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## Before the Gītā: Battlefield, bhūmi, and the cosmographs of the Mahābhārata

Adam Bowles

### Abstract

Prior to the Bhagavadgītāparvan (6.14–40) in the Mahābhārata’s book 6 (Bhīṣmaparvan), which itself contains the Bhagavadgītā proper (6.23–40), there are two sections referred to as the Jambūkhaṇḍavinirmāṇaparvan (6.1–11), the 'book on the measuring out of the Continent of the Black Plum Tree' and the Bhūmiparvan (6.12–13), the 'book of the earth'. Much of the scholarly attention on these *parvans* has been concerned with matters of source criticism of the so-called 'cosmographical episode' from Mbh 6.6 to 6.13, which bridges the two sections. In this paper I propose, rather, to consider both these *parvans* within the context of their narration in the Mahābhārata, especially as a preamble to the war, where they work to foreground the land over which the battle will be fought. Of particular interest will be the ways in which the narrative alternates between the 'localised' plane of the field of battle (Kurukṣetra) on which the armies 'of the earth' marshal, the earth as the lands from which the armies are drawn and for which the protagonists battle, and the position of these lands (equated with Bhāratavarṣa, a novel idea) within the cosmography. Considered also are some of the influences that likely led to the creation of the cosmographs, and certainly to the appropriation of what became important geographic terms.

### Introduction

The Mahābhārata (Mbh) contains a number of episodes which reflect, in Pollock’s words (2006: 226), “spatial interests.” Examples include the *digvijaya* accompanying Yudhiṣṭhira’s Rājasūya, the *tīrthayātrā* the Pāṇḍavas undertake in exile, the so-called 'cosmographical episode' preceding the Bhagavadgītā in Book 6 (the topic of this presentation), and the horse’s tour accompanying the *aśvamedha* of book 14. This paper, a work in progress, represents an attempt to understand the third of these, which is contained in the two *upaparvans*, the Jambūkhaṇḍavinirmāṇaparvan (6.1–11), the 'book on the measuring out of the continent of Jambhū tree', and the Bhūmiparvan (6.12–13), the 'book of the earth'; the 'cosmographical episode' bridges these two *parvans* between chapters 6.6 to 6.13.

The ‘cosmographical episode’ is probably the most well-known and well-studied section of these *parvans*,<sup>1</sup> having received considerable interest from scholars such as Kirfel (1927), Hilgenberg (1938), Belvalkar (1939),<sup>2</sup> Sircar (1967), and Eck (2012), primarily in order to understand the significance of the cosmographies presented in them, and their relationships to other representations of similar cosmographies — though much of this work tends to depend more on similar accounts in the *purāṇas*. Hilgenberg, inspired by Kirfel, attempted to prove that the Mbh borrowed this episode from the Padmapurāṇa (which contains a more or less identical passage), an argument that Belvalkar successfully, I think, takes to task.<sup>3</sup> Even so, higher criticism may reveal further aspects of the text history of this section; as Belvalkar notes in the critical edition (pp.cxxiv–v), and as I will draw attention to below, the cosmographical episode is sometimes disorderly in its sequence.

Broadly speaking, I am interested in two problems related to the cosmographical episode. First, I shall reflect on the experience of reading the episode. What are its narrative and literary effects? I shall chart the text’s movements through different spatial plains, such as Kurukṣetra, the *bhūmi*, Sudarśanadvīpa, Bhāratavarṣa, Jambūdvīpa, Mount Meru’s four *dvīpas*, and the cosmos construed as seven concentric *dvīpas* — in other words, the various lands and worlds, indeed the whole universe, as depicted in the cosmographs. For it is evident that there are three cosmographs, and they interact with varying degrees of complementarity and contradiction, and they use terms — such as Jambūdvīpa — with multiple reference points. I am interested in the features of those lands extramural to — but implicitly contrasted with — the *bhūmi* of the *janapadas* gathered on Kurukṣetra. I pose the question (perhaps as a heuristic) of why the cosmographs were included at all, since one might propose that the wider context does not require them. What then, since they are there, are their literary effects?

I shall in particular argue that the cosmographs place in stark relief the discordant and dysfunctional goings-on among the nations gathering to fight the war and the greed of their kings for sovereignty over their land (*bhūmi*). The cosmographs provide opportunities to imagine better worlds (if that was not so for their authors, then certainly for their readers). Nevertheless, the cosmographical episode also articulates a love and desire for the land (*bhūmi*) over which its warriors shall soon go

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<sup>1</sup> Eck (2012) refers to this section as the *bhuvanakośa*, a term found only in the colophons of Southern recension manuscripts. *Bhuvanakośa* became a common term in the Purāṇas.

<sup>2</sup> Belvalkar discusses it further in the CE’s Bhīṣmaparvan.

<sup>3</sup> See also Gail, 1973: 16 n.9. Belvalkar repeats (and amplifies to some comedic affect) his criticisms in the notes to the Critical Edition of the Mbh.

to war. The cosmographs therefore serve to frame and foreground this land and the emotional connection to it that the heroes are said to hold.

Second, it is evident that the cosmographs introduce some text-historical and historical questions. I have noted already Belvalkar's opinion regarding the disorderly sequence of the cosmographical episode, a view that I often share, for reasons I will try to explain below. When this is considered with other factors, such as the introduction of a 'geographical' vocabulary that is both new to Brahmanism and rare for the Mbh, the sometime ambiguity of this vocabulary, as well as some possible evidence for the insertion of the episode, I will suggest that there are grounds to productively speculate on the provenance of the episode and of the cosmographs.

### **The preamble to the cosmographs**

The cosmographical episode, which bridges two aforementioned *upaparvans*, begins at 6.6. The five chapters that precede it establish a context for the cosmographical episode, and introduce some key terms for my analysis.

The Udyogaparvan ends with the Duryodhana's army marching out to meet the Pāṇḍavas' army on the battlefield, and the setting of the armies into battle arrays. The Bhīṣmaparvan then opens with a question from Janamejaya:

*katham yuyudhire vīrāḥ kurupāṇḍavasomakāḥ  
pārthivās ca mahābhāgā nānādeśasamāgatāḥ || 6.1.1*

How did those Kuru, Pāṇḍava and Somaka heroes wage war, those illustrious kings **gathered from the various lands?**

To this question, apposite to the context, Vaiśampāyana responds:

*yathā yuyudhire vīrāḥ kurupāṇḍavasomakāḥ  
kurukṣetre tapahkṣetre śṛṇu tat pṛthivīpate  
avatīrya kurukṣetraṃ pāṇḍavāḥ sahasomakāḥ  
kauravān abhyavartanta jigīṣanto mahābalāḥ  
vedādhyayanasaṃpannāḥ sarve yuddhābhinandināḥ*

*āśaṃsanto jayaṃ yuddhe vadhaṃ vābhimukhā raṇe*  
*abhiyāya ca durdharṣāṃ dhārtarāṣṭrasya vāhinīm*  
*prāṇmukhāḥ paścime bhāge nyaviśanta sasainikāḥ*  
***samantapañcakād*** *bāhyaṃ śibirāṇi sahasraśaḥ*  
*kārayām āsa vidhivat kuntīputro yudhiṣṭhiraḥ*  
***śūnyeva pṛthivī sarvā*** *bālavṛddhāvaśeṣitā*  
*niraśvapuruṣā cāsīd rathakuñjaravarjitā*  
*yāvat tapati sūryo hi **jambūdvīpasya maṇḍalam***  
*tāvad eva samāvṛttaṃ balaṃ pāṛthivasattama*  
*ekasthāḥ sarvavarṇās te maṇḍalaṃ bahuyojanam*  
*paryākṛāṃanta deśāṃś ca nadīḥ śailān vanāni ca || 6.1.2–9*

Listen, lord of princes, to how the Kuru, Pāṇḍava, and Somaka heroes battled **on the field of the Kurus, the field of pain**. Having arrived at the field of the Kurus, the mighty Pāṇḍavas and Somakas drew near the Kauravas, eager to defeat them, furnished with recitations of the Veda, looking forward to battle, seeking victory in battle, and ready for killing in combat. Having approached that unassailable army of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son, they set up camp with their armies on the western side facing eastwards. According to rule, Kuntī’s son Yudhiṣṭhira had tents set up by the thousand on the outskirts of **Samantapañcaka**. **The entire land (pṛthivī)**, save for the young and the old, **was almost empty**; it was devoid of men and horses, and wanting of chariots and elephants. For as long as the sun scorches the **realm (maṇḍala) of Jambūdvīpa** that army gathered there, finest of princes. All those *varṇas* standing together had roamed over the realm (*maṇḍala*) of many yojanas, and countries, rivers, mountains, and forests.

And so Vaiśampāyana introduces the battlefield, the fabled Kurukṣetra, and the forces arranged upon it. Though he promises to, he does not right now answer Janamejaya’s query regarding how the heroes fought; that will be some time away. In introducing the battlefield of Kurukṣetra he uses some terms that help to establish one pole of the present analysis — the nature of Kurukṣetra and the wider land from which the warriors are drawn. I will discuss four of these.

The first is the description of **Kurukṣetra** as **tapahkṣetra**, the only instance of this term in the Mbh, though it is known in other literature, typically in reference to locations of ascetic practice.<sup>4</sup> I have translated this as ‘field of pain’, but it could have multiple references. It may allude to the great Kuru, after whom the field is named, who is said in the Ādiparvan to have made it sacred through his austerities (1.89.43cd: *kurukṣetraṃ sa tapasā puṇyaṃ cakre mahātapāḥ*). More generally it may evoke the field of the Kurus as a site of pilgrimage and religious austerity, the current visitors being poignant exemplars of both. Their fighting itself might be understood as a form of *tapas*, a religious austerity, in keeping with the war being a ‘sacrifice of battle’ (*raṇasatra*). And it may evoke the torment and suffering about to ensue; the battle books frequently use the verb *tap* for the infliction of pain.

The field on which the warriors gather is then called **Samantapañcaka** (‘the [place] consisting of five adjacent [lakes]’), a name inaugurated with the Mbh, which evokes the event for which the Kurukṣetra received this name, the 21-times-over slaughtering of kṣatriyas by the avenging brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya, during which he produced five blood lakes in the vicinity of Kurukṣetra (sometimes also referred to as the *rāmahradas*, ‘Rāma’s lakes’). The use of Samantapañcaka here — the only time in the Bhīṣmaparvan — recalls Rāma’s massacre and portends the destiny of the gathered warriors.

These two names, which localise the battle, give way to broader geographical terms. Because the warriors have gathered on Kurukṣetra, the ‘entire land was as if empty’ (*śūnyeva pṛthivī sarvā*), bar a few. The term *pṛthivī* here and elsewhere in these two *parvans*, as is also the case with its synonym *bhūmi*, almost always refer to the land from which the warriors are drawn — what will later be called Bhāratavarṣa, and sometimes Jambūdvīpa; they do not typically mean some conception of a ‘world’ of which this (or any other) land is a part, i.e., the types of broader worlds depicted in the cosmographs. The emptied land evokes an eschatological image — what if the warriors don’t return? — reminiscent of Arjuna’s concern in the Gītā for the *kuladharmas* in the absence of the men slain in battle.

The last term is **Jambūdvīpa**, the ‘Black Plum Isle’,<sup>5</sup> which is often taken to refer to ‘India’. It is possible that Jambūdvīpa here is the name given for the *pṛthivī* from which the warriors were drawn.

<sup>4</sup> Aśvaghōṣa uses it twice, *Buddhacarita* 7.34 and *Saundarānanda* 1.18; it appears once in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, 17.1.75. For the *Saundarānanda*, see Leitan 2020: 28–31.

<sup>5</sup> Jambū, as Wujastyk (2004) has shown, is the black plum; the *dvīpa*, therefore, is the ‘Black Plum Isle’, not the ‘Rose-Apple Isle’, as it is usually called in the secondary literature.

However, Jambūdvīpa can have different cosmographical references. The term *maṇḍala* can indicate a disc shape (not simply a territory), which might suggest the reference here is to the disc world Jambūdvīpa, which contains, but cannot be equated with, the ‘land’ of the warriors. The geographical language of the cosmographs often involves ambiguity, as will be discussed further below.

The first three of these terms evoke the destructive capacity of the coming war and have eschatological connotations, and the last two give the combatants a geographical and potentially cosmographical dimension that transcends the place on which they gather. Later in the chapter these two dimensions are again drawn together, reiterating some of the imagery already established:

*ubhe sene tadā rājan yuddhāya mudite bhṛśam  
kurukṣetre sthite yatte sāgarakṣubhitopame  
tayos tu senayor āsīd adbhutaḥ sa samāgamaḥ  
yugānte samanuprāpte dvayoḥ sāgarayor iva  
śūnyāsīt **prthivī** sarvā bālavṛddhāvaśeṣitā  
tena senāsamūhena samānītena kauravaiḥ ||6.1.23–25*

Then, king, both those armies stood on the field of the Kurus, euphoric for battle, ready like a rippling ocean. The meeting of those two armies was astonishing, like that of two oceans when the end of an epoch has come. The entire **land (prthivī)** was empty, aside from children and the elderly, due to that array of armies assembled by the Kauravas.

The next few chapters can be quickly summarised for context. In chapter 2 Vyāsa warns Dhṛtarāṣṭra of the carnage to come, especially of his own sons (2.4–5), and offers him the divine eye to see the battle; he rejects it, and Vyāsa then gives it to Saṁjaya. It is through this device that we, too, will learn of the battles. Vyāsa then describes portents anticipating the coming slaughter, which alternate between the battlefield, distortions of the normal human domestic experience, and astrological disturbances. Dhṛtarāṣṭra seems resigned to the coming fate (3.44–46), but Vyāsa tries to convince him to stop his sons, but to no avail. Vyāsa then tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra, at his request, of the characteristics of those who will be victorious (4.16–25), and those who will not, emphasising strategy over army size (4.31–35).

In the middle of the passage on portents, as he describes the sun being eclipsed by four meteors (*ulkā*), he relates a prediction made by the seers who worship the sun,

*ādityam upatiṣṭhadbhis tatra coktaṃ maharṣibhiḥ*  
***bhūmipālasahasrāṇāṃ bhūmiḥ pāsyati śoṇitam*** || 6.3.34

The great seers worshipping the sun there said, **‘the land [bhūmi] will drink the blood of thousands of her kings’**.

The great seers’ prediction reflects the idioms of both warrior epics and the literature on portents. In the former case, it appears in both the Mbh and Rām in relation to the anticipated outcomes of battle. In the Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa (62.2.5) it is one of the predicted consequences of earthquakes; in the Śārdūlakāvadānam (379.2) it portends, with the falling of meteors, the consequences of a king’s death.<sup>6</sup> In the Mbh, it is not merely a poetic idea, for it foregrounds the *bhūmi* — the land that is the object of the warriors’ desire — is an active agent in its fortune. This is reflected in the Mbh’s charter myth in the Ādiparvan (1.58), where *Bhūmi* appeals to Brahmā to relieve her burden, and then in the Karṇaparvan, when the land (*bhūmi*) actually does drink the blood of Karṇa (8.69.17; Bowles 2008: xxxix), the only time this idiom appears in the present tense in the entire epic.

The chapter preceding the cosmographical episode emphasises the *bhūmi* as an object of the warriors’ desire. Vyāsa departs at the beginning of chapter 5, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra then turns to Saṃjaya with a series of queries:

*pārthivāḥ pṛthivīhetoḥ samabhityaktajīvitāḥ*  
*na ca śāmyanti nighnanto vardhayanto yamakṣayam*  
***bhaumam aiśvaryam icchanto na mṛṣyante parasparam***  
*manye bahuguṇā bhūmis tan mamācakṣva saṃjaya*  
*bahūni ca sahasrāṇi prayutāny arbudāni ca*  
*koṭyaś ca lokavīrāṇāṃ sametāḥ kurujāṅgale*  
***deśānāṃ ca parīmāṇaṃ nagarāṇāṃ ca saṃjaya***  
*śrotum icchāmi tattvena yata ete samāgatāḥ* || 6.5.4–7

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<sup>6</sup> The second hemistich of the Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa and Śārdūlakāvadānam verses (with respective variants) — *rājaputrasahasrāṇāṃ bhūmiḥ pibati/pāsyati śoṇitam* — echoes that of the verse under discussion.

These kings risk their lives for the sake of the **land** and never rest while fighting as they expand the realm of Yama. **Longing for the land's sovereignty**, they cannot forgive one another. I reckon the **land** has many qualities; Saṃjaya, tell me about them! Many thousands, millions, tens of millions, and crores of the world's heroes have gathered on **Kurujāṅgala**. Saṃjaya, I want to hear truthfully about the **scope of the regions and cities** from which those gathered have come.

I continue to translate both *bhūmi* and *pṛthivī* as 'land' to capture that these words in this context reflect a territorial notion, and to avoid connotations that the *bhūmi* reflects the broader 'global' conceptions of the cosmographs. The land is that from which the warriors of the war come, and for the sovereignty of which they go to battle. Verse 6.5.5 underscores the kings' desire (*iṣ*) for sovereignty over the land — a significant theme repeatedly returned to through these *parvans*.

Saṃjaya announces that he will describe the land's qualities (*bhaumān ... guṇān*) and then does so in terms of its living things, both stationary and moving. He concludes:

***bhūmau** hi jāyate sarvaṃ **bhūmau** sarvaṃ praṇaśyati  
**bhūmiḥ** pratiṣṭhā bhūtānāṃ **bhūmir** eva parāyaṇam  
yasya **bhūmis** tasya sarvaṃ jagat sthāvarajaṅgamam  
tatrā**bhigrddhā** rājāno vinighnantītaretarām || 6.5.20–21*

For everything comes into existence on the **land** (*bhūmi*) and everything vanishes into the **land**. The **land** is the foundation of living things; the **land** alone is the final refuge. Whoever possesses the **land** possesses the **entire world** (*jagat*) of moving and stationary things. Kings eagerly **longing** for it kill one another.

Stanza 6.5.20 establishes the cosmological and ontological priority of the *bhūmi* for those things born in it; as the ground of existence,<sup>7</sup> the land is an object of desire, a receptacle of people's emotion; the kings of this land are greedy for it, a point already introduced that will soon be emphasised further. This characteristic of the people of this particular land contrasts with other lands and their beings, as shall also be discussed soon.

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<sup>7</sup> *Jagat* frequently appears with the qualifier *sthāvarajaṅgamam*.



Dhṛtarāṣṭra now wants to know more about this *bhūmi* — about its rivers, mountains, forests, and nations (*janapada*), as well as the size of the *pṛthivī* (6.6.1–2). He is still talking about the land of the people who have assembled at Kurukṣetra, what might be understood to be Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s own land in the broad terms of a sovereign or potentate.

We will return to the Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s question about the *bhūmi* soon. At this point, we must appreciate that it is this line of questioning that leads to Saṃjaya’s accounts of the cosmographs. Since these can be somewhat difficult to digest in prose form (not least because of the way they are presented), I will first spend some time describing them and teasing apart their interrelationships.

### The three cosmographs

The cosmographical episode has three cosmographs; I will refer to these, in their order of appearance, as Cosmograph 1, Cosmograph 2, and Cosmograph 3. I will describe each of the cosmographs, which, as already noted, in some respects are confusingly spliced together.

Cosmograph 1 is first introduced at 6.6.12, where it is called Sudarśanadvīpa,<sup>8</sup> and described as circular (*parimaṇḍala*) and having the form of a disc. This Sudarśanadvīpa is surrounded by a salty ocean (*lāvaṇa samudra*) and contains six mountain ranges running horizontally across the disc from east to west, which divide its *varṣas*. At its centre is Mount Meru — perhaps to also be understood as a *varṣa* (though 6.7.36 calls it *llāvṛta*), south of the Nīla range and north of Niṣadha range, and in between (to its west and east) Mounts Mālyavat and Gandhamādana. At Sudarśanadvīpa’s southern end, below the Himavat mountain range, is Bhāratavarṣa, the furthest south of the *varṣas*.<sup>9</sup>

Cosmograph 1 is more typically referred to as Jambūdvīpa, as it is, for example, later in this episode,

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<sup>8</sup> Sudarśanadvīpa presumably gets its name because Sudarśana is the name, according to 6.8.18, of the Jambū tree to the south of the Nīla mountain range and to the north of the Niṣadha mountain range, i.e., where Mount Meru is located. *Purāṇas* often repeat this line that gives the name of the tree as Sudarśana (see, e.g., Matsyapurāṇa 114.74; Brāhmāṇḍapurāṇa 1.17.23), but do not then call the *dvīpa* Sudarśana. Rather they typically call it Jambūdvīpa, after the *type* of tree. Mbh 6.8.19 says: *tasya nāmnā samākhyāto jambūdvīpaḥ sanātanaḥ* ‘due to the name of that [tree], the eternal Jambūdvīpa was [so] named [i.e., Sudarśanadvīpa — I assume this to be an ellipsis]’. It seems likely that the point is ‘Jambūdvīpa was named Sudarśanadvīpa because the name of the Jambū tree is Sudarśana’. However, according to some *purāṇas*, Jambūdvīpa is the name of the isle because of the type of tree (*jambūvrkṣa*). The same line as 6.8.19 appears in the above mentioned *purāṇas* subsequent to the cited verses, which suggests that these *purāṇas* have not followed the *tasya nāmnā ... vanaspateḥ* of their texts, since the name of the tree, as the first of the two verses makes clear in all versions, is Sudarśana. This may be evidence that the *purāṇas* have reshaped the sense of the verse under the influence of the increasingly dominant name Jambūdvīpa.

<sup>9</sup> Bhāratavarṣa, at the bottom of the disc world, is understood to be curved. Schubring (2000: 225) suggests that this curve reflects the Indian peninsular, which led to the circular conception of Jambūdvīpa (here called Sudarśanadvīpa).

where it reappears as the central *dvīpa* of the *saptadvīpa* cosmograph (Cosmograph 3). It corresponds to plate V in Sircar (1967), though with some difference in the names of *varṣas* (for which see Kirfel 1920: 57 and 215).

At the point of the introduction of Mount Meru, Cosmograph 2 is introduced at 6.7.11. The conjunction of Cosmographs 1 and 2 creates some difficulties in terms of cohesion and nomenclature. Verses 6.7.7–8 describe, as part of Cosmograph 1, the two Mountains Mālyavat and Gandhamādana that bridge the Nīla and Niṣadha ranges, in the middle of which is Mount Meru. Once Mount Meru is introduced, Meru is telescoped closer.<sup>10</sup> Mount Meru is, indeed, Cosmograph 2 and consists of four *dvīpas* located on the sides (*pārśva*) of the mountain: Bhadrāśva (on the eastern side), Ketumāla (on the western side), Jambūdvīpa (on the southern side), and the Uttarakurus (on the northern side). All these names appear as *varṣas* in some versions (but not in the constituted text of the Mbh CE) of Cosmograph 1: the *varṣas* to the east and west of Meru/Ilāvṛta are sometimes respectively called Bhadrāśva<sup>11</sup> and Ketumāla; the *pārśva* to the north, Uttarakuru (the ‘northern Kuru’), in many versions of Cosmograph 1 is the name given to the *varṣa* furthest to the north.<sup>12</sup> In the constituted text of the Mbh CE, this far north *varṣa* is called Airāvata, which avoids a potentially confusion between the northern territories of the two cosmographs. Jambūdvīpa, of course, is a common name of Cosmograph 1; Jambūdvīpa as a *pārśva* of Meru is, in other texts, also often called Bhāratavarṣa (the name of the most southern *varṣa* in Cosmograph 1);<sup>13</sup> with either name, this is often taken to mean ‘India’, as is the southern *varṣa* of Cosmograph 1, in which it is embedded. Sudarśanadvīpa is called Jambūdvīpa in Cosmograph 3, which demonstrates the potential confusions in the nomenclature. Cosmograph 2 — the simplest of the cosmographs — is Sircar’s plate 1 and often referred to as *caturdvīpā vasumatī*, the ‘earth with its four *dvīpas*’. In my view, this is a strong chance this is a later insertion into the cosmographical episode<sup>14</sup> — after a laud to Meru, there is a brief account of Meru’s Ketumāla *pārśva* (i.e., belonging to Cosmograph 2), and then a reversion to

<sup>10</sup> Schwartzberg (1992: 335) notes that the amalgamation of cosmographs is common — he is referring in this instance to the amalgamation of what I am calling Cosmographs 2 and 3 (also Sircar 1967: 36). In the present instance, we have an amalgamation of Cosmographs 1 and 2, which Eck (2012: 504 n.25) notes are often ‘meshed together, sometimes in garbled fashion’, giving a long list of purāṇic exemplars. Schwartzberg (1992: 337, fig. 16.3) suggests that what I am calling Cosmograph 1 is a purāṇic conception ‘derivative’ of the other two. It is notable that Cosmograph 1 in the constituted text of the Mbh CE is missing the western and eastern *varṣas* of Ketumāla and Bhadrāśva, which is perhaps why 6.7.50 indicates only seven *varṣas* rather than nine.

<sup>11</sup> As it is in a hemistich inserted in the southern recension mss T1 and G4 after 6.8.12 (and in M2 after 8.13).

<sup>12</sup> As it is in a verse inserted in the southern recension mss T1 and G4 after 6.7.35. These southern recension mss suggest that their copyists/contributors (Mbh ‘connoisseurs’, as Alf Hiltebeitel described them) were wrestling with the tensions between the cosmographs.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, ms. D7 has *bhārataś cāpi* for *jambūdvīpaś ca*.

<sup>14</sup> See also Hopkins 1910: 368–69.

Gandhamādāna and the *varṣas* of Cosmograph 1 from 6.7.32. The transition is, again, somewhat abrupt.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, at the beginning of 6.8, blurs Cosmographs 1 and 2 at their margins. In the first verse he asks for an explanation of the northern and eastern slopes (*pārśva*) of Meru (i.e., belonging to Cosmograph 2), as well as about Mount Mālyavat (i.e., Cosmograph 1). Saṃjaya responds in the same vein in 6.8.2: to the south of the Nīla range (Cosmograph 1) on the northern slope (*pārśva*) are the Uttarakurus. Meru of Cosmograph 2 continues to be described until 6.8.17. At that point, the account reverts again to Cosmograph 1 (including the reason for the naming of Jambūdvīpa as Sudarśanadvīpa at 6.8.18–19). Cosmograph 1 remains the focus from here until the end of 6.9. The blurring at the margins can be confusing, but arguably it adds to the telescoping effect. Cosmograph 2, after all, is nested in the centre of Cosmograph 1.

If Cosmograph 2 represents a telescoping into the centre of Cosmograph 1, then Cosmograph 3 represents a telescoping out from Cosmograph 1 to its encompassing ‘world’. Cosmograph 1, in other words, is nested in the centre of Cosmograph 3. Cosmograph 3 appears as a consequence of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, in 6.12.1–3, stating that after hearing about Jambūkhaṇḍa (i.e., Cosmograph 1, Sudarśanadvīpa, which now will usually be called Jambūdvīpa), he would like to hear about its diameter (*viṣkambha*) and circumference (*parimāṇa*), plus the other *dvīpas*. Saṃjaya tells him that there are many *dvīpas*, but he will describe only seven (plus the moon, sun, and planets — which he does only barely at 6.13.39–45). This cosmograph has Jambūdvīpa surrounded by the salty ocean (*lāvaṇa samudra*) at its centre; the name Sudarśanadvīpa, to which this Jambūdvīpa equates, no longer appears, though the ‘salty ocean’ (see above; Mbh 6.6.14) clearly links the two. Ever widening concentric rings of oceans and *dvīpas* surround Jambūdvīpa, the oceans each being of different liquid substances. The *dvīpas* each duplicate the model of central mountain and ‘tree’ and the east-to-west mountain ranges and *varṣas* (i.e., on the model of Cosmograph 1). They do not receive the same degree of attention; Śākadvīpa, in purāṇic accounts normally the sixth *dvīpa* moving outwards, but here probably second since it is twice (*dviguṇa*) the extent of Jambūdvīpa,<sup>15</sup> for some reason receives the most attention (6.12.9–6.13.37). The account of Cosmograph 3 is, again, somewhat disordered and repetitive, and the terminology not always in keeping with better known (and perhaps more systematic) models. Even so, Cosmograph 3 is clearly an instance of what is often called *saptadvīpā vasumatī*, corresponding to Sircar’s pate II.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Kirfel 1920: 57; Clark 1919: 218 suggests that Śākadvīpa as the second isle represents the earlier tradition.

<sup>16</sup> Hopkins (1910: 368 n.1) and, in following Hopkins, Clark (1919: 217) are of the view that this cosmograph does not represent the expanding concentric *dvīpa* model, i.e., that typically referred to as *saptadvīpā*

## Utopian *varṣas* and *dvīpas*

I now argue that the cosmographs serve to emphasise by contrast the land of Bhāratavarṣa; the cosmographs provide opportunities for the presentation of utopian *varṣas* and *dvīpas*, offsetting Bhāratavarṣa, which has been made dystopic by the impending war, a dystopia amplified by the dissonances of the natural world and the cosmos presented already in the preamble. Yet, Bhāratavarṣa remains a 'land' (*bhūmi*) of sovereign desire because it is the land all of those gathered on the plains of the Kurus. The 'land' of Bhāratavarṣa is the focal point of its people's unremitting affection expressed as desire, which has led to a dystopic moment of imminent violence motivated by that very desire. The cosmographical episode serves, therefore, to establish a bivalency between the land of the Mbh's people, and other lands that are imaginable, but not desirable in sovereign terms. The literary purpose of the cosmographs, therefore, is not necessarily a precise explanation of them. In the following I will indicate the cosmographs by the number I've given them in order to keep track of the shifts between them.

Recall that Saṃjaya introduces the cosmographs as part of his answer to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's question about the land (*bhūmi*) — the rivers, mountains, forests, and nations (*janapada*) — encompassing the 'land' from which the warriors have come. He also asks about the entire size (*pramāṇam*) of the *pṛthivī*. The latter, perhaps, invites the cosmographs. Saṃjaya initially responds by giving an account of *bhūmi* as one of the five 'great elements' (*mahābhūtas*),<sup>17</sup> of which it is the superior because it has all the five qualities: sound, touch, form, taste, and smell.<sup>18</sup> The elements constitute the cosmoses depicted in the cosmographs. The element 'earth' (*bhūmi*) is especially crucial for the conceiving of land mass (*bhūmi*, *pṛthivī*, and *dvīpa*). The *bhūmi*, therefore, is introduced through its predominant substance, *bhūmi*.

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*vasumatī*. This argument is based on the lack of statements that say the *dvīpas* surround the oceans (not just that the oceans surround the *dvīpas*), as is common in the *purāṇas*. However, given the piecemeal presentation of Cosmograph 3, I do not find this convincing. The two islands paid the most attention (Jambūdvīpa and Śākadvīpa) are said to be surrounded by oceans (salty and milky respectively, in accordance with the standard theory), as Hopkins and Clark are aware; further, 6.13.3 says that all the *dvīpas* are double in size of the last and are surrounded by mountains on all sides (*paraspāreṇa dviguṇāḥ sarve dvīpā narādhipa | sarvataś ca mahārāja parvataiḥ parivāritāḥ*). The doubling in size reflects the concentric rings theory. The encompassing mountains may reflect the idea of the *cakravāla*.

<sup>17</sup> *bhūmir āpas tathā vāyur agnir ākāśam eva ca*

<sup>18</sup> The other four progressively drop one.

In beginning to describe Sudarśanadvīpa, Saṃjaya explains that there are six bejewelled mountains (*ratnaparvata*; some N. mss have *varṣaparvata*) stretching from the east (*prāgāyata*), submerged at both ends by the eastern and western oceans. The intervals between these mountains are the *varṣas*. Saṃjaya then introduces the three southern *varṣas* in the following manner:

*idaṃ tu bhāratam varṣam tato haimavataṃ param |  
hemakūṭāt paraṃ caiva harivarṣam pracakṣate || 6.7*

This is Bhārata varṣa; beyond it is Haimavata [*varṣa*]. Beyond [Mount] Hemakūṭa they call Harivarṣa.

This is the first time Bhāratavarṣa appears in the Mbh. Indeed, this passage accounts for 5 of the 6 instances of Bhāratavarṣa in the Constituted Text of the Critical Edition — a frequency to which we shall return.<sup>19</sup> The demonstrative pronoun *idaṃ* here has no obvious antecedent. I propose that this is an example of proximal deixis; we might imagine Saṃjaya (or the narrator or performer) pointing at a map or, perhaps more likely, to their immediate environs, as if he were saying, ‘this world around us, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is Bhāratavarṣa’. Haimavata must refer here to a *varṣa*, as it does later (6.11.1, 14), not to the Himavat range; in other contexts, Haimavata varṣa is called Kiṃpuruṣa.<sup>20</sup> The term *param*, ‘beyond’, we could as well take to mean ‘to the north of [abl.]’, since we are moving through the Southern *varṣas* to the centre.

The stanza establishes an opposition between ‘this Bhārata *varṣa*’ and those *varṣas* to the north of it (keeping in mind that this is Cosmograph 1). I suggest that *idaṃ ... bhāratam varṣam* is, in fact, an intentional refrain, repeated on two other occasions, designed to return us from the cosmographs to the land of the warriors readying for the impending war on Kurukṣetra. The proximal deixis establishes an intimacy between the interlocutors, their location, and the land of which they speak.

The various ‘other’ *varṣas* and *dvīpas* of Cosmographs 1 and 3 (excluding Bhāratavarṣa and Jambudvīpa respectively) serve to articulate imaginary utopian lands to which Bhāratavarṣa and Jambudvīpa are implicitly contrasted. The same pattern occurs in relation to Cosmograph 2, first in its somewhat awkward transition back to Cosmograph 1 (discussed above), where its western slope

<sup>19</sup> The sixth instance in the Śuka episode of the Śāntiparvan (12.312.14), where it may be being equated with *āryāvarta*. There are 3 other instances not included in Constituted Text of the CE; all of these are from the S recension.

<sup>20</sup> Sircar 1967: 53.

Ketumāla is equated to Indra’s paradise (*nandana*); life there lasts ten thousand years, men are coloured gold, and women are the like of *apsarases* (6.7.29). In the return to Cosmograph 2 at 6.8.2–6.8.17, Meru’s *pārśvas* Uttarakuru and Bhadrāśva are beautiful and prosperous lands. People invariably live inordinately long lives in these places, are free of disease and beautiful, and need not worry when and from where the next meal may come. In Uttarakuru couples live out equal lives and are, like a pair of ruddy shelducks (*cakravāka*), models of conjugal bliss,<sup>21</sup> never leaving one another through their 11,000 year-long lives (8.9–10). In Bhadrāśva, life lasts ten thousand years long, and those who drink the juice of the *kālāmra* (black mango) — the special tree of Bhadrāśva — retain their youth.

Cosmographs 1 and 3 articulate similar general principles:

*uttarottaram etebhyo varṣam udricyate guṇaiḥ*  
*āyuspramāṇam ārogyaṃ dharmataḥ kāmato 'rthataḥ | 6.7.37 (Cosmograph 1)*

Each *varṣa* further to the north exceeds the others in qualities — length of life, health, and by their virtue, pleasure, and profit.

*viprāṇām<sup>22</sup> brahmacaryeṇa satyena ca damena ca*  
*ārogyāyuhḥpramāṇābhyāṃ dviguṇaṃ dviguṇaṃ tataḥ | 6.13.27 (Cosmograph 3)*

For brahmins there’s a doubling in their religious discipline, honesty, self-restraint, good health, and the length of life, and a doubling after that [i.e., moving outwards from the centre through the concentric *dvīpas*].

In the northern *varṣas* of Cosmograph 1 (6.7.35–36), Ramaṇaka, Hairaṇvat, and Airāvata, men are beautiful and live for increasingly extraordinary spans of life (11,500; 12,500; 13,000).<sup>23</sup> Later (6.9.2–14, the men born in Ramaṇaka are described as beautiful and devoted to pleasure. Those in Hairaṇvat are powerful, wealthy, beautiful, followers of Yakṣas, their minds ever delighted. The range between it and Airāvata is full of gems, gold, and mansions, and is the home of a goddess, while in Airāvata, the sun does not burn, people do not age, and they are like lotuses in every way.

<sup>21</sup> See Dave 2005: 450–53.

<sup>22</sup> Dn and D4 have *prajānām*.

<sup>23</sup> The life spans are repeated in the longer section, suggesting redundancy.

The concentric *dvīpas* of Cosmograph 3 reflect the same utopian delights. The accounts of the *dvīpas* are haphazard and uneven, but each *dvīpa* reflects a similar cosmography to Sudarśanadvīpa — a central tree or mount sharing the name of the *dvīpa* plus seven *varṣas*. Saṃjaya describes Kuśadvīpa, Śālmalikadvīpa, Krauñcadvīpa, and Puṣkaradvīpa, though Śālmalika and Puṣkara only briefly; Plakṣa receives no attention at all.<sup>24</sup> *Śākadvīpa* gets the most attention, first in brief (6.12.8–11) and then at length (6.12.13–37); its nations are pure and people do not die there. Its people are black because of the mountain there called Śyāma, where Kṛṣṇa resides. Śaṅkara is worshipped. It has four sacred nations (*janapada*) constituted respectively by one of the four *varṇas*, each perfectly realising their normative ideals. Indeed, it is a model *varṇa* society:

*varṇāḥ svakarmaniratā na ca steno 'tra dṛśyate*  
*dīrghāyuso mahārāja jarāmṛtyuvivarjitāḥ || 6.12.28*

The *varṇas* are dedicated to their rightful deeds and thievery isn't seen there. Great king, life is long and devoid of old age and death.

*na tatra rājā rājendra na daṇḍo na ca daṇḍikāḥ*  
*svadharmeṇaiva dharmam ca te rakṣanti parasparam || 6.12.36*

There's no king there, lord of kings, no coercive authority, and no wielder of authority; through pursuing their own dharmas alone, they protect *dharma* and one another.

In the seven *varṣas* of Kuśadvīpa people do not die; the gods, *gandharvas* and people roam about enjoying themselves (6.13.14). There are no *dasyus* nor *mlecchas* there, and the people are generally white and tender (6.13.15). Nārāyaṇa lives on Krauñcadvīpa (6.13.8), while Prajāpati resides on Puṣkara (6.13.24); they abound in riches and are frequented by gods and *gandharvas*.

### ***idaṃ bhāratam varṣam***

If the accounts of the *varṣas* of Cosmograph 1 and the *dvīpas* of Cosmograph 3 are uneven in length and haphazard in content, the broad intent is clear: life gets better the further north of Bhāratavarṣa one moves in Cosmograph 1 and the further out in the concentric disc worlds one progresses in Cosmograph 3. The accounts of the *varṣas* and *dvīpas* of each cosmograph are divided by a more

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<sup>24</sup> Some S. mss insert the *dvīpa plakṣa* after 13.6ab (T1 G4 M2).

thorough description of Bhāratavarṣa. And it is Bhāratavarṣa, I argue, that the cosmographs serve, as literary devices, to enframe and elevate.

Towards the end of chapter 9, as Saṃjaya closes his description of Cosmograph 1 with an account of Airāvata, its northernmost *varṣa*, he introduces a devotional passage (6.9.15–18). The shift again is abrupt and yet another cosmology is seemingly introduced. Anticipating or reflecting the theology of the Bhagavadgītā and the Nārāyaṇīya, it says that north of the ocean of milk (*kṣīroda samudra*)<sup>25</sup> lives Hari Vaikuṅṭha, ‘the contraction and expansion and the creator and instigator’ of all living things (*saṃkṣepo vistaraś caiva kartā kārayitā ca saḥ*). Dhṛtarāṣṭra becomes reflective about his own sons, bringing us back to the immediate interlocutory moment with the armies gathered ready for battle, and repeats some words that Vyāsa had said to him earlier (6.4.2cd–3ab):<sup>26</sup>

*asamaśayaṃ sūtaputra kālah saṃkṣipate jagat  
sṛjate ca punaḥ sarvaṃ neha vidyati śāśvatam |6.9.20c-f*

Without doubt, sūta’s son, time contracts the world and emits everything again. Here nothing is eternal.

And he evokes Nara and Nārāyaṇa as a unified god whom the gods call Vaikuṅṭha and the Vedas Viṣṇu.

After Saṃjaya’s touring through various utopian visions of *varṣas*, mountains, and *dvīpas* in the cosmographies, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s existential and theological reflections — and his recalling of his own sons — returns him to the present and to his own land. And he asks Saṃjaya:

*yad idaṃ bhāratam varṣam yatredaṃ mūrchitam balam  
yatrātimātram lubdho 'yaṃ putro duryodhano mama  
yatra grddhāḥ pāṇḍusutā yatra me sajjate manaḥ  
etan me tattvam ācakṣva kuśalo hy asi saṃjaya ||6.10.1–2*

<sup>25</sup> The ‘ocean of milk’ in Cosmograph 3 surrounds Śākadvīpa. That cannot be the reference here. More likely this echoes the Nārāyaṇīya (Mbh 12.323.21ff), which describes north of the ocean of milk (*kṣīroda*) — i.e., on the northern side of Meru (*meror uttarabhāge*) — a Śvetadvīpa on which live devotees to Nārāyaṇa. See also Viṣṇusmṛti 49.4.

<sup>26</sup> See also Vassilkov 1999: 18.



Since you're fit for it, Saṃjaya, tell me truthfully about this **Bhārata Varṣa**, for which this military force has swooned, for which my son Duryodhana has **become greedy** beyond measure, which Pāṇḍu's sons **crave**, and to which my mind clings.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's *idaṃ bhāratam varṣam* recalls the introduction of Bhāratavarṣa at 6.7.6; the deictic pronouns again place us in the presence of the speaker and his audience, as he seemingly gestures demonstratively towards the *varṣa* and the gathered army. The language also reflects Saṃjaya's at 6.5.21<sup>27</sup> — indeed, we could understand this passage as picking up the thread that was dropped there for the description of the *bhūmi* as one among the five great elements and then of the Sudarśana cosmograph (Cosmograph 1). Saṃjaya's reply deploys the same terms as well, as he corrects Dhṛtarāṣṭra over the Pāṇḍavas but confirms his diagnosis of his sons:

*na tatra pāṇḍavā grddhāḥ śṛṇu rājan vaco mama  
grddho duryodhanas tatra śakuniś cāpi saubalaḥ  
apare kṣatriyās cāpi nānājanapadeśvarāḥ  
ye grddhā bhārata varṣe na mṛṣyanti parasparam || 6.10.3–4*

The Pāṇḍavas do not **crave** that place. King, listen to my words! Duryodhana **craves** that place, as does Subala's son Śakuni. So do the other kṣatriyas, the lords of various nations (*janapadas*). Those **greedy for Bhāratavarṣa** do not tolerate one another.

The desire for Bhāratavarṣa is the necessary premise for the impending war. Not only is it the favoured place for the warriors about to do battle, it is also the favoured place for many gods and ancestral heroes:

*atra te varṇayīṣyāmi varṣam bhārata bhāratam  
priyam indrasya devasya manor vaivasvatasya ca  
pṛthoś ca rājan vainyasya tathekṣvākor mahātmanaḥ  
yayāter ambarīṣasya māndhātur nahuṣasya ca  
tathaiva mucukundasya śiber auśīnarasya ca  
ṛṣabhasya tathailasya nṛgasya nṛpates tathā  
anyeṣāṃ ca mahārāja kṣatriyāṇāṃ balīyasām  
sarveṣāṃ eva rājendra priyaṃ bhārata bhāratam || 6.10.5–8*

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<sup>27</sup> See p.6 above.

For this, Bhārata, I will describe Bhāratavarṣa, the favourite of the god Indra and Manu Vaivasvata, king, as it is also of Vena's son Pṛthu, and of mighty Īkṣvaku, Yayāti, Ambariṣa, Māndhātṛ and Nahuṣa, as well as Mucukunda, Uśīnara's son Śibi, Īla's bullish son, and king Nṛga, and other of the most powerful warriors, great king. Indeed, lord of kings, Bhārata, Bhārata [varṣa] is the favourite of all.

Samjaya then launches into his description of the *varṣa*, starting with its seven mountain ranges, then names over 150 rivers and over 200 *janapadas* (10.37) or *deśas* (10.68). The method here is enumeration (*uddeśamātreṇa* — 6.10.68) and the list impresses in quantity and scope — the names include Śakas, Pahlavas, Bāhlikas (Bactrians), Romāṇas, Yavanas, Hūṇas, Cīnas, and Tukhāras [Kuṣāṇas]. Many are familiar from the North and the South (if fewer overall in the latter),<sup>28</sup> but many are not — some names may well be instances of hapax; the varied spellings and substitutions in the manuscript corpus suggests their unfamiliarity.

Implicitly these are the peoples gathered at Kurukṣetra, readying for battle; the earth, we recall, has been emptied. Samjaya suggests as much, returning to the themes of the opening verses (10.1–8) of the chapter, and reflecting the thematic thread that preceded the cosmographs:

*uddeśamātreṇa mayā deśāḥ samkīrtitāḥ prabho ||*  
*yathāguṇabalaṃ cāpi trivargasya mahāphalam |*  
*duhyed dhenuḥ kāmadhuk ca bhūmiḥ samyag anuṣṭhitā ||*  
*tasyāṃ grdhyanti rājānaḥ śūrā dharmārthakovidāḥ |*  
*te tyajanty āhave prāṇān rasāgrddhās tarasvinaḥ ||*  
*devamānuṣakāyānāṃ kāmāṃ bhūmiḥ parāyaṇam |*  
*anyonyasyāvalumpanti sārameyā ivāmiṣam ||*  
*rājāno bharataśreṣṭha bhoktukāmā vasum̐dharām |*  
*na cāpi tṛptiḥ kāmānāṃ vidyate ceha kasya cit ||*  
*tasmāt parigrahe bhūmer yatante kurupāṇḍavāḥ |*  
*sāmnā dānena bhedena daṇḍenaiva ca pārthiva ||*  
*pitā mātā ca putraś ca khaṃ dyauś ca naraṃgava |*  
*bhūmir bhavati bhūtānāṃ samyag acchidradarśinī || 6.10.68cd–74*

<sup>28</sup> As if to redress the disparity, the S recension inserts after 6.10.67: *kāraskarās ca vaṃśās ca āndhrās ca dramīḍās tathā | colās caiva tathā pāṇḍyās cerās caiva susiṃhalāḥ ||*

I've described these lands by nothing but their names, lord.

Properly governed according to its strengths and qualities, **the land** — a wish-fulfilling cow — should be milked for the great fruit of the triple set: [virtue, profit, love]. Heroic kings wise in *dharma* and *artha* **crave** (*grdh*) her; **lusting for the earth** (*rasā*), they quickly give up their lives in battle. Willingly, the **final resort** of the bodies of gods and men is the **land**. Just as dogs tear apart one another's flesh, finest of Bharatas, kings wishing to enjoy the **earth** tear it apart; moreover, no one finds contentment for their longings here. Therefore, king, the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas strive to seize the **land** through appeasement, generosity, division, and force. Of living things the **land** becomes the father, mother, son, space and sky, bull of men, duly watching over them without pause.

After the description of Bhāratavarṣa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks about the lifespans and various merits of the southern *varṣas* of the Sudarśana cosmograph — Bhāratavarṣa, Haimavatavarṣa, and Harivarṣa. Saṃjaya only speaks to these issues for Bhāratavarṣa, for which he recounts the basic yuga theory. After concluding that the destruction ('compression', *saṃkṣepa*) of the Dvāpara is taking place, he adds that the Haimavatavarṣa is superior in qualities and that Harivarṣa is superior to it (6.11.14), in keeping with the principle enunciated at 6.7.37 that the *varṣas* improve the further north they are.

The contrast with the warring janapadas of Bhāratavarṣa, gathered on the fields of Kuru, craving battle and craving for sovereignty of their *bhūmi*, disputing the law in all its senses, seems rather pointed. The articulation of alternate social, political, and religious ideals of the three cosmographs place in stark relief the goings-on that have led to the nations of the *bhūmi* to gather at Kurukṣetra, to fight for that very *bhūmi*. The very last line of the *bhūmiparvan* and therefore of the cosmographical episode returns from the cosmographs back to the here and now of Kurukṣetra, where Saṃjaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra contemplate the arrayed forces. Again, the proximal deixis seems purposeful:

*idaṃ tu bhāratam varṣam yatra vartāmahe vayam  
pūrvam pravartate puṇyam tat sarvam śrutavān asi | 6.13.50*

But *this* is **Bhārata varṣa**, where we live. Its merit has been set out already. You've heard it all.

## Whence the cosmographs?

The amalgam of the three cosmographs can be understood as a progression from the disc world of Sudarśanadvīpa with Meru at its centre (Cosmograph 1), telescoping inwards to Mount Meru and its four *dvīpas* (Cosmograph 2), then telescoping outwards to the seven concentric island (*saptadvīpa*) disc world (Cosmograph 3) with Jambūdvīpa (the ‘new’ name for Sudarśanadvīpa) at its centre, interleaved by the description of Bhāratavarṣa, which could be understood as the southern *varṣa* of Sudarśanadvīpa/Jambūdvīpa or, in some other accounts of Cosmograph 2 (but not the Mbh’s), as the southern *pārśva* of Mount Meru (which the Mbh calls Jambūdvīpa). Yet, the cosmographical episode is an untidy reading experience. The descriptions of each cosmograph are uneven and incomplete, especially Cosmograph 3, and the blurred overlap between Cosmographs 1 and 2 takes some parsing. The nomenclature of the *varṣas* and *dvīpas* only adds to the confusion. These factors give pause when considering the function and origin of the cosmographs. I outlined an argument above for the purpose that the cosmographs serve at the narrative juncture at which they appear; I will now consider what conclusions we might draw from the manner of their presentation.

In the immediate aftermath of the cosmographical episode, a narrative rupture suggests a seam in the composition of the epic. After Saṃjaya gives his account of the *bhūmi* and the cosmographs from 6.6 to 6.13, chapter 14 begins with Saṃjaya returning from the battlefield (*samara*) to inform Dhṛtarāṣṭra that Bhīṣma has been struck down. The transition is abrupt; Saṃjaya’s returning to a place in which the prior passage required him to be receives no comment. Earlier in 6.2, before the cosmographs, Vyāsa had offered Dhṛtarāṣṭra the ‘divine eye’ to see the battle (Dhṛtarāṣṭra is blind and remains in his court). Dhṛtarāṣṭra refuses, and so Vyāsa offers it to Saṃjaya. Through this device, Saṃjaya becomes Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s war reporter. The beginning of 6.14 suggests that this did not mean that Saṃjaya never ventured to the battle; as Belvalkar (1946: 314) notes, Vyāsa also grants Saṃjaya immunity from weapons, fatigue, and other incapacities, which may be viewed as otherwise redundant without being in the location of battle. Vyāsa closes 6.2.14 with the famous refrain *yato dharmas tato jayaḥ*. It is possible to imagine 6.14 once followed from this point; it is also possible to imagine book 6 at one point started with 6.14. Either way, I think there are good reasons to consider the cosmographs, Vyāsa’s description of portents (6.3), and his attempt to sway Dhṛtarāṣṭra one last time (6.4), as later inclusions.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See also Belvalkar 1939: 24.

The sheer novelty of the cosmographs and the nomenclature that accompanies them in the Mbh and in contemporary brahmanic contexts gives another reason to consider this is as a possibility. Outside of this cosmographical episode, the cosmographs and their nomenclatures are rare events in the Mbh or, indeed, other śāstric sources broadly sharing the Mbh's period. They certainly pale in significance to the regularity of the 'triple world' (*triloka*) cosmology (the earth, intermediate space, and heaven) inherited from the Vedas. Mbh 12.14 has an account of four *dvīpas*, all similar in dimensions, to the south, west, east, and north of Mount Meru conquered by Yudhiṣṭhira — Jambūdvīpa, Krauñcadvīpa, Śākadvīpa, and Bhadrāśva. This is evidently a type of *caturdvīpa vasumatī* with the focal point being Meru, but with a unique nomenclature sharing elements of all three cosmographs presented above.<sup>30</sup> In the Digvijayaparvan of the Sabhāparvan, Arjuna's conquest of the north on occasions suggests familiarity with something like Cosmograph 1, though the order is not typical. He conquers and moves through successively Himavat (2.24.27), Śvetaparvata (2.24.27–25.1), Hāṭaka *deśa* (2.25.3, the 'golden land', i.e., Hairaṇyakavarṣa/Hiraṇmayavarṣa), Harivarṣa (2.25.7), and then the Uttara Kurus (2.25.11). To some transmitters of the Mbh, these names suggested Cosmograph 1, since a number of southern recension manuscripts at this point insert a long and purāṇically orthodox account of this cosmograph after 2.25.5a or 2.25.6.<sup>31</sup> The notion of an earth of seven *dvīpas* occurs on similarly rare occasions. In the constituted text of the Mbh Critical Edition, it appears explicitly, if only glibly, three times, first during Arjuna's conquest of the north in the *digvijaya* (2.23.16), then in reference to Arjuna Kārtavīrya's conquest of the earth and its seven isles (12.49.13),<sup>32</sup> and finally in reference to the sun pouring with rain over the seven isles (13.97.22). In contemporaneous literature to the Mbh, references to the cosmographs appears to be largely non-existent. The only example I am aware of is the brief and undeveloped reference to the *saptadvīpā vasumatī* in Patañjali's Mahābhāṣya.<sup>33</sup>

The terms taken to be indicative of 'India' or 'South Asia' — Jambūdvīpa and Bhāratavarṣa — reflect similar scarcity in the Mbh and brahmanic literature until the emergence of the *purāṇas*. But other sources present interesting possibilities. Of the ten references to Jambūdvīpa in the constituted text of the Critical Edition, six are found in the cosmographical episode.<sup>34</sup> Of the others, 12.14.21 (discussed above) reflects cosmographical thinking, while the others propose a geopolitical totality

<sup>30</sup> See the note to this verse in Fitzgerald 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Respectively mss G1.6 and the remainder of S mss, bar G3, which inserts it after 2.24.21.

<sup>32</sup> In the Harivaṃśa, see 23.138 and 144.

<sup>33</sup> Keilhorn and Abhyankar 2005: 9.

<sup>34</sup> It also occurs in 5 passages not included in the constituted text of the CE; plus 4 not included in the CT of the Harivaṃśa CE.

(13.110.128) composed in some respects of sovereign parts (3.78.4, 14.87.13). The Rāmāyaṇa refers to Jambūdvīpa twice (1.38.22 and 4.39.53), but with little detail.<sup>35</sup> The earliest clearly datable reference to Jambūdvīpa (or, Jambudīpa) occurs in Aśoka’s ‘minor rock’ inscriptions, wherein it stands as the world of men in contrast to that of the gods.<sup>36</sup> This is typically taken as a reference to ‘India’. Another inscriptional reference occurs at the Karle Caitya, datable perhaps to the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE, in which the Caitya is referred to as the ‘best in Jambudīpa’.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Jambudīpa is not uncommon in Buddhist Pāli texts (Sircar, 1967: 33). Bhāratavarṣa, too, is not a common concept outside of the cosmographical episode. In the Mbh, of the six references in the constituted text of the Critical Edition, five occur in the cosmographical episode. The other describes Śuka’s movement through northern regions before arriving at *āryāvarta*, in a passage that seems to be aware of some of the *varṣas* of Cosmograph 1 (12.312.14). Again, the earliest clearly datable reference to Bhāratavarṣa occurs in an inscription, in this case the mid 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE Hāthīgumphā inscription of Khāravēla, a patron of Jainism this inscription evidences.<sup>38</sup> Of some interest is that Khāravēla does not include his own territory (Kaliṅga; approximately the modern state of Odisha) within this territory;<sup>39</sup> rather, Bharadhavaśa (Bhāratavarṣa) is a land against which he sent an expedition (Jayaswal and Banerji 1983: 79 and 88; Sircar 1967: 34).

Ruth Satinsky (2015; see also Satinsky and Wiley 2020: 3) has recently argued against the standard view that Jain cosmological concepts, such as those integrated in the cosmographs, are always derivative of similar concepts found in Hindu models. The latter position ultimately derives from Kirfel (1920: 2) and is often reflected in scholarship on Jain cosmography and cosmology.<sup>40</sup> Satinsky bases her argument primarily on two things that are absent from brahmanic literature prior to the Mbh, the concept of Mount Meru at the centre of the earth and universe and the prominence of the number eighty-four and its multiples. Her evidence for the Mbh introducing these is, in the case of the former, Mbh 3.102.2–7, 3.160.24–29, and 6.7.8–19 (Cosmograph 2 above); the last also includes her numerical evidence, since Meru is described as 84,000 *yojanas* high at 6.7.10.<sup>41</sup> The novelty of notions like Jambūdvīpa and Bhāratavarṣa adds weight to such a proposal. The persuasiveness of

<sup>35</sup> The former may evoke the *cakravāla*.

<sup>36</sup> Hultzsch 1925: 166 (Rūpnāth), 169 (Sahasram), 174 (Maski), 176 (Brahmagiri). Sircar 1967: 20.

<sup>37</sup> Senart 1981; Khandalavala 1956–1957: 11–26.

<sup>38</sup> Though it also says he performed a *rājasūya* and exempted brahmins from taxes.

<sup>39</sup> The Mbh’s account of Bhāratavarṣa includes Kaliṅga (three times!), see 6.10.38, 44, 67.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Ohira 1994: 22, 76; Dundas 1992: 79.

<sup>41</sup> See also Bronkhorst 2023: 220–21. Satinsky is in part inspired here by Bronkhorst’s Greater Magadha thesis, in which he argues that many elements of brahmanic thought that are assumed to have developed within that context developed, rather, in the region around Magadha amongst Buddhists, Jains, and Ājīvikas, which he proposes was largely isolated from the Vedic Brahmanism of the doab. According to Bronkhorst, these ideas later influenced Brahmanism, entering into its literature.

Satinsky's argument will depend, in part, on how the Mbh's cosmographic episode can be understood in historical terms. Is it later or earlier than purāṇic material? Were all three cosmographs introduced at once? Hilgenberg, as noted above, attempted to argue that the Mbh passage was derived from a similar passage in the Padmapurāṇa, an argument successfully rebutted by Belvalkar. Hilgenberg's comparison of these two texts was inspired by Kirfel's establishment of three text groups for in his analysis of Hindu cosmographs determined by the commonality of their nomenclature. The Mbh episode and the Padmapurāṇa were group three (Kirfel 1920: 56), the smallest group by some degree. Curiously, Kirfel further notes that some of the names of Cosmograph 1 (the *varṣas* Haimavata, Ramaṇaka, and Airāvata) are held in common with the Jain tradition (1920: 58), against the other *purāṇas*.

The position that 'disc world' cosmographic concepts have their origins in brahmanic or Hindu contexts can in part be explained by 'flat earth' theories in the Veda.<sup>42</sup> Yet, these relatively simple ideas do not reflect the complex cosmographies of the Jain and Buddhist (*cakkavāla*) traditions, and the cosmographies of the Mbh and *purāṇas*. Without question, there are significant issues in clarifying the dates of the texts involved — Jain and Buddhist texts are in many respects more difficult to date than brahmanic ones. Yet, if the Mbh cosmographs are deemed to be derivative of purāṇic models, then this largely dissolves as a problem, since the *purāṇas* emerge around the time of the Guptas; Ohira (1994: 23) suggests that the Jain 'cosmographical framework' began to be laid down in the third canonical stage (1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE/1<sup>st</sup> c. CE – 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE). Even if the Mbh does indeed represent the beginning of the brahmanic cosmographic speculation and the appropriation of concepts associated with them, then this timeframe does not render Jain influence out of the question. The authors of the Mbh cosmographs give some impression of not having been experts in this form of knowledge, especially given the tension between Cosmographs 1 and 2 and the patchy descriptions of all three. The scarcity of cosmographic thinking in the Mbh, and of notions such as Jambūdvīpa and Bhāratavarṣa, points to these being novel conceptions. While Jain and Buddhist cosmographic thought reflects ideas that can be related to all three of the Mbh's cosmographs, they do not appear to involve the same spatial tensions. The proximity of the Mbh's conceptions to those of the Jains suggests that the relationships between them needs a rethink.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., Gombrich 1975: 112–16.

<sup>43</sup> Buddhist conceptions of the *cakkavāla* (Kloetzli 1983: 23–43) arrange in quite a different way elements recognizable in Cosmographs 1, 2, and 3.

## Conclusion

As a literary, cultural, and political artefact, the Mbh served to normalise many new ideas for its communities of reception. Many of these ideas inevitably reflected the influences of the period of cultural, religious, and political diversity in which the Mbh emerged. The cosmographies of the Mbh's 'cosmological episode' are a product of this period and these influences. Some geographic and cosmological ideas associated with them show clear signs of having been appropriated from traditions outside of Brahmanism, though we might suspect mutual influence over time led to the articulation and refinement of cosmographies in the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions. These are interesting, though quite difficult to solve, historical problems.

My initial interest in analysing the cosmographies was to come to an understanding of how they work as narrative devices. I have tried to show that — despite the tensions and inconsistencies between the cosmographs — the text moves in and out and through different geographic and cosmological spatial conceptions. These movements serve to heighten the emotional effectiveness of a new titular idea — Bhāratavarṣa, expressed especially through the deictic refrain *idaṃ bhāratam varṣam* — for a land nested within the cosmographs that encompasses the regions from which are drawn the soldiers on both sides of the Bhārata war. Their emotional connection to the land, in turn, produces a desire for it, which is often expressed as a greed for sovereignty that explains their inexorable pathway to the war for which they have gathered.



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