

**“Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Vision of *Dharma*:
Violence, Nonviolence, and the Nonhuman World in Arun Kolatkar’s *Sarpa Satra* (Snake
Sacrifice)”**

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Introduction

What is the implicit understanding of *dharmā* in Arun Kolatkar’s poem, *Sarpa Satra* (Snake Sacrifice)? In what ways does it align with or deviate from that of the critical edition of the *Mahabharata*? In the poem, why do Arjuna and Krishna destroy the Khandava forest? Why is Janamejaya’s sacrifice a distorted *yajna*? Why should Astika intervene to stop it? In addressing these questions, I will argue that while *Sarpa Satra* seems to focus on a critique of vengeance and violence, and gestures toward an anthropocentric understanding of *dharmā* (in which human beings should live and let other species live), there are elements in the poem that suggest a vision of non-anthropocentric *dharmā* (as that which sustains and promotes all life and the earth), as a higher ideal to be recognized and pursued by human beings and other species. The ideal of non-anthropocentric *dharmā*, I would suggest, is more fully visible in the critical edition, in the forest burning and other episodes, and in the ethos and activities of Krishna, whose mission as *avatar* is to relieve and regenerate the earth, through a vast *yajna* of creative destruction.

I begin with a reading of *Sarpa Satra*, an English poem published in 2004.¹ The poem comprises three parts: “Janamejaya,” in which Janamejaya describes Takshaka’s killing of Parikshit and Janamejaya’s intentions of revenge; “Jaratkaru Speaks to Her Son Aastika,” in which Jaratkaru gives her story of the burning of the forest, her view of the snake sacrifice, and her advice to Astika to stop it; and “The Ritual Bath,” on the aftermath of the sacrifice and the potentially unending nature of its underlying passions of hostility and vengeance. I then turn to a discussion of the forest

¹ A separate Marathi version was published in the collection, *Bhijaki Vahi*, in 2003.

burning and Astika's intervention in the snake sacrifice in the critical edition, the implicit understandings of *dharma* in these episodes, and their commonalities with and deviations from *Sarpa Satra*. The critical edition and *Sarpa Satra*, I conclude, urge human beings to attempt to interrupt the workings of hostility and vengeance, promote life on the earth, and slow down the progress toward the *pralaya* (world-dissolution).

Burning the Forest

According to Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra*, why do Arjuna and Krishna participate in the burning of the Khandava forest? What is the nature of the wrong they are committing? What are the implicit messages of this episode for human beings?

In the middle section of the poem, Jaratkaru conveys the story of the forest burning to her son, Astika, which she says is the true story ("what actually happened" (Kolatkar 2010:194)), that he should know, before Vyasa writes his version (and "gives / his own spin / to the whole of human history" (p.194)). In Jaratkaru's telling, there is no Agni who appears in the form of a Brahmin and asks for assistance from Arjuna and Krishna, so that he might burn the forest, which he has attempted before, but has been stopped by Indra, who protects it due to his friendship with Takshaka, the Naga, who dwells there. In *Sarpa Satra*, Arjuna and Krishna seem to be the ones orchestrating the destruction: "[I]t was these two together / that did this thing / – burn down the Khandava forest" (p.195). But without Agni, how are they able to do so? They are given "divine weapons" (p.194); for Arjuna, "a divine bow / two inexhaustible quivers" (p.194), for Krishna, "a chakra called / Sudarshan / and a gada called Kaumodaki" (p.195), and they circle the forest in "divine chariots" (p.197). These weapons do not seem to generate fire. But by describing these as divine weapons received for this purpose, Jaratkaru seems to be conceding that divinities critically enabled this action of human beings.

But in the absence of Agni, why are Arjuna and Krishna engaging in this destruction? Jaratkaru gives some possible motives to do with passions and interests. They might have been filled with egoistic, hubristic feelings, on receiving the divine weapons,² and were eager to see what they could do: “Maybe just the fact / that now they had all these fantastic weapons / went to their heads // and they just couldn’t wait / to test their awesome powers” (p.197). In the forest burning, she suggests, with irony, Arjuna, the “great superhero”, a “wizard with a bow” (p.194) and “magical quiver” (p.199), “the valiant Arjuna” (p.199) might also have been exhibiting what “heroism” (p.194) means according to their understanding of the martial ethos of *kshatriyas*, which *Sarva Satra* will question. Jaratkaru also asks if along with these possible passionate motives, there might have been political-economic interests in play, that is, the desire to acquire land for the Pandavas: “Maybe they just wanted // a clear title to the land / unchallenged / by so much as a tigermoth” (p.197).³ But she also implies that it is difficult to ascertain their motives, by reference to passions and interests. It was a “senseless massacre” (p.194); “god knows what happened to him [Arjuna], / what came over him! Just went berserk, I guess” (p.194). “Why did they do it? Who knows! Just for kicks, maybe” (p.197). Jaratkaru suggests possible motives of egoistic passions, martial-heroic self-understandings, fascinations for weaponry, and political-economic interests, but leaves space for regarding the forest burning as an act lacking in comprehensibility, perhaps better explained as a kind of unthinking madness.

² The question remains of why the divine weapons were requested, that is, why did they wish to burn the forest.

³ For related interpretations of the burning of the forest in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* (i.e., as conquest, forest clearing, the acquiring of land for settled agriculture, and ecological damage), see Karve (2007:96–108), Shahane (2019), and Sinha (2014). In discussing imageries of the forest in the Sanskrit epics, Lutgendorf describes one of the themes: “*The forest is vast and exploitable*. Although kings are occasionally admonished to plant trees (especially along royal roadsides), their more characteristic concern with the forest is in clearing it or securing its abundant game. The forest is for them primarily a zone for exploitation and consumption, and there is no sense in the epics of the modern notion of the ‘fragility’ or endangerment of the forest ecosystem” (Lutgendorf 2000:279).

While the precise motives of Arjuna and Krishna might not be clear to Jaratkaru, she is not in doubt about the ethical wrongness of their actions. They committed a “crime” in destroying “one of the largest / rainforests in the land” (p.195), which was the abode of a vast diversity of life. These forms of life included trees, plants, insects, birds, animals (e.g., squirrels, crabs, elephants, gazelles, antelopes, bears, lions), and forest-dwelling human beings (“children of the forest” (p.196), perhaps analogous to *adivasis*), with their own languages, music, medicinal knowledge, and shamanic healing traditions, who seemed to be living nonviolently with respect to the forest and its multiple species. The Khandava forest was “God’s own laboratory on earth / where life had been allowed to express itself / with complete abandon.” (p.196). It was a “great sanctuary so dear to Indra / and protected by the gods themselves” (p.196). In her telling of the episode, Arjuna and Krishna seem to have been committing a crime against the very processes of generativity in this forest laboratory: Krishna’s cakra slices through honeybees, Arjun kills a lion mother holding her cub, arrows pursue and destroy a flock of fleeing swans (perhaps symbolizing souls of diverse life whose embodied existences are being abruptly cut short) (p.198).⁴ But Jaratkaru also insists that partial culpability for this crime resides with Takshaka, her Naga brother, who was missing at the time (engaged in holy or not so holy activities, she says), rather than protecting his wife and son from the violent onslaught, and protecting the forest as a whole, as was his duty (to “protect / the forest he held in trust for the gods” (p.199)). The forest burning was enabled by Takshaka’s absence, so Takshaka is partly responsible for the crime for which he will pursue revenge against Arjuna. Nonhuman beings (and not just humanity), to Jaratkaru, are also responsible for protecting the nonhuman world.

In Jaratkaru’s telling, as noted above, Agni is missing in the forest burning, and this seems to remove the elements of divine instruction, agency, and purpose that might assist in explaining or

⁴ The swan imagery reappears in describing a Naga family, holding onto one another, going into the fire and smoke of the snake sacrifice (p.209).

legitimizing the episode. Jaratkaru does not seem to acknowledge the possible divinity of Krishna, who is described only as a “crosscousin” and “crony” of Arjuna “since childhood.” “They were a team of sorts, / partners / in many escapades” (p.195).⁵ The destruction of the forest seems to be largely the work of human beings.⁶ But the story of the forest burning, and indeed, the entire poem, is saturated by references to fire. The forest is “torched” (p.194) and “burnt down” (p.195), leaving “miles of ash that kept smouldering” (p.195). It was a “conflagration” and an “inferno” (p.197), in which “half-cooked turtles” “crawl out of / the boiling lakes” (p.197), “a bear bursts into flames // falls from a tree / with a burning branch between its legs/ to roll in the flaming grass below,” and a lioness “with her mane in flames” attempts to flee (p.198). In Jaratkaru’s story, what is the source of this fire, if it is not Agni? There are implicit connections in the fire imagery across the poem that suggest a possible response. One sees connections between: 1) the burning of the forest, which destroys diverse creatures, including human beings, and heats up water bodies (“boiling lakes”); 2) the snake sacrifice, in which there is the targeted destruction of the Nagas and Agni is the “sacred sacrificial fire” (p.202), in what Jaratkaru describes as a “holocaust” (p.207) and “festival of hatred” (p.211); 3) the vengeful, destructive, and still burning fires of Aurva and Parashara directed against *kshatriyas* and *rakshasas* (pp.213–214); and 4) global warming in the contemporary world, the heating of the earth and its water bodies, with the attendant destruction of myriad species of life, who are in their own ways, suffering, fleeing, and being decimated by the activities of human beings. If one follows these connections in Jaratkaru’s story, one might suggest that the deeper source of the fire in the burning of the forest, whatever might be its physical source, is the contempt and hostility of human beings toward the nonhuman world, and also toward human beings (e.g., *adivasis*) who are seen to be less civilized, less incorporated into, and less allied to an urban-industrial vision of

⁵ According to Matilal, Duryodhana in the Sanskrit epic does not accept that Krishna is a divine *avatar* (Matilal 2002:116).

⁶ Jaratkaru does not seem to regard Arjuna as partly divine (as the son of Indra).

civilization and progress (and who might be obstacles to that vision, when it comes to resource extraction from forests, lands, and rivers). If the deeper source for the burning of the forest is hostility, this action might be seen as one within a long sequence of “celebrations of hatred” (p.213) toward human beings and the nonhuman world, in the epic and in present times. The Khandava forest then is not only “God’s laboratory”; the poem might be gesturing to the earth as a whole as God’s laboratory. If Jaratkaru wishes to tell the true story before Vyasa gives a “spin” to the whole of human history, one might see the poem as attempting to give the history of human beings acting upon the earth, in past and especially modern times.

Yajna (Distorted and True)

Why is the snake sacrifice a distorted *yajna*, according to Jaratkaru? What would constitute a true, proper *yajna*? Why should Astika intervene to stop it? The snake sacrifice is distorted due in part to Janamejaya’s motive of vengeance and its objective of annihilating the entire species of Nagas. This vengeance is a carrying forward of Takshaka’s vengeful feeling toward Arjuna, and the story of Takshaka’s killing of Parikshit is depicted with imagery that resonates with that of the forest burning. Takshaka’s venom grew so strong over long years of waiting, plotting, and hosting vengeful feelings that one drop could turn a banyan tree into a “crackling cloud of ash,” hovering over a “fluted pillar of fire,” and “collapsing into a smoking ruin” (p.186). When Parikshit is bitten by Takshaka, he becomes a “searing flame” and his palace becomes a “grand funeral pyre” (p.187). Takshaka observes the “blaze,” does a “jig in the night sky,” and distributes sweets in the Naga city of Bhogawati (p.187), suggesting that like the forest burning and the snake sacrifice, this killing is also a “celebration” of hatred. Janamejaya’s objective is genocide, as he states: “My vengeance will be swift and terrible. / I will not rest / until I’ve exterminated them all.// They’ll discover / that no hole is deep enough / to hide from Janamejaya” (p.187). While Jaratkaru regards the forest burning

as a crime that provokes Takshaka's vengeance, she asks why Takshaka did not exact his revenge on Arjuna while he was alive, as required of "true revenge" (p.200), rather than targeting Arjuna's grandson, for which Takshaka deserves the "harshesht punishment" (p.193). She describes Takshaka as an "extremist," a terrorist, and ultimately, a coward, for seeking refuge with Indra after inflicting such destruction (p.193). But Jaratkaru is also critical of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, which is disproportionate and unjustified, in seeking to punish and destroy all Nagas for the crime of Takshaka (p.188). The snake sacrifice is also a distorted *yajna* due to the motives of myriad others who are promoting and orchestrating it, referred to as "cronies," "councillors" (p.189), "great sages," "rishis," "maharishis," "so-called great thinkers," "the finest minds of our age" (p.190), "officiating priests" (pp.191, 212), "the best minds / of three generations" (p.192), "vedic event managers" (p.200), "wise men" (p.204), and "vedic wizards / and other / intellectual superstars of the show" (p.212). These figures seem to be motivated by egoistic desires for employment, wealth, and prestige and sycophantic desires to satisfy and please a king.

The motives underlying the snake sacrifice, of vengeance and egoistic desire, seem to go against the nature of true *yajna*, according to Jaratkaru. In a true *yajna*, Agni as "sacred sacrificial fire" brings the "gifts, oblations, / supplications and praise," "offered lovingly" by human beings to the gods, and brings back divine blessings to human beings. The offerings are given in a spirit of love, not hostility, vengeance, or hatred. In the snake sacrifice, human beings deploy Agni as an "assassin" (the word used to describe Takshaka plotting against Parikshit (p.186)), "butcher or a mass murderer" (p.202) of the species of Nagas. The sacrifice is a great "insult" to Agni. The genocidal *yajna* is a "violation of all the known laws / of gods and man" (p.203), suggesting that the snake sacrifice is against *dharmā*. No gods are present (just as gods are absent in her story of the forest burning), perhaps, she suggests, as they are aware that they could be targeted by Janamejaya's vengeful desires in this "cynical *yajnya*" (p.202). In the "song and dance, / fun and games, /

gambling and chariot races” (p.200), and the orchestrators’ “evident relish” (p.203), the *yajna* becomes a “festival” of hatred, in which Vaishampayana’s narration of the *Mahabharata* accompanies the genocidal destruction of the Nagas (p.201). There is a resonance here, as Vyasa’s epic, for Jaratkaru, is largely a story of hostility, vengeance, and hatred. One sees a chain or sequence of festivals and celebrations of hatred, of the forest burning to Takshaka’s killing of Parikshit to the snake sacrifice, along with the epic’s core story of the destructive conflict of the Kurus, in which Vyasa witnessed the “madness of his grandchildren” (p.192), as they killed each other and as “a whole nation destroyed itself” (p.193), but did not stop it. This spectatorship should not be emulated at the snake sacrifice, Jaratkaru says: “This snake sacrifice, / this mockery, this grotesque parody / of the institution of yajnya // has got to stop” (p.203).

But why should Astika intervene to stop the *yajna*? First, Jaratkaru says, no one else wishes to do this, including the gods, who are keeping a distance from the *yajna* (p.205). Astika also has the right qualities, as he is young and is not driven by vengeful feelings. Jaratkaru says, “It means your eyesight / is good, / your vision clear. // Not spoilt by reading too many books yet, / or ruined / by the smoke of too many sacrifices, // or clouded by rage, power, ego, pride / or any of the other / common diseases of the eye. // It means your brain is not maggoty yet / with perceived wrongs, / or pickled in the brine of hatred. // It means your wounds heal quickly, / thank God for that. / It means you do not view the world // through the dark prism of a wound / infected / by the dirty bandage of history. // It means that the gangrene / of insensitivity // hasn’t spread to your soul” (p.206). Astika can hear the story of violence to his Naga ancestors and not be provoked into vengeance, as Janamejaya was, when he was told the story of his father’s killing. Unlike Somashravas, who has a snake mother, as Astika does, and should feel some empathy for the Nagas, but is the presiding priest at the snake sacrifice, Astika is less ethically compromised and less desirous, it seems, of serving the king.

Second, the snake sacrifice is a dangerous *yajna*, which could lead to destruction far beyond the genocide of the Nagas. The earth is “balanced precariously” (p.204) on the hood of Shesha, the elder brother of Jaratkaru, and is protective toward her, and if he comes to know of the snake sacrifice, he might get angry, and that could mean the destruction of all species on earth. “And that, surely, will be The End. / Of not just the nagas, or any one species, / but of everything and everybody. // A slight toss of his head... / the merest shrug... / and it will all be over,” she says (p.205).⁷ Jaratkaru’s rationale, in advising Astika, is intriguing and puzzling. As the son of Jaratkaru, the human ascetic, Astika is a human being, she says, and should intervene not for the sake of her or Vasuki or other Nagas, but because he is a human being, who must save “the last vestige of humanity” (p.211). The poem diverges here from the critical edition, in which Jaratkaru sends Astika precisely to save Vasuki and other snakes (indeed, this is why Astika is born to Jaratkaru). Here, she seems to be putting forward an anthropocentric understanding of *dharmā* (analogous to modern ecologically sensitive humanism), with human beings at the center of the world and all other species at the periphery. Human beings should seek to survive and prosper, while also allowing other species to live. The genocidal sacrifice should be stopped so that human beings can go on doing this, that is, to live and let live.

But if one considers the other images in the poem – of the forest and of the earth as a whole as God’s laboratory, which includes human beings within it; the absence of the gods at the forest burning and at the snake sacrifice; the possibility of Shesha destroying all life; and the references to Aurva and Parashara who are restrained from annihilating the world – the poem might be intimating a non-anthropocentric vision of *dharmā*. The “last vestige of humanity” might be read as what is possible for human beings, at their best, when they are recognizing and pursuing this valence of

⁷ If true Vedic sacrifice is meant to contain conflict and violence and restore peace and order, Janamejaya’s distorted *yajna* seems to push the world in the opposite direction, toward greater destruction and disorder (Zecchini 2010:140–142).

dharmā, in seeking to nurture all life and the earth, in which no species is understood to be at the center or periphery. If Astika does not keep alive this potentiality, human beings might be left only with anthropocentric *dharmā*, or its more narrow forms of *kṣatriya dharmā*, and in time, might egoistically destroy other species and other human beings, as in the *Mahābhārata*,⁸ provoking Shesha to angrily complete the world-destruction. Indeed, the *yajna* might be seen as an image of the accumulating, destructive workings of anthropocentric *dharmā*, through developmental states and the activities of capitalist elites and scientific and technical experts (i.e., the greatest sages, minds, and thinkers of the times), with the urban-industrial development process generating fire, heat (p.210), “dirty smoke,” and a poisoned atmosphere (p.209), while also creating provisional wealth (the gold from the *yajna* (p.212)) through the oppression and exploitation of human beings and the mining and plundering of the earth. As Jaratkaru observes the mighty Nagas being drawn one by one into the fire, one wonders if she is speaking in the voice of the earth as a whole, witnessing multiple species disappear into the urban-industrial *yajna*, and giving advice to all human beings, not just Astika, that there is still time to stop this *yajna* and its violence to the nonhuman world, and engage in true *yajna*, by pursuing non-anthropocentric *dharmā*, in serving all life, the gods, and the earth, in cooperation with other species, as was occurring inside the Khandava forest. If they do so, they might avoid instigating Shesha or other gods who might be witnessing this *yajna*. Or more darkly,

⁸ Scholars have suggested that the forest burning and the snake sacrifice in *Sarpa Satra* are metaphors for conflict and violence among human beings, in particular, Hindu-Muslim violence to do with the Ram temple movement, the demolition of the Babri mosque, the Mumbai riots, and the Gujarat violence, but also as suggested in Kolatkar’s other poems in the *Bhijaki Vābi* (e.g., “The Last Tear”), ethnic violence, genocides, and wars, in the past and present, in India and the world (Hemang 2021; Joshi 2022:502, 504–507; Nerlekar 187–188, 193; Zecchini 2010:135, 146–148, 151n23). While *Sarpa Satra* does indeed seem to be concerned with violence to human beings, especially as borne of contempt, hostility, and vengeful feeling (e.g., forest-dwelling *adivāsīs*, the mass deaths in the Kurukshetra war), I wish to explore how the poem (and the critical edition) might also be drawing attention to violence to the nonhuman world (which as with Shesha, can also retaliate), and to the possibility of recognizing and pursuing non-anthropocentric *dharmā*, which would include (but not be exhausted by) the amelioration of violence to human beings.

perhaps, in the destruction to life that the world is experiencing through global warming and ecological change, the poem might be suggesting, Shesha might already be slowly shrugging.

Dharma

In the critical edition, the forest burning episode, with its gory and gruesome details, raises questions about what should be the relations of human beings and the nonhuman world, in terms of understandings of *dharmā*. At the request of Agni, the Fire god, Arjuna and Krishna assist in the burning of the forest, in which diverse forms of life (e.g., elephants, lions, deer, birds, snakes, and demons) are massacred. Are Arjuna and Krishna on the side of *dharmā* in engaging in this zealous assault on nonhuman life? The epic, I wish to argue, says yes, from the standpoint of *kṣatriya dharmā*, in its more egoistic valences; but no, from the perspective of non-anthropocentric *dharmā*, as that which sustains and promotes all life and the earth, arguably the highest ideal of *dharmā* in the epic.

After the burning of the house of lac, going into hiding, and getting a portion of the kingdom back, the Pandavas build Indraprastha. One day, Arjuna and Krishna go out to the banks of the Yamuna with Draupadi, Subhadra, and others. The women are drinking, dancing, laughing, and quarreling. Arjuna and Krishna leave, and sit together. A Brahmin comes, and says he is hungry. He is Agni, and he wants to consume the Khandava, but it is protected by Indra, because Takshaka, his friend, lives there. Arjuna asks for weapons and a chariot. The god Varuna, the World Guardian, gives him the Gandiva bow, quivers, and a chariot. From Agni, Krishna gets the discus with a thunderbolt at its center. Unlike in *Sarpa Satra*, Agni is doing the burning. “At these words of Arjuna and Dasarha, the lord took on his fiery form and began to burn the forest. Surrounding it on all sides with his Seven Flames, the Fire angrily burned the Khandava, as though to exhibit the end of the Eon. When he encircled and invaded that forest, ... burning down all the

creatures with the thunderous roar of the monsoon cloud, the burning forest took on the shape of Mount Meru, king of mountains, that sparkles with gold” (van Buitenen 1973:417). In the description of the actions of Arjuna and Krishna, one sees resonances with *Sarpa Satra*’s depictions of the killing of animals and the heating of water bodies, but here, there are witnessing gods, allusions to the churning of the ocean, and intimations of the impending *pralaya*.

Standing on their chariots at both ends of the forest, the two tigerlike men started a vast massacre of the creatures on every side. Indeed, whenever the heroes saw live creatures escaping, such as lived in the Khandava, they chased them down. They saw no hole to escape, because of the vigorous speed of the chariots – both the grand chariots and their warriors seemed to be strung together. As the Khandava was burning, the creatures in their thousands leaped up in all ten directions, screeching their terrifying screams. Many were burning in one spot, others were scorched – they were shattered and scattered mindlessly, their eyes abursting. Some embraced their sons, others their fathers and mothers, unable to abandon them, and thus went to their perdition. Still others jumped up by the thousands, faces distorted, and darting hither and thither fell into the Fire. All over, the souls were seen writhing on the ground, with burning wings, eyes, and paws, until they perished. As all watery places came to a boil, ... the turtles and fish were found dead by the thousands. With their burning bodies the creatures in that forest appeared like living torches until they breathed their last. When they jumped out, the Partha cut them to pieces with his arrows and, laughing, threw them back into the blazing Fire. Their bodies covered with arrows and screeching fiercely, they leaped upward nimbly and fell back into the Fire. The noise of the forest animals, as they were hit by the arrows and left to burn, was like the ocean’s when it was being churned. The huge flames of the happy Fire jumped up to the sky and caused the greatest consternation among the Gods. All the great-spirited denizens of heaven went and sought refuge with the Thousand-Eyed King of the Gods, the Sacker of Cities.

The Gods said:

Why are all these people being burned by the Fire? Has perchance the end of the worlds arrived, lord of the Immortals? (pp.417–418)

Arjuna must combat Indra. He is “showing off his splendid weapons” and creates a shower of arrows that blocks Indra’s rain. Many Gods and nonhuman beings ally against Arjuna and Krishna, including forest animals, birds, snakes, Gandharvas, Yakshas, Rakshasas, Daityas, Danavas, Yama, Varuna (strangely, who gave Arjuna the weapons and chariot for this purpose), Siva, the Asvins, and others. Arjuna and Krishna are victorious, Indra is pleased, and he gives them boons. But drawing on *Sarpa Satra*, it is difficult not to see this episode as a “holocaust” on nonhuman life.

In the critical edition, is the burning of the forest aligned to *dharma*? One might consider the actions of Agni, Arjuna, and Krishna. First, Agni does the burning,⁹ but one is not told why he wishes to do this, only that he is a hungry Brahmin with a limitless appetite (p.415). In other versions, there is the story that Agni's digestion has been ruined by an excessively long sacrifice, going on for many years, and the god Brahma advises Agni to consume the Khandava to regenerate his stomach.¹⁰ This story gives a possible purpose to the forest burning (and to Arjuna's and Krishna's killing of so many creatures) that might align with *dharma*, for the god Agni must be healed. But as noted above, many gods and beings oppose what Agni is doing, suggesting that this action is not clearly *dharma*. Also observe that Agni is angry. In the Gita, Arjuna asks Krishna, "So what impels a man to commit sin...seeming to force him even against his will?" Krishna says, "It is desire, it is anger. It arises from the quality of *rajas*, Passion, and is voracious and very wicked" (Smith 2009:357). When Agni meets Arjuna and Krishna, he says, "I am a voracious brahmin. I always eat boundlessly. I beg you, Varsneya and Partha, for once give me enough to eat!" (van Buitenen 1973:415). Agni's killing of the forest creatures is not without desire or anger. The presence of these passions might be a clue that the epic does not clearly view Agni's burning of the forest as aligned with *dharma*.

In agreeing to assist Agni, and in displaying spectacular martial abilities in the forest burning, it would seem that Arjuna is epitomizing *kshatriya dharma*. He receives boons from Indra, and at other places in the epic, Yudhishtira, Draupadi, and others praise him for this accomplishment.¹¹ *Kshatriya dharma* seems to be understood here as that which protects and expands human kingdoms.

⁹ Arjuna and Krishna "burn to death (or slaughter with their arrows) virtually every living creature of the virgin woodlands in a vast holocaust to sate Agni, the god of fire," Goldman writes (Goldman 2021:46). Perhaps *Sarpa Satra*, which does not refer to Agni in the forest burning, is giving a similar interpretation of what Arjuna and Krishna are doing with their divine weapons.

¹⁰ See Hildebeitel (1982:211) and Katz (1989:76).

¹¹ See Smith (2009:245, 273–274).

In its more narrow, egoistic forms (e.g., Duryodhana), it can be focused on the sphere of power of oneself and one's close kin. In less narrow forms, it can extend to humane anthropocentric *dharma*, an ethos of living and allowing other species to live. To give an example, in Shantanu's kingdom, "Neither cattle nor boar, deer nor fowl suffered useless death...[T]he fair-spirited Samtanu impartially ruled the creatures without lust or passion...[N]o unlawful death befell any breathing creature" (p.223). Arjun seems to be located within the spectrum between the narrowly egoistic and the anthropocentric; he is closer to the egoistic pole, though there are moments, such as the Gita, in which he is open to more expansive understandings of *dharma*. During the forest burning, Arjuna is "laughing" (p.418), showing off his weapons, and rejoicing along with Krishna (p.421).¹² But consider later events, which suggest that the forest burning generates destructive and self-destructive consequences, thereby questioning whether this action aligns with *dharma* and whether Arjuna should only be praised for it. It is as if Arjuna's arrows from the Gandiva, received for this purpose, unbeknownst to him, are double-edged. They come back on the Pandavas. The asura Maya, who is spared in the forest burning, constructs a marvelous palace in Indraprastha, which provokes envy in Duryodhana, who challenges the Pandavas to the dicing; the Pandavas go into exile; and then there is war, with its massive losses of life to the Kurus and their future generations (and also to huge numbers of military animals on the field of battle). The chain of violence and vengeance of the Pandavas and Nagas is initiated in the Khandava burning.¹³ Ashvasena, Takshaka's son, who

¹² For Karve, the forest burning resembles an extended hunt, in which the manner and magnitude of the killing of animals violates the *kshatriya* rules of hunting (Karve 2007:104–105). Katz writes, "The behavior extolled as heroic in the episode also violates the rules of warfare, the *kshatriya* code, set forth throughout the *Mahabharata*, which state clearly that innocent bystanders are never to be slain in battle. The Khandava episode, on the contrary, depicts a berserker ideal of martial ecstasy, as Arjuna and Krishna, laughing, slay all creatures who cross their path. It is apparent, then, that the episode represents a way of thinking anterior to the extant epic" (Katz 1989:73). Framarin interprets the warriors' laughter as instructive nonattachment to an impermanent world (Framarin 2014:97–114), but one might also see it as a critique of *kshatriya dharma* and a provocation to more nonviolent, compassionate engagement in the world.

¹³ I am following the insights of Karve (2007:105–108).

survives the burning of the forest, attempts to kill Arjuna in the war, with the snake weapon launched by Karna.¹⁴ Thakshaka kills Parikshit, the surviving heir of the Kurus, provoking his son Janamejaya to conduct the snake sacrifice, which as mentioned above, becomes a cruel and angry re-enactment of the burning of the Khandava, singularly targeting the species of Nagas. But one might also observe that there are other possibilities for relations between the Pandavas and Nagas. A few pages before the forest burning, Arjuna, in exile from the Pandavas, weds Ulupi, a Naga princess (pp.400–401), and we are told later that she has a son, Iravan, who is a divine-human-Naga hybrid.¹⁵

Krishna, in participating in the burning of the forest, seems to be doing two things. First, he is actively engaging in *kshatriya dharma* alongside Arjuna. We are told early in Book I that the demons, after being defeated by the gods, have reincarnated on earth as *kshatriyas*, and are wreaking havoc, creating an oppressive burden on the earth, who calls for assistance to Brahma. The gods agree to incarnate portions of themselves, and Vishnu takes the *avatar* of Krishna, to destroy the *kshatriyas* and relieve that burden. The epic observes that the oppressive activities of the *kshatriyas* are directed toward other human beings and also toward the nonhuman world: “Some of them, sons of Diti and of Danu, fallen from heaven, were born as mighty lords of the earth: full of valour but also full of arrogance, able to change their shapes at will, those foe-crushers overwhelmed the ocean-bounded earth. They oppressed Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras too, and they oppressed other creatures also in their might; terrifying and slaying many creatures of every kind, they roamed the whole earth in their hundreds and thousands.”¹⁶ In the forest burning, one seems to be seeing the egoism, oppressiveness, and cruelty of the *kshatriyas*, when they pursue *kshatriya dharm* narrowly.

¹⁴ Smith (2009:517–519).

¹⁵ Gitomer (2021:55, 57–58). The description and importance of Iravan and Ghatotkaca in the epic suggests a possible “deep empathy” for human-nonhuman hybrid offspring who are engaging in valorous sacrifice for the divine-human Pandavas (Gitomer 2021:68). Astika might be seen as an analogous human-nonhuman hybrid figure who intervenes in the snake sacrifice (in the critical edition) to protect the lives of his nonhuman mother and kin.

¹⁶ Smith (2009:19). See also Goldman (2021:41–42).

One is arguably getting a revelation of *kshatriya dharma* in its more demonic valence (that too, involving Arjuna, not the Kauravas), enabling one to see why such *kshatriya dharma* causes so much destruction in the world. Second, one might say that Krishna, who is “so enigmatic,” as Gandhari puts it when cursing him,¹⁷ is simultaneously disclosing, through negative example, the higher ideal of non-anthropocentric *dharma*. Krishna’s mission as the *avatar*, one might suggest, is to uphold this valence, by overseeing the destruction of the *kshatriyas* in the war, and afterward, of his own egoistic people, the Yadavas, and thereby catalyze the regenerative-destructive transition from the *Dvapara yuga* into the *Kaliyuga*. In the apocalyptic burning of the Khandava, Krishna might be instructively demonstrating that *kshatriya dharma* in its more demonic valence, involving oppression of and violence toward human and nonhuman beings, burdens the earth, brings about mass destruction, and propels the world toward the *pralaya* (world-dissolution). During the forest burning, as quoted above, the gods ask if they are witnessing the *pralaya* (the “end of the worlds” (p.418)). Diverse beings fall into the fire, “as though struck down by Time itself.”¹⁸ As intimated in the Gita, in the *pralaya*, all will go into the flaming mouths of the Visvarupa (the divine form of Krishna), like river-currents flowing into one ocean.¹⁹ In this reading, the fire of Agni in the forest burning will become the fire of the *yajna* of this *avatar* as a *kshatriya* (that will include the war, also depicted as a *yajna*), who has descended to relieve the world of the excesses of *kshatriya dharma*. But also observe that despite Krishna’s participation in the burning of the Khandava, the epic shows the close connections between Krishna and the Nagas. There is a deep bond between Krishna (as *avatar* of Vishnu) and Balarama, his elder brother, close companion, and witness, who is the *avatar* of Shesha (Vishnu’s mount) and whose brother is Takshaka, whose abode is the Khandava. When Balarama dies and returns to his form as Shesha, we are told that the Nagas (“celestial serpents”) greet,

¹⁷ Fitzgerald (2004:70).

¹⁸ van Buitenen (1973:422)

¹⁹ See Davis (2015:28–29, 34–35; Goldman 2021:42).

welcome, and honor him,²⁰ as if to acknowledge his vital role in assisting the *avatar* in the non-anthropocentric mission of alleviating the earth's burden.

Conclusion

In the critical edition, Astika, a sage, the hybrid offspring of a Brahmin and a Naga, is sent by his mother Jaratkaru to stop the sacrifice. He goes there, praises Janamejaya and the sacrifice, and receives a boon. As Thakshaka is about to be sent into the fire, Astika asks for his boon, which is to cease the sacrifice. Janamejaya agrees (Smith 2009:8–9).²¹ Vyasa appears and gives Janamejaya a desired vision of Parikshit, which “destroys his grief” (p.749).²² Astika says, “Those who take *dharmā's* side, those who delight in good conduct, those at whose sight sin wanes: these are the men who deserve honour” (p.750). To take *dharmā's* side, the epic seems to be suggesting, is to depart from the vengeance and destructiveness of *kshatriya dharmā*, narrowly understood, and attempt to align more closely with more expansive understandings of *dharmā*, i.e., humane anthropocentric *dharmā* and non-anthropocentric *dharmā*.

Sarpa Satra, in its critical and ironic tones, can seem to regard the Sanskrit epic as largely glorifying human destructiveness and violence toward other human beings, other species, and the earth, in wars, ecological devastation, and sacrifices. In Jaratkaru's story of the forest burning, it is not clear why the warriors are doing it (“god knows” (p.194)), in the absence of Agni, though gods provide the weapons. In her advice to Astika to save “the last vestige of humanity,” the poem can seem to be nudging human beings from egoistic *kshatriya dharmā* to anthropocentric *dharmā*, and no

²⁰ Smith (2009:672–673).

²¹ In his refusals of Janamejaya's enticing boons (Bowles 2023:59), Astika is quite different from the mercenary priests of *Sarpa Satra*.

²² Unlike Jaratkaru's depiction of Vyasa as a passive spectator in *Sarpa Satra*, Vyasa of the Sanskrit epic intervenes many times and in important ways; here, to assist in quelling Janamejaya's desire for vengeance. Perhaps such acts would be seen by Jaratkaru as Vyasa's distortive “spin” on human (violent) history.

further. But Jaratkaru’s message, when she seems to be speaking in the voice of the earth, might be close to that of the Sanskrit epic. But the epic, in contrast to *Sarpa Satra*’s reading, I would argue, does not glorify the burning of the forest, the war, or the snake sacrifice (or other expressions of *kshatriya dharma* in demonic valences, for example, the Pandavas’ burning of *adivasis* in the house of lac and Ashvatthaman’s night raid of the Pandava camp).²³ Indeed, the epic seeks to disclose the close connections across such events, extending to the *pralaya* – of *karma*, retributive consequences, and the regeneration of the earth.²⁴ The *kshatriya* assault on human and nonhuman beings, which violates more expansive understandings of *dharma*, invites punishment, annihilation of the wrongdoers, and a mass holocaust to lessen the oppressive weight of the *kshatriyas* and other human beings on the earth. The epic’s possible message – that to violate non-anthropocentric *dharma* invites retributive consequences – might be why Krishna is present in the forest burning, to reveal why he has descended, not to glorify *kshatriyas* but to remove them, in a true *yajna* for the earth. So “god knows” why the forest is being burnt, for unlike in *Sarpa Satra*, god is not missing, and might be disclosing that *kshatriyas* are not inclined toward non-anthropocentric *dharma*. If the forest is “vast and exploitable” in the epics, as Lutgendorf suggests (Lutgendorf 2000:279), it might also be the case that to regard the forest in this way is not the highest *dharma*. Lutgendorf also observes that the forest “teems with life” (p.280), there is “a kind of extrahuman perspective according to which

²³ Ruru, a Brahmin of the Bhargavas, describes Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice as exemplary *kshatriya dharma*, as it delivers punishment and protects human beings (Bowles 2023:45). But one might view this sacrifice similarly to the forest burning, as a negative and dangerous example of *kshatriya dharma*, meant to disclose more expansive ideals of *dharma*. Bowles suggests, drawing on the black color of the garb of Agni and Janamejaya’s priests, that the forest burning and the snake sacrifice might be seen as evil-countering black magic, intending to reduce the menace, acknowledged by Brahma, of excessive snakes in the world (Bowles 2023:50, 55–56).

²⁴ Other scholars have observed the close connections between the forest burning, the war, the snake sacrifice, and the *pralaya*, in terms of intimations, metaphors, and images (e.g., of *yajna*) (Framarin 2014:102–105; Katz 1989:78; Lutgendorf 2000:281), but these interpretations, to my knowledge, do not seem to regard the war and the *pralaya* as possible retributive consequences for violations of *dharma* enacted in the forest burning.

all life-forms are seen to have a place and a right to exist” (p.285), and the good life is “situated within a complex web in which all organisms have a place and are entitled to survive” (p.285). This language comes close to non-anthropocentric *dharmā*, I would argue, in which there is no species at the center or periphery of the world, and all species are meant to sustain and promote this diversity of life.

Are human beings capable of pursuing this vision of *dharmā*? And if so, can the earth be saved? The figure of Astika, a human-nonhuman hybrid, one might suggest, might be symbolic of a more inclusive, expansive, nonviolent consciousness, that all human beings (and perhaps all species) might strive to realize. Human beings do not have to only be humanists. The capacity to move beyond anthropocentrism, as *Sarpa Satra* might be suggesting, might constitute the “last vestige of humanity” that is worth recovering. But what might be the effects of Astika-like interventions in a world of massive violence to human beings and the nonhuman world? *Sarpa Satra* gives an ambiguous response. Human beings “rediscover simpler pleasures – / fly kites, / collect wild flowers, make love // Life seems to return to normal” (Kolatkar 2004:213). But the fires of hostility and vengeance, fueling the excesses of *kshatriya dharmā* and the egoistic activities of human beings more generally, continue to rage and destroy life and the earth (pp.213–214). There is no permanent peace. There is no lasting transformation of Janamejaya’s heart. But when Astika in the critical edition says, “Stop! Stop!” there is a vital pause, a suspension (Takshaka hovers above the sacrifice),²⁵ an interruption of wrongdoing, which saves lives. The progress of the *yugas*, shepherded by Krishna as Kala (Time), perhaps cannot be stopped. But Astika-like interventions might possibly slow down time, so that multiple species of the earth might be allowed to survive a bit longer.

²⁵ Bowles (2023:59–60).

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