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The Gemhearted Hero and His Gemheaded Foe:

**A Materiophilosophical Method for Interpreting the *Mahābhārata*'s Aversion of Universal
Catastrophe through Arjuna's Vaiṣṇava *Nivṛtti* and Aśvatthāman's Śaiva *Pravṛtti***

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**Introduction: Choosing Theoretical Tools for Interpreting Sanskrit-Epic Ornamental
Culture**

This essay constitutes a coda of sorts within a three-piece suite in which I study primary Sanskrit epic depictions of ornamental culture.

In the first of that triad of efforts, “Gembedded Narratives: Jewelled Peacetime Tales of Rāma’s Exile and Rāvaṇa’s Domicile as Alternative Afterlife Anticipations in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*” (Pathak, forthcoming-b), I explore the antithetical portrayals of that poem’s protagonist and antagonist that contrast their respective experiences of sedentariness expressed in connection to virtual and physical jewels. Thus, the human hero, Rāma, while in exile, resides and reclines on woody Mount Citrakūṭa, where he compares the plentifully deposited minerals to gems and can cultivate a serenity that is prescient of the equanimity that he exhibits in the process of attaining *mokṣa* (reincarnational release¹) at the epic’s end, when he and his younger brothers combine in a celestial space with the divine preserver, Viṣṇu, from whom they have partly descended. But a different fate is in store for the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s villain, Rāvaṇa, demon devotee of divine destroyer

Śiva. Rāvaṇa's death at Rāma's hand in their final battle sends the demon to heaven and hell as he remains entrenched within the reincarnational cycle. His imminent saṃsāric captivity is signalled as he rests inside his arrogated jewelled palace, which will go up in flames with the rest of his island fortress, Laṅkā, thanks to Rāma's follower Hanumat and the other apes in his company.

The distinct decors of Rāvaṇa's personal assembling hall (*śālā*) and the professional assembling hall (*sabhā*) of half-divine king Yudhiṣṭhira of Indraprastha in the *Mahābhārata* form the two foci of my second materially concerned work, "Demonic and Demidivine Beauty in the Eyes of Demidivine and Demonic Beholders: Making Hanumat Disbelieve and Duryodhana Misbelieve through (A-)Puruṣārthic Assembling-Hall Aesthetics in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*" (Pathak, forthcoming-a). In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāvaṇa's Laṅkan lair, a locus of multisensory stimulation and satisfaction, tempts upright Hanumat only briefly before the stolid simian refocuses his wandering eyes on his intelligence-gathering mission for his moral authority Rāma, who incarnates half of Viṣṇu. But, in the *Mahābhārata*, Yudhiṣṭhira's Indraprasthan area, a space for opulent demonstration as well as philosophical contemplation, elicits the envy of his part-demon paternal cousin Duryodhana, who goes on to overthrow temporarily Yudhiṣṭhira, the human son of righteousness god Dharma, through devious dicing games and to eschew Yudhiṣṭhira's commitment to his maternal cousin Kṛṣṇa, part of Viṣṇu reborn, in favor of supporting another acolyte of Śiva, namely, Śiśupāla. For these diverging theological concerns, assembling-hall observers Hanumat and Duryodhana earn disparate fates from the predominantly Vaiṣṇava epic authorships, who portray Hanumat as living at length before uniting with the wind god Vāyu, his father, but depict Duryodhana as ascending briefly to heaven for dying in battle but descending to hell for a much lengthier stay for his many moral offenses.

Mokṣa and *saṃsāra* remain in store as well for the pair of opposed nemeses on whom the present essay centers. Arjuna, one of Yudhiṣṭhira's younger brothers and the world's best warrior, ultimately is released from reincarnation as a result of his affection for Viṣṇu. Arjuna's foe, the son of his military instructor, is Aśvatthāman, whom Śiva temporarily possesses in his capacity as destructive time, but who otherwise remains ignorant of how to approach the dread god (whom he partly has incarnated) or to approximate him in his action, and consequently is consigned to roam the earth without respite and to be reborn in realms that are not heavens. The means to these enemies' ends are betokened by gems connected with serpents. These ophidian ornaments include a stone supplied by Arjuna's snake-princess wife, Ulūpī, to revive the warrior once his son and her stepson, Babhruvāhana, has struck him down in combat; and a stone with which Aśvatthāman has been born and that he is required to remove in retribution for his killing of many of Arjuna and his brothers' male relatives. The locations of these stones are emblematic of the characteristics that have effected the particular afterlife trajectories of those duelers: the jewel placed upon Arjuna's chest represents his affective attachment to Viṣṇu, as attested by Arjuna's physical and emotional proximity to the deity's part-manifestation Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's guide through his moral morass over whether to fight in the first place in the war between his family's factions; but the jewel removed from Aśvatthāman's head signifies his lack of knowledge akin to that possessed by supreme, three-eyed yogi Śiva, whose lack of attachments to this world Aśvatthāman cannot capture and therefore must repeatedly take ignoble births. Even before he leaves the earth, however, Aśvatthāman's abortive strike against the Pāṇḍava patriline is reversed with Kṛṣṇa's revival of Arjuna's unborn grandson Parikṣit. This Vaiṣṇava intervention in a Śaiva attack not only elevates Viṣṇu above Śiva in the overall estimation of the *Mahābhārata*'s authors but also makes possible the persistence of the epic's Viṣṇu-favoring text

itself, with the poem's telling to Parikṣit's son Janamejaya on the occasion of his striking snake sacrifice.

Even as my third recent epic-related piece, like its two precursors, focuses on a sectarianism-informed distinction between a duo's ornamental encounters having afterlife implications, this last part of my expository triad is distinct in the direction of its theoretical orientation—inward rather than outward. By contrast, the first two parts of my ornamental-culturally concerned series rework Western conceptual apparatuses to adapt them to analyses of Indic epic materials.

“Gembedded Narratives,” at the outset of its examination of episodes about major characters whose moments of repose are expressed in regard to metaphorical and literal jewels, redefines, as the respective synonyms for the Sanskrit words *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti*, the English terms “otherworldliness” and “thisworldliness” used by Weberian sociologist Reinhard Bendix. Rather than accept the associated dichotomization of Hindu divinity by polymath Max Weber into a particularized devotional recipient tethered to the cycle of *saṃsāra* and a faceless cosmic reality relegated to realm of *mokṣa*, my chapter builds on Indologist Greg Bailey's identification, with respect to *Mahābhārata* 12.327, of Viṣṇu as a deity to whom both ritualists and renunciants attend. My work extends this twofoldness to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, surveying the epic to locate both Vaiṣṇava features in Rāma's journey from his literally jewelled capital of Ayodhyā (from where he presides over his surrounding kingdom, Kosala) to his metaphorically jewelled hermitage on Citrakūṭa (where he anticipates aspects of his ultimate emancipation) and distinguishing these gem experiences from those of Śaiva Rāvaṇa in his stolen, ornamented Laṅka stronghold (where he lies on an ornate bed that presages his battletime death and his ensuing ascension to heaven, as well as his descent to hell for his immoral excesses) (Pathak, forthcoming-b).

“Demonic and Demidivine Beauty,” to underpin its investigation of epic assembling halls, turns to aesthetic philosopher Kendall L. Walton’s theory of make-believe, applying his concept of “ornamental representations” to the edifices respectively established by Rāvaṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira within the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* epics authored by primarily Vaiṣṇava poetic collectivities, and Walton’s concepts of “appreciators” and “critics” both to Hanumat and to Duryodhana, who respectively encounter the personal and professional assembling halls and reflect upon their encounters. The elaboration that my article makes on Walton’s framework is to consider the different treatments of Hanumat’s and Duryodhana’s aesthetic experiences in light of their contrasting theological allegiances. While Hanumat engages in what Walton describes as an “authorized game of make-believe,” reacting eventually with reproach to Rāvaṇa’s overluxurious setting in line with the theological aims of the mostly Vaiṣṇava *Rāmāyaṇa* poets responsible for this interlude’s depiction, Duryodhana (whose birth has been brought about by Śiva) takes part in what I call an “unauthorized game of fake-believe,” for, after being deceived by the trompes l’œil of Yudhiṣṭhira’s hall, Duryodhana goes on to decry that king’s support of Kṛṣṇa (to whom Yudhiṣṭhira has credited his material success) and thereby to be discredited in the eyes of the *Mahābhārata*’s mainly Vaiṣṇava authors (Pathak, forthcoming-a).

In writing this essay, I address a question that remained unspoken in my earlier ornamental-cultural epic inquiries: how are the objects that the epic—in this case, the *Mahābhārata*—symbolically showcases conceptualized differently in that text than they would be by prior inquirers into its portrayals of material culture? Admittedly, the examples that I have discussed thus far and will continue to treat below compose a small, purposively selected sample of poetic decorative entities amid seas of realia treated over many verses. Nonetheless, I believe that by

highlighting and declining earlier approaches to poetic material-cultural objects presented within the primary Sanskrit epics, I can explain more convincingly why situating such objects within the thought worlds that those texts construct illuminates them more brightly than does linking them to elements of the settings extrinsic to those texts. Accordingly, I continue this study by reviewing two past tacks taken to navigate epic realia oceans before elaborating on the direction on which I have decided within my inlet of interest.

Materiohistorical, Materioanthropological, and Materiophilosophical Methods for Exploring Epicallly Expressed Desirable-Object Culture

The pair of previous approaches to portrayals of material culture in the primary Sanskrit epics appear in two sets of studies that bookend about a century of scholarship on those poetic texts. Employing, over two volumes, a materiohistorical method to regard *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* treatments of a variety of societal fixtures as creating textual reliquaries for their surrounding worlds, historian C. V. Vaidya ([1907] 1984, 1:21, 21n) sees the first poem as “furnish[ing] evidence of the condition of India between 3000 and 300 B. C.[,] a period to which [h]e assign[s] the name of the epic period,” and the second poem as “furnish[ing] evidence for some centuries before and after this[,] *i.e.*, from 3500 B. C. to 100 B. C.” In two volumes of his own, South Asianist James McHugh (2012, 2021) includes epic data among myriad premodern textual attestations of aromatics and perfumes and of alcohol and some other drugs, modelling a materioanthropological method with which he engages in and observes the manufacture of certain of the substances evinced in his focal texts.

As I consider each of these approaches in turn, I limit my looks at them to desirable objects in the *Mahābhārata*. My goal in doing so is to glean an analogous instruction as to how to study the poetic gems before me. Gathering these hints, even if simply to rule out the exegetical procedure for which they call, is indispensable to determining my own interpretative method.

Materiohistorian Vaidya ([1907] 1984, 1:152) himself mentions epic ornaments and infers from them the following facts about jewelry fashion of the “epic period”: “Both males and females delighted in wearing ornaments[,] and the richness of India in precious stones and metals and in pearls enabled them, perhaps engendered in them[,] the desire . . . to wear ornaments in profusion.” According to his account, regal jewelry possesses pride of place among the people’s adornments: “Kings wore crowns made of gold and jewels. In what form the crowns were cast we are not in a position to state. They were perhaps conical in shape[,] their tops being decorated with a resplendent jewel.” Vaidya ([1907] 1984, 1:147) suggests the inextricability of such headgear from the sovereign’s station while speculating on the firm fit of Duryodhana’s own headwear even in the *Mahābhārata* scene where Bhīma does him in: “It is strange to remark that when Duryodhana fought his mortal duel with Bhima he had his crown on his head and when he fell down with a broken thigh the crown was still retained on his head and Bhima went and trampled it under his foot. Perhaps the crown was so fixed on the head as to be removable only by unloosening its bond.”

By assuming that epics’ mentions of objects amounted to a catalogue of artifacts in the actual world, Vaidya creates in his study a hypothetical complement to art-historical explorations seeking to construct curatorial stories in the presence of aesthetic objects. One of the most notable such recent curatorial efforts is art historian Usha R. Bala Krishnan’s (2001) catalogue of the jewelry collection once owned by the Nizam of Hyderabad and since sold to the Government

of India—“a group of jewels that dated to the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, and that belonged to the wealthiest and foremost native prince of India”; “an enduring testimony to the legacy of the Nizams, the creative genius of designers, the technical skills of the craftsmen and the prosperity of the Deccan . . . [that] give[s] credence to legends and apocryphal tales of a fabulously wealthy dynasty that ruled for seven generations” (Bala Krishnan 2001, 7, 11).

I, however, am reluctant to regard the accounts of Arjuna’s and Aśvatthāman’s serpentine gems as reliquaries in their own rights. While these tales may reflect interclass tensions about the appropriateness of precious objects to any *varṇa* (class) other than that of *kṣatriyas* (rulers and warriors), there are two reasons why I am less sanguine than Vaidya perhaps would be about the stories’ value as evidence of the existence of specific jewels outside of the epic. First, the opponents’ gems are limned only in the most general of terms. The stone that brings Arjuna back to life upon contact with his chest is described merely as a “life-restoring jewel” (*saṃjīvanaṃ maṇim*) and as a “supernatural jewel” (*maṇir divyaḥ*) (*Mahābhārata* 14.81.2b, 9a). Vaguer still is the stone, or “jewel” (*maṇir*), that Aśvatthāman relinquishes as punishment (*Mbh.* 10.15.28d, 30c, 31c). Second, although I situate the composition of both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* mostly in the interimperial period between the Mauryan (c. 320–c. 185 BCE) and Guptan (320–c. 500 CE) polities—an era briefer and later than Vaidya’s “epic period”—the political flux and proliferation of this time, as I have discussed elsewhere (Pathak, forthcoming-c), pose challenges to correlating epic aspects with extant entities.

Circumventing such challenges is McHugh, who adopts a materioanthropological method to do so. In each of his inquiries into quotidian premodern South Asian material usages, he cites *Mahābhārata* data that relate to his ethnographic experiences of small-scale substance production.

He characterizes one such substance like so: “We possess a number of formulae for *Yakṣa* Mud, whose name refers to the type of supernatural beings called *yakṣas*—for whom this perfume is evidently like mud. This perfume would have been a dark-ruddy color, very fragrant, and, no doubt, a very costly paste” (McHugh 2012, 137). Indeed, he has firsthand knowledge of it: “A paste such as *yakṣa* mud would have been an intense color. I have made such pastes myself, and the combination of the colored woods with musk and saffron make an intensely dark-golden paste” (McHugh 2012, 153). Further insight into this paste’s components is provided by Śukra, instructor to the *asuras* (antigods), in *Mahābhārata* 13.101, where he specifies that incense for *yakṣas* ought to be made with “heartwoods[,] . . . of [which] . . . aloeswood, the precious, warming, black, exotic burning-wood par excellence we have encountered many times,” ranks the highest (McHugh 2012, 226, 232, 233, 234).

Yet another substance that the *Mahābhārata* mentions and that McHugh (2012, 47, 48, 49) can confirm through contemporary practice is a kind of “[m]ixed . . . ‘[w]in[e]’ [(ā)sav[a]]” that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna imbibe to excess at *Mahābhārata* 5.58.5—namely, *madhvāsava* (“most likely a honey-*āsava*”), which likely comprises “fruit extract (or other flavoring extract) plus a large quantity of sugarcane product, a little honey, and a[n] herbal additive.” An ancient modification to the drink whose persistence McHugh witnesses himself while watching similarly “fermented medicinal drinks being made in Kerala” is the addition of many “dried . . . *dhātakī* flowers,” which catalyzes the necessary chemical reaction as well as contributing flavor.

Although McHugh’s spotlighting of the artisanal crafting of his focal materials in manufactories serves well his larger aim of understanding substances’ roles in daily premodern South Asian life, his materioanthropological approach applies less readily to my current *Mahābhārata* study because we have different scholarly priorities. His central subject is the employ of certain

everyday sensory objects, the set of premodern practices that is evidenced in an array of texts. His emphasis on activities themselves over the narratives that feature them aligns well with his observations of those behaviors' continuations today, which are likely to be edifying. But my main topic is the symbolism of certain jewels within one particular epic's narrative, jewels that are extraordinary rather than ordinary and that thus correspond less closely to gems created currently. Thus, the instructiveness, in my investigation's case, of a materioanthropological study even in regard to jewelry—such as Lawrence A. Babb's (2013) *Emerald City: The Birth and Evolution of an Indian Gemstone Industry*, an account of Jain, Hindu, and Muslim influences on Jaipur's gemstone companies—is less immediately apparent.

If the *Mahābhārata*'s marvellous meditations on jewelledness in the cases of Arjuna and Aśvatthāman are not represented well by materiohistorical reliquaries nor by materioanthropological manufactories, then how might those gemmed episodes be conceptualized instead? I see them as imaginaria, capacious spaces for contemplating the macro- and microcosmically significant ideas that they elliptically envision. From this materiophilosophical perspective, I seek to elucidate the contrastingly placed gems by considering them in terms of *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti*. Fortunately, other scholars already have broken key grounds on this ideational distinction's landscape. In light, then, of Greg Bailey's (2005) analysis of Viṣṇu's participation in *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* in *Mahābhārata* 12.327 and Arti Dhand's (2008) characterization of the epic's female characters through that practical dichotomy, I will bridge the divine and human in my materiophilosophical study, connecting Viṣṇu-linked Arjuna's and Śiva-containing Aśvatthāman's differing gembodied experiences with their diverging afterworlds.

Understanding Materiophilosophically the Gemming of Arjuna’s Heart and the Ungemming of Aśvatthāman’s Head as Instantiations of Vaiṣṇava *Nivṛtti* and Śaiva *Pravṛtti*

[This section is to be expanded on the basis of the following summary:

Among the most memorable *Mahābhārata* crises is one that does not occur. In the aftermath of Aśvatthāman’s night attack on nearly the entire family of Draupadī—wife to the epic’s protagonists, the pentad of Pāṇḍava brothers; daughter of Drupada, the ruler (*kṣatriya*) humiliated by Aśvatthāman’s priest (*brāhmaṇa*) father, Droṇa, after dishonoring their interclass childhood friendship; and sister of Dhṛṣṭadyumna, who avenged their father’s embarrassment by beheading his then defenseless nemesis—Aśvatthāman seeks to complete his revenge by unleashing his fiercest missile at the Pāṇḍavas, who have surrounded him upon finding their murdered menfolk. The Pāṇḍavas’ maternal cousin, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, instructs the middlemost brother, Arjuna, to hurl an identical weapon in return, but the spread of the ensuing blaze into the cosmos causes divine sages Nārada and Vyāsa to appeal to the duelers in its behalf. Arjuna, on the strength of his past ascetic attainment, can withdraw his weapon, but Aśvatthāman, lacking the necessary spiritual power to do so, only can redirect his missile into the uteri of the other Pāṇḍava women. Although all the remaining Pāṇḍava heirs fall prey to this prenatal destruction, Arjuna’s fetal grandson Parikṣit is revived by his great-uncle Kṛṣṇa as he has promised.

The Pāṇḍava patriline’s persistence—essential to the epic’s very narration to the king whose snake sacrifice occasions the poem’s telling, namely, Parikṣit’s son, Janamejaya—often overshadows, in its audiences’ and interpreters’ eyes, the intervening aversion (from the Latin verb *avertere* [to turn away from]) of universal catastrophe (from the Greek verb *katastréphein* [to overturn]). Understanding that overturning away from which the epic turns its plotline demands attending to the poem’s intersectorian polemics. As the product primarily of Vaiṣṇava

brāhmaṇas, the *Mahābhārata* often privileges Viṣṇu and his most prominent human manifestation, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. Accordingly, even when Kṛṣṇa, after intuiting that Aśvatthāman will attack the Pāṇḍava/Pāñcāla camp nocturnally, worships divine destroyer Śiva and receives in return Śiva’s temporary protection through his phantasmagoric form, this apparition clad in Śiva’s animal skins and garlanded with his snake emits from his sensory organs thousands of mini-Viṣṇus fitted with the preserver god’s conch, discus, and mace. And, although Śiva stops guarding the Pāñcālas, who become subject to his annihilation upon his possession of Aśvatthāman (who compares himself to destructive time), the god cannot destroy all the worlds, for Aśvatthāman and Arjuna’s standoff and its concomitant doom for those realms is curtailed by Nārada (the usual interabode intermediary) in partnership with Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa (another human Viṣṇu manifestation, who both has grandfathered the Pāṇḍavas and their paternal cousins, the Kauravas, in the *Mahābhārata* and has authored it mythologically).

The epic’s actual authors concretize the Vaiṣṇava restriction of Śaiva destruction—ordered in the poets’ work by Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, executed by Arjuna, and contained by Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa—as the contrasting connections that Kṛṣṇa’s kinsman Arjuna and Śiva’s vessel Aśvatthāman have to gemstones. Arjuna will obtain his jewel once he has been felled by his son Babhruvāhana in defense of his jewelled capital, Maṇipūra, during Arjuna’s tour with the sacrificial horse of his eldest brother, Yudhiṣṭhira of Indraprastha. Arjuna is revived by his snake wife, Ulūpī, who applies the life-giving serpentine jewel to his chest after having urged her stepson Babhruvāhana to fight with his father in the first place. This reminder, late in the epic, of Arjuna’s earlier unions with Ulūpī and with Babhruvāhana’s mother, Citrāṅgadā, evokes Arjuna’s next marriage, to Kṛṣṇa’s sister, Subhadṛā. Aśvatthāman, however, will be requested by Vyāsa to relinquish to the Pāṇḍavas his forehead’s embedded gem (the snakelike

invulnerability repository with which he—a partial incarnation of Śiva—was born, and which represents his supreme deity Śiva’s third eye, an organ of spiritual awareness), and will be relegated by Kṛṣṇa to roam the earth solitarily and sick for three thousand years.

The metaphorical addition of a snake’s gem to Arjuna’s heart and the literal subtraction of a snaky gem from Aśvatthāman’s head have soteriological significations. Arjuna (already known as Kṛṣṇa’s most immediate devotee in the *Bhagavadgītā*) incarnates with his cousin the divine-sage tandem of Nara (Man) and Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu in his reclining form upon floating thousandheaded serpent Śeṣa), and upon ascending to heaven will merge with that divine representation in realization of *mokṣa* (release from reincarnation as the self [*ātman*] unites with the universal reality, Brahman). Aśvatthāman expends his earthly existence in extended, wretched wandering before being reborn in nonheavenly realms, having wrongheadedly channeled the serpent-encircled Śiva to terminate unborn life rather than to foster it in that god’s manner. Vaiṣṇava Arjuna and Śaiva Aśvatthāman, then, respectively demonstrate object lessons in *nivṛtti* (otherworldliness) and *pravṛtti* (thisworldliness).]

Conclusion

[This section is to be completed.]

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¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.