

## Caste and Ethics in the Mahābhārata

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yáthemāṃ vācaṃ kalyāṇīm āvādāni jánebhyaḥ |  
brahmarājanyābhyāṃ śūdrāya cāryāya ca svāya cāraṇāya |  
—Śukla Yajurveda 26.2

### Introduction

The Mahābhārata presents itself as a Veda for those excluded from privilege and as a text on *dharma*.<sup>1</sup> The wisest character is the author’s biological son Vidura who is systematically excluded both from having a say in *dharma* and from questioning his standing in life, because he was born from a Śūdra woman.<sup>2</sup> In this contribution, I trace the epic’s argument that privilege uses *dharma* in a legalistic, unethical way, and delegitimizes those who oppose its abusive power. In doing so, I raise the question of whether *varṇa* is a privilege system, and whether the Mahābhārata accepts critiques of such a view.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, women, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras; cf. Bhagavadgītā 9.32 and Mahābhārata 12.314.45; and see also the later attribution in Bhāgavatapurāṇa 1.4.25. For the Mahābhārata as a *dharmaśāstra*, see the celebrated verse at Mahābhārata 1.56.33. All references to the Mahābhārata are to its critical edition: V. S. Sukthankar, et al., eds., *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1931–1971). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are from the Chicago edition: J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973–1978) and James L. Fitzgerald, trans., *The Mahābhārata: 11. The Book of the Women; 12: The Book of Peace, Part One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> I uppercase the titles of the four orders—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra—and of classes of beings such as Ṛsis, Asuras, Siddhas, and Devas. All other Sanskrit terms are lowercased.

<sup>3</sup> The *prima facie* view is that the Mahābhārata is a work of Brahmanic ideology. Von Simson, who epitomizes this perspective, expresses it as follows: “The Brahman authors and redactors to whom we owe the epic’s latest revisions sought to legitimize with all the rhetorical means [at their disposal] a social structure in which they could claim the dominant role. Already since the late Vedic period the battle for supremacy between the Kṣatriyas and Brahmans was a constant topic. [...] The picture we encounter here is by no means a balanced one, but rather, reflects the view of the epic’s Brahmanic revisionists, and this view is to a great extent driven by their interests and ideologically prejudiced.” Georg von Simson, *Mahābhārata: Die Große Erzählung von den Bhāratas* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 591. Text-critically, this view has been shown to be untenable: von Simson is merely attempting to revive the anti-Brahmanism of nineteenth-century German Indology. But here, instead of reprising these arguments against German reconstructions of an earlier, pre-Brahmanic version of the epic, which we have comprehensively refuted, I wish to show that the Mahābhārata, though located within the world of Brahmanic ritual and philosophy, nevertheless develops a stunning *intellectual* critique of Brahmanism as a privilege system. That critique not only undermines the traditional view of *varṇa* as based on *kula* and *janma*; it also refutes facile generalizations about the epic as embodying the caste and class ideology of “Brahmins.” For examples of the latter approach, see Shalini Shah, “Patriarchy and Property in the Mahabharata,” *Social Science Probings* 6, nos. 1–4 (1989): 10–18; Uma Chakravarti, “Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 14 (1993): 579–85; Romila Thapar, “War in the Mahabharata,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 124, no. 5, Special Topic: War (2009): 1830–33; and Smita Sahgal, “Gendered Inquiry into Niyoga: Appraising the Institution from the Perspective of Female Actors,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 72, no. 1 (2011): 179–92. It is no coincidence that the majority of these studies are by

Scholars have often focused on the episode of Dharma being cursed by Māṇḍavya (Mahābhārata 1.101),<sup>4</sup> but in this contribution, I focus on the plight of Vidura, who is

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Indian authors: apparently, the Mahābhārata is less a text than a scapegoat in the perpetual culture wars in the subcontinent. The reading I advance here, however, though not blind to contemporary issues of power and privilege, is based on a close reading of key passages from the text. As such, it sets aside polemics and position-taking, to focus on how the central conflict in the text appears from the perspective of marginalized characters such as Vidura and Draupadī. I argue that these characters actually orchestrate the downfall of the Kuru patriarchy: thus, provided we read it attentively, the epic emerges as an indictment rather than a validation of a heteronormative caste and clan-based social order. For a critique of von Simson's views, see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism* (London: Anthem, 2018). For the background of these views, particularly their debt to nineteenth-century ideas of a Brahmanic "takeover" or "redaction" of the epic, see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), particularly chapters 1–2. Simson's reconstruction of an earlier version of the Mahābhārata without the Bhagavadgītā is also critiqued in chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> S. G. Kantawala, "The Legend of Aṅgī Māṇḍavya," in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata: Prof. R. K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995), 101–9 surveys the different versions of the episode in the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas. See also the older survey in N. B. Utgikar, "The story of Aṅgī Māṇḍavya in Sanskrit and Buddhistic Sources," *Proceedings and Transactions of the Second Oriental Conference* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1922), 221–38. Only Utgikar's conclusion need be cited here: "The Story in the *Ādiparvan* remains therefore as the original form of the story from which the other versions might be reasonably supposed to have borrowed. This Epic version however comes only in an *upākhyāna*, an episode, very probably not existing in the original *Bhārata* Epic (using the word Epic in its true sense) but only added to this during the period when this was being evolved to be the great (*Mahā*) *Bhārata*, the repository of all ancient legends and stories" (238). A. D. Pusalkar, in "Epic and Purāṇic Studies," in *Studies in the Epics and Purāṇas* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1955), 82–225, provides the fascinating detail that Lacchmi Dhar Sastri "sees in the Aṅgī Māṇḍavya episode in the *Mbh* a parallel to the accounts of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. According to him, Aṅgī Māṇḍavya is 'a representation of representation of Jesus Christ in the *Mbh* in the most important aspects of his life and character ... The teaching of Aṅgī Māṇḍavya represents the teaching of Jesus Christ, repudiates *Karma* and upholds faith, hope, and charity" (115). Presumably, the stake provides the point of comparison (though Sage Māṇḍavya is anally pierced rather than crucified), whereas the fact that he does not die even after being impaled may recall the Resurrection. Robert Goldman in "Karma, Guilt, and Buried Memories: Public Fantasy and Private Reality in Traditional India," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 3 (1985): 413–25 views the episode as an example of "how the popular traditional literature attempts to personalize the impersonal operation of the law of *karma*." Goldman argues that the story represents "a position intermediate between the religio-philosophical notion of *karma* as an abstract and impersonal principle, a 'law of nature' and the epic/purāṇic transposition whereby one may incur positive or negative '*karma*' through deference or abuse respectively directed to powerful and heavily cathected figure" (418–19). Insofar as these developmental hypotheses depend on a reliable dating of texts, their value is negligible. Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) does not add significantly to these studies, other than to note: "Dharma's harshness is softened by the mitigations pronounced by the sage. The result is a Dharma or Yama more appropriate to human frailties, one given to compassion, indeed, one whom the sage curses not by Dharma-Yama's own harsh prior principle of *lex talionis* ..., which would result in another impalement in the series, another stake for a stake, but by the new principle of *maryāda*—'limit,' 'propriety'—which submits Dharma or Yama to function as the impersonal principle of *dharma* in response to such specifically human traits as childhood sexuality and violence, amnesia (Aṅgī Māṇḍavya forgets that he tortured the insects), latency, and adult accountability. It is clearly more 'humane' to be born in the womb of a Śūdra than impaled, although there is no evidence that the text views either as any more or less human" (195). Albrecht Wezler, "The Story of Aṅgī Māṇḍavya as Told in the *Mahābhārata*: Its Significance for Indian Legal and Religious History," in *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and Its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, ed. Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz

God Dharma born from a *sūdrayoni* (1.57.80d and 81b). Lexically, the word *sūdra* appears approximately 289 times in the constituted text of the critical edition of the Mahābhārata, with a significant number of occurrences (sixteen) occurring in the compound *sūdrayoni*. A semantic map of the term *sūdra* thus reveals the ramifications of this term for Vidura's outsider status. Besides interpreting Vidura's status as a critique of privilege, this contribution also analyzes the relationship of the character Vidura to the overall plot and presentation of virtue in the Mahābhārata. Did Vidura's plight in the plot make Vyāsa feel so guilty that he felt he must compose a Veda for women and Śūdras? Or is Vidura an eloquent testimony to the overall theme of the Mahābhārata: a cautionary tale of justice, ignoring which, systems of privilege destroy themselves?

The second word I examine is *dharma*, a word with multiple meanings, though most often translated as "Law," "ethics," or "justice."<sup>5</sup> This contribution clarifies some of those meanings as they pertain to Vidura's identity with God Dharma. The text-historical approach to *dharma* in the Mahābhārata focuses on whether *dharma* is a conceptual descendent of Vedic *ṛta*,<sup>6</sup> but this approach is insufficient to explain the pathos of Vidura's narrative. Nor is the tragic presentation of *dharma* a justification either for antinomianism or for advocating *adhharma*.<sup>7</sup> Vidura's narrative leaves us with a humbler

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(Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 533–556 largely recycles Utgikar's study, without contributing anything of significance.

<sup>5</sup> See James L. Fitzgerald, "Dharma and its Translations in the Mahābhārata," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32, no. 5/6 (2004): 671–85.

<sup>6</sup> See Paul Hacker, "Dharma im Hinduismus," *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 49 (1965): 93–106 and Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1988), particularly the chapter "Dharma in the Self-Understanding of Traditional Hinduism," 310–33; and see also Fitzgerald's article, cited earlier.

<sup>7</sup> In *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), Emily T. Hudson reads Draupadī's disrobing in the dicing match as evidence that "not only do Draupadī's husbands and her elders fail her, but, by extension, *śāstric* learning fails her; ritual sacrifices fail her; familial ties fail her; her standing in society fails her. So too does her virtue fail her; *dharma* fails her" (99), and from this, she draws the antinomian conclusion that one must "perform *dharma* for the sake of nothing" (33; cf. similar formulations at 103–4 and see also 212 and 218–19). At 219, Hudson claims that "the notion of *dharma* performed for the sake of something, particularly for the sake of acquiring merit to safeguard one from misfortune... is a fundamentally flawed conception of *dharma*." However, as I have shown in the Hudson review—Vishwa Adluri, "Ethics and Hermeneutics in the Mahābhārata," review of *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*, by Emily Hudson, *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 20, no. 3 (2016): 385–92—this is a tragically foreshortened view of not only the workings of *dharma* but also the operation of the epic plot. The present article continues this argument against seeing in the Mahābhārata either a justification of the status quo or nihilism about the possibility of improving one's lot in life. The Mahābhārata is specifically against the kind of pessimism and moral relativism that Hudson espouses; contrary to her thesis, it provides a full-throated affirmation of the importance of cleaving to *dharma* particularly in the face of adversity. Finally, we may also dismiss Doniger's claim that, whereas "the public transcript [in the *sāstras*] is the message of dharma, put there by the dominant Brahmins and designed for the control of the other, subaltern classes," there also exists a "hidden transcript, the subversion of dharma," which was "put there not by subalterns but by another branch of those same Brahmins, designed to challenge the stranglehold of dharma on both them and the other classes." First, Doniger is simply projecting her own interests when she claims that "they did this ... not to fulfill a deep revolutionary agenda or a desire to undermine the powers of other sorts of Brahmins, but simply out of their primary allegiance to their own goals: Kautilya to maintain power, Vatsyayana to facilitate pleasure, in both cases without letting dharma get in their way." The thesis is neither textually nor historically verifiable, and suffers from the psychologistic fallacy. Second, Doniger's assertion that "the Mahabharata had already deconstructed this aspect of dharma [that is, *dharma* as

but more dependable method: the interpretive method, whereby we carefully track how privilege trumps *dharma* in the epic. Vidura the outsider is a witness to how Hāstinapura insiders conducted politics. If we apply the rule that a son gains his *varṇa* from the lineage of both parents, as is seen in the case of Vidura, then Vyāsa himself would be a *sūta*,<sup>8</sup> which would make Vidura a *sūtaputra*. If so, the “author” Vyāsa, the *sūta* (be it the author or the bard Lomaharṣaṇa or the son of a bard Ugraśravas), and Vidura appear to be working together to expound the puzzling, fragile, and subtle aspects of *dharma*. Can justice never be safeguarded against privilege, especially when privilege is secured through legal codes of inheritance?

Moments before the ghastly war, Arjuna raises the question of *varṇasaṃkara* (Mahābhārata 6.23.41 and 43; Bhagavadgītā 1.41 and 43). Kṛṣṇa does not respond explicitly, as if he had other and more important messages for Arjuna. Does Kṛṣṇa provide an implicit vindication of Vidura in the Bhagavadgītā? When, in the concluding *parvan* of the Mahābhārata, Vyāsa bemoans the abandonment of *dharma* with uplifted arms,<sup>9</sup> is he thinking of the principle of justice or does he mean the abandonment of Dharma, his son Vidura?

### Vidura in the Mahābhārata

On the eve of the great war, as debates rage over the inheritance of the throne of Hāstinapura, Vidura helplessly stands by *dharma*. His helplessness stems from a lack of privilege.<sup>10</sup> Vidura is biologically the son of Vyāsa, legally the son of Vicitravīrya, and wise stepbrother to the dead Pāṇḍu and the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra; intelligent, ethical,

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“ethics” rather than “power” or “pleasure”] long before any of our *śāstras* were composed. ‘Dharma is subtle,’ insists the *Mahabharata*, which in practice means that dharma is intrinsically impossible to achieve” is exactly as flawed as Hudson’s claim, cited earlier, that the Mahābhārata intends us to “perform *dharma* for the sake of nothing.” This is exactly the conclusion the Kuru elders led by Bhīṣma arrive at, and for this they pay the ultimate price. For the Doniger citations, see Wendy Doniger, *Against Dharma: Dissent in the Ancient Indian Sciences of Sex and Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 22 and 59–60.

<sup>8</sup> Mānavadharmasāstra 10.11.17 defines a *sūta* as the son of a Kṣatriya father and a Brāhmaṇa mother. In Vyāsa’s case, these positions are reversed, so that he is the son of a Brāhmaṇa father (Parāśara) and a Kṣatriya mother (Satyavatī). The point, however, is that he is as much of mixed parentage as his son, which further adds to the critique of purity of lineage in the Mahābhārata. I cite the Manusmṛti according to Olivelle’s edition: Patrick Olivelle, ed. and trans., *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> ūrdhvabāhur viraumy eṣa na ca kaś cic chṛṇoti me |

dharmād arthaś ca kāmaś ca sa kimarthaṃ na sevyate || (Mahābhārata 18.5.49)

<sup>10</sup> The term *adhikāra* means eligibility, especially for performance of ritual viewed not only as an individual’s duty, but also as the discharge of an obligation to society by performing one of the four essential functions that define *varṇa* or social class. There is a side to *adhikāra*, which is based on aptitude and training; by *earning* a diploma, the candidate is “entitled to all the rights, privileges, and obligations that pertain to that degree.” This earned privilege is not the same as unearned privilege, accruing from mere birth in a social class or an influential family; although there can be overlap of these two senses (cf. legacy admissions in Ivy League universities). In this latter case of privilege, both society and the individual are harmed: society, because it loses the service of a capable citizen, and the individual because he is unjustly disadvantaged for lacking access to unearned privilege. It is this second sense of privilege that I mean throughout this paper. Terms such *anuśaṃsa*, *prakriyā*, *pūrvabhāj*, *parihārya*, etcetera add confusion, rather than providing a useful equivalent for “privilege” in this essay. The Mahābhārata is especially concerned with privilege that accrues through birth, and is interested in condemning the genealogical transfer of privilege to unworthy sons through endogamy and inheritance.

eloquent, and equipped with every political virtue; yet, even when his older stepbrothers are disqualified for kingship, he does not stand third in line for his patrimony.

Vyāsa declares that Vidura is Vicitravīrya's son: with the ritual *niyoga*, through his virility, Vidura was begotten on Vicitravīrya's "field" (*vaicitravīryake kṣetre*; Mahābhārata 15.35.14; Vaiśampāyana concurs at 1.100.30). Vyāsa calls him the great intellect, a great *yogī*, a great-souled one, indeed, the very great-souled one (*mahābuddhir mahāyogī mahātmā sumahāmanāḥ*; 15.35.12). Moreover, Vidura was nourished by truth, self-control, tranquility, liberality, and that greatest of virtues: *ahiṃsā* or non-violence (15.35.17).

Vyāsa, who calls Vidura the God of gods (*devadeva*) and declares him superior to Bṛhaspati and Śukra, the Brāhmaṇa priests of the gods and titans (Mahābhārata 15.35.13), is rightly proud of his third *niyoga* son, the best among the wisest (*sarvabuddhimatām varah*; 1.100.26; only Yudhiṣṭhira and Sanatsujāta share this title at 15.17.2 and 5.41.3). Not only Vidura, but also the woman on whom Vidura was begotten pleased the Ṛṣi: whereas Vicitravīrya's Kṣatriya wives Ambikā and Ambālikā receive curses, Vyāsa tells the maiden that she will no longer be a servant girl (*abhujīṣyā bhaviṣyasi*) and that her womb is auspicious (1.100.26).

But despite all these excellent merits, Vidura is disqualified even among a brood of unfit brothers, *solely* because his mother is a Śūdra woman. His biography is thus a painful narrative of exclusion of the best and the triumph of blind privilege. Even patriarchy in the form of his father Vyāsa cannot come to his rescue. Though born of the womb of a fish, Satyavatī, who is the daughter of the king of fishermen and hence a Kṣatriya woman, is able to rid herself of her fishy smell by cohabiting with Parāśara (Mahābhārata 1.57.65). By contrast, her son Vyāsa, though endowed with awesome austerities, cannot undo the stigma of birth from a Śūdra womb for Vidura.

Vidura's pedigree is a puzzle that stands out in the "genealogical riddle" of the Mahābhārata.<sup>11</sup> If he was conceived within the ritual of *niyoga*, Vidura would be a Kṣatriya, taking on the *varṇa* of his legal father, Vicitravīrya. Vyāsa could also confer *his* *varṇa* on Vidura. But Vicitravīrya is dead, and Vyāsa is bound by the rules of *niyoga*. Or is he? Vidura is not, in *sensu stricto*, an issue of *niyoga*. Ambikā had sent her slave girl (*dāsī*; Mahābhārata 1.100.23) to Vyāsa as a substitute for herself. Bhīṣma and Satyavatī authorize Vyāsa's ritual insemination of the Kuru widows, but the substitution of the serving girl is not part of this ritual contract.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the *dāsī* ends up giving pleasure to Vyāsa, which is not the point of the austere ritual of *niyoga*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Vyāsa *could* have given his Brāhmaṇa *varṇa* to Vidura. In doing so, he would be following his father Parāśara, who gave his *varṇa* to Vyāsa, a son who, again in *sensu stricto*, ought to be a *sūta*. Finally, even if Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra were *aurasa* or legitimate heirs (primogeniture and succession destroyed by prenatal and postnatal curses), Manu anyway

<sup>11</sup> I borrow the term from van Buitenen: see J. A. B. van Buitenen, "Introduction," in J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans. *The Mahābhārata I: The Book of the Beginning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xviii. I cite extensively from van Buitenen later in the text.

<sup>12</sup> The most extensive recent account I know of is David Brick, *Widows Under Hindu Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). See particularly chapter 2, "Widow Remarriage and *Niyoga*."

<sup>13</sup> Arti Dhand, "The Subversive Nature of Virtue in the Mahābhārata: A Tale about Women, Smelly Ascetics, and God," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 1 (2004): 33–58.

recommends that legitimate heirs share the patrimony with all other sons (Mānavadharmasāstra 9.163).<sup>14</sup>

Droṇa twice notes that Pāṇḍu gave the throne to *both* Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura (Mahābhārata 5.146.4 and 8); Gāndhārī counts Vidura in the line of Kuru succession while affirming Yudhiṣṭhira’s claim (5.146.30). Nevertheless, Dhṛtarāṣṭra ends up on the throne and the text notes that “Vidura stood below him [Dhṛtarāṣṭra] like a humble servant and waited upon him, holding up the tail hair fan” (5.146.6) These passages occur in the context of debates about the inheritance of the Kuru kingdom. Before Droṇa’s words and Gāndhārī’s judgment, two others speak up. Bhīṣma recounts his role in arranging the *niyoga* ritual with Vyāsa. Thereafter, addressing Bhīṣma, Vidura “lifts his voice, turning to his father and looking him in the face” and begs him to prevent the war. “After you created me and the lustrous king Dhṛtarāṣṭra as a painter who creates a painting, do not destroy us now” (5.146.22). These two speeches by the “father” and the “son” present their relationship with the metaphors of painter and Prajāpati: they point to paternity near and far.<sup>15</sup> Bhīṣma is Vidura’s father by the same pretense with which he assumes the role of the *pitāmaha* in Hāstinapura. Just as Bhīṣma was silent about Draupadī’s question about *dharma* in the assembly hall, the patriarch also remains silent on Vidura’s place in the kingly succession. Bhīṣma, who engineered the marriage and birth of Vicitravīrya’s sons, and their marriages, finds a “bastard daughter” for Vidura (*pārasavīm kanyām*; 1.106.12; technically the daughter of a Brāhmaṇa man and a Śūdra woman, or a son by another’s wife). Bhīṣma’s *sāvṛṇa* choice of bride for Vidura is cruel irony. Forsaken, Vidura remains a *kṣatta* by profession. By birth he is “legally” the son of the dead Vicitravīrya and an ex-Śūdra woman, an outsider misbegotten in the ritual of procreation.

From the curse of Māṇḍavya in the Ādiparvan (Mahābhārata 1.101) to Vidura entering the body of Yudhiṣṭhira in the Āśramavāsikaparvan (15.33); from his helplessness in preventing the dicing game and the humiliation of Draupadī to his immense power in being able to summon Sanatsujāta, “the eternal one of excellent pedigree” (5.41.5); in his fearlessly giving voice to Draupadī’s issue with *dharma* in the assembly hall (2.60.155–75) when Bhīṣma dithers and Yudhiṣṭhira remains silent (2.62.15 and 2.60.9); in his ability to save the lives of the Pāṇḍavas in the lacquer house (1.133.15–25 and 1.135.1–15), and his inability to teach ethics to the witless Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura embodies the painful vicissitudes of *dharma*. Indeed, God Dharma is unique in having two manifestations, as both father and as son: Vidura and Yudhiṣṭhira. Vidura is Dharma himself, but God Dharma also engenders Yudhiṣṭhira as his gift to Kuntī. When

<sup>14</sup> In Olivelle’s translation: “The natural son is the sole master of his father’s wealth; nevertheless, so as not to be unkind, he should provide maintenance for others.”

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan comments on this passage as well. After noting that “Greg Bailey has observed that Bhīṣma and Brahmā share the appellation *pitāmaha*, are impartial in the conflicts between the Pāṇḍavas/gods and the Kauravas/demons, and that both ‘are great teachers of *dharma*,’ he adds: “indeed, one could further, citing the impassioned plea of Vidura, third son of Vyāsa at the Bhārata court, to his ‘father’ Bhīṣma. ‘After creating Dhṛtarāṣṭra and me, O brilliant sir, like a painter creates a painting, do not destroy us now, as Prajāpati, creating creatures, then destroys them’ (5.146.22).” Sullivan, however, holds that “Bhīṣma’s correspondence with Brahmā Prajāpati is not as strong as this simile and Bailey’s note seem to indicate. For the epic poets, Bhīṣma was an incarnation Dyaus Pitṛ, not Brahmā; just as these two deities are somewhat similar, so also are Bhīṣma and Vyāsa.” Bruce M. Sullivan, “The Religious Authority of the Mahābhārata: Vyāsa and Brahmā in the Hindu Scriptural Tradition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 2 (1994): 377–401; here: 391.

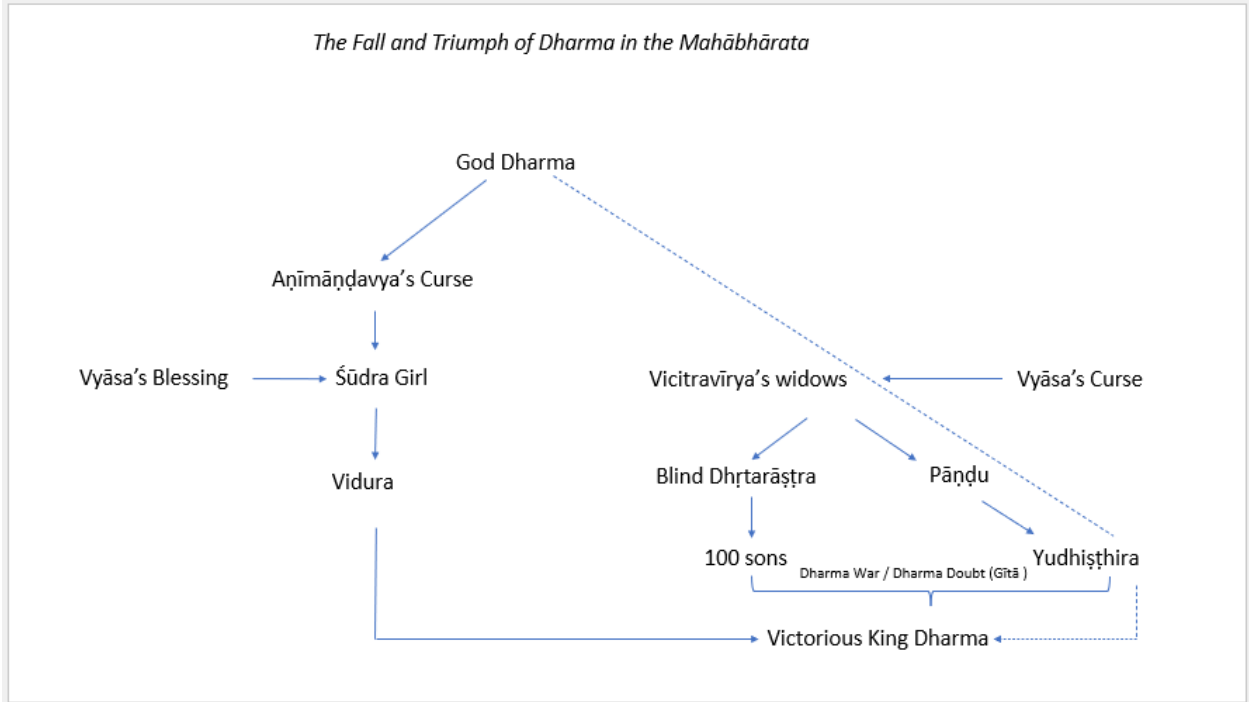
Vidura dies, he “enters” Yudhiṣṭhira and lives on in him, just as a father lives on through his son. Vidura never receives a funeral.

When victory goes to Yudhiṣṭhira, who is a *dharma* image of Vidura, the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra lives on the dregs of despair, grieving his hundred dead sons. Vaiśampāyana grimly notes that only Vidura, Saṃjaya, and Yuyutsu “Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son by his *vaiśya* wife” took care of the old, defeated king (Mahābhārata 15.1.5). All three are children of mixed *varṇas*, with diminished privileges. Yudhiṣṭhira Dharmarāja knows the difference between justice and privilege: he tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that Yuyutsu is his *aurasa putra* (15.6.7), a “legitimate” son, even though he was born from a *vaiśya* womb, and recommends that Dhṛtarāṣṭra give the kingdom to Yuyutsu. This wisdom—too little and too late—is the very perspective that vindicates the disenfranchised Vidura to his privileged brother.

### **Patriline and Privilege**

The biography of Vidura is simple. God Dharma metes out justice according to the law of one’s *karma*. Ṛṣi Aṅgīrṣa had once impaled an insect with a blade of grass, and in consequence finds himself impaled on a stake. Enraged, he curses God Dharma to be born in a Śūdra womb. Summoned by his mother to perform *niyoga* on her two widowed daughters-in-law, Vyāsa fathers Vidura in the womb of a servant girl of the Hāstinapura royal family. Thus, although technically Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, and Vidura are half-brothers, Vidura is reduced to a mere *kṣatta*: his duties are to wait upon Dhṛtarāṣṭra, running errands and providing good counsel. God Dharma also grants Kuntī a son, Yudhiṣṭhira. Yudhiṣṭhira Dharmarāja is a partial incarnation of God Dharma. Towards the end of the epic, when Yudhiṣṭhira regains his kingdom, Dhṛtarāṣṭra goes to the forest with Gāndhārī and Kuntī; Vidura accompanies the three of them. There, he becomes accomplished in *yoga*, and transfers himself into the body of Yudhiṣṭhira. Dharma becomes whole again.

The issue of Dharma being cursed to be born from a *śūdrayoni* is significant to the stated purpose of the epic: it is a *dharma* text, a Veda especially meant for the dirempted—women and Śūdras. The victory of Yudhiṣṭhira is the triumph of *dharma*.



In contrast to the Vidura genealogy of *dharma*, the genealogy of the Kurus is beset with complications. The Aṅīmāṇḍavya-upākhyāna is the fourth in the Ādiparvan, the first being the Śakuntalā-upākhyāna. In the first *upākhyāna*, the legitimacy of King Duṣanta's marriage to Śakuntalā and the legitimacy of the heir to the throne, Bharata are debated (Mahābhārata 1.68.10–69.30). To understand the significance of the relation between these two *upākhyānas*, let us recall some features of the Mahābhārata's genealogical design. We can do no better than cite van Buitenen's summary *in extenso*.

As is obvious from this outline of the barest skeleton of the central story of the great epic, the plot is extremely complex. The succession rights of the male descendants are a genealogist's nightmare, and, to me at least, there is little doubt that the story was in part *designed* as a riddle. Whatever historical realities may also have been woven into the epic, it is not an accident of dynastic history; however fortuitous its career of expansion, it is not an accident of literary history. The grand framework was a *design*. ...

One of the striking features of *The Mahābhārata* is the complexity of paternity, demanded indeed by the central succession conflict. This conflict begins with the great-Grandfather Śaṃtanu, who had an eldest son, Bhīṣma, by the river goddess Ganges. We might expect to find so eminently qualified an issue to become heir. But no; the father falls in love with a fisher girl, and her uncanny father insists that *her* issue shall inherit. Bhīṣma gives in, and also promises to sire no children of his own.

Whatever else these rather dramatic developments were intended to convey, they leave us in the grandfather generation with a grandsire patriarchally uncommitted to either party in the later generations for whom he is able to act as an arbitrator. But this presence of Bhīṣma, surely essential to the epic, seems to





a good set of key concepts by which to approach the design of the text. Although I disagree with van Buitenen's "history" of the composition of the text and his demarcation of a "central story" from what he terms "fuzzy edges" and "the second perimeter," theses that have no basis in the critical edition of the Mahābhārata,<sup>17</sup> he nonetheless admits that, even in the central story we find a grand design. While van Buitenen uses this very design to demarcate the "central story" from its "fuzzy edges," I will demonstrate that this design is hardly the work of "heralds" lauding a Kṣatriya epic,<sup>18</sup> but a complex and coherent narrative explicating the central problems of *dharma*.

One of these problems already arises in the *dharma-saṃvāda* or the *dharma* debate in the Śakuntalā-upākhyāna. It concerns legitimate heirs and the requirements of

<sup>17</sup> For a critique, see Vishwa Adluri, "The Critical Edition and its Critics: A Retrospective of *Mahābhārata* Scholarship," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 7–8. See also Vishwa Adluri, "Frame Narratives and Forked Beginnings: Or, How to Read the *Ādiparvan*," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 184, n. 31.

<sup>18</sup> This has been the dominant view—or shall we call it a prejudice?—of the epic for nearly two centuries. I have already shown at length elsewhere why this approach is untenable: the argument has been made from both intellectual-historical (*The Nay Science*), text-critical (*Philology and Criticism*), interpretive ("The Divine Androgyne" and "Vasu(s) in the Mahābhārata"), and text-historical ("Paradigm Lost") perspectives. It only remains to draw these different strands of argument together into one comprehensive perspective, which is the aim of the present contribution and my previous contribution to the AAR Mahābhārata Seminar—"Fathers and Sons: Deconstructing Paternity and Engendering Literature," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (forthcoming). Here, for those unacquainted with the history of Mahābhārata scholarship, I provide a brief summary of how this prejudice came about: Christian Lassen first proposed that "the collection was primarily intended for the warrior caste" and attributed the text's current form to a Brahmanic "revision" (*Bearbeitung*) of an originally Kṣatriya text. Christian Lassen, "Beiträge zur Kunde des Indischen Altertums aus dem *Mahābhārata* I: Allgemeines über das *Mahābhārata*," *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* (1837): 85. Lassen's thesis that the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa "actually constitute the literature of the *ks'atrija*" (85) was further bolstered by Holtzmann Jr., who, drawing on Max Müller, Weber, and others, affirmed that "the epic had nothing to do with the religious literature of the Brahmans, as it is represented in the *Veda*; it was the property of the warrior caste." Adolf Holtzmann Jr. *Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata* (Kiel: C. F. Haessler, 1892), 51. Holtzmann Jr. forcefully articulated this sentiment in several forms, including "*the old epic poetry is the property of the warrior caste*" (57; italics in original) and "the religious literature of the Brahmans ran alongside the epic literature, both [were] completely independent of each other, only occasionally mutually using each other" (61). Lassen's hypothesis was enthusiastically received, as it dovetailed with the prevailing anti-clericalism of the time (for a discussion see Adluri and Bagchee, *The Nay Science*; see also *Philology and Criticism*, 269 and 313, n. 359). Goldstücker, in a review of Lassen's views on the epic added details of the Brahmans' alleged "addiction to spiritual domination" (Theodor Goldstücker, "Hindu Epic Poetry: The Mahābhārata," *The Westminster Review*, n.s., 33 [1868]: 388), whereas Holtzmann Jr., making explicit comparisons between Brahman "priests" and Catholic clergy, expanded the thesis into a virulent anti-Brahmanic polemic. The hypothesis survives in van Buitenen's idea that the epic was "in the third phase brahminized" (van Buitenen, "Introduction," xxiii) and in J. D. Smith's assertion, "in the process the character of the work underwent a significant change: the bardic Kṣatriya epic whose early existence we can deduce ... ended up becoming a gigantic compendium of chiefly brahmanical lore." John D. Smith, trans. *The Mahabharata* (2009: xiii). It also features in a series of articles by Fitzgerald, in which he gives renewed rein to the anti-Brahmanism of Holtzmann. Finally, Hildebeitel has sought to revive this prejudice with his thesis of the southern recension of the Mahābhārata as a Brahmanical "makeover." See Alf Hildebeitel, "From R̥ṣidharma to Vānaprastha: The Southern Recension Makeover of the Mahābhārata's Umā-Maheśvara Saṃvāda," In *Churning the Ocean of the Epics and Purāṇas: Papers from the Epics and Purāṇas Section of the 15th World Sanskrit Conference, New Delhi, January 2012*, ed. Simon Brodbeck, Adam Bowles, and Alf Hildebeitel (New Delhi: Dev Books, 2018), 34–63, relying on T. P. Mahadevan, "On the Southern Recension of the Mahābhārata, Brahman Migrations, and the Brāhmī Paleography," *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2008): 43–147.

the proper ritual and witnesses required to codify a marriage. The love between the king and the maiden is clear enough and sufficiently private, but when presenting a legitimate heir, an entire political-social order needs to be invoked, one that is invariably ritual.<sup>19</sup> We need not understand ritual in the strict sense of sacred ritual: even a modern, democratic society based on freedoms and rights of citizens cannot exist without proper procedure established by law. The question of legal inheritance concerns not only every society, but also every family, indeed, every successful procreative act. We may wish to reduce it to an individual's will and testament, but this too needs to be ritually attested.

### **The Inheritance Gamble: Desire and Death**

Having established the *dharma* framework (Vidura–Yudhiṣṭhira) and the complicated genealogy of the Kurus, let us proceed directly to the second book of the Mahābhārata, the Sabhāparvan. This section contains a close reading of the key chapters of this *parvan*, to underscore the role Vidura plays in the events leading to Draupadī's disrobing and the exile of the Pāṇḍavas.

The aim of this close reading is to investigate the claim that Mahābhārata is a *strī-śūdra-veda*. Whereas much ink has been spilt from a feminist perspective on the outrage perpetrated against Draupadī, to my knowledge, no scholar has read the critical scene of the dicing-hall from a Śūdra perspective. In the following sections, I therefore propose shifting focus from Draupadī's tragic situation to a critical analysis of how *dharma* and its disenfranchisement are enacted from the *śūdrayoni* perspective. Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī (who is often referred to as the Pāṇḍavas' "lawful wife," *dharmapatnī*; for example at Mahābhārata 1.200.2; cf. *ekā dharmapatnī*; 1.200.17; Dhṛtarāṣṭra warns Duryodhana at 2.63.25 that she is a *dharmapatnī*; cf. also 3.13.58 and 3.46.20) emerge as subjects of the critical voice of God Dharma, the one keeping silent and the other spurring the assembled members to answer her *dharma* question.

Duryodhana, seeing the fortunes of Yudhiṣṭhira, successfully consecrated with the *rājasūya* sacrifice, burns with envy, rage, and contemplates suicide (Mahābhārata 2.43.20–35). To bring down Yudhiṣṭhira, Śakuni proposes a dicing match (2.44.15–20). Dhṛtarāṣṭra is reluctant at first but agrees to his son's wicked scheme without consulting Vidura (2.45.45). Later, on Vidura's advice, Dhṛtarāṣṭra wavers, but Duryodhana and Śakuni convince him to proceed with the game. Duryodhana argues: "Bṛhaspati has said that the way of kings differs from the way of the world, and that therefore the king should endeavor always to think of his own profit. The baron's way, great king, is to be devoted to victory; let it be *dharma*, or *adharmā*...as long as it is *his way*" (*sa vai dharmo 'stv adharmo vā svavṛttau*; 2.50.15c; van Buitenen trans. modified).

After this second round of discussion, Vidura protests again, but Dhṛtarāṣṭra remains firm and sends Vidura to invite the Pāṇḍavas to game (Mahābhārata 2.51.20–25). When Vidura warns Yudhiṣṭhira that the dicing game will bring misfortune (*dyūtam anarthamūlam*; 2.52.11), Yudhiṣṭhira simply ignores his advice. In response to the warning, he asks who else, besides Duryodhana, will join the gambling (2.52.12). When the game begins, Śakuni wins by resorting to trickery (*nikṛtiṃ samupāśritaḥ*). This phrase is repeated fourteen times at Mahābhārata 2.54.7, 15, 18, 23, 27, 29 and 2.58.4, 6, 8, 10,

<sup>19</sup> This aspect is emphasized in the southern manuscripts, but it is not an addition of "ritualistic" Brāhmaṇas as Hildebeitel thinks.

15, 21, 25, and 28. Chapters 2.55–57 contain two speeches: one by Vidura (2.55 and 56) and another by Duryodhana (2.57).

Vidura interrupts the dicing and angrily speaks out against Duryodhana to Dhṛtarāṣṭra (Mahābhārata 2.55, 56). Even as Duryodhana (an Asura) had co-opted Br̥haspati, the priest of the gods in justifying *adharmā*, Vidura quotes Kāvya, the priest of the Asuras, in supporting *dharma*: “To save the family, abandon a man; to save the village, abandon a family; to save the country, abandon a village; to save the soul, abandon all earth” (2.55.10). He implores Dhṛtarāṣṭra to abandon the jackal Duryodhana and favor the Pāṇḍava tigers (2.55.9). In 2.56, Vidura warns against the war that will result from the dicing game, a war that will be the extinction of men (2.56.5). Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not respond but Duryodhana does. Among the insults he hurls at Vidura, the following ones are significant for our argument: Vidura is partial to the Pāṇḍavas and despises the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (2.57.1); Vidura’s argument is colored by his partiality (2.57.2); this partiality is treachery; nothing is more sinful than fratricide (*bhartṛghnatvān na hi pāpīya āhus*; 2.57.3); Vidura is unlearned (2.57.6); Vidura is an outsider, meddling in affairs that do not concern him (2.57.6); Duryodhana’s true teacher is one who teaches in the womb, that is, Duryodhana does not recognize any authority besides this inborn teaching (2.57.8); Vidura should leave; and finally, he is as untrustworthy as a cheating woman (2.57.7 and 12). Duryodhana’s precise words are: “a bad wife, though cajoled, will leave anyway!” (*sa yatrecchasi vidura tatra gaccha; susāntvitāpi hy asaṭī strī jahāti*; 2.57.12).

Vidura pleads for *dharma* by turning to his half-brother: “tell him, king, . . .” But to no avail. Vidura understands that all Duryodhana wants around him are flatterers (Mahābhārata 2.57.16); not someone who relies on *dharma* (2.57.18). He withdraws and the gambling continues; and with it the refrain of Śakuni tricking and winning (*nikṛtiṃ samupāśritaḥ*; 2.58.4).

Duryodhana’s speech deploys several strategies. Vidura is put in his place by repeatedly specifying his position as a mere *varṇa* role (*kṣatta*; Mahābhārata 2.57.3, 4, 7, and 12). This speech never addresses the argument Vidura made by quoting the priest of the Asuras; in fact, none of Vidura’s points are taken seriously. Rather, in a series of *ad hominem*s, Vidura is othered, his authority rejected, and his voice silenced. Vidura himself is now under suspicion, suspicion of fratricide no less. Dhṛtarāṣṭra does not deign to respond to his half-brother, nor intervenes as his son abuses him. On the contrary, the father repeats the son’s words to Vidura after the Pāṇḍavas leave for the forest. When Vidura advises him to make peace with the Pāṇḍavas, the blind king repeats “Now go where you want or stay if you must: a bad wife leaves, however much prayed!” (*yathēcchakaṃ gaccha vā tiṣṭha vā tvam; susāntvyamānāpy asaṭī strī jahāti*; 3.5.19).

Among these personal attacks (rather than argument for *dharma*), Duryodhana’s caricature of Vidura as a fickle woman stands out—indeed, so emphatically, that the blind father repeats it. To note the obvious, this is an insult in the male-dominated court. The Mahābhārata is not simply presenting the patriarchy as patriarchy (as historical-sociological approaches suggest) nor it is justifying patriarchy (as critical theory approaches suggest). The text presents, analyzes, deconstructs, and teaches justice in human affairs. In the present case, comparing Vidura to a woman is intended as an insult.

Yet, the feminine critique is not far off. In the humiliation of Draupadī, the reader is confronted with the horror of toxic masculinity on the part of the Kauravas. In contrast

to Vidura, whom Duryodhana accuses accused of being a “fickle woman” (*asatī*), Draupadī twice describes herself as being *satī* (Mahābhārata 2.62.8 and 10; Dhṛtarāṣṭra also calls her *satī* at 2.63.27).<sup>20</sup> She saves the Pāṇḍavas from slavery, as well as dramatically and poetically *justifying* the complete annihilation of the Kuru males. The feminine voice of Gandhārī’s reprimand also critiques the dominant male voices in this court. But most stunning is the genius of the epic in transforming and deploying the emasculating insult: as Vidurā, the feminine form of Vidura appears in the Udyogaparvan (Mahābhārata 5.131.1–134.14) on the eve of settling scores with the greedy and cruel Kauravas. At the end of the exile, when the Pāṇḍavas prepare for war, Kuntī, who is related to both Yudhiṣṭhira and Dharma (now in the form of Vidura), sends a message to her sons through Kṛṣṇa. Her message: the narrative of Vidurā, a Kṣatriya woman who exhorts her son to fight, live a bright if brief life, win or lose, and not be a eunuch! Vidurā berates her defeated, dejected son thus: “where did you come from? Neither I nor your father begot you! Too cowardly for anger, barely hanging on to a low branch, you are a man with the tools of a eunuch!” (*klībasādhanah*; 5.131.5). Kṛṣṇa explicitly repeats this insult in the Bhagavadgītā (*klaibyaṃ mā sma gamaḥ pārtha*; Bhagavadgītā 2.3). The *dharma* circuitry in the epic is as strong as it is subtle.

Besides deeper resonances, Vidura hurls these gendered insults back at Duryodhana, speaking to Dhṛtarāṣṭra directly:

Tell him, king that those (*puruṣaṃ*) who desert their friends

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<sup>20</sup> In the Virāṭaparvan Draupadī is actually called *asatī*. Here is the episode in Sutherland’s summary: “in the fourth book of the *Mahabharata*, the ‘Virataparvan’, Kicaka tries repeatedly to seduce the hapless Draupadī, here in the guise of the ‘independent’ maid servant, Sairandhri. Although her husbands are present at Virata’s court, they are disguised and are not allowed to acknowledge their relationship to Draupadī in public. Thus Draupadī is effectively anatha, with no man to defend her. In private, Draupadī complains of her plight to Bhīma. And although he is not allowed publicly to defend her, the two of them develop a plan by which Draupadī’s virtue, her *satitva*, can be maintained. Draupadī arranges a rendezvous with Kicaka; but Bhīma, in the guise of Draupadī, keeps the appointment and kills him. Kicaka’s relatives, upon seeing the body of their kin, turn on Draupadī: ‘When they had all gathered, a junior member of the Kicaka clan spoke, “This evil woman [*asatī*], for whose sake Kicaka was killed, must herself be quickly killed.’”” But as Sutherland notes, the attribution is actually improper, for “The dramatic situation has been carefully constructed to allow Draupadī to maintain her dignity and propriety, yet at the same time to expose her to yet another in a long series of sexual assaults. But what is crucial in this verse is the use of the word ‘*asatī*’. Sairandhri-Draupadī is considered an evil or bad woman, one who has sexually seduced a man and thereby has become *asatī*. The sexual seduction here is perforce a result of her status as a woman who has no lord as has been made explicit in an earlier passage where she is called ‘*araksita*’ and therefore is considered sexually available by Kicaka. Uncontrolled sexuality has long been recognised as flaw of unprotected women. In order for Draupadī, in the guise of Sairandhri, to function as a good woman again, at least in the eyes of Kicaka’s relatives, she must enter fire and die with him. Thus purifying herself, and showing ultimate devotion to the person whom they consider her lord, Kicaka.... Here Draupadī, considered *asatī*, is understood to have used her sexuality to bring about the fall of her ‘lord’, [i.e., Kicaka] and must burn alongside him. The sexual woman needs to be punished and returned to the man to whom she belongs. As she burns, her state of *asatitva* burns too, and once again she can become *satī*. If a woman does not accept this as her fate, her relatives can, it seems at least for the story at hand, take action on their own. That the resolution of this story does not follow these lines comes about because finally Kicaka is not Sairandhri’s lord or husband, and because her state of *asatitva*—generated from an absence of a husband—is only illusory. For, her real husbands, as the audience well knows, are present all the time, and are finally able, even though disguised, to protect Draupadī’s virtue.” Sally J. Sutherland, “Suttee, Sati, and Sahagamana: An Epic Misunderstanding?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 26 (1994): 1599–1600.

For this much alone see their friendships end...  
Who once has made a man (*puruṣam*) his friend  
And then reviles him is only a child!  
A stupid mind is led to no good,  
Nor a corrupt wench (*strī*) at a scholar's house.  
Of course it displeases this Bharata bull,  
As a sexagenarian displeases a girl (*patiḥ kumāryā iva ṣaṣṭivarṣaḥ*)!  
If all you would hear is what pleases you, prince,  
In all that you do, be it good or bad,  
As the women (*striya*), prince, and the dumb and the halt,  
Go ask those who are equally silly! (Mahābhārata 2.5.213–16)

Before we proceed further, let us think about another of Duryodhana's insult: "nothing is a greater sin than fratricide" (Mahābhārata 2.57.3). How would this apply to Vidura? Duryodhana, in a fit of rage, makes an unintentional confession: Vidura is Dhṛtarāṣṭra's brother, and taking the side of Pāṇḍavas harms the blind king. This is either a thoughtless slip by Duryodhana, or great confidence in Vidura's lack of privileges, despite being a brother to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. But for Vidura's lack of privileges due to his being born from a *śūdrayoni*, Duryodhana's confession might well place Vidura in succession to the throne.

Duryodhana's confidence, however, is misplaced, because the question of fraternity underscores the identity of the Pāṇḍavas as the heirs to another brother, Pāṇḍu. Duryodhana's removal of a discussion of *dharma* from the table, asserting the privileges of the court of the Kuru king, serves as a warning. Bhīṣma, Drona, Kṛpa, etcetera, indeed, all courtly eminences remain silent about the gambling; no one entertains the question of *dharma* introduced by Vidura. No one questions Duryodhana's impudence. The institution of Hāstinapura is but a sham court of those who decide who is "in" and who is "out," assembled in a royal hall, clinging to their privileges and gambling with Death. Perhaps this is the fate of *all* institutions, beginning with Prajāpati Dakṣa's sacrificial assembly. Just as Umā's grievance causes Rudra to destroy *that* august sacrificial *śāla*,<sup>21</sup> Draupadī enters this *sabhā* (like Satī in the Purāṇas), a gambling hall Dhṛtarāṣṭra had constructed for his son. Whereas Prajāpati stood at the inceptive moment of creation, Duryodhana is prevailing over a catastrophic moment, at the end of the *rajasūya* and at the beginning of the extinction of the Kuru lineage. This sacrificial loop will unfold through the great war and conclude in the duel between Duryodhana and Bhīma at the site of Prajāpati's *uttaravedi* (northern sacrificial fire).

Returning to the text at hand, after Vidura responds to Duryodhana's insults, he wishes the king and his son well. There is nothing in the text to suggest that Vidura leaves the scene, van Buitenen overtranslates *yathā tathā vo 'stu namaś ca vo 'stu; mamāpi ca svasti diśantu viprāḥ* (Mahābhārata 2.57.20) as "And this being so, I bid ye farewell, And may the priests give me their blessing!" In point of fact, Vidura speaks again after the next round of dice.

As already noted, no one in the assembly responds to Vidura. Only Śakuni enquires into Yudhiṣṭhira's wealth, cheats, and wins (Mahābhārata 2.58.2–10). Then,

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<sup>21</sup> See the Mokṣadharmaparvan for the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice: in the final duel, both Duryodhana and Bhīma are explicitly compared to Rudra, and Bhīma's destruction of the Kauravas compared with Arjuna's destruction of the Khāṇḍava.

Yudhiṣṭhira stakes his brothers Nakula and Sahadeva (2.58.10–15). Before wagering on Arjuna and Bhīma (2.58.20–25), Śakuni suggests that the twins, Yudhiṣṭhira’s half-brothers are less dear to Yudhiṣṭhira than his two full brothers. It is *here* that Yudhiṣṭhira speaks firmly about *adharmā*. Because his silence over Draupadī’s *dharma* question is so weighty, his utterance here, which concerns *adharmā*, should be taken seriously. Yudhiṣṭhira declares: *adharmam carase nūnam yo nāveksasi vai nayam | yo naḥ sumanasām mūḍha vibhedaṃ kartum icchasi ||* (2.58.7). Van Buitenen translates this sentence as: “Surely this is Unlaw that you are perpetrating, without looking to propriety! You want to pluck us like flowers!” But his translation is incorrect. Ganguli’s translation is more accurate: “Wretch! you actest sinfully in thus seeking to create disunion amongst us who are all of one heart, disregarding morality.” We can render this sentence as Yudhiṣṭhira saying, “Now you perpetrate *adharmā* by ignoring *naya* (proper conduct, polity, prudence); you wish, O fool, to divide those who are wise (*sumanasām*; well disposed, good).” Yudhiṣṭhira disapproves of Śakuni’s contention that he makes a distinction between brothers who shared the same womb as he, and those who are merely his half-brothers: *that would be adharmā*.

*This, then is the singular judgment about dharma made by Yudhiṣṭhira at the dicing game: making a distinction based on the womb of birth is adharmā.* The ramifications of this statement are far-reaching. Yudhiṣṭhira’s statement directly addresses the very person of *dharma*, Vidura. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Bhīṣma made a distinction between brothers based on the womb in which they were conceived. Vidura and Dhṛtarāṣṭra share the same father (be it Vyāsa or Vicitravīrya); the sole difference between them concerns their mothers’ wombs. Although his mother was a Śūdra, she was by *nature, conduct, and Vyāsa’s blessing*, a *dharmayoni*, Vidura is *sumanas*, endowed with grace and wisdom. And it would not be politically prudent (either for the Kuru clan or for the kingdom) to “other” such a brother, especially in favor of a blind king who does not know *naya*, especially a king who on account of his blindness, both physical and filial, is incapable of leading the kingdom. The word *nayana* means “leading,” but it also means “eye.” Yudhiṣṭhira’s statement only superficially rebukes Śakuni: in truth, it is a veiled but meaningful condemnation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra on behalf of Vidura. To discriminate against Vidura for being a *śūdrayoni* is *adharmā*. That is Dharmarāja’s stand on injustice: had *this adharmā* been avoided, the gambling match would never have occurred.

### ***Sumanas and Sensus Communis***

What is the proof that Vidura is *sumanas* in the fraternal sense of the Pāṇḍavas being *sumanas*, that is, in the sense in which Ganguly translates the word in this passage: “of one heart”? The first answer is that *sumanas* can be translated as the Pāṇḍava brothers being well-disposed to one another. When Dhṛtarāṣṭra tells Vidura to “go wherever he pleases” (Mahābhārata 2.5.19), Vidura heads to the forest to meet the Pāṇḍavas. Dhṛtarāṣṭra summons him back and Vidura returns with these words: “I have forgiven it, king. You are our highest guru. Indeed, I returned at once solely to see you. For, O tiger among men, men who are law-minded hasten to the aid of the oppressed, king, and do not give it a second thought” (3.7.21–22). Vidura is *sumanas* in the sense Yudhiṣṭhira’s statement conveys, even if unreciprocated by Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

We could also extend the meaning of *sumanas* to *sensus communis*, “common sense” in the traditional sense, where “ethical judgments” and “linguistic consensus” are

not divorced from each other. This is the sense in which Vico interprets this term. Philosophers such as Schaeffer correctly suggest that divorcing these two aspects of *sensus communis* leads to ethical relativism.<sup>22</sup> Their work highlights the danger of a “critical philosophy,” in which *sensus communis* is relegated solely to “aesthetics” due to Kant’s positing of the transcendental subject, a subject that is further valorized in modernity. Fortunately, this danger is averted here: Draupadī insists on rhetoric *and* ethics in an indivisible unity when she frames her *dharma* question in the *sabhā*. Yudhiṣṭhira’s crime, if there is one, is that he universalizes himself in a self-imposed imperative: *when challenged to dice, one may not refuse*.

Granted, this is neither the categorical imperative nor the practical one that Kant recommends. But neither of these imperatives is sufficient to avert Draupadī’s existential (as opposed to critical) crisis. Draupadī demonstrates the paradox of those who are ethical (bound by “respect”) yet unable to act, while those who are unethical (not bound by “respect”) perpetrate evil deeds. Through a violation of “respect,” Duryodhana violates both Kantian imperatives and demonstrates their inability to operate without the kind of *sensus communis* the Pāṇḍava brothers share. Duryodhana has secured the ability to control the dynamics of privilege, a dynamic in which ethics is not exiled, but *instrumentalized*. Beyond virtue-signaling, the great *gurus* of the court are ethically impotent and, as accomplices, *guilty*. In the Kantian system, the only response to such a breach of ethics is punishment. Since the entire court is guilty, the entire court stands in need of punishment.

Let us set aside the digression into Vico and Kant: its purpose was merely to clarify the *philosophical* dimension of Draupadī’s ethical challenge to the court. For those interested in thinking about this point further, compare the ethical struggle articulated here with Hegel’s analysis of Sophocles’s *Antigone*. It would be laughable to say that Duryodhana and Draupadī *both* have a part of the “good,” but to an excess that needs reconciliation! Today, where we have recovered from being drunk on Hegel’s *Geist*, we should return to rethinking ethics in terms of irreconcilable tragedy, the perpetual need for humane interpretation, and respect.

### **Vidura in the *Sabhā***

The purpose of this contribution is to trace the *adharma* of privilege over merit and actions (*guṇa* and *karma*). Therefore, the focus is on Vidura, who is othered for being born from a *śūdrayoni*. Other meanings are also possible and necessary, but space does not permit us to explore them in detail. Take, for example, the identity of Vidura: King Dharma is also King Yama, the God of Death. In the dicing hall, the Kauravas are recklessly gambling with death. In the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, Naciketas rejects wealth—sons and grandsons, cattle, elephants, gold, and horses, long-life, a wide expanse of earth, beautiful women that are difficult to obtain, etcetera—precisely the things that the blind king’s brood are gambling for. The tighter we hold on to material things, the tighter is the noose of death around us: Vidura brings up the image of the noose (*pāśabaddhaḥ*; Mahābhārata 2.59.2) shortly thereafter. In fact, Śakuni’s response to Yudhiṣṭhira’s comment on *adharma* recalls Yama’s sardonic remark about the “blind fools” who think *ayaṃ loko nāsti para* (Kaṭha Up. 1.2.6). I raise this point because of an argument raised

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<sup>22</sup> John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).



by Plato, who remains our perennial recourse in Western philosophy (unlike Hegel). Without the doctrine of the immortal soul that collects rewards and punishments, it is impossible to defend ethics in a community of mortals. The Thrasymachian view (and its neo-Conservative interpretation) remains unchallenged: justice *is* the advantage of the stronger (Plato, *Republic* 338c2–3).

As Yama Dharmarāja, in the court of the Kauravas, Yudhiṣṭhira’s increasing stakes also raise the risk of the members of the Kuru court. The question of *adharmā*, raised by Yudhiṣṭhira on behalf of discrimination against the good and wise Vidura, failed to rouse the court to justice—perhaps because Vidura is a mere *kṣatta*. Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Death, makes his next move on behalf of the God of Justice and Death. His next move brings the sacrificial altar-born goddess, Draupadī, into the court with a legal *dharma* claim. She is no expendable *sūdrayoni*. On the contrary, she is *ayonijā* (Mahābhārata 2.72.13), born without a womb at a sacrificial altar (1.153.8). Draupadī is not a marginal member of the court, but a queen consecrated in the Rājasūya. Let us also remind ourselves that when she was born, a prophecy declared that she would unburden the earth of asuric kings. No wonder then that, when Yudhiṣṭhira gambled Draupadī, the beloved goddess (*priyā devī*; 3.58.31; van Buitenen translates the phrase as “precious queen”), Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, and others “broke out in sweat” (*bhīṣmadroṇakṛpādīnām svedaś ca samajāyata*; 2.58.39). “But Dhṛtarāṣṭra, exhilarated, kept asking ‘Has he won? Has he won?’ for he did not keep his composure” (2.58.41). It is not so much the “long arc of the moral universe that bends towards justice” in the words of Martin Luther King, but the long rope of *dharma* by which the privileged hang themselves. By denying the immortal soul, modernity forecloses this normative hope. When politics becomes *everything*, power, not ethics, becomes ultimate.

Yudhiṣṭhira’s staking of Draupadī opens up the possibility that the privileged *haute monde*, who stand by and permit the othering of the meritorious Vidura, will condemn itself for execution in the Kurukṣetra war. When Śakuni wins the throw, an exhilarated Duryodhana turns to Vidura and commands him: “All right, you Steward, bring Draupadī / The beloved wife whom the Pāṇḍavas honor” (*ehi kṣattar draupadīm ānayasva; priyām bhāryām saṃmatām pāṇḍavānām*; Mahābhārata 2.59.1). Duryodhana commands Vidura, his foremost opposition, to obey in order to demonstrate his power in court. Vidura was already reduced to a *kṣatta*, but Duryodhana sets the pecking order straight. Moreover, his choice of the word *saṃmatā* to describe Draupadī reinforces our earlier interpretation of *sumanas* as “well-disposed to each other.” And separating those who are *sumanas*, Yudhiṣṭhira believes, is *adharmā*. His judgment on *adharmā* holds for Duryodhana here as well.

In a final attempt to restore *dharma*, Vidura speaks again: He warns Duryodhana that he is tied to a noose (Mahābhārata 2.59.2); he is a goat who cuts its own throat (2.59.8); he does not know that he is going to the terrifying gate of hell (*dvāram sughoram narakasya*; 2.58.10); and, leading many others to it, he will bring about the end of the Kurus (2.59.10). But Duryodhana is a fool, and for him “The words of the sage, so apt, and his friends (*vācaḥ kāvyāḥ suhrdām*) / Are no longer heard, and greed just grows!” (2.59.12). We are tracing the *sensus communis* of *dharma* through a series of linguistic clues: *sumanas*, *saṃmatā*, and *suhṛd*. The word *suhṛdāḥ* (amicable, well-disposed) is juxtaposed with the words *lobha eva* (“just greed”). Vidura is accusing the destructive partnership between Duryodhana, Karṇa, Śakuni, and Duṣśāsana specifically,

the paternal love of Dhṛtarāṣṭra by extension, and the impotent concern of the Kuru court in general as not true *suhr̥d*, but *lobha eva*, just greed. The wise Vidura’s words are not heeded, and when “the words of a sage, so apt, are no longer heard” greed grows, and brings with it universal destruction (*sarvaraho vināśaḥ*; 2.59.12).

The Mahābhārata carefully traces the destructive journey of Duryodhana’s mind. “Resentful of the fortune of the Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana...sunk in gloomy thought, and his mind became evil” (*pāpā matir ajāyata*; Mahābhārata 2.43.13). Although the word *mātsarya*, envy, does not occur in the text, another term signifying envy and intolerance of Yudhiṣṭhira’s fortune is frequently used for Duryodhana. This term is *amarsa* (2.43.8, 21, 26, and 36; 45.12 and 13), which van Buitenen translates according to context as “choleric,” “rancor,” “resentment,” “bearing a grudge,” and “intolerant.” Duryodhana’s anger with Vidura needs no proof. Thinking he won Draupadī, Duryodhana reveals himself to be full of *darpa* (pride, arrogance, haughtiness, insolence, self-conceit). Lying on a bed of arrows, Bhīṣma will teach that one who is self-controlled does not resort to desire, anger, greed, self-conceit, arrogance, boasting, delusion, envy, and dishonor (*kāmaḥ krodhaś ca lobhaś ca darpaḥ stambho vikatthanam | moha īrṣyāvamānaś cety etad dānto na sevate* ||; 12.154.18). The Gītā succinctly presents this trajectory to destruction (Bhagavadgītā 2.62–63). Here, neither the grandfather Bhīṣma nor the father Dhṛtarāṣṭra can successfully rein in Duryodhana, even as he transgresses against Draupadī.

### **Transgression and the Limits of Justice: Prātikāmin**

What is Duryodhana’s relationship to Draupadī? Manu says that the wife of an elder brother is neither a sister nor a mother, but rather, the wife of the preceptor (Mānavadharmasāstra 9.57). Duryodhana’s transgression is horrific, no doubt, but it is not problematic for him, because he does not recognize Yudhiṣṭhira as his brother. His own father offers a precedent: Dhṛtarāṣṭra owes greater allegiance to his son’s whims than the dictates of fraternal *dharma*. The blind king recognizes neither the inalienable patrimony of his brother Pāṇḍu nor grants the authority due to his other brother, Vidura. He cloaks his injustice in a justification, a justification resting solely on privilege, that is to say, on the Śūdra status of Vidura’s mother. The ghastly transgression in the court of the Kurus has *this* apparently banal, distant, and forgotten source: the question of inherited privilege. The treatment of Vidura is the shared guilt that gags *all* the great men of this court. “Maddened with pride, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son...looked at his usher in the hall and to him he spoke amidst those grandees, ‘Go, usher [Prātikāmin], and bring me Draupadī here!’” (Mahābhārata 2.60.1).

What is the significance of Prātikāmin here? Van Buitenen translates *prātikāmin* as “usher.” This is an unusual translation. Ganguli takes it as a proper noun, as do I: the term refers to no one else in the Mahābhārata. Moreover, Prātikāmin could be taken as the “son of Pratikāmin” (“he who is against desire,” and thus an epithet of Śiva), offering a wry lexical contrast to “the son of the putrakāmin,” which would be the son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. However speculative these lexical suggestions, the term *prātikāmin* serves as a marker for Draupadī’s molestation: Draupadī herself mentions *prātikāmin* when she recounts her molestation in the Virāṭaparvan (*yan māṃ dāsīpravādena prātikāmī tadānayaṭ | sabhāyāṃ pārṣado madhye tan māṃ dahati bhārata* ||; Mahābhārata 4.17.2). In the Śalyaparvan, when Duryodhana emerges from Dvaita Lake, Yudhiṣṭhira once

again takes a chance by offering him a one-on-one combat with a Pāṇḍava of the Kaurava's choice (9.31.53). This time, however, Kṛṣṇa (not Draupadī) is with the Pāṇḍavas (9.31.43). Duryodhana throws the choice back at Yudhiṣṭhira, declaring that he would fight any one of them. Kṛṣṇa angrily chastises Yudhiṣṭhira at length for taking this chance (9.32.2–14). Consoling Vāsudeva, Bhīma picks up the challenge. Turning to Duryodhana, he reminds him of the crimes committed by the blind king and his son: the events of Varāṇavata (the burning of the lacquer house), the humiliation of Draupadī in the middle of the *sabhā*, the gambling match orchestrated by Śakuni (9.32.37–38). “Behold, wicked soul, the tremendous consequences of your sinful deeds. Bhīṣma the grandfather of us all has fallen, Droṇa, Karṇa, Śalya, Śakuni, and all your kin and the Kṣatriyas who supported Duryodhana are slain.”<sup>23</sup> But Bhīma singles out Prātikāmin for mention: *prātikāmī tathā pāpo draupadyāḥ kleśakṛd dhataḥ* (9.32.43).

Until chapter 55, the narrative of the fight is interrupted. When it resumes, Bhīma again recounts the offenses of Duryodhana: Varāṇavata, the humiliation of Draupadī in the middle of the *sabhā*, the game of dice orchestrated by Śakuni. As the fruit of these evil deeds, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa, Śalya, Śakuni, and the other warriors have been vanquished, along with Duryodhana's brothers and friends. Yet, Bhīma once again cites the outrage of Prātikāmin: *prātikāmī tathā pāpo draupadyāḥ kleśakṛd dhataḥ* (9.55.33). To a casual reader, this may appear as “repetition,” and the entire intervening section (Balarāma's pilgrimage) appears to be an interpolation. However, there is no manuscript evidence to show that this is the case: the critical edition logically constructs the archetype, the latest common ancestor of the manuscripts examined for the edition, and this section therefore cannot be doubted as belonging to the archetype. The reason given for speculating that this section is an interpolation is that the “pilgrimage” of Rāma has little to do with the “heroic action” of the duel narrative, especially a scene as climactic as the final decisive battle. This argument presupposes that the “original” epic was a heroic-bardic one, and those sections which intervene in this *Urepos* could be suspected of being interpolations and thus “excised” to give us the pure Indo-European war epic. These are prejudices that we now know to be unfounded and, moreover, problematic. The “duplication” picks up an interrupted scene, but interruption is not interpolation.

There are notable textual clues that demonstrate that the interruption is intentional. Dramatically, the pilgrimage narrative keeps the audience on edge, teasingly postponing the promised climax. Such narrative devices turn our attention from what is narrated to how it is narrated.<sup>24</sup> This is especially crucial in a story whose ending is well known even to those who have never read the text. Such a suspension of action occurs in the Bhīṣmaparvan, for example, with the Bhagavadgītā. Attempts to show the Gītā to be an insertion proved to be facile.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, Rāma's “return” needs to be

<sup>23</sup> tvatkṛte nihataḥ sete śaratalpe mahāyaśāḥ |  
gāṅgeyo bharataśreṣṭhaḥ sarveṣāṃ naḥ pitāmahaḥ ||  
hato droṇaś ca karṇaś ca hataḥ śalyaḥ pratāpavān |  
vairasya cādikartāsau śakunir nihato yudhi ||  
bhrātaras te hataḥ śūrāḥ putrāś ca sahasainikāḥ |  
rājānaś ca hataḥ śūrāḥ samareṣv anivartinaḥ || (Mahābhārata 9.32.40–42; Ganguli trans.).

<sup>24</sup> Bagchee has recently drawn attention to this aspect in a brilliant article titled “Narrative Discourse and the Mahābhārata,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true of the work of Mislav Jezic, which has been comprehensively analyzed in Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, “Paradigm Lost: The Application of the Historical-Critical Method to

explained: he has, after all, been missing since the beginning of the war. His return is necessary, because after visiting all these holy pilgrimages, his decision to move the final battle to Samantapañcaka makes sense: he mentions that this site is known in the world of the gods as the northern sacrificial altar of Prajāpati (Mahābhārata 9.54.5).

*Bhārāvatarāṇa* is the secret of the gods (*devarahasya*) and it is the work of the gods, as Nārada knows full well when he attends Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*. The pilgrimage comments on the sacrificial level of the narrative: the genealogical puzzle reveals the genealogical peril—salvation is not through the son.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, heaven is not the recommended final goal of human birth; but for those desirous of heaven (*svargakāmins*), sons and sacrifice being the means to attain it. Those warriors who fall on this sacrificial site, says Rāma, are sure to obtain the permanence of *svarga* (9.54.6). Pilgrimage, on the other hand, is part of the path that abstains from sacrifice and replaces its goal (*svarga*) with *mokṣa*. The interruption clarifies that what appears to be a war is, significantly, a sacrifice and the goal of sacrifice is heaven, whereas the goal of pilgrimage is liberation. Bhīma's "repetition" adds a nuance in the second iteration: among the wrongs done to the Pāṇḍavas is also the forced hiding in the court of Virāṭa, which was like entering a womb (*yonyantaragatair iva*; 9.55.30). Balarāma not only pauses the action; he also moves it to a different location, a location he had visited during his pilgrimage. In doing so, he completely changes the meaning of the battle. It is now the battle of *dharma* and *adharma*, and a clarification of *svarga* and *mokṣa*. Prātikāmin thus stands for the humiliation of Draupadī and thus the central *adharma* permitted by the Kaurava court; he appears in the rest of the text as a cipher for everything done to Draupadī.

Returning to the scene we are interpreting, the *sabhā* where Vidura, Yudhiṣṭhira, and Draupadī are framing the question of *dharma* in the court of Hāstinapura, we could see easily that the eight intervening books could also be dismissed as interruptions of the dramatic narrative: Bhīma could have avenged Draupadī heroically immediately

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the Bhagavadgītā," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 20, no. 2 (2016): 199–302. As we note in conclusion there, "This article's main concern was to clear away misperceptions of the text, especially a powerful myth regarding the *Mahābhārata*'s origins in a heroic, war epic. As we showed, it is this myth rather than any scientifically reliable analyses that explains the *Gītā* critics' analysis. Indeed, we found the continuing hold of this myth on the scholarly imagination to be so strong that Bhargava and Jezic preferred to finesse their criteria (or the application of these criteria) rather than produce results that contravened this myth" (257). To date, Jezic has not produced a defense of his method for identifying "layers" in the Bhagavadgītā. His sole response amounts to a race-based *ad hominem*: "This outcome of text analysis has been accepted to this day by a number of experts in the world (explicitly John Brockington, Georg von Simson, Horst Brinkhaus, Gavin Flood, Przemyslaw Szczyrek, Ivan Andrijanić, Robert Zydenbos, etc.), but on the other hand, it is disputed by some Western postmodernist religious scholars (Alf Hiltebeitel), and most efforts have been made to refute it by colleagues of Indian descent, sensitized to Western 'Orientalism' and analyticalness by Vishva Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (2016), who devote almost 100 pages—in vain—to their refutation." His justification for not providing a defense of his method? "This article is not the place to present philological evidence in the original text for the resulting picture of the history of Bhagavadgītā because it would require the article to become too extensive and too philologically professional, and it is contained in my previous articles published in English." But since when has "too philologically professional" been an argument against publishing an article in Indology? Mislav Ježić, "Historical Layers of Bhagavadgītā—the Transmission of the Text, Its Expansion and Reinterpretations. What Do Bhagavadgītā and the Cathedral of Saint Dominus Have in Common?" *Filozofska Istraživanja* 41, no. 2 (2021): 249.

<sup>26</sup> See my forthcoming article, "Fathers and Sons: Deconstructing Paternity and Engendering Literature."

following her molestation. German Indologists never grasped that the structure of the narrative is driven by the dynamics of *dharma*.

Draupadī quickly surmises the situation and sends Prātikāmin back with a *dharma* question, in its legal form: “Bhārata! Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” (Mahābhārata 2.60.7). Twice she addresses him as *sūtaja* (2.60.7a and 7e), an epithet shared by Karṇa (for example, at 3.8.20; Duryodhana also calls Prātikāmin *sūtaputra* at 2.60.18a). She does so, of course, tactically. It is by this excuse that Prātikāmin recuses himself from going back to Draupadī. He declares to the assembly “who am I to speak to a Draupadī?” Draupadī thus calls on the entire court to make a judgment on *dharma*, albeit in a narrow legal sense. Interestingly, Vidura had already ruled on the very question Draupadī raises. He says to Duryodhana: “Don’t infuriate them, fool, lest you go to Yama! Kṛṣṇā is not a slave yet, Bhārata! I think she was staked when the king was no longer his own master” (2.59.4–5)

The trap is thus set by God Dharma—a deadly triad in the form of Vidura, Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī (who voices the *dharma* question). Should the royal assembly fail to resolve the question of justice, it will cease to perform its essential function and remain a ceremonial, effete institution. All privilege-based institutions eventually bring about their own destruction. Intelligent Draupadī does not play the victim: how easy it would have been to appeal to the privileged elders’ sense of pity! That would only have empowered the institution: it would have doled out “justice” on behalf of the oppressed, rather than critique itself.

### ***Sabhāmadhye: The Goddess Enters***

Now the court. We saw Bhīṣma Droṇa, Kripa, and others sweating when Draupadī was staked, whereas blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra gleefully asked repeatedly if she was won and Vidura alone reprimanded Duryodhana. In the *sabhā*, amidst the greatest of the courtiers (*paramāryamadye*; Mahābhārata 2.60.1), Duryodhana humiliates Vidura and sends for Draupadī. The text now draws our attention repeatedly to the *sabhā*. Draupadī sends her question back with Prātikāmin publicly: “ask in the assembly” (2.60.7). Duryodhana responds: “Let Kṛṣṇa of the Pāñcāla come here and ask the question herself. All the people here shall hear what she or he has to say” (2.60.10). It is not enough for Duryodhana to have won the Pāṇḍavas, their wealth and their wife. He wants to demonstrate that he owns the court. So Prātikāmin takes back the message, “the men in the hall are summoning, Princess!”

But by now it is clear to Prātikāmin that if Draupadī were to enter the hall, the Kurus will be destroyed (Mahābhārata 2.60.12). When Draupadī, requested by Yudhiṣṭhira through a messenger appropriate to her, enters the *sabhā*, Duryodhana gleefully summons her closer, watching the faces of those assembled there (2.60.16). Indicating at the Pāṇḍavas, he gloats “what can they do?” However, by implication, he means: *no one can stop me*. Draupadī underscores the impotence of the court with polished words:

In the hall are men who have studied the books,  
All follow the rites are like unto Indras.  
They are all my *gurus* or act for them:  
Before their eyes I cannot stand thus!

It is base (*anāryam*) that amidst the Kaurava heroes  
You drag me inside while I am in my month;  
There is no one here to honor you for it,  
Though surely, they do not mind your plan.  
Damnation! Lost to the Bhāratas  
Is their *dharma* and the ways of sagacious barons,  
When all these Kauravas in their hall (*kuravaḥ sabhāyām*)  
Watch the Kuru *dharma*'s limits overstridden!  
There is no mettle in Droṇa and Bhīṣma,  
Nor to be sure in this good man;  
The chiefs of the elders amongst the Kurus (*kuruvṛddhamukhyāḥ*)  
Ignore this dread *adharma* of this king. (Mahābhārata 2.6.29–34)

Draupadī understands only too well: *dharma* is the warp and woof of the universe (*otaṃ ca protaṃ ca*; Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up. 3.8.3 –7; Brahmasūtras 1.3.10, Bhāgavatapurāṇa 11.12.21).

The word *sabhāmadhye* is significant: it occurs ten times in the Sabhāparvan (Mahābhārata 2.43.3; 2.61.29, 40, 48, and 82; 2.62.5; 2.63.5; 2.68.27; 2.71.29; and 2.72.12.) One reference occurs in the context of the fall of Duryodhana in Yudhiṣṭhira's *sabhā* due to his misperception. But all the remaining occurrences commence when Draupadī enters the *sabhā* with her question on *dharma*. Verse 2.61.48 refers to a pile of Draupadī's garments in the middle of the *sabhā*—the chief exhibit of the injustice presented in the middle of the court, seeing which cries of “*dhig!*” condemn the court for not answering her question. When the time for the punishment of this flawed institution arrives in the form of the Kurukṣetra battle, Kṛṣṇa delivers the decisive judgment in the middle of two armies (*senayor ubhayor madhye*; 6.23.21 and 24; and 6.24.10). That is the Bhāgavadgītā. Let me continue reading in the form of brief chapter summaries, highlighting the chief points that concern us here.

Chapter 2.61 contains a pair of speeches addressing Draupadī's question about *dharma*. Vikarṇa, a junior son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura, the younger brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, both demand that the court answer Draupadī's question. Both speeches are prefaced by Bhīma's anger, and both are terminated by Karṇa.

Mahābhārata 2.61.1–10 contain a brief outburst by Bhīma against Yudhiṣṭhira. Even gamblers have compassion for whores and never gamble them. He wishes to burn down Yudhiṣṭhira's arms. Arjuna restrains him with a sermon: “Obey your highest Law: no one may overreach his eldest brother by Law.” This prestige of the “older” is quickly problematized by the young Vikarṇa's outspoken defense of Draupadī and by Karṇa's rebuttal thereof. But Arjuna provides a rationale for Yudhiṣṭhira's actions: he was following *kṣatriyadharmā*. Bhīma grudgingly relents.

In verses 2.61.11–20, Vikarṇa challenges the elders of his court: “Answer the question that Yājñasena's daughter has asked! We must decide or we shall go to hell! Bhīṣma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are the eldest of the Kurus: they are here but say nought, nor does the sagacious Vidura. Droṇa Bhāradvāja is here, the teacher of us all, and so is Kṛpa, yet even they, most eminent of brahmins, do not speak to the question! All the other kings, assembled here from every horizon, should shed all partisan feelings and speak up

as they think.” After demanding an adjudication of Draupadī’s question, Vikarṇa offers his own judgment:

Ye best of men, they recount four vices that are the curse of a king: hunting, drinking, dicing, and fornicating. A man with whose addictions abandons the Law, and the world does not condone immoderate deeds. The Pāṇḍava was under the sway of his vice when the gamblers challenged him and he staked Draupadī. The innocent woman is held in common by all the Pāṇḍavas, and the Pāṇḍava staked her when he already had gambled away his own freedom. It was Saubala who mentioned Kṛṣṇā when he wanted a stake. Considering all this I do not think she has been won. (Mahābhārata 2.61.20–24)

Mahābhārata 2.61.21–39. Karṇa’s rebuttal is flush with invective rhetoric, but his basic criticism is that Vikarṇa ought not overreach the elders of the court. Begging the question, he argues that Draupadī was already won the moment that Yudhiṣṭhira staked all his property. Besides, he says the Pāṇḍavas allowed her to be named and staked, falsely conflating silence with acquiescence. This is a critical point: the court, for example is silent out of fear and Yudhiṣṭhira for reasons of *dharma*, but neither silence may be taken as acquiescence. Grautitously, Karṇa cites of Draupadī’s polyandry and concludes “assuredly she is a whore!” Turning to Duḥśāsana, he orders him to strip Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas.

Let us read this section carefully. When Draupadī fails to receive an answer to her question on *dharma*, Vikarṇa, son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, demands that her question be answered. The choice of Vikarṇa is a stroke of literary genius. Grammatically, his name is comprised of *karṇa* (ear) with the prefix *vi*. This *upasarga* can either oppose the term *karṇa* (*vi* = *vigata*) or it could intensify its meaning (*vi* = *viśeṣa*). If we take *vi* in opposition to *karṇa*, his name either means “earless” or “one who is other than Karṇa” (cf. *videśa*). Poetically, “not Karṇa” would mean the one who is opposed to or unlike Karṇa. But if we take *vi* as intensifying or emphasizing the meaning of *karṇa*, his name signifies that Vikarṇa is not only able to hear Draupadī’s *dharma* question, but also to *heed* it. Her question about *dharma* falls on deaf ears; the Kuru elders are unable to appreciate either its subtlety or its import. Now let us compare how Vikarṇa and Karṇa are opposed in the text by listening to their speeches which are immediately juxtaposed to each other.

Vikarṇa: “Ye kings! Answer the question that Yajñasena’s daughter has asked! We must decide or we shall go to hell! Bhīṣma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are the eldest of the Kurus; they are here but say nought, nor does the sagacious Vidura. Droṇa Bhāradvāja is here, the teacher of us all, and so is Kṛpa, yet even they, most eminent of brahmins do not speak to the question! All the other kings, assembled here from every horizon, should shed all partisan feelings and speak up as they think.” (Mahābhārata 2.61.12–15)

Karṇa: “Duḥśāsana, this Vikarṇa is only a child, babbling of wisdom! Strip the clothes from the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī!” (Mahābhārata 2.61.38)

The contrast between Karṇa and Vikarṇa could not be starker. Karṇa points to Vikarṇa's youthful age (Mahābhārata 2.61.21 and 29), his junior status (2.61.30), and his immaturity (2.6.38). Karṇa declares that the silence of the court is an affirmation of its view on dharma (2.61.28), alleges that the law of monogamy for women is divinely sanctioned, and that Draupadī “submits to many men and assuredly she is a whore!” (2.61.35). In this speech, Karṇa—mistakenly lionized in popular Indian culture and in scholarship—denudes himself of all humanity and decency. Karṇa emerges as who he is: an utterly toxic male, an unchivalrous lap dog of Duryodhana who cloaks himself in the piety of friendship and adherence to divine morality, while instigating the public humiliation and molestation of a consecrated queen. As an aside, let us put to rest one particularly distasteful fetish in scholarship which avers that Draupadī was *not* disrobed.<sup>27</sup> The text is clear: “Then Duṣṣāsana forcibly laid hold of Draupadī's robe, O king, and in the midst of the assembly began to disrobe her (*draupadyā vasaṇam balāt*). But when her skirt was being stripped off (*ākṛṣyamāṇe vasane*), lord of the people, another similar skirt (*tadrūpam aparaṁ vastram*) appeared every time” (2.61.40–41). As low as Karṇa and Duṣṣāsana fell ethically, one is astonished to see “higher criticism” sink even lower. Hoping to impress the scholarly *sabhā* and making a mockery of “academic freedom” and a spectacle of “being emancipated from tradition,” some Indian scholars continue to entertain the hateful pseudoscience of “higher criticism.” Their point? Draupadī was not disrobed! Higher criticism is *wissenschaftlich*! Never mind that higher criticism and historicization were the most anti-Semitic weapons in the service of Protestant Christian hermeneutics.<sup>28</sup>

Mahābhārata 2.61.40–50. Draupadī is disrobed. But each time her garment is stripped off, a new one appears miraculously. Exhausted and ashamed, Duṣṣāsana gives up, exhausted. Bhīma takes the terrible oath: “May I forfeit my journey to all my ancestors, if I do not carry out what I say, if I do not tear open in battle the chest of this misbegotten fiend, this outcaste of the Bharatas, and drink his blood!” At this, “the people shouted, ‘The Kauravyas refuse to answer the question,’ and condemned Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Thereupon, raising his arms and stopping the crowd in the hall, Vidura, who knew all the Laws, made his speech” (2.61.50–51). Notice how defunct Dhṛtarāṣṭra's court has become, and how it is unable to function as an institution of justice.

The tension between privilege and the practice of one's *dharma* reaches a climax in this scene of the Mahābhārata. Vidura, the knower of all *dharma*, takes up Vikarṇa's question, once more bringing up the question of justice raised by Draupadī. He narrates an “ancient story” to illustrate his point (*atrāpy udāharantīmam itihāsaṁ purātaṇam*; Mahābhārata 2.61.58). The phrase *itihāsaṁ purātaṇam* can be taken generically as “an ancient tale,” but also as the proper name of the genre to which the Mahābhārata belongs. *Itihāsa-purāṇa* is a *dharmasāstra* and also Vedic hermeneutics (*itihāsapurāṇābhyām*

<sup>27</sup> This distasteful game was begun by G. H. Bhatt in “Draupadīvastraharaṇa Episode: An Interpolation in the Mahābhārata,” *The Journal of Oriental Research* 18 (1948–49): 170–8, who blames the episode's insertion on “redactors of the epic, with motives too well-known” (178). It has since then been continued by amateurs of various kinds, trying their hand at “higher criticism.” For examples see the two essays by Pradip Bhattacharya, “Was Draupadī Ever disrobed?” *Annals of the Bhadarkar Oriental Research Institute* 86 (2005): 149–52 and “Was Draupadī Ever Sought to Be Disrobed?” in *Text and Variations of the Mahābhārata: Contextual, Regional and Performative Traditions*, ed. K. K. Chakravarty (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2009), 88–99.

<sup>28</sup> See the quotations from Solomon Schechter in Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, 313, n. 359.



*vedam samupabr̥m̥hayet*; 1.1.204). So when Vidura, described in this context as *sarvadharmajña* (knower of all *dharma*) speaks here, he is also enacting an interpretation of *dharma*. The dissonance between Vidura's status as *śūdrayoni* and his knowledge of *dharma*, however, does not manifest as long as one remains at the level of the character. Rather, one must see Vidura from the *author's* perspective to fully understand the role he is playing in the narrative, a narrative his "father" Vyāsa authored and a role he assigns to him. Likewise, we cannot appreciate the incredible gap between the Kauravas' privileged status and their questionable ethics unless we again learn to view them in the context of the Mahābhārata's overarching argument, which is a *dharma* argument pertaining to the correct, that is, both humane and salvific interpretation of the Veda.

We are "presented" with these dissonances by an agency that expects us to know more than the characters know about themselves. This is a form of irony. Authors often employ this form of irony, so reading the Mahābhārata as "anonymous literature" is simplistic and effectively destroys poetry and philosophy based on authorial irony. There are two distinct questions here: whether a historical person called Vyāsa existed and whether the Mahābhārata can be read intelligently or read at all without the cipher "Vyāsa." The historical question is impossible to answer and has served as a Rorschach Chart for scholarship for nearly two centuries. All answers to the question of (the non-existence of) Vyāsa have served but one function: to reveal the fantasies and prejudices of scholars. These fantasies rely sometimes on a bit of *realia* or a bit of contradiction... as if contradiction is prohibited in literature! The other question about whether we can read the Mahābhārata at all by erasing the sentences where Vyāsa is presented as the author can be easily answered. No. We can choose to not read a text at all, but, in the case of the Mahābhārata, reading it *obligates* us in uncanny ways to accept Vyāsa as its author. Every other speculation on the Vyāsa "issue" is sophistry.

From the point of view of irony, we may appreciate Vyāsa's juxtaposition of Karṇa and Vidura in this scene using their epithets: *sūtaputra* and *śūdrayoni*. Both are born unexpectedly, and both bear the stigma of inherited status. Karṇa was abandoned by his mother, whereas Vidura was raised in the royal household of Hāstinapura, but granted none of its privileges. Duryodhana makes Karṇa king, raising him from the status of a *sūtaputra*. This cures none of Karṇa's issues with his birth status. Sukthankar acidly remarks: "With overweening confidence in his own powers, Karṇa refuses to fight while Bhīṣma is still alive, and remains sulking in his tent. His stupendous vanity thus deprives Duryodhana of whatever help he could have rendered during the first ten days of the war, a circumstance which did not fail to give the Pāṇḍavas a certain initial advantage over their enemies in spite of the heavy numerical odds against them" (1957: 52). When Duryodhana negotiates with Śalya, a king in his own right, to become Karṇa's charioteer, Karṇa foolishly humiliates him. His speech reveals a hateful misogynist and a xenophobic, choleric, and fanatically ritualistic individual. Vidura, however, thinks less of his own birth status and more about *dharma*. Not surprisingly, unlike Karṇa's egotistic friendship with Duryodhana, Vidura's *dharma*-informed friendship with the Pāṇḍavas helps rather than harms them. Readers who thoughtlessly consider Karṇa to be a tragic victim and apply over-the-counter psychoanalysis to valorize him fail to see that Karṇa was adoringly raised by foster parents and received the kind of parental love neither Vidura nor the Pāṇḍavas received. Yet, they stood for *dharma*, whereas Karṇa joined "with secret pleasure the ribald crowd at the court of Hāstinapura during the fateful game

of dice in relentlessly humiliating and persecuting the innocent Draupadī” (Sukthankar 1957: 51).

### **Birth and Character**

Let us now turn to the second speech in chapter 61: the speech of Vidura. Vidura begins by stating the dysfunctionality of the court. “Draupadī, having raised the question, now weeps piteously as though she has none left to protect her. If you do not resolve it, men in this hall, the Law will be offended. The man who comes to the hall with grievance is like a blazing fire: the men in the hall must appease him with true Law. If a man comes with a grievance and raises a question of Law (*dharma-praśna*) with the men in the hall, they must resolve the question and shed all partiality. Vikarṇa has answered the question according to his lights, kings of men; you too must speak to the question according to yours. If a person sits in the hall and fails to answer a question, although he sees the Law, incurs half the quilt that accrues if the answer is false. And he who has gone to the hall, knows the Law, and resolves it falsely, certainly incurs the full guilt of the falsehood. On this they quote this ancient story (*itihāsa purātana*), the exchange between Prahlāda and the Hermit, Angiras’s son.”

On the surface, Vidura tells a tale of Brāhmaṇa supremacy (Mahābhārata 2.59–79): Prahlāda’s son Virocana and Angiras’s son Sudhanvan fall in love with the same girl and challenge each other as to who is better; the loser becomes the winner’s slave. After consulting with this own father Prajāpati Kaśyapa, Prahlāda delivers his decision: Sudhanvan is a better man than the Asura’s son Virocana. The former is a Brāhmaṇa, the latter an Asura king. Sudhanvan turns out to be a gracious winner: he praises Prahlāda and sets Virocana free, blessing him with a long life. A careless reader would see this as justification for Brāhmaṇa privilege, a hegemony handed down from father to son. It is precisely this hegemony that the epic denounces. But there is more to this episode than meets the eye.

The *itihāsa-purāna* contains *dharma* debates: its true content is not merely the literal one. This literary self-consciousness is revealed by the “ancient tale” retold by Vidura. On a human level, the literary genius here is astounding. Because the disrobing of Draupadī has become so iconic, we do not feel the full impact of the theater here, but let us pause and consider this scene. The narrative has succeeded in getting us to identify with Draupadī, a woman, of royal blood, consecrated, lawfully married, who is dragged into the court of powerful, wicked men who have ensconced themselves institutionally. She cries piteously, and Vidura tells us that everyone has heard her question. The reader certainly has.

On yet another level, the Deva-Asura conflict, essentially a conflict of *dharma* and *adharma*, is evoked from the very beginning of the epic’s genealogies. Devayāni and Śarmiṣṭha, daughters of Śukra and Virocana, had a similar squabble, resulting from the mixing up of their garments by Indra in the form of a strong wind. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son is an Asura, whereas the Pāṇḍavas are sons of gods. On this level alone, the Pāṇḍavas are on the side of *dharma*, and thus better individuals. Draupadī’s questions reveals that no matter how hard the Kurus try to take her garment from her, they cannot: it rightfully belongs to her.

Moreover, one who comes to court with a grievance and raises a *dharma-praśna* is like a blazing fire. Towards the end of the first round of dicing game, Bhīma breaks out

incandescently, fueled by a fire within: his face is likened to Yama at the end of the *yuga* (Mahābhārata 2.64.8–10). Draupadī is born on a fire altar, and quite beautifully embodies the logic of sacrifice. The fruit of the actions (and inactions) of every individual in the assembly are guaranteed by it. The destruction of the Kaurava court is inevitable.

These considerations lead us to two conclusions: the Kauravas are not superior either by birth, their nature, or their actions. Yet, there is a sense in which those who are just and act justly are superior. Whereas the Asura Virocana, despite his less privileged birth, acts justly and wins, the asuric Kauravas are acting unjustly. They are not an underprivileged group: they are a privileged, asuric breed. Vidura is dissociating the connection between birth and privilege. In the terms of Vidura's narration, those who are inferior by nature (*guṇa*) and actions (*karma*) are claiming privilege. Vidura may be a son of a Śūdra woman, but he is the one who truly understands *varṇa*. The Kṣatriyas are not only inferior to him, but their inhumanity is also demonic.

There is a final level of our analysis remaining. Why does Virocana consult Prajāpati Kaśyapa? Like the Brāhmaṇa motif, the Prajāpati motif appeals externally to the court: Bhīṣma and Dhṛtarāṣṭra are paternal figures, they should advise the wayward Duryodhana to uphold what is true and just. But there is a deeper meaning, one that anchors this episode to the deepest salvific level. Prajāpati Kaśyapa represents a genealogical root of all beings: he is the progenitor, father, and lord of *pravṛtti*. Vidura will continue this game of interpreting *varṇa* as based on *guṇa* and *karma*, an interpretation critical to the *varṇa* elaboration of the epic. Even understood as *guṇa-karma*, *pravṛttidharma* is limited, always subject to the eternal conflict of *dharma* and *adharmā*. While one strives for Brahminhood based on *guṇa-karma*, one must ultimately go beyond *pravṛtti*. Thus, while the Vidura performs his functions in the court, although in privilege he is bettered by his inferiors, he will appeal to a higher Brahminhood, one which has its root not in Prajāpati, but in Sanatsujāta. Only in the register of the *Brahman* that is beyond *guṇas* will Vidura's interpretation of *guṇakarma* yield its unimpeachable destination. But first, let us return to the question of *dharma* raised in the assembly hall.

In the Udyogaparvan, when the Pāṇḍavas successfully complete their exile and a year of hiding, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is struck with fear. In the middle of the assembly (*sabhāmadhye*), he commands Saṃjaya to go to Yudhiṣṭhira and Vāsudeva with a vague message of peace (Mahābhārata 5.22.35–37). Yudhiṣṭhira knows the greed of the blind king and turns to Kṛṣṇa for advice. Vāsudeva says:

They are fools and caught in the power of death  
Who have rallied inanely to Dhṛtarāṣṭra;  
Once more behold that vilest of acts  
That the Kurus committed amidst their assembly (*sabhāmadhye*).  
The Kauravas headed by Bhīṣma ignored it  
When the Pāṇḍavas' dear wife Draupadī  
That glorious woman of virtue and conduct,  
Was seized upon by a lecher and, wept.  
Duḥśāsana, trampling the rules, brought Kṛṣṇā  
In the midst of the hall (*sabhāmadhye*) of her fathers-in-law!  
Once brought there she spoke so pitifully  
And found no protector but Vidura. (Mahābhārata 5.29.30–33)

Kṛṣṇa rejects the Thrasymachean view of justice (“justice is the advantage of the stronger”). He says, “Where a thief steals property without witness, where another steals it by force in public, they both are equally guilty of crime: What sets Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son apart? He out of mere greed considers that *dharma*, whatever he pleases...” (Mahābhārata 5.29.28). The courtiers are guilty, too. “The kings were too pusillanimous to be able to protest in the hall (*kārpaṇyād eva sahitās tatra rājño nāsaknuvan prativaktum sabhāyām*; 5.23.34). Pointing to Saṃjaya, Kṛṣṇa says: “You did not yourself talk *dharma* in the hall; are you now to lecture the Pāṇḍava (Yudhiṣṭhira)?” (5.29.35). In a lengthy speech, Yudhiṣṭhira concurs and respectfully bids farewell to Saṃjaya.

When the term *sabhāmadhye* returns in the narrative, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is filled with dread. Summoning Vidura to his chamber, he confides: “Saṃjaya has returned, Vidura. After berating me he left. Tomorrow he will deliver Ajātaśatru’s message in the assembly hall (*sabhāmadhye*)” (Mahābhārata 5.33.19). Before Kṛṣṇa goes to Hāstinapura on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas, the term occurs twice. Draupadī complains bitterly to him, “I was put in the middle of the hall (*sabhāmadhye*) and made a slave to vile men! The Pāṇḍavas watched it without showing anger without showing anger or doing anything, so it was you I desired in my heart, Govinda, crying ‘Save me!’” (5.80.25).<sup>29</sup> Arjuna wants to know if the “main task be carried out, by gentleness or feud? Or if you that it is better they are slaughtered immediately, let it be done at once, and don’t hesitate about it. For you know that fiend molested Draupadī in the middle of the hall (*sabhāmadhye*), you know that the others allowed it Mādava!” (5.76.17–19). In the word’s next appearance, Kṛṣṇa occupies Draupadī’s lexical space: “Janāradana, dark as flax blooms and robed in yellow, glistened in the middle of the hall (*sabhāmadhye*) like a sapphire set in gold” (5.92.52). In a comic pairing with Kṛṣṇa’s embassy to the Hāstinapura court, Duryodhana sends Ulūka, the son of Śakuni, on an embassy with a provocative message. Ulūka taunts Bhīma about the oath he swore in the middle of the hall (*sabhāmadhye*): that he will drink Duhsasana’s blood (5.157.17). Outraged, Arjuna responds that he will kill Bhīma and Duryodhana will soon reap the fruit of “the oath that Bhīmasena in his fury swore...in the middle of the hall (*sabhāmadhye*)” (5.160.15).

Whereas Draupadī clothes herself again and again in renewed garments, Duryodhana bares his own thigh as a lewd gesture intended to degrade Draupadī. Karṇa and the court only metaphorically bare themselves as bereft of *dharma*, but Duryodhana literally exposes his body by baring his left thigh. Bhīma then vows to kill Duryodhana by breaking his thighs in battle (Mahābhārata 2.63.10–14). Bhīma had already vowed to kill Duḥśāsana by tearing open his chest and drinking his blood.

<sup>29</sup> Much is made of the fact that in the critical edition, Draupadī is miraculously saved, and Kṛṣṇa does not appear to replenish her robes, as the textual tradition later interprets it. However, here is the textual clue, albeit in seed form that is developed in this miracle. Draupadī continues her plea to Kṛṣṇa with the words “Janārdana, you are well aware of those grievances—save me again, lotus-yed one...” The word “again” does not occur in the text, but van Buitenen is correct in his translator’s intuition: *trāhi mām iti govinda* (Mahābhārata 5.8.26c) is meaningfully echoed three verses later in *trāhi mām puṇḍarīkākṣa* (5.8.29c). Implied in this repetition is that Draupadī acknowledges that Kṛṣṇa saved her previously in the *sabhā*, and he should do so now again. In this case, the interpolation of Kṛṣṇa’s intervention at the disrobing of Draupadī is but a gloss on the text itself. Should the disrobing *not* have occurred, as some scholars argue, all these verses would seem empty. Exactly *how* did the miracle of a heap of resplendent clothes that Duḥśāsana pulls off Draupadī appear in the middle of the hall?

I have addressed every reference to the term *sabhāmadhye* in the Udyogaparvan. By following this term, we see it serving as a cipher for the appearance of Draupadī in the Kuru court with a *dharma* question. We also see that Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva now replaces Draupadī in the middle of the hall, while espousing her question one last time before the court is wiped out for its injustice. He is present with the Pāṇḍavas until Duryodhana's end to ensure that the Kaurava court reaps the terrible result of his actions. I also end the close reading of the text of the Sabhāparvan.

### **The Destruction of Prajāpati's Sacrificial Logic**

Although Satī does not appear by name in the Mahābhārata, the full manifestation of the Goddess in the epic is beyond doubt. I have argued for her manifestation as Ambā elsewhere, and that remains, in my view, still correct.<sup>30</sup> But Draupadī also manifests the Goddess in the *sabhā*, in a form that can be identified as tantric. Let me elaborate.

The Mahābhārata knows of Dakṣa's sacrifice as the primal great sacrifice of Prajāpati, the foundational sacrifice that enacts the sacrificial logic of *pravṛtti*. It is an inceptive moment, one that is genealogical and hegemonic, and keeps the cycles of *pravṛtti* rolling. He is the primary hegemon, the one who institutes sacrifice as a means for propagation, allotment of shares, mutual benefit of humans and gods—in short, as the means of the *dharma* of progeny and prosperity. Imagine a situation where Prajāpati would be the supreme God! Genealogy and privilege would ultimately be grounded in a supreme referent. Already this inceptive sacrificial moment is marked by exclusion, the exclusion of Rudra, who is declared unfit for the privileges apportioned in the sacrifice. In the Mahābhārata, Umā is not happy, and Rudra destroys the sacrifice. Sacrificial logic will keep the cycles of *pravṛtti* rolling, but always with a crack in the foundation.

That crack reveals something that must be interpreted. The Mahābhārata calls the support of *yajña* by the name Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa. Henceforth, the hegemonic structure of the universe remains separated from its ground. Direct, unmediated access to *Brahman* is the only true liberation possible in a universe bound by cause and effect, that is to say, by sacrificial logic.

The *rājasūya* itself is an inceptive moment. Here, the Goddess appears not as Satī, the young bride and daughter, but in a more tantric form. Dishevelled, in her period, simultaneously impure, yet also purified by being sprinkled with consecrated waters, simultaneously denuded, but also miraculously clothed, opening a gateway to both horrific destruction and renewal (she regains the kingdom for Yudhiṣṭhira). She is unconquerable by the Asuras born as the Kauravas and sets them on the path of destruction. Draupadī's question is the question of the limits of *pravṛttidharma*. All hegemonies have their limit in *Brahman*. "From fear of him, fire burns; from fear, the sun shines; from fear, Indra and Wind; and Death, the fifth, speeds" (Kāṭha Up. 2.3.3).

The purpose of these remarks is not to write a history of Tantra or the dates of Tantra. The purpose is to show that crack in the foundation of sacrifice: inception already carries within it the seed of its own diremption, and in the diremption of all hegemonies, operating as the ineradicable economy of this universe of gender, engendering, and inheritance, there is "redemption." Without this crack, privilege would be the infinite

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<sup>30</sup> See Vishwa Adluri, "The Divine Androgyne: Crossing Gender and Breaking Hegemonies in the Ambā Upākhyāna of the Mahābhārata," in *Argument and Design: The Unity of the Mahābhārata*, ed. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 275–319.

condition of existence in the universe, and God himself would be drawn into the economy of redeeming the privilege of those who have lost it for breaking the Law. The purpose of these remarks is to demonstrate the limits of the political universe, and thereby avoid enshrining privilege as if it were something ultimate. In her manifestation as Śikhaṇḍin, the androgynous form of Ambā, the Goddess will finish what Draupadī started, by causing the fall of the *pitāmaha*. Dakṣa too is killed but tentatively restored with a goat's head, just as Bhīṣma hangs between life and death.

Institutions, inasmuch as they are *instituted*, follow the sacrificial model of division and rules for admission, inclusion, and exclusion. They also have rules for participation and codes for proper functioning and for the optimal fulfilment of stated goals. Let us call these the “eligibility” or “qualification” dimension of institutions. The Sanskrit word for this is *adhikāra*. But another dimension is privilege, which is passed on through birth, social status, inheritance, etcetera. This dimension of institutions I will call “privilege.” Unfortunately, in the life of institutions, privilege accrues in each generation, and one social group or another seizes domination. Such a seizure is always “righteous,” and appears “justified.” Even the horror of slavery is being rewritten in Florida curriculums as if it were “justified”; books are burnt in Delhi as if this book-burning were “justified.” So what is *dharma*? Merit or power? *This is the real question Draupadī poses in the sabhā*. The powerful Kauravas and the powerless Vidura alike are caught in the politics of power. Draupadī begins the manifestation of the diremption of the Kuru court, the seat of political power.

### **Nominal Privilege**

The Mahābhārata, contrary to reigning text-historical scholarship, is a *dharma* text. Vyāsa makes a final appearance at the end of the text (Mahābhārata 18.5), proclaiming his chief message:

With arms uplifted I am crying aloud, but no one listens to me. There is *artha* and *kāma* but [only] in accordance with *dharma*. Then why is it that (*dharma*) is not resorted to?

Never should one abandon *dharma* either on account of pleasure, or on account of fear or on account of greed; or even for the sake of (one's own) life. *Dharma* is eternal, pleasure and pain are ephemeral. *Jīva* is continual, [but] its cause is terminable. (Mahābhārata 18.5.49–50)

As Bagchee has recently demonstrated, Vyāsa occupies a complex and nuanced presence within the text: he functions as the author, the procreator, the director of action, and the key agent of the unfolding and modulating of the text's *dharma* teaching.<sup>31</sup> Although much of *dharma* is explicitly taught by Bhīṣma, there are many others who teach it, ranging from Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva to a mongoose. Bhīṣma himself introduces many teachers, beginning from Brahmā down to various animals. I focus here on three teachers directly associated with Vidura: Sanatsujāta, Vidurā, and Kṛṣṇa. But before I proceed, let me remind readers that Bhīṣma's entire teaching is made possible through the intervention of Vyāsa and Kṛṣṇa. Vyāsa suggests Yudhiṣṭhira learn *dharma* from Bhīṣma (Mahābhārata 12.38.5–10). But as Vyāsa does so, he glances at Nārada (12.38.6), who is a significant

<sup>31</sup> Bagchee, “Narrative Discourse and the Mahābhārata.”

figure privy to the *devāsura* and *mokṣa* dimensions of the text. Yudhiṣṭhira next approaches Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, who is sitting in deep meditation and stillness with the sun rising behind him (12.45.11–20). Kṛṣṇa in turn directs the king to Bhīṣma (12.46.20). Kṛṣṇa grants Bhīṣma the celestial eye (*caḅsur divyaṃ*; 12.52.20) and the eye of knowledge (*jñānacakṣu*; 12.52.21) by which all *dharma* is revealed. But as the author of the narrative in which Bhīṣma reveals this knowledge to Yudhiṣṭhira, Vyāsa stands in the background of the entire *dharma* pedagogy. That pedagogy includes women and Śūdras. Bhīṣma begins his instruction in Mahābhārata 12.56.10. Within a few verses he brings up the question of Brāhmaṇas and makes a distinction between authentic and pretender Brāhmaṇas. “Completely quiet within, the most excellent of the brahmins maintain the terrestrial *brahman* [that is, the Vedas] and likewise, tiger, you should always use your arms to restrain those who might seem like brahmins but who assault the system of the world” (*lokatantraviḅhātakāḅ*; 12.56.26–27). A king must restrain or exile such “scandalously deviant ones” (12.56.31).

Vyāsa teaches Yudhiṣṭhira on giving to the Brāhmaṇas. This takes the form of the following soliloquy: “Anything given to brahmin estranged from *dharma* with the notion ‘That is how worthy people behave... whatever he does is *dharma* (*āptācaritam ity eva dharma ity eva*) would be ineffective because the receiver is faulty... [Such a Brāhmaṇa] is like an elephant made of wood, or a deer fashioned from leather—all three of them are what they are called in name only (*nāmadhārakāḅ*)... That fool is an enemy who destroys the offerings made to the Gods and those to the ancestors; he merely takes wealth and does not deserve to gain the worlds” (Mahābhārata 12.37.37–43; Fitzgerald trans. modified). Chapter 2 of the Manusmṛti contains a near verbatim statement:

157. Like an elephant made of wood, like a deer made of leather, is a Brahmin without Vedic learning; those three only bear the name (*nāma bibhrati*).
158. As fruitless as a eunuch with women, as fruitless as a cow with a cow, and as fruitless as a gift given to an ignorant man, is a Brahmin ignorant of the Veda.
159. A man who wishes to promote the Law should instruct creatures about what is best without hurting them (*ahimsayaiva*), employing pleasant and gentle words.
160. Only a man whose mind and speech have been purified and are always well-guarded acquires the entire fruit of reaching the end of the Veda (*vedāntopagataṃ phalam*).
161. Though deeply hurt, let him never use cutting words, show hostility to others in thought or deed, or use aberrant language that would alarm people. (Olivelle trans.)

Three points are to be noted here. First, Manu understands the problem of Brāhmaṇas in name only. Second, the ultimate goal, which is an-archic and beyond the socio-political order, is not merely transcendental. It provides an insuperable limit to absolutization of both religious authority and secular, political authority. The second point rests on interpreting *vedānta* in Manu’s statement. Medhātithi demurs on whether the ritual portions of the Veda or the Upaniṣads are meant here. But most commentators agree that “‘*Vedānta*’ stands for the Upaniṣads, and the ‘reward’ is Final Release (Govindarāja,

Kullūka, Nārāyaṇa Nandana and Rāghavānanda).<sup>32</sup> For the third point, compare the last line of Manu cited above:

*nāruntudaḥ syādārto 'pi na paradrohaḥ karmadhīḥ |  
yayā 'syodvijate vācā nālokyāṃ tāmudīrayet ||* (Mānavadharmasāstra 2.161)

The Mahābhārata says:

*nāruṃtudaḥ syān na nṛśamsavādī; na hīnataḥ param abhyādadīta |  
yayāsyā vācā para udvijeta; na tāṃ vaded ruśatīm pāpalokyāṃ ||*

Be never hurtful or speak cruelly,  
Nor extort the last from a penniless man,  
Nor speak the wounding, hell-earning words  
That when voiced hurt another man. (Mahābhārata 2.59.6)

The context here is the dicing game, Vidura speaks these words to Duryodhana when the asuric prince summons Draupadī to court with humiliating words. The hemistich *nāruṃtudaḥ syān na nṛśamsavādī na hīnataḥ param abhyādadīta* is repeated twice more in the epic (Mahābhārata 12.288.8 and 13.107.56). While Vyāsa is consoling Yudhiṣṭhira with the same verses as Manu cites, he omits this hemistich. Both Manu and Vyāsa know these verses, but whereas Manu is merely reprimanding unbecoming behavior in a teacher, Vyāsa is using the opportunity to sharpen the criticism of Brāhmaṇas in name only. “Hurtful speech” is the least of the problems in the context of Vyāsa’s criticism of Brāhmaṇas who are this in name only. Whereas Manu merely says that adharmic behavior by Brāhmaṇas render their words (and deeds) *alokya*, that is, they prevent them from gaining heaven, Vyāsa goes further. Brāhmaṇas who are so “in name only” (*nāma-dhāraḥ*) are the “enemy.” And as per the hemistich that Vyāsa omits here, but places elsewhere in the mouth of Vidura: they earn hell.

Hearing Vidura’s words in the context of both Manu and Mahābhārata, we finally arrive at Vyāsa’s conception of “privilege” and its critique. Brāhmaṇas who are “mere” bearers of name claim a privilege that they have not earned. What name do they claim? Their Brāhmaṇa name, their *gotra*. How did they come to possess it? Through inheritance. Thus, inheritance is the key mechanism through which unjust privilege accrues. This is not a special problem of “Brahmanic ideology” as German Indology, colored by its Protestant, anti-traditional anxieties understood it. In Vyāsa’s view, the Kṣatriya court of Hāstīnapura is just as guilty. Duryodhana demands (and Dhṛtarāṣṭra permits) the dissonance between privilege accrued through merit (*dharma*) and privilege accrued through inheritance. Now we begin to see Vyāsa’s deconstruction of the Kuru genealogy in a new light. The Kuru tale is not a heroic, warrior, Aryan epic; it is structured bone and muscle as a critical examination of *dharma*. As *sūdrayoni*, *dharma* has taken up a most under-privileged name. And in doing so, Vidura works hand-in-glove with the an-archic (anti-Prajāpati) Goddess Draupadī, King Dharma, and Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa

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<sup>32</sup> Ganganatha Jha, trans. *Manu-Smṛiti: Notes, Part II: Explanatory* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1924), 123.



in ending the privilege-based court system of the Kurus. Yudhiṣṭhira and Vidura, a defeated king and a cursed God, are reunited: Dharma is made whole, and triumphs.

### **Critique of Privilege in the Gītā with Reference to Vidura**

The transition to the Gītā is provided by the namesake of Vidura, a woman called Vidurā. We have already seen the “gendered” insults hurled at Vidura by Duryodhana and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and, of course, we have the critique of their privilege presented through Draupadī’s question on *dharma* and Gāndhārī’s declaration that Vidura stands in line before Duryodhana in the inheritance claim of the throne—a claim that is denied him by the privileged in the Kuru court. We have seen the irony of Vidura—meritorious and learned in *dharma*—bearing the stigma of the name *sūdrayoni* whereas the elite Kṣatriyas and Brāhmaṇas (Droṇa, Kṛpa, etcetera) are so in name only. The Kṣatriyas failed in their duty to protect the weak, by cheating instead of winning in battle and by failing to abide by good counsel. Despite Vidura’s warning, the blind king failed to eliminate the threat to the dynasty and to the people he ruled. In his court, *dharma* and *kṣatriyadharmā* were openly mocked, giving way to the abuse of those who abided by the law and of those who pleaded for justice. By following the term *sabhāmadhye* we saw how, on his diplomatic mission to the court, Kṛṣṇa came to occupy the locus of that term.

Just as he had done in setting up the *dharma* debate in court during the dicing session, Vidura once again plays a key role in setting up the inheritance debate during Kṛṣṇa’s visit. For one, he hosts Kṛṣṇa at his home. Upon the blind king’s request, he leads Gāndhārī to the court to reprimand and correct Duryodhana’s conduct. She fails, and Duryodhana plots with Śakuni, Karṇa, and Duḥśāsana to capture and bind Kṛṣṇa (Mahābhārata 5.218.9). When he learns of the plan, Vidura addresses Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the court thus: “Time is wrapping up for all your sons, enemy-burning king, ready as they are to commit a heinous, impossible crime...If they attack that indomitable and invincible tiger among men, they will no more survive than moths attacking a fire” (5.128.18–20).

The far-sighted Vidura (*viduro dīrghadarśivān*; Mahābhārata 5.128.57) already anticipates Kṛṣṇa revealing himself as Time to Arjuna in the battlefield (6.33.32), where all the warriors including Karṇa are seen flying like moths into the infernal maw of that awesome form (6.33.26–27). Vidura knows Kṛṣṇa intimately. He tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra: “When he was a mere babe, he killed Pūtana and held up Mount Govardhana to save the cows, bull of the Bharatas. He has slain Ariṣṭa, Dhenuka, the powerful Cāṇūra, Aśvarāja, and the evil doing Kaṁsa. He has slain Jarāsaṁdha, Vakra, the heroic Śiśupāla, and Bāṇa...He has defeated Śacī’s Consort himself. When sleeping on the one vast ocean (Ekāraṇava) he slew Madhu and Kaiṭabha, and in another birth slew Hayagrīva. He is the Unmade Maker...No, you do not know Govinda Acyuta of awesome strides, a mass of splendor...” (5.128.46–51). Immediately upon the conclusion of Vidura’s speech, Kṛṣṇa reveals himself in the Puruṣa form (5.129). When the Lord departs shortly thereafter “Nārada and the other seers disappeared and went—another miracle in the continuing spectacle” (5.129.18). Nārada had also appeared after the dicing game, sealing the vows of Bhīma when Draupadī was brought into the *sabhā*.

As noted earlier, the word *sūdra* appears approximately 289 times in the constituted text of the critical edition of the Mahābhārata. The distribution of this term is as follows: Ādiparvan (22), Sabhāparvan (7), Vanaparvan (37), Udyogaparvan (9), Bhīṣmaparvan (9), Droṇaparvan (1), Karṇaparvan (7), Śalyaparvan (2), Sauptikaparvan

(2), Strīparvan (1), Śāntiparvan (77), Anuśāsanaparvan (100), Āśvamedhikaparvan (6), Āśramavāsikaparvan (5), and Mausalarparvan (1). The greatest concentration of these terms occurs in the Śāntiparvan and Anuśāsanaparvan (177). These are massive books and contain more theoretical discussions on *dharma* than the books dealing with war. This would explain the next large figure, Vanaparvan with 37 occurrences. Less intelligent “higher criticism” would surely leap to the absurd conclusion that these *dharma* encomiums are “brahmanic,” most likely “later interpolations” into a Kṣatriya *Urepos*, but that explanation is now shown to be utterly unscientific and untenable. Let us instead turn to the Gītā to see how the term *sūdra* is interpreted by Kṛṣṇa.

Arjuna ends his lament in chapter 1 of the Gītā with the words “If, in this battle, the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra armed with weapons kill me who am non-resistant and unarmed, that will be more beneficial to me” (Bhagavadgītā 1.46). Ironically, it is Droṇa who suffers this fate, the same Droṇa whom Arjuna loved deeply, but who was also a thoroughly problematic individual. Although a Brāhmaṇa, he behaves like a Kṣatriya, consistently seeking wealth from anyone he interacts with, be it Drupada or Rāma Bhārgava. He draws the innocent Kuru princes into a personal vendetta. Like Karṇa, he is deeply class-conscious, a point vividly underscored by his inhumane treatment of Ekalavya. An epic that tenderly humanizes the cannibalistic *rākṣasī* Hidimbā does not hesitate to euthanize Droṇa in an act of mercy: at least he dies as Brāhmaṇa. His entire life was a lie, and through a lie, he was saved from the path he had embarked on.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps it was Arjuna’s love for him that interceded on Droṇa’s behalf when Kṛṣṇa punished the Kuru court for its *adharma*?

But in the present passage, Droṇa, Bhīṣma, and kinsmen stand before Arjuna, ready for battle. Arjuna looks at them all: “teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law as also relatives” (Bhagavadgītā 1.34) and is overcome by horror at the prospect of having to kill them. Thrice he laments having to kill his “own” relations (*hatvā svajanam; svajanam hi katham hatvā; and hantum svajanam; 1.31, 37, and 45*).

These relationships are thematized by Arjuna in terms of *kula* and *jāti*; he uses *varṇa* only in the compound *varṇasamkara* where he is concerned with miscegenation. This biological/social interpretation requires a closer look. *Jāti* means birth, position assigned by birth such as rank, caste, race, lineage, etcetera.<sup>34</sup> *Kula*, however, means clan, family, community, tribe, etcetera. *Jāti* and *kula* are used synonymously by Arjuna. He cites *kuladharmā* (Bhagavadgītā 1.39), interpreting *dharma* according to *pāpa* and *doṣa* (1.37) with the aim of saving oneself from hell (*naraka; 1.41; cf. narake nityam*, “eternal hell” at 1.43) and sustaining the ancestral heaven (1.41). These are elements of *pravṛttidharma*, or justice in its familial-societal form. The aim of this *dharma* is to attain wealth here and heaven hereafter. For both the preservation of wealth here and the sustenance afterwards in heaven, sons are required. Sons inherit wealth and create further progeny; they also offer *piṇḍas* (1.41) as part of obligatory funerary rituals to ancestors (*śrāddha*). *Pravṛttidharma* is thus ritual and transactional: it is driven by sacrificial logic and depends on sons for salvation. That salvation is attainment of heaven where fantastical desires can be fulfilled.

<sup>33</sup> For an interpretation of this episode, see my forthcoming “Fathers and Sons: Deconstructing Paternity and Engendering Literature.”

<sup>34</sup> Monier-Williams, s.v. “*jāti*.”

*Pravṛttidharma* operates macrocosmically in the universe and its laws and structures, mesocosmically in the nation and the family, and microcosmically in the physical body. “Nation” here stands for *janapada*, *grāma*, *rājya* or any form of society united by an identity and a government. Arjuna takes the political sphere to be the exclusive locus of *dharma*, ignoring both the macroscopic and microscopic aspects of *dharma*. And the political aspect of *dharma* appears to most unthinking individuals as the *summum verum et totum bonum*. Arjuna’s “lament” is not the cheap stuff of existentialism. If it were simply about death, dread, anxiety, sickness, fear, trembling, judgment, pity, guilt, etcetera, we could set the question aside as belonging to an unhealthy relationship with the mortal condition. Arjuna is a hero, and a hero teaches the healthy way of overcoming these fears. For our purpose here, Arjuna is revealing how societies operate: power and privilege are maintained through a hetero-normative grounding encapsulated in endogamy and inheritance laws. And it is in the context of this political *dharma* that two problematics arise. First, the problem of desire: Arjuna does not know whether to desire victory or defeat, whether he will be able to enjoy the fruits of victory or reap remorse. Second, the *dharma* debate about whether he should follow *kuladharmā* or *kṣatriyadharmā*. Desire and this dilemma about *dharma* arise within a politically delimited *topos* of *pravṛttidharma*.

### Forms of Privilege in the Gītā

Let us first take up the issue of *kuladharmā*. Vyāsa has successfully deconstructed the Kuru patriline and complicated the straightforward business of inheritance. Straightforward since when? Straightforward since the Prajāpatis. Let us review the genealogy:

Brahmā  
Prajāpati Marīci  
Kaśyapa  
Vivasvat  
Yama Vaivasvata  
Mārtaṇḍa  
Manu  
(others including Ikśvāku, brother of Ilā) → Sūrya *vaṁśa*——Rāma Dāśarathi  
Ilā + Budha ← Soma ← Atri  
Purūravas + Ūrvaśī  
Āyus  
Nahuṣa  
Yayāti + Śarmiṣṭhā + Devayānī → Yadu → Yadavas → Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva  
Pūru  
(others)  
Duḥṣanta + Śakuntalā ← Viśvāmitra + Menaka  
Bharata  
Hasti (Founder of Hāstinapura)  
Ajamīdha  
Saṃvaraṇa + Tapatī ← Sūrya  
Kuru

(others including Uparicara Vasu → Satyavatī → Vyāsa)

Pratīpa

Śaṁtanu + Gaṅgā + Satyavatī → Vicitravīrya // Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Pāṇḍu, Vidura //  
Pāṇḍavas

Bhīṣma X

Notice the stepwise descent until Manu. This is the genealogy of the teaching Kṛṣṇa gives Arjuna in chapter 4 of the Gītā, the “solar” path of transmission. With the gender-switching Ilā, there is a disruption of the procreative order, marked by the appearance of the Soma lineage. Silently, the Gītā is marking off the genealogy of the transmission of salvific knowledge from the genealogy of the Kurus and Yādavas. And in doing so, it is punning on what *soma* represents: the “lunar” path of procreation and attainment of heaven.

Kṛṣṇa does not respond to Arjuna’s question about *kula* and *jāti*, but he has plenty to say about the problem with personhood understood as the owner of property: he repeatedly critiques *ahamkāra*. The relational sense of “personhood” manifests as *aham-mama* while simultaneously feigning—as does modern subjectivity does—as an absolute (*aham karta, aham bhokta, aham eva sarva ca*). Kṛṣṇa also has a lot to say about desire, the very engine that fuels the ongoing sacrifice set in motion by Prajāpati.

Kṛṣṇa’s silence on Arjuna’s concern with *kula* is surprising, especially given the Mahābhārata’s careful characterization of Vidura, a victim of the system of privilege. In his insistence that Arjuna perform his warrior duty, it seems as if Kṛṣṇa leaves the question of privilege through birth untouched. Kṛṣṇa, however, does mention the four social orders of society. Shortly after revealing the genealogy of transmission of salvific knowledge in chapter 4 (noted above), Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna that they both had many births; Kṛṣṇa remembers them but Arjuna does not. This raises the question of whether *jāti* is a permanent property of the *jīva* or whether it is, like the body and the garments a body wears, simply temporary external paraphernalia.

Let us briefly review chapter 4 of the Bhagavadgītā, titled *jñāna-karma-saṁnyāsa-yoga* or the Yoga of Renunciation of Action in Knowledge in the colophon. The teaching here consists of:

1. The genealogy of transmission of salvific knowledge (Bhagavadgītā 4.1–3);
2. The many births of beings and Kṛṣṇa’s incarnation (4.4–10);
3. Desires and action (4.11–12);
4. The four *varṇas* of society (4.13–15);
5. Critical analysis of action, especially ritual action; and
6. Supremacy of knowledge and the degrading nature of irrational skepticism.

In this scheme of topics, the hemistich *cātur-varṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam* seems to appear out of nowhere. Kṛṣṇa was speaking about the meaning of his *avatāra*, which is the re-establishment of *dharma*. And it is understandable that he would, as a continuation of his lecture on *dharma*, proceed to highlight desire (all action is motivated in desire) as well as undertake a deconstruction of actions performed with selfish, ego-determined motives. All this is part of an ontological pedagogy and a recommended praxis that leads to liberation. But amid this teaching, the mention of the four *varṇas* appears jarring. An

uneducated person might resort to his own wits and, aroused by the flaming passion of righteousness, lose all perspective. By contrast, an “educated” person trained in “text-historicism” will most likely seize on a few *realia* to construct his own version of the epic, one purged of these narrative and philosophical complexities (not “contradictions” as the text-historian thinks). But this is the danger of an education that emphasizes neither conceptual thinking nor the sublime art of reading literature. One can always eliminate verses 13–15 as an “interpolation” or explain them away as “Brahmanic domination,” but this does not resolve the underlying problem of why these verses occur *here* and *how* they should be read in their wider textual context.

If we read the Gītā without prejudice, the transmission of *yoga* as a means for liberation is not restricted to the three *dvija* sections of society. Kṛṣṇa as Īśvara may have revealed it first to Vivasvat, etcetera, but the reader has already learned it from a butcher in the third book, the Vanaparvan (the so-called Vyādha Gītā in Mahābhārata 3.197–201). The Brāhmaṇa Kauśika “was an eminent brahmin, scholar of the *Veda*, austere, ascetic, making a habit of the law (*vedādhyāyī tapodhanaḥ tapasvī dharmasīlaś ca*; 3.197.1). Moreover, he “studied all the *Vedas*, with [the six auxiliary] branches and upaniṣads” (3.197.2) Yet, he angrily burns down a female crane whose droppings sullied his ritual purity while he was chanting the *Veda*. He is later taught by a woman, whose teacher turns out to be a butcher. The eminent Brāhmaṇa himself later seeks out this teacher to learn from him.

The Vyādha Gītā is remarkably close to the authorial intention of Vyāsa, who composed the Mahābhārata as a *Veda* for women and Śūdras. The Brāhmaṇa is re-educated in the *strī-śūdra* interpretation of the *Veda*. This re-education narrative forms part of Mārkaṇḍeya’s instruction to Yudhiṣṭhira in the presence of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. The topics the butcher deals with include the workings of *karma*, rebirth (Mahābhārata 3.181) and cosmic dissolution (3.186), and the revelation of *Brahman* as Nārāyaṇa and the universe as his manifestation (3.187). As part of this revelation, Nārāyaṇa says: “Brahmindom is my mouth, baronage my arms, the commoners cling to my thigh, and the serfs share my feet, because of my puissance and my stride” (3.187.13)

While reading the Bhagavadgītā, the butcher’s wisdom comes through. Mārkaṇḍeya declares him to be “the pious hunter, best of the upholders of all the laws” (*dharmavyādhas tu nipuṇaṃ ... sarvadharmabhṛtāṃ varaḥ*; Mahābhārata 3.200.1). He knows Sāṃkhya and Yoga (3.201–203), the eternal *jīva* and its travails through *karma* and rebirth (3.200), and is resolute: “I know this to be my svadharma,” he says, “I will not give it up!” (*svadharma iti kṛtvā tu na tyajāmi...*; 3.199.4). He is also a sophisticated interpreter of *ahiṃsā* or non-violence. He is endowed with good judgment, pragmatism, and a desire to make the best of his lot.

Vyādha’s story bears a striking resemblance to Vidura’s. In a previous life, the Vyādha, who was a Brāhmaṇa accidentally pierced a Ṛṣi in a hunting accident. The Ṛṣi cursed him to be born in the womb of a Śūdra woman (*vyādhas tvaṃ bhavitā krūra śūdrayonāv iti dvija*; Mahābhārata 3.205.29). Then, relenting, the Ṛṣi modifies his curse: “Although born from a serf womb, you shall be a sage of the Law (*dharmajña*)” (3.206.4). Like Aṅgī Māṇḍavya, the pierced Ṛṣi suffers but does not die, the role they both play is to place *dharma* in the womb of a Śūdra woman. Instructed by the Vyādha, the Brāhmaṇa learns his lesson.

These are the vicissitudes, happy as well as unhappy, that man incurs, good sage. Pray have no regrets, for you have accomplished a difficult task, son, as you know your real birth (*jānatā jātim ātmanah*). Your present vile profession is due only to your caste, sage (*vidvann ātmajātikṛtena vai*). Suffer it for the time being, then you shall be a brahmin! Even now I doubt not that you are a brahmin; while a [*jāti*] brahmin, living in crime is sure to hasten his fall, and arrogant and wallowing in misdeed is equal to a serf (*śūdreṇa sadṛśo bhavet*). Any serf who always rises to self-control, truthfulness, and Law, I judge him a brahmin; for one becomes a brahmin through one's conduct (*taṃ brāhmaṇam ahaṃ manye vṛttena hi bhaved dvijaḥ*). (Mahābhārata 3.206.9–12)

Vyāsa carefully separates the merit of being a Brāhmaṇa from the privilege of being born as one. A meritorious person—as well as a fallen one—can be born in any family high or low. So how are we to understand *varṇa*? Not as Arjuna means it in chapter 1 of the Gītā. The Vyādha, Vidura, and Ekalavya point to the pain of *varṇa* misused as a privilege system based on endogamy and inheritance. Even if endogamy were abolished, a legal system of inheritance remains in danger of turning into a system of privilege. In the Gītā Kṛṣṇa clearly says: *cāturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭaṃ guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ* (Bhagavadgītā 4.13). The fourfold *varṇa* division is based on *guṇa* and *karma*. Kṛṣṇa explicates the nature of these four *varṇas* in chapter 18. No being is free of the *guṇas* of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, be they terrestrial or celestial (18.40): to be born is to be born as something or someone. Humans are born into societies, and they perform their duties therein according to their innate nature (*svabhāvaprabhavair guṇaiḥ*; 18.41). Kṛṣṇa does not use the word *kula* or *jāti*; and the text does not say *cāturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭaṃ kulajanmavibhāgaśaḥ*. Instead, he describes Brāhmaṇas as those who are endowed with control of the internal and external organs, austerity, purity, forgiveness, straightforwardness, knowledge, and faith. By contrast, a Kṣatriya is one whose nature consists of heroism, boldness, fortitude, capability, generosity, and lordliness; a Kṣatriya does not retreat from battle. Those who provide service are no less valuable to society, they are an integral part of Puruṣa Nārāyaṇa. To interpret *varṇa* as inherited privilege is thus to falsify the plot, structure, and teaching of the Mahābhārata.

### Duty and Selfhood in the Gītā

Even if we interpret the Gītā's teaching on *varṇa* as a supremely sophisticated, egalitarian but tragic, view of the world, the question of *svadharma* remains. The Vyādha had also pointed to this as key to *dharma*. Kṛṣṇa twice says *śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt* (Bhagavadgītā 3.35 and 18.46), translated as “One's own duty, (though) defective, is superior to another's duty well performed.” The translation *viguṇaḥ* as “defective” is correct, but how can one's *svadharma* be defective? By taking *paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt* (“another's duty well-performed”) as the model, we could interpret this line to mean “one's own duty, though performed sub-optimally, is better than another's duty, performed well.” This may solve the problem of *viguṇa* but it creates another problem. If duty is based on my *svabhāva*, how *could* I perform another's duty well? Kṛṣṇa glosses *svadharma* in Bhagavadgītā 18.46 as *svabhāvaniyatam karma*, that is, actions determined by one's nature. Thus, “sub-optimal” is not the best interpretation of *viguṇa*.

A better interpretation is possible if we discard the privilege notion of *svadharma*. The Vyādha's *svadharma* is frowned upon, Vidura's *svadharma* is lowly, and Arjuna's is downright horrific. Some of us provide services to society that may be considered lowly, without glamour or financial merit. We shall therefore interpret *vigūna* as "without merit" in the sense of "without merit in society's eyes." Kṛṣṇa, then, is not saying "do your own duty even if you are defective in performing it." Rather, he is saying, "do that which conforms to your nature (*svaprakṛti anurūpam karma*) even if it is bereft of privilege." Thinking his *svadharma* is determined by his *sūtaputra* status, Karṇa craves the identity and privileges of a Kṣatriya. Blinded by the need for wealth and royal status, Droṇa, who by nature is a great teacher, betrays Ekalavya, a great disciple, both capable and devoted. A mighty Kuru who has been already crowned heir to the throne, Bhīṣma sets aside his own nature and training to procure a woman for his father. These are all well-executed *paradharmas*, which are fearful and destructive.

What is *svadharma* then? Here we turn to the commentarial tradition for elucidation. Gītā 18.42–44 describes the four *varṇas* in terms of their *karma* or duties, not by birth. The natural duties of the Brāhmaṇas are the control of the internal and external organs, austerity, purity, forgiveness, straightforwardness, knowledge as also wisdom and faith. These duties are *svabhāvajam*, based on *svabhāva* or one's own nature; then, Kṛṣṇa lists the duties that are to be performed based on that *svabhāva*. Śāṅkara glosses *svabhāvajam-brahma-karma* with the qualifier *brāhmaṇa jāti*. Kṛṣṇa does not support the *kula* or *jāti* interpretation here at all. After he describes the duties of the four *varṇas*, he says: "Being devoted to his own duty, man attains complete success" (*sve sve karmany abhirataḥ saṃsiddhiṃ labhate naraḥ*; Bhagavadītā 18.45). Not just Brāhmaṇas, but *all* humans attain the highest success. Śāṅkara is perhaps concerned here with ritual purity, endogamy, etcetera, or with an entrenchment of occupation amongst various social classes. Or perhaps, as a philosopher rather than a householder, he is simply uninterested in litigating matters that go beyond his own interests.

In the Brahmasūtras (1.3.34–38), Śāṅkara glosses Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.2.3 where Raikva calls the king a Śūdra. Śāṅkara is deeply concerned with how to interpret passages meaningfully without discarding the text. As he struggles with *Gautama-Dharmasūtra*, he remains loyal to the Upaniṣadic declaration that *varṇa* is ascertained by *guṇa-karma* and not by birth, as in the case of Satyakāma Jābala. He adds, "But from those to whom knowledge dawns as a result of (good) tendencies acquired in the past lives, as for instance to Vidura, Dharmavyādha, and others, the reaping of the result of knowledge cannot be withheld, for the result of knowledge is inevitable. This position is confirmed by the Smṛti text, 'One should read out to the four *varṇas*,' which declares the competence of the four *varṇas* for the acquisition of *itihāsapurāṇa*" (Brahmasūtrabhāṣya 1.3.38). The examples of Vidura and the Vyādha, as well as the scriptural support of the eligibility of all four *varṇas* for attaining knowledge, are derived from the Mahābhārata: Śāṅkara is citing Mahābhārata 12.314.45c—*śrāvayec caturo varṇān*.

All Sanskrit commentators following Śāṅkara take *varṇa* as *jāti*. This is how privilege becomes institutionalized. But the Mahābhārata and the Gītā are quite clear on this point. Today, ancient injustices have become more visible, and in certain matters, we must turn to more recent commentators for better interpretations. I provide two recent examples of the interpretation of *svadharma*.

Strictly, *svadharmā* is work according to one's nature. But until an ideal and efficient social system comes into vogue, it may not be possible to give everyone a work for which he is suited by his character type. What could be done today, if one's duty is not according to one's nature, is to change it for a more suitable one, considering the former as *paradharmā*, the duty of another type of character. But today most men are found seeking not a duty temperamentally suitable to them, but what will bring them the maximum income. When a duty is valued solely for the income it fetches, it ceases to be a pursuit of *dharma*...

This is my *dharma*, but I am not doing it so perfectly. I am doing somebody else's *dharma* perfectly. That is not correct. It is: whatever we do 'dictated by our own inner disposition,' *svabhāva niyatam*. What we really are is dictating the work that we do. That means our soul is finding expression in our work.<sup>35</sup>

Although recent, these interpretations are, in fact, consonant with the Mahābhārata, and although the earlier commentators are authoritative, scripture itself is more authoritative. It is the task of interpretation to provide the most useful and relevant readings for every age and society, and therefore the task of commentary never ends. Why anyone would read out of the texts something that is completely alien to our lives, injures the sentiments of the community to which the texts belong, and weaponize the texts to appear clever and righteous, is beyond my comprehension.

The Gītā is not recommending a theocracy or arguing for a *status quo* of privilege. It is not selling the opioid of an afterlife in heaven. It is carefully analyzing the socio-political existence imposed upon humans and refusing this imposition's absolute claim. In this, I find the Gītā unique and liberating. This concludes our interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's response to Arjuna's concern regarding miscegenation. Let us return to the Mahābhārata to continue our interpretation of Vidura.

### The Testimony of Vidura

Samjaya arrives in Hāstinapura after visiting Yudhiṣṭhira; the Pāṇḍavas have successfully completed the terms of their wager. A tired Samjaya meets the king and reprimands him, promising to deliver the message of Yudhiṣṭhira in the Kuru court the next day (Mahābhārata 5.32.10–30). Samjaya warns Dhṛtarāṣṭra that he has fallen into his son's power (*putravaśānugaḥ*) and he has become notorious in the kingdom for his *adharmā* (5.32.16). He also explains the distinction between two types of persons: the lowborn (*dausḥkuleyaḥ*) ones are unwise, unread, cruel, and lack Kṣatriya virtues, whereas the highborn ones follow *dharma*, endowed with fame, learning, self-mastery, etcetera (5.32.17–18). Samjaya concludes by saying,

You alone in the world are falling into  
The power of sons that were born to you: ...  
By preferring untrustworthy men, O king,  
And rejecting the trustworthy ones, lord of men,  
You are now too feeble, O Kauraveya,

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<sup>35</sup> Swami Ranganathananda, *Universal Message of the Bhagavad Gītā: An Exposition of the Gītā in the Light of Modern Thought and Modern Needs* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000).



To protect your endless, opulent land. (Mahābhārata 5.3.28–29)

The word *āpta* means more than trustworthy: it also means one who is accomplished, one who is an expert. Since the issue here is *dharma*, Saṃjaya is probably thinking not only of Bhīṣma and others who tried to warn the king at the dicing game, but especially of Vidura. Ironically, the competent, trustworthy one who exhibits all the qualities of the highborn happens to be Vidura, whereas Duryodhana and his father behave as if lowborn.

Reprimanded thus, and unable to sleep, Dhṛtarāṣṭra summons Vidura to keep him company with wise words (Mahābhārata 5.33.1–15). Vidura lectures on various topics, punctuating his lessons with extolment of the virtues of Yudhiṣṭhira and urging the king to make peace with the Pāṇḍavas. Exhorting the king on honesty, Vidura reintroduces the narrative of Virocana, the Asura prince, and Sudhanvan, the Brāhmaṇa. Recall that Vidura had already recounted this narrative in the Kuru court when no one answered Draupadī’s question on *dharma*. Repetition is not a flaw in teaching *dharma* (cf. Brahmasūtra 4.1.1: *āvṛttir asakṛdupadeśāt*); more significantly, the Kuru court never resolved the question. Vidura now compares *ārjavam* (honesty, straightforwardness, rectitude, propriety, sincerity, frankness) with such salvific duties as visiting pilgrimages (5.35.2). Narrative accounts such as the Virocana episode are individual, semantic entities. When repeated, they are never exactly the same—context, details, the lesson they carry, etcetera—vary. The context here is less about Draupadī’s question, and more about avoiding a disastrous feud with the Pāṇḍavas. We are told the name of the princess that Virocana has fallen in love with: Keśini. This time, Prahṛāda does not merely acquiesce in Sudhanvan’s status as the son of Angiras. He quizzes Sudhanvan on *dharma*, especially as it concerns an arbiter of a *dharma* issue. In the Sabhāparvan iteration, Prahṛāda knew the answer, but not the consequences of not speaking out. Here, the question is about one who arbitrates falsely, obstructing a judgment in favor of doing the right thing. Prahṛāda says “I ask you, Sudhanvan, what night does the false arbiter spend who would neither speak the truth nor lie?”

Sudhanvan responds, “A false arbiter will spend the night that a superseded wife spends, or one who lost at dicing, or one whose body is exhausted with his burden. The false arbiter spends the night of one forbidden the city and staying hungry outside the gate and seeing many enemies. With a lie about a goat, he kills five, with a lie about a cow ten, with a lie about a horse a hundred, with a lie about a man a thousand.... If he lies about gold, he kills those born and unborn, with a lie about land he kills everything. Don’t lie about land!”

Blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra, caught up in *adharma* resulting from his lust for the kingdom and his selfish love for his son, cannot accept Vidura as the foremost of the wise. Vidura may have the king’s confidence but he lacks influence. In the final analysis, their relationship remains separated by Vidura’s status as a chamberlain. By contrast, Sudhanvan has a great pedigree: he is the son of Angiras Prajāpati. Perhaps Dhṛtarāṣṭra would heed Sudhanvan’s *āpta-vacanam* (expert testimony)? In any case, the blind man does not respond, and Vidura continues teaching, ending with a summary of the four *varṇas*: explicitly described along the *guṇa-karma* register. This brings Vidura’s teaching on *pravṛttidharma* to an end. Dhṛtarāṣṭra probably recognizes it as such, resigning himself to mortal fate. “Is there anything, Vidura, that you have left unsaid?”

*Pravṛttidharma* is encoded in *varṇāśramadharmā*. It is “mortal” *dharma*. Instituted by the Prajāpatis, it regulates progeny through endogamy, and maintains genealogical continuities through inheritance and funeral libations. It is finite and fragile, fraught with the conflict of *dharma* and *adharmā*. Encoded into the inheritance system is the evil of unearned privilege. *Varṇa* as *guṇa-karma* divisions ossify into perverse privilege systems based on *kula-janma*. No society is free of this danger: “white privilege” is impossible without endogamy and inheritance. Liberal societies try to minimize the claims of privilege but do not acknowledge that the very definition of a person they operate with is related to possession of property. No violent revolution can overthrow this socio-biological system completely; to do so would mean that society as an organized group of functions and interdependencies would cease to exist. And this is the anarchy Arjuna fears. It is not the same an-archy which the Goddess reveals in the *sabhā* and Kṛṣṇa on the battlefield.

To return to the question Dhṛtarāṣṭra raised, namely, has Vidura left out anything, the answer is *nivṛttidharma* or *mokṣa*. To teach this, Vidura summons Sanatsujāta. Śāṅkara follows the Mahābhārata closely in his interpretation of the text; in his Introduction to the Bhagavadgītā, he writes: “After projecting this world, and desiring to ensure its stability, He, the Lord, first created the Prajāpatis, viz Marīci and others and made them follow the *dharma* characterized by action (rites and duties) as revealed in the Vedas. And then, having created others, viz Sanaka, Sanandana, and so on, He made them espouse the *dharma* characterized by renunciation and distinguished by Knowledge and detachment. For, the *dharma* revealed in the Vedas is of two kinds—one characterized by action, and the other by renunciation” (Gambhirananda trans.).

Let us compare the Vyādha episode with the Sanatsujāta episode. In both cases, the *sūdrayoni* issue hangs in the background. In the latter, Vidura says: “I have been born from a Śūdra womb, therefore I cannot say any more than this. But I know the eternal wisdom of the youth...” (Mahābhārata 5.41.5). In his dialogue of with the Vyādha, the Brāhmaṇa student asks, “The eternal Law is obscure to one who has been born a serf (*durjñeyaḥ śāśvato dharmāḥ sūdrayonau hi vartatā*); I do not think you are a serf” (3.205.19). The Vyādha adopts the *guṇa-karma* description of *varṇa*:

Governed by *sattva* is one who is illumined, steady, aloof, unprotesting, free from anger, wise, and self-controlled. Enlightenment, the mark of *sattva*, is troubled by the ways of the world; when one has learned that which is to be learned, he loathes the way of the world. Once this character of dispassion prevails, his self-pride mellows, and his sincerity becomes serene. Thereupon upon all the pairs of opposites are mutually appeased, and he does not exert himself at all in any cause. A man who observes the virtues of this good estate, if born a serf (*śūdra*) will become a commoner (*vaiśya*), O brahmin, or a baron (*kṣatriya*). When he abides by his uprightness, he lays claim to brahminhood [that is, he becomes a Brāhmaṇa]. (Mahābhārata 3.203.7–12)

This is the strong interpretation of the philosophical basis of *varṇa*. It does not displace the more subtle *karma* theory, however. The Vyādha was a Brāhmaṇa in a previous life, who through association with a king was tempted to go hunting, and accidentally shot a Rṣi. As a result, he was cursed to be born in a *sūdrayoni* (Mahābhārata 3.205.29) The

Brāhmaṇa agrees with the *guṇa-karma* interpretation of *varṇa*, rejecting the *kula-janma* interpretation:

Even now I doubt not that you are brahmin [that is, by *guṇa-karma*]; while a brahmin [who is so by birth], living in crime that is sure to hasten his fall, and arrogant and wallowing in misdeeds, is equal to a serf (*śūdreṇa sadr̥śo bhavet*). Any serf who always rises to self-control, truthfulness, and Law (*dharma*) I judge him a brahmin; for one becomes a brahmin through one's conduct (*taṃ brāhmaṇam ahaṃ manye vṛttena hi bhaved dvijaḥ*) (Mahābhārata 3.206.10e–12).

Vyāsa goes one step further. The lowborn hunter is not only conversant with the philosophy of Sāṃkhya but also Yoga. In his lecture on the latter, he provides a paraphrase (Mahābhārata 3.202.21) of the chariot allegory from the Kāṭha Upaniṣad (Kāṭha Up. 1.3.3). Not only has he “heard” the sacred revelation, but he also has the authority to quote from it, explain it, and profitably apply it to his own salvation.

The literary genius of the Mahābhārata carries the eddies of these deep interpretations of *dharma* all the way to the narrative surface. The Ṛṣi who was accidentally shot through by the Vyādha in his Brāhmaṇa birth reminds us of the tragicomic travails of Anī Māṇḍavya. We are told, in a significant aside, that although he was pierced, the Ṛṣi failed to die (*na ca prāṇair vyayujyata*; Mahābhārata 3.206.7). The entire “piercing” is docetic: it is merely to illustrate the connection between *karma* and the twofold *dharma*: the deterministic *pravṛttidharma* and the liberation endowing *nivṛttidharma*. The detail that in his Brāhmaṇa birth the Vyādha fell in with a king and acquired weaponry reminds us of Droṇa, who abandoned his *guṇa-karma* Brahminhood and took up—through his unrequited friendship with King Drupada—the qualities of a Kṣatriya. In the Ekalavya episode, Vyāsa sets up Droṇa as a deeply problematic character; the teacher here goes by the *jāti* interpretation of *varṇa*. *Varṇasaṃkara* is not only a mismatch between one's nature and profession, but also a confusion of the two interpretations of *varṇa*. By taking these vast resonances related to Vidura into account, we can make full sense of Vidura's accursed birth. It parallels Kṛṣṇa's *avatāra* in bringing forth an interpretation of *dharma* appropriate to all in the present *yuga*. Where there is *dharma*, there is Kṛṣṇa could be reframed as “where there is Vidura, there is Kṛṣṇa.”

In the Bhagavadgītā, Kṛṣṇa reiterates the “heroism” lecture by Vidurā, the *varṇāśramadharmā* interpretation by Vyādha based on Sāṃkhya by Vyādha, and Yoga and Pañcarātra by Sanatsujāta. Vidura, I have shown, is related to all these three respectively by name, by shared birth status, and by authority to summon the highest Ṛṣis. Arjuna's question about miscegenation and Kṛṣṇa's response are thus conditioned by Vidura through these narrative strategies. Recall that the central question of abuse of *varṇāśramadharmā* to justify privilege was guided by Vidura and Draupadī in the *sabhā*: Kṛṣṇa, absent from the dicing, merely executes the consequences of the outrage of the court in misinterpreting *dharma*.

Vidura is thus the *dharmayoni*; his travails provide a triumphant interpretation of *dharma*, one especially keen on the liberation of women and others dirempted from the privilege systems of society, patriarchy, and the gods of the *polis*. The Mahābhārata, as I have argued elsewhere, is an interpretation of the Gītā. But in this present interpretation,

we have reason to think the reverse is also true. The Gītā organically emerges from the Kuru narrative as ethical thoughtfulness on the issues of politics, power, privilege, and inheritance.

### **Teaching Dharma/Interpreting Dharma**

The Mahābhārata does not, however, simply cancel privilege the way Luther cancels the Pope. Despite its widespread abuse, privilege is endemic to every social system. Even the post-capitalist society envisioned by Marx requires a class of “Vanguards” to maintain the system. The Mahābhārata maintains a delicate balance between utopianism and apocalypticism, between earth and heaven, and, between idealism and *Realpolitik*. Let us look at the Anuśāsanaparvan. Containing 154 chapters, this thirteenth *parvan* marks the transition from the destruction of the war to the dawn of a new cycle. Bhīṣma concludes his instruction in chapter 152 and gives up his life in chapter 154. When the patriarch’s mother, Goddess Gaṅga appears grieving as Yudhiṣṭhira offers libations, Kṛṣṇa reminds her that Bhīṣma’s birth was the result of a curse (Mahābhārata 13.154.28). This curse is an explicit reminder of the beginning of the Kuru intrigue in the first book, the Ādiparvan (1.91–93).

The foundation of a new order follows the scheme of the restoration of the sacrifice of Prajāpati—all governments, whether they admit it or not, are grounded in hegemony. The new order therefore requires the establishment of social order; social functions must be fulfilled; social roles assigned; an economy of expertise, authority, and privilege must be established. The Anuśāsanaparvan understands the role of education in its contribution to society, and thus the important role Brāhmaṇas play as academics, ritualists, and counselors and custodians of learning and revelation. These are academics, intellectuals, *pastors*. The encomium of the Brāhmaṇas in the Anuśāsanaparvan is extensive, if not overdone. Brāhmaṇas are most honorable (Mahābhārata 13.8, 13.136, and 13.147) and worthy of gifts and stipends—or, in the contemporary idiom, *tenure* (13.62, 13.68, 13.100, 13.113). Promises to them are not to be broken (13.9) and there are rules for giving to Brāhmaṇas. Taking away their livelihoods, letting them starve, ignorantly insulting scripture are all equal to Brahminicide. One’s nature is inborn, but one may lead a virtuous life and gain better birth in the next life (13.28–30, the Mataṅga episode). *Brāhmaṇatvam* is difficult to achieve, but Viśvāmitra and Vītahavya became Brāhmaṇas (13.51). Brāhmaṇa virtues are praised by Nārada (13.32), and it is the king’s duty to protect those endowed with them (13.33). Kṛṣṇa himself honors them (13.34). Even those who are Brāhmaṇas by birth alone should be respected (13.35); however, one should give only to those who actually possess Brāhmaṇa virtues (13.37). Then follow the rules of endogamy and inheritance. Brāhmaṇas should not marry a Śūdra woman, but if a son is born of such a marriage, he is not legally eligible for legal inheritance. However, they must be given a share out of compassion (13.47). A Śūdra woman’s son is impure in the sacerdotal, inheritance, and occupational functions of society (13.48). But still, one can become a Brāhmaṇa, as Kūśika did, for example (13.52–56). However, as the Bhārgava-Kṣatriya debacle shows, class conflict is ever ready to erupt. Brāhmaṇa power is eulogized (13.137–42), but Brāhmaṇas should follow rules (13.93); giving to unworthy Brāhmaṇas brings grief to the donor (13.94). Goddess Umā is keen to know how one’s social class could be improved and how one becomes a Brāhmaṇa (13.131).

Before we jump to the conclusion that all this can be dismissed as “Brahmin ideology,” written by and for an elite group seeking privileges, and a revolution ought to be instigated on behalf of the dirempted, etcetera, let us remember the vicissitudes of *dharma* in the previous *parvans*. The optimism of the Anuśāsanaparvan has already been deconstructed, there has been, to my knowledge, no philosopher, economist, or righteous prophet who critiqued the sacrificial economy of society as devastatingly as did the Goddess who became the cause of the destruction of the sacrifice of the Creator God Prajāpati. “Righteousness” is not a replacement for the hard work of thinking; establishing, governing, and maintaining society is a significantly more difficult a task than adolescent critique.<sup>36</sup>

The Anuśāsanaparvan *follows* the deconstruction of the previous cycle. That deconstruction began with the Draupadī entering the *sabhā*. Now, for society to function, the struggle of *dharma* and *adharma*, the possibility of greed and disorder, the non-absolute nature of politics, the tragic human condition, etcetera must be veiled over. Umā, the terrible daughter who cracked the foundation of the foundational sacrifice, as it were, now smilingly appears as a benign wife in the Umā-Maheśvara-Saṃvāda (Mahābhārata 13.127–134). To live requires us to have illusions; to be liberated requires us to see life itself as an appearance. The philosophical daring of the Mahābhārata does not retreat with fear from questioning the very foundation: the creator-created paradigm on which the cosmopolis rests. Without blinking, Vyāsa stares at the an-archic foundation of the entirety of phenomenal existence. For the time being, the patriarchy of the previous cycle has ended, *dharma* is victorious, and there is hope, however, illusory.

The authorial voice comes through all this analysis of *varṇa*. Having heard that *ahiṃsā* is the highest *dharma*, the highest form of self-control, the highest giving, and the highest austerity (Mahābhārata 13.117.37–38), Yudhiṣṭhira asks about the fate (*kām yoniṃ pratipannās te*) of all those who were killed in the previous cycle, that is, in the war (13.118.1c). Bhīṣma responds with a narrative, the Vyāsa-Kīṭa-Saṃvāda, or the dialogue between Vyāsa and an insect (13.118–120). The *kīṭa*, a creeping, crawling insect, sometimes translated as a “worm” stands in for the lowest birth—birth in a *tiryagyoni*. The Chandogya Upaniṣad says, “On the other hand, through neither of these two paths [that is, the path of the gods and the smoky path where one is reborn according to *karma*], are born those small creatures (*kṣudrāṇi bhūtāni*) which transmigrate again and again. This third state indicated by the words, ‘be born and die’ (*jāyasva mriyasva*)” (Chāndogya Up. 5.10.8). The insect symbolizes the lowest form of an animate being.<sup>37</sup>

The Mahābhārata goes beyond the socially dirempted like *sūdrayoni* Vidura or Vyādha (a point social justice critics miss); it even goes beyond animal rights (the humanization of snakes and the inhumanity of violence against them constitutes the frame of the epic): it extends the dignity of existence all the way to a *tiryagyoni*. Vyāsa is taking the argument, literally, down to an insect. Not satisfied with blessing a *sūdrayoni* with the embodiment of *dharma*, he does not neglect the *tiryagyoni*, the *kīṭa*: indeed, Vyāsa guides the creature’s pedagogy until it reaches its ultimate goal.

<sup>36</sup> For a good formulation of this critique, see Nietzsche’s *Second Untimely Meditation*. I quote from this work in the conclusion.

<sup>37</sup> For examples, see Brahmasaṃhita 5.53 which uses the expression *brahmādi-kīṭa-patagāvadhayaś ca jīvāḥ* (“all *jīvas* beginning with Brahmā down to the insect”); likewise, Lalita Sahasranāma, verse 67 *ābrahma-kīṭa-jananī varṇāśrama-vidhāyinī*.

The term *tiryagyoni* appears 42 times in the Mahābhārata. Sometimes the term is used generically to denote a creature born of an animal womb. *Tiryak* means that which is moves obliquely or horizontally (as opposed to erect, like humans); it also means any animal. Apte gives an additional adjectival meaning: that which lies in between. The Mahābhārata uses the term to mean a being, a creature, an animal. But *tiryagyoni* occurs in significant places. The two quarreling brothers eaten by Garuḍa curse each other to become animals, one an elephant and another a tortoise (*tiryagyonigatāv api*; Mahābhārata 1.25.19). But when one looks closer, Hanumān is called *tiryagyoni* in the Vanaparvan when Bhīma encounters him (3.146.75): high praise indeed for *tiryagyoni*. But these are not accidental eulogies to animality. If *sūdrayoni* Vidura is the *dharma*-endowed son of Vyāsa, then Vyāsa himself is born to a *tiryagyoni*: his mother Satyavatī was born of a fish. The text specifically marks this detail by using this term (1.57.52). The subject matter of the Mahābhārata—*dharma* (as Vidura)—and the author (as Vyāsa) are *sūdrayoni* and *tiryagyoni*, respectively. We ignorantly babble like fools when we talk about a “Brahminic takeover” of the epic or “Brahminization” or a “Brahminic makeover” of the southern recension, etcetera.

### The Message of Nahuṣa

If Satyavatī interrupted the hoary Kuru genealogy by displacing Bhīṣma, the rightful heir with full inheritance credentials, was the line at least pure and the ancestors safe before she entered the story? The response is overwhelmingly negative. The term *tiryagyoni* appears five times in relation to the ancestor of the Kurus, Nahuṣa (Mahābhārata 3.176.17; and 3.178.9, 11, 12, and 13). Even before the arrival of Satyavatī, Nahuṣa had fallen from heaven as a boa. Shortly after meeting Hanumān, his theriomorphic brother, Bhīma meets his ophidian ancestor.

Nahuṣa, the ancestor of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, ascended to heaven through sacrifice and austerity (Mahābhārata 3.177.7–8). “Power-bred confusion inebriated me,” he confesses, “I was so drunk with self-grandeur that I did not think of anyone else” (*aiśvaryamohena madāviṣṭo... abhimānena mattaḥ san kaṃ cin nānyam acintayam*; 3.178.31 and 33). When he kicks Agastya with his foot, a voice curses him: “Perish, you Snake!” (3.178.37). He falls headlong from heaven illustrating that any heaven attained through sacrifice is perishable and ego-based. When Nahuṣa calls out to the compassionate Agastya, the sage sets a limit to the curse. “He who replies precisely to the questions you ask him will set you free from the curse” (3.176.21).

When Bhīma comes his way, the snake overpowers him; Yudhiṣṭhira arrives to free him. In this *dharma* dialogue, Yudhiṣṭhira answers the snake’s questions on *dharma* “precisely” and liberates both his ancestor Nahuṣa and his brother Bhīma. When the Kuru ancestor fell, only precisely answering the question of *dharma* could save him. By contrast, precisely by not answering Draupadī’s question (which, we saw, was a front for the Vidura’s diremption of privilege), Dhṛtarāṣṭra forfeits his sons. And by answering the *dharma* question, Yudhiṣṭhira not only saves Bhīma from death, but he also saves him from losing the worlds of his ancestors: Bhīma had sworn that he would forfeit them if he did not kill Duryodhana.

Interestingly, the questions Nahuṣa poses to Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, prior to releasing Bhīma have only one subject matter: interpretation of *varna*. This is an interesting topic of conversation between ancestors and distant progeny. One would

expect the conversation to be about procreation, as in the case of Jaratkāru and his Yāyāvāra ancestors (Mahābhārata 1.13.5–30). Rather than a “be fruitful and multiply, offer sacrificial offerings to the ancestors, conquer death through sacrifice and genealogy” sermon, we are given a *dharma* debate about *varṇa*, which consists of three questions. Let us review them.

1. The snake asks: who is a Brāhmaṇa and what should be known? Yudhiṣṭhira answers that a Brāhmaṇa is one who possesses virtues such as truthfulness, charity, forgiveness, good conduct, non-injuriousness, self-control and compassion (*dānaṃ kṣamā śīlam ānṛśaṃsyam damo ghrṇā*; Mahābhārata 3.177.16). One is a Brāhmaṇa by *guṇa* and *karma*. That which is to be known is the highest *Brahman* (*paraṃ brahma*), which is beyond happiness, unhappiness and untouched by grief (3.177.17).

2. The snake raises a doubt: if the Veda is the authority, and if *Brahman* takes one beyond misery, then even a Śūdra could possess these virtues. Yudhiṣṭhira elaborates. Birth does not determine who is a Brāhmaṇa or a Śūdra. A Śūdra who exhibits the above virtues is a Brāhmaṇa.

3. The snake persists. “If you judge a brahmin by conduct, king, then birth has no meaning (*vyarthā jāti*), my dear sir, as long as no conduct is evident” (Mahābhārata 3.177.25).

Yudhiṣṭhira responds: (1) *jāti* is anyway difficult to ascertain in this world; (2) *varṇasamkara* or miscegenation is ubiquitous; (3) speech, sexual intercourse, and birth and death are common to all humans; (4) therefore, the Ṛṣis use the formula *ye yajāmahe* by which one can make offerings to gods no matter what one’s *jāti* may be; (5) all begin their lives as Śūdras, the natal ceremony externally conferring status; and (6) Manu Svāyambhuva’s judgment is that miscegenated ones are superior to initiated ones, if the latter do not display the appropriate virtues (Mahābhārata 3.177.26–31).

Before he is questioned, Yudhiṣṭhira addresses Nahuṣa with the words, “You know fully what a brahmin may know here, O king of the Snakes. When I have heard you I shall make my reply” (Mahābhārata 3.177.14). How are we to understand their dialogue then? We cannot say the snake does not know *dharma*. Nor can we say that the snake is testing Yudhiṣṭhira for its liberation from its *tiryagyonī* state is dependent on the proper execution of this dialogue. Let us take the broader context of the dialogue, Nahuṣa had fallen because of his *ahaṃkāra*, and he had disregarded the Brāhmaṇas. Agastya himself did not curse Nahuṣa; in fact, he compassionately sets a limit to the curse and reveals an escape clause. But within the dialogue, a *siddhānta* or a decisive conclusion has emerged as a result: not birth but conduct determines a Brāhmaṇa. And ethics is ultimately anchored in the ultimate goal, *paraṃ brahma*. Thus, *this* connection between Brāhmaṇa conduct and *Brahman* emerges in the discussion. The Mahābhārata is not simply listing the four goals. *Mokṣa* guides the reign of *dharma* over all goals. If not *mokṣa* what remains? Desire and power. Nahuṣa’s fall from his heavenly sovereign status is but a correct interpretation of *dharma*.

The episode stages a hermeneutic exercise. Yudhiṣṭhira’s response to Nahuṣa is anchored in *śruti* and *smṛti*, namely, Veda and Manu. He cites the opinion of Manu Svāyambhu to resolve a difference of opinion (*asminn evaṃ matidvaidhe*; Mahābhārata 3.177.30) regarding the interpretation of the Veda. “Class is determined by observance of tasks. If no conduct is observed, there is judged to be overwhelming class mixture.” Our conscience is an insufficient guide to ethics, because our subjectivity is influenced by

desire, wrath and greed—sometimes desire is seen as good, whereas wrath and greed are easily justified. Yet these three open the gate to hell (Bhagavadgītā 16.21); only by liberating oneself from these can one reach the ultimate goal of life (16.22). Therefore, we ought to follow scripture which helps us condition our desires and not act according to our own dictates (16.23). “Therefore, let the *śāstra* be your authority for determining what should be done and what should not be done. Knowing what is enjoined in the injunctions of the *śāstra*, you should perform work here” (16.24). Desiring the worlds, Nahuṣa had practiced austerities and sacrifices and charity. Attaining the objects of desire does not extinguish desire, and therefore he fell, overcome by greed for Indra’s property and lust for Indra’s wife, etcetera. While citing scriptural authority, Yudhiṣṭhira uses logic and argumentation, as well as empirical evidence to support his claim. If scripture by itself is the authority, why do we need Manu’s opinion here? Neither scripture alone nor all the other means of knowledge are sufficient. Rather, we also need the experience of learned ones. In the Āraṇyakaparvan App. 1, no. 32, verse 65, Yudhiṣṭhira says, “Reason is inconclusive (*tarko ’pratiṣṭhaḥ*), scriptures vary. There is no philosopher whose opinion is authoritative. The truth of dharma (morality and *mokṣa*) is hidden (in the heart). That by which the great ones have traversed is the road (to reality)” (my trans.). In his commentary on the Brahmasūtras, Śāṅkara carefully applies these hermeneutic principles enshrined in the Mahābhārata.

For this further reason, one should not on the strength of mere logic challenge something that has to be known from the Vedas. For reasoning that has no Vedic foundation and springs from the mere imagination of persons lacks conclusiveness. For man’s conjecture has no limits. Thus it is seen that an argument discovered by adepts with great effort is falsified by other adepts...If, however, the reasoning of somebody having wide fame, say for instance Kapila or someone else, be relied on under the belief that this must be conclusive, even so it surely remains inconclusive, inasmuch as people, whose greatness is well recognized and who are initiators of scriptures (or schools of thought)—for instance, Kapila, Kaṇāda, and others—are seen to hold divergent views. (Brahmasūtrabhāṣya 2.1.11)

Nahuṣa had asked not only about Brāhmaṇas, but also what they know. Yudhiṣṭhira had replied “the ultimate *Brahman*.” Nahuṣa does not readily accept this. “The object of knowledge, you say, king of men, is beyond happiness and unhappiness; but not a thing is free from either, and I do not think it exists.” Yudhiṣṭhira replies with an analogy: “Just as in between cold and heat there is neither cold nor heat, so there can be something somewhere in which there is neither happiness nor unhappiness: this is my view, Snake” (Mahābhārata 3.177.24). The question of liberation is left out, for the time being. Yudhiṣṭhira’s education is still incomplete, and Bhīṣma will teach him *mokṣadharmā* elsewhere. Śāṅkara, however, completes the interpretation:

Although reasoning may be noticed to have some finality in some contexts, still in the present context it cannot possibly get any immunity from the charge of being inconclusive; for this extremely sublime subject-matter, concerned with the reality of the cause of the Universe and leading to the goal of liberation, cannot even be



guessed without the help of the Vedas. And we said that It cannot be known either through perception, being devoid of form, etcetera or through inference, etcetera, being devoid of the grounds of inference, etcetera.... And since there can be no other source of true knowledge, ‘there will arise the possibility of liberation being ruled out’ (*avimokṣaprasaṅgaḥ*). (Brahmasūtrabhāṣya 2.1.11)

I cite this passage to draw our attention to the “context” here. In scientific matters, as well as with facts, there can be finality of reason, therefore reason cannot be abandoned. It is only in regards to matters of *dharma* that things are subtle. Thus, proper reasoning based on scripture is recommended for understanding *dharma*. The Mahābhārata is carrying out this massive interpretive project. Here, the context of *dharma* is *pravṛttidharma* or the attainment of heaven through sacrifice and scriptural faith. Nahuṣa has committed the interpretive error by not aligning this finite *dharma* with *nivṛttidharma*.

These interpretive issues may appear complex to us, but the Mahābhārata has delivered its judgment. *Varṇa* is an ineradicable feature of social existence due to diversity of social functions and human nature, not to mention institutions related to economics, politics, education, etcetera. However, one becomes a Brāhmaṇa not by birth, but by acquiring virtue. But, let us note, those born as Brāhmaṇas have a greater chance of education. And with education accrues privilege. We could deconstruct privilege (as Draupadī, Vidura, Vyādha, Kṛṣṇa, and Vyāsa do), but to eliminate it would strike at the root of our socio-political existence. The sacrificial foundation of the institution called our cosmos is problematic, as Dakṣa’s daughter demonstrates, and it can be painful, as the war shows. *But it cannot be eliminated*. Sadly, privilege is unavoidable and the function of pedagogy indispensable. Both must be held accountable, however. The Hāstinapura court erred in excluding critique, and by interpreting *dharma* according to birth, privilege, and power. Marx had an extraordinary critique of the institution of economy; however, without a critique of desire, wrath, and greed, without the understanding of the tragic human condition, Marxism devolves into the hubris of Prometheus. Let us conclude our analysis of Nahuṣa with his words: “There are three ways one can go as a result of one’s acts, O king, and these three are human birth, sojourn in heaven, and animal birth (*tiryagyoni*)” (Mahābhārata 3.178.9). “A man controlled by desire and anger, given to injury and greed, falls from human estate and is born as an animal (*tiryagyonau prasūyate*), while one born an animal, so it has been laid down, may become human” (3.178.12).

### **The Life of an Insect**

We now return to the Vyāsa-Kīṭa-Saṃvāda (Mahābhārata 13.118–120). The term *tiryagyoni* occurs 5 times in this narrative (13.118.14, 17 and 119.1, 20, 23). Vyāsa who realized *Brahman* (*brahmabhūta*; 13.118.7) comes upon a *kīṭa* scurrying on a busy road. Questioned about his rush, the insect confesses that he is running out of fear that he may be crushed to death. Vyāsa asks the creature if death would not be a good thing for a creature like an insect (13.118.14–15). The insect replies that every creature becomes attached to life and thinks it is happy. In a previous life, the insect was a cruel Śūdra. He was cruel, given to bad conduct, harsh in speech, illiberal, hateful, greedy, profiteering at the expense of others, uncaring of gods and ancestors, unhelpful, envious, wishing for the downfall of others, etcetera, and in consequence, he was born as a *kīṭa*. However, he

adored his mother and on one occasion he extended guest hospitality to a Brāhmaṇa. Owing to these two good deeds, he did not lose memory of his past life.

Vyāsa is merciful, and says, “I can save you through the power of my austerities by (granting you my) *darśana*” (*ahaṃ hi darśanād eva tārayāmi tapobalāt*; Mahābhārata 13.119.2). Vyāsa reveals the hope of becoming a Brāhmaṇa by acquiring meritorious virtues and promises to teach him *Brahman*. The worm loses his fear and remains on the road. Acquiring merit through various births, he becomes a king. Then, remembering that he had been a worm and acknowledging the grace of Vyāsa of limitless brilliance (*prasādāt ... amitatejasaḥ*; 13.119.16), he goes to see Vyāsa. Again, through obtaining Vyāsa’s *darśana*, the king, after falling in battle, will eventually attain to the happiness of heaven and finally union with *Brahman*. The king, however, begins to practice severe austerities, but Vyāsa reminds him that the duty of Kṣatriyas is to protect all creatures. The worm thus, by performing his duties, continued to better himself, until he reached the highest goal and realized *Brahman*. This, apparently, without being born a Brāhmaṇa by birth.

This account is fascinating, if only because of the appearance of Vyāsa as a salvific figure, extending his grace not merely to the dirempted in society, but even to an insect. That dignity bestowed on this insect is not because all creatures—great and small—are created equally; that would be a bald lie. The dignity of all creatures is the possibility of using their nature and their work to acquire virtue. The long list of vices rhetorically evokes the Gītā verse: “Even a hardened criminal who loves me and none other is to be deemed a saint, for he has the right conviction” (*api cet sudurācāro bhajate mām ananyabhāk | sādhuḥ eva sa mantavyaḥ samyag vyavasīto hi saḥ* ||; Bhagavadgītā 9.30; van Buitenen trans.).

Remember that Aṅgī Māṇḍavya, the impaled Ṛṣi was punished for piercing an insect (*patamgaka*; Mahābhārata 1.101.24) and in retaliation cursed God Dharma to be born in a *sūdrayoni*. None other than Vyāsa had sired him and blessed his mother. Did Vyāsa remember his cursed son Dharma who had stood up for a pierced insect when he saw the *kīṭa*? Or is his grace universal, extending the scripture’s benefit not only to women and Śūdras but also to animals and insects? Note the two meritorious actions the *kīṭa* had performed in its life as a Śūdra: adored his mother and welcomed a Brāhmaṇa guest. These are precisely the two virtues of Vyādha, who was a Brāhmaṇa who accidentally pierced a Ṛṣi and was hence cursed to become a Śūdra. We already explored the resonances between Vidura and the Vyādha.

The dominance of the political as a privilege system is undercut by this trans-species interpretation of birth—the human is no longer a privileged being either on the planet (*mahīpatis*) or vis-à-vis species. If species birth is not an absolute, how little should social identities be declared absolute? By introducing the *tiryagyoni*, Vyāsa critiques anthropocentrism, a key feature of the absolutization of privilege in politics.

### **Upaniṣadic Discourses in the Strīparvan**

In the Udyogaparvan, Vidura had cited his status as *sūdrayoni* to refrain from teaching Dhṛtarāṣṭra about the Upaniṣadic doctrine of *Brahman*. Instead, he summoned Sanatsujāta to teach the esoteric doctrine. In the Strīparvan, as part of teaching *buddhimārga* to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura likens the man who transmigrates to someone who has entered a deep forest and has fallen into a well, hanging by a rope being gnawed at by

rats, and surrounded by dangers (*vanaṃ durgam hi yat tv etat saṃsāragahanam hi tat...*; Mahābhārata 11.6.5)

Through this allegory (*upamāna*), Vidura makes room for *brahmavāda*, paraphrasing directly from the Upaniṣad. He teaches Upaniṣadic practices of self-control, renunciation, and vigilance (*damas tyāgo 'pramādaś ca*; Mahābhārata 11.7.19). The dangers of *pramāda* were central to the teaching of Sanatkumāra in Udyogaparvan: *pramāda* is death; *apramāda* is immortality (*pramādam vai mṛtyum aham bravīmi; sadāpramādam amṛtatvam bravīmi*; 5.42.4). The Udyogaparvan and Strīparvan episodes are symmetrical: both are dialogues between Vidura and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, both consolations, forming two bookends to the war-sacrifice. But whereas in the Udyogaparvan Vidura had dithered from delivering the ultimate salvific message, here in the Strīparvan, he paraphrases the Kaṭhapaniṣad allegory of the body as the chariot (11.7.14–20) with the stated goal of liberation (in Brahmāloka, that is, the attainment of *saguṇa Brahman*, the *Brahman* Sanatkumāra had lauded as *bhagavān*).

We should note an important difference between the two episodes: the Vedic *dharma* taught by the highborn Sanatsujāta has become compatible with the lowborn Vidura. Moreover, Sanatsujāta's brief remark about the “blind” ones (*tamo 'prakāśah*) who follow sensate desires falling into a pit (*gacchantah śvabhram*; Mahābhārata 5.42.11) is developed by Vidura in the Strīparvan into an elaborate analogy of the sensate man falling into a well. Both these accounts have the Kaṭhapaniṣad passage in the background, where Yama tells Naciketas “living in the midst of ignorance and considering themselves intelligent and enlightened, the senseless people go round and round, following crooked courses, just like the blind led by the blind. The means for the attainment of the other world does not become revealed to the non-discriminating man who blunders, being befooled by the lure of wealth. One that constantly thinks that there is only this world, and none hereafter, comes under my sway again and again” (Kaṭha Up. 1.2.5–6). Vidura tells the blind king, “They say this chariot [the body] that bewilders the stupid (*durbudhāḥ*) belongs to Yama. It gets you what you have gotten, king: The destruction of its kingdom, the destruction of its allies, the destruction of its sons” (Mahābhārata 11.7.15–16). But he who is discriminating and self-controlled attains immortality. The allegory of the chariot was also cited by the Vyādha.

One way to look at the difference between the ways the Upaniṣad is presented by Sanatsujāta and by Vidura is as follows. Vidura summoned Sanatsujāta to give instruction in the proper way when Dhṛtarāṣṭra could have been a qualified student before the war. It would have counted as “hearing” from a qualified teacher or as receiving *śruti* through hearing (*śravanam*). But although the teacher was highly qualified, the student (who had birthright eligibility or *adhikāra* as a Kṣatriya) was greedy for sons and wealth and consequently engaged in the war-sacrifice to fulfil his desires. Only the transactional, ritual portion of the Veda interests him: he is not interested in *jñāna* or the knowledge component of scripture.

After the war, Vidura's teaching is reminding Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the teaching he had previously received: it is thus *smṛti* or recollection. And of course, as *smṛti*, Upaniṣadic teaching is accessible to all, including the *śūdrayoni* Vidura. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, however, does not ask for Sanatsujāta or knowledge of *Brahman*; rather, it is Vidura who introduces the topic. Significantly, Vidura had completed a discourse on *kuladharmā* (Mahābhārata 5.36.23–37.8), good conduct, the ultimacy of *dharma* (5.40.11–12), concluding with an

interpretation of *varṇa* in terms of *guṇa-karma* (5.40.24–27). During this discourse, the question of rebirth had come up (*punar naro mriyate jāyate ca*; 5.36.44), as also the doctrine of the embodied *ātman* (5.40.19). During his description of *kuladharmā*, Vidura includes *puṇyā vivāhāḥ* (5.36.23), translated as “good marriages” by van Buitenen, as one of the keys to great families (*mahākula*). He goes on to say, “Great are those families on which neither conduct nor womb (*yoni*) is deficient, which practice the Law (*dharma*)...which aspire to distinguished renown (*kīrti*) in their lineages” (5.36.24). Vidura squarely faces the question of endogamy and inheritance—these two are inalienable to the social condition of humans.

Given the social condition of humans, everyone strives to contribute; at worst, greed and privilege contribute to the destruction of society. The privileged Kauravas demonstrated this in the assembly hall. Certainly, through “bad marriages and neglect of Veda” (*anijyayāvivāhāś ca vedasyotsādanena ca*), and by transgressing *dharma*, families lose their identity (*kulāny akulatām yānti*; Mahābhārata 5.36.25). Still, Vidura avers “families that own cattle, men, and horses do not attain to the name of *family* when they are lacking in good conduct, but families that do not fall short in conduct though they be of small means bear the name of *family* and reap great renown” (*mahad yaśaḥ*; 5.36.29).

“Family” is a relative entity from the perspective of *dharma*. “For the sake of the family, abandon the man, for the village, abandon a family, for the country abandon a village, for the soul, abandon the earth” (Mahābhārata 5.37.16). Vyāsa does not place the criticism of the privilege of the elite in conflict with the less privileged. This would be a violent, extrinsic correction: we see repeatedly how those who claim to liberate only usher in another tyranny. Instead, the underprivileged Vidura points to a more potent critique, one that goes beyond politics to the heart of social justice. The privileged have failed to follow *dharma*, to regulate themselves, and have consequently become the source of their own destruction. “Abandoning these mighty archers, the boundlessly august Pāṇḍavas,” Vidura tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra, “you have devolved the grand dominion of the Bhāratas upon Duryodhana. You shall soon see him toppled from it as Bali, deluded by the drunkenness of power (*aiśvaryamadasammūḍham*), was toppled from the three worlds” (5.38.43–44). Let us recall the complexity of this comparison: both Bali and Duryodhana are Asuras; Asuras in this context are those who side with strength and power rather than with *dharma*; their own greed and egoism undermines them; in the case of Kṛṣṇa, the main *avatāra* of Viṣṇu in this text, Kṛṣṇa is on the side of *dharma* and topples the Kauravas.

Another way to see the difference in the two presentations of the Upaniṣad by Vidura—viz., that through the mediation of Sanatsujāta and that without any mediation in the Strīparvan—concerns the very enterprise of the *itihāsapurāna*: to make the Veda accessible to all, without compromising its faithful transmission which required a class of society—the Brāhmaṇas—that would dedicate itself fully to its ritual prescriptions. When seen in this light, the Brāhmaṇa “institution” closely resembles academic institutions today. Here we pursue the question of the eligibility of Śūdras to receive the Veda. The question is addressed in the Brahmasūtras, and in Saṅkara’s commentary on the issue, both Vidura and the Vyādha appear, while the discussion is concluded with a quote from the Mahābhārata. Let us turn to this text.

### **Adhikāra in the Brahmasūtras**

Brahmasūtras 1.3.34–38 comprise the *apaśūdrādhikaraṇam* (topic on the pseudo-Śūdra). These five *sūtras* on the eligibility (*adhikāra*) of the Śūdras to study Veda follow a discussion on whether the Gods are eligible to perform rituals (*devatādhikaraṇam*; Brahmasūtra 1.3.26–33). Both these topics (numbered 8 and 9) constitute a digression in this third section. The section discusses various Upaniṣadic references to *nirguṇa Brahman* such as the repository (*āyatana*), infinity (*bhūma*), immutable (*akṣara*), the object of seeing (*īkṣana*), the space in the heart (*dahara*), the measured one (*pramita*). After the digression into the eligibility of Gods and Śūdras, the section returns to its topic on discussing *Brahman* as vibration (*kampana*), light (*jyoti*), space (*ākāśa*) and in relation to deep sleep and death.

In such a theological discussion, the digression into *adhikāra* stands out. A discussion on the “measured” one, especially “the puruṣa the size of a thumb resides (in the heart) within the body (of men)” (*aṅguṣṭamātraḥ puruṣaḥ madhya ātmani tiṣṭhati*; Kāṭha Up. 2.1.12–13 and 2.3.17) provides a pause for a digression on the *adhikāra*. Śāṅkara correctly points to the connection between the basic text and this digression by underscoring the seeming anthropocentricity of the scriptural image: is scripture meant only for men, or others such as Gods? Gods are not qualified for the performance of vedic rituals (*madhu-kāṇḍa*, etcetera), as there are no other gods to be propitiated by their offerings. Consequently, the question arises: since the scriptures are meant for human beings, are men belonging to all *varṇas* entitled to the performance of vedic rituals and acquiring knowledge of *Brahman*? The present topic (*apaśūdrādhikaraṇam*) focuses on an interpretation of Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.2.3: “O Śūdra, let the chariot, together with the necklace, as also the cows be with you yourself.” To repeat the question: is a śūdra eligible to receive the Veda or not?

The five *sūtras* systematically frame the issue as follows:

1. *Sūtra* 34 states the grief of Jānaśruti on hearing the swan praise Raikva, who addresses him as a Śūdra.
2. *Sūtra* 35 clarifies that Jānaśruti is a Kṣatriya, a king descended from Citraratha.
3. *Sūtra* 36 brings up mention of purificatory rituals, which are obligatory for the three *varṇas*; these being not mentioned for the Śūdras.
4. *Sūtra* 37 refers to another episode in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (4.4.5): Gautama gives instruction to Satyakāma Jābala, whose mother is a prostitute and whose father is unknown.
5. *Sūtra* 38 points out that *smṛti* texts (such as *Gautama Dharmasūtra* and *Vāsiṣṭha*) forbid the acquisition of Veda by Śūdras.

As expected of a theologian of salvation by knowledge alone, Śāṅkara goes along with the ritualist explanation of the ritual status of Śūdras. When he cites prohibitions and sanctions concerning Śūdras, he does not innovate and cites the relevant passages from *smṛti*. But he adds an important qualifier:

But from those to whom knowledge dawns as result of (good) tendencies acquired in the past lives, as for instance Vidura, Dharmavyādha, and others, the reaping of the result of knowledge cannot be withheld, for the result of knowledge is

inevitable. This position is confirmed by the Smṛiti text, ‘One should read out to the four castes,’ which declares the competence of all the four castes for the acquisition of [knowledge through] itihāsa purāṇa.

Which is this overriding authoritative *smṛiti*? It is the Mahābhārata (*śrāvayec caturo varṇān*; Mahābhārata 12. 314.45)! We have come full circle here: we began with an inquiry into how the Mahābhārata balances the twin functions of strict preservation of the Veda with a mission of bringing knowledge to all. We sought clarity through the Brahmasūtra, which is itself a logical system of interpretation of the Upaniṣads. We were hopeful to find in the *apaśūdrādhikaraṇam* a decisive judgment on the issue, but instead, we were led via the *sūtras* and their commentator back to the Mahābhārata!

Before we leave this discussion, let us note that the *sūtras* problematized the meaning of the term *śūdra* by bringing up someone who was not Śūdra by birth, but a Kṣatriya. The ascertainment of Śūdrahood was based on the *guṇa-karma* of the truthful Satyakāma of damned parentage. But these episodes are not artificially pulled together in the Brahmasūtras: both occur in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. As we now return to understanding *varṇa* in the Mahābhārata, let us note that Sanatsujāta, according to Śaṅkara is Sanatkumāra (cf. the Sanatsujāta commentary attributed to him). If Śaṅkara is right, his argument is strengthened by the fact that the Chāndogya Upaniṣad presents Sanatkumāra as an impeccable source in the tradition of transmission of *parāvidya* or salvific knowledge. We could also surmise that Vidura had access to this Upaniṣad. It is also interesting to note that one of Vidura’s frequent epithets is *kṣatta*. In the Upaniṣads, this term occurs only in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad where Jānaśruti sends his *kṣatta* to Raikva.

In commenting on the *apaśūdrādhikaraṇam*, Śaṅkara provides an etymology for the word *śūdra*. He writes “this word Śūdra can be construed with someone already having the competence. How? The answer is...Jānaśruti, grandson of Putra, was struck with grief (*śuk*). Raikva hinted at this grief by using the word Śūdra...How, again, is it suggested by the word Śūdra that he was struck with grief? ...he rushed to Raikva, because of sorrow (*śuca*).” The word *śūdra*, then, does not apply to the birth status but to the state of being stricken with grief. If we apply this Upaniṣad-Brahmasūtrabhāṣya insight back to the Mahābhārata, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is presented—from the very beginning in the Ādiparvan—as the primary character embodying grief! In this derivative sense of the term, Dhṛtarāṣṭra would be a Śūdra and Vidura a Satyakāma. In this sense, Vidura summoning Sanatsujāta would be ironic: Vidura confessing that he is a *śūdrayoni* is a veiled way a knower of the tradition would accuse the blind king of being one. It would not be Raikva or Jānaśruti’s *kṣatta* but Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s own *kṣatta* accusing him of being a Śūdra!

### **The View of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa**

The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is more explicit in its interpretation of *adhikāra*. Vidura is taught self-knowledge by Maitreya (Bhāgavatapurāṇa 1.13.1); his *śūdratvam* was an effect of a curse that lasted a hundred years (1.13.15); but in reality, he is the Kṣatriya God Yama. In the Purāṇa, Vidura does not hesitate to tell Dhṛtarāṣṭra what Mahābhārata readers always felt he should have: that the king was always blind and also now hard of hearing, his intellect and memory diminished, his organs failing as he greedily clings to life (1.13.22),

that the blind king should stop living like a dog in the house of those whom he tried to get killed and whose wife he insulted (1.13.24). Dhṛtarāṣṭra heeds Vidura and departs for the forest (1.13.27).

Let us return once more to the “puruṣa the size of the thumb” and the question of *adhikāra*. We must recall the Mahābhārata’s “thumb” narrative: the Ekalavya episode. Droṇa does not teach Ekalavya citing the boy’s birth status. Vyāsa shows Ekalavya to be free of resentment, a diligent student, who through his skill and effort excels in archery. Ekalavya is thus the equal of Arjuna in *guṇa* and *karma*. Droṇa, though born a Brāhmaṇa, craves wealth and kingdom: he is not following his *varṇa* duty. Ekalavya is a Niṣāda and, strictly speaking, outside the fourfold *varṇa* system. Moreover, he is a prince, the son of King Hiranyadhanus. The name Hiranyadhanus, signifying a golden bow, is a perfectly Kṣatriya name. When taken in the sense of parentage, a Niṣāda would be the son of a Brāhmaṇa man and a Śūdra woman. By this definition, we saw, Vidura would be a Niṣāda, albeit one who is already cognizant of Vedic teaching.

We already mentioned that Vyāsa too would fall into this category, if Satyavati’s social parentage is considered. These resonances show how the Ekalavya episode is not a banal statement of injustice, but a carefully constructed vignette about *dharma*. Even as Droṇa’s cruelty literarily moves us to compassion for Ekalavya, the text literally calls Droṇa *dharmajña*, a knower of *dharma*. We cannot dispute the fact that Droṇa knows the precepts of *dharma*, but his actions invite us to think about his interpretation of these precepts. Here is the text: *na sa taṃ pratijagrāha naiṣādir iti cintayan | śiṣyaṃ dhanuṣi dharmajñas teṣāṃ evānvavekṣayā ||* (Mahābhārata 1.123.11). Van Buitenen translates: “But Droṇa, who knew the Law, declined to accept him for archery, out of consideration for the others, reflecting that he was a son of a Niṣāda.” Ganguli explicates the sense of the verse more clearly: “Droṇa, however, cognizant of all rules of morality, accepted not the prince as his pupil in archery, seeing that he was a *Nishada* who might (in time) excel all his high-born pupils.”

Droṇa interprets *dharma* texts literally and without proper deliberation (as Gautama had done): no wonder, then, he asks for his student’s thumb as his fee. All the motifs of *apaśūdrādhikaraṇam* and the Chāndogya Upaniṣad—how to interpret *adhikāra* and how one can go wrong in interpreting *varṇa* according to birth—are in full display here. Droṇa has a materialistic, transactional understanding of “thumb,” whereas Ekalavya learns from a Droṇa made of clay (*mahīmayam*; Mahābhārata 1.123.12). Clay is a metaphor for *Brahman* in the same Chāndogya Upaniṣad we are discussing here. Satyakāma learns about the infinite *Brahman* as all-pervading (space, earth, etcetera), as light, and in man (as breath, eye, ear, etcetera). In short, the “digression” into *adhikāra* turns out to be the pedagogical path of Satyakāma (literally, “lover of truth”) in the Upaniṣad, a path that Ekalavya also follows in the *itihāsa*. When he cuts off his thumb to fulfil Droṇa’s demand, the text describes him as “ever devoted to truth” (*satye ca nirataḥ sadā*; 1.123.36).

We are trying to explain why Vidura defers to Sanatsujāta to teach Dhṛtarāṣṭra the first time, and later teaches the blind king himself. Apparently the *sūdrayonitvam* is suspended after the war. From our exploration of the Brahmasūtras, we gleaned that the restriction of access to texts is less about privilege (although, as we saw, privilege is a constituent feature of all institutions) and more about preservation of knowledge. The latter requires a type of character, training, and vocation: these are traditionally passed

down along genealogical lines. But this is an imperfect solution. All solutions in *pravṛtti* are imperfect, so a proper critique of stratification in society and ossification of privilege, we saw, requires *nivṛttidharma*. The Mahābhārata embarks on such a critique.

Let us continue our interpretation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra as a “pseudo-Śūdra.” The first major character to speak in the epic is Dhṛtarāṣṭra. He provides a summary of the Mahābhārata in the form of a personal lamentation (Mahābhārata 1.1.96–159); this dirge concludes with a syncope and a wish to commit suicide. During this speech on grief, he repeats *tadā nāśamse vijayāya saṁjaya* 54 times. Having listened to the blind king’s narrative, Saṁjaya chides him *na... śocitum arhasi* (“you ought not grieve”; 1.1.183). In the Strīparvan, during his dialogue with Vidura, Dhṛtarāṣṭra “burned with grief for his sons and then fainted to the ground” (11.8.1). The Mahābhārata could not have provided a clearer exposition of the *śudratvam* of the blind king.

Vidura’s allegory about the mystery of rebirth features neither a Śūdra nor a Vyādha, but a Brāhmaṇa who was trapped in a jungle, afraid and confused, and had fallen into a pit, hanging by his foot and surrounded by countless terrors. This fallen Brāhmaṇa greedily drinks the honey pouring near him, his desire for it never satiated. The text itself says, this is “an allegory cited by those who are experts on Absolute Freedom” (*mokṣavidbhir udāhṛtam*; Mahābhārata 1.6.4). The explanation of the analogy comes up immediately after Dhṛtarāṣṭra brings up the question of the crisis of *dharma*.

There are several ways we could understand the compound term *dharmasaṁkṛta*. In the present context, it could mean a crisis in *pravṛttidharma*. The blind king has lost his sons and thus also heaven. The dangers lurking in *pravṛttidharma* include the trials and tribulations of life, including irresistible death. And in *saṁsāra*, these fears and fate repeatedly cause a human to suffer.

Given that *pravṛttidharma* is part and parcel of *dharma*, do we jump to the conclusion that *pravṛttidharma* is itself faulty? Do we prefer death to life, as Dhṛtarāṣṭra laments, or give way to defeatism, as Arjuna confesses? (Bhagavadgītā 2.6). That would invalidate scripture and moreover stand against the empirical evidence of the obvious joys in life. A more robust interpretation is required.

The basis of *pravṛttidharma* is a well-ordered life; its goal is to reveal the means for the satisfaction of desires and attainment of heaven. *Dharmasaṁkṛta* appears not in the revelation, but in an interpretation of it. That interpretation is the worldly interpretation meant for wealth, wife, sons, and heaven. It holds that there is nothing beyond *pravṛttidharma*, which is to be followed according to one’s desires. Such individuals are called *karmaṭhas*: they take the finite for the ultimate; they transact in ephemeral things. They mistake personhood (*ahaṁkāra*) for the Self (*puruṣa*). But these metaphysical issues can be set aside for now, as we focus on the issue of *varṇa*.

Note that the individual who was dangerously lost in the forest was a Brāhmaṇa. His social status did not help him, just as Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s kingship did not help him. We can use or misuse revelation based on how we interpret it. Here, we are interested in the question of those who lack the *adhikāra* for receiving revelation, namely, Śūdras. We interpreted *varṇa* as *guṇa-karma*, although *kula-janma* is endemic to institutions and the question of merit sometimes entropies into blind privilege, especially through endogamy, procreation, and inheritance. In Vyāsa’s view, a critique of the foundation of all institutions and hegemonies, paradigmatically in the form of Dakṣa Prajāpati’s sacrifice is



key to understanding the limits of institutions, their formation through the exclusion of some, their myth that they—historically and politically—constitute the entire reality.

The figure of Vidura teaches a valuable interpretation of *dharma*. Vidura had been excluded from kingship due to his birth status. This interpretation of *varṇa* was responsible for the destruction of the Kuru dynasty. Let us recall that Manu had said: *eka evaurasaḥ putraḥ pitryasya vasunaḥ prabhuh | śeṣānāmānṛśamsyārthaṃ pradadyāt tu prajīvanam*, “The natural son is the sole master of his father’s wealth; nevertheless, so as not to be unkind, he should provide maintenance for others” (Mānavadharmasāstra 9.163). The Mahābhārata says *ānṛśamsyaṃ paro dharmah* (non-hurtfulness is the highest *dharma*; Mahābhārata 3.67.15, 3.203.41, 3.297.55 and 71, and 12.316.12). In 3.297.54, the Yakṣa asks Yudhiṣṭhira which *dharma* is highest in this world, and Yudhiṣṭhira answers *ānṛśamsya* and chooses Nakula, his stepbrother over his own brothers. Interpretations of revelation and *dharma* texts must be guided by *ānṛśamsya*, which is raised to a meta-ethical level, overriding all other precepts.

The Mahābhārata embraces this compassion as its *raison d’être*. It is out of this kindness towards the dirempted and excluded, be they women, Śūdras, Niṣādas, Vyādhas, Kīṭas, and so on, that Vyāsa composed the epic. The Bhāgavatapurāṇa states it quite explicitly: “women, Śūdras and Brāhmaṇas in name only are beyond the pale of the three Vedas; therefore, the sage (Vyāsa) composed through compassion for them the Bhārata tale” (*strī-śūdra dvijabandhūnām trayī na śruti-gocarā | karma-śreyasi mūdhānām śreya evaṃ bhaved iha | iti bhāratam ākhyānaṃ kṛpayā muninā kṛtam ||*; Bhāgavatapurāṇa 1.4.25).

In the Mahābhārata, the knowledge of the Vedas is transmitted to all. Kane writes of the *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition that beyond Vedic sacrifice, practices such as reading the Purāṇas or listening to them, pilgrimages, *vrātas*, and *bhakti* are emphasized.<sup>38</sup> The Mahābhārata has a critique of the sacrificial order, the primary foundation of all institutions, their powers and their privileges. This critique does not “cancel” institutions or the division of labor in a society, nor does it exclude expertise and technical skill. The critique of sacrifice is conducted in terms of its finite rewards and the violence incurred (see the fall of Vasu in the Nārāyaṇīya); of course, sacrificial logic is incapable of providing for the highest goal: liberation. Muṇḍaka, Kaṭha, and all of the principal Upaniṣads teach the highest self; the Purāṇas continue this line of interpretation. Kane again: “The purāṇas adopt, in spite of the claims made by them here and there about their priority to the Vedas, about their own value and efficacy, the same attitude towards the Veda as the Upaniṣads do.”<sup>39</sup>

During this transmission, the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas also offer an interpretation which is compassionate and all-inclusive. Whatever the historical and sociological externalities may be, the *guṇa-karma* interpretation of *varṇa* surpasses the *jāti-karma* interpretation of the fourfold social structure in the epic whose interpretive strategy is both Upaniṣadic and compassionate.<sup>40</sup> Such a hermeneutics guards against

<sup>38</sup> P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. 5, part II (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1967), 915–16 (my summary).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 918.

<sup>40</sup> This is not simply my personal view, nor have I simply selected texts at will to construct an argument. Kane himself notes: “The Purāṇas set about their task by saying that for the understanding of the Veda, knowledge of Itihāsa and Purāṇa was essential. A famous verse says ‘one should strengthen the Veda by (the study and application of) Itihāsa and Purāṇa; the Veda is afraid of the person of little learning (with the

political, sociological, historical, and even biological blind spots, navigating between fundamentalism, anarchy, and relativism. This sentiment is expressed in the Ādiparvan: *itihāsapurāṇābhyāṃ vedaṃ samupabṛṃhayet | bibhety alpaśrutād vedo mām ayaṃ pratarīṣyati* (Mahābhārata 1.1.204). This line is translated by van Buitenen as: “With both the Epic and Purāṇa one should support the Veda—the Veda is afraid of a man of little knowledge, me it shall ferry over!” Van Buitenen’s translation is wrong: the subject is Veda, and thus *mām* goes with the word *veda*. A correct translation would be: “With both the Epic and Purāṇa one should support the Veda—the Veda is afraid of a man of little knowledge, [thinking, he will] destroy me!”<sup>41</sup> The variant reading *praharīṣyati* (instead of the constituted text’s *pratarīṣyati*; both terms mean “to harm, destroy”) occurs in many manuscripts, which supports my translation here.

But the Mahābhārata makes an even stronger claim than that in 1.1.204: “Once the divine seers foregathered, and on one scale they hung the four Vedas in the balance, and on the other scale *The Bhārata*; and both in size and in weight it was the heavier” (1.1.209); and this view is carried forward in some form in all the Purāṇas. The Kūrmapurāṇa makes a similar point (*ekatastu purāṇāni setihāsāni kṛtsnaśaḥ | ekatra cedam paramametadevātiricyate ||*; Kūrmap. 2.44.129), whereas, as Kane notes, “Several Purāṇas are spoken of as equal to the Veda (Vedasammita) as in Vāyu I.11,4.2, Brahma 1.29, 245,4 and 21, Viṣṇu I.1.13, vi.8.12, Padma VI. 282.116.”<sup>42</sup> “Further, several Purāṇas claim to have been delivered by some God such as Brahmā (Brahmāpurāṇa I.30) or by the Wind-god (Vayu I.196) or by the avatāras of Visnu as in the case of Matsya-purāṇa (I.26) or Vāraha (2.1.6).”<sup>43</sup> We can interpret these claims as mere allegory or eulogy, and congratulate ourselves on our critical acumen at “seeing through” these texts. But at least from our enlightened, compassionate, social justice perspective, we must concede that there is a larger aim to these texts and that, in one respect at least, namely, their dissemination of the Vedic revelation to those previously excluded from hearing it, they do go beyond it, even while preserving it.<sup>44</sup>

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thought) that he (the man of small learning) may harm it’ [itihāsapurāṇābhyāṃ vedaṃ samupabṛṃhayet / bibhety alpaśrutād vedo mām ayaṃ pratarīṣyati // Mahābhārata 1.1.204]. Manu states that those Brāhmaṇas that have learnt the [interpretive] rules (of Veda study) the Veda together with the works that strengthen it are to be understood as śiṣṭas and are instrumental in making (the meaning of) the Veda clearly perceptible. The Vāyu emphasizes in this connection that that Brāhmaṇa who knows the four Vedas together with (the six) ancillary lores and the Upaniṣads would not be a wise man if he did not know Purāṇas. The Upaniṣads drop brief hints about the creation of ākāśa from the one brahma (in Tai. Up. II.1), of tejas (Chān. Up. VI. 2. 3), and of waters (Chān. Up. VI. 2. 4). The Purāṇas explain at great length the creation and dissolution of the elements (in the order reverse of that of creation) e.g., Vāyu 4.17 ff, Brahma 1–3, Agni 17, Brahmāṇḍa II. 3ff, Kūrma I. 2, 4, 7, 8 &c.” Ibid., 914.

<sup>41</sup> A similar statement also occurs in the Rāmāyaṇa, which bears out my claim about the status of *itihāsapurāṇa* as *continuing* revelation, reaching out to ever wider circles.

sa tu medhāvinau dṛṣṭvā vedeṣu pariniṣṭhitau |  
vedopabṛhmanārthāya tāv agrāhayata prabhuḥ || (Rāmāyaṇa 1.4.5)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 915.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Compare Kane: “This gives rise to interesting questions. The sūdras had no right to study the Veda. But as a matter of fact, the Purāṇas contain as exemplified above a good many Vedic mantras. It is stated in the Bhāgavata ‘women, Śūdras and Brāhmaṇas in name only are beyond the pale of the three Vedas; therefore, the sage (Vyāsa) composed through compassion for them the Bhārata tale’ [strī-śūdra dvijabandhūnām trayī na śruti-gocarā / karma-śreyasi mūdhānām śreya evaṃ bhaved iha / iti bhāratam ākhyānam kṛpayā muninā kṛtam //BP I.4.25]. The Devībhāgavata states ‘study of the Veda is not accepted for women, sūdras and

## The Path of the Śūdra

Before drawing the discussion of privilege and *varṇa* to a close, let us read one more text, Chapter 10 of the Anuśāsanaparvan. Here, the question of whether it is wrong to give instruction (*upadeśa*) to one of “lower birth” (*jātyāvāra*; Mahābhārata 13.10.1) is taken up. The question is posed by Yudhiṣṭhira to Bhīṣma, with an important qualification: Yudhiṣṭhira tells Bhīṣma that he should answer this question because *dharma* is subtle (*sūkṣmā gatir hi dharmasya*; 13.10.2). Recall that this was the reason Bhīṣma cited for failing to answer Draupadī’s question in the *sabhā*: it was his excuse for passing the question on to Yudhiṣṭhira. In the meantime, we have seen that Draupadī’s question did not just concern the outrage perpetrated on her; rather, her question revealed the critical space that Vidura’s birth status occupied. It is a question that goes to the heart of the entire *varṇāśramadharmā* system and, by implication, *pravṛttidharma*. How apt then, that it is on this question that the *pitāmaha* Bhīṣma falls!

Let us proceed to Bhīṣma’s response now bearing in mind that here, following the deadly war, Bhīṣma cannot overlook the catastrophic consequences of the dicing episode. Given that he has gained wisdom not only from his own experience, but also directly from Kṛṣṇa prior to beginning teaching, has Bhīṣma’s view of the *varṇa* question become more nuanced in the meantime?

Bhīṣma begins by repeating the allegedly old dictum “instruction should not be given to one who has no birth status under any circumstance” (*upadeśo na kartavyo jātihīnasya kasya cit*; Mahābhārata 13.10.4). Then he proceeds to illustrate this principle with a narrative that took place at the sylvan hermitage of Brāhmaṇas at Mount Himavat, a setting that eerily recalls Vyāsa’s teaching his students at the foot of Mount Himavat (*himavatpāda*; 12.337.9–10). This hermitage is populated by various plants, animals, births, Siddhas, and other beings. It is also the abode of Brāhmaṇas and celibate students, all of whom were initiated, had undertaken various vows and restraints (*niyamas* and *tapas*), and were living frugally, regulating what they ate. These purified ones (*kṛtātmabhiḥ*; 13.10.8) studied and loudly chanted the Veda. Also present were those who practiced *nivṛttidharma*, such as the Vālakhilyas. The entire hermitage was headed by a *kulapati*. One is reminded of the Naimiṣa setting where *kulapati* Śaunaka heard the Mahābhārata from Ugraśravas.

But instead of the *sūta*, a Śūdra arrives and is duly honored by all the sages present there (*pūjitaś ca tapasvibhiḥ*; Mahābhārata 13.10.10). This is quite at odds with what we contemporary critics would expect: far from being rebuffed, oppressed, broken, downtrodden, etcetera (the Sanskrit word here would be *dalit*), the sages revere the visitor, as the word *pūjita* denotes. In writing the Fifth Veda for Śūdras and in siring *dharma* upon a Śūdra woman, Vyāsa has certainly followed up his veneration of the Śūdra with his word, deed, and seed.

The Śūdra approaches the *kulapati* wishing to learn the renunciate *dharma*. He declares that he is a Śūdra of a low *varṇa*, adding the qualifier *jāti* (*varṇāvāro ’haṃ ... śūdro jātyāsmi*; Mahābhārata 13.10.14). The *kulapati* responds quite precisely that it is

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brāhmaṇas in name only and Purāṇas are compiled for the purpose of benefitting them’. From this it follows that in the case of śūdras listening to the Bhārata was deemed to bring about the same results that the Veda does for *dvijas* and that even the śūdra may acquire the knowledge of the Self (and mokṣa) from the Bhārata.” Ibid., 921–22.

impossible for him to remain there following the renunciate way of life if he bears the *identity* of a Śūdra (*śūdreṇa liṅgam āśritya vartitum*; 13.10.15). However, if the Śūdra does not mind, he may remain there and offer his service to the hermits. This is exactly how Nārada attains to the highest goal in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. From our previous analyses, we understand that the *kulapati* is no Droṇa asserting his blind privilege vis-à-vis a Niṣāda or a Śūdra. But neither is the *kulapati* here an unthinking revolutionary. He quite clearly specifies that it is the identity professed by the Śūdra himself that is problematic. The *kulapati* moreover does not exclude him from progressing in his spiritual-intellectual pedagogy. Identities get in the way of this pedagogy. The Śūdra should be given an opportunity to purify himself, since he does not have the qualifications that are expected of a Brāhmaṇa. These qualifications have less to do with birth than, as we see, than with an improper preparation for receiving this knowledge.

Like Ekalavya, the Śūdra constructs an altar for the gods and begins purifying himself through various regulations. He begins to worship the gods with ablutions and, pouring libations into the sacrificial fire, he makes offerings to them and worships them (*devatām ...apūjayat*; Mahābhārata 13.10.18). The *kulapati* has achieved two things: he has preserved Vedic learning for those who were eligible (through purification, initiation, and study), while also devising a path for those who are not yet ready for Vedic learning by creating an alternative for them. This is a very significant interpretation of *varṇa* and *adhikāra*.

The Śūdra—who interestingly is not named and hence must stand as a common noun designating all of us who are not self-controlled, purified, and trained from birth in the Veda—makes rapid progress. He begins to eat moderately from fruits, etcetera; he gives up all desire-motivated initiatives, receives guests, and honors them. Among his frequent guests is a very impressed Ṛṣi whom he serves and converses with. One day, the Śūdra asks the Ṛṣi to help him perform rites to his ancestors. The *kulapati* was right in his assessment of the Śūdra: though he had made progress, the Śūdra was not yet ready for true renunciation. The identification with *pravṛttidharma* through birth status (*jāti*) now manifests as this desire for performing rites for ancestors.

Unlike the *kulapati*, the Ṛṣi unthinkingly agrees to supervise the ritual. Note that the Ṛṣi is himself imperfect—a true Ṛṣi would not involve himself in *śrāddha* rituals. That is the domain of the ritualists. Not only the teacher Ṛṣi, but also the Śūdra student is imperfect. The Śūdra makes mistakes in the rituals; the Ṛṣi corrects him, and they conclude the ritual. On the surface, the scene is endearingly human: an imperfect teacher correcting an imperfect student in the joint effort of learning. But is this so? The sacrificial ritual would be worthless if it was merely human; it stands at the point of contact between humans and gods. The rituals are “revealed”: they need a lifetime of instruction, practice, and perfection. Any imperfection in their execution not only renders the rituals ineffective, but it also produces an undesirable, negative result that may harm the performer. In other words, there are two issues here: one is expertise and the creation of ritual professionals who safeguard ritual knowledge and the other is the task of education where one is guided through a path appropriate to the student’s preparation.

Both the student and the teacher are reborn according to their tendencies. The Śūdra is born into a higher birth as a Kṣatriya (thanks to the *kulapati*’s instruction) and the Ṛṣi descends into a birth in the clan of priests (*purohitakule*; Mahābhārata 13.10.32). Bhīṣma ends by concluding that instruction should not be given to one who is a Śūdra.

But he has also has learnt his lesson in the meantime. The reason for not instructing a Śūdra is not because he is a *śūdrayoni*. It is because “*dharma* is subtle” and it is difficult to grasp for those who are not prepared for it through purification and who moreover lack discipline (*sūkṣmā gatiḥ hi dharmasya durjñeyā hy akṛtātmabhiḥ*; 13.10.64). One should not give instruction to such individuals, because if the student misuses the instruction due to his incompetence or his failure to regulate himself, the blame accrues to the teacher.

The key term here is the distinction between *kṛtātmabhiḥ* and *akṛtātmabhiḥ* (Mahābhārata 13.10.10 and 10.64). It is not a distinction based on *yoni*, even though on the social-political level, birth circumstances play a significant role in defining one’s life circumstances. Bhīṣma has certainly learned his lesson: *vaktavyam iha prṣṭena viniścitya viparyayam | sa copadeśaḥ kartavyo yena dharmam avāpnuyāt* || (“one should instruct when asked, after determining what is erroneous. One should instruct so that one may acquire *dharma*”). Notice the contrast: Vidura *śūdrayoni* had asked a question about *dharma* in the *sabhā*; Draupadī had asked the same question about *dharma*. Unlike the ritualist or legalist interpretation, the *strī-śūdra-veda* represents the correct interpretation of *varṇāśramadharmā*. Political and academic interpretations of *varṇa* hopelessly shoot fish in a barrel. Lack of greed and economics, not tone-deaf readings or a dubious “critical” philology help those who are truly dirempted.

### **Conclusion: Justification of Method of Analysis**

This lengthy and detailed interpretation of key texts in the Mahābhārata followed Vidura *śūdrayoni* to investigate the epic’s view of *varṇa*. It demonstrated the overwhelming critique of *varṇa* understood as inherited privilege rather than one’s character and competence. Rather than summarize this long argument, here I wish to clarify the principles that undergirded this interpretation, and how this interpretation in turn bears out the validity and applicability of those principles.

First, the text used for analysis is Sukthankar’s critical edition of the Mahābhārata. Since this aims to reconstruct the archetype from which all extant manuscripts are demonstrably descended, it serves as a base text on which to base interpretations of the entire Mahābhārata tradition. This is even more so because, by noting the variations in different manuscripts, the critical edition provides a comprehensive guide to all these manuscripts. I am aware of the literature that attempts, adventurously, to redefine the archetype not as it is understood in textual criticism—hat is, as the “latest common ancestor” of all manuscripts examined for that edition<sup>45</sup>—but as merely the text of a “normative redaction” or a “Brahmanic redaction” that allegedly took place once the epic’s transmission entered into the hands of the Brahmans.<sup>46</sup> Together

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<sup>45</sup> Michael D. Reeve, “Archetypes,” in *Manuscripts and Methods: Essays on Editing and Transmission* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011), 117.

<sup>46</sup> This is Andreas Bigger’s peculiar definition of the constituted text in Andreas Bigger, *Balarāma im Mahābhārata: Seine Darstellung im Rahmen des Textes und seiner Entwicklung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998) and see also Andreas Bigger, “The Normative Redaction of the Mahābhārata: Possibilities and Limitations of a Working Hypothesis,” in *Stages and Transitions: Temporal and Historical Frameworks in Epic and Purāṇic Literature. Proceedings of the Second Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas*, ed. Mary Brockington (Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2002), 21–33. Unfortunately, despite being non-standard it has been accepted by many accredited scholars, who really should have known better. For a comprehensive list,

with my colleague, I have examined all the arguments that purport to show that the constituted text of the Mahābhārata is that alleged “redaction.” Suffice it to say that not one of these arguments stands; indeed, those who go on clinging to the work of German Mahābhārata critics desperately trying to salvage last century ideas of a Kṣatriya *Urepos* (even if this attempt is disguised as “layers” analysis) only display their ignorance. For reasons detailed in *Philology and Criticism*, the constituted text of the Mahābhārata critical edition is not a “Brahmanic redaction” of earlier oral epic materials, and those who continue to use this term for the edition only demonstrate how little they have understood of textual criticism.

Second, the Mahābhārata is, as Biardeau called it, “un récit fondateur du brahmanisme.” Its “Brahmanic” character is native to it, and not the product of a later “redaction” of earlier epic materials. The text—however we might imagine its author(s)—exists in this world of ideas and texts and is making certain moves, doubtless not always clear to us, that make sense only within this world. Contrary to the two-centuries old prejudice about a Brahmanic “takeover” of a *Heldenepos*, rather than showing us “us the tragic struggle of two principles; of knighthood, whose time is over; and of the newly arising politics,” in which “the old honest battle-ethics of the knights after a brave defense succumbs to treason and deceit,”<sup>47</sup> the Fifth Veda undertakes to carry the Vedic revelation to all classes, and to no longer make access to pedagogy dependent on birth or class privilege. In explicit terms, the epic does not just depict the destruction of the Kuru genealogy, but *of all genealogy whatsoever*. From Yayāti’s transferal of kingship to his youngest son Pūru to Kuntī’s disowning of her eldest son Karṇa, the principles of endogamy and inheritance, and the economy of privilege innate to the functioning of all societies, come in for a searing critique. Both their violation, as in the examples just mentioned, and their extreme conservation, as illustrated by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who is determined to transfer the kingdom to his worthless son at all costs, are presented as problems.

Third, the “text-historical” method and “higher criticism” have produced so many demonstrably erroneous conclusions, that they may as well be replaced with a rabbit’s foot. These methods derived their apparent explanatory force by “confirming” the Lutheran, Christian, anti-Semitic, and racist prejudices of the scholars who produced tomes of “text-historical” analyses. Our work has shown how these principles operated not only in the case of the Mahābhārata, but also regarding the Bhagavadgītā,<sup>48</sup> the Saṁ narrative,<sup>49</sup> etcetera. I have dutifully avoided using the terms “earlier” and “later” not because I see all texts atemporally,<sup>50</sup> but because I consider historicizing texts to be a

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including quotations from their work, see Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, chapter 3, “The Argument from Expertise.”

<sup>47</sup> Holtzmann Jr., *Zur Geschichte und Kritik*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> See the criticism of the application of text-historicism to identify “layers” in the Bhagavadgītā in Adluri and Bagchee, “Paradigm Lost.”

<sup>49</sup> See Adluri, “The Divine Androgyne,” particularly the criticism in n. 94 of Annemarie Mertens’s four-stage chronological reconstruction of the Dakṣa myth in Annemarie Mertens, *Der Dakṣamythos in der episch-purānischen Literatur: Beobachtungen zur religionsgeschichtlichen Entwicklung des Gottes Rudra-Siva im Hinduismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998).

<sup>50</sup> Hildebeitel in Alf Hildebeitel, *World of Wonders: The Work of Adbhutarasa in the Mahābhārata and the Harivaṁśa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 37 accuses me of being a “Mahābhārata perennialist.” If by this he means that I think the epic continues to be relevant in the present, then I am in august company, for Sukthankar thought so too. But if by this Hildebeitel intends a put-down, then he

waste of time. It is a waste of time not only because of the entirely subjective, hypothetical, and question-begging nature of all criteria thus far professed, but because this sophomoric game of making up chronologies and identifying “layers” is unworthy of the humanities. The contemporary crisis of the humanities is at least in part attributable to the fact that, having been “embalmed” in a Teutonic cast for nearly two centuries, humanities have failed to produce anything deserving of the term “art.”<sup>51</sup> Rather, their

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wasted his life explicating a text that he thought ultimately had no purpose except for fanning the raging fire of his scholarly vanity. Hildebeitel feels compelled to clarify: “But in terms of my distinction between text and tradition, this brings me to an area over which I have had a disagreement over what one means when one speaks of the Mahābhārata as a unity or as a whole. For me, it means only the unity of the whole critical edition text, and not the unity of the Mahābhārata tradition. Vishwa Adluri maintains the opposite outlook. Adluri takes the Mahābhārata to be an inherently philosophical text with an underlying proto-Vedantic unity that is communicated to readers through initiatory symbols.” Alf Hildebeitel, *World of Wonders: The Work of Adbhutarasa in the Mahābhārata and the Harivaṃśa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 36 and 37. But the critical edition text only reconstructs an arbitrary moment in the history of the tradition; indeed, as we wrote in *Philology and Criticism*, “The critical edition does not provide any support for the thesis of ‘older Bhārata or Mahābhārata versions.’ No justification exists for thinking the text reconstructed in it is an especially prominent exemplar, the product of an intentional redaction, compilation of different narratives, replacement of oral versions and the like. As we have seen, these interpretations are false, arising from a misconception regarding the nature of stemmatic reconstruction, namely, that because the archetype occupies a prominent position on our stemma, it must also have been an especially prominent exemplar for the tradition. In truth, the archetype may have been quite unexceptional from the perspective of the tradition. It is only by chance that its descendants, rather than those of the other manuscripts in circulation at the time, survived.” Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, 21–22. Now if the Mahābhārata tradition does not have an underlying unity, how does Hildebeitel explain “the unity of the whole critical edition text”? It stretches the bounds of credulity to argue that, out of a tradition that was not unified, serendipitously, the constituted text manages to pluck out a text that is or *was* unified. And even if it managed, through pure luck, to capture perfectly this one moment of unified text amidst a sea of non-unified texts, how did that historical exemplar come to be unified, if the tradition before it and after it and alongside it was not? Hildebeitel’s argument is exactly as self-defeating as Bigger’s attempt to prove the constituted text reconstructs the text of a special “Brahmanic redaction,” except Bigger has this advantage over him that he can at least account for how an allegedly free-form epic tradition came to be unified at one moment in time, specifically the moment of its alleged redaction. Hildebeitel cannot even do that, unless he first enters into a parley with the Indologists.

<sup>51</sup> The expression is Arrowsmith’s, though I am using it in a wider sense here. But his splendid account, the inspiration for so much of my own work, is worth quoting in full: “In every humanistic field today one still finds the same vogue of objectivity and the same hatred of the subjective; the cult of the fact and the naive faith in the accumulation of data; an obsession with methodology and classification; a profound unwillingness to make normative judgments; a preoccupation with ‘problems’ and the purely informational definition of knowledge. In classical studies the typical monument of the age is still those immense Teutonic encyclopedias in which every known fact is embalmed. At the lower level are the dreary doctoral dissertations, with their weary prologues on methods-to-be-followed, and their statistical analyses of tropes and metaphors, their patient parsing of the obvious and the irrelevant, and their laboriously trivial discoveries. In musicology or Romance philology, it is the exhaustive monograph; in English, the monumental biography, the complete bibliography, the immense variorum. In less than a century the combined efforts of European and American scholars have produced a corpus of fact so immense and so unedited that it could only be mastered by a lifetime of assiduous study. This is one of the older and less happy results of modern humanistic scholarship: in its effort to elucidate and clarify, it has somehow managed to interpose between us and the texts we study a barrier of knowledge more lush and impenetrable than our earlier ignorance. Worse, modern scholarship seems to have no means of editing itself, of eliminating its own wastes. Having forsworn value judgments, it is reluctant to judge what is valuable and what is waste in its own works. And so committed has it become to the idea that every scrap of information is useful, and that every discussion of a ‘problem’ or crux must at least be known, if not accepted, that it is

function has principally been the evacuation, in the name of the “historical sense,” of all meaning from great literature, which includes the Mahābhārata. But here, we would do well to remember Nietzsche’s critique:

When the historical sense reigns *without restraint*, and all its consequences are realized, it uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs the things of the atmosphere in which alone they can live. Historical justice, even when it is genuine and practiced with the purest of intentions, is therefore a dreadful virtue because it always undermines the living thing and brings it down: its judgment is always annihilating...history is the antithesis of art: and only if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them. Such a historiography would, however, be altogether contrary to the analytical and inartisti tendencies of our time, which would indeed declare it false.<sup>52</sup>

In this sense, then, *itihāsapurāṇa* is art, and exists as “true” beyond the rough-hewn empiricism of the historian.

Political-critical readings undertaken from the point of view of “social justice,” which have entered into an unholy alliance with the historical sense, are likewise shallow undertakings that may appeal to our best (utilitarian?) interests. Let us read Nietzsche again:

Now picture to yourself the historical virtuoso of the present day; is he the justest man of his time? ...Who compels you to judge? And moreover – test yourself to see whether you could be just if you want to be! As a judge, you must stand higher than he who is to be judged, whereas all you are is subsequent to him. The guests who come last to the table have to be content with the last places: and do you want to be the first? Then at least perform some high and great deed; perhaps then they really will make room for you, even if you come last.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Nietzsche questions whether our critique of the past arises from a sense of true justice by which we live, or simply because we are ensconced in a later time and feel ourselves to be empowered by our institutions and their values, which appear to us completely just. Justice then becomes “court manners” and bureaucratic processes, in which the text is neither understood nor appreciated, nor do our allegedly critical (historical) readings contribute in any way to the purpose of these text, namely, to teach us to critique *ourselves and our institutions*. Our interpretations become mere virtue-signalling.

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literally mired in its own speculations. The commentaries begin to threaten the text; the details destroy the whole.” William Arrowsmith, “The Shame of the Graduate Schools: A Plea for a New American Scholar,” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, Third Series, 2, no. 2/3 (1992–1993): 159–76; here: 161. Arrowsmith of course had never encountered the Indologists, or he would have given up thinking pleas for a more intelligent approach might have some effect.

<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95–6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.



The Mahābhārata, as I have shown, has a powerful critique of the court of Hāstinapura: we can be unthinking historicists and go looking for fragments of Painted Gray Ware or calculate the date of the death of Bhīṣma by means of such-and-such an asterism, or we can be *literate* and ask what lessons we can learn from its portrayal, not just of the Kuru court, which is at best merely of historical interest, but of the mechanism of privilege, which transcends its literary setting and is a universal concern of humanity. In what way do our own institutions replicate features of Hāstinapura? How have we structured academia to keep out questions of real importance, while we engage in our empty self-serving ritual games of publishing and presenting and career-advancing?

In this contribution, I applied the textual-interpretive method in my analysis of privilege in the Mahābhārata. This method summons language, philosophy, narratology, hermeneutics and psychoanalysis—indeed, all disciplines of the humanities (with a healthy and well-grounded suspicion of historicism and politics)—in reading the text carefully. Let me conclude by saying that this method is not mine, and it is *not* new. It is the basic purpose of reading texts, a method that now appears novel and daring, even controversial only because of our abject capitulation before the unethical and transgressive spirit of a vulgar historicism. We noted that the Mahābhārata says “With both the Epic and Purāṇa one should support the Veda” (Mahābhārata 1.1.204). But in what way does the *itihāsapurāṇa* support the Veda? Here, Yudhiṣṭhira’s about whether knowledge can be given to those who are of low birth provides a clue: demonstrating great textual self-consciousness, the Mahābhārata raises a question within the narrative that is not only concerned with the narrative, but reaches out beyond the proximate context of Yudhiṣṭhira’s question to encompass not just the epic itself, but also the world in which it exists.

I commenced this contribution by citing, as an epigraph, the opinion of Śukla Yajurveda 26.2: “I say these beautiful (beneficial) words to people who are Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Śūdras, and Vaiśyas, to myself to all others.” But this is not the only view. Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda Taittirīya Saṃhita 7.1.1.5 says categorically, “Therefore the Śūdra is not eligible for the sacrifice.” We could read these two statements and decide, like the Indologists, that the scriptures are contradictory. We could moreover derive from this lack of consistency, the conclusion that, their *apauruṣeyatvam* notwithstanding, these texts are the product of individuals responding to historical circumstances and expressing personal opinions. When we, furthermore, see the commentators holding on to the revealed origin of these texts, and attempting to harmonize their manifest contradictions, we could conclude smugly like von Stietencron that this is only to be expected from the melanin-over-endowed, “who not only harmonized and freely downplayed all breaks in the text, but, above all, sought to read their own philosophical-theological concepts out of individual textual passages, in order to secure Kṛṣṇa’s divine authority for them.”<sup>54</sup>

But this enterprise of historicization is not only self-defeating, but also harmful. Even if we reject salvation as the goal of philosophy,<sup>55</sup> we need scripture at least for ethics. But to read scripture one must have both the skills and the knowledge to *interpret* it. And those skills have to be *taught*. Yudhiṣṭhira’s question here can be seen as bearing

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<sup>54</sup> Heinrich von Stietencron, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Angelika Malinar, *Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1996), 6–7.

<sup>55</sup> See my introduction to Vishwa Adluri, ed., *Philosophy and Salvation in Greek Religion* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013) titled “Philosophy, Salvation, and the Mortal Condition.”

upon the entire textual tradition: it is the question the Mahābhārata, as Fifth Veda and Kārṣṇa Veda, asks, and to which Vyāsa brings his comprehensive genius. Explicitly here, we see the resolution of the contradiction between the views expressed in Śukla Yajurveda 26.2 and Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda Taittirīya Saṃhita 7.1.1.5.

Bhīṣma’s response, as we saw, does not fully affirm either view, but rather, attempts to negotiate between the competing concerns, worries, or interests they give voice to. On the one hand, there is a danger when texts fall into the hands of immature, materialistic, or ignorant interpreters (and their *ersatz paramparas*). On the other, there is a humanitarian need to let the texts nourish the human need for meaning. Regardless of whether one thinks scripture was revealed by a God to Moses, authorless, or merely human artifice, no one would write it down if he did not think it had some *value* for humanity. Taking this basic intent as our interpretive guideline, we must now see if there is a perspective that allows us to adjudicate between the competing claims of the two statements. Such a perspective is precisely the appeal to eligibility understood according to *guṇa-karma*.

The interpretive tradition we are concerned with here proceeds according to *samanvaya*, or harmonization. That harmonization does not rashly deny or affirm socio-political identities, but aims to preserve the meaning of the revelation. And it does so, as the Brahmasūtra 1.1.4 says: *tat tu samanvayāt*. “But that *Brahman* (is known from the Upaniṣads), (*Brahman*) being the object of their fullest import.” What is this harmonization, *samanvaya*? Śāṅkara glosses: “*samanvayāt*, because of being the object of their fullest import; for in all the Upaniṣads the texts become fully reconciled when they accept this very fact in their fullest import. (As for instance): ‘O amiable one, this universe, before its creation, was but Existence, one without a second’ (Ch.VI.ii.1)” (Brahmasūtra 1.1.4). This ontological orientation towards *Brahman* is the goal of scripture, and Śāṅkara is clear that “realization of the Self as *Brahman* [is] beyond acceptance and rejection.” Thus, this principle of harmonization itself must be beyond affirmation or negation. When Śāṅkara follows the method of *samanvaya*, he is following the *itihāsapurāṇa* in doing so. Might we reject the idea of *samanvaya* itself (as von Stietencron in his arrogance does)? No, because this would be to involve oneself in a logical contradiction, and also to abandon the search for a perspective from which apparent contradictions may be resolved—this is the human search for meaning.

What is the alternative to “harmonization” in the interpretation of scripture? Modern scholarship proceeds by identifying “breaks” and finding “contradictions” and separating “layers.” That these methods are ultimately subjective and question-begging (they suffer from the logical fallacy of *itaretara āśrayatvam*) has been amply demonstrated. But a further point can be made: *samanvaya begins* where the historical method struggles to reach and fails. Whereas the historical method tries to find contradictions, *samanvaya* already recognizes the existence of contradictions and proceeds therefrom to resolve these contradictions. Nor is this harmonization as simple as “freely downplay[ing] all breaks in the text.” As I showed in the interpretation of *varṇa* in the *itihāsapurāṇa*, it takes profound logic, knowledge of the *prima facie* view, the tradition, and the competing interests to be negotiated. In fact, it takes the entirety of the Fifth Veda, before the Mahābhārata’s *siddhānta* regarding this question can be presented. Let us now go the Purāṇa to verify this process in a different text attributed to the same “genius.” In the Uddhavaḡītā section of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (chapter 29), Kṛṣṇa says:

You should not reveal this to a hypocrite having no real faith, to an atheist who accepts neither God nor His revelation, to a crafty man, to one who does not like to hear it, or to one without any trace of devotion. 31. You can impart it to people who are without the above-mentioned defects—to persons who are devoted to holy men and to Me, who are of high moral standard, and who are pure in life. If they have devotion, it can be imparted also to śūdras and to women (*sūdra-yoṣitām*). (Bhāgavatapurāṇa 11.29.30; Tapasyananda trans. modified)

Note that Kṛṣṇa is carrying on the interpretation of Veda by reference to Himself as the interpretive principle. In clarifying that he is *Brahman*, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa remains faithful to *samanvaya* as the Brahmasūtra also confirms.

A final word about *samanvaya* as opposed to the historical method. Human life, as I have been repeating, demands meaning, and scripture's function is to provide some transcendent, non-empirical meaning to human life. This is the very definition of Veda. Sāyaṇa, in his commentary on the Kṛṣṇa Yajurveda Taittirīya Saṃhitā defines Veda as a “book which informs about the transcendental means (*alaukika*) to achieve the *iṣṭa* (the desired) and avoid the *aniṣṭa* (unwanted).”<sup>56</sup> The historical method blindly disrupts the channels of meaning derived through scripture—whether Vedic or other—without providing anything to replace it with. It would not be far-fetched to see in verse 30 the description of the historian and in verse 31 the description of the philosophical heremeneut, and Kṛṣṇa's concern with distinguishing them. Although on the surface, this seems like a God who demands faith, the very kind of “superstition” that the European Enlightenment critiqued, Kṛṣṇa has a real point here. It is not dogmatism about *adhikāra* but about the conditions necessary for a proper interpretive approach that motivates the desire to preserve texts only for deserving recipients. That approach is *samanvaya*. Without *samanvaya*, we are left at the mercy of fideism, fundamentalism, and abject materialism. And of course, violence.

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<sup>56</sup> Sāyaṇa, *Upodghāta to the Ṛgvedasaṃhitā*, cited and translated in Saraswati Bali, *Sāyaṇa's Upodghāta to the Taittirīya Saṃhitā and the Ṛgveda Saṃhitā: Introduction, English Translation of the Text and Notes* (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 1999), 163.