of this incident that ensues in the next chapter (12.140), it is quite believable that this *dharmaśāstra*-spouting Caṇḍāla was constructed simply as a straw man for the criticism of *dharmaśāstra* proper, which that next chapter now makes. The whole episode smacks of satire, and no element of it more so than its putting the details of *dharmaśāstra* punditry into the mouth of a "barbarian" whose repulsive qualities the text goes out of its way to emphasize.

This story is told to the new Pāṇḍava king Yudhiṣṭhira by the wise sage Bhīṣma as one of several episodes arguing that the *dharmaśāstra* is not just a matter of "black letter law," but requires sophistication, interpretation, and adjustment to circumstances. When his pious, brahmin-sympathizing pupil Yudhiṣṭhira expresses astonishment at Viśvāmitra's eating the dogmeat, Bhīṣma unleashes a stunning diatribe against the narrow-minded, "strict-constructionist" literalists of *dharmaśāstra*. He calls them

> enemies of Law [*dharma*] who steal the science [*śāstra, dharmaśāstra*] and explain it as being harsh because they have nonsensical understandings of practical matters. They are the most wicked of men, these enemies of Law, who seek to live off of learning and lust for glory from every side. They're completely unsophisticated (*aśāstrakuśalāḥ*), foolish men with half-baked ideas (*apakvamatayo mandāḥ*). They keep their eyes only on the wrongs that are taught in the *dharmaśāstra* and thereby steal its teachings. Their understanding of *dharmaśāstra* goes, "That is not right." They make their own teachings known only by their criticism of the teachings of others. Having taken a mouthful of metal blades for words, they speak in sharp darts and arrows; they seem to have milked the cow of learning dry [. . .] The whole of *dharma* that is known is mocked by them as a fraud.[32]

32 *MBh* 12.140.11–17, with paraphrase and translation interspersed: *parimuṣṇanti śāstrāṇi dharmasya paripanthinaḥ / vaiṣamyam arthavidyānāṃ nairarthyāt khyāpayanti te* //11 // *ājijīviṣavo vidyāṃ yaśaskāmāḥ samantataḥ / te sarve narapāpiṣṭhā dharmasya paripanthinaḥ* //12 // *apakvamatayo mandā na jānanti yathātatham / sadā hy aśāstrakuśalāḥ sarvatrāpariniṣṭhitāḥ* // 13 // *parimuṣṇanti śāstrāṇi śāstradoṣānudarśinaḥ / vijñānam atha vidyānāṃ na samyag iti vartate* //14 // *nindayā paravidyānāṃ svāṃ vidyāṃ khyāpayanti ye / vāgastrā vākchurīmattvā dugdhavidyāphalā iva / tān vidyāvaṇijo viddhi rākṣasān iva bhārata* //15 // *vyājena kṛtsno vidito dharmas te parihāsyate / na dharmavacanaṃ vācā na buddhyā ceti naḥ śrutam* //16 // *iti bārhaspataṃ jñānaṃ provāca maghavā svayam / na tv eva vacanaṃ kiṃ cid animittād ihocyate* //17.

The Louche Gautama Brahmin Commits a Crime beyond Expiation, But Is Forgiven with Kindness

Bhīṣma's defense of Viśvāmitra's violation of norms opens onto a more extreme possibility: the matter of brahmins who engage in scandalous behavior habitually, not merely in times of exigency. An example of this is the story of the louche Gautama brahmin (12.162–67).[33] Impoverished, this brahmin leaves his native village, wanders far and wide in search of alms, and ends up living among "barbarous" tribes and adopting their ways – eating meat, marrying among them, and so on (12.162.28–37). A proper brahmin from his native town encounters him there and upbraids him because of his debasement (162.39–49). The Gautama is ashamed and takes to the road, traveling toward the sea to start his life over again. Some misadventures befall him, but eventually, the exhausted Gautama brahmin chances to benefit from the protection and sumptuous hospitality of a magnificent "stalk-legged" bird (*nāḍījaṅgha*) living in a banyan tree – a bird named Rājadharman ("King-nature," suggesting as well "The Laws of Kings," *rājadharma*), perhaps another stork.[34] When the Gautama tells Rājadharman he is searching for wealth, the bird promises him that he will make it back home with newfound riches. He directs him to go to a nearby king, Virūpākṣa, "Ugly Eye," a wealthy and munificent king of Rākṣasas, flesh-eating, night-prowling monsters – seemingly another, though more qualified "othering" of "barbarians" one might meet on the road. When our derelict brahmin arrives at Virūpākṣa's opulent city, the king probes his status and determines he is a fallen brahmin.[35] He decides, nonetheless, to allow him to join the thousands of brahmins who are lining up to be fed on this full-moon day of Kārttika (12.163–165.9); of course, any and all brahmins accepting honor and food from a Rākṣasa would be regarded as brahmins in name only (*brahmabandhu*s). The Gautama stuffs himself at the feast and then accepts the monster king's invitation to cart off as much gold as he can carry away, as do all the other brahmins there. He overburdens himself in his greed and struggles back to Rājadharman's banyan tree, where the bird feeds him and shelters him again. But then he kills the bird so he will have food enough for his journey back home (12.166.3) – a striking inversion of the king's presiding over the life and death of his subjects. When the Rākṣasa king becomes aware of the Gautama's perfidious act of ingratitude, he sends his monstrous minions out to hunt the brahmin ingrate down and bring him back to his court.

33 Fitzgerald, *Mahābhārata*, 590–602.

34 At the least, it is another allusion to the association of such birds with kingship.

35 Thus not a worthy *pātra* for any pious observer of the *sadācāra* (see above, note 15).

They do so; Ugly Eye orders him killed, and he is. But, as Bhīṣma explains next to Yudhiṣṭhira, the one sin that cannot be expiated is ingratitude, and for that reason the Rākṣasa monsters, who would normally have had no compunction about eating the brahmin's carcass, refuse to do so – for the evil in that body cannot be removed even by his capital punishment (12.166.12–25).

But just as it seems the narrative has come to rest in justice, as Ugly Eye presides over the cremation of the recovered body of the stork Rājadharman, the Goddess who is the mother of all cows, Surabhi, appears over the stork's remains, dripping milk on them, and Rājadharman comes back to life. The God Indra then appears and explains that Rājadharman had been cursed to suffer death because he had once failed to pay court to the God Brahmā: this is celestial code saying that a *kṣatriya* king had failed to honor brahmins and the Vedas. Following this karma-based explanation of Rājadharman's being murdered by a greedy brahmin ingrate, Rājadharman, now revived by the milk of motherly kindness, invokes the *sādhāraṇa dharma*s, forgives the ungrateful brahmin (addressing him as "my dear friend Gautama") and requests that he be brought back to life. The Gautama is brought back to life, and Rājadharman then sends him on his way home with all his gold. Rājadharman pays court to Brahmā without fail from then on, but the Gautama brahmin returns home, produces two evil sons, and ends up in hell (167.5–15).

In this story, not even the *āpaddharma* can save the Gautama brahmin from the consequences of his laxity. The kindness of the *sādhāraṇa dharma* redeems him temporarily, but he remains impervious to its grace, though we can infer it elevated the wronged Rājadharman.

The Aloof *Uñchavṛttin*: A Brahmin Diametrically Opposed to the Louche Gautama

The story of the kind Rājadharman's forgiveness of the louche brahmin (which occurs as the final text of the *Āpaddharmaparvan* collection in Bhīṣma's postwar instruction of Yudhiṣṭhira, just before Bhīṣma's *Mokṣadharmaparvan* collection begins) seems not to have sat well with everyone. It was answered with a glorification of the human emblem of stubborn brahmin scrupulosity and aloofness, the *uñchavṛttin*, "one who lives (just) by gleaning grains"[36] (which stands

36 That is, not performing rituals for clients, not teaching the Vedas to pupils, not accepting donations. The reason for such inaction is that he cannot secure the patronage of sufficiently worthy (pure) clients or donors. The Gautama brahmin (and others like him) had no such scruples.

as the final text of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*).[37] The *uñchavṛttin* seems to have been the most saintly figure of orthodox Vedic Brahminism during the hard times of the *MBh*'s development.[38] The *uñchavṛttin* is a brahmin householder who lives on the small amounts of grain he gleans every day; that is to say, he is often close to starving to death because of poverty.[39] The *uñchavṛttin* brahmin lives this way because, even in the exigent circumstance of there being no sufficiently pure clients for his services or sufficiently pure donors to give him alms,[40] he refuses to adopt any livelihood other than his now-unremunerative priestly duties and Veda recitations. He will not abandon the *svadharma* of the orthodox brahmin and stoop to earning his livelihood by commerce or in the service of the king.

There are a number of glorifications of *uñchavṛtti* in the *MBh*,[41] but the story that occurs at the end of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* in answer to the tale of the louche Gautama brahmin is especially relevant to this discussion. In this story, a prosperous elderly brahmin, puzzled about the *dharma* he should observe in the final phase of his life, makes a journey – upon the considered advice of a brahmin friend – to consult an illustrious Nāga chief,[42] who is said to be eminently virtuous (in terms of *sādhāraṇa dharma*) and able to demonstrate the highest form of *dharma*.[43] It is not perfectly clear who this serpent-chief of

37 Thus the sixty-two preceding texts that make up the *Mokṣadharma* collection stand "book-ended" by the story of the louche Gautama brahmin and the glorification of heroic gleaning found at 12.340–353.

38 See James L. Fitzgerald, "The Ethical Significance of Living by Gleaning (*uñchavṛtti*) in the Mahābhārata," in *Release from Life: Release in Life. Festschrift Peter Schreiner* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 89–110.

39 See the depiction of the gleaner brahmin and his family and their ascent to heaven as a result of great generosity in spite of their extreme poverty at *MBh* 14.93.2–82.

40 This dilemma for the well-trained, pure brahmin makes clear why patronage directed to non-brahmins or poorly trained or impure brahmins was such a painful issue for the earnestly orthodox.

41 For which, see Fitzgerald, "The Ethical Significance of Living by Gleaning (*uñchavṛtti*) in the Mahābhārata."

42 The Nāgas are typically conceived of as serpents inhabiting watery realms of the earth; there are a considerable number of literary and artistic representations of them. For a standard survey of these, one may consult J. Ph. Vogel, *Indian Serpent Lore or the Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1926).

43 The friend tells our unnamed protagonist, "Without fail, he will *show* you the very highest norm of action" (*sa te paramakaṃ dharmaṃ namithyā darśayiṣyati*), 12.343.7cd. There is a recurring emphasis in this story on demonstration and seeing. While brahmins receive verbal instruction from different "inferiors" in the stories of Tulādhāra, the Mithilā butcher, and Viśvāmitra, that is not the case in this *uñchavṛtti* story: the brahmin's quest for knowledge is completely satisfied by the Nāga's recounting to him the marvel he had observed of an

the watery realm might represent in Indian sociopolitical history, but he is clearly someone below the brahmin in purity and, it would seem, outside the parameters of Brahminically conceived society altogether.[44] As this story praising the *uñchavṛtti* as the best way for a brahmin householder to live is also, implicitly, a rebuttal of the laxity of the Gautama brahmin and his testing the limits of *āpaddharma*, it might be fair to infer that the Nāga chieftain here is a ruler analogous to the Rākṣasa Ugly Eye, except that the Nāga is relatively noble and is not repulsive.[45] When the brahmin arrives at the Nāga's settlement, that headman is away performing his month-long corvée duty, pulling the chariot of the Sun God across the sky.[46] The brahmin guest is treated hospitably while he awaits the chief's return, but will take none of the food the Nāga's family offers him in hospitality.

The Brahminic ambivalence toward the Nāga and his kin extends to the story's revealing narrative of the brahmin's learning the highest *dharma*. When the Nāga returns, the brahmin tells him he wishes to receive instruction in *dharma*. But before the instruction actually gets underway, the brahmin asks the Nāga to tell him

uñchavṛttin's world-exit-journey (*gati*) into the sun. Is it significant that a story praising brahmin aloofness from compromising intercourse with rich and powerful would-be patrons allows the brahmin to be enlightened without the verbal transfer of knowledge that makes one a subservient pupil? I think this point holds at the level that matters, even though words were the actual mechanism by which the Nāga conveyed his demonstration (12.352.1cd: "Your words speak to my concern and they have shown me the path to take" [*anvarthopagatair vākyaiḥ panthānaṃ cāsmi darśitaḥ*]).

44 A marked feature of this story is its abundant attentiveness to the social interactions between all its interlocutors: between the brahmin and his brahmin visitor, between the brahmin traveler and the Nāga's wife and kinsmen, between the Nāga chief and his wife, and between the brahmin and the Nāga.

45 I would conjecture that both this Nāga lord and the Rākṣasa king Virūpākṣa in the Gautama story represent the leaders of semi-assimilated non-Aryan peoples of India somehow within the purview of the authors of the stories. The Nāga is depicted as well-educated in *dharma* (especially *sādhāraṇa dharma*), and the Rākṣasa monster as eager to gain the support and approval of brahmins. While Nāgas are sometimes regarded as divine or partly divine, *rākṣasa*s, or *rakṣas*es, "beings to guard against, watch out for," were ferocious, swiftly flying, flesh-eating, nocturnal monsters known in the most ancient strata of Sanskrit literature.

46 And if we suspect the Nāga chieftain and the Rākṣasa king represent non-Aryan polities and societies, we must also ask what sociopolitical organization might the Sun represent here? Whomever the Sun may represent here, the Nāga's compulsory service to him would seem to signify some kind of imperial formation. See F. B. J. Kuiper, *Varuṇa and Vidūṣaka: On the Origin of the Sanskrit Drama* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1979), 81–88, for notes on the ancient Vedic God Varuṇa as the lord of the subterranean watery realm and the Nāgas and Asuras and on that netherworld as an inversion of the empyrean realm of the Sun.

of any marvels he has witnessed while pulling the Sun's chariot. The Nāga answers by relating an amazing spectacle he has observed. An apparent second sun rose up from the earth, traveled through the sky and approached the Sun, who welcomed this ball of fire. The blazing second fire then fused its brilliance with that of the Sun (12.350.5–15). When questioned about this marvel by the Nāga, the Sun explained that the fireball was a person, a sage who had become perfected through living only on what he could glean (12.351.1–5). The brahmin is delighted and abruptly terminates his journey of instruction with this testimony of the Nāga's, without any further, formal, verbal instruction. The brahmin politely takes his leave and returns home, where he is initiated into the *uñchavṛtti* by the Bhārgava brahmin Cyavana (12.353.1–2), a kinsman of Rāma Jāmadagnya, the *MBh*'s recurrently ferocious enforcer of Brahminic safety and dignity.[47]

This tale in praise of the life of gleaning is a determined affirmation of Brahmin independence in opposition to a world rife with the temptations to compromise, such as those reported in the cases of Viśvāmitra and the Gautama brahmin! But though this assertion of Brahmin ambivalence and aloofness occupies a place of emphasis and honor in the received text of the *MBh*, our little tour in this paper attests overall to various indications of productive engagement and compromise between alert and adaptive members of the Brahmin tradition and the hurly-burly cosmopolitan world beyond their circles.

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47 See Fitzgerald, "The Rāma Jāmadagnya Thread."

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