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THE EPIC HERO: BETWEEN BRAHMIN
AND WARRIOR

In this paper, I propose to examine the figure of the hero in the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* (MBh) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Rm).¹ In the context of ancient India, one would naturally expect the prototypical hero of an epic text to belong to the *kṣatriya* or warrior class. *Kṣatriya* heroes are of course not lacking, and I would obviously agree that if we say “the heroes of the *Mahābhārata*” we mean the Pāṇḍavas, and if we say “the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*” we mean Rāma – because they are the main characters of these texts. Nevertheless, I will argue that the real heroes of the epics are not the warriors but the Brahmins – in the sense that the Brahmins are consistently declared to be more powerful and more intelligent than all the other classes. Continuing Vedic religious thinking, which stresses the importance of sacrifices in which the Brahmins act as the sole mediators between men and gods and as providers for the gods’ welfare, the Sanskrit epics, especially the *Mahābhārata*, were from the start planned, designed and executed with the aim of extolling the *brahman* or brahmanical power. Their insistence on the superiority of the Brahmins, the duty of the other social classes and even of the gods to respect them, and the indispensable nature of their ritual interventions,

¹ All the references to these texts are to the critical editions: MBh = Sukthankar 1933–1959, Rm = Bhatt 1960–1975; the translations are by van Buitenen 1973–1978 and Fitzgerald 2004a for the MBh, and by Goldman 1984–2009 for the Rm. The Manusmṛti translations are by Olivelle 2005.

are carried out in detail and on various levels. Furthermore, the epics present us with a type of Brahmin-hero who does not shy away from taking to arms if the need arises, and who generally proves to be superior in strength to his *kṣatriya* opponents. In short, the Brahmins can be different types of heroes, but whether they are shown as “culture heroes” or “warrior-heroes”, their prominent and incontrovertible position is constantly stressed.

It is well-known that the Brahmins played a great role in the composition, transmission and dissemination of the texts, and can thus be considered as real culture heroes. Much more than any other class, certainly more than the kingly dynasties, the Brahmins were the preservers and transmitters of Brahmanical culture: they were the repositories not only of Vedic lore, which their mnemonic efforts helped preserve through centuries and even millenia, but they were also in all likelihood the composers of the fifth Veda – the epics: Vyāsa and Vālmīki, their mythical authors, are presented as Brahmins. Likewise, Vyāsa’s students, most prominently Vaiśampāyana, the main narrator of the *Mahābhārata*, are all Brahmins. The third book of the *Mahābhārata* is filled with stories told by Brahmins to entertain the Pāṇḍavas in their long exile. Janaka’s chaplain Śatānanda similarly entertains Rāma in the first book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with stories pertaining to Viśvāmitra and Vasiṣṭha, while the sage Agastya regales him with the history of the *rākṣasas*’ lineage in the last book. The Brahmins were thus not only the preservers of the Vedic tradition, but also the propounders of the new epic tradition, which was fast becoming even more important than the older one. As MBh 1.2.235 states: “A brahmin who knows the four *Vedas* with their branches and Upaniṣads, but does not know this epic, has no learning at all.”

In Dharmaśāstra texts, the Brahmins are shown to be practically above the law; at least, they are in no way punishable to the same extent as the members of the other classes for

identical offenses.² The same texts insist that the Brahmins are inviolable, and slaying a Brahmin (*brahmahatyā*) is listed as the first of the capital offenses.³ Also, a king has control over the wealth of all his subjects, except that of Brahmins – provided they behave according to the law.⁴

While reading the epics, we cannot fail to notice what great pains the Brahmins took to portray themselves as indispensable to the *kṣatriyas*. The Brahmins are needed to perform various rituals, without which no success at any level, even in what can be considered the most private and intimate sphere, can possibly accrue to the unfortunate *kṣatriya* who would be foolhardy enough to do without them. One is struck, for instance, by the number of kings who are incapable of fathering offspring unless they first perform certain sacrifices with the help of priests – Daśaratha, in the first book of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is a case in point (Rm 1.8-15).⁵ The Brahmins also claim that they can protect the *kṣatriyas* from the attack of divine or supernatural forces: in the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, the Pāṇḍavas, when they flee from the fire in the lacquer house, are attacked on their way by a band of Gandharvas. The Gandharva king subsequently tells them that he could attack them only because they were not protected by a Brahmin chaplain, a *purohita* (MBh 1.159). Likewise, the Brahmins in the third book of the *Mahābhārata* do not allow the Pāṇḍavas to go to the forest alone, and insist on accompanying them to carry out their rites (MBh 3.2). One feels here that the Brahmins' intentions towards the *kṣatriyas* are twofold: officially, they mean to protect, but unofficially, to

² See Manu 8.124: "Manu, the son of the Self-existent One, has proclaimed ten places upon which punishment may be inflicted. They are applicable to the three classes; a Brahmin shall depart unscathed."

Manu 8.380-381: "The king should never put a Brahmin to death, even if he has committed every sort of crime; he should banish such a Brahmin from his kingdom along with all his property, without causing him hurt. There is no greater violation of the Law on earth than killing a Brahmin; therefore, a king should not even think of killing a Brahmin."

³ Manu 11.55: "Killing a Brahmin, drinking liquor, stealing [esp. gold belonging to Brahmins], and having sex with an elder's wife – they call these "grievous sins causing loss of caste"; and so is establishing any links with such individuals."

⁴ MBh 12.78.2: "A king is the owner of the wealth of those who are non-brahmins, and of those brahmins who do the wrong work."

⁵ On Daśaratha's relation with the Brahmins, see Feller 2009.

supervise and keep a watch over them. The Brahmins' power even extends over the gods themselves. Many mythological narratives in both epics show that the Brahmins are stronger than the gods, and can subdue the latter to their will. To cite only two examples: the sage Gautama curses Indra to lose his testicles because he seduced his wife Ahalyā (Rm 1.47.26-27). The sage Bhṛgu curses Agni to become omnivorous because, due to the fire-god, his wife Pulomā was abducted by a *rākṣasa* (MBh 1.5-7).

Passages abound in the epics which exhort the *kṣatriyas* and the brahmins to work hand in hand, insisting on the prosperity and paramount power over the enemy (whoever the enemy may be), obtained by the two classes by their union, while not so subtly hinting that of the two classes, the Brahmins are of course the real bosses.⁶ Consider the following passage from the *Mahābhārata*'s Forest-book, narrated to Yudhiṣṭhira by the sage Baka Dālbhya:

Brahmindom joined by baronage and baronage joined by
brahmindom elevate each other and burn down the
enemies as fire and wind burn down the woods.

Do not wish to remain without brahmins, son,
If you wish to win this world and the next;
With a brahmin learned in Profit and Law,
Who has shed his confusion, a king removes rivals.

[...]

This earth with her riches does not love the baron
For long, if he does not ally with the brahmin;
But the sea-girt earth will bow to him
Whom a brahmin teaches, learned in prudence.

As of an elephant in battle that is out of its mahout's
control the might of the baronage fades if it lack in
brahmins. In brahminhood there is unequalled insight, in
baronage matchless strength; when the two go together,
the world is serene. As a great fire burns up the

⁶ MBh 12.72-76 expounds on the same topic at length.

underwood fanned by the wind, so the baron burns down the enemy sided by the brahmin. To gain what he does not have and to prosper what he has gained, a wise man should seek out the advice of the brahmins. (MBh 3.27.10-18).

The comparison used here is quite telling: the *kṣatriyas* are the elephants and the Brahmins are the mahouts! With its mere brute force, the elephant can achieve nothing unless it is wisely guided. Politically speaking, one does not have to wonder long why the Brahmins insisted so much on cooperation: they must have needed the help of the kings to establish their spiritual authority, and to achieve this, they had to persuade the kings that the power of arms was nothing if not helped and abetted by the Brahmins' spiritual energy. As MBh 12.75.2 states: "That country thrives happily where the *brahman* quiets the subjects' fear of the unseen, and the king quiets their fear of what is seen with his two arms." The epics can thus be considered as a vast work of progaganda for the Brahmin-cause, recommending the above division of labour between kings and Brahmins as the best way to achieve successful dominion over the rest of the subjects.

This type of ideal cooperation, however, was perhaps not respected by the *kṣatriyas* at all times.⁷ At least, a number of stories circulating in both epics describe situations of distress in which the kings clearly do not stick to their side of the deal: they do not show proper respect towards the Brahmins, steal their property,⁸ or worse, even slay them.⁹ But not all the concerned Brahmins take this lying down. On the contrary, a number of them retaliate, sometimes with an equal measure of

⁷ This is also revealed by the very insistence with which these texts, especially the *Mahābhārata*, broach the topic again and again.

⁸ Stealing cows or calves is prominent, but there are references to the theft of other types of wealth, esp. in Aurva's story (see MBh 1.169 ff.).

⁹ In the same publication, part 1 of Johannes Bronkhorst's article "Reflections on the fate of the northwestern Brahmins" shows that Brahmin massacres at the hand of kings are not pure fiction, but did take place historically. Even though it is impossible to prove, it cannot be ruled out that these historical events inspired legends depicting feuds between kings and Brahmins.

violence. Such behaviour finds justification in Dharmaśāstra passages. In the Śāntiparvan, for instance, Bhīṣma declares: “The *brahman* should put a stop to the *kṣatra* when it has grown haughty, especially when haughty toward brahmins, for the *kṣatra* originates in the *brahman*.” (MBh 12.79.21). We shall examine some of these stories below, especially those depicting the hostile relations between Rāma Jāmadagnya and Arjuna Kārtavīrya, Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, as well as Droṇa and Drupada. In each of these instances it comes to downright war between a Brahmin and a *kṣatriya*, and in each case the Brahmin gains the upper hand.

The story of Rāma Jāmadagnya¹⁰, a scion of the Bhārgava-family, is extremely well-known, and is narrated several times in the *Mahābhārata* with some variations between the different versions.¹¹ The Bhārgavas as a clan are notorious for their fierceness and war-like disposition, and this feature has provoked scholarly curiosity for some time, and given the impetus for a long series of monographs and articles.¹² But even within his own family, Rāma Jāmadagnya stands out for his extraordinarily fierce nature.¹³ His main feat is that he slaughters the entire *kṣatriya* population twenty-one times in a row to avenge his father’s unjust murder at the hands of king Arjuna Kārtavīrya’s sons. In the third book of the MBh, the story is narrated by the sage Akṛtavraṇa to the Pāṇḍavas, while they are performing a pilgrimage:¹⁴

¹⁰ Rāma Jāmadagnya is from the 6th century of the common era better known as Paraśurāma, or Rāma with the axe. See Brockington 1998: 283.

¹¹ On these, see Gail 1977, chapter 1.

¹² Most noteworthy among these is Sukthankar’s 1936 famous theory of Bhṛguization: his idea was that the Bhārgava family had taken over the transmission of the *Mahābhārata* text at a certain point, and had interwoven its main narrative with stories pertaining to the Bhṛgu family. This theory was then developed in Goldman’s 1977 publication. While the theory of a Bhṛgu textual take-over has been disproved in the meanwhile (see Hildebeitel 1999, Fitzgerald 2002), the idea remains accepted that the Bhārgavas represent in a sense the champions of the Brahmin cause.

¹³ The fact that he behaves more like a warrior than a Brahmin can no doubt partly be explained by the fact that his mother is a *kṣatriyā*. But even within the tradition, this was apparently felt to be an insufficient explanation, for the *Mahābhārata* introduces the story of a misguided exchange of boons to explain his war-like temperament (see MBh 13.4).

¹⁴ See also MBh 1.58 and 12.48-49. Rm 1.74.

Then one day, when [Jamadagni's] sons as before had gone out, O lord, the heroic Kārtavīrya arrived, the king of the shorelands. The seer's wife welcomed him as he came to the hermitage, but the king, who was maddened by war craze, did not accept the welcome. He ransacked the hermitage, forcibly abducted the calf of the whining sacrificial cow, and broke down all the big trees. The father himself told it all to Rāma when he returned; and seeing the cow lowing miserably, Rāma was seized by fury. Overpowered by anger, he stormed at Kārtavīrya and the Bhārgava, slayer of enemy heroes, bravely engaged him in battle. He grasped his shining bow and with his honed bear arrows cut off his arms, which numbered a thousand, sturdy like bludgeons. Infuriated by Rāma, Arjuna [Kārtavīrya]'s heirs thereupon rushed upon Jamadagni when he was in his hermitage without Rāma. They slew the powerful ascetic, who refused to fight, while he, unprotected, kept calling for Rāma. [When Rāma returns he finds his father dead and laments.] Thus he lamented much, O king, piteously and variously; and the ascetic performed all the obsequies for his father. He burned his father in the fire, did Rāma, victor of enemy cities; and he swore to massacre all of the baronage, Bhārata. The furious, puissant, powerful hero grasped his weapon and, image of death, alone slew the sons of Kārtavīrya. And the barons who were their followers, O bull of the barons, Rāma, greatest of fighters, crushed them all. Twenty-one times the lord emptied the earth of barons and built in Samantapañcaka five lakes of blood. In them the bearer of Bhṛgu's line offered up to this forebears. (MBh 3.116.20 – 3.117.9).

This narrative is interesting for several reasons: we see that king Arjuna Kārtavīrya, with his thousand arms, is a sort of super-*kṣatriya*, for the *kṣatriya*'s strength resides in his arms. But unlike a good king, he behaves, without the slightest provocation, in a singularly obnoxious fashion: he breaks everything in the hermitage, cuts down the trees and, most

importantly, kidnaps the calf of the Brahmin's cow.¹⁵ His sons in turn do not shy away from committing Brahmin-murder, that most heinous of all offenses, killing the ascetic Jamadagni who was not even fighting back. Rāma's retaliation is as swift as it is terrible: not content with killing the direct culprits, he completely annihilates the whole warrior-class. We see that in effect he is performing a *kṣatriya*-sacrifice – as if *kṣatriyas* were mere sacrificial beasts – since he offers up their blood as libations to his ancestors.

While Rāma Jāmadagnya's story remains the most striking and extreme example of a feud between Brahmins and *kṣatriyas*, it is by no means the only one. Another famous narrative dealing with a clash between representatives of these two *varṇas* is the story of Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra, which is found in practically the same form in the two epics.¹⁶ Like Rāma Jāmadagnya's story, it starts with the (attempted) theft of a Brahmin's cow. The sage Vasiṣṭha once received hospitably king Viśvāmitra in his forest hermitage, and he entertained and fed the king and his huge retinue very liberally, with the help of his *kāma-dhenu*, the wish-fulfilling cow Śabalā¹⁷, who produced on demand mountains of food and drinks. Impressed by the cow's powers, Viśvāmitra requested Vasiṣṭha to give her to him, but Vasiṣṭha adamantly refused to give her away even for all the riches in the world, declaring:

“She alone is my jewel. She alone is my wealth. She alone is everything to me, my very life.
Your majesty, she alone represents for me the new and full-moon rites, the sacrifices by which I earn my fees.
She represents all the various ritual performances.” (Rm 1.52.22-23).

We understand that Vasiṣṭha cannot give away the magical cow, because she is the main source of his sacrificial offerings:

¹⁵ Quite unlike the virtuous king Dilīpa in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (2.59) who is ready to give up his own life to protect Vasiṣṭha's cow Nandinī (see Scharpé 1964: 41).

¹⁶ In the MBh it is narrated in 1.164-165.

¹⁷ Called Nandinī in MBh 1.165.16-17.

without her, he could not perform sacrifices in the forest. Faced with this refusal, Viśvāmitra simply starts to drive away the cow. But she protests loudly and reproaches Vasiṣṭha for abandoning her, saying:

They say that a kshatriya has no real power, and that a brahman is, in fact, more powerful. Brahman, the power of a brahman is divine and much greater than that of the kshatriyas.

Your power is immeasurable. Viśvāmitra is very powerful, but he is not mightier than you. Your power is unassailable.

Just give the order, mighty man, and filled with the power of the brahmins, I will crush the might and pride of this wicked man.

When she addressed him in this fashion, Rāma, the greatly renowned Vasiṣṭha said, "Create an army to destroy the armies of my enemy."

Then, protector of men, she gave a roar, "*Humbhā*," from which were born hundreds and hundreds of Pahlavas who destroyed Viśvāmitra's army before his very eyes.

The king was furiously angry, and his eyes wide with rage, he destroyed those Pahlavas with all manner of weapons.

Seeing the Pahlavas struck down in their hundreds by Viśvāmitra, the cow created a new mixed force of dreadful Śakas and Yavanas.

This mixed force of Śakas and Yavanas covered the earth. Splendid and immensely powerful, they shone like so many golden filaments of flowers.

Carrying long swords and sharp-edged lances and clad in golden garments, they consumed the entire army of the king like blazing fires.

Then mighty Viśvāmitra fired his weapons.

Seeing her hosts stunned and overwhelmed by Viśvāmitra's weapons, Vasiṣṭha commanded, "Wish-fulfilling cow, create more troops through your yogic power."

From her bellow, “*Humbhā*,” were produced Kāambojas bright as the sun, while from her udders came Pahlavas, weapons in hand.

From her vulva came Yavanas, from her anus, Śakas, and from the pores of her skin, Mlecchas, Hāritas, and Kirātas.

Within an instant, delight of the Raghus, Viśvāmitra’s entire army was destroyed, with its infantry, elephants, horses, and chariots.

Then the hundred sons of Viśvāmitra, seeing that their army had been destroyed by great Vasiṣṭha, the foremost reciter of the vedas, took up various weapons and charged him furiously. But the great seer, merely uttering the syllable “*Hum*,” consumed them all.

And so, in a single moment, the sons of Viśvāmitra, horses, chariots, infantry, and all were reduced to ashes by great Vasiṣṭha. (Rm 1.53.14 – 1.54.7).

Unlike Rāma Jāmadagnya, Vasiṣṭha does not directly resort to weapons. He first acts through his cow, as if she were an extension of his own self, ordering her to produce armies out of her own body. Curiously, we see that all these armies that come out of the orifices of the cow’s body consist of foreigners, barbarians or tribals – not of *kṣatriyas*, who might perhaps have formed an alliance with Viśvāmitra’s army.¹⁸ Then, Vasiṣṭha himself utters the syllable *hum* which instantly destroys Viśvāmitra’s sons. After this, Viśvāmitra is thoroughly dejected and has to admit that: “The power of the kshatriya is no power at all. Only the power of a brahman’s energy is power indeed.” (Rm 1.55.23). He then resolves to become a Brahmin, and finally manages to do so, but only after tens of thousands of years of the most strenuous austerities – a fact which again stresses the Brahmins’ vast superiority over the warriors. But once Viśvāmitra has achieved Brahminhood, he becomes a seer of unparalleled puissance, uniting in himself the powers of both *varṇas*.

¹⁸ We may surmise here an allusion to a historical defeat of *kṣatriyas* at the hand of foreign armies.

As a last example of a feud between a Brahmin and a *kṣatriya*, we can cite here the story of Droṇa and Drupada (MBh 1.121-122 & 1.154). The Brahmin Droṇa was the son of the seer Bharadvāja. In his childhood, he became friend with the future king Drupada, who was educated at Bharadvāja's hermitage. Droṇa's chief interest lay in the art of weapons, and when Rāma Jāmadagnya retired from the world and gifted away all his riches to the Brahmins, Droṇa obtained all his weapons from him, including the terrible *brahmāstra*. Then he paid a visit to Drupada, who had in the meanwhile acceded to the throne, and claimed once again Drupada's friendship. But Drupada received him very haughtily and spoke harsh and contemptuous words to him, rejecting his friendship as if he were a beggar, and saying that a king could not be the friend of one who was not a king. Droṇa swore revenge. He became the young Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas' master of arms, and once they had finished their instruction, he claimed his teacher's fee from them: they should capture Drupada and deliver the king to him. Once this had been achieved, he told Drupada: "Once more, O king of men, I seek your friendship. You know, no king can be a friend to a man who is not! Therefore, Yajñasena, I have toiled for your kingdom. You shall be king on the southern bank of the Ganges, and I north of the river."¹⁹ (MBh 1.154.23-24).

Clearly, Droṇa is a Brahmin of the same ilk as Rāma Jāmadagnya, interested more in weapons than in typical brahmanical activities – indeed, his very livelihood depends on his mastery of arms. His direct filiation with Rāma is moreover clearly established by means of the *astras*, or magical weapons, which Rāma makes over to him before he retires. But unlike Rāma, when provoked by a *kṣatriya*, Droṇa does not slaughter the offending king, but he chooses to become one himself, taking half of his kingdom from Drupada, since, as he ironically remarks, this is the only way Drupada will agree to be "friends"

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that Droṇa chooses for himself the half of the kingdom which is north of the Ganges, holy land, leaving the impure, or at least wild, southern half to his unfortunate rival. In Rm 2.50, which contains a description of the forest, we see that once Rāma has crossed the Ganges and the Yamunā and reached the southern shore, he leaves civilization and enters into wilderness.

with him.²⁰ Usually, Brahmins are not supposed to take the earth away from the *kṣatriyas* – the earth being the kings’ preserve just as the cow is the Brahmins’. Droṇa, by doing so, clearly trespasses into *kṣatriya* domain.

Quite obviously, the general import of all the above stories is that the power of the *brahman* is much greater than that of the *kṣatra*. The intimidation manoeuvre towards the *kṣatriyas* is clear and straightforward: if provoked beyond endurance, the Brahmins will not stay put in the roles which are traditionally theirs, will not respect the sanctioned division of labour, but will beat the *kṣatriyas* with their own weapons – only made immeasurably more powerful by the injection of their own brahmanical power. And most astonishingly, all this can be achieved by the Brahmins without incurring blame,²¹ loss of caste or, perhaps most importantly, diminution of their *tapas*.²²

Yet paradoxically, by acting in this ruthless manner the Brahmins become similar to *kṣatriyas*, for violence is usually the warrior’s preserve. The converse is also true: the ideal *kṣatriya*, as presented in the epics, often appears quite brahmanised. The best example is perhaps king Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma or Law personified, who would clearly prefer to live a life of renunciation and restraint rather than pursuing war-like activities as befits a *kṣatriya*. Rāma Dāśarathi too, who is

²⁰ It goes without saying that after this, Drupada, far from becoming Droṇa’s friend again, only harbours thoughts of revenge, going so far as to produce by means of black magic a son who will be capable of slaying Droṇa (see MBh 1.155).

²¹ Of course, Rāma Jāmadagnya is banished by the sage Kaśyapa for slaughtering all the warriors (MBh 12.49). However, Rāma’s prestige and the awe he inspires remain intact.

²² The Dharmaśāstras, it must be admitted, usually have some provision for times of distress, allowing certain classes to perform the work of other – usually immediately lower – classes. Thus Manu 10.81-82, for instance, states: “When a Brahmin is unable to earn a living by means of the activities specific to him given above, he may live by means of the Kṣatriya Law, for the latter is the one right below him. If it be asked: what happens if he is unable to earn a living by either of these two means? Taking up agriculture or cattle-herding, he should earn a living by the occupation of a Vaiśya.” The *Mahābhārata* itself has contradictory views on this topic. In MBh 12.79.2, it is stated that a Brahmin may not only live in the fashion of a *kṣatriya* in times of distress, but even in the fashion of a *vaiśya*. In MBh 12.62.4, on the other hand, Bhīṣma states that the Brahmins who perform the work of other classes are despised and perish. And *Bhagavadgītā* 3.35 famously states: “It is better to perform one’s own duty imperfectly than another’s to perfection. It is better to perish doing one’s own duty, (for) another’s duty brings peril.”

always described as the ideal king, deserves this title because he follows the dictates laid down by the Brahmins. Furthermore, the Ādiparvan (MBh 1.58) explains that after all the *kṣatriyas* in the world had been slain twenty-one times by Rāma Jāmadagnya, the surviving *kṣatriya* women begged the Brahmins to sire children on them. This is how a new – presumably better – race of warriors was born, who were in effect half brahmin half *kṣatriya*,²³ and a golden age followed.

All in all, we notice a singularly ambivalent attitude on the part of the epics' Brahmin-authors towards the warriors.²⁴ On the one hand, they insist on their own superiority over the *kṣatriyas*; on the other hand, as we have seen, Brahmins and *kṣatriyas* are shown to be similar, both by their behaviour and by their mixed ascendancy. Furthermore, the dividing lines between the two classes seem rather permeable: the king Viśvāmitra becomes a Brahmin and the Brahmin Droṇa becomes a king! How to explain this state of affairs? My contention is that this attitude resulted from the increasing importance of the new religions (mainly Buddhism and Jainism), which is roughly contemporary with the composition of the epics, and as a reaction to which the epics were most likely composed.²⁵ We know that the Brahmins' position, both as advisors to the kings and mediators between the rulers and the supernatural forces, was to some extent usurped by the newcomers, who fulfilled – or at least threatened to fulfill – some of the Brahmins' functions.²⁶ We know that both these religious currents were very strongly against violence of any kind, and were both, at least in their initial stages, mainly turned to other-

²³ Though by law they are *kṣatriyas*, since the Brahmins sowed their seed in the *kṣatriyas*' field – as Manu expresses it in 9.31-56.

²⁴ And this is without even discussing the way in which the Brahmins describe the *kṣatriyas* as an obnoxious species whose numbers deserve to be periodically pruned. See Feller 2004, chapter 6, and Feller 2013.

²⁵ See Biardeau 2002: 136-161; Fitzgerald 2004b: 54.

²⁶ Historically, this is well-attested in Aśoka's edicts, which give equal importance to *brāhmaṇas* and *śramanas*. As Fitzgerald 2004b: 59 remarks: "Aśoka, who was a lay follower of the Buddha, did not subordinate himself to Brāhmaṇ guidance and even insulted Brāhmaṇism by treating it as just one more religious elite among many elites that were all eligible for imperial support...".

worldly concerns. The new trend of *ahiṃsā* had in turn pervaded Brahmanism and many passages in the epics clearly reflect the tension between the older Vedic, sacrificial, religion and the new ideology according to which “non-harming is the highest law” – *ahiṃsā paramo dharmah*.²⁷ But some Brahmins must have felt that this new trend was alien to their tradition, and therefore rejected it. In this perspective, the belligerent nature of some of the epic Brahmins was perhaps a way of telling the *kṣatriyas*: “We be of one blood, ye and I!”²⁸ We can marry your daughters; the most powerful among us are precisely those who are a mix of both *varṇas*, like Viśvāmitra or Rāma Jāmadagnya; we too can be moved by wrath and emotions, and cling to our worldly possessions; we know the affairs of the world. Therefore, we can be of more help to you than those “others” who look beyond this world and its immediate concerns. So you had better stick to us – and if you don’t, then be it at your own risks and perils!

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²⁷ See Fitzgerald 2004b: 60.

²⁸ If it is permitted in this context to quote Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*.

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