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ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* AS A CULTURAL ARTEFACT IN EARLY HISTORICAL INDIA (400BCE-400CE)

In this paper I present some of the arguments relating to the plural nature, or absence of it, of the brahmin role model as this is elaborated in the *Mahābhārata* (MBh). Then I ask where this leads us in understanding shifting power relations in some of the polities existing during the early centuries (200BCE-200CE) in which the composition and initial dissemination of this epic is typically placed. Does the very extensive argumentation in the MBh about the obligations of brahmins and kings towards each other indicate anything else than that anxieties about the foundations of their own power base weighed heavily on the minds of the brahmins? Or that beyond their own self-interest this was a subject of concern for very few other members of society? If so, is this text, like so much other literature in early historical India, a text of elites which has little explicit relevance to the other classes of society who are placed outside of the mainstream of the intellectual, political and religious elite? Finally, I will speculate on the social and political significance of the MBh as a communicative device within the framework of its probable historical background. It is my firm belief that despite its apparent obsession with the religious and political/military elites of its time, it does take seriously the complexity of society in which it was initially grounded even if its concerns seem philosophical and political instead of sociological or ethnographical.

The study of the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, has to date been

substantially the study of the text in three areas of concentration: firstly, as a philological monument; secondly, as a mine for sourcing realia about Indian culture; and, finally, as a witness for the broadening of early Indian religious culture from its beginnings noted in the Vedas to the very strong devotional trends evident in Hinduism. More recently a fourth concern has been added: the study of the text as a record of the attempts of the highest class, the brahmins, to define as they saw it a model of a coherently functioning society, and of their role in it. This attempt was made in response to the brahmins' perception of a society seemingly undergoing dramatic change. Analysis of the contents of the MBh as reflexes of historical events is of course fundamental, but an evaluation of its cultural significance and instrumentality as a new genre [1] in a form that can only be described as monumental, is also a desideratum. There is clear evidence in the MBh itself that as its contents developed they underwent a revision by learned brahmins. Additionally, much of the epic is concerned with critically exploring the relationship between the brahmins and the *kṣatriyas*. The justification for this is that the brahmins in particular are seemingly convinced that it is they who should provide ideological guidance for the achievement of social coherence in an increasingly pluralistic society. Such a conviction comes out of a sense of self doubt on the part of the brahmins themselves about the extent to which non- brahmins accepted the brahmins' prescriptions for a coherent society. This self doubt could only have been exacerbated by the material success of Buddhism from about 200BCE and the brahmins' own belief that the actual roles they performed were violating the bases of authority which would allow them to be accorded the highest status in society by other classes.

Scenario

The following passage (3, 198, 24-30) depicts a wholly ideal polity envisaged from the brahmin's perspective:

> Livelihoods for men in the world are related to agriculture, cattle herding and trade, as well as government, and learning from the three Vedas. People exist on these. Labour is said to be for the *śūdra*, agriculture for the *vaiśya*, war for the *kṣatriya*, and always for the brahmin: sacred learning, austerity, spells and truthfulness. By using the law the king governs his subjects who are devoted to their own activities *(svakarma)*, but any who are engaged in the wrong activities he reconnects to their own proper activities. One should always be fearful of kings because they are the overlord of their subjects. They kill those who are engaged in wrong activities as a hunter kills a deer with his arrows.
> In this kingdom of King Janaka nobody can be found who is engaged in the wrong activities, brahmin sage, and the four classes are devoted to their own activities, excellent brahmin. If this King Janaka even has a son who acts badly he throws him in jail for punishment yet he shows no aversion to the man who follows the law. The king who is wholly bound to good conduct watches everything in terms of the law. For *kṣatriyas* there is regal prosperity, kingship and the staff of punishment, excellent brahmin. Yet kings try for even more regal prosperity by following their own lawful duty. The king is the protector of all the classes.

This heavily formulaic statement mirrors the conditions in the kingdom of the famous Janaka of Mithilā, long known in Sanskrit literature prior to the MBh as a sage king, whose rule is regarded as having produced a society marked by social coherence and voluntary adherence to normative social rules. Such visions are found elsewhere in the MBh and are elaborated in great detail in the *Śāntiparvan*.

But what is represented here is fantasy, or better, a fantasy used as ideology. Other literary sources, including the MBh itself, plus epigraphical and numismatic evidence, as well as inference drawn from archaeology, require us to acknowledge a huge gap between ideology and the complexity of the actual historical situation during the centuries (200BCE-200CE) over which the MBh was composed. Ideology it may be, but these recurring statements of the ideal society

speak to us about the function of the MBh as a communicative device and about the 'corporate' anxiety experienced by the brahmins in regard to their own status as one group in society attempting to locate themselves and convince others of the legitimacy of their status. The brahmins certainly knew that social and cultural processes in society exhibited an infinitely greater level of complexity than is implied in these kinds of statements. Yet it is especially these, amongst other didactic tracts, that act within the MBh itself as a working commentary on the narrative plot, in order to educate what the brahmins expected of the political elite who buttressed their status and provided them with economic support.

Historical Context

Scholars have not been able to narrow down a date of composition/reworking of the MBh to less than four centuries, 200BCE to 200CE, though the contents of the epic find parallels in literature that extend back another several centuries, and developments in the written text continue well after 200CE. What is important is that the epic in the form we have it today was being alluded to in Buddhist literature by the 2nd C CE at the latest and so was clearly known in a cultural environment beyond that which had actually produced it. Geographically its action occurs substantially in the area defined by the brahmins as Āryavārta, located slightly to the Northwest of central India. By placing the action here the brahmins could make forays outside of this area so that differences could be sharply contrasted with the cultural practices of marginalized people from further outlying areas.

Though the MBh narrative depicts relationships between kings and political elites in a manner mirroring the Indian political situation current at its time, where many minor kings were ruling their own kingdoms and taking part in the battle described in its middle part, its vision is of the establishment of a universal king/emperor who will usher in a golden age of rule conforming to what is found in Janaka's kingdom alluded to above. Our knowledge of actual political history[2]

2. An excellent summary is given by A. Malinar, *Rājāvidyā: Das königliche*

is often simply restricted to the names of dynasties augmented by a few details of reigns usually taken from sources hostile to the kings whose reigns are being focussed upon. However, what we can be confident of is that after about 179 BCE there was no dynasty that successfully ruled over most of North and Central India until the rise of the Guptas in 320 CE. It is true that the Kuṣāṇas do establish a dynasty (30 CE-250 CE) centred in North Western India which extends into Central India, and that at a slightly earlier, and then overlapping, period the Sātavāhanas ruled (50 BCE-200 CE) over much of present day Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. Neither encompasses the same extent of territory as did the Mauryas (320-179 BCE) or the imperial Guptas 320 CE-500 CE. Moreover, when viewed from the outside the periods between the 'pan-Indian dynasts' of the Guptas and the Mauryas seem to have been one of intense instability, with many small tribal chieftains and oligarchies, hangovers from the older *janapadas*, conflicting with each other and haggling about the tribute they would sometimes have to pay to larger monarchical kingdoms. It is arguable, then, that northwestern India was already in a state of instability at the time of the overthrow of the final Mauryan emperor in 179 BCE. Conquests continued steadily from Central Asia over the next six centuries. This is, of course, too much of a generalization, but the sense of instability, constant change and accompanying adaptational process which comes with it cannot be ignored.

It is also necessary to add that the social status of the rulers of these kingdoms had never been typically of the warrior class, normatively laid down to occupy such roles in the treatises of the brahmins. The Nanda dynasty 362-321 BCE was allegedly of the *śūdra* class, whereas the Mauryas were *kṣatriyas*, the Śuṅgas and the Kāṇvas were brahmins. The Sātavāhanas claimed brahmin status [3], whereas the Kuṣāṇas, though originally of a non-Indian ethnic stock were of uncertain status. Besides these well known names there must have been

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Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht. Studien zur Bhagavadgītā, (Wiesbaden, 1996), Ch.8. A more recent summary is R. Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to AD 1300*, (Berkeley, 2002).

3. H. P. Ray, *Monastery and Guild. Commerce under the Sātavāhanas*, (Delhi, 1986), p. 175.

many others who were of different class status. All of this suggests a considerable degree of fluidity in status, though it cannot be easily said how this might have been perceived at close distance, yet evidence for this can be found in the MBh if we know how to look for it.

If political dynasties were constantly changing, what can be said about social, economic and cultural change, including religion? There is some evidence that the class system was being made more rigid by the time of the composition of the *Mahābhārata*. This emerges in the *Dharmasūtra* literature dating from the third century BCE which certainly presents a picture of the world from a brāhmaṇical perspective and implies the brahmin's wish to have a social world where boundaries are tightly drawn. This may well have been a response to a situation where social boundaries were still fluid, at least at the class level below that of brahmin. Equally, it could also have been compounded by geographical expansion and a concomitant shoring up of existing status. Already it is likely that the classes were consolidating into many lineage groups, each having a status within one of the four normative classes. And this only takes into account those groups regarded as belonging within class based society. Many tribal groups existed outside of this, as well as different ethnic groups who came into the subcontinent from Central Asia via the north-west and succeeded in building up large kingdoms. To this we can add the groups of Buddhist and Jain monks who rejected their class affiliations when they left society, only to form another corporate group.

In the area of trade and economy changes had been occurring since about 400 BCE, consonant with the rise of large-scale societies and the continued existence of small-scale societies. One of the great legacies of the Mauryan kings was that they built many roads and policed them, a factor which substantially facilitated trade. Industries not directly associated with agricultural production were opening up, including what today we would call the financial services industries. Farming did, however, continue to be the principal source of income and the peasant farmer was the principal socio-economic category in the countryside. The new wealth associated with people who lived predominantly in urban centres and were known to engage in intra-regional trade and sometimes international trade if they lived on the coast must have been highly conspicuous even to disinterested observers. H.P. Ray and Romila Thapar have both shown how wide-

spread were the trading networks which arose after 200 BCE and which came to foster trading relations possessing their own sense of coherence, maintaining their continuity irrespective of the potential instability of changing polities and the military incursions which would support these changes.

The Buddhist Context

What is fundamental to the aim of the present study is the determination of the perceptions held by brahmins and, importantly, by other non-brahmin elites of the period (200 BCE – 200 CE) about brahmin status and accompanying treatment at the hands of those they regarded as inferior to them in social status. Of the four classes mentioned frequently enough since the early Vedas the profile of the brahmins and the *kṣatriyas* was the one most clearly defined in terms of occupational categories and obligations to the other classes. At least for the benefit of those who knew Sanskrit, it was the Brahmins who were doing the defining. By the time of the *Manusmṛti* (1st C CE) there were approximately fifty *jātis* or lineage groups mentioned, indicating that the actual historical situation was certainly more variegated and complex than the picture presented in the epics, though even there hints at complexity are given. The dominance of the brahmins as a group (defined by the three distinctive occupational categories of farming and land-holding [4], custodianship of knowledge and performance of rituals) is given a very high profile in the Pāli canon and in Buddhist Sanskrit texts. Emerging from the texts is the impression that the brahmins were very self-assured as to their status, especially in their own self-perception as custodians of the transcendental knowledge of the Vedas, a sense constantly communicated in the Nikāyas. It is for this reason that the Buddha is so often depicted defeating young brahmin men in debate. Note that the oldest parts of the Canon were probably composed in north-central and north-eastern India (Greater Magadha), some perhaps as early as the fourth century BCE and

4. On this much useful information is provided by E. Ritschl, "Brahmanische Bauern. Zur Theorie und Praxis der brahmanischen Ständeordnung im alten Indien," *Altorientalistische Forschungen*, 7 (1980), pp. 177-87.

beyond and indicate a period when brahmins had moved out of north-west and central India into the newly opened up eastern and southern frontier areas of the sub-continent.

In order to understand the pivotal role of the brahmins in the MBh, it is necessary to look at early Buddhist literature because the Buddhists represented the most serious early 'civilizational' challenge to what subsequently became a brāhmaṇical cultural hegemony. This challenge was institutional and lasted for centuries, hence it was much more than an ideological challenge, though it was this as well. It was institutional in the sense that the Buddhist *saṅgha* had a clear legal order, a large material presence, a considerable body of religious celebrities, a well defined set of relationships between monks and nuns and enjoyed material patronage at all levels of society. We can be certain that it was highly visible at all levels of society. A socially and economically complex *saṅgha* could not have arisen during the lifetime of the Buddha, but on the basis of evidence from the Aśokan inscriptions (evidence outside of a strictly Buddhist or Hindu framework), it must have reached such a position by Aśoka's time, and the archeological record suggests a tremendous growth in the institutional aspects of Buddhism after this period [5].

What is important then is to note the extent to which brahmins are given a very high profile, especially in the Pāli Canon, less so in early Mahāyāna literature. The *Dīgha* (Vol.1 *suttas* 9-13) and *Majjhima* (Vol.2 *suttas* 91-100) *Nikāyas* contain entire sections of *suttas* about *brahmins*, and the important early text the *Sutta Nipāta* (and the *Dhammapada*) also contains considerable information on brahmin social conditions [6]. A close reading of all this material inclines me to believe that the Buddha not only regarded the brahmins as his chief intellectual opponents, but that he was in some sense self-conscious of the success brahmins seem to have had in establishing themselves at the top level of society, or at least as a very distinctive group who had carved out for themselves a specific identity not based on economic or

5. See Greg Bailey, "The Mahābhārata as Counterpoint to the Pāli Canon," *Orientalia Suecana* LIII (2004), pp. 43-44 and n. 2 p. 37; Lars Fogelin, *Archeology of Early Buddhism*, (Lanham, 2006), Chs. 5 and 8.

6. Analysed in Greg Bailey and Ian Mabbett, *The Sociology of Early Buddhism*, Cambridge, 2003), Ch. 5.

political power. Many brahmins were landlords and many others are also portrayed as being economically prosperous and very self-confident about their social status and the extensive ideology they believed justified their status. Much of the Buddha's preaching activity is directed towards defeating, in a very muted manner, brahmins in intellectual disputes and the majority of early converts to Buddhism were brahmins. Contrast this with the defensive image of the brahmin implied everywhere in the MBh. What must have happened to cause such a turn around, if this is what really happened? Or would it be more prudent to argue that two different corporate groups in early historic India developed quite different perceptions of each other in the absence of substantial intercommunication?

In a 2004 article [7] I asserted the possibility that the composition of the MBh may have been partially a response to the *material success* of Buddhism from the third century BCE up until about the second century CE. Some of my research activity over the last three years has been devoted to refining this hypothesis and locating evidence that supports or falsifies it. It is not just a question of religious differences between two successful groups, but of a different perception of the role that classes of people play in the economy, society, polity and the broader culture. The perceptions of both Buddhist and brahmins towards each other were inclusive in the sense that these perceptions operated at a level of closure and completeness, though certain texts show that this inclusiveness was rhetorical rather than actual. As this paper concerns the MBh it is the perception of the brahmins, held collectively [8], towards the Buddhists that must be ascertained, as difficult as this might be from the MBh itself. Outside of the text it is possible to make an evaluation of the material presence of Buddhism in various parts of India and then to draw inferences from this concerning the interaction between Buddhist monastic and devotional centres and their surrounding areas, and specifically the extent to which the *saṅgha* had become an inseparable component in the economic and social life of its immediate geographical location.

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7. Bailey, 2004, *op. cit*.
8. The brahmins were not, of course, an homogenous group in all areas of life.

Beyond the broad archeological surveys of Buddhist cave sites in Western India and Andhra Pradesh, beginning from as early as 1850, that have shown widespread building activity associated with the spread of Buddhism southwards and westwards from Magadha, recent work by archeologists has been valuable in providing us with the resources to determine how the localized *saṅgha* was able to interact with local communities. Especially significant here is the on-going work of Julia Shaw and John Sutcliffe who in a number of archeological surveys involving the delineation of settlement patterns around the great *stūpa* of Sanchi (located in Madhya Pradesh) have proven the importance of monasteries and activity surrounding them as stimulatory forces for economic activity. I quote them at length:

> The distribution of Buddhist remains [around Sanchi] and early-historic settlements across the study area attests to a much higher density of population in the past, and to a degree of 'monumentalisation' that is no longer evident in today's largely rural landscape. This would have put considerable pressure on local food supplies, calling for the kind of intensive agriculture represented by the Sanchi dams. Further, the high investment required for building such systems would not have made sense without a developed administrative framework for overseeing the use and supply of irrigation. Quite clearly, it would have been in the interests of the monks as non-producing sections of society, to be embedded in an agriculturally efficient environment, as their livelihood depended on the availability of local patronage. Whether the monasteries were actively involved in the management of the irrigation supplies, as in the case of Sri Lankan 'monastic landlordism', cannot be proven without supportive epigraphical evidence. However, the relative configuration of dams, monasteries and settlements in the Sanchi area is sufficiently similar to patterns in Sri Lanka to suggest that the Sanchi dams were central to the development of complex exchange networks between the Buddhist *saṅgha*, local landlords and agriculturalists [9].'

This is an important conclusion justified by extensive argumentation in this and other papers. Where it becomes significant for my

9. Julia Shaw and John Sutcliffe, "Ancient Dams and Buddhist Landscapes in the Sanchi area: New evidence on Irrigation, Land use and Monasticism in Central India," *South Asian Studies*, 21 (2005), p. 18-19. Cf. p. 20.

argument is that the brahmins would only have had to theorize their position as a distinctive group in society after the Buddha's time, and even then would have received considerable deference from most members of village society. It is only with the appearance of successful 'outsiders' and new social institutions such as the *saṅgha* that the brahmins were forced to consider their own status as 'insiders'. That the *saṅgha* had managed so successfully to domesticate itself in localized contexts shows how accomplished it was at adapting itself to existing life-style and subsistence conditions. From the brahmin's perspective this must have been just a continuing stream of incursions, not backed up by military force, into local areas of a new body of people who were not amenable to incorporation into the more rigidly defined class system that was especially visible at the level of the village where everybody knew each other, as opposed to the large scale urban centres where interaction was not so dependent on class, but on economic factors as well. They did not oppose this system, but nor did they support it. Finally, the monks constituted a new form of localized general elite where this position had previously been held by the brahmins, and in an economic sense by wealthy landowners who may have been brahmins. Add to this the economic opportunities opened up for lay people by the needs of the *saṅgha* and the potentialities for status displacement and the perception of such are very strong.

There are dozens of Buddhist sites located around Sanchi, but insufficient work has been undertaken at other Buddhist sites of a similar nature to enable the localization/domestication argument to be extended throughout most of the areas in ancient India where Buddhism appears to have been well entrenched. An exception here is the recent work done by Lars Foegelin in Thotlakonda in North coastal Andhra Pradesh where several large *stūpas* have been found, accompanied by many small votive *stūpas* (containing the bones of prominent monks and prominent lay people), plus several *vihāras* and hundreds of burial cairns which also have a mortuary significance in relation to the main *stūpas* [10]. These are located over an area of a few square kilometres, though it is significant that all of the burial sites have been deliberately located in sight of the main *stūpa*. For the

10. Foegelin, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86; Ch. 8.

moment I am only concerned about what he says in relation to the monastery and its immediate local environment:

> … the evidence for local economic interaction is extensive. First, the majority of ceramics from the monastery resemble, in both type and frequency of non-plastic inclusions, those found at the settlement. This indicates that ceramics from both sites were locally produced.
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> …Another form of economic interaction is shown by the laborers employed by the monastery. If religious conviction underwrote their labor, it should be expected that there would be structures in their work spaces to remind them of the higher purpose of their efforts. Given the paucity of ritual structures within the area used by the laborers, it seems that their employment was not based upon religious donations. ... the high frequency of bowls in their work areas may suggest that the laborers received payments of food, if not other tangible benefits as well.
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> …The final evidence for economic interaction consists of donation inscriptions on cchatras and other items at the monastery [11].

Given that Thotlakonda and Sanchi, plus dozens of other lesser locations, had been what I would call 'working Buddhist sites' since the beginning of the second century BCE [12], there can be little doubt that the time frame dovetails well with the equivalent time frame for the composition of the MBh. Similar early datings have been suggested by Fogelin and other scholars (Morrison and Dehejia) have noted the development of extensive rock cave temples in Maharashtra dating back to the second century BCE [13]. One urgent task for future

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11. Ibid., pp. 196-197.

12. Julia Shaw, "The Archeological Setting of Buddhist Monasteries in Central India: a Summary of Multi-Phase Survey in the Sanchi Area, 1998-2000," in C. Jarrige and V. Lefèvre, *South Asian Archeology* 2001, (Paris, 2005), Vol. 2, pp. 667-678, "Over 35 'new' Buddhist sites, ranging from c. 3rd century BC to 7th century AD, were documented during the survey (Figure 1). Most were hilltop monastic centres; however Buddhist remains were also found within a number of the habitational sites. Structural finds included *stupas* as well as residential buildings. The latter ranged from single-roomed rectangular buildings (Figure 3; cf Agrawal 1997), to massive stone platforms (Figure 4) which would have been surmounted by towering superstructures (Shaw 2001, 667-668, cf. p. 670). Datable to c. 2nd century BC, these early monastery remains present a direct challenge to the received view that there are no monastery remains at Sanchi clearly datable before the Gupta period (Trainor 1996, 32)".

13. See n. 4 above.

research is to trace the distribution of monumental Buddhist architecture across India for the period between the second century BCE and CE, and to correlate these sites with their surrounding urban networks, in order to test the hypothesis that post-Aśokan Buddhism does expand in conjunction with a growing urbanism.

A final, yet crucial, point relates to the conspicuousness of the monumental remains at the time when they were part of a living landscape. Most of the main *stūpas* so far excavated in India are highly conspicuous within their surroundings [14]. Evidence from the Western Deccan during the Sātavāhana period (50 BCE and beyond) indicates that many of the Buddhist cave temples and monasteries were strategically located near trading routes, a factor that would also enhance visibility and provide increased possibilities for raising money through donations. Ray notes that "…bullock carts may have been used for carrying wood and agricultural produce from the inland regions of the western Deccan to the leeward side of the Ghats. From there the steep gradient to the ports on the west coast may have required the use of pack animals. It is not surprising that the caves are located at precisely those points where the change-over is required to be made [15]."

How Might This Relate to the MBh?

Dating of the factors instigating the composition of the MBh as a text of response strongly reacting to the perception of a series of negative events, from the perspective of its composers, over an extended historical period assumes more precision if we take the starting basis of this reaction as the reign of Aśoka [16]. Because we know more about Aśoka than any other early Indian king, and because his inscriptions place so much emphasis on the idea of *dhamma* – a foundational con-

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14. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, pp.102 and 109, though urging caution on this point. He also refers to Julia Shaw, "Buddhist landscapes and monastic planning: The elements of intervisibility, surveilance and the protection of relics," in T.Insoll, ed., *Case Studies in Archeology and World Religion*, (Oxford, 1999).

15. Ray, *op. cit.*, p.126.

16. Cf. Malinar, *op. cit.*, p. 437, who would take it further back to the distinctive form of political centralization associated with the Nandas.

cept in Buddhist literature and both Sanskrit epics, it is fully understandable that he should be seen as establishing the conditions for a collective brahmin disgruntlement [17]. At least this is what the most recent scholarly consensus has come to be. Fitzgerald is most eloquent on this:

> … the idea of dharma as well as claims about our knowledge of it and its substance became highly contested matters during Nandan, Mauryan, and immediate post-Mauryan times (ca. 340-100B.C.). During this period, in two important developments, the Buddhist movement made its own uses of the word *dharma*, and the Mauryan emperor Aśoka, claiming to have become a lay Buddhist, used his imperial position to propagate 'dharma' to the populace of his empire. These non-Brahminical and imperial propagandistic appropriations of dharma infringed upon some of the actual substance of Brahminic dharma, and – what was even more serious – they transgressed the Brahminic claim to have unique authority to prescribe dharma and settle issues about dharma [18].

Brahmins felt they were being attacked as to their oft proclaimed claim to be the principal interpreters and disseminators of a concept that promised social coherence, even if, as the epics so decisively show, there are all kinds of leakages in the belief that *dharma* as a workable framework for right human activity can be totally comprehensive. Such a claim falls within the more general function of the brahmins as the culturally sanctioned interpreters of the Vedas to those below them who are permitted to have access to Vedic teachings. Early Buddhist literature loudly denies the transcendental status of the Vedas and in doing so undercuts the brahmins claim as custodians of a special knowledge. How much the brahmins themselves were aware of these claims cannot be determined with any degree of certainty, but the widespread use of the word *nāstika*, designating those who deny the existence of any eternal entities, in the MBh to define a religious sceptic may be one reflection of this negative perception.

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17. We have little precise knowledge of the social background to the composition of the MBh and it would be simplistic to assume the brahmins constituted an homogenous body, yet they did have a substantial monopoly on the production of Sanskritic knowledge in ancient and medieval India.

18. J. L. Fitzgerald, *The Mahābhārata, Volume 7*, (Chicago, 2004), p. 104.

Aśoka was a king claiming *kṣatriya* status who within the framework of ancient Indian political theory was required to sustain financially and religiously the authority of the brahmin. Yet this was only so in theory and the situation did not necessarily improve when after the Mauryas were overthrown in a coup in 179 BCE, a brahmin dynasty of the name Śuṅga assumed power. But, to cite Fitzgerald again:

> If one reads the *Mahābhārata* along the lines I have been suggesting, it may seem that the narrative of a divinely led purge of the *kṣatra* and the reinstitution of proper *brahmaṇya* rule fits the tenor of the Śuṅga revolution very well; it might well have been a myth inspired by, or even chartering, these political events. I have no doubt that the Śuṅga revolution contributed a great deal to the development of our *MBh*; however, one important trait of the *MBh* does not fit with the Śuṅga era and may be a reaction against it. I refer to the critically important insistence in the MBh upon rule being appropriate to *kṣatriyas* and not brahmins. … The ultimate credibility of brahmins as a religious elite depended upon their disassociating themselves from the direct cruelties of governing, and so the MBh works to correct this excess of the Śuṅgas and Kāṇvas [19]…

One problem with Fitzgerald's argument is that it only works tangentially from the putative framework of belief that the brahmins enjoyed prior to the composition of the MBh, or, at least, of the brahmins' reworking of the text. The (Buddhist) textual rumours of the Śuṅgas persecuting Buddhists cannot be confirmed (a point Fitzgerald also makes) and, to the contrary, the prodigious growth of Buddhism during this period testifies to an alternative picture different to what any one sided view may give. However, Fitzgerald is undoubtedly right to stress that the brahmins were defining a clear role model strongly delimited by a withdrawal from violence, but he does not reconcile this with the likelihood that brahmins were in all probability engaged, even if by intermediaries, in a variety of polluting occupations of a kind severely compromising the traditional non-polluting role they sought to publicize.

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19. Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 122. Cf. Malinar, *op. cit.*, pp. 439-443, who along with other scholars accepts (p. 439) that the Śuṅga period was not one of religious zealotry, but a period where Buddhism continued to expand in a highly conspicuous manner.

The second problem is that his comment leaves aside the impact of the complexity of the economic situation with the accompanying influence of the trading networks that gave a high degree of social and economic security to those who participated in them. Whilst most of the population after Aśoka's time would have continued to be peasant farmers, an increasing number of people would have been involved in mercantile activities, whether in the financial services industry or the distribution industry involving the physical aspects of trade and exchange. Ray's work is excellent on this even though it seems to relate to a period perhaps at the end of the composition of the MBh. I see the scenario as follows: the elite stratum of early historical Indian societies consisted of religious, political and economic elites, all coming from the four *varṇas*, and not just reflecting a categorical demarcation between the classes as normatively presented in the Dharma literature and the MBh. Each of these were in some sense conspicuous to the others and clearly interacted with each other, and systems of patronage, already existed between the final two and the first. Of the religious elites, it is the brahmins and the members of the Buddhist *saṅgha* who would have constituted the largest number in terms of raw numbers and were likely to have been the most conspicuous [20]. Thus it is the complexity of society and the brahmins' initial incapacity to adapt to steady, as opposed to, dramatic change that produced in the brahmins a sufficient anxiety to define a charter that not only called upon kings to have an especially narrow role, but required the brahmins themselves to comport themselves almost in a non-changing role of a spiritual celebrity.

Textual Evidence of the Brahmins' Alienation from Change in the Broadest Sense

Much of the content of the didactic sections of the MBh is taken up with the portrayal of an ideal polity and social system from the

20. We should not underestimate here the extent to which low class priests associated with mother goddess worship and the veneration of a variety of fertility figures such as *nāgas* also had some status though they may have been looked down upon by brahmins and monks.

brahmin's point of view and the reason why this should be so. This involves placing the king at the centre of a society whose coherence rests on the interdependence of the four classes included within it and a level of tolerance and control towards those who exist on its fringes. Where the tone of most such descriptions is ideological, to say the least, the descriptions of the opposite state are either told in terms of metaphor (as in the *Āpaddharmaparvan*) or in an hyperbolical style, where extreme images are supposed to evoke in the audiences a feeling for the anxieties of the brahmins about their situation, not acceptance of the veracity of the detail of what is being described. In either case the imagery used is strong and the normative idealism of so much of the didactic portions of the text is entirely reversed.

The *Mārkaṇḍeyasamāsyaparvan* (3, 179-221) is one such text and especially in reading its chapters 186-189 we can hope to obtain a clarification of one instance of the extremity of the brahmins' perception of the changes to which they had been subjected over the previous centuries and the breadth of the changes against which they were reacting. This text encompasses forty-two chapters, of which the first half rehearses continually the theme of the ideal brahmin and the relation which should obtain between king and brahmin. The second set of chapters deals with the birth of the god Skanda, the general of the gods, and appears to provide a Śaiva balance to the strong Vaiṣṇava imprint of the first set of chapters. Like many other contextually similar passages this series of chapters effectively halts the narrated action and causes the reader/hearer to pause.

The text itself provides us with a hearer in the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira, who, along with Arjuna, is one of the most prominent characters in the third book of the MBh. Briefly the narrative context is that the five Pāṇḍavas are spending twelve years in the forest as part of their period of exile following the dicing game in which Yudhiṣṭhira lost so much for them. The *Āraṇyakaparvan* is interesting because it includes many shorter narratives that diverge substantially from the main plot of the epic, but which are designed to educate the principal characters on the Pāṇḍava side about what they are really fighting for and to remind the reader/hearer of the main interpretative tools for

understanding the plot. Thus such sections are clearly commentarial in the light of what action has already occurred and what can be expected to occur in the future. But the commentarial activity brings with it all of the deep structural elements making up the ideological component of the MBh, the component enabling us to unpack the parameters determining how 'empirical material' has been taken up into the text.

In the *Mārkaḍeyasamāsyaparvan* the ancient sage Mārkaṇḍeya, old and wise beyond belief, because he has witnessed the origin, continuity and destruction of the world, arrives at the Pāṇḍavas' camp and effectively gives an audience to Yudhiṣṭhira, who asks him many questions. He is given a range of responses communicated in several of the mini-genres found elsewhere in the MBh. The two chapters with which I am most concerned are 186 and 188, both dealing with the degradation that occurs when there occurs a transformation between various world ages or *yugas*, a transformation Mārkaṇḍeya himself has witnessed [21]. These descriptions of degradation are placed in the future, and may invite comparison with the present (the boundary between the Tretā and the Kali) in which the Pāṇḍavas, the audience of the speech, find themselves. Though they have often been studied in isolation, it is important that they be contextualized within their surrounding chapters where images of the idealized brahmin (see especially Ch.197) are given. The imagery in our two chapters is apocalyptic and in both cases evokes a situation of crisis which must be overcome either by the intervention of a 'reforming' god or by a cosmic destruction.

It is unambiguously clear from its content and its context that this section is depicting the views of the brahmin as a distinct class. In both chapters arguments are made by hyperbole and bald assertion. Certain themes recur repeatedly: status reversal; brahmins functioning

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21. For another analysis of this section where stress is laid on the devotional implications of the passage within the wider MBh framework and the oscillation between *dharma* and *adharma*, see M. Biardeau, *Le Mahābhārata*, Paris, 2002, Vol. 1, pp. 599-612. It is arguable (for example, p.607 "*Cela ne peut signifier qu'une extension* du bouddhisme aux dépens des cultes brahmaniques, qui plus est de taxes accablantes qui les font s'enfuir". My italics) that she reads too much into certain passages as responses to the spread of Buddhism, though this rapid spread is consistent with the archeological evidence.

like *śūdras* and brahmins like *śūdras*, where the foolish are considered wise and the wise foolish, where the size of things shortens dramatically, where people speak falsely, where women are not protected, where kinsmen engage in exploitative behaviour towards each other, where trade relations have degenerated into mutual cheating. Reversal in the sense of perversion characterizes the whole world (188, 64ab). A common thread in all of these is the breaking of boundaries (188, 72ab), boundaries not exactly equivalent to those demarcated in a dharmic sense, but consistent with the idea of *dharma* as a body of rules providing the possibility of a distinctive coherence to any given society. I note all the themes in the attached table.

Subject	References
False speech	186, 24d; 29d; 32d; 188, 15; 18cd; 31; 38a
Social reversal between brahmins and *śūdras*	186, 26a-c; 188, 18; 62; 63, 64ef; 69cd
Social reversal between *ksatriyas* and *śūdras*	186, 26c; 28ab
Brahmins falling away from their traditional duties	186,31ab
Kṣatriyas falling away from their traditional duties	186, 31cd; 188, 32-33; 37
The rise of *mlecchas*	186, 29a; 188, 37a (= 45ab); 52a; 70ab
Vaiṣyas falling away from their traditional duties	186, 31d
Falsity in general	186, 29; 33b; 38b; 39b; 41a; 41c; 42a; 188, 14; 50a
Smallness [22] in general	186, 32a; 32d; 33cd; 34a; 35c; 37b; 48a; 49c; 53a; 188, 13; 15; 31a, 38a (of truth); 47-48; 50a; 67d; 68d
Heretics	186, 43a
Spiritual defects, *lobha* etc	186, 39a; 188, 16cd; 17a; 17c; 24c; 31b; 40b; 57a
Defects in economic life	186, 40a; 40cd; 41c; 46; 49; 50; 188, 36ab; 188, 23; 25;

22. Cf. MBh. 12, 34, 1.

	27; 30; 34; 37; 53; 61d (taxes); 70cd (taxes); 73cd
Religious reversals	188, 22cd; 24; 26; 45; 54ab; 64cd *(eḍūka pūjā)*; 65-66 *(eḍūka)*; 69ab
Reversal of intellectual capacity	188, 38cd; 46
Other reversals	188, 39ab, 40cd *(dharma/adharma)*; 43ab;
Flattening out of class differences	188, 40ab; 41b
Family relations in crisis	188, 73cd; 77-78; 82ab
Dietary changes	188. 40ab; 44ab; 67ab; 71d
Poverty	188, 50
Individuality	188, 54c
Break down of reciprocity	188, 17c; 18a; 22a; 24c; 32c; 39c; 55b; 84c
Assuming the positions of brahmins	188, 57
No protection for brahmins	188, 58-60; 61b

There may be disagreement as to the specificity of these categories in classifying the contents of Chs.186 and 188 and certainly a more thorough assessment needs to be made of the extent to which the particular concentrations of terms used in these chapters are found elsewhere in the MBh. These chapters might be seen as atypical but the conceptual scheme of degradation across the *yugas* and the role of the brahmin (189) in rescuing the world are not.

To understand how the contents of these two chapters may relate to social and political history, it is necessary to distinguish broad-brush mother-hood statements from others specific in their intent, or falling outside of the framework of what might be designated as a dharmic life-style *(vṛtti)*. Here I am especially interested in those parts of the text relating to trade and lifestyle options, excluding those relating directly to ritual performance or the kind of intellectual activities traditionally associated with the brahmins. My hypothesis is that the brahmins as a corporate group were not just estranged from the existing political and military powers, or aggrieved that other socio-religious groups were receiving conspicuous support from these kinds of elites, but that they were collectively disconcerted by the success of

trading networks, new economies and the wealth associated with this. Such an idea becomes still more significant if the adaptability of Buddhism, a likelihood receiving considerable support from archeological evidence, was as conspicuous to the population at large as it seems to be even from a distance of two thousand years.

It is not a question of the prominent MBh theme of *varṇaśaṅkara*, or mixture of classes, being thematically dominant here, but of a systematic decline in standards consistent with a seventy-five percent collapse in adherence to the law that theoretically marks behaviour in the Kaliyuga. This follows the logic of decline evidenced often in descriptions of the four *yugas*. Such decline is not primarily defined by a lowering of standards everywhere, as of a reversal of normatively defined status positions, each bringing with them a particular role, and by the brahmins' interpretation of the changes as representing an intense process of individualization where greed and avarice are deeply ingrained, if crude, motivational factors for this kind of attitude. This would conform with the brahmin's wish for the organic society based on the four classes working under the watchful if detached guidance of a king, but may clash with the kind of individuality that is characteristic of the behaviour of trading classes and individuals who opt out of society to become ascetics, though asceticism is certainly in a process of domestication in the MBh, and has strongly been domesticated in Buddhism. This means we cannot easily tie this concern into a body of people easily identifiable outside of the text.

The category I have called 'Defects in Economic Life' also has some relevance here and may, at a stretch I admit, provide evidence for my supposition that the brahmins were not just feeling alienated by a change in the political life of their time. Equally they could have been reacting negatively to a long-term incapacity to deal with changes in the nature of the economy that benefited some, though not others, especially when the indirect benefactors could easily be identified as the Buddhists. I include here a list of these defects:

> 186.40 The weight of taxes leads householders to steal and practice trade under the guise that they are ascetics *(municchadmākṛticchannā vāṇijyam upajīvate)*.
> 188, 61cd, 70cd Bad kings will oppress the brahmins with taxes *(karabhārapīḍitāḥ)* and so they will go everywhere.

186, 41cd The life of the student becomes vacuous because of their greed for material wealth. *(arthalobhān … vṛthā brahmacāriṇaḥ)*
186.46a People who engage in buying and selling cheat massively.
186, 49 People in daily life and work use improper tactics *(adharmiṣṭhair upāyaiś ca prajā vyavaharanty uta)*.
186, 50 Theft of money by those who have been entrusted to hold it.
188, 23, 27 Exploitation of barely cultivable land.
188, 25 Family members exploiting *(bhoktā)* each other.
188, 27 Using cows as draft animals and driving cows that are one year old.
188, 30. Taking the property *(vittāni)* of the poor, kinsmen and widows.
188, 34 People exploiting *(bhokṣyante)* the wealth *(dhanāni)* and wives *(dārān)* of the good.
188, 36ab Stupid kings taking the wealth of others *(parārthān)*.
188, 37c One hand will rob the other when barbarians dominate the world.
188, 53 When people buy and sell, everyone will cheat everyone else because of avarice due to their livelihood *(vṛttilobhāt)*.
188, 73 Kinsmen, relatives and friends will depart for financial gain *(arthayuktyā)*.

What can be extracted from these few references is scant and general. Do the three references to taxation indicate that brahmins were being taxed, whereas normatively they should be the object of beneficence from kings and other financial elites, though more likely from kings? If some brahmins were taxed, presumably for non-religious income derived from land-holdings, this no doubt aroused anger towards monastic groups such as the Buddhists who were likely not taxed. Other references to cheating, exploitation of family members and the financially disadvantaged may suggest an expansion of mercantilist activity where profit (*arthalobhāt* 188, 41cd; *arthayuktyā* 188, 73; *vṛttilobhāt* 188, 53) was the only motif and where class status meant nothing. Cheating is mentioned several times. It is possible that some of the other categories in the table included above could be correlated with this general perception of economic change. In 188, 24 the exploitation of men towards each other is attributed to the overwhelming influence of avarice *(lobha)* and 57 where brahmins who are overwhelmed by avarice *(lobābhibhūtān)* will wander the world exploiting *(bhuñjate)* the wealth of real brahmins *(brahmavittāni)*. How far the

latter is relevant, I cannot determine exactly, as it could be a veiled reference to various groups of ascetics assuming the guise of a brahmin, but not fulfilling the religious requirements of such. In any case, derivatives of *lubh* need to be examined elsewhere to see if they have an economic and not just exclusively a religious significance.

Further analysis of these two chapters may enable more precision of the line of inquiry I am arguing for here. One other theme that could be relevant is the assertion of the emptying out of the *janapadas* (186, 33a *bahuśūnyā janapadā mṛgavyālāvṛtā diśaḥ*) and the very obscure reference at 186, 36a (= 188, 51) that the *janapadas* will contain places 'where food is sold' *aṭṭaśūlā*. The second of these may be a reference to expanded mercantile activity, whereas the first could conceivably be interpreted as an observation about the process of urbanization, such that the brahmins, generally considered to be most comfortable in the countryside are troubled by the move to cities and smaller urban centres. The archeological evidence suggests that urbanization has received considerable impetus from the expansion of monasteries and *vihāras* and supports the view that the brahmins were more conservative than the Buddhists in adapting to new settlement patterns and that they would associate the expansion of Buddhist monuments with an increase in mercantilist activity. Of course, further philological analysis needs to be undertaken before firm conclusions can be drawn.

In concluding this section, what is significant is that these two chapters probably represent an exaggerated version of the disjunction between patterns of normative and actual behaviour that had been occurring in the centuries following the death of the Buddha. It is also arguable that this disjunction is in part caused by the transformation that produces large-scale societies from small-scale societies. Against this is the likelihood that caste divisions are beginning to tighten up, thus conforming to the kinds of boundaries–essentially definitions of difference–the brahmins are so eager to observe. A kind of collision must then have been occurring, with the influx of new ethnic groups, occupational possibilities, and social institutions clashing with a group of educated brahmins (represented in the *Dharmasūtras* and the MBh) desiring to tighten up the four *varṇa* system that had always promised a more simple world.

Conclusion

The MBh is a huge text with an equally huge reach in influence throughout India and South-east Asia, lasting up until the present day. But the actual empirical historical data it gives us is extensive, if difficult to specify in time and space. This judgement no doubt betrays an element of prejudice in that inscriptional and artefactual evidence may be given more credence than literary evidence, especially since the former is so much easier to tie down in space and time and can easily be related to micro-events. A text like the MBh operates in a civilizational macro-space and has a totalising discourse as its ambit, and yet substantially represents the brahmins' take on that civilization. Its sheer monumentality may entice us in giving it much more hermeneutical weight than it is entitled to, but this pitfall is somewhat ameliorated by the known fact that it has continued to function as a text throughout South Asian history.

It developed as a privileged communicative device in a period perceived by the brahmins, though not necessarily by others, as one of unrelenting transition where political and social transformations were marked just as strongly as were religious and ethnic changes. The MBh is chock full of evidence of alternative views in all sorts of areas, reflecting beyond doubt the dominance of a strongly pluralistic intellectual life, one clearly engaged in by the brahmins, but one over which they sought to have some control. Pluralism was acceptable as long as it was overseen by the brahmins in some way or other.

Inspite of the belief amongst the brahmins that their status had begun to fall at some point in the early centuries BCE and that they needed urgently to codify their view of the ideal society and polity, we have no evidence outside of the MBh itself of such a decline. Yet the MBh communicates to us and to generations of Indian audiences that the king must constantly cultivate the social conditions propitious to the maintenance of a coherent society, in which the brahmins stand at the top. Accordingly, to sustain this view many charter myths are included in the epic. It is true they are found earlier in Vedic and Buddhist literature, though never with the concentration existing in the MBh. I see this as a successful rhetorical exercise in consolidating a power base for brahmins that would stand independent of the posses-

sion of material wealth or military force, one resting on the capacity to provide a knowledge of the theoretical and practical conditions of a coherently functioning society consisting of many different groups.