

Greg Bailey

SOME EMERGING BUDDHIST CRITIQUES OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* IN ITS CONTEXT AS A TEXT FOR CULTURAL UNITY

This article explores the role of the *Mahābhārata* in developing a sense of social and political unity in ancient India within an historical political environment that was highly fragmented. As an institutionalized religious system Buddhism had developed as a very successful organization by the beginning of the Common Era, responding to many social and cultural concerns, whilst building up a large material and economic base. When the *Mahābhārata* became a seemingly popular text from the same period it offered a more comprehensive view of polity and society than is found in early Pāli literature. Evidence of its emerging popularity is reflected especially in the *Jātakas* where there are a number of critiques of episodes and themes in the *Mahābhārata*. Some of these critiques are examined here.

Keywords: Mahābhārata, Jātakas, Draupadī, Pāṇḍavas, political fragmentation, cultural criticism.

For the last fifteen years I have been fiddling around at the edges of a large research programme, asserting a hypothesis that the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*) was composed in part as a response to the material success of Buddhism.¹ There are many aspects to this hypothesis and it has wide implications for our knowledge of socio-economic history in Early Historical India. To date² I have focussed mainly on intertextual connections between the *MBh* and Buddhist literature, mainly in Pāli, assumed to pre-date the *MBh*. An urgent related task is to survey the Buddhist archeological deposits in North and South India over the four centuries 200BCE-200CE, a monumental, yet necessary job. I suspect, on the basis of a few thoroughly excavated sites, that the quantity of Buddhist holy places, containing a mixture of *vihāras*, *stūpas* and *caityas* is much greater than the existing literature suggests.³

It is not just a question, however, of locating the *MBh* in a framework of an earlier Buddhist success story. It is also necessary to recognize that the epic was utilized as a vehicle for the propagation of a new form of culture we have retrospectively called Hinduism, a cultural form enabling the inclusion of many brahmins and people of other classes who did not originally come from 'pure stock'. In part this was a response by the brahmins to the integration of the Buddhist Order into local areas. The accompanying economic involvement of the *saṅgha* necessary to sustain this integration could not have escaped the gaze of the brahmins. But equally the *MBh* had to be used as a literary vehicle for consolidating the five centuries of visible change that had characterized North India from the beginning of the 5th BCE, with a considerable urban and rural landscape accommodating most of the population by the beginning of the 2nd century CE. Vedic ritual practices, with the emphasis on public rituals, continued as signs of prestige, but essentially had been transformed into household rituals. These had to be reconciled with the ubiquity of devotional practices and theologies. It was the function of the *MBh* to communicate this transformation and accompanying integration and to place it within a communicable narrative frame even as it was actually happening before the eyes of all who witnessed it.

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Adam Bowles for some very helpful suggestions regarding this article.

² Bailey 2012-13, 2012, 2011, and 2004.

³ See especially Shaw 2007.

Integration and Difference

But it would be a mistake to focus simply on one causal factor as producing a monumental text like the *MBh*.⁴ What is becoming increasingly clear, especially from archeological evidence, is that the period from 200BCE — 200 ACE was one of considerable political fragmentation, though I suspect Indian polity, if we can speak of it as such, was always like that. Political and economic elites were localized, even where there were ‘empires’ of considerable size such as the oft-cited Mauryan empire, the Sātavāhanas in the Deccan and Andhra Pradesh, and the Kuṣānas in the North. The point here is that political dominance did not necessarily equal economic dominance, with urban conurbations retaining their prominence even through periods of political instability.⁵ Epigraphical evidence suggests local elites were probably more important in sustaining a constancy of Buddhist patronage than was support from kings, which was intermittent rather than constant.⁶ And between the two so-called ‘empires,’ the Mauryan and the Gupta, there was considerable political fragmentation plus ethnic and cultural difference experienced by emerging and existing cultural elites, and recognized as being non-negotiable to change by external forces.

The *MBh* in its totality both reflects these differences just as it asserts a universal model of society and culture. This model has been widely studied and its outlines—*varṇāśrama*, the centrality of *dharma* as a guide for behaviour at all levels of the cosmos and as an overarching cosmic behavioural system, the co-operation of brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya, the theology of a devotional deity—are well known. To this we can add the assumption that the *MBh* is a text for the future, but one anchored in the traditions of the past used as the vision of a religious and social

⁴ If the *MBh* narrative was continually added to, what factors gave its recitational tradition the capacity to accept constant revisions and inspired those who desired to add them in the first place? That such additions and modifications were easily attainable, without fundamentally altering the text, may well be another sign of the text’s early high status and accessibility over a large area to a wide audience.

⁵ See also Smith 2006: 116: “Towns and cities also developed throughout the remainder of the subcontinent, providing a large-scale network of urban areas that shared economic and social ties but relatively few and ephemeral political connections (Fig. 3). This circumstance of strong economies in a relatively weak political environment again highlights the potential for the study of urbanism before and in the interstices of regional state-level consolidations.”

⁶ Cf. Rees 2009: 119–134.

base for establishing continuity with the future. As careful observers of social customs and variant belief systems, the brahmins must have been strongly aware of the depth of differences confronting anyone wanting to impose a theoretical and practical overarching system of culture and society. And so their task was to develop this system whilst maintaining a realistic understanding of the deep-rooted differences they would always confront.

We still do not know in terms of absolute chronology when the *MBh* was composed and most scholars would prefer to think of a compositional process extending over time rather than of a particular date, the latter being naïve even when viewed in relation to the composition of contemporary literature. Hildebeitel has “proposed that the Mahābhārata was composed over no more than two generations by a committee working between 150 BCE and the turn of the millennium,”⁷ but philologists are wont to stratify and see the bulk of the epic established in the Critical Edition as being composed over hundreds of years with different recensions and many interpolated passages. Of course, it is necessary to distinguish between the Sanskrit *MBh*, possibly a Gupta text—although on the basis of the recent work of T. P. Mahadevan,⁸ it could be earlier than this—reflected in the Critical Edition and the different uses in a recitational context made of a performative text calling itself the *Mahābhārata* or some other name indicating that what was being recited related closely to the *MBh*. For what would have been the worth of what is intended to be a universalistic text propagating a complete vision of the world if it could not be communicated in vernacular versions?

To make such a statement is of course highly intuitive and reads into the text what may not have been intended. Yet the entire chapter of *MBh* 1, 56 underscores the correctness of this intuition in its recommendation of the *MBh* as a text covering everything that should be considered “culturally” important, thus giving clear guidelines as to how it should be understood. But why was it necessary to compose such a comprehensive text that must have quickly assumed a status sufficient to allow new material to be added to the Sanskrit version, whilst conceivably spinning off vernacular versions to be presented at different levels of society, especially since most people would have

⁷ See Hildebeitel 2011: 11.

⁸ Mahadevan 2008: 1–146, esp. p.7.

scarcely understood spoken Sanskrit? Was it because, as Lubin judiciously points out, when considering how the brahmins were sensitive to different applications of *dharma*: “The comment near the beginning of the *Āśvalāyanagr̥hyasūtra* is well known: ‘Now various indeed are the *dharmas* of the (different) countries, and the *dharmas* of the (different) villages; one should observe them in the wedding. But we shall state what is common (to all)’ (*Āśvalāyanagr̥hyasūtra*, 1.7.1-2 [*atha khalūccāvaca janapadadharmā grāmadharmās ca tān vivāhe pratīyāt yat tu samānam tad vakṣyāmaḥ*]) here.⁹ This would mean, depending on their dates, that the *Gr̥hya-* and *Dharmasūtras* were already placing custom and behaviour within a framework developed around the always ambiguous concept of *dharma* whilst continuing to recognize customary difference. But the *MBh* (and the *Rāmāyana* (*Rām*), even if less so) appear to have wanted to go beyond this. Already *dhamma* has assumed a systemic form in Buddhist teaching. As a governing concept in the huge body of Buddhist literature contemporary with and prior to the compositional period of the two epics its star was already very high, to such an extent that it could not have been ignored by non-Buddhist intellectuals.

The audience for the *Gr̥hya-* and *Dharmasūtras* must surely have been small, given their composition in elliptical Sanskrit, though the audience for the ideas communicated in them would have been much larger, and would have been exemplified often in actual social behaviour. But there is a difference between their being known as a body of texts and the details of these very same texts. Where are the Buddhist equivalents? Surely not the various *Vinayas*, as they are focused primarily on the conduct of monks, and of nuns to a lesser extent. The odd *sutta* such as the *Sigālovādasutta* for laypeople may be cited, but none were as systematized as the two sets of Sanskrit texts, especially the *Gr̥hyasūtras*, where important life cycle rituals were included. The *Dhammapāda*, essentially a set of aphorisms, cannot be equated with them because it is thematically based and contains virtually nothing about ritual.

Primarily intended for the educated elite, the *Gr̥hya-* and *Dharma-**sūtras* must have been known through the priestly agents who used them to give guidance to others. But there must have been a demand/ felt need for a narrative that would have embedded these technical

⁹ Lubin 2005: 83. See also Bowles 2015: 137–163.

texts in an accessible literary form, one where the narrative component interacted in a complementary manner with its more homiletic and educative/prescriptive contents. Precedents for this had long been known in both the *Brāhmanas* and the *Upaniṣads*, where narrative plot was interlaced with strict homiletic teachings. Both were composed, however, for a smaller more specialized audience in what were essentially small-scale societies. The *MBh* and the *Rām* fulfilled a need to come to terms with the development of large-scale societies that had existed for several hundred years by the time of their initial composition. This was a necessity irrespective of whether brahmins continued to demonstrate an ideological tendency to shun the urban areas for a life in the rustic village or on the fringes of the jungle. However, this reflects a tendency in a few stray texts and we have no way of knowing whether it reflected the actual situation on the ground.

The *MBh* in particular knows a broader spatial context and a comprehensive social profile far beyond that of earlier texts, something like the Buddhist *Jātakas* and the *Avadānas*. It may be trite to say that it transitions the transformation between small-scale and large-scale societies, but the amount of education both didactic and practical given in the text allows us confidently to suggest this. And so too does its imagining of empire: witness the horse sacrifice in Book 14 and the kings who are required to swear allegiance to Yudhiṣṭhira, as well as the advancing of its geographical scope beyond Āryavārta to much of what is contemporary India.

Political Fragmentation

In a previous paper I alluded to the political fragmentation in Early Historical India (perhaps 200BCE-200CE rather than 400BCE-400CE), characterized by different ethnic groups and different class status.¹⁰ During the four hundred years of this period there were dynasties — Maurya, Kuṣāṇa, Śātavāhana, plus others in Eastern India — in North-central India that on the basis of inscriptional evidence could lay claim to ruling over very large territories. However, this does not mean a fully unified polity where all power derives from some central area or bureaucracy. Rather it denotes a political body with power usefully diffused across a large area enabling the existence of many regional power centres dominated by political and economic elites. Chakrabarti

¹⁰ Bailey 2008: 13–37.

is surely right when he writes, “The kingdom such as that of the Mauryas could not have come about without a clear geopolitical sense of the significance of each of its component areas from south Afghanistan and Nepal to the bouldery outcrops of south Deccan. By the sheer fact of putting such a vast area in the framework of a single state, this must have acted as a catalyst of unleashing regional and local political and economic forces which naturally led to the formation of multiple states after its overarching framework disappeared.”¹¹

Economic and political elites in Early Historical India were not defined just by political power and agency, but also by religious status and disposable wealth, as well as by a capacity to raise armed troops and to receive publicized support from religious elites. Power, however this be defined, was fragmented, but despite this its agents must have been easily recognized by people in local areas where this power was exercised, perhaps a model inspired by Aśoka with his dharma instructors and local governors. Power was expressed through the obvious means of physical power, yet more subtly through the capacity of religious and political agents to gain financial and other support. The roots of some of this would obviously have been the charisma driving particular individuals, and an ability to facilitate pecuniary goals, but was also determined on the basis of status defined simply by tradition.

The political systems of this period were characterized by what might be called “empires,” but only with the qualification that modes of dispensing power and redistributing income were not uniform across the entire geographical region of the “empire.” Sahu, in dealing with earlier views relating to Indian feudalism, offers a neat corrective to a perception of clearly defined hierarchies, when he writes: “Reality was far more complex and problematic than the perceived neat hierarchies, involving relations of protection and loyalties at various levels. ... Great kings in regional or supra-regional formations were not absolute masters because lesser kings and chiefs accepted their own subordinate positions largely owing to political compromise or having

¹¹ Chakrabarti 2010: 34. A cautionary note is provided by C. Sinopoli (2008): “Within historic period archeology, in contrast, an emphasis on linear and dynastic history has remained dominant, with little effort to address broader anthropological questions. This is problematic on multiple grounds, not least the challenges in precisely linking material remains, whether architecture or artifacts, with specific rulers and dynasties, and the dangers of assuming that material changes directly parallel political ones.”

entered into mutually beneficial deals.”¹² Further Hawkes argues in the case of Bharhut: “...the evidence of this inscription [which records the donation of a King Dhanabhūti who ruled ‘during the reign of the Śuṅgas’], together with wider numismatic evidence in the form of a number of series of locally struck coins dated to the later centuries BCE and early centuries CE found throughout Madhya Pradesh (Sharma, 1998), points towards the entire wider area being made up of small apparently independent territories, which at various points came under the wider (though not necessarily direct) rule of powerful empires that had their centres of power elsewhere. All in all then, the region within which Bharhut is located appears to have been a distinct geographically and culturally bounded area, which would appear to have been fairly isolated from, though undoubtedly connected to, wider areas of the subcontinent.”¹³

This is the image of polity reflected in the Pāli Canon and the *MBh*. In both the idea of the *cakravartin* and the *saṃrāj* is present in a manner possibly suggestive of ‘empire’,¹⁴ whether that had ever been present other than as an ideal. How does this relate to the extended reflections on kingship found in the *MBh* and the concept of *dharmarāja*, which dominates Yudhiṣṭhira’s complex character¹⁵ development throughout the epic? One possible, if insufficiently explanatory, response might suggest the *dharmarāja* idea was intended simply as a model of kingship conceived within a brahmanical perspective. But it clearly contradicts the reality of realpolitik which operated in practice and where kings had to be responsive to local

¹² Sahu 2006: 72.

¹³ Hawkes 2009: 153. Citing Sharma, R. 1998.

¹⁴ Hildebeitel, 2001: 9: “The corresponding, and also Buddhist and Jain, term *cakravartin*, “turner of the wheel”, is not used for Yudhiṣṭhira, but is used in the Mahābhārata for “heroic Kṣatriyas who were emperors in the Tretā yuga” (6, 11, 10), and also for some of the sixteen kings Yudhiṣṭhira hears about in contexts that suggest overlap with the title *saṃrāj*.”

¹⁵ Typical is *MBh*. 12, 76, 15-17 where Yudhiṣṭhira says, “I have not sought the pleasures of kingship! I have not wanted kingship, not even for an instant! I acquiesced to kingship for the sake of Law, and yet there is no Law in it. So I have had enough of kingship where there is no Law. And I will just go to the forest in my desire to do Meritorious Lawful Deeds. There in the fresh, verdant wilds, having lain down the royal rod of force, having conquered my senses, a sage eating only roots and fruit, I will worship the Good Law.” Trans. in Fitzgerald 2004: 359. Even at the beginning of the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* he is still putting up objections to the Horse-Sacrifice necessary for the Earth’s purification, and his own.

practices of governance and be in contact with the local economic and religious elites. Leaving aside the question of whether the real parallel of *dharmarāja* is not between Yudhiṣṭhira and Aśoka, but between Yudhiṣṭhira and the Buddha, I suggest that the concept of the *dharmarāja* is part of broader brāhmaṇical socio-cultural teachings proposing an imagined pan Hindu empire where *dharma* would ideally regulate all behaviour and the king would function both as exemplar of this and of its enforcer, with the brahmins having the privileged function as interpreters of *dharma*. It was an ideal whose effectiveness would function to some extent in the breach, because so many kings would not or could not observe it, but it was something that was universal which could always be returned to as an achievable goal.

Buddhist Evidence for the Success of the MBh

There is compelling evidence outside of the *MBh* itself that its story and accompanying vision of a new society/polity was becoming known early in the CE.¹⁶ The *Jātakas*, in particular, are highly significant because they provide the first literate commentaries on the *MBh* narrative, in texts meant for a more popular audience. Their sometimes critical allusion to the *MBh* plot, though not to the didactic portions, may be an indication of its increasing importance at a vernacular level. The many previous lives of the Buddha provide the capacity for plot based narrative as well as homiletic teachings, and so perform an important educational function. In literary form they could constitute a competitor to the two Sanskrit epics without being as imposing.¹⁷ Underneath all of this could have been the fear in certain quarters of the *saṅgha* that an increasingly popular text like the *MBh*, which does recommend strong material support for the brahmins as a class, could militate against the widespread financial support to the *saṅgha* received from people of all social classes

Earlier Buddhist canonical literature is very aware of literary genre.¹⁸ But it does not correlate generic specificity with the names of

¹⁶ This is considerably earlier than its narrative summaries in Purāṇas like the Mārkaṇḍeya and the Padma, summaries important as guides for how the *MBh* was being received in alternative narrative traditions such as the Purāṇas.

¹⁷ And they are probably as popular as both epics in South-east Asia.

¹⁸ See especially *Dīgha Nikāya* (Rhys Davids and Estlin Carpenter 1960, Vol.1: 6), which mentions *naccaṃ gītaṃ vādiṭaṃ pekkhaṃ akkhānaṃ paṇissaraṃ vetālaṃ...* Buddhaghosa comments for *akkhānam*: Bhārataramāyaṇādi. *Taṃ yasmiṃ thāne kathiyati tattha gantum*

specific brāhmaṇical texts, except for general designations of the Vedas, the latter often as part of a caricature of the brahmins as a group whose puffed up status derives from their claimed expertise in manipulation of Vedic knowledge. The Buddhists were scrupulously aware of the ideas of other religio/philosophical groups and referred to them often, with the brahmins being the default group. In the so-called Brahma suttas of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (II 134-213)) and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (I 154-172; III 221-246) there is a sense that the Buddha himself feels a level of apprehension about brahmin self-confidence and arrogance, associated (as Tsuchida¹⁹ shows) with ownership of property and a claimed prerogative over the utilization of specialist knowledge.²⁰ Within a few hundred years, say by 200 BCE or later, this apprehension has almost certainly diminished as the *saṅgha* expands and the visible and invisible assets²¹ it holds produced institutional self-confidence and an awareness of its interactive function in an increasingly complex society. This is not an entirely intuitive assessment as the massive geophysical expansion of the *saṅgha* bespeaks its acceptance in many areas of the country. Also, the increasing construction of monumental architecture in areas where it is highly visible implies a desire for the *saṅgha* to assert its presence in a material sense as an institution that has made it, as it were.

Yet there were signs in late and post-canonical literature of a developing realization of the resurgence of a new brāhmaṇical consciousness, though whether this is a reaction to Hinduism as a newly formulated institutional²² body cannot easily be said. The genius of the brahmins in developing Hinduism was that they were

na vaṭṭati. "On the occasion when it is recited, it is not appropriate to go there." (*The Sumanāgala-Vilāsini*; quoted as in Rhys Davids and Estlin Carpenter 1968, Vol. I: 84). Different is the list in *Dīgha Nikāya* 1 p. 8, which talks about the content of *kathās*, rather than the form in which they might be transmitted.

¹⁹ Tsuchida 1971: 51-95.

²⁰ Though how these interact is uncertain and in the *MBh* the image of brahmins as property owners is definitely played down.

²¹ Learning, specialization in certain areas such as medicine and literacy, political influence, and general status.

²² Possibly reflected in the beginning of shrine construction, the teaching of the *Dharma-* and *Gṛhyasūtras* on ritual and their attempts to standardize these in relation to the householder understood as the prime economic unit, and the beginnings of royal support of Vedic learning in the establishment of *agrahāras*. I owe these insights to Adam Bowles.

able to establish themselves as elites without having physical assets like the Buddhists or an overarching organizational body like the *saṅgha*.

For the purposes of this article I am only interested in the response some Buddhist texts and intellectuals showed to the *MBh*. Of these responses, the most well known are those found in the *Jātakas*. Many of these are simply parallel passages, and it has been argued frequently that they may be independent developments drawn from common sources,²³ and similar parallels are also found in the *Dhammapāda*.²⁴ But it is arguable, I think, that some of the *Jātaka* passages can be read as critiques of some aspects of the *MBh* (to my knowledge they do not mention the text by name) plot and definitely of some of its central teachings. I have not studied this in any detail, yet two cases are illustrative.

The *Kuṇāla Jātaka* contains a number of passages which could be construed as misogynistic in tone and some of them criticize Draupadī. The king of the birds Kuṇāla is speaking to the cuckoo of the “faults of women” (*itthīnam agunaṃ*) and initially reports that:

“I have seen, good Puṇṇamukha, that Kṛṣṇā had two parents, and five husbands, and she attached her heart onto a sixth man, that one being a bull-necked dwarf going around on crutches.”²⁵

This expands the following verse: “The rājas, Arjuna, Nakula, Bhīma, Yudhiṣṭhira and Sahadeva were her five husbands, but the woman wanted more and she committed an evil act with a humpbacked dwarf.”²⁶

This is elaborated in the prose at pp. 426-427. In the end the Paṇḍavas reject her and go to Mt. Himavat where they perform the *kathina* ritual.

Unquestionably a controversial aspect of the plot of the *MBh* is being alluded to here and the fact that this was chosen is worthy of comment in its own right. Yet Kṛṣṇā (Draupadī) is only one of a series of women named who are treated as being utterly obsessed by sex. This

²³ Gönc Moacanin 2009: 373–398. Söhnen-Thieme 2009: 349–372.

²⁴ See Hegarty 2012.

²⁵ *Jātaka* (Fausbøll and Andersen 1875–1897, Vol. 5: 424): *Diṭṭhā māya samma puṇṇamukha kanhā dvepitikā pañcapatikā ya chaṭṭhe purise cittaṃ paṭibaddhan ti yā yadidaṃ kavandhe piṭhasappimhī ti. Bhavati ca pana ttar’ ettha vākyam*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5: 424: *ath ajjuno nakulo bhimaseno yudhiṭṭhilo sahademo ca rājā / ete paṭi pañca-m-aticca nārī akāsi khujjavāmanakena pāpan ti //*

same *Jātaka* finishes with a number of *subhāṣita* type verses strongly condemning women, of a kind also found in *MBh* 13, 39. There is definite intertextuality operating within this *Jātaka* and a distinctive critical element is present. Whilst Kṛṣṇā is only one of the prominent women condemned, that she is mentioned at all suggests she was well known to the composers of the *Jātakas*. And that it is she who is won by Arjuna in the *svayaṃvara* described in the *MBh* (1, 179, 22-23) seems to correspond to having Arjuna expose her evil action to his brothers in the *Kuṇḍala Jātaka*. Additionally, Draupadī is such a fundamental player in the *MBh* drama that one can regard her selection as relating to the epic as a whole, not just to the problematic of polyandry.

A totally different kind of reference to a prominent theme in the *MBh* is found in the *Sambhava Jātaka*²⁷ where we find a question being put to various sages about *dharma*, the question ultimately being traced back to Yudhiṣṭhira himself.

*rajjañ ca paṭipann' asmā adhipaccam sucīrata,
mahattaṃ pattum iccāmi vijetum paṭhaviṃ imaṃ. (Jātaka V, p. 57)*

“I have gained the kingdom and sovereignty, Sucīrata, and I want to gain greatness and conquer this whole earth.”

*dhammena no adhammena adhammo me na ruccati,
kicco va dhammo carito rañño hoti sucīrata. (Jātaka V, p.57)*

“But by the Law, not by what is not the Law, for what is not the law is not pleasing to me. The law is practised by a king as if it were his duty, Sucīrata.”²⁸

*idha c' evāninditā yena pecca yena aninditā,
yasaṃ devamanussesu yena pappomu brāhmaṇa. (Jātaka V, p.57)*

“By which he is definitely without blame here and without blame in the next world, by which we must gain renown amongst men and gods, brahmin.”

*yo' haṃ atthañ ca dhammañ ca kattum icchāmi brāhmaṇa,
taṃ tvaṃ atthañ ca dhammañ ca brāhmaṇ akkhāhi pucchito. (Jātaka V, p. 57)*

“I wanted to do what pertains to wealth and the Law, brahmin, and, brahmin, now that you have been asked, explain about wealth and the Law.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5: 57-67.

²⁸ A theme surely reflected at *MBh*.3, 155, 9cd where some brahmins predict: “you will rule the earth with your warrior law.” (*kṣatradharmaṇa dharmajña tīrtvā gāṃ pālayiṣyasi* 155, 9cd). And also 3, 170, 69.

*rañño 'haṃ pahito duto koravyassa yasassino,
atthaṃ dhammañ ca pucchesi iccabravi yudhiṭṭhilo
taṃ tvaṃ atthañ ca dhammañ ca vidhur' akkhāhi pucchito. (Jātaka V, p. 59)*

“I was sent as a messenger of the renowned king, descendent of Kaurava, because Yudhiṣṭhira had said, you must ask this question about wealth and the Law. Vidhura, now that you have been asked, explain about wealth and the Law.”

This verse is repeated several times and each time the addressee admits he cannot answer it, until, finally, it is answered by somebody who was previously the Buddha. This is a typical strategy in earlier Buddhist literature where the Buddha will respond to a question a brahmin or the god Brahmā has not been able to answer. In this case, three figures—Vidhura, Bhadrakāra and Saṃjaya—are asked to provide an answer. Vidhura and Saṃjaya are extremely prominent advisers on *dharma* in the *MBh*, and well known for this, yet they cannot answer the question. Only Saṃbhava gives an appropriate response at the end, being enjoined to say that Yudhiṣṭhira should act when the opportunity arises, but staying in control of himself (*mā katvā āvasi* V p.66).

It is surely significant that Vidhura—who I take as the equivalent of Vidura—and Saṃjaya are mentioned,²⁹ and it could not have been in the absence of a good working knowledge of the *MBh* narrative. Both are figures renowned for their knowledge of *dharma*³⁰ and the ambiguities associated with it. The specific use of these names, and especially of Yudhiṣṭhira too, I take as conveying a critical note because of the number of debates that occur in the *MBh* on the primacy of *artha* over *dharma*³¹ and vice-versa, as well as because of Yudhiṣṭhira's well known difficulties with understanding *dharma*, despite his status as Dharmarāja.

One other non-*Jātaka* passage where a critical tone is taken towards the *MBh* comes from the *Lalitavistara* where there is some debate about which royal family the *bodhisattva* would be born in before his final birth as Gautama. One of the lineages canvassed is that of the Pāṇḍavas:

²⁹ Bhadrakāra in the *MBh* is mentioned as one of the eight sons of Abhiṣvat in the Pūru line (1, 89, 46); and in the plural they are also a tribe who stayed in the West through fear of Jarāsaṃdha (2, 13, 25, cf. 7, 22, 58).

³⁰ At 12, 161, 4 Vidura is also described as *arthagatitattvajñāḥ*.

³¹ See for instance *MBh* 12, 8 where *artha/dhana* is regarded as the essential precondition for *dharma*. Also 3, 2, 48-49 *yudhiṣṭhiraivam artheṣu na sprhāṃ kartum arhasi*; 5, 88, 78; 12, 59, 134; 12, 93, 6-14; 12, 161, 6-11. See also Bowles 2007: 229-233.

“Others said, ‘There was a king in the large city of Hastināpura, born in the lineage of Pāṇḍu. He was a hero, strong, with an excellent body and limbs. That family of destroyers of enemy armies is suitable for the establishment of the foetus of the bodhisattva.’ Others say it is unsuitable. ‘What is the reason? Because the lineage was completely confused by the births of Pāṇḍu’s family. It is said that Yudhiṣṭhira is Dharma’s son, Bhīmasena Vāyu’s, Arjuna Indra’s, and Nakula and Sahadeva are sons of the Aśvins.’”³²

This is significant not just because it mentions the five Pāṇḍavas but because it also shows a precise awareness of the nature of their semi-divine births, and therefore of the narrative plot itself. Equally, its hesitation about the suitability of the lineage has a critical tone about it.

To these passages of a critical nature we can add Aśvaghoṣa’s apparent awareness of a *MBh*³³ containing the didactic books and the presence of a *parvasaṃgraha* of the *MBh* in a Sarvāstivādin manuscript perhaps dating to the third part of the 3rd CE.³⁴ Whilst there is intense debate over how the contents of this list relate to other parvan lists and the contents of the *MBh* as given to us in the Critical Edition, my concern lies with the fact that the *MBh* is explicitly coming up in at least four different Buddhist texts, different in genres and schools. Does this say something about the popularity of the text in the first centuries CE and beyond? Surely, it points to the recognition given to this new genre, and no doubt to the *Rām* as well, as it is reworked in the *Dasaratha Jātaka*.

Conclusion

The *Mahābhārata* offers the possibility of a conceptual unity that enables the acceptance and continuation of a diversity of cultural/social/religious practices. How could it have done otherwise given the realities on the ground? But even to say this is too simplistic, because a text of such great complexity—where the complexity resides in the didactic/homiletic material combined with the broader narrative plot—mirrors both the historical complexities underlying its material production, as well as a desire to transcend these. Given the antiquity of this narrative style it was not a stylistic innovation to compose a text

³² Vaidya 1958: 16–17.

³³ Hildebeitel 2006: 229–286.

³⁴ See Brockington 2010: 75–87.

in this manner, except that the plot runs across the entire narrative, a feature not found in earlier texts.

It is a much more expansive text in every aspect than the *Rāmāyaṇa* and other literature of that period, the Dharma texts and the *Mahābhāṣya*. The latter defines a set of intellectual fields that will continue to dominate Sanskrit learning, but not the intellectual culture of the majority of the population. It is this latter towards which the *MBh* is directed and it fills this need very effectively in both educative and entertainment value. It could be communicated in vernacular forms, in truncated versions—as was likely—or simply as a group of minor episodes drawn from its more extended narrative. Despite its versatility the existence of a huge version of the text in Sanskrit must have been known well outside the space of those who were responsible for its direct recitation and transmission. This gave it a sense of universality, mirrored in the dharmic universality taught by *smārta* brahmins³⁵, that represented a consistent cultural layer on top of the extremely variant sub-structure of cultural practices which the brahmins as cultural elites knew were firmly anchored in the myriads of local cultures. That one *Jātaka*, at least, calls into question its understanding of dharma is hardly surprising.

References

- Bailey, Greg. 2004. The Mahābhārata as counterpoint to the Pāli Canon. *Orientalia Suecana*, LIII (2004): 37–48.
- . 2008. On the Significance of the *Mahābhārata* as a Cultural Artefact in Early Historical India (400BCE-400ACE), *Indologica Taurinensia*, XXXIV (2008) pp. 13–37.
- . 2011. ‘Him I Call a Brahmin’: Further Instances of Intertextuality between the Mahābhārata and some Pāli Texts. *Pūrvāparaprajñābhīnandanam. East and West, Past and Present. Indological and Other Essays in Honour of Klaus Karttunen*. Ed. Tikkanen, B. and A.M. Butters, *Studia Orientalia*, 110: 3–19.
- . 2012. ‘Sthavirabuddhayaḥ in the Maṛkaṇḍeyasamāsyaparvan of the Mahābhārata. Problems in locating critiques of Buddhism in the Mahābhārata.’ In *Devadattīyam. Johannes Bronkhorst Felicitation Volume*, ed. F. Voegeli, et. al., Peter Lang, Bern, Berlin: 685-701.
- . 2012-13. Dharmarāja in the Mahābhārata and Early Buddhist Literature. *Brahmavidyā*, 76–77: 149–188.

³⁵ See Lubin 2005: 16.

- Bowles, Adam. 2007. *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India*. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2015. Dharma and 'custom': semantic persistence, semantic change and the anxieties of the principled few. *Religions of South Asia*, 9, 2: 137–163.
- Brockington, John. 2010. The Spitzer manuscript and the Mahābhārata. In: Franco, E. and M. Zin, eds. *From Turfan to Ajanta: festschrift for Dieter Schlingloff on the occasion of his eightieth birthday*. Bhairahawa, Rupandehi: Lumbini International Research Institute: 75–87.
- Chakrabarti, D.K. 2010. *The geopolitical Orbits of Ancient India: The Geographical Frames of the Ancient Indian Dynasties*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Fausbøll, V. and Dines Andersen. 1875-1897. *The Jātaka: Together with Its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*. London: Trübner & Co. 7 vols.
- Fitzgerald, J. 2004. (tr.) *The Mahābhārata*, Volume 7. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gönc Moacanin, Klara. 2009. Epic vs. Buddhist Literature: The Case of Vidhura-panḍitajātaka. In: *Parallels and Comparisons. Proceedings of the Fourth Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, September 2005*. Edited by Petteri Koskikallio, Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences: 373–398.
- Hawkes, J. 2009. The Wider Archaeological Contexts of the Buddhist Stupa Site of Bharhut. In: *Buddhist Stupas in South Asia: Recent Archaeological, Art Historical, and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Hawkes, J. & A. Shimada. New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 146–176.
- Hegarty, J. 2012. The *Dhammapada*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Mānava Dharmasāstra*: A Study in Early South Asian Intertextuality. Paper delivered at the XVth World Sanskrit Conference, New Delhi, 2012.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf. 2001. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001
- . 2006. Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita: The First Known Close and Critical Reading of the Sanskrit Epics. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 34: 229–286.
- . 2011. *Dharma. Its Early History in Law, Religion and Narrative*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Lubin, Tim. 2005. The Transmission, Patronage, and Prestige of Brahmanical Piety from the Mauryas to the Guptas. In: F. Squarcini, ed., *Boundaries, Dynamics, and Construction of Traditions in South Asia*, Florence: 77–103.
- Mahadevan, T.P. 2008. On the Southern Recension of the Mahābhārata, Brahman Migrations and Brāhmī Paleography. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 15/2 (2008): 1–146.
- Rees, Gethin. 2009. A Hiatus in the Cutting of Buddhist Caves in the Western Deccan. *Ancient Asia*, 2: 119–134.

- Rhys Davids, T. W and J. Estlin Carpenter. 1960. (eds.) *The Dīghanikāya*. London: Luzac, reprint 1960, Vol.1.
- . 1968. (eds.) *The Sumaṅgala-Vilāsinī. Buddhaghosa's Commentary on the Dīgha-Nikāya*. London: Luzac, reprint 1968, Vol. I.
- Sahu, B. P. Ways of Seeing: History and Historiography of the State in Early India. In: Brandtner, M. and S.K. Panda, eds. *Interrogating History. Essays for Herman Kulke*, Delhi: Manohar: 63–83.
- Sharma, R. 1998. *Encyclopedia of Art, Archeology and Literature in Colonial India*. 2 Vols. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.
- Shaw, J. 2007. *Buddhist Landscapes in Central India: Sanchi Hill and archeologies of religious and social change. 3rd century BC to 5th century AD*. London.
- Sinopoli, Carla. 2008. Imperial Landscapes of South Asia. In: Stark, M. (ed.) *Archaeology of Asia*. Blackwell Publishing: 324–349.
- Smith, M.L. 2006. The Archeology of South Asian Cities. *Journal of Archeological Research*, vol. 14, issue 2: 97–142.
- Söhnen-Thieme, Renate. 2009. Buddhist Tales in the *Mahābhārata*. In: *Parallels and Comparisons. Proceedings of the Fourth Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, September 2005*. Edited by Petteri Koskikallio, Zagreb: Croatian Academy of Sciences: 349–372.
- Tsuchida, R. 1971. Two Categories of Brahmins in the Early Buddhist Period. *The Memoirs of the Toyo Bunko*, 49: 51–95.
- Vaidya, P. 1958. (ed.) *Lalita Vistara*. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute.