

## The Pāñcālan Role in Fostering Peace

### §1 Making the Case for the Pāñcālans

*Agne aṅgiro yo'syāṃ pṛthivyāmasyāyuṣā  
nāmnehi yukte'nādhr̥ṣṭam  
nāma yajñiyaṃ tena tvā'ddhe | TS 1.2.12.1.c*

**Agni Aṅgiras, you who reside in the Earth,  
joined with the name meaning invincible.  
Whatever your name might be in the sacrifice,  
I deposit you by it.**

For an epic about war, the Mahābhārata is quite cagey about explaining how to end it. After all, even after Duryodhana's defeat when the end of hostilities feels all but certain, Aśvatthāma remains true to his vow to a dying Duryodhana to defeat those that killed him and plots the night raid to destroy the Pāñcālans and Upapāñḍavas as they sleep in their camps. What was shaping up to be a painful but satisfying victory for the Pāñḍavas with their sons inheriting the kingdom was quickly dashed away, much like the hopes of the crows who were resting on the banyan branch when slaughtered by the owl (MBh. 10.1.35) that inspired Droṇa's son to undertake his raid. He weighs in his mind whether an ambush is in ethical accordance with kṣatriya dharma, concluding that it would be since the five brothers and Kṛṣṇa had themselves repeatedly bent the rules to their advantage throughout the war and that the enemy should be defeated no matter the method or manner (MBh. 10.1.50).<sup>1</sup>

The attack on the Pāñcāla and Pāñḍava camp is initially disapproved of by Kṛpa, who tells Aśvatthāma to consult his elders before undertaking the attack – advice which the warrior ignores. Ultimately, though, when Ashwatthama, Kṛpa, and Kṛtavarma approach the camp, they are faced by Kṛṣṇa in a terrible monstrous form resembling Śiva (10.6). They battle and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all citations of verse and line numbers are of MBh. Other texts are cited accordingly.

finally unable to defeat him, Aśvatthāma calls on Śiva, offering himself as the sacrificial victim (*paśu*). A golden altar appears before him and he enters its flames, seeking Śiva's aid in defeating this fearsome being, and his wish is granted.<sup>2</sup> Once he successfully attacks the camp, all of Draupadī's biological children are slaughtered and burned in the camp.

So, in the end, we're left wondering what the whole war was for since Parikṣit, Arjuna's grandson by Subhadra, Kṛṣṇa's sister, takes the throne. Draupadī's maternal line never assumes the throne, yet the Pāñcālan family plays a critical role in winning the war.<sup>3</sup> Aside from Draupadī, the eldest sibling Śikhaṇḍi and Draupadī's elder brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna act at critical moments, serving to hasten on the events of the Kurukṣetra war and urge it towards its conclusion and eventual peace.<sup>4</sup> Pratap Kumar rightly points out that while Drupada marries Draupadī off to the Pāñḍavas with the hope of gaining sons-in-law to reclaim his kingdom from Droṇa, that she becomes equally important in bringing allies to the Pāñḍavas without whom they would not have won the war.<sup>5</sup> The battle's conclusion and subsequent peace, as we are reminded throughout the epic, can only come when the Kauravas are killed and the Pāñḍavas declared victors. It is a peace, though a Pyrrhic one.

In this paper, I look at the role of the three Pāñcālan siblings, Śikhaṇḍi, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, and Draupadī-Pāñcālī, and examine how their actions both hasten the onset of the war and move it forward to its conclusion. Examining the *itihāsa* from this perspective, I'll also argue for Agni's central role in the narrative, not least because he enables the birth (or rebirth in Ambā's case) of the three central Pāñcālan siblings<sup>6</sup>, but because the fire god repeatedly aids the

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<sup>2</sup> MBh. 10.7

<sup>3</sup> Kumar 2016, 166 discusses this in his reading of the Kurukṣetra war from the peripheries.

<sup>4</sup> Sutherland 1989, 67 suggests that the whole war can be attributed to Draupadī's persistence in asking her husbands to take action against the Kauravas following the disrobing scene. I expand this to include her two fire-born brothers.

<sup>5</sup> Kumar 2016, 177

<sup>6</sup> Reich 2011, 30 discusses the birth of the Pāñḍavas as forms of the five Indras as a narrative which is used to justify

Pāṇḍavas throughout the epic just as his fiery offspring do through the Pāṇḍava-Pāñcāla marriage alliance.

While the Kurukṣetra war has often been interpreted as either being about the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, or the story of the Yādava and Puru clans<sup>7</sup>, the importance granted to Drupada's three fire-born offspring, presents a strong case for reading the epic as one centering around the Pāñcālans and Drupada's feud with Droṇa. Reading the text through this lens shows how the epic is bookended and punctuated by the Vedic fire deity. We see his presence beginning with Śikhaṇḍi's self-immolation and rebirth to her younger siblings' birth from the *yajña*, to the favor granted by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna in helping Agni to consume the Khāṇḍava. The final role Agni plays is at the end of the epic when Arjuna is confronted by him asking that he return the Gāṇḍīva to Varuṇa. Even when he is absent in anthropomorphic or elemental form, Agni's essence remains present as *tejas*, a luminous energy related to a warrior's virility, prowess, and rage-driven (*manyu*) lust for dharmically proper war.<sup>8</sup>

Agni's constant presence throughout the work and his related fiery imagery suggest quite strongly that events of the war be considered components of a vedic sacrificial rite, though recast here in the kṣatriya context. Here I build on Alf Hiltebeitel's 1990 discussion of the *yuddha-yajña* and Herman Tiekens's 2004 (p. 8-9) suggestions that we read the concluding events of the epic as a series of three *yajñas* where the Pāñcālas, Pāṇḍavas, and Yādavas self-sacrifice to remove *pāpa* accrued from battle, turning the epic into a cyclical sacrifice. While we see hints of Agni's importance throughout the text, the most direct discussion of this idea appears in the *Rāja Dharma*

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Draupadī's polyandry, but does not address the Pāñcālan siblings' birth.

<sup>7</sup> Thapar 2009, 1830

<sup>8</sup> Whitaker 2000, 87-90 remains the most thorough study of *tejas* in the epic context and defines it as a tangible and functional, self-standing source of fiery energy which is cultivated through the warriors' "raw fury." They can unleash *tejas*' deadly force through divine weapons (*divya astras*) like the Sudarśana Cakra or the Gāṇḍīva bow. While Whitaker does not provide a Sanskrit term for what he calls "raw fury" we make the argument below that it is connected to *manyu*, the insatiable rage that drives a kṣatriya to act.

*Anuśāsana Parva* (12.99) in which Bhīṣma recounts a conversation between Indra and King Ambarīṣa where various components of *yuddha* are correlated and equated with various components and implements used in the *yajña*.<sup>9</sup>

Looking for Agni as we read this work, might also spotlight Brahmanical fears during the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE- 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE period of the MBh.'s composition regarding the popularity of Śramaṇa groups and non-Brahmanical modes of life. The text reiterates that mental and political peace are interrelated, and furthermore, that this peace is facilitated by adherence to the *yajña* and propitiation of Brahmins through *dakṣiṇa* (gift) offerings.

## **§2 Fire-Born Siblings**

*ilāyāstvā pade vayaṃ nābhā pṛthivyā adhi |*  
*jātavedo ni dhīmahyagne havyāya volhave | | RV 3.29.4*

**In the footprint of the offering and in the navel of the Earth,  
O Agni Jātaveda, we establish you to carry the oblation (*haviḥ*)**

We'll begin with the three fire-born Pāñcālan children. We aren't told much about Pāñcāla in the Mahābhārata, except that it is Drupada's kingdom of which Droṇa seized half. The primary instance of travel to the kingdom in the story is during the *swayaṃvara* where Draupadī is won.<sup>10</sup> In the recounting of Draupadī's birth, we are also told that it is home to Drupada's three children who enable the conflict between the Pāñḍavas and Kauravas to progress so that peace can come to war-torn Hastināpura. Drupada's daughter, Draupadī, also went by the toponym Pāñcālī and Kṛṣṇā, the dark one. Along with this, Yajñasenī, or daughter of Yajñasena (Drupada) the man with the *yajña* and army, is also used, with these latter two

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<sup>9</sup> Two more instances of similar discussions occur in 5.139.29-51 where Karṇa discusses the impending battle against the Pāñḍavas in terms of *yuddha-yajña* and in 5.57.10-18 where Duryodhana does something similar.

<sup>10</sup> MBh. 1.174-188

names associating her with her birth from Agni rather than from a human mother.<sup>11</sup> Having emerged from the center of the sacrificial altar, she is described as *ayoniḥja*<sup>12</sup>, meaning “one not born from a womb.” Both here and elsewhere, the center of the altar is described in human anatomical terms as the *nābhi* or the navel of the *uttarā vedī*, which highlights the fact that she was generated from solely male sources, Drupada and Agni. Since her mother, Pṛṣatī, was still inside the *patnīśālā* applying *gandha* to her face when she had to be present for the ritual consummation, the children are born from the fire without any feminine influence on the children. But the text adopts discussions of the Vedic sacrificial arena, using the term *nābhi*, identifying the altar with female anatomy. Frits Staal supports this reading, saying that Agni represents the male generative force which enters the waters residing within the female Earth, a point that I further develop below.<sup>13</sup>

Draupadī’s and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna’s births from the sacrificial fire altar shape their physical appearance and fiery personalities. If anything, Draupadī’s pro-war stance throughout the epic demonstrates how her birth from Agni endowed her with a thirst for warfare which, because of her gender, is channeled through her constantly goading her husbands to fight.<sup>14</sup> Though she doesn’t appear to be described with the term *tejas*, the fiery energy required for all warriors, Draupadī seems to embody it, and certainly shows herself as capable of sparking

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<sup>11</sup> MBh. 2.31.9, 2.48.28, 2.48.41

<sup>12</sup> MBh. 1.153.7-9: A Brahmin informs the Pāṇḍavas of Śikhāṇḍī and the womb-less births (*ayonijātva*) of Dhṛṣṭadyumna and Yajñaseni:

*sa tatrākathayad viprah kathānte janamejaya |*  
*pāñcāleṣv adbhutākāraṃ yājñasenyāḥ svayaṃvaram | |*  
*dhṛṣṭadyumnasya cotpattim utpattim ca śikhāṇḍinaḥ |*  
*ayonijātvaṃ kṛṣṇāyā drupadasya mahāmakhe | |*  
*tad adbhutatamaṃ śrutvā loka tasya mahātmanaḥ |*  
*vistarenaiva paṇḍracchuḥ kathāṃ tām puruṣarṣabhāḥ | |*

<sup>13</sup> Staal 1983, Vol. 1, 73

<sup>14</sup> Kumar 2016, 166 suggests that her emergence from the fire is the source of her desire to kill her enemies, but does not detail why this must be the case. On p. 175, he further suggests that her role is that of propagating the conflict between Drupada and Droṇa, but this seems more applicable to Dhṛṣṭadyumna who is born to kill the warrior brahmin.

it in her husbands, serving in many ways, I suggest, as the ideal spouse for a *kṣatriya*.<sup>15</sup>

The causative event of Draupadī and Dhṛṣṭadyumna’s fiery births stems from a conflict between King Drupada and Droṇa, the Brahmin master of weapons who trains the Pāṇḍavas and Kaurava clans. The two men were childhood friends, Drupada dishonors an adult Droṇa by rejecting his request to recognize their friendship (MBh. 1.153). After training the Kuru warriors, Droṇa asks the Pāṇḍavas to capture Drupada as a prisoner of war as their *parama dakṣiṇa* to him (1.128). The young warriors acquiesce, and reminding Drupada of his earlier insult, Droṇa tells him that he can return his kingdom if he agrees to split Pāñcāla in half, gifting him one portion. While Drupada submits to save his own skin, his grudge against Droṇa leaves him seeking children who will be capable of waging war, killing the Brahmin, and reclaiming his territory. Though their lives intersect in the current conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, the epic is just as much about Droṇa’s conflict with Drupada as we see through Droṇa’s slaughter by Dhṛṣṭadyumna, who in turn is avenged by Droṇa’s son Aśvatthāma. In addition to this, thinking of Ambā and Bhīṣma’s enmity, we once again could read the epic in terms of the Kuru-Pāñcāla’s conflict.

Drupada sets off to the Gangetic banks to find Brahmins powerful enough to help him accomplish this task and approaches two brahmins appropriately named Yāja and Upayāja.<sup>16</sup> Upayāja explains that his penance and powers have led him to fully renounce the material world and are not suitable for attaining mundane goals, advising Drupada to consult Yāja. Upayāja says Yāja is more amenable to eating impure foods, implying that he is still attached to the material world and willing to perform rituals for material gains, unlike himself who has fully

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<sup>15</sup> Here, I disagree with Sutherland (1989, 73) who suggests that Draupadī’s outspokenness prevents her from being the ideal wife; Custodi 2007, 22 follows Sutherland, saying that Draupadī goes against tradition in her quest for vengeance; Whitaker 2000, 108 n. 18 suggests that *śakti* is the feminine form of *tejas*.

<sup>16</sup> Their names translate to “sacrificer” and “the additional verses sung at the sacrifice”

renounced material desires (1.155). Although Yāja agrees to undertake the ritual, the complexity of the rite requires him asking Upayāja for assistance. Together they perform the *yajña* that will give Drupada a son whose qualities are fated as follows (1.155.32):

*sa ca putro mahāvīryo mahātejā mahābalaḥ |*

*isyate yadvidho rājanbhavitā te tathāvidhaḥ | |*

And your son will possess great power, great luminous energy<sup>17</sup>, and great strength;

the kind of son you wished for will be born to you, King.

While Drupada is seated as the *yajamāna* (officiant) for the rite, his wife appears to be in the palace with sandalwood paste (*gandha*) applied to her face, and so when the priests call upon her to engage in ritualized intercourse with her husband, she is unable to do so. In fear that Yāja will abandon the whole rite, she asks him to pour the oblations for her beloved husband's sake.<sup>18</sup> Yāja says that since the mantras have been chanted and the offerings made, that he will complete the ritual without her. First from Agni arises Dhṛṣṭadyumna:

*brāhmaṇa uvāca |*

*evamukte tu yājena hute haviṣi samskrte |*

*uttasthau pāvakāttasmātkumāro devasamṇibhaḥ | | 37 | |*

*jvālāvarṇo ghorarūpaḥ kirīṭi varma cottamam |*

*bibhratsakhaḍgaḥ saśaro dhanuṣmānvinadanmuhuh | | 38 | |*

*so'dhyārohadrathavaram tena ca prayayau tadā |*

*tataḥ praṇeduh pāñcālāḥ prahrṣṭāḥ sādhu sādhwiti | | 39 | |*

*bhayāpaho rājaputraḥ pāñcālānām yaśaskaraḥ |*

*rājñāḥ śokāpaho jāta eṣa droṇavadhāya vai |*

*ityuwāca mahadbhūtamadrśyaṃ khecaram tadā | | 40 | |*

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<sup>17</sup> The multiple valences of *tejas* must be acknowledged. Whitaker 2000 provides the most detailed analysis of this concept.

<sup>18</sup> MBh. 1.155.35

*devyuwāca |*

*avaliptaṃ me mukhaṃ brahmaṇṣṇyāngandhānbibharmi ca |*

*sutārthenoparuddhāsmi tiṣṭha yāja mama priye | |*

The Brahmin said: With this spoken and the sacrificial offerings made by the sacrificer, a godlike young man arose from the fire (*pāvaka*). His complexion was fiery, his appearance terrifying, he wore a crown, and he wore the best armor. He carried a sword, a bow with arrows, and roared repeatedly. He then ascended an excellent chariot and went forth.

Thereafter, the Pāñcālas rejoiced and exclaimed, “Excellent! Excellent!”

Then a heavenly, invisible, and greatly wondrous voice said, “This prince will remove fear and increase the glory of the Pāñcālans. He is born to remove the king’s sorrow and to destroy Droṇa.”

Though the passage doesn’t explicitly state it, saying only that he resembles a god (*devasamibhah*) the description of Dhṛṣṭadyumna likens him to Agni himself. He has fiery color (*jvālāvarna*)<sup>19</sup> and a terrifying form (*ghora rūpa*)<sup>20</sup> and he roars loudly<sup>21</sup> and rides a chariot<sup>22</sup>. These are all attributes of Agni as he’s described in the Ṛg Vedic hymns, though such references abound throughout the Sanskrit literary and liturgical corpus. Even the curious bit of the story where Pṛṣatī is absent for Dhṛṣṭadyumna’s conception and moment of birth, maps onto tales of Agni’s mythology. Agni’s mother is said to be unable to suckle him (RV 10.115.1) and this seemingly holds true in this scenario since the young man who emerges from the fire is far too old to need a mother’s milk. Further, because the priests use a drill made of sticks to kindle Agni, he is generated by men (RV. 160.3; 4.1.1; 7.1.1) but kindled in a small ditch dug into the feminine Earth.<sup>23</sup> The forceful friction required to produce him is the reason he’s said to be the son (*sūnu*, *putra*, or *yuvan*) of *sahas* (power, force, strength, or victory).<sup>24</sup>

To further support this reading, in MBh. 1.61.87-88, Vaiśampāyana tells Janamejaya how the gods manifested a portion of themselves in human heroes and specifies that

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<sup>19</sup> Agni is described with bright or flame colored skin in RV 2.10.2, 6.10.3, 7.15.10, 1.140.1, 5.2.3;

<sup>20</sup> RV 4.6.6

<sup>21</sup> RV 4.6.10; In RV 1.44.12 he roars like the sea; RV 10.45.4 He thunders like Dyaus

<sup>22</sup> Agni is identified with a chariot in RV 3.11.5 and is said to resemble one in 1.141.8.

<sup>23</sup> Staal 1983, Vol. 1, p. 82

<sup>24</sup> MacDonell 1897, 91



Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna the chariot fighter (*mahāratha*) is a portion of Agni (*agneramśam*), Śikhaṇḍi was a *rākṣasa*, and Draupadī was a portion of Śrī, the Earth goddess of fertility and prosperity.<sup>25</sup> Berry notes that Draupadī, as a portion of Śrī, and suggests that she chooses who receives the privilege of obtaining the kingdom, and chooses Bhīma as the most deserving by repeatedly calling on him to avenge her.<sup>26</sup> Bhīma acquiesces multiple times and even takes Draupadī’s side when scolding Yudhiṣṭhira for his inaction at their wife’s disrobing by calling him a eunuch (*klība*) in 3.34.11.<sup>27</sup> Although Draupadī is a portion of Śrī, she is a woman born from Agni, and this grants her a blend of both gods’ qualities. We see the aspects of Śrī come through in her dark physical appearance resembling fertile soil and ability to have children. But I note that her dark appearance also resembles the smoke that accompanies Agni, and her constantly goading her husbands to act on their *tejas* in accordance with their kṣatriya dharma is a manifestation of Agni’s influence on her psycho-physiology.<sup>28</sup> Dhand rightly notes that both Draupadī and Ambā are good female ascetics who are characterized by obsessive single-mindedness<sup>29</sup> since both of these women perform *tapas* in previous lives to attain their rebirth to fulfill specific goals.<sup>30</sup> To this point, I add that Agni is deemed responsible for enabling their rebirths through the *yajñasāla*.

The altar itself (*vedi*), where only Agni is allowed to dwell or sit (*vediśad*) is described as the

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<sup>25</sup> MBh. 1.61.95-98

*śrīyastu bhāgaḥ saṃjajñe ratyartham pṛthivītale |*  
*drupadasya kule kanyā vedimadhyādaninditā || 95 ||*  
*nātihrasvā na mahatī nīlotpalasugandhinī |*  
*padmāyatākṣī susroṇī asitāyatamūrdhajā || 96 ||*  
*sarvalakṣaṇasaṃpannā vaidūryamaṇisaṃbhā |*  
*pañcānām puruṣendrānām cittapramathinī rahaḥ || 97 ||*

<sup>26</sup> Berry 2023, 178

<sup>27</sup> Berry 2023, 188-190: Berry reads this close relationship between Bhīma and Draupadī as a symbolic *abhiṣeka* of Bhīma as king rather than Yudhiṣṭhira since the former acts in accordance with kṣatriya dharma; Custodi 2007, 210 cites this passage and 4.15.21 where Draupadī wonders how her husbands can be eunuchs when they fail to defend her after Kīcaka’s assault.

<sup>28</sup> Sutherland 1989, 72 rightly notes that in her arguments with Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī “fuels tension” in her husband over whether his dharmic responsibility lies in honoring the wishes of elders or defending his spouse.

<sup>29</sup> Dhand 2008, 193

<sup>30</sup> Dhand 2008, 84 notes that Ambā’s *tapas* is in 5.170.97 and Draupadī’s *tapas* in a previous life to obtain a good husband occurs in 1.157.6-10. Both of these figures are granted their boons by Śiva.

navel (*nābhi*) of the earth (1.59.2), and is also the technical term for the hollow in the *uttarā vedi* (northern altar) where Agni is deposited. In MBh.1.155.41 this is cited as the spot (*vedimadhyāt*) from which the *kumāri* (maiden) named Pāñcālī emerges after the *kumāra* (young man) (MBh. 1.155.41-46):

*kumārī cāpi pāñcālī vedimadhyātsamutthitā |*  
*subhagā darśanīyāṅgī vedimadhyā manoramā || 41 ||*  
*śyāmā padmapalāśākṣī nīlakuñcitamūrdhajā |*  
*mānuṣaṃ vīgrahaṃ kṛtvā sākṣādamaravarṇinī || 42 ||*  
*nīlotpalasamo gandho yasyāḥ krośātpravāyati |*  
*yā bibharti paraṃ rūpaṃ yasyā nāstyupamā bhuvī || 43 ||*  
*tām cāpi jātām suśronīm vāguvācāsarīriṇī |*  
*sarvayoṣidvarā kṛṣṇā kṣayam kṣatraṃ ninīṣati || 44 ||*  
*surakāryamiyaṃ kāle karisyati sumadhyamā |*  
*asyā hetoḥ kṣatriyānām mahadutpatsyate bhayam || 45 ||*  
*tacchrutvā sarvapāñcālāḥ praneduḥ siṃhasaṃghavat |*  
*na caitānharsasampūrṇāniyaṃ sehe vasuṃdharā || 46 ||*

Then the young maiden Pāñcālī arose from the center of the altar (*vedi*). She possessed good fortune, had beautiful form, stood in the middle of the altar (*vedi*) and was pleasing to the mind. She had a dark complexion, eyes like the palāśa flower<sup>31</sup> and the lotus, and dark blue hair arising from the crown of her head. She had the appearance of an immortal made directly into a mortal form. Her fragrance was like the blue lotus and emanated for two miles. Her supreme beauty had no equal on Earth and she was born with beautiful hips. A disembodied voice said, “The Dark One (Kṛṣṇā), the best of all women, brings destruction (*kṣayam*) of the warrior class (*kṣatra*). At the proper time (*kāle*) the fine-hipped one will undertake a divine task. From her, a cause for great fear will arise among the kṣatriyas.” Having heard this, all the Pāñcālans rejoiced and roared like lions. And the Earth (*vasuṃdharā*) was unable to bear those who were filled with delight.

Now, in contrast to her resplendent and shiny brother, Draupadī’s complexion is dark (*śyāma*)

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<sup>31</sup> This flower possessed a reddish-orange color, suitable for a child of Agni.

and her hair is dark blue, which brings another aspect of Agni’s dual qualities into the discussion – the smoke that accompanies him. While he is described as bright in complexion, he is also accompanied by smoke, sometimes described as the black horses that pull his chariot (RV 1.141.7; 2.4.6-7; 6.6.1). His flag is also described as *dhūmaketu* or the “smoke-banner,” so while he and his chariot are shining and bright in appearance, the poets account for the clouds of smoke that follow him. Drupada’s fiery offspring are named based on the part of the fire from which they appear to emerge: the boy is born from the flames, and thus is named Dhṛṣṭadyumna, “the brave and shining one” and Kṛṣṇā is named for her smoky complexion. Her color also derives from her association with Śrī, the goddess of fertility, and the color of dark fertile soil. But her eyes are red-orange like the flowers of the *palāśa* tree, making her gaze, which she uses often to signal her anger to her husbands, a sign of fire too. Two aspects of Agni are thus manifested in two children.

### **§3 Śikhaṇḍi’s Ignominiously Igneous Rebirth**

*namaste harase śociṣe namaste astvarciṣe |  
anyaṃ te asmat tapantu hetayaḥ pāvako  
asmabhyam śivo bhava | | TS 4.6.1.2*

**Homage to your flame, let there be homage to your ray,  
Let your flames burn another, purify us, and be benevolent to us.**

Before these siblings were born, their elder sibling Śikhaṇḍi was born biologically to Drupada’s Queen Pṛṣatī as a reincarnation of Ambā, the eldest of the king of Kāśī’s three daughters. Her origin is narrated in MBh. 5. 170-193 (*Ambopākhyāna*) when Duryodhana asks Bhīṣma to explain why he won’t fight Śikhaṇḍi on the battlefield. He explains that in his past life, Śikhaṇḍi was a woman named Ambā. He recounts abducting her and her sisters Ambālika and Ambika from the court of King Śalva, and how the latter two sisters consummated their marriage

with the sage Vyāsa and bore Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Ambā, spurned by her betrothed King Śalva, returned to Bhīṣma asking to marry him, but his celibacy vow prevented it. The enraged Ambā undertook penance and received a boon from Śiva, who told her she would be reborn as a warrior in Drupada's lineage and would kill Bhīṣma. To hasten her rebirth, Ambā self-immolates on a pyre that she builds and is reborn as Śikhaṇḍinī, Pāñcālī's older sister (MBh. 5.188.17-18):

*citām kṛtvā sumahatīm pradāya ca hutāśanam |*  
*pradīpte'gnau mahārāja roṣadīptena cetasā | |*  
*uktvā bhīṣmavadhāyeti praviveśa hutāśanam |*  
*jyeṣṭhā kāsīsutā rājanyamunāmabhito nadīm | |*

Having constructed a huge funeral pyre and setting it on fire,

O Great King, when the fire was blazing, with her mind ignited by anger,

Having said, “This is for Bhīṣma's destruction!” the eldest daughter of the King of Kāśī entered the fire beside the Yamuna River.

Even in the account of her piling her funeral pyre and entering it, Ambā exhibits the behavior of the male relative who prepares the pyre for a deceased individual. She collects the wood, piles it, sets it on fire<sup>32</sup>, and enters her own pyre. While Śikhaṇḍi has a biological birth from a human woman, Agni serves as the transformative agent in this transaction, which is approved of and mediated by Śiva. But she hits a road bump in her rebirth – she is born a woman and has to develop *tejas* to engage with Bhīṣma on the battlefield.

Since Agni is one of the paradigmatic models of masculinity, along with Soma and Indra<sup>33</sup>, and in accordance with the boon granted by Śiva to Drupada, Śikhaṇḍinī is raised as a man called Śikhaṇḍi, with the truth discovered only when she is married off to a princess. The shame of the discovery leads her to enter the forest again and undertake penance only to

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<sup>32</sup> Numerous sources discuss this, but I'm thinking here of the Aśvalāyana Gṛhya Sutra 4.2.10-14 which lays out rules for a cremation. We see this also in the MBh. 13.154.8-9 when the Pāṇḍavas and Vidura pile the citā for Bhīṣma. The men gather the wood and pile the altar while the women gather around the body, fanning it with palm leaves (MBh. 13.154.11).

<sup>33</sup> Taylor 2013, 156

eventually switch genders with the yakṣa Sthūṇakarṇa and finally become a man to kill Bhīṣma. But as Custodi (2007, 218) points out, although the epic states five times<sup>34</sup> that Śikhaṇḍi killed Bhīṣma, other characters, including Bhīṣma himself cast doubts on whether this is the case or if it's just the transgender warrior's physical presence that immobilizes Bhīṣma and allows Arjuna to shoot him. After all, Bhīṣma has to explain Śikhaṇḍi's gender status to Duryodhana and laughs at the warrior when he appears on the battlefield, but there are not any visual signs that Śikhaṇḍi was ever a woman; remember that the *Ambopākhyāna* is related by Bhīṣma because Duryodhana cannot understand the reason that Bhīṣma won't fight the eldest of the Pāñcālan sibling triad.

Furthermore, although Śikhaṇḍi was now a man, Bhīṣma recognized him as the reincarnation of Ambā *only* because he'd had spies convey the information about her reincarnation. So, just to add to Custodi's point, would Bhīṣma have even known he was facing a transgender man if not for his spies? It seems unlikely given that in 6.78, Śikhaṇḍi demonstrates his prowess in battle by shooting Aśvatthāma in the forehead. He then rages about the battlefield with his sword until he's wounded by Droṇa's son and throws his broken sword at him which is described as *kālānalasamaṇḍam* or "blazing like the apocalyptic fire."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, in MBh. 6.114 he shoots arrows and breaks Bhīṣma's bow and pierces him with 10 arrows, leading him to throw a spear at Arjuna. When this fails, Bhīṣma complains about Kṛṣṇa's aiding the Pāṇḍavas and making them invulnerable (*avadhyatvāt*) and about Śikhaṇḍi's feminine sex (*strībhāvāt*).<sup>36</sup> Despite the text's vacillation on Śikhaṇḍi's role in killing Bhīṣma, it cannot be denied that he immobilized him and opened a path to Pāṇḍava-Pāñcāla victory.

Then, the spotlight falls on Droṇa in the 7<sup>th</sup> *parvan*, in which the Brahmin warrior slays

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<sup>34</sup> Custodi 2007, 217 cites MBh. 5.47.35, 6.14.5, 6.15.45-47, 6.115.482, 14.59.11

<sup>35</sup> MBh. 6.78.34

<sup>36</sup> MBh. 6.114. 32: *kāraṇadvayamāsthāya nāhaṃ yotsyāmi pāṇḍavaiḥ |  
avadhyatvācca pāṇḍūnāṃ strībhāvācca śikhaṇḍīnaḥ | |*

Drupada (7.161.35). Here, too, Śikhaṇḍi takes on Kṛpa and shatters his bow but is eventually knocked unconscious by the master archer.<sup>37</sup> And here is where Śikhaṇḍi's younger brother, Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna takes center stage in his attack on Droṇa, who is defended by Karṇa, Aśvatthāma, Śalya, Duḥśāsana, Duryodhana, Śakuni, and Drumasena. Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna is eventually joined by Sātyaki who corners Karṇa and opens the path for him to attack Droṇa.<sup>38</sup> Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna's *āgneya* qualities are highlighted in this battle sequence since the arrow he fires is described as being so powerful that it shines like the Sun and illuminates the soldiers below its path, striking fear into their hearts.<sup>39</sup> Eventually, Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna fulfills his birth prophecy by decapitating Droṇa<sup>40</sup>:

*tasya mūrdhānamālambya gatasattvasya dehinaḥ |*  
*kiṃcidabruvataḥ kāyādvicakartāsinā śiraḥ | |*  
*harṣeṇa mahatā yukto bhāradvāje nipātite |*  
*siṃhanādaravaṃ cakre bhrāmāyankhadgamāhave | |*

He [Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna] grasped the head of the lifeless body. With his sword, he cut off his [Droṇa's] head as it mumbled something. Enjoined with great joy since the Bharadvāja's son was struck down, he let out a lion's roar, brandishing his sword in the battle (*āhave*). His roaring at this moment brings us almost full circle to his birth from the *yajña*, when he emerged roaring from the flames, got on a chariot, and sped around the sacrificial arena. The uncontrollable rage with which he decapitates Droṇa despite Arjuna's pleas to not do so remind

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<sup>37</sup> MBH 7.144

<sup>38</sup> MBh. 7. 145

<sup>39</sup> MBh. 7.145.11-12

*sa viśṛṣṭo balavatā śaro ghorō mahāmṛdhe |*  
*bhāsayāmāsa tatsainyaṃ divākara ivoditaḥ | |*  
*taṃ dṛṣṭvā tu śaraṃ ghoram devagandharvamānavāḥ |*  
*svastyastu samare rājandronāyetyabruvanvacah | |*

In the great battle, the powerful one released that fearsome arrow.  
It illuminated the soldiers as if the sun had arisen.

Having seen that fearsome arrow, the gods, the gandharvas, and men spoke these words, "May Drona be victorious in this encounter!"

<sup>40</sup> MBh. 7.165.47-48

us of how Agni consumes all in his path and is insatiable as in the Khāṇḍava Forest scene. The use of *āhave* raises a double meaning, since it can also mean “sacrificial rite,” summoning up images of Dhṛṣṭadyumna’s birth and reason for existing *and* the sanctity of this slaughter as one that is dharmically proper. This multigenerational conflict continues after the war with Aśvatthāma’s (Droṇa’s son’s) slaughter of the Upapāṇḍavas and Pāñcālans later during his night raid on the Pāṇḍava camp. When Aśvatthāma comes upon Dhṛṣṭadyumna sleeping in his tent, the dazed Pāñcālan prince is compared to a sacrificial animal (*paśu*) as Droṇa’s son acts as the *Śamīty*, or the member within the sacrificial retinue that slaughters the *paśu*, and hurls him by his hair in the ground and steps on his throat, slowly suffocating him.<sup>41</sup>

*tamākramya tadā rājankaṇṭhe corasi cobhayoh |*  
*nadantaṃ viṣphurantaṃ ca paśumāramamārayat || 18 ||*

Then, O King, [Aśvatthāma] having stepped on him, with one foot on his throat and another on his chest, he prepared to kill the writhing and roaring [Dhṛṣṭadyumna] as if he were a sacrificial animal (*paśu*).

When Dhṛṣṭadyumna begs to be killed honorably with the sword, Aśvatthāma shouts that he doesn’t deserve to die honorably and stomps him to death. In a way, this death, though dishonorable for a warrior, suits the metaphor of the *paśu* since the sacrificial victim of a *yajña* would be suffocated to provide a bloodless slaughter. Note that his slaughter inaugurates the long night of destruction in the Pāṇḍava camp that follows and connects seamlessly to the concept of the yuddhayajña discussed in section §7 of this paper.<sup>42</sup> Hildebeitel points out that by killing Dhṛṣṭadyumna here, Aśvatthāma has also killed a portion of Agni since the warrior is often described as *agnerbhāgam* or *agneraṃśam*.<sup>43</sup> Aśvatthāma’s son eventually pays dearly for his

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<sup>41</sup> MBh. 10.8.18; Hildebeitel 1990, 321-322 suggests that Aśvatthāma becomes Paśupati after “sacrificing” Dhṛṣṭadyumna by suffocating him.

<sup>42</sup> This is also noted by Smith 2009, p.567n1 and p.573n1

<sup>43</sup> Hildebeitel 1990, 319 cites 1.61.87 and 15.39.14

adharmic slaughters at the end of the epic when he is cursed to wander the Earth rather than attaining *mokṣa*, the lesson being that Agni doesn't favor Brahmins who harm him.<sup>44</sup>

The enraged Aśvatthama continues slaughtering all the descendants of Draupadī that he can find, and the *Prabhadrakas*, a special division of the Pāñcālan army formed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna and Śikhaṇḍi, rush at him. As he slaughters them all with his sword, Śikhaṇḍi again shoots him in the forehead with an arrow (MBh. 10.8.60):

*sa tu krodhasamāviṣṭo droṇaputro mahābalaḥ |*  
*śikhaṇḍinaṃ samāsādya dvidhā ciccheda so'sinā ||*

But then Droṇa's powerful son was filled with rage,

Having approached Śikhaṇḍi, he cleaved him in two with his sword.

After the Brahmin avenges his father, the goddess Kālī appears on the battlefield and the Pāṇḍava and Pāñcālan soldiers realize that they are fated to die (10.8.64). The final time we hear of Śikhaṇḍi is at the great cremation of all the war dead that happens in the catalogue of the cremations in which warriors are burned in order of importance by Yudhiṣṭhira's order.<sup>45</sup>

Śikhaṇḍi's cremation is followed by Dhṛṣṭadyumna, and their two younger brothers Yudhāmanyu and Uttamauijas. The two brothers meet their end on the funeral pyre, a consecrated form of Agni, returning to the element from which their transformation and birth occurred, exemplifying yet again the Fire god's procreative and destructive abilities.<sup>46</sup>

#### **§4 Seeking out Agni**

***Yajñasya ketuṃ prathamam purohitam agnim naras  
triśadhasṭhe sam īdhire | Indreṇa devaiḥ sa ratham  
sa barhiṣi sīdan ni hotū yajathāya sukratuḥ || RV 5.11.2***

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<sup>44</sup> Mbh. 10.16 relates Aśvatthāma receiving a curse from Vyāsa to wander the earth after his death despite his Brahmin status.

<sup>45</sup> MBh. 11.26.34

*śikhaṇḍinaṃ ca pāñcālyam dhṛṣṭadyumnaṃ ca pārṣatam |*  
*yudhāmanyuṃ ca vikrāntamuttamauijasameva ca ||*

<sup>46</sup> MBh. 15.45-47 explains the deaths of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Kuntī, and Gāndhārī in a sacrificial fire turned wildfire. After Nārada reassures Yudhiṣṭhira that these elders were consumed by a sacred fire, he asks his attendants to collect the bones for proper *śrāddha* rites to be completed.



**As the banner of the *yajña*, as the foremost one placed in front, the men have kindled Agni in his triple seat (i.e., his three sacrificial fires). On a chariot with Indra and the gods, let the skilful one sit on the sacred grass as the Hotṛ to perform the *yajña*.**

Now that we've detailed the births of all three characters, there is one another aspect of Agni's identity that also maps onto this – his threefold nature and association with triples. Agni is said to live all three regions, heavens, earth, and waters. He is also said to have three births, first from the heavens as lightning, then on earth at the hands of the priests, and finally in the waters.<sup>47</sup> This triplet also mirrors the three sacrificial fires: *gārhapatya*, *āhavanīya* and *dakṣiṇa*.<sup>48</sup> These three altars are located to the West, East, and South of the *vedi*, the central sacrificial arena shaped like a rectangle with concave sides which is said to resemble the female body.<sup>49</sup>

In MBh.13.85, Brahma ladles his own semen into a sacrificial fire and produces hundreds of divine and semidivine beings in a recasting of the *Puruṣa Sūkta*. Among these are three men who possess the qualities of the substance from which they arose. Bhrigu, whose name derives from the sound of crackling flames (*bhrig*) emerges from the flames. Aṅgiras is born from *aṅgāra* (burning hot coals) as is Kavi, who emerges from cooled-off coal. Thus, with the three Pāñcālan children's connections to Agni, we are presented with a fascinating war-time, kṣatriya parallel to the householder's own sacrificial duties in tending Agni. This invites the reader to think about the war itself as a *yajña*, complete with battle formation shapes (*vyūhas*) that parallel the shape of Vedic altars described in earlier liturgical texts. The ritual of sacrifice thus aligns with the ritual of battle to ensure kṣatriyas access to mokṣa, a topic that Hildebeitel and others have argued elsewhere and to which I will return later in the paper.

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<sup>47</sup> RV 10.45.1; For triple birth cf. RV 1.95.1 and 4.1.7; The gods make him threefold RV 10.88.10, i.e., with the three sacrificial fires. Agni's watery birth links him with Varuṇa.

<sup>48</sup> Staal 1983, Vol 1, p.41 explains that the *gārhapatya* is the householder's domestic fire, the *āhavanīya* is the fire into which oblations are offered, and *dakṣiṇāgni* is the Southern fire into which the ancestral offerings are made.

<sup>49</sup> Olivelle 1998, 18.

## §5 Seeking Peace through War and Wealth

*kulāyinī vasumatī vayodhā  
rayiṃ no vardha bahulaṃ suvīraṃ |  
apāmatiṃ durmatiṃ bādhamānā  
rāyaspośe yajñapatimābhajanti || TS 4.3.4.1c*

**The one who nourishes offspring, treasure trove, bestower of strength,  
Augment our wealth and the number of heroic descendants,  
Ward off enmity and evil intentions, let the lord of the *yajña*  
partake in the growth of wealth.**

As a result of her fiery origins, Draupadī, perhaps more than any other male or female character in the epic, repeatedly urges the Pāṇḍavas to war, and tries through her speeches to stoke their *manyu*, or rage. She cites two reasons: first, she is angered that her husbands, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira did nothing to prevent her disrobing by Duḥśāsana and attempted rape by Kīcaka. Second, she is later aggrieved by seeing her husbands suffer in poverty while in the forest and when hiding in Virāṭa's court. When in the gambling match, Yudhiṣṭhira wagers and loses Draupadī, the *sūta* is ordered to fetch her. When summoned, Draupadī says (2.60.13):

*draupadyuvāca |  
evaṃ nūnaṃ vyadadhātsaṃvidhātā sparśāvubhau spṛśato dhīrabātau |  
dharmaṃ tvekaṃ paramaṃ prāha loke sa naḥ śamaṃ dhāsyati goḥyamānaḥ ||*

Draupadī said, "This indeed, is what Creator must have ordained. The wise man and fool are both touched by fate, but one Dharma was declared the highest in this world and will maintain us in peace (*śamaṃ*) if it is defended.

This moment, early in the narrative, is a turning point. Her words can be read in two ways. It appears to be the last time that Draupadī suggests that peace is possible without bloodshed, but as the listener and reader know, her impending disrobing will result in Draupadī's repeated requests for her husbands to violently avenge her. In each of these instances, she will urge them to adhere to their kṣatriya dharma, protect her honor, and retake their kingdom.

Her disbelief that she could have been wagered in the match is soon broken when Duḥśāsana enters her chambers and drags her by the hair and menstruating, into the court amidst multiple generations of the Pāṇḍava and Kaurava men. As Duḥśāsana drags her into the court, Draupadī screams at the men, saying that Droṇa, Bhīṣma, and Yudhiṣṭhira have failed to adhere to Dharma by failing to prevent her assault.<sup>50</sup> Here, Draupadī’s fiery qualities come to the fore as her scornful sidelong glances further inflamed (*saṃdīpayāmāsa*) her husbands whose bodies were already overwhelmed with anger (*pāṇḍavān kopa parīta dehān*) at the sight of her abuse, and plunged them into sorrow. While as a woman, she is unable to dharmically physically fight her assaulters, she uses her positionality to urge her husbands to violent action. Still, they do nothing to save her, and she scolds them for it. Yudhiṣṭhira prevents Bhīma from taking violent action in the court at this moment and will repeatedly argue that according to dharmic law, there was nothing either he or nor his siblings could do since they were property of the Kauravas. It seems that the questions from Nārada to Yudhiṣṭhira in the beginning of the second *parvan*, preempt this very type of situation (2.5.15):

*kaccitsaṃdhiṃ yathākālaṃ vighraṃ copasevase |*

*kaccidvṛttimudāsīne madhyame cānuvartase ||*

Do you pursue peace and war at the appropriate time?

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<sup>50</sup> MBh. 2.60.33-36

*droṇasya bhīṣmasya ca nāsti sattvaṃ dhruvaṃ tathāivāsyā mahātmano’pi |*  
*rājñastathā hīmamadharmamugraṃ na lakṣayante kuruvṛddhamukhyāḥ | |*  
*tathā bruvantī karuṇaṃ sumadhyamā kākṣeṇa bhartṛṅkupitānapāśyat |*  
*sā pāṇḍavāṅkopaparītadehānsaṃdīpayāmāsa kaṭākṣapātaiḥ | |*  
*hṛtena rājyena tathā dhanena ratnaisca mukhyairna tathā babhūva |*  
*yathārtayā kopasamūritena kṛṣṇākātākṣeṇa babhūva duḥkham | |*

“The good character (*sattva*) and steadfastness of Droṇa and Bhīṣma no longer exist, nor do they in this great-souled man [Virāṭa]. Indeed, similarly the foremost of the great Kuru Lineage have not noticed this terrible unrighteousness (*adharmam*) of the King [Virāṭa].” Thus, speaking pitifully, the fine-hipped one looked at her angry husbands with a sidelong glance. She, with her sidelong glances, inflamed the Pāṇḍavas, filling their bodies with anger. They were not as sad from the loss of their kingdom, wealth, or jewels, as they were from Kṛṣṇā’s sidelong, anger-stirring (*kopa*) and suffering glance.

Do you follow the path in the middle with neutrality?

We see that Yudhiṣṭhira chooses not to pursue a fight at this moment, but to remain inert despite knowing that the actions committed in his presence were wrong. Yudhiṣṭhira's second gambling match and loss to the Kauravas leads us to Draupadī's extended complaint to Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas in the 3<sup>rd</sup> *parvan* once they have been banished to the forest (3.13.105-108):

*ta ime siṃhavikrāntā vīryeṇābhyadhikāḥ paraiḥ |*  
*viḥinaiḥ pariklīśyantīm samupekṣanta mām katham | |*  
*etādṛśāni duḥkhāni sahante durbalīyasām |*  
*dīrghakālaṃ pradīptāni pāpānāṃ kṣudrakarmaṇām | |*  
*kule mahati jātāsmi divyena vidhinā kila |*  
*pāṇḍavānām priyā bhāryā snuṣā pāṇḍormahātmanah | |*  
*kacagrahamanuprāptā sāsmi kṛṣṇa varā satī |*  
*pañcānāmindrakalpānāṃ prekṣatām madhusūdana | |*

These men have the valor of lions and have more courage than others – how can they ignore my suffering through the oppression of inferiors? Such sorrows are suffered by those who are weak and of little strength. For a long time, these sinful and lowly actions have inflamed me. I was born into a great clan according to divine order itself! I am the beloved wife of the Pāṇḍavas and the daughter-in-law of the Great-Souled Pāṇḍu. O Kṛṣṇa Madhusūdana, I, the most virtuous woman, was seized by my hair all while the five Indra-like men watched on!

While she scolds her husbands for their inaction, her complaints to Kṛṣṇa climax with her angrily declaring (*kruddhā vacanamabravīt*) all her male relatives effectually dead since they repeatedly fail to defend her honor (3.13.111-113)

*cakṣuṣī parimārjantī niḥśvasantī punaḥ punaḥ |*  
*bāṣpāpūrṇena kañṭhena kruddhā vacanamabravīt | |*  
*naiva me patayaḥ santi na putrā madhusūdana |*  
*na bhrātaro na ca pitā naiva tvaṃ na ca bāndhavāḥ | |*  
*ye mām viprakṛtām kṣudrairupekṣadhvaṃ viśokavat |*  
*na hi me sāmīyate duḥkham karṇo yatprāhasattadā | |*

She cried tears of grief and sighed again and again. Angry (*kruddhā*), with her throat choked with tears, she said, “O Madhusūdāna! I have no husbands, sons, brothers, father, or relatives. They ignored me when I was oppressed by inferior ones, unmoved by sorrow. My grief that Karna laughed at me then will never be pacified (*śāmyate*).”

In both these passages, Draupadī’s anger (*kopa*) comes from her self-perceived status as being equivalent to a widow who would be subject to *satī*<sup>51</sup> and thereby giving her yet another connection to having a fiery psychological nature, *and* as a woman with no male relatives to take action on her behalf. But this is just the beginning of her repeated attempts to stoke her husbands’ anger to make them take action against the Kauravas. She complains to Kṛṣṇa that her valorous, lion-like husbands have repeatedly failed to save her or support her and that she has burnt (*pradīptāni*) for a long time (*dīrghakālam*) with anger from suffering at the hands of those who perform evil deeds (*pāpānām kṣudrakarmaṇām*) (3.13.105-108). We see Draupadī’s mental and physical characteristics associated with insatiable, raging Agni and she is often trying to ignite her husbands’ anger and make them act on her behalf. Though she is plagued by unending anger as a woman, she is incapable of developing it into *manyu* (rage) and taking violent action. She repeats that her sorrow cannot be pacified (*na hi me śāmyate duḥkham*) and later tells them that she will be pacified only when the Kauravas have been defeated and Yudhiṣṭhira restored to the throne.

Kṛṣṇa sympathizes with Draupadī, and his response is one urging violence; he says that the wives of the men who angered her will weep as Draupadī does when they see their husbands’ corpses killed by Arjuna’s arrows and immersed in a flood of blood.<sup>52</sup> He promises to make her

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<sup>51</sup> Dhand 2008, 167-169 discusses *satī* at length, noting that is not common for the numerous widows in the epics who continue to serve in influential political roles, but that it seems to be gaining ground as an ideology in this period.

<sup>52</sup> This passage forebodingly foreshadows the slaughter that will follow, but also the metaphor of the yuddha as a river in 12.99.30-34.

MBh. 3.13.114-115

*athainābravīt kṛṣṇastasmīnvīrasamāgame |*  
*rodīsyanti striyo hyevaṃ yeṣāṃ kruddhāsi bhāmini | |*  
*bībhatsuśarasamchannāñṣonitaughapariplutān |*

the *queen* of kings (*rājñāṃ rājñī bhaviṣyasi*)<sup>53</sup>, though never the *mother* of kings — a stark reminder for readers familiar with the story that things will not turn out as Draupadī hopes and that her offspring will never inherit the throne. Immediately, the Pāṇḍava and Pāñcālan men make vows to defeat specific enemies in avenging various other characters: Dhṛṣṭadyumna vows to kill Droṇa to avenge Drupada, Śikhaṇḍi vows to kill Bhīṣma to fulfill Ambā’s vow, Bhīma will kill Duryodhana to fulfill the vow he made to break his thigh during the gambling match, and Arjuna vows to kill Karṇa. This momentarily pacifies Draupadī until Kṛṣṇa takes his leave.

She then turns to the Pāṇḍavas, asking Yudhiṣṭhira how there can be peace in her heart (*kā śāntirhrdayasya me*) when he is no longer surrounded by kings in the assembly.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, living in the forest has forced them all to gather wild fruits and hunt game to feed themselves instead of having palace cooks make them meals, and knowing wolf-belly Bhīma’s love of eating and his quick temper and favor towards her, she talks of his suffering next. She tells Yudhiṣṭhira that her mind can have no peace (*noḥśāmyati me manaḥ*) seeing Bhīma do menial tasks, but asks how he isn’t filled with rage over time, by seeing Bhīma’s suffering (*dhyāyantaṃ kiṃ na manyuste prāpte kāle vivardhate*). She repeatedly asks “*kasmānmanyurna vardhate?*” Why doesn’t your rage grow?<sup>55</sup> With no peace in her heart or her mind, Draupadī’s enraged exasperation comes to a

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*nihatāñjīvitam tyaktvā śayānāvasudhātale* | |

<sup>53</sup> MBh. 3.13.116:

*yatsamarthaṃ pāṇḍavānāṃ tatkarisyāmi mā śucaḥ* |  
*satyaṃ te pratijānāmi rājñāṃ rājñī bhaviṣyasi* | | 116 | |

<sup>54</sup> MBh. 3.28.12:

*yadapaśyaṃ sabhāyāṃ tvāṃ rājabhiḥ parivāritam* |  
*tacca rājannaḥśāntyaḥ kā śāntirhrdayasya me* | |

I have seen you in the sabhā, surrounded by kings.

O king, upon no longer seeing that, how can there be peace in my heart?

head when she says she is bewildered (*muhyāmi*) that he isn't angry that Arjuna, the most excellent of warriors, is not allowed to fight.<sup>56</sup> After asking a total of *ten times* — twice for each of the five brothers — how his rage (*manyu*) has not increased, Draupadī then tries a different tactic: insulting Yudhiṣṭhira. She says that he's behaving in a way contrary to kṣatriya dharma since the *smṛti* texts say that no kṣatriya in the world is devoid of rage (*na nirmanyuḥ kṣatriyo'sti loke*). She urges him to display his fiery virility (*tejas*) when it's appropriate, telling him not to show mercy to his enemies. She says that she knows full well that he possesses the *tejas* to defeat them, but that he just needs to summon it up and take action.<sup>57</sup> Yudhiṣṭhira rejects her view of kṣatriya dharma, saying that anger (*krodha*) is not conducive to attaining prosperity or producing welfare in the

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<sup>55</sup> 3.28.18

*sarvāṁstānādya paśyāmi vane vanyena jīvataḥ |*  
*aduḥkhārhānmanusyendra nopāśāmyati me manaḥ || 18 ||*  
*bhīmasenamimam cāpi duḥkhitam vanavāsinam |*  
*dhyāyantaṁ kiṁ na manyuste prāpte kāle vivardhate || 19 ||*  
*bhīmasenaṁ hi karmāṇi svayaṁ kurvānamacyuta |*  
*sukhārhaṁ duḥkhitam dṛṣtvā kasmānmanyurna vardhate || 20 ||*

I see them all living in the forest by the forest, O King of Men [Yudhiṣṭhira], undeserving of suffering - my mind has no peace. I see Bhīmasena, sad and living in the forest, meditating – in time, how does your rage (*manyu*) not grow? Indeed Bhīmasena is performing all these tasks himself, O Infallible One (Yudhiṣṭhira). Having seen the one deserving of comfort being in grief, how does your rage (*manyu*) not grow?

<sup>56</sup> MBh. 3.28.26:

*dṛṣtvā vanagataṁ pāṛthamaduhkhārhaṁ sukhocitam |*  
*nā ca te vardhate manyustena muhyāmi bhārata ||*

<sup>57</sup> MBh. 3.28.33-37

*nūnaṁ ca tava naiwāsti manyurbharatasattama |*  
*yatte bhrātṛṁśca mām caiva dṛṣtvā na vyathate manaḥ || 33 ||*  
*na nirmanyuḥ kṣatriyo'sti loke nirvacanaṁ smṛtam |*  
*tadadya tvayi paśyāmi kṣatriye viparītavat || 34 ||*  
*yo na darśayate tejaḥ kṣatriyaḥ kāla āgate |*  
*sarvabhūtāni taṁ pārtha sadā paribhavantyuta || 35 ||*  
*tattvayā na kṣamā kāryā śatrūnprati kathamcana |*  
*tejasaiwa hi te śakyā nihantuṁ nātra saṁśayaḥ || 36 ||*  
*tathaiva yaḥ kṣamākāle kṣatriyo nopāśāmyati |*  
*apriyaḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ so'mutreha ca naśyati || 37 ||*

“It is certain that there is no rage (*manyu*) left in you, Best of the Bharatas (Yudhiṣṭhira). Despite seeing your brothers and me, your mind is not distressed. The *smṛti* texts say that there is no kṣatriya in the world without rage (*manyu*). But in you, today, I see that which is contrary to kṣatriyas. A kṣatriya who does not display his fiery energy (*tejas*) when the time is right, O Partha, is always despised by all beings. Therefore, you should never show forgiveness towards your enemies. There is no doubt that you can destroy all of them through your fiery energy (*tejas*). But it is also true that a kṣatriya who is not pacified when the time of forgiving arrives, is hated by all beings and is destroyed here and hereafter.”

world, and so he has controlled his anger like a wise man (Mbh. 3.30.8):

*taṃ krodhaṃ varjitaṃ dhīraiḥ kathamasmadvidhaścaret |*  
*etaḍ Draupadī saṃdhāya na me manyuḥ pravardhate || 8 ||*

Anger (*krodha*) is cast aside by the wise – how could someone like me behave otherwise?

Draupadī, having reflected on this my rage (*manyu*) does not grow.

Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira pointedly uses two different terms in their argument: *manyu* and *krodha*.

He says that wise men do not experience anger (*krodha*), and after identifying himself as a wise man, says that his rage (*manyu*) won't grow because he won't give way to the emotion of anger.

Angelika Malinar discusses this in greater detail, saying that anger (*krodha* / *kopa*) are transient mental states, but that rage (*manyu*) is “the essential quality of gods like Indra and Varuṇa which allows them to maintain their regal status.”<sup>58</sup> Embodying, possessing, and acting on *manyu* and not *kopa/krodha* is what enables the gods with the vigor required to accomplish their deeds.<sup>59</sup>

Having recognized this, Draupadī wants her husbands to show this necessary quality of a warrior, arguing that they should display *tejas*, a fiery, luminous energetic power which is only associated with men, rather than *kṣama* (forgiveness).<sup>60</sup> But Yudhiṣṭhira argues that *kṣama* is at the core of every aspect of life (3.30.36-37):

*kṣamā dharmāḥ kṣamā yajñāḥ kṣamā vedāḥ kṣamā śrutam |*  
*yastāmevaṃ vijānāti sa sarvaṃ kṣantumarhati ||*  
*kṣamā brahma kṣamā satyaṃ kṣamā bhūtaṃ ca bhāvi ca |*  
*kṣamā tapaḥ kṣamā śaucaṃ kṣamayā coddhṛtaṃ jagat ||*

Forgiveness is dharma. Forgiveness is sacrifice. Forgiveness is the Vedas. Forgiveness is the *śruti*. He who knows this is able to forgive everything. Forgiveness is the *Brahman*.

Forgiveness is the truth. Forgiveness is what was and will be. Forgiveness is heated

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<sup>58</sup> Malinar 2007, 82-84

<sup>59</sup> Malinar is correct to distinguish *manyu* and *krodha*, and I add here that this also seems to be related to the Greek *mēnis* (ἡ μῆνις) which in the Doric and Ionic dialects becomes “mān-“ (μᾶν-) which describes Achilles' inextinguishable rage in Homer's *Iliad*. As the first word of the Greek war-epic, it also serves as the central theme of the entire work, with his rage finally soothed when he grieves over Patroclus with Priam who grieves over his dead son Hector in the last book of the epic.

<sup>60</sup> Malinar 2007, 84.



meditation (*tapah*). Forgiveness is purity. Forgiveness is that which supports the universe. Note that he says these phrases more than ten times to overwhelm each of Draupadī's uses of *manyu*. Responding to her demands that he activate his *tejas* and act on his *manyu*, Yudhiṣṭhira replies telling her that forgiveness is even the highest principle *Brahman* itself (3.30.39):

*kṣamā tejasvinām tejaḥ kṣamā brahma tapasvinām |*  
*kṣamā satyaṃ satyavatām kṣamā dānaṃ kṣamā yaśaḥ | |*

Forgiveness is the luminous energy (*tejas*) of the powerful (*tejasvin*). Forgiveness is the *Brahma* of the ascetics. Forgiveness is the truth of the truthful. Forgiveness is alms. Forgiveness is fame.

He argues against her claims that he lacks *manyu* by saying that his ability to forgive is the utmost demonstration of the *tejas* upon which those in a state of rage act. Yudhiṣṭhira concludes his speech by shifting the discussion from the temporary state of forgiveness (*kṣama*) to peace (*śama*), a possibly more permanent political state. This mirrors the relationship between *krodha* and *manyu* discussed above in that the former is fleeting while the latter is a more permanent state. He says that all the Kaurava elders are pushing for peace (*śama*) and urges Draupadī to not be angry (*mā krudhaḥ*) after chanting a peace hymn by Ṛṣi Kaśyapa (MBh. 3.30.44-48):

*iti gītāḥ kāśyapena gāthā nityaṃ kṣamāvatām |*  
*śrutvā gāthāḥ kṣamāyāstvaṃ tusya Draupadī mā krudhaḥ | |*  
*pitāmahaḥ śāntanaṃ śamaṃ saṃpūjayisyati |*  
*ācāryo viduraḥ kṣattā śamameva vadisyataḥ |*  
*kṛpāśca saṃjayaścaiva śamameva vadisyataḥ | |*  
*somadatto yuyutsuśca droṇaputrastathaiva ca |*  
*pitāmahaśca no vyāsaḥ śamaṃ vadati nityaśaḥ | |*  
*etairhi rājā niyataṃ codyamānaḥ śamaṃ prati |*  
*rājyaṃ dāteṣu me buddhima cellobhānaśisyati | |*  
*kālo'yaṃ dārunaḥ prāpto bharatānāmbhūṭaye |*  
*nīśitaṃ me sadaivaitatpurastādapi bhāmini | |*

Thus, these verses about those who are forgiving were always chanted by Kaśyapa.

Having heard these verses on forgiveness, be satisfied, Draupadī, and don't be angry. Our grandfather, Śaṅtanu's son [Bhīṣma], always honors peace. The preceptor and steward Vidura is speaking only about peace. Kṛpa and Sanjaya also speak about peace. Somadatta, Yuyutsu, Drona's son, and our grandfather Vyāsa always speak about peace. Always urged by all of them towards peace, I think the king will return the kingdom. If he does not, he will face destruction. A terrible time has arrived and it will lead to the destruction of the Bharatas, Beautiful One [Draupadī]!

He ends his response saying that the Kaurava elders and advisors to Duryodhana (Bhīṣma, Vidura, Kṛpa, Sanjaya, Somadatta, Yuyutsu, and Aśvatthāma) urge peace (*śama*) and that he's confident that Duryodhana will listen to their advice. However, he reassures her that if Duryodhana doesn't return to the kingdom, he will face ultimate destruction since he is undeserving of *kṣamā*.<sup>61</sup> Draupadī remains unpacified and rejects his reasoning, saying that *dharma*, compassion, forgiveness, uprightness, and tenderness are not conducive to accruing prosperity (*śrīyam*) a play on words referring to her own divine connection to Śrī, that is to win her, he must win the kingdom back.<sup>62</sup> Reclaiming the throne was of utmost importance for Draupadī who had argued that Yudhiṣṭhira should retake his kingdom so that she and her husbands did not need to suffer as impoverished forest-dwellers.

### **§6 Yudhiṣṭhira's First Display of Anger**

*agninā viśvāṣāt |*  
*sūryeṇa svarāt |*  
*kratvā śacīpatiḥ |*  
*vṛṣabheṇa tvaṣṭā |*  
*yajñeṇa maghavān |*  
*dakṣiṇagne suvargah |*  
*manyunā vṛtrahā | TS 4.4.8.a-g*

**Through Agni, you are the all-conqueror,**

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<sup>61</sup> MBh. 3.30.47

*etairhi rājā niyataṃ codyamānaḥ śamaṃ prati |*  
*rājyaṃ dāteṭi me buddhirna cellobhānnaśīyati ||*

<sup>62</sup> MBh. 3.31.2:

*neha dharmāṅśamaṣyābhyāṃ na kṣāntyā nāryavena ca |*  
*puruṣaḥ śrīyamāpnoti na ghrṇitvena karhicit ||*

**Through the Sun, you are self-ruling,  
Through Power you are the lord of succor,  
Through the bull, you are the creator,  
Through the *yajña*, you are munificent,  
Through the southern altar, you keep good company,  
Through Rage (*manyu*), you destroy enemies...**

The second major instance of Draupadī's censuring her husbands occurs in the Virāṭa court after Kīcaka abuses her. Yudhiṣṭhira, fearful that the Pāṇḍavas' real identity will be discovered while in hiding, once again prevents Bhīma from killing Kīcaka even though they are witness to Draupadī's pleas. Draupadī angrily incites the Pāṇḍavas's anger by repeating five times (4.15.15-19): *teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt*: "I am the proud wife of those [Pāṇḍavas] and a Sūta's son has kicked me." Without being able to name them lest she break their disguise, and under the pretense that her celestial *Gandharva* husbands are elsewhere, she repeats the phrase five times urging each of them present in the royal court to action (MBh. 4.15.19-21):

*sarvalokamimāṃ hanyurdharmapāśasitāstu ye |  
teṣāṃ māṃ māninīm bhāryāṃ sūtaputraḥ padāvadhīt | |  
śaraṇaṃ ye prapannānām bhavanti śaraṇārthinām |  
caranti loke pracchannāḥ kva nu te'dya mahārathāḥ | |  
kathaṃ te sūtaputreṇa vadyamānām priyāṃ satīm |  
marṣayanti yathā klībā balavanto'mitaujaśaḥ | |*

I am the revered wife of those who, had they not been bound by the noose of dharma, are capable of destroying the entire world. They provide aid to those who seek refuge (*śaraṇam*). They are roaming the world in disguise - where are those great chariot warriors now? How do those powerful ones tolerate that their beloved and chaste wife is physically abused by the son of a *sūta*, as if they were eunuchs (*klībā*)?

She goes on to say that her proud husbands, bound by Dharma's noose (*dharma pāśa*), continue giving refuge to seemingly everyone *except* her, their own wife. By calling them eunuchs (*klībā*) she highlights that their life incognito has completely drained them of their masculinity; while only Arjuna is crossdressing as Bṛhannaḷa, and has transformed into a eunuch, as far as Draupadī's

concerned, all the Pāṇḍavas are in the same emasculated position – fettered by Dharma and as good as dead.<sup>63</sup> It is rather striking that as Yama’s son and manifestation of *dharma* that is present in the court, Yudhiṣṭhira himself can be associated with the *pāśa* since he fetters his brothers from acting to defend Draupadī. The queen’s choice of *dharmapāśa* also conveys imagery of Yama as the god of death, something that is echoed later in Kṛṣṇa’s plea for peace to Dhṛtarāṣṭra (5.93.52):

*pramuñcemānmṛtyupāśātkṣatriyānkṣatriyaṣabha |*  
*praśāmya bharataśreṣṭha mā manyuwaśamanvagāḥ | |*

Free those *kṣatriyas* from the noose of death, Bull Among Kṣatriyas.

Having made peace, O Best of the Bharatas, do not be carried away by rage (*manyu*). Here, with the *tatpuruṣa* compound *mṛtyupāśa*, Kṛṣṇa links the *pāśa* to Yama’s role as the god of death, reminding us to keep both the dharmic and mortal aspects of the god in mind as we analyze the scene. The Pāṇḍavas’ refusal to respond to the assaults on Draupadī was, in effect, a living death *and* a failure to adhere to their dharmic responsibility as *kṣatriya* husbands. Brought before King Virāṭa, she accuses the king of acting favorably towards Kīcaka and not punishing him appropriately, and therefore following the dharma of a *dāsyu* (non-Aryan barbarian).<sup>64</sup> This insult hurled at Virāṭa enrages Yudhiṣṭhira who, disguised as the Brahmin Kaṅka, begins to sweat with anger (MBh. 4.15.30: *kopāttu lalāṭe sveda āsajat*) and orders Draupadī to return to her ladies’ quarters in Queen Sudeṣṇa’s dwelling. He tells her that she is promised heaven with her warrior husbands, but that they do not see this as the time for rage (*manyu*).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> In discussing Draupadī’s repeated sexual assaults, Sutherland (1989, 72) notes that her inert husbands who fail to act in her defense are further emasculated by failing to defend her.

<sup>64</sup> MBh. 4.15.24

*na rājanrājavatkiṃcitsamācarasi kīcake |*  
*dasyūnāmiva dharmaste na hi saṃsadi śobhate | |*  
O king! You are not acting anything like a king in your treatment of Kīcaka. Your dharma is that of a *dāsyu* (barbarian) and is indeed not worthy to be in an assembly hall.

<sup>65</sup> MBh. 4.15.30-34

*vaiśampāyana uvāca |*  
*evaṃ saṃpūjayamstatra kṛṣṇām prekṣya sabhāsadaḥ |*  
*yudhiṣṭhiraṣya kopāttu lalāṭe sveda āsajat | |*  
*athābravīdrājaputrīm kauravyo mahiṣīm priyām |*  
*gaccha sairandhri mātra sthāḥ sudeṣṇāyā niveśanam | |*

Knowing that Bhīma is the most likely to spring to action through anger, Draupadī then approaches her husband late that night, hoping to inflame his anger, and asks him to kill Kīcaka.<sup>66</sup> In her speech she compares Arjuna to a fire that is trapped in a well (4.18.10):

*yo'tarpayadameyātmā khāṇḍave jātavedasam |*  
*so'ntahpuragataḥ pārthaḥ kūṭṭe'gniriva saṁvṛtaḥ ||*

He, the one of immeasurable soul, who satisfied Jātaveda (Agni) in the Khāṇḍava (forest), having entered the inner rooms [of the palace], Pārtha [Arjuna], is like fire hidden in a well.

Draupadī's reference here to the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna (MBh. 1.214-219) recalls three different components of the epic, each of which is related to the fiery theme I'm highlighting here: 1) the Gāṇḍīva bow, 2) Jātaveda/Agni's central role in the epic, and finally, 3) Arjuna's *tejas*, or fiery, luminous, masculine energy. Just like Arjuna's hidden away in the recesses of the Matsya palace as Bṛhannaḷa, his bow, capable of bringing fiery destruction to enemies is buried under a tree.<sup>67</sup>

Draupadī's grief stirs Bhīma to action; he weeps, complains that Yudhiṣṭhira prevented him from acting in the Matsya court, and the fact that the Kauravas remain unpunished burns (*dahati*) him like stakes driven through his heart.<sup>68</sup> Note the similarity in Bhīma's heated emotional state with Draupadī's as *pradīptani* earlier in 3.13.106. He first asks Draupadī to

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*bhartāramanurudhyantyaḥ kliṣyante vīrapatnayaḥ |*  
*śuśrūṣayā kliṣyamānāḥ patilokaṁ jayantyuta ||*  
*manye na kālaṁ krodhasya paśyanti patayastava |*  
*tena tvāṁ nābhidhāvanti gandharvāḥ sūryavarcaśaḥ ||*  
*akāḷajñāsi sairandhri śailūṣṭva vidhāvasi |*  
*vighnaṁ karoṣi matsyānāṁ dīvyatāṁ rājasamsadi |*  
*gaccha sairandhri gandharvāḥ karisyanti tava priyam ||*

<sup>66</sup> Sutherland 1989, 72 notes that only Bhīma is incapable of controlling his emotions when Draupadī is assaulted and so is the only husband that protects her throughout the epic.

<sup>67</sup> She repeats a similar phrase later MBh. 4.19.16:

*nādāvikamidaṁ manye yatra pārtho dhananjayaḥ |*  
*bhīmadhanvā mahābāhurāste śānta īvānalaḥ | |*

I think it cannot be anything other than fate, when mighty-armed Partha Dhananjaya, whose bow is fearsome, has been pacified, like a fire that is covered.

<sup>68</sup> MBh. 4.20.4

conquer her anger (*krodham jahī*) and to adhere to dharma. Draupadī replies that Kīcaka has repeatedly angered her, but that she has repeatedly restrained her anger (*puṇaḥ niyamya kopaṃ*)<sup>69</sup> and warned the *rākṣasa* to stop since the dharma of the kṣatriya is to destroy their enemies.<sup>70</sup> With this reminder of his duties to her and his *varṇa*, Bhīma acquiesces to her request and kills Kīcaka by squelching him in an embrace.<sup>71</sup> This method invokes the story of Śiva's interruption of King Dakṣa's *yajña* where the god crushes the *yajña* itself as his *paśu*. Śiva is angered that his father-in-law neglected to invite him and his wife Satī to his major sacrifice and so he destroys the sacrifice itself. This story is recounted in Bhīṣma's teachings to Yudhiṣṭhira within an ontological framework of Agni's varied forms and his presence on Earth in the form of the fever (*jvara*) in 12.274. Bhīṣma explains that Śiva's perspiration fell to the ground and produced a great fiery being resembling the cosmos-destroying fire (*kālānala*). This dwarfish (*hrasvo'ti*) figure with red eyes, with erect hair, dark colored skin but draped in red clothing terrified the brahmins officiating Dakṣa's sacrifice as it threw the universe into disarray.<sup>72</sup> This image of

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<sup>69</sup> MBh. 4.20.18

*tamaḥ kupitā bhīma puṇaḥ kopaṃ niyamya ca |  
abruvaṃ kāmamaṃmūdhamātmānaṃ rakṣa kīcaka | |*

<sup>70</sup> MBh. 4.20.28

*vadātāṃ varṇadharmāṃśca brāhmaṇānāṃ hi me śrutam |  
kṣatriyasya sadā dharmo nānyah śatrunibarhaṇāt | |*

I have heard brahmins speak about the dharma of different varṇas. There is no dharma for kṣatriya other than the destruction of enemies.

<sup>71</sup> MBh. 4.21.59

*tasya pādau ca pāṇī ca śiro grīvāṃ ca sarvaśaḥ |  
kāye praveśayāmāsa paśoriva pinākadhyk | |*

<sup>72</sup> MBh. 12.274.35-40

*taṃ tu yajñam tathārūpaṃ gacchantamupalabhya sah |  
dhanurādāya bāṇam ca tadānvasarata prabhuh | | 35 | |  
tatastasya sureśasya krodhādमितatejasah |  
lalātāṭprasṛto ghorah svedabindurbabhūva ha | | 36 | |  
tasminpatitamātre tu svedabindau tathā bhūvi |  
prādurbabhūva sumahānagniḥ kālānalopamah | | 37 | |  
tatra cājāyata tadā puruṣaḥ puruṣarṣabha |  
hrasvo'timātrarakṭkṣo hariśmasrurvbhīṣaṇah | | 38 | |  
ūrdhvakeśo'tilomāṅgaḥ śyenolūkastathaiva ca |  
karālah kṣṇavarṇaśca raktavāsāstathaiva ca | | 39 | |  
taṃ yajñam sa mahāsattvo'dahatkaṣmivānalah |  
devāścāpyadravansarve tato bhītā diśo daśa | | 40 | |*

anthropomorphic fire also summons up the description of Agni's arrival in *Khāṇḍavadāha* passage. Only Brahma's pleading calmed Śiva's rage, and this great fire was divided into smaller portions and produced many different types of fever (*jvara*).<sup>73</sup> The reference also foreshadows Kīcaka's kinsmen's actions who, upon discovering that their leader is dead, decide to punish Draupadī by cremating her on Kīcaka's pyre, once again referencing the practice of Satī.<sup>74</sup> They tie Draupadī up and bring her to the cremation grounds, but she's rescued by Bhīma who slaughters the *sūtas* attempting to ritually cremate his wife, and the Pāṇḍavas' identity remains hidden. In a dramatic turn of events, Agni consumes the corpses of these 105 *sūtas* killed by Bhīma by order of Matsya's General Virāta, demonstrating once more that Agni will condone and consume when it is dharmically proper for him to do so. The god always gets his due.<sup>75</sup>

So, we see Draupadī repeatedly argue throughout this portion of the epic that violent retribution is owed her by her husbands, and it's only Bhīma whom she successfully inflames to action. So far, we have seen Draupadī's repeated association with fire, most directly with the story about Dakṣa's sacrifice. Note that the story, though it is about Satī, does not reference her

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But seeing the sacrifice in such a form as it was proceeding, he (Śiva) took up his bow and arrow and followed it. Then, due to the intense anger (*krodham*) of the Lord of the gods, who possessed great fiery energy (*mahātejas*), a terrible drop of sweat emerged from his forehead. As soon as that drop of sweat fell upon the earth, a great fire, resembling the fire of cosmic destruction (*kālānala*), appeared. There, a figure appeared, O Bull Among Men, with a short stature, very red eyes, and a fearsome lion-like hair. With upward hair and excessively hairy body like a vulture, thus, he was fearsome, dark in color, and wore blood-red garments. That great being, like an apocalyptic fire consuming a room, consumed that sacrifice. All the gods, terrified, fled in all ten directions.

<sup>73</sup> MBh. 12.274.45-46

*yaścaīṣa puruṣo jātaḥ svedātte vibudhottama |*  
*jvaro nāmaīṣa dharmajña lokeṣu pracariṣyati || 45 ||*  
*ekībhūtasya na hyasya dhāraṇe tejasah prabho |*  
*samarthā sakalā pṛthvī bahudhā sṛjyatāmayam || 46 ||*

There is this man who has been born from your sweat, O Greatly Enlightened One! In the name of fever, let him wander around the worlds, O Knower of Dharma. If all of this fiery energy (*tejas*) exists as one, the entire earth will not be able to bear it; let it be divided into many.

<sup>74</sup> MBh. 4.22

<sup>75</sup> MBh. 4.23.6-7

*teṣāṃ tadvacanam śrutvā virāto vāhinīpatiḥ |*  
*abravītkriyatāmeṣāṃ sūtānāṃ paramakriyā ||*  
*ekasmīnneva te sarve susamiddhe hutāśane |*  
*dahyantāṃ kīcakāḥ śīghraṃ ratnairgandhaiśca sarvaśah ||*

burning, but rather on the way Śiva's rage manifests and materializes itself, and draws the comparison between Śiva and Bhīma. Draupadī's success in stirring Bhīma to act on his anger is temporary since in the next *parvan* he calms down again, asking Kṛṣṇa to convince the Kauravas to seek peace and prevent the war.

The discussion begins when Yudhiṣṭhira tells Kṛṣṇa that enmity (*vairam*) cannot be solved through enmity (*vaireṇa*), comparing it to how placing oblations in the sacrificial fire (*haviṣāgnir yatha*) makes it grow larger (*abhiwardhate*).<sup>76</sup> Here too, the image is of Agni and his voracious appetite. He argues instead that strength/power (*balavān*) is the greatest distress on the heart (*balavānādhirhṛdayabādhanah*) and that by renouncing this enmity (*tyāgena*) from the mind (*manasaḥ*), one can find peace (*śānti*).<sup>77</sup> However, he tells Kṛṣṇa that while giving up their claim on the kingdom would produce peace, it would be equal to death (*vadha*).<sup>78</sup> Yudhiṣṭhira argues that peace obtained through submission to the enemy (*pranipāteṇa*) is the best route forward.<sup>79</sup>

Surprisingly, Bhīma agrees with his brother, asking Kṛṣṇa to speak to the Kauravas in such a way that they permit peace.<sup>80</sup> He says that Duryodhana is wicked and evil, but that following him and being under his command would be preferable to destroying the Bharata lineage<sup>81</sup> and asks Kṛṣṇa to address the elder members of the Kaurava faction and convince

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<sup>76</sup> MBh. 5.70.63

*na cāpi vairam vaiरेṇa keśava vyupaśāmyati |  
haviṣāgniryathā kṛṣṇa bhūya evābhiwardhate ||*

<sup>77</sup> MBh. 5.70.65

<sup>78</sup> MBh. 5.70.67

*yā tu tyāgena śāntiḥ syāttadrte vadha eva saḥ |  
saṁśayācca samucchedāddviṣatāmātmanastathā || 67*

<sup>79</sup> 5.70.68

*na ca tyaktuṁ tadicchāmo na cecchāmaḥ kulakṣayam |  
atra yā pranipāteṇa śāntiḥ saiva garīyasī ||*

<sup>80</sup> MBh. 5.72.1

*bhīmasena uvāca |  
yathā yathāiva śāntiḥ syātkurūṇāṁ madhusūdana |  
tathā tathāiva bhāsethā mā sma yuddhena bhīṣayeh || 1 ||*

<sup>81</sup> MBh. 5.72.20

*api duryodhanaṁ kṛṣṇa sarve vāyamadhaścārāḥ |  
nīcāirbhūtānuvāsyāmo mā sma no bharatā naśan || 20 ||*



them to seek peace by reasoning with Dhṛtarāṣṭra.<sup>82</sup> Kṛṣṇa laughs at Bhīma, thinking that it was as if the fire had gone cold (*tacchītatvamiva pāvake*)<sup>83</sup> and tries to incite (*samtejāyam*) and fan the flames of his rage with words (*vāgbhirmātariśveva pāvakam*).<sup>84</sup> He reminds Bhīma that he is losing sleep while constantly brooding over how to destroy the Kauravas, noting that his breath burns like a fire while his mind is at unrest (*aprasāntamanā*) like a fire with smoke (*sadhūma iva pāvakaḥ*).<sup>85</sup> Kṛṣṇa, knowing full well the effects of his words, goes so far as to insult Bhīma's masculinity, calling him a eunuch (*klība*)<sup>86</sup> to which an enraged Bhīma tells Kṛṣṇa that he still firmly adheres to the Kṣatriya dharma.<sup>87</sup> Draupadī once again rejects any possibility of drawing a peace with the Kauravas and tells Kṛṣṇa that the enemy cannot be pacified with generosity (*dānena na śamyati*)<sup>88</sup> and must be dealt the penalty from the *mahādaṇḍa* (great scepter) of justice.<sup>89</sup>

Kṛṣṇa then goes to visit Kuntī who mourns for Draupadī's condition, saying that although she has five warrior husbands (*patibhiḥ pañcabhiḥ prahāribhiḥ*), triple alliteration that seems to only be missing *pāṇḍavaiḥ* pointing to their absence, possessing the nature of divine fire (*sūrainagnikalpaiḥ*), that her lot has only been pain and suffering (*duḥkhaḥ*).<sup>90</sup> She says that a prophecy at the time of Arjuna's birth stated that he would conquer the earth and perform the three sacrifices and that the war must take place.<sup>91</sup> After he's victorious, Dhananjaya (Arjuna)

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<sup>82</sup> 5.72.22

*vācyah pitāmaho vṛddho ye ca kṛṣṇa sabhāsadaḥ |*  
*bhrātṛnāmastu saubhṛvātraṃ dhārtarāṣṭraḥ praśāmyatām ||*

<sup>83</sup> 5.73.2

<sup>84</sup> 5.73.3

<sup>85</sup> 5.73.6

<sup>86</sup> 5.73.17: *aho nāśamsase kiñcītpuṃstvaṃ klība ivātmani |*

<sup>87</sup> Custodi 2007, 210 notes that this same insult is hurled at Bhīṣma by Śiśupāla when informed of his vow of celibacy in MBh. 3.34.13.

<sup>88</sup> This reminds the reader of the conversation at 3.30.39: *kṣamā dānaṃ*

<sup>89</sup> 5.80. 9-14.

<sup>90</sup> 5.88.45

<sup>91</sup> MBh. 5.88.64-65

*yanmā vāgabravānnaktam sūtaka savyasācinah |*  
*putraste pṛthivīm jetā yasaścāsya divam spṛśet ||*  
*hatvā kurūṅgrāmajanye rājyaṃ prāpya dhananjayaḥ |*  
*bhrātybhiḥ saha kaunteyastrīnmedhānāharisyati ||*

will lead the three sacrifices (*trīṇmedhānāharisyati*), she says, bringing the focus back to the *yajñas* that victorious *kṣatriyas* are responsible for performing: the *Aśvamedha*, *Rājasūya*, and the *Vājapeya*.<sup>92</sup> She repeatedly grieves over *Draupadī*'s insult in the court and seems ashamed of *Yudhiṣṭhira*'s inaction, asking that *Kṛṣṇa* urge the *Pāṇḍavas* to pursue war, particularly *Bhīma*, whose anger never subsides until his enemies are vanquished; he must fulfill his vow to kill *Duryodhana*.<sup>93</sup> *Kṛṣṇa*'s embassy to the *Kaurava* court following this (MBh. 5.89-130) fails to secure peace (*śama*) before the war, despite numerous attempts to change *Dhṛtarāṣṭra*'s and *Duryodhana*'s minds. He asks *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* to negotiate now so that peace can exist (*śamaḥ syādīti*) without the warriors having to fight.<sup>94</sup>

*Kṛṣṇa*'s attempts to persuade *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* to establish his son on a path to peace fail, of course, and in the *Strī Parva* (12), after the war is over, *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* physically expresses his anger in another fiery reference. Upon meeting the *Pāṇḍavas* for the first time since the death of all his sons, the *Kuru* king is overcome with grief and rage and attempts to kill *Bhīma* with his rage-filled embrace. With all his sons dead, *Dhṛtarāṣṭra* must perform his kingly duty and welcome the victorious *Pāṇḍavas*, but his heart still aches over *Duryodhana*'s death. While *Yudhiṣṭhira* is met with an empathetic embrace (*dharmarājam pariśvajya sāntvayitvā*), the *Kuru* king's rage roils as he comes to *Bhīma*, the *Pāṇḍava* who slew *Duryodhana*: "with an evil heart, he seemed like he wanted to burn *Bhīma* like a fire (*dīdhakṣuriva pāvakaḥ*) burns a forest

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When I was giving birth to *Savyasachi*, a voice told me in the night,  
'Your son will conquer the earth and his fame will touch heaven.  
Having killed the *Kurus* in a battle among men, *Dhananjaya Kounteya* will obtain the kingdom  
and will perform three sacrifices with his brothers.'

<sup>92</sup> Staal Vol. 1, p. 118

<sup>93</sup> MBh. 5.88.83

*na hi vairam samāsādyā praśāmyati vṛkodarah |*  
*sucirādapi bhīmasya na hi vairam praśāmyati |*  
*yāvadantaṃ na nayati śātravāṅśatrukarśanaḥ | |*

<sup>94</sup> MBh. 5.93.3

*kurūnām pāṇḍavānām ca śamaḥ syādīti bhārata |*  
*aprayatnena vīrāṇāmetadyatitumāgataḥ | |*

(*bhīmasenamayaṃ dāvam*).<sup>95</sup> Quite literally, this translates to “a forest consisting of Bhīmasena,” a suitable reference to Bhīma’s massive size and to reflect the Kuru monarch’s expansive rage. Knowing his intentions, Kṛṣṇa places an iron effigy before the king, who injures himself while crushing it in an embrace. But the forest fire reference once again summons up the Khāṇḍava Forest burning<sup>96</sup> where Agni’s insatiable rage and appetite are satisfied by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna at the beginning of the epic. To slightly extend this metaphor, Kṛṣṇa does not allow Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s fire to burn because it is unjust and would be against *dharma*. While the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest and the slaughter of its inhabitants is permitted since it is by Agni’s personal request, Kṛṣṇa does not permit Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s fire to consume Bhīma here. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s anger is released (*samutsṛjya*)<sup>97</sup> and his mind is filled with sorrow at thinking he killed the Pāṇḍava, but Kṛṣṇa reveals that Bhīma lives and scolds the king for supporting Duryodhana who was rightfully avenged by Bhīma for assaulting Draupadī.<sup>98</sup> As we’ve seen in all these examples in this section, Anger is often equated and metaphorically described as fire, but this comparison clarifies that anger must be experienced and acted upon at the right time by those whose actions and intentions are deemed dharmically proper much like a yajña must be performed at the astronomically-determined proper moment. It is this notion of dharmically-ordained or mandated acts of burning that I turn to in this next section.

### **§7 Yuddha as Yajña**

***asmākaṃ senā avatū pra yutsu | |***  
***Indra āsām netā brhaspatir-***  
***dakṣiṇā yajñāḥ pura etū somaḥ |***  
***devasenānāmabhibhañjatīnām***

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<sup>95</sup> MBh. 11.11.13-14: quite literally a “forest consisting of Bhīma.”

*duṣṭātmā bhīmamanvaicchaddidhaksuriva pāvakaḥ*

<sup>96</sup> MBh, 1.214-219

<sup>97</sup> MBh. 11.11.21

sa tu kopaṃ samutsṛjya gatamanyur mahāmanāḥ |  
hā hā bhīmeti cukrośa bhūyaḥ śokasamanvitaḥ | |

<sup>98</sup> MBh. 11.12

***jayantīnām maruto yantvagre* || TS 4.6.4.1h**  
**Let our army be in the front of the battle,**  
**Let Indra, Br̥haspati, the gift-offering (dakṣiṇā),**  
**the yajña, and Soma go in front.**  
**Let the victorious Maruts at the front lead**  
**the divine armies which cause destruction.**

A few particular sections of the *Śānti Parvan* emphasize the important role the Brahmins play in the performance and sponsorship of *yajñas*, and sacrifice's relationship with warfare. The focus here seems to be on the necessity of close ties between Brahmins and Kṣatriyas. Yudhiṣṭhira's all-consuming grief is therapeutically managed by Bhīṣma's patient lectures on far-ranging topics related to the king's dharmic responsibilities, slowly convincing the new king that he should set aside his grief and any thoughts of becoming a forest-dwelling renunciate. He must rule the kingdom which he and his brothers rightfully won in war. Early on in Book 12, the four Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī seem fed up with Yudhiṣṭhira's failure to fulfill his regal duties and each lecture him with various accounts and anecdotes of past rulers. Bhīma rebukes Yudhiṣṭhira, asking what the point of the whole war was if he wouldn't assume kingship.<sup>99</sup> Arjuna tells the story of brahmins who became forest-dwelling renunciates only to meet Indra who tells them to return home and fulfill their duties as householders.<sup>100</sup> Nakula explains that the fulfillment of the householder rituals constitutes a form of renunciation in itself that doesn't require abandoning one's family. He urges Yudhiṣṭhira to adhere to kṣatriya dharma and reign.<sup>101</sup> Sahadeva agrees with his twin, adding that the king must not only conquer the world but also enjoy the fruits of his labor.<sup>102</sup> Draupadī, who by this point in the epic has repeatedly demonstrated her deep knowledge of Kṣatriya dharma, makes the economic argument of reminding her husband that

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<sup>99</sup> MBh. 12.10

<sup>100</sup> MBh. 12.11

<sup>101</sup> MBh. 12.12

<sup>102</sup> MBh. 12.13

the warrior's dharma differs from the Brahmin's and that the latter relies on the king's gifts (*dakṣiṇa*) after officiating sacrifices.<sup>103</sup> Arjuna's argument is on societal order and reminds Yudhiṣṭhira that the king's means for maintaining and establishing dharma is the *daṇḍa*, the king's scepter *and* the punitive rod of justice; kings must vanquish their enemies and mete out justice to their subjects.<sup>104</sup>

Throughout Book 12, Yudhiṣṭhira continues arguing his case for abandoning kingship to become a renunciate, continuing to learn more about specific aspects of kingship from Bhīṣma. Bhīṣma reiterates the importance of performing *yajñas* and maintaining the societal structure that allows brahmins to perform those *yajñas*. He recommends keeping a virtuous brahmin as the household priest to bring the greatest benefit to the king and his kingdom, and presents an account of the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (RV 10.90) to make his point that the Brahmins are responsible for protecting dharma while the Kṣatriya's dharma is to protect people with the *daṇḍa*.<sup>105</sup> The necessity for this close relationship between the brahmin and kṣatriya is further emphasized in 12.98, where Bhīṣma reiterates that the kṣatriya who fights on behalf of brahmins engages in a great self-sacrifice and is thus absolved of his sin (*pāpa*).

Bhīṣma lists three actions that purify the king: 1) by punishing (*nigraheṇa*) the wicked, 2) by undertaking sacrifices, and 3) by giving gifts (*yajñairdānaiḥ*).<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, because the king takes on the risk of dying in battle, he is compared to the *yūpa* sacrificial post to which the animal sacrifice (*paśu*) was tied with a rope (12.98.9-10):

*sa sarvayajñairījāno rājāthābhayadakṣiṇaiḥ |*

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<sup>103</sup> MBh. 12.14

<sup>104</sup> MBh. 12.15

<sup>105</sup> MBh. 12.73

<sup>106</sup> MBh. 12.98.3

*bhīṣma uvāca |*  
*nigraheṇa ca pāpānām sādḥūnām pragraheṇa ca |*  
*yajñairdānaiśca rājāno bhavanti śucayo'malāḥ ||*

*anubhūyeha bhadrāṇi prāpnotīndrasalokatām ||*  
*brāhmaṇārthe samutpanne yo'bhiniḥsṛtya yudhyate |*  
*ātmānaṃ yūpamucchṛitya sa yajño'nantadakṣiṇaḥ ||*

The king performs all the sacrifices and gives fearlessness as a gift-offering.

Having experienced prosperity, he reaches Indra's realm.

Having arisen, when he advances to fight for the sake of brahmins,

He erects himself as the sacrificial post (yūpa) and his *yajña* produces infinite *dakṣiṇa*.

Just as the Brahmin performs his duties seated by the sacrificial altar (*vedī*) the kṣatriya engages in a sacrificial rite on the battlefield. As the *yūpa*, the king stands at the center of the entire sacrificial rite, connecting the earthly and the heavenly realms. It is to him that the all-important animal sacrifice (*paśu*) is tied – he must slay it. As a warrior performing all the sacrifices (*sarvayajñairvījāno*) and engaging in the necessary warfare, the king gives the brahmins and all his subjects the ultimate *dakṣiṇa* of fearlessness (*abhaya*). This opens a much longer and detailed discussion in 12.99 of ways in which the components of the *yajña* and the sacrificial arena have correlates in the military context which I've presented in two charts below.

In this *adhyāya*, Bhīṣma recounts a conversation between Indra and King Ambarīśa to teach Yudhiṣṭhira what realms (*loka*-s) warriors attain after dying in war. Indra explains that warriors who perform the *saṃgrāma-yajña*<sup>107</sup> (the sacrifice of war) or the *yuddha-yajña*<sup>108</sup> attain the highest realms. King Ambarīśa asks Indra what things in battle equate to the oblations (*haviḥ*), ghee (*ājya*) offerings, the gift to the priest (*dakṣiṇā*), and the officiating priests (*ṛtvijas*) – the four most fundamental components of any *yajña*. Indra provides a catalog of sacrificial terminologies and their equivalents on the battlefield, dividing it between two metaphors. The first part

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<sup>107</sup> MBh. 12.99.12

*indra uvāca |*  
*etasya vītastāta sudevasya babhūva ha |*  
*saṃgrāmayajñāḥ sumahānyaścānyo yudhyate narah ||*

<sup>108</sup> MBH. 12.99.13

*saṃnaddho dākṣiṇāḥ sarvo yodhaḥ prāpya camūmukham |*  
*yuddhayajñādhūkārastho bhavatīti vimiścayāḥ ||*

(12.99.15-29) captured in Table 1 is the description of the sacrificial altar and the *vedī*, where the tri-directional fires, the ladles, priests, and the various offerings are equated to different types of weapons, groups of warriors, battle cries, and animals. The passage builds from the various parts of the sacrificial arena and the preparation for the *yuddha-yajña* to the actual slaughter and bloodshed.<sup>109</sup> The metaphor then switches to that of a river (12.99.30-34) charted in Table 2, where the heaps of dead warriors and the blood pouring from their bodies is likened to that of a surging river like the Ganges with its cleansing properties, perhaps alluding to the end of the epic when the parade of slain warriors emerges from the Gaṅgā's waters.<sup>110</sup> The warrior who immerses himself in that river of blood, flesh, hair and bones goes to the highest realm (*paramam gatim*).<sup>111</sup> Thus, the warrior who dies in action never needs to be ritually purified after death or cleansed. Yudhiṣṭhira, who repeatedly tries to abandon the warrior's life for that of the brahmin's is re-assured that a warrior can attain the same level of liberation through dharmically proper and mandated, necessary violence that an ascetic can through non-violence (*ahimsā*) and urged to not feel guilt about the Pāṇḍavās' actions.

<b>Table 1 – The Yajña as Battlefield</b>	
<b>Sacrifice - Yajña</b>	<b>Battlefield - Yuddha</b>
<i>rtvijah</i>	Elephants
<i>adhvaryu</i>	Horses
<i>havih</i> (oblations)	Enemy flesh
<i>ājya</i> (ghee)	Blood of war dead
<i>srucah</i> (ladles)	Spears, javelins, swords, spikes, axes
<i>sruva mahān</i> (big ladle)	Yellow straight arrows
<i>sadasyāh</i> (spectators)	Jackals, vultures, crows

<sup>109</sup> The most detailed study of warfare as the yajña remains Hildebeitel's 1990 study, where on p.318 he also documents the use of *raṇayajña* (5.57.12, 5.154.4) and *śastrayajña* (5.139.29); Reich 2001, 145 further develops Hildebeitel's discussion and cites another instance of *yuddhayajña* in MBh. 18.2.2. She goes on to link this concept with the *vrātyas*' practice of *sattra* rites in the Khāṇḍava Forest and as an agonistic sacrificial practice regionally specific to the Kurupāñcāla region (p. 147-148); Parpola in Staal 1983, Vol. 2, 47 notes that in the Baudh. Sr. Sū. 18.26, we are told that the Kuru brahmins went on an expedition against the Pāñcālas, perhaps hinting at an earlier strain of the epic's plot, but says that this region remains the "core area of Vedism."

<sup>110</sup> MBh. 15.40-44: Gaṅgā's bookending the epic as the source of the Kuru clan through Bhīṣma's birth and the waters in which the dead reside after liberation serves as yet another instance of circularity in this epic paralleling that of Agni's which we are discussing here and merits further investigation.

<sup>111</sup> MBh. 12.99.40

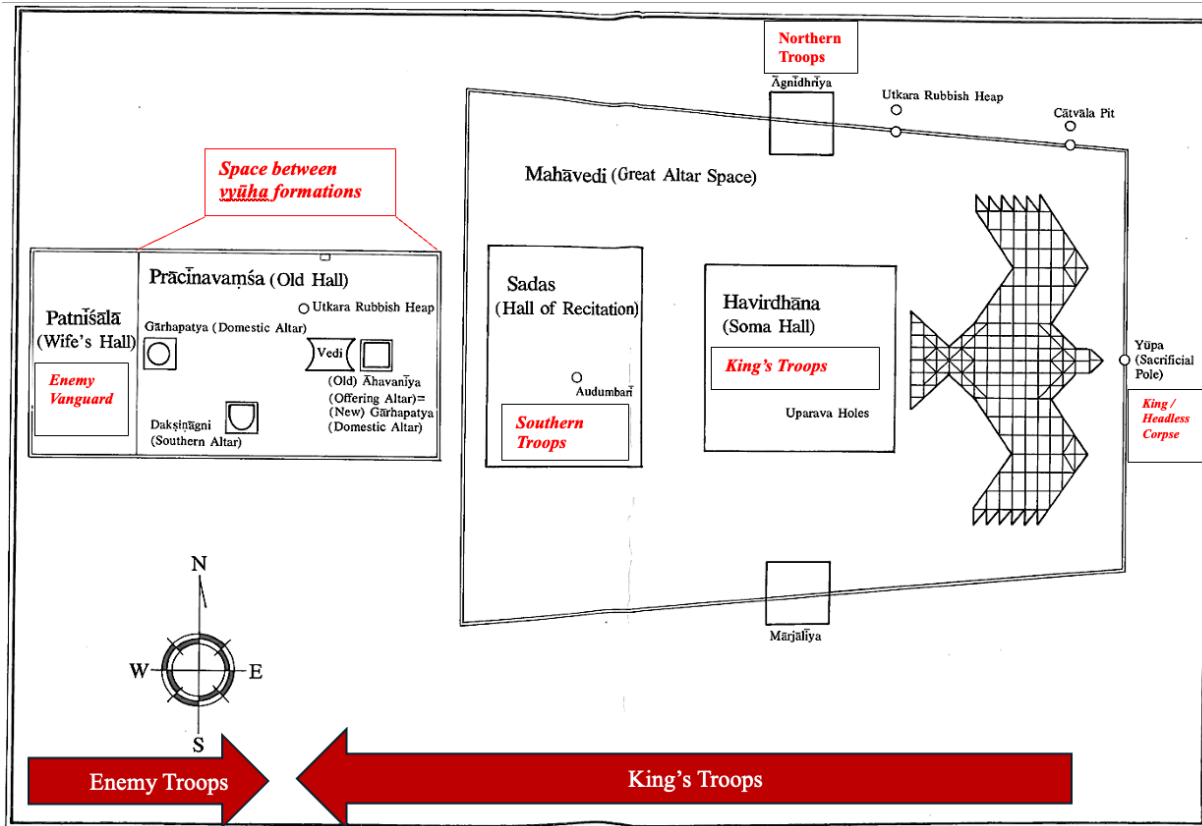
<i>sphya</i> (sticks for stirring the sacrifice)	Swords with tiger fur scabbards and ivory handles)
<i>vasu</i> (prize / reward)	Blazing spears, battle axes made of iron and steel
<i>pūmāhutiḥ</i>	Blood flowing to ground
<i>sāma</i> hymns	Vanguard of army shouting cut / slice ( <i>chindhi bhindhi</i> )
<i>havidhānam</i>	Vanguard of enemy army
<i>śyenacitah</i>	Armored elephants and horses
<i>yūpa</i> made of khadira wood - 8 sided	Headless body standing
<i>idā</i> (goddess in the sacrifice)	Goaded elephant screams
<i>vaśatkāra</i> – exclamation used when offering oblations	Palms slapping
<i>trisāmā</i> (triple Sāman) sung by udgātṛ	Battle drum
<i>darbha</i> grasses strewn across altar area	Heads of enemies, necks of horses and elephants
<i>Patnīśālā</i> – wife’s quarters	Enemy vanguard
<i>havidhānam</i> (oblation storage area)	King's troops
<i>sadas</i> (sacrificial enclosure to East)	Soldiers to the south
<i>Agnīdhra</i> – priest accompanying Brahman priest	Soldiers to the north
<i>Vedī</i> of the <i>yajña</i> where the 3 sacrificial fires are burning and they are the 3 Vedas ( <i>vedāstrayo'gnayah</i> )	Space between two <i>vyūha</i> -s (battle formations)

<b>Table 2 – The River as Battlefield</b>	
<b>River</b>	<b>War</b>
Turtles and frogs	Heaps of javelins and drums
Stones	Bones
Boats on the river	Swords and shields
Moss / weeds	Hair
River fording spot ( <i>saṅkramā</i> )	Broken chariots / corpses of elephants and horses
Cane Bushes	Banners
Alligators	Dead elephants
Fish, vultures, herons cranes	Spear, swords, flags
<i>Nadī</i> (river)	<i>āvabhr̥tham</i> (final bath after mahāyajña)

While the tables provide a convenient way to quickly see the correlations made, charting Table 1 onto a diagram of the sacrificial arena used for the Agnicayana Soma rite further aids our understanding of the direction in which the *yajña* is spread (*tanoti*). In Figure 1, we see that the *yūpa* signifying the king/general is placed at the Eastern end of the enclosure and that all his troops move Westward until they reach the *Vedī* and the three sacred fires. In the *Prācīnavamśa* (the Old Hall), the king’s troops meet the enemy vanguard advancing Eastward from the *Patnīśālā* (Wife’s Hall). That the two armies meet in the space housing the triple-fire and *vedī* further supports Reich’s reading of the *yajña* as possibly being agonistic in origin.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Cf. footnote 103.





**Figure 1. Diagram of the Sacrificial arena with Yuddha-Yajña Components**

**(Image adapted from Staal 1983 Vol. 1, p. 718-719)**

This section provides some of the strongest evidence for this paper’s argument that Agni is the Vedic deity who commands a central role in the epic, punctuating its beginning, middle, and end. Agni and his fiery imagery related to anger and military prowess are a constant throughout the epic, and Draupadī constantly tries to stir anger in her husbands, hoping they’ll take action in accordance with their kṣatriya dharma and avenge her. Just as Draupadī argues that the only way for enmity between the cousins to end is through the successful conclusion of the war, the metaphor of the *yuddhayajña* also suggests the theme of completion; only when the enemy is slain according to the dharmic laws of warfare will the ritual be deemed successfully completed, and the officiant and his brahmins gain their rewards.

Following Yudhiṣṭhira’s arguments for clemency, Bhīṣma also explains that the warrior

must never trust his enemy because the risk of an attack is an ever-present reality in their *realpolitik*-driven world. He explains this principle using the story of King Brahmadata and Pujani, the dharma-conscious Jivajivaka bird that lived in his palace. Pūjanī raises her son along with the prince, feeding them both fruits that she'd fly out and collect, but as the boy grows older, he takes the baby bird and kills it out of jealousy. Pūjanī pecks the boy's eyes out in revenge, saying that no one should ever trust a kṣatriya. The king tries to convince her that the two of them are even now, having harmed each other's offspring, and that she should stay in the palace, but Pūjanī explains to the king that one can never trust the other party once an injury has been committed. The five sources of enmity (*vairam pañcasamutthānam*) that she lists all, rather unsurprisingly, apply to the Pāṇḍavas' own situation leading to the war: caused by women, born from property, things said, rivalries, and offenses against others.<sup>113</sup> She, too, uses the metaphor of fire to describe the rage hidden deep inside an individual when there is a cause for enmity, saying that it is like the fire hidden deep inside a piece of wood: it can flare up at any time given just a little friction or a spark.<sup>114</sup> Just like Aurva's fire burning at the bottom of the ocean, the fire of enmity (*vairāgni*) is not pacified (*śāmyate*) without destroying one party or the other (*śāmyatyadagdhvā vinā hyekatarakṣayāt*).<sup>115</sup> Avenging one's enemies is particularly beneficial when also protecting brahmins who must be revered, honored, and protected like one's ancestors (MBh. 13.33.6 *te pūjyāste namaskāryāste raksyāh pitaro yathā*). When brahmins prosper, the kingdom likewise does, but if disrespected, the brahmin's anger (*kopa*) can burn everything. Though they lack manyu, which seems to be solely a kṣatriya quality, a brahmin's anger is fueled by his luminous energy (*tejas*).

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<sup>113</sup> MBh. 12.137. 39:

*vairam pañcasamutthānam tacca budhyanti paṇḍitāḥ |*  
*strīkṛtām vāstujaṃ vāgjaṃ sasapatnāparādhajam ||*

*n.b.* I read *strīkṛtām* as an adjective modifying *vairam*, giving it the meaning I use above.

<sup>114</sup> MBh. 12.137.40c

*channaṃ saṃtiṣṭhate vairam gūḍho'gniriva dāruṣu | |*

<sup>115</sup> MBh. 12.137.42

Nothing can pacify the angry brahmin's unending rage, burning like Agni's *sikhā* (hair) and spreading in all directions through the forest.<sup>116</sup> We are reminded again of the burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest early in the epic; once Agni desires something, he rages until wholly consuming it. The warrior's *manyu* for restoring dharma for the brahmins' sake must mirror this.<sup>117</sup>

Throughout the epic, we are shown how fire and its associated masculine, psycho-physiological material essence of *tejas* produce fearsome warriors and the destructive capabilities of brahmins. In an instance where *tejas* fertilizes *tejas* (MBh. 13.83.53: *tejastejasi*) with devastating effects and produces offspring without the involvement of a mortal woman's womb, the created beings are radiant and violent warriors just as we saw with the *yajña* that created Draupadī and Dhṛṣṭadyumna. Their births from the *vedi* resemble that of Kumāra-Skanda, which results from Śiva's semen falling into Agni, described as *tejas* combining with *tejas*.<sup>118</sup> Here, the extremely energy-laden embryo is placed in the River Gaṅgā to gestate and named *pāvaki* (fire's child)<sup>119</sup>:

*sa tu garbho mahātejā gāṅgeyaḥ pāvakodbhavaḥ |*

*divyaṃ śaravaṇaṃ prāpya vavṛdhe'dbhutadarśanaḥ ||*

But Gaṅgā's greatly luminous (*mahātejā*) embryo was generated from Pāvaka (Agni)

Having reached a thick thicket of reeds, it grew to have a wondrous appearance.

The story of Kumāra's birth also praises Agni as the ultimate creator deity (*sarvabhāvanah*) who

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<sup>116</sup> MBh 13.33.7-9

*abhicārainuḥpāyaisca daheyaṇi tejasā |*  
*niḥśeṣaṃ kuṇḍitāḥ kuryurugrāḥ satyaparākramāḥ ||*  
*nāntameṣāṃ praṇaśyāmi na diśaścāpyaḥpāvṛtāḥ |*  
*kuṇḍitāḥ samudīkṣante dāveṣvagniśikhā iva ||*  
*vidyanteṣāṃ sāhasikā guṇāsteṣāmatīva hi |*  
*kūpā iva tṛṇacchannā viśuddhā dyaurivāpare ||*

<sup>117</sup> Srinivasan 1983, 548-549 notes that Agni and Rudra share a dual nature of being very generous to those who propitiate them while being capable of cosmically destructive rage, and cites *Taitt. Sam.* 5.5.7.4 where Agni is said to be equivalent to Rudra.

<sup>118</sup> MBh. 13.83.53

*taṭpapāta tadā cāgnau vavṛdhe cādbhutopamam |*  
*tejastejasi saṃprkṛtamekayonitvamāgatam || 53*

<sup>119</sup> MBh.13.84.75

along with Śiva was not cursed by Uma with sterility.<sup>120</sup> Described as a heap of energy (*tejorāśiḥ*)<sup>121</sup> Agni is sought out as the god who is able to destroy all fears, and is capable of going everywhere (MBh. 13.84.17: *sarvagah*). Similarly, his offspring Kumāra is capable of destroying all those who cause fear in others and those who are enemies of the gods.

These qualities resonate with the three Agni-born Pāñcālan children who constantly clamor for the total destruction of the Kauravas and restoration of rightful kingship.<sup>122</sup> Śikhaṇḍi defeats, or at least permits Arjuna to defeat Bhīṣma in battle, Dhṛṣṭadyumna kills Droṇa to avenge Drupada's humiliation, and throughout the epic Draupadī repeatedly urges her husbands to kill the Kauravas to avenge her repeated assaults. The three fire-born Pāñcālans seem to agree with Pūjanī that enmities can only be managed with the utter destruction of one's foes, and without their actions, there would not have been a prospect of peace.

### **§8 Ahimsā as an Aṃśa of Peace**

*śaṃ no vātaḥ pavatāṃ mātariśvā śaṃ nastapatu sūryaḥ |*  
*ahani śaṃ bhavantu naśśaṃ rātriḥ prati dhīyatām |*  
*śamuṣā no vyacchatu śamāditya udetu na | TA 4.42*

**Peace - Let the Mātariśvā wind cleanse us;**  
**Peace – Let the Sun warm us;**  
**Peace – Let there be Day for us;**  
**Peace – Let the night be held off;**  
**Peace – Let the dawn gape for us;**  
**Peace – Let the Sun rise for us;**

A lengthy scholarly discourse on this peace in Indic literature precedes this article, but

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<sup>120</sup> MBh. 13.83.51-54; 13.85 relates the tale of Śiva in the form of Varuṇa, the sea god, performing a *yajña* and produced the children of Agni (Aṅgiras), Varuṇa (Bhṛgu), and Brahma (Kavi).

<sup>121</sup> MBh. 13.84.18

<sup>122</sup> MBh. 13.84.10

astreṇāmoghapātena śaktyā taṃ ghātayiṣyati |  
yato vo bhayamutpannaṃ ye cānye suraśatravaḥ

here I respond to an article on ancient Indian conceptions of peace that concludes the following:

In one sentence, it means that Indian antiquity has produced no credible ideas about political peace. This may look surprising in a civilization in which mental peace played such an important role. Mental peace is central in Buddhism and in many manifestations of Brahmanism... Human society, even in periods of political peace, was often rejected as not conducive to mental peace.<sup>123</sup>

This applies philosophical discussions of peace directly to political discourse, thereby rendering the two completely incompatible. Instead, we suggest that mental and political peace were inextricably linked and that ancient Indian conceptions of peace included both in its definition, something which Bhīṣma makes a point of teaching Yudhiṣṭhira. After the war concluded, Yudhiṣṭhira looked to Bhīṣma lying on his bed of arrows for guidance on coping with the mental anguish caused by war. Their conversation makes up the *Śānti Parva*, or the “Section on Peace” where, among many things, Bhīṣma teaches the Pāṇḍavas about *śānti* (peace) (12.168-169). *Śānti* refers to the king’s peaceful mental state which is reflected in his kingdom’s political stability. This understanding of *śānti* connects with the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE critic-poet Ānandavardhana’s discussion of the epic’s overall emotional state as that of *śāntarasa*. He suggests that the futility of war as depicted in this epic should lead readers to become disenchanted with the material realm since they attain their goals by sustaining great losses. Sullivan also suggests that self-willed deaths, like the interconnected deaths of Ambā and Bhīṣma, highlight the futility of the acquisitive mode of life, and promote that of the renouncer.<sup>124</sup> He allegorically reads the central message as one telling audiences to focus on transcendental goals.<sup>125</sup> Notwithstanding arguments about the Kāśmīri critic’s relative proximity to the text in comparison to us, one might argue that

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<sup>123</sup> Bronkhorst. (2016). Thinking about Peace in Ancient India. In *Peace in the Ancient World* (pp. 67–97). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. p. 88.

<sup>124</sup> Sullivan 2006, 64, 72

<sup>125</sup> Sullivan 2011, 3

Śāntarasa applies better to book 12 than to the entire epic. It is in this section that Bhīṣma teaches that without a calmed mind, the king cannot be just or successfully fulfill the other duties requires of him. Richard Salomon claims that *śānti* in the *MBh.* is used to refer solely to mental peace, but our discussion demonstrates that mental and political peace are closely inter-related, if not inter-dependent concepts.<sup>126</sup>

The intent of Bhīṣma's discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira is twofold. The first is to shift the king's mental state after the devastating war from grieving to level-minded clarity. Since Yudhiṣṭhira was leading the Pāṇḍavas, he was driven by violence to defeat the Kauravas and become king – but this was dharmically required of him and asked of him by Draupadī. Though the war ends, the violent and disturbed mental state of the survivors must be pacified to permit the transition to peacetime. Yudhiṣṭhira is wracked with guilt over the war's destruction and seeks guidance to restore his own mental peace to restore peace in the kingdom, saying (*MBh.* 12.7.31-33):

*so'smākaṃ vairaṇ puruṣo durmantriṇ pragrahaṃ gataḥ |*  
*duryodhanakṛte hyetatkulaṃ no vinipātitaṃ |*  
*avadhyānāṃ vadhaṃ kṛtvā loke prāptāḥ sma vācyatām ||*  
*kulasyāsyāntakaraṇaṃ durmatim pāpakāriṇam |*  
*rājā rāṣṭreśvaram kṛtvā dhṛtarāṣṭro'dya śocati ||*  
*hatāḥ sūrāḥ kṛtaṃ pāpaṃ viśayaḥ svo vināśitaḥ |*  
*hatvā no vigato manyuḥ śoko māṃ rundhayatyayam ||*

An enemy of ours, a hostile person, took control through evil advisor. Indeed, because of Duryodhana, our family has been destroyed. We have committed the slaying of those who should not have been killed, and now we have earned reproach in the world. The king Dhṛtarāṣṭra now grieves, having made that evil-minded, sinful Duryodhana—who has been the end of this family – the lord of the kingdom. The brave warriors are slain, sin has been done, our land has been destroyed. Even after killing (our enemies), our rage

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<sup>126</sup> Salomon, R. (2007). Ancient India: Peace Within and War Without. In War and Peace in the Ancient World, K.A. Raaflaub (Ed.), p. 59

(*manyu*) has not departed – this grief overcomes me.

It is recognized that violent conflict resolution will not serve the king in restoring a peaceful kingdom, and he can only rule when his mind is in a state of *śānti*. Second, an important component of the coronation rituals is the *śānti* rite to pacify the king from his state of *manyu* to *śamam* through *abhiṣeka*, or a ritual bath.<sup>127</sup> Bhīṣma urges Yudhiṣṭhira to establish mental *śānti* with the larger goal of restoring peace to the post-war kingdom. Thus, Bhīṣma’s emphasis on psychological peace has very real consequences for the possibility of political peace, particularly since Yudhiṣṭhira wishes to abdicate the throne and become a forest-dwelling ascetic. For Bhīṣma, *ahiṃsā*, or nonviolence, is a critical component of a good ruler’s character. War is a last resort and a peaceful state, where laws adhere to *dharma* is ideal for producing peace. The Śānti Parva urges the king to tolerate differences by maintaining a peaceful mental state, upholding *dharma*, and practicing *ahiṃsā*. Thus, even in a situation in which the Pāṇḍavas are dharmically required to go to war, they are warned against warfare as the first-choice solution.

How then does *ahiṃsā* apply to the sacrificial context of the *yuddha-yajña*? Tull, Following Schmidt (1968) suggests that the notion of *ahiṃsā* originates from the Vedic sacrificial rites which are highly cognizant of avoiding injuries to all those involved in the *yajña*, including the *paśu* itself, which is killed through suffocation rather than bloodshed.<sup>128</sup> Bhīṣma’s argument for non-violence is not as extreme as that of the Jainas, but of course as a *kṣatriya* whose *dharma* requires punitive justice, it cannot be. Nevertheless, the aged warrior urges Yudhiṣṭhira to live by *ahiṃsā* for personal happiness and presents him with a version of the “golden rule.”<sup>129</sup> In the next section

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<sup>127</sup> McGrath 2017, 65 note 65 discusses this sacred sprinkling of water in greater detail as an act that initiates the king into office. Both the *abhiṣeka* and *rājasūya* are associated with Soma rites and appear to have developed in the late Vedic period.

<sup>128</sup> Tull 1996, 224; Whether the origins of *ahiṃsā* lie in Vedism or Śramaṇa movements is heavily debated, most recently by Dickstein 2024, who argues for later Brahmanical integration of Jaina notions of *ahiṃsā*.

<sup>129</sup> MBh. 13.114

(13.115) Bhīṣma explains vegetarianism is an important aspect of *ahiṃsā*, saying that all humans should refrain from harming animals.

The Pāñcālans are as hellbent on war as the Pāṇḍavas (except perhaps Bhīma, at times) are for peaceful resolution and even submission to Duryodhana. Following the end of the war, and the night raid (*Sauptika Parva*), Yudhiṣṭhira's mind is unrestful and grief-stricken from the violence, preventing him from taking up the kingship as expected of him. Bhīṣma's speeches from his bed of arrows teach the new king that the king's dharma expects him to develop expertise (*kovidā*) in both war (*vigraha*) and peace (*saṃdhi*).<sup>130</sup> Bṛhaspati, the chief household priest of the gods is also present and says that he'll outline six doors to Dharma<sup>131</sup>, among which the best is non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) (MBh. 13.114.1-2):

*yudhiṣṭhira uvāca |*  
*ahiṃsā vaidikam karma dhyānamindriyasamyamaḥ |*  
*tapo'tha guruśuśrūṣā kiṃ śreyah puruṣaṃ prati ||*  
*bṛhaspatiruvāca |*  
*sarvānyetāni dharmasya pṛthagdvārāṇi sarvaśaḥ |*  
*śṇu saṃkīrtyamānāni śaḍeva bharatarṣabha ||*

Yudhiṣṭhira said, “Non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), the rites of the Vedas, action (*karma*), meditation, controlling the senses, austerities, or serving the teacher? What is best for a man??

‘Bṛhaspati said, “All of these are entirely different doors to dharma. Listen, O Bull of the Bharatas, I will describe all six.”

He goes on to explain that non-violence and reticence in using the *daṇḍa* against other living beings is the best way to ensure happiness after death (MBh. 13.114.5):

*ahiṃsakāni bhūtāni daṇḍena vinihanti yaḥ |*

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<sup>130</sup> MBh. 12.118.10

*yuktācāram svaviśaye saṃdhiṃvighrahakovidam |*  
*rājñastrivargavettāram paurajānāpadaḥpriyam || 10 ||*

One who has proper conduct within his own domain, is skilled in peace and war, knowledgeable of the three pursuits of life, and beloved by both the city-dwellers and the countryside citizens.

<sup>131</sup> MBh. 13.114.1

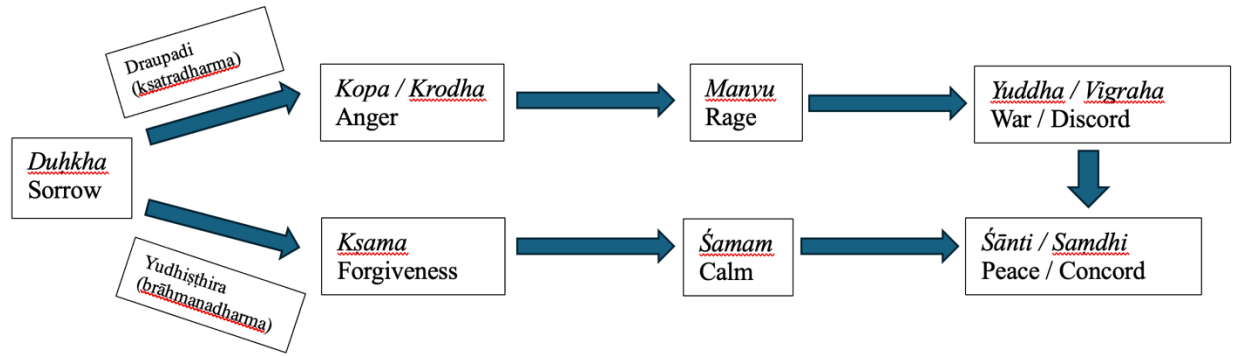


*ātmanaḥ sukhamanvicchanna sa pretya sukhī bhavet ||*

He who harms non-violent beings with the rod for the sake of his own satisfaction will be happy after death.

Though, one wonders whether the *karmaphala* of such actions will actually produce any happiness even in the next life. At the end of Bhīṣma’s teachings, Yudhiṣṭhira is convinced to return to Hastināpura, being reassured that if he rejoices in the warrior’s dharma (*kṣatradharmarataḥ*) and honors the ancestral spirits and gods (*pitṛndevāṃśca*) that he shall attain the highest good. He’s told to let go (*vyetu*) of the *jvaraḥ* (fever) of his mind (*mānasaḥ*), that is his grief.<sup>132</sup> Thus, it seems that after experiencing an injury, an individual can pursue two possible paths as outlined by

Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī:



Even after all the bloodshed is over, driven by Draupadī’s fiery rhetoric (who was now pacified), Yudhiṣṭhira’s mind remains agitated by great grief. So much so that Bhīṣma orders him twice in just the space of four *ślokas* to dispel (*vyetu*) his mental *jvaraḥ*, a term that can mean fever, affliction, or illness.<sup>133</sup> The use of *jvaraḥ* here recalls the earlier account in 12.274 where Yudhiṣṭhira is told

<sup>132</sup>MBh. 13.152.7-8

*kṣatradharmarataḥ pārtha pitṛndevāṃśca tarpaya |  
śreyasā yoksyase caiva vyetu te mānaso jvaraḥ || 7 ||  
rañjayasva prajāḥ sarvāḥ prakṛtīḥ parisāntvaya |  
suhṛdaḥ phalasaṅkārairabhyarcaya yathārhatāḥ || 8 ||*

O Partha! Remain engaged in the dharma of kṣatriyas and satisfy the ancestors and the gods. With your mental anxiety (*jvaraḥ*) dispelled, engage in what is beneficial. Delight all your people and pacifying your mind. Honor your well-wishers with respect and awards as is appropriate.

<sup>133</sup> MBh. 13.152.5

*uvāca cainam madhuraṃ tataḥ śāntanavo nṛpaḥ |*

of Agni’s division into different portions of fire that are embodied as different types of fevers in living things, and humans are afflicted by the illness at birth, death, and in the middle of life, which seems to be the one plaguing Yudhiṣṭhira now.<sup>134</sup> The most terrible of these *jvara*-s is known as *tejas*, rather interestingly connecting the fiery mental state of an angered warrior with the illness that is a manifestation of Śiva’s rage. Once again, we find Agni and Śiva linked as they were in the narrative of Kumāra’s birth.

But eventually, Bhīṣma decides that the time for attaining *mokṣa* has come, and Yudhiṣṭhira’s mind returns to its natural state (*prakṛtim āpannaḥ*), though the word choice of *prakṛtim* referring to his “natural state” here seems deliberate.<sup>135</sup> Yudhiṣṭhira, as we see throughout the epic, seems to possess the character of an ascetic renouncer more than that of a *kṣatriya*, so we are left wondering if these hundreds of chapters of discourse served any purpose at all in changing Yudhiṣṭhira’s character. At the very beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> Parvan, Yudhiṣṭhira sinks to the ground in grief when he meets Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhāri after the final rites for Bhīṣma are concluded.<sup>136</sup> Kṛṣṇa and even Dhṛtarāṣṭra himself tell Yudhiṣṭhira to toughen up and stop grieving, while Vyāsa complains that all the attempts to instruct Yudhiṣṭhira on dharma have been in vain. Yudhiṣṭhira’s grief is finally pacified through Kṛṣṇa’s discourse in 14.13, and he takes up the kingdom as is required of him (14.14.6-7):

*praśāntacetāḥ kauravyaḥ svarājyaṃ prāp̄ya kevalam |*  
*vyāsaṃ ca nāradaṃ caiva tāmścānyānabravīn̄rpaḥ | |*

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*praviśasva puraṃ rājanvyetu te mānaso jvaraḥ | |*

Then the king, who was Śantanu’s son, spoke these sweetly, “O King, enter the city and let your mental affliction (*jvaraḥ*) be dispelled.

<sup>134</sup> 12.274

<sup>135</sup> MBh. 13.152.2

*rājanprakṛtimāpannaḥ kururājo yudhiṣṭhiraḥ |*  
*sahito bhrātr̄bhīḥ sarvaiḥ pārthivaiścānyāyibhīḥ*

O King, the Kuru King Yudhiṣṭhira, having returned to his natural state (*prakṛtim*), was accompanied by all his brothers and all his allied kings.

<sup>136</sup> MBh. 14.1

*āśvāsito 'ham prāgvṛddhairbhavadbhirmunipuṅgavaiḥ |  
na sūksmamapi me kiṃcidvyalīkamaḥ vidyate | |*

Having obtained only his own kingdom, Kouravya's mind was tranquil. The king spoke to Vyasa, Nārada and the others, "I have been comforted by you, the elders and foremost sages. There doesn't seem to be the slightest bit of affliction (*vyalīka*) left in me.

Thus, Yudhiṣṭhira rules quite happily for 36 years and the Pāṇḍavas finally enjoy the fruits of their labor and status, but Yudhiṣṭhira eventually decides that the time for him to abdicate the throne has arrived. With all of Draupadī's biological sons dead, the Pāṇḍavas coronate Parikṣit, Arjuna's grandson by Abhimanyu and Uttarā. Abhimanyu's own parentage is not through Draupadī, but rather through Kṛṣṇa's sister Subhadra, meaning that Draupadī's offspring and the Pāñcālans never inherit the throne, but the Yādavas do. As the Pāṇḍavas now begin their journey to the Himalāyas to live as renunciates, they are confronted by Agni who demands something of them once more.

### **§9 From Agni to Agni**

***agninvo'gnibhyo juṣṭānprokṣāmi | BŚS 10.27***  
**I sprinkle beloved Agni with Agnis.**

Agni appears in the epic one last time as the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī, and their newly adopted dog travel East after Yudhiṣṭhira abdicates the throne to Parikṣit. Agni asks Arjuna to return the Gāṇḍīva bow to its source now that it has served its purpose (MBh. 17.33-43):

*agnim te dadṛśustatra sthitaṃ śailamivāgrataḥ |  
mārgamāvṛtya tiṣṭhantaṃ sākṣātpuruṣavigrahaṃ | | 33 | |  
tato devaḥ sa saptārciḥ pāṇḍavānidamabravīt |  
bho bho pāṇḍusutā vīrāḥ pāvakaṃ mām vibodhata | | 34 | |  
yudhiṣṭhira mahābāho bhīmasena paramāpā |  
arjunāśvisutau vīrau nibodhata vaco mama | | 35 | |  
ahamagniḥ kuruśreṣṭhā mayā dagdhaṃ ca khāṇḍavam |  
arjunasya prabhāveṇa tathā nārāyaṇasya ca | | 36 | |  
ayaṃ vaḥ phalguno bhrātā gāṇḍīvaṃ paramāyudham |  
parityajya vanam yātu nānenārtho'sti kaścana | | 37 | |*

*cakraratnaṃ tu yatkr̥ṣṇe sthitamāsīnmahātmani |  
gataṃ tacca punarhaste kālenaiṣyati tasya ha || 38 ||  
varuṇādāhṛtaṃ pūrvam mayaitatpārthakāraṇāt |  
gāṇḍīvaṃ kāmukaśreṣṭhaṃ varuṇāyaiva dīyatām || 39 ||  
tataste bhrātaraḥ sarve dhananjayamacodayan |  
sa jale prākṣipattattu tathākṣayyau maheṣudhī || 40 ||  
tato'gnīrbharataśreṣṭha tatraivāntaradhīyata |  
yayūśca pāṇḍavā vīrāstataste dakṣiṇāmukhāḥ || 41 ||  
tataste tūttareṇaiva tīreṇa lavaṇāmbhasaḥ |  
jagmurbharataśārdūla diśaṃ dakṣiṇapaścimam || 42 ||  
tataḥ punaḥ samāvṛttāḥ paścimāṃ diśameva te |  
dadṛśurdvārakāṃ cāpi sāgareṇa paripltām || 43 ||*

They saw Agni standing before them, like a mountain. He stood there, barring their way, adopting a human form. The god with the seven flames addressed the Pāṇḍavas, “O, o, Sons of Pāṇḍu, heroes, listen! Know me to be the Fire God. O Mighty-Armed Yudhiṣṭhira! O Bhīmasena, scorcher of enemies! O Arjuna and the heroic sons of the Aśvins, listen to my words. I am Agni, O Best of the Kurus, the Khāṇḍava forest was burned by me using the extraordinary powers of Arjuna and of Nārāyaṇa. This brother of yours Phalguna, having cast aside the supreme weapon Gāṇḍīva, let him go to the forest – there is no purpose in him going with it. The jewel-like chakra, which used to be with the great-souled Kṛṣṇa is gone, but when it is time, it will again appear in his hand. For Partha’s sake, I had earlier brought Gāṇḍīva, the best among bows, from Varuṇa. It should now be returned to Varuṇa.” At this, all the brothers urged Dhananjaya to comply. He flung the bow into the water, together with the two great and inexhaustible quivers. Then, Best of the Bharatas, it was as if Agni vanished right there. The brave Pāṇḍavas now headed in a southerly direction, O Tiger of the Bharatas! They then went by the northern shores of the salty waters, they proceeded in a southwestern direction. Then, having turned around again, they went in the Western direction and saw Dvāraka completely flooded by the Sea.

So why does Agni materialize asking for Arjuna’s bow on Varuṇa’s behalf – couldn’t Varuṇa himself have appeared? We find that Ṛg Veda 4.1.2 provides one potential explanation that links the two gods quite early on:

*sa bhrātaraṃ varuṇam agna ā vavṛtsva devām acchā sumatī yajñavanasam jyeṣṭhaṃ yajñavanasam |  
ṛtāvānam ādityaṃ carṣaṇīdhṛtaṃ rājānaṃ carṣaṇīdhṛtam | |*

Agni, turn here to your brother Varuṇa, to the gods with your favor — to him who yearns for sacrifice, your oldest (brother) who yearns for sacrifice, the truthful son of Aditi

who supports the cultivators, the king who supports the cultivators. This hymn dedicated to Agni highlights that they are a pair, and one which appears quite often, second only to the pairing of Agni and Indra through the corpus.<sup>137</sup> Agni's association with Varuṇa changes throughout the the hymns since he is sometimes even said to be born from the waters, or to transform throughout his life, beginning as Varuṇa and aging into Mitra when he's kindled.<sup>138</sup> In the evening, Agni becomes Varuṇa.<sup>139</sup> But this longstanding association does not explain why *Agni* has come rather than Varuṇa, but as we've seen throughout this paper, Agni plays a role in transformations and rebirths. The transformation that he mediates here is Arjuna's transition from the city-dweller to that of the mountain-dwelling renunciate, a sort of transition between the *varṇāśramas*.

Here, Agni asks Arjuna to return the Gāṇḍīva, reminding him that way back in MBh. 1.214-219, he gifted Kṛṣṇa the discus and Arjuna the Gāṇḍīva in order that they aid him in warding off Indra's rains that had prevented him from consuming the Khāṇḍava forest. Now that the Pāñcālan camp and the Upapāṇḍavas were consumed by the fire set during the night raid, and war-dead were cremated with the correct rituals by Yudhiṣṭhira, Agni has once again consumed all that he is owed, much like he consumed the forest early on – note here too, a triplet of fires like the householder's three fires. The weapons he granted Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna served their purpose both then and later in the war, and they must be returned to their source.<sup>140</sup> Agni grants them as necessary for maintaining dharma in the world. Yudhiṣṭhira has abdicated the throne and has begun the stage of his life where he is now a forest-dwelling renunciate, and Arjuna must

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<sup>137</sup> RV 2.1.3- 4 associates Agni with Indra, Varuṇa, and Mitra; Varenne 1977, 376-77 notes that *Indrāgni* appears 50 times in the R̥g Veda because he serves a warlike function by burning foes and protecting those invoking him through ritual; Sahgal 2015, 9 notes that both these deities are described as pinnacles of masculinity through zoomorphic epithets related to the bull (*vṛṣabha*).

<sup>138</sup> RV 5.3.1

<sup>139</sup> AV 13.3.13

<sup>140</sup> MBh. 1.223 contains a reference to Agni's ability to produce water, thereby linking him with Varuṇa in yet another way.

give up his bow to ensure that he will adopt the renunciate life as expected of him.

The epic is thus bookended and punctuated by Agni in various forms, whose presence throughout the work motivates the violence necessary for the war to happen through his offspring. But the text constantly reminds us that this violence, as long as it is dharmically proper, is an appropriate means of obtaining peace, and even equates *yajña* with *yuddha*. While this initially serves the immediate purpose of reassuring Yudhiṣṭhira that his violent actions won't prevent him from obtaining *mokṣa*, it simultaneously reaffirms an idealized Brahminical societal order in which kṣatriyas protect and pay brahmins for performing *yajñas* which enhance regal powers and their subjects' wellbeing. Agni's central role in the work further emphasizes the epic's ideological impetus that the Kṣatriyas and Brahmins are dharmically intertwined through the *yajña*. Herman Tieken interestingly suggests that we read Agni, Kṛṣṇa, and Arjuna as a triad of sacrificial patron accompanied by two assistants, further strengthening the sacrificial motifs present in that scene. The transfer of wealth from the enemy to the king to the brahmin is a central concern of the work in justifying warfare.

Even in the practice of giving *dakṣiṇa* to the Brahmin, Agni is all three: Brahmin, gold, and sacrificial flame. He is called *hiranyaretas* because of his ability to produce and emit golden semen, which is deposited deep in Vasumatī<sup>141</sup>, or the Earth, and this gold is called *Jātarūpa*<sup>142</sup>. Gold contains the essence of Agni and Soma (*agnisomātmakaṃ*) and is thus purest of the pure (*pavitrāṇām pavitra*), making it a suitable gift for the Brahmins who kindle and tend Agni.<sup>143</sup> We are also told that when Agni is not available, that gold can be substituted for the fire and that those who know dharma donate gold, with this section explaining the type of liberation one gains

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<sup>141</sup> MBh. 13.84.74

<sup>142</sup> MBh. 13.84.68

<sup>143</sup> MBh. 13.84.80

based on the time that he donates gold.<sup>144</sup> Recalling the Khāṇḍava Forest encounter, we note that Agni appears as a hungry Brahmin<sup>145</sup> with a golden physical appearance described as yellowish brown (*hariṅga*), with the radiance of melted gold (*prataptakanakaṅbrahāḥ*) and blazing with luminous energy (*tejas*) as if on fire (*prajvalan iva*).<sup>146</sup> The text is certainly not shy about telling kṣatriyas what to do with their hard-won war booty.

### **§10 Concluding Thoughts**

Pāñcāla served as home to Śikhāṇḍi, Pāñcālī, and Dhṛṣṭadyumna without whom peace through war would not have been possible. Pāñcālī's wedding to the Pāṇḍavas led to Yudhiṣṭhira qualifying to ascend the throne and outed the brothers from hiding. Furthermore, Duryodhana's insult and command to disrobe Draupadī in his court after winning the dice game led to Bhīma's vow to kill Duryodhana, a promise that comes to fruition after the end of the war. Pāñcālī is not the sole cause of the war, but rather motivates the Pāṇḍavas to defeat the Kauravas. Her brother Śikhāṇḍi, presents the solution to the ongoing battle by helping Arjuna defeat Bhīṣma. Finally, Draupadī's twin brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna fulfills his fate and defeats Droṇa, the teacher of both clans of cousins and the second most fearsome warrior after Bhīṣma. Thus, we find that alone, the Pāṇḍavas would likely not have fought the war, but Draupadī's constant reminders to fulfill their *kṣatradharma* forces them to fight. Thus, the possibility of peace through the Pāṇḍava victory comes from Pāñcāla.

Second, by focusing on Agni as the primary Vedic deity of the epic, I highlight two aspects of the text that are crucial for understanding the positionality of this epic within the broader network of Indic literature. First, in this period, defined by the changing religious

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<sup>144</sup> MBh. 13.85

<sup>145</sup> MBh. 1.215.5

<sup>146</sup> MBh. 1.214.30-31

landscape of South Asia with the strengthening of Buddhist and Jaina traditions which reject Brahmanism, there is also a realignment of the Hindu pantheon with the growth in popularity of a new group of gods that are related but separate from the Vedic ones. The Mahābhārata shows that Agni plays a central role in both shifts. First, while Kṛṣṇa is the most active divine protagonist throughout the poem, constantly interacting and manipulating events to help the Pāṇḍavas win, his (and Arjuna's) powerful weapons are a gift from Agni. Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa only come to have these weapons because of their veneration of Agni by allowing him to consume the Khāṇḍava Forest. Second, this scene serves a didactic function, outlining the idealized, symbiotic relationship between the brahmin and kṣatriya classes in the face of a king (Yudhiṣṭhira) who constantly seeks to abandon kṣatriya dharma in favor of the brahmin renunciate.

Searching for Agni's centrality in the epic results in the Agni-born Pāñcālan siblings taking center stage through their marriage alliance with the Pāṇḍavas. Though she lacks *tejas* since she is a woman, Draupadī's fiery nature comes through in her constant goading the Pāṇḍavas to action. All of these figures can be considered offspring of Agni, and I hope to have shown how their fiery parentage manifests itself in their characteristics, albeit in different ways. Draupadī's unique position and role in goading on her husbands to fight throughout the epic also raises the question of exactly who needs to be in a calm mental state for the war to truly conclude: Yudhiṣṭhira or Draupadī? As a pair of spouses, the two could not be more different in their responses to insults, giving Draupadī good reason to repeatedly seek out Bhīma, who was quick to anger and repeatedly avenged his wife. While many analyses of Draupadī have marked her as a problematic or non-ideal wife when compared to Sītā, our discussion suggests that she was the ideal kṣatriya wife because of her birth from Agni and her fiery psychological qualities



inherited from him.<sup>147</sup>

Thus, the Pāñcāla-Pāñḍava marriage alliance might also be read as a strengthening of ties between Agni and the kṣatriya class. Warriors rely on their innate fiery energy, *tejas*, to succeed in battle, but their martial powers and the welfare of their subjects develop from venerating the brahmins. Kṣatriyas must sponsor yajñas and pay the brahmins for their services, but the text goes one step further by developing the concept of the *yuddha-yajña*. Warriors who adhere to their dharma can attain liberation through their actions just as the brahmins do through their ritual actions. Without the alliance of brahmins and kṣatriyas, there can be no peace.

The concept of peace in India differed from that of other ancient cultures because it linked mental (*śama*) or philosophical peace with political peace (*saṁdhi*), which together created a state of *śānti* for all. Ancient Romans and Greeks did not conceive of peace in this way. Seeking linguistic cognates for the English word “peace” as a derivation of the Latin *pax* in the Indic context fails to recognize the mandates of fulfilling one’s dharmic duties in pursuit of this political peace. For the Pāñḍavas, the right to kingship and key to political peace originated from Pāñcāla, but the guarantee of restoring the kingdom to peace, as Bhīṣma instructs Yudhiṣṭhira, could only come after quelling the king’s – and queen’s – *manyu* and restoring their collective mental peace.

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<sup>147</sup> Sutherland 1989, 72-73 compares the two heroines; Kumar 2016, 165 suggests that Draupadī disrupts the established social order in her repeated calls on her husbands to go to war, but one could argue that her speeches and actions serve to strengthen and remind her husbands of their kṣatriya dharma. I think this paper strengthens the latter argument.

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