The *Bhagavad Gītā* in the *Mahābhārata*

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"Whatever is here, on Law, on Profit, on Pleasure, on Salvation, that is found elsewhere, but what is not here is nowhere else."[1]

The *Mahābhārata* is no mere text; it is a tradition. It embodies a tradition. The tradition of the *Mahābhārata* is built into the extraordinary form of its text.[2] Though Vyāsa is the purported "author" of the *Mahābhārata*, the text of the *Mahābhārata* does not come down to us as Vyāsa narrated it. Instead, we have it as narrated by the bard reporting it as Ugraśravas narrated it to Śaunaka in the Naimisha forest. The bard Ugraśravas comes by the descendants of the Bhṛgu clan headed by Śaunaka performing the twelve year sacrifice. Śaunaka asks Ugraśravas to narrate the genealogy of the Bhṛgu clan. Ugraśravas's narration which begins with the story of creation, leads to the story of Ruru, the Bhṛgu ancestor. Ruru had once vowed to put an end to the race of snakes. He had been dissuaded from doing so by being told of the story of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice and how Āstīka had stopped it. This provokes Śaunaka to enquire about Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. Ugraśravas had been present at that sacrifice and he narrates to Śaunaka the story of Āstīka and how he had stopped Janamejaya's sacrifice. Vyāsa had also attended that sacrifice along with his disciple Vaiśaṃpāyana. During a break in the sacrifice, Janamejaya had enquired about his lineage, that of the Bharatas, and how the Kurukṣetra war had come about. At Vyāsa's bidding, Vaiśaṃpāyana had narrated the story of how the breach between the Pāṇḍavas and

Kauravas had arisen and culminated in the Kurukṣetra war. Ugraśravas reports this narration to Śaunaka. Thus, even the main story of the *Mahābhārata*, the story of the war between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, comes down to us through a series of reported narrations.

The extraordinary narrative technique of the *Mahābhārata* consists in that it is not only a series of reported narrations but that at every level of reporting the original narration is preserved by its being reported in direct speech. Further, since at every level the narration is provoked by an interlocutor's query, the text does not proceed as a continuous narrative but in the form of a dialogue. That is, at the outermost level the bard reports the story of the *Mahābhārata* as a dialogue, between Ugraśravas and Śaunaka, in direct speech. Ugraśravas in turn reports it as a dialogue, between Vaiśaṃpāyana and Janamejaya, once again in direct speech. Thus even at this level of simplification, the *Mahābhārata* comes down to us in three layers of sequentially reported dialogues, each embedded within the other, each one of which is in direct speech. And in the actual text of the *Mahābhārata*, any particular narrative comes down to us as embedded within several layers of dialogic texts of reported direct speech.

The sequential embedding of the dialogues is achieved by it being reported at every level by a third party who is not a participant in the dialogue. The narrator being a third party ensures the objectivity of the text and also frees it of

interlocutor intention. In the *Mahābhārata*, the third party reporting is always preserved. Thus Śakuntalā, in response to Dushyanta's enquiries about her parentage, tells her own story as she heard it being told by Kaṇva to a visiting sage.

Śakuntalā said:

> Then listen, my king, how this story has come to me, and how this came to be, and how in fact I became the hermit's daughter. One day a seer came here who raised questions about my birth, and hear how the reverend spoke to him, sire.
>
> "Viśvāmitra as you know," he said, "performed of yore such huge austerities...."
>
> In this manner did Kaṇva describe my birth to the great seer who had questioned him, and thus, overlord of men, should you know me for Kaṇva's daughter. For I think of Kaṇva as my father, never having known my own. So, sire, I have told you exactly as I have heard it.[3]

So is the presence of the narrator as an eye-witness in the arena of the narrated events and the line of transmission of the narrative scrupulously ensured within the *Mahābhārata*. For instance:

Janamejaya said:

> I first wish to hear what was said between the King of Snakes and Kāśyapa in that forest, which must have been empty of people. By whom was it witnessed and who heard what came to your ears? When I have heard

that, I shall set my mind on the destruction of the of the Snakes.

The councilors said:

Sire, listen to the tale that someone has told us about the encounter on the road between this prince among brahmins and this Prince of the Snakes. A certain man had been looking for dead branches to use as kindling wood for a sacrifice and had climbed up a tall tree. The Snake and the brahmin were unaware of him sitting in the tree.... Afterward he came here and told his story in the city. What we told you about the encounter of Takṣaka and the brahmin was precisely as it happened and was witnessed. Now that you have heard it, you must provide as it pleases you.[4]

It is important to notice that in both the above cases the narrator testifies to the authenticity of the text that s/he is reporting. Śakuntalā assures; "I have told you exactly as I have heard it." So do the councilors; "we told you... precisely as it happened and was witnessed." This is comparable to the sayings of the Prophet which in the Islamic tradition have canonical value as *hadith*. The authenticity of these statements is established through *isnad*, a process of evaluation by the examination of links in the line of transmission. The presence and veracity of each witness in the line of transmission, from the first "Companions of the Prophet" to the recorder, are evaluated and the *hadith* accordingly accepted or rejected.[5] Similarly, Vyāsa's

claim to being the author of the *Mahābhārata* rests on the fact that he had "been a witness to the deeds of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas."[6]

The third party who was an eye-witness to the dialogue, reports it in direct speech along with the context of the dialogue. The narrator who was present at the original narration not only reports the text but also the circumstances in which it took place. The reported text is thus embedded in its dialogic context by the enveloping reporting text. The narrative is invariably set in its narrative event.[7]

As is evident from the above instances, no story in the *Mahābhārata* is told in vain but only in response to a query in its dialogic context. The context provides the justification for its narration. And not just that. The context provokes the narration. The story of the past is narrated only in so far as it is relevant to the present, in order to understand how the present came to be. Hence it is the presence of Śakuntalā in a hermitage living as the daughter of a celibate that provokes the telling of her story. This is the nature of a narration of a genealogy which traces the past as it leads up to the descendent to whom it is narrated. This is also the nature of history. History is the reclamation of the past, from the vantage point of the present, in order to comprehend how the present came to be. Thus:

The Bard said:

> Thereupon the Snake woman Jaratkāru summoned her son; and, following the words of Vasuki, King of Snakes, she said to him, "Son, I was given to your father by my brother for a purpose. The time has come. Do what must be done!"
>
> *Āstīka said:*
>
> Why did my uncle give you to my father? Tell me the truth, and when you have told me I shall do as I must.
>
> *The Bard said:*
>
> Then undaunted, for she wished her kinsmen well, Jaratkāru, the sister of the King of Snakes, told him,"... [8]

While retaining its eye-witness objectivity, the knowledge of the past is not passively transmitted, but on the other hand is dialogically reclaimed from the vantage point of the present. The story of the past is told by the narrator only in response to a query by the interlocutor in the context of the present that it brought about. In every narrative its narrated events are those that bring about its narrative event. Hence every narrative is self-contextualizing. The text weaves the context of its own telling.

The preservation of the reported text, as an *utterance*[9], in its individuality and with its voices, set in the context of its narrative event within the reporting text, *finalizes*[10] it, closing it as a local-text which can then exist monadically in

relation to the global-text. In other words, each of the stories in the *Mahābhārata*, though integrally embedded within the global-text of the *Mahabharata*, can nonetheless exist as a unitary text in its own right, without a necessary reference to the global-text of the *Mahābhārata*. Hence the story of Śakuntalā, or Nala, or Yayāti, or even a discourse like the *Bhagavad Gītā* can exist as an independent unitary text outside the *Mahābhārata*. But since every story within the *Mahābhārata* is provoked by a query in a specific context each local-text has its precise place within the global-text. Every story within the *Mahābhārata*, like a Leibnizian monad is self-contained and unitary, while being simultaneously in harmony with the global-text. Even today these local-texts or episodes known as *prasangas* constitute the basic performance unit of the *Mahābhārata*, be it in readings, theatre or for that matter in TV serials.

Though each story is closed, the embedding of the narrative in its narrative event, makes every text mirror its context. The story of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice is narrated to Ruru when he embarks on a similar venture. That of Yayāti, who gave up his youth at his father's behest, is told in the context of Bhīṣma taking the vow of celibacy to fulfill his father's desires. Nala's story, of how he lost his kingdom at a dice game, is narrated to Yudhiṣṭhira when he looses his everything at the dice game. Thus every text in the *Mahābhārata*, each in its own way, like a Leibnizian monad reflects the global-text.

Different dialogical contexts reclaim the same past differently. The same story or the narrated events - "the work in the totality of all its events"[11] - may be reclaimed in different contexts in the form of different narrative texts. Within the *Mahābhārata* the same story may be told more than once - in different contexts, in different ways, to different ends; each time reclaiming different *semantic potential* of the same episode. In *The Book of Beginning* alone the story of Āstīka is told several times - as different narrative texts. Twice by Ugraśravas to Śaunaka in two different contexts. Once by Brahma when he assures the snakes that Āstīka will be born to save their line from Janamejaya's sacrifice; once to Ruru when he enquires about Janamejaya's snake sacrifice; once to Āstīka by his mother when he enquires about the circumstances and reasons of his birth and once by Āstīka himself to Janamejaya during the snake sacrifice. Even the *Bhagavad Gītā* is repeated in the *Mahābhārata*.

In the lateral third party transmission, the third party who is not a participant in the embedded dialogue reports it in the enveloping dialogue. He reports not only the text but also its context. The location of the narrator in the arena of the narrated event as passive eye-witness gives him a local omniscience. Since the dialogue is reported in direct speech as it unfolds, a continuous nexus is established between the dialogic narrative text and its effect in the realm of action or the dialogic context of the narrative event, which is reported by the narrator in the enveloping text. Hence, every dialogic text

in its narrative movement continuously indexes the present as the events unfold in real time. The text represents the "world-in-the-making"[12]

Every text is alternately a reporting and a reported text. And given the structure of repeated embeddment, every narrative is sequentially the narrative event of the text it embeds and the narrated event of the text it is enveloped by. And since every text reports the past through the use of the quotative frame, the *verbum dicendi* ...said, every dialogic level sequentially indexes a point in time.

Not only is the story of the past told in response to a query in the present which it brought about, but it is told to motivate action in the realm of the present in which its narrative event is located. Though it is in response to the interlocutor's query that the past is reclaimed, insofar as his actions are conditioned by the story of the past that the narrator recites, there is, in a sense, a shift in the locus of agency from the interlocutor who acts to the narrator and moreso the story. Thus:

> *Kāśyapa said:*
>
> ...Now devour you the two of them since they are mad with battle fury, each out to vanquish the other, and then swiftly finish the task you have set for yourself.
>
> *The Bard said:*
>
> Hearing his father's word, the sky-sweeping Bird came down with a terrifying swoop...[13]

Or again:

> *Arjuna said*:
>
> The delusion is gone, Acyuta, and by your grace I have recovered my wits. Here I stand with no more doubts. I shall do as you say....
>
> *Samjaya said:*
>
> Then, seeing that Arjuna again held his Gandiva bow and arrows, the great warriors roared their approval.[14]

The illocutionary act of the narration of the embedded text has its perlocutionary effect on the narrated event of the enveloping context.[15] The repeated collapse of the dialogic text into the dialogic context, reported text into the reporting text, the story into the story telling event, makes the illocutionary act of the embedded narrative event, by its perlocutionary effect *move* the outer narrated event, and, given the structure of repeated embeddment, cumulatively *moves* the global-text in a continuous sequence - through time.

"Authoritative discourse cannot be represented - it is only transmitted."[16] The canonical texts are authoritative and are transmitted. The lateral transmission of the *Mahābhārata* is, however, in contrast to the pattern of transmission of the canonical texts or for that matter the other epic Ramayana. These texts are not laterally structured with dialogic embeddment but are linearly transmitted, that is, they are handed down. These texts are consequently "finished" or *finalized* and purport to be

context-free. In the *Mahābhārata* the authoritativeness of the text is ensured throughout by the preservation of the text, at every level of its transmission, in its original voice. While in the *Mahābhārata* the embeddment of the text in its context that is achieved through the eye-witness narration and third party transmission *finalizes* the local-text, the global-text is, given the structure of repeated embeddment, cumulative.

The canonical texts, known as *smriti*, have divine authors. But these texts are never given as narrated by the divine authors. They are handed over to their human recipients by their authors and transmitted. But at the first link in the human chain of transmission, when the first human recipient hands it down to the next generation, it is done in the presence of its divine author. Thus for instance, in case of the *Mānavadharmaśastra* when the sages approach Manu to get the laws:

> *Manu said:*
>
> "The Imperishable One composed these sacred laws and himself taught it to me in the beginning and I taught it to the devotees of Marīci and other sages. Bhṛgu here will fully recite it to you, for he has learned it in entirety from me." Then the great sage Bhṛgu being thus addressed by Manu, pleased in his heart said to all the sages: "Listen...."[17]

At the moment when the text is placed in the line of transmission its divine author is present as a third party and as

the silent ratifier of the authenticity of the transmitted text. God in these cases is literally the *superaddressee*.[18]

This is also true of the *Mahābhārata*, which is regarded as a canonical *smṛiti* text, and its "author." The text of the *Mahābhārata* does not come to us as narrated by Vyāsa, but as it is narrated to Janamejaya by Vyāsa's student Vaiśaṃpāyana in his presence. When asked by Janamejaya to narrate the story of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas, Vyāsa asks his disciple to narrate it to him:

> Having heard the question, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayāna turned to his student Vaiśaṃpāyana sitting at his side and instructed him: "Tell him in full, as you have heard it from me, how of old the Breach occurred between the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas." Hereupon that bull among brahmins acknowledged his guru's command and narrated the entire Epic to the King.[19]

In the first link of the chain of transmission of the *Mahābhārata*, Vyāsa, its "author", is its silent ratifier, the *superaddressee*.

The cumulative open-endedness is also ensured in the text by the displacement of Vyāsa, the "author" of the *Mahābhārata*, from a position of final authority. Vyāsa is not the final author of the *Mahābhārata* as it has come down to us. The story of the *Mahābhārata* as Vyāsa told it, is itself embedded in a dialogic context and placed in a line of transmission within the *Mahābhārata*. In its present form the text of the *Mahābhārata* itself states that it has grown since Vyāsa "authored" it.

The non-linear embedding and the essential fragility of the dialogue makes it possible for the text to be opened up at any point, keeping the *Mahābhārata* perennially open-textured. Wherever a question can be asked a question is asked, and a story comes up in answer to it - an independent local-text, but organically embedded in the context of the global-text. It is this that also contributes to what some critics have pointed out as the overdetermined nature of the *Mahābhārata*. But it keeps the *Mahābhārata* ever an open-text, allowing it to be opened or closed at any point without doing violence to its overall coherence.[20] The *Mahābhārata* can hence manifest itself in different "editions." The absence of a single overarching authorial voice in tandem with the essential fragility of the dialogue enables the *Mahābhārata* to incorporate within itself a vast heterogeneity of voices of encyclopedic proportions.

The Rāmāyana is known as the *adi kāvya* - the original poem. It is finished and its author Valmiki beheld a vision of the entire epic in the cup of his hands. The *Mahābhārata* in contrast, though *finalized* at every level, given its structure, is cumulative. The *Mahābhārata* is authoritative, cumulative and open-ended. Tradition has it that the *Mahābhārata* is *Itihāsa - it is said that* - history.

A *parampara - from one to another* - is a lineage. It could be the lineage of a family - *vamsa parampara* - or the lineage of learning - *guru parampara*. In the *Mahābhārata* these two *paramparas* or lineages run side by side, intersecting and

interweaving, each motivating the other[21]. These are the lineage of the actors, *vaṃsa parampara*, that the genealogies recount in the narrative at any point, the lineage of the transmission of the narrative, and the actual narration of the genealogies that keeps both these lineages *moving*. These genealogies are narrated during the sacrifices which are performed by the descendants for the well-being of their lineage. The performance of the sacrifice is in fulfillment of the debt one owes to the gods for the maintaining the world-order - *dēva ṛna*. This is the first of the triad of obligations one is bound by - *ṛna traya*. The second is the *ṛṣi ṛna*. This is the debt one owes to the sages of lore for the heritage that they have bequeathed and is to be discharged by receiving the tradition and handing it over to the coming generation. The genealogies which are narrated in reported direct speech, preserving the original voices and tense, *enact* the lineages. The sequential use of the quotative frame, the *verbum dicendi*, in the past tense - ...said - *enacts* the serial transmission of the genealogy. The legitimacy of the lineage rests on the authoritativeness of the genealogy. The narrative axis of the global text of the *Mahābhārata* thus simultaneously represents the axis of the authoritativeness of the genealogy, the legitimacy of the lineage that rests on it, their mutual motivation and parallel, cumulative movement in time.[22]

The *Mahābhārata* is an indexical icon[23] of a tradition and its history; of the knowledge of the past and its cumulative transmission in time, and most importantly, of the knowledge of

the past as it motivates the present, at every moment, in its movement towards the future. In every telling, the story that made the past intercedes on behalf of the making of the story of the future. This epic is not about the "absolute past."

The *Mahābhārata* is a perennially repeated dialogue - a continuous and ongoing dialogue of a very plural cultural tradition with itself. And not all dialogues need imitate the form of Platonic dialogues wherein the interlocutors by a dialectical pendular back and forth movement seek to come to rest at the truth. Dialogues in real life move not in a pendular fashion, but instead go round and round, in an ever growing spiral, one subject leading to another, one event reminding of another, in a series of related digressions, repeatedly coming back to the central theme and drifting away again only to come back to it again and again from another angle and then yet another. This is the structure of the *Mahābhārata*, as also of human experience. Human experience proceeds neither from axiomatic origins to multiple articulations nor from its multiple manifestations to their unitary ideal. But on the contrary in a gradually emerging pattern, out of disparate but not unconnected experiences, the text of each being necessarily embedded in a context, and the context of each leading inevitably to another text, of what is at first sight "a bloomin' buzzin' confusion." The *Mahābhārata* embodies in its structure its central concern; *dharma sūkshmata* - the never ending dialogic struggle in search of the fragile subtlety of the Right Way in the midst of life's

bewildering complexities. The *Mahābhārata* is about life, all of it; and the book of life has no critical edition.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is set in the battle field of Kurukṣetra. The feud of succession between the two branches of the Bharata lineage, the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, culminates in the *Mahābhārata* war. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind father of the Kauravas, expresses a desire to know how the war is progressing. Vyāsa grants Saṃjaya, the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra's charioteer, a divine vision with which he can see the entire battlefield from wherever he is, and Saṃjaya narrates the Kurukṣetra war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. It is on the tenth day of the war that Saṃjaya arrives with the news that Bhīṣma has fallen. Bhīṣma is not only the Commander-in-Chief of the Kaurava army, he is also known to be an invincible warrior. Most importantly, he is the grandfather of both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. It is in response to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's agonized queries as to how the Pāṇḍavas could ever have taken up arms against Bhīṣma, and how they could ever have defeated him, that Saṃjaya narrates the commencement and progress of the war.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not the only one to be confronted by this moral predicament. Moments before the commencement of the war, Arjuna the hero of the Pāṇḍavas asks his friend and charioteer Kṛṣṇa to position his chariot in between the two armies so that he can study the battle formations. As he surveys the Kaurava army, Arjuna is struck by pangs of moral agony. The enemies arrayed against him are his cousins. Their Commander-in-Chief is his grandfather Bhīṣma. The other great warrior against whom he

will have to take up arms is Droṇa. Arjuna was his protege. Standing between the two armies about to clash, Arjuna downs his bow and tells Kṛṣṇa that he has no desire to go to war against his cousins, elders and teachers. Instead of participating in a fratricidal war Arjuna threatens to renounce his claim to the kingdom and become an ascetic. It is Kṛṣṇa's counsel to Arjuna, in this context, exhorting him to go to war that has come down to us as the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

The intricate weaving of the text *Bhagavad Gītā* into the context of its narrative, after the announcement of the fall of Bhīṣma, is not merely a successful dramatic device, but is in keeping with the narrative technique of the *Mahābhārata*. Saṃjaya narrates the story of the war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's shocked query, on hearing of Bhīṣma's fall, as to how it came to be that the Pāṇḍavas had taken up arms against Bhīṣma. Kṛṣṇa's discourse to Arjuna is also provoked by precisely the same moral dilemma confronting Arjuna of having to go into battle against his elders and which consequently leads to the fall of Bhīṣma. The narrated events of the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā* are those that bring about the context of the narrative event in which the narrative is located. Within the *Mahābhārata*, the text of the *Bhagavad Gītā* recreates itself in the context of its own creation.

Bhīṣma's fall is the appropriate context for the narrative of the *Bhagavad Gītā* for other reasons too. Bhīṣma was the heir to the Bharata lineage. But to comply with a whim of his father, he had renounced his claim to the throne, and to forestall the

possibility of his progeny staking any claim to it, had vowed to remain a celibate. It is this vow that earned him the appellation Bhīṣma - "The Awesome One." It is also this vow that leads to the series of illegitimacies through which the Bharata lineage is kept going that motivates the central story of the *Mahābhārata* culminating in the Kurukṣetra war. Bhīṣma is the ultimate cause of the war. He is its first sacrificial victim. As Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna, the war he is about to fight is no ordinary war. It is the Lawful War to reestablish legitimate order in the world; *dharma yudha*. The battlefield of Kurukṣetra is the sacrificial ground of the grand sacrifice for the sustenance of the social and cosmic order; *dharmaksetra*. The sacrifice of the celibate Bhīṣma on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, becomes in the *Bhagavad Gītā* an emblem for the sacrifice that is performed for the sustenance of the cosmic order.

The *Mahābhārata* has numerous stories about the disruption brought about by the celibate. The story of Jaratkāru is one such. Jaratkāru is the last of his line and an ascetic. He wanders into a cave where he finds men hanging from a thread with their faces down about to fall from heaven. The thread is being gnawed at by a rat and there is only one strand left intact. On enquiry, Jaratkāru discovers the men to be his ancestors. The thread is his lineage. He is the last strand. The rat is Time.[24] Every person stands between his ancestors and his descendants. He is the nexus between the past and the future generations. It is through him that the ancestral line has to continue. And not just

that. The well-being of one's ancestors depends upon the continuation of their line into the future. The ancestors are kept in heaven by the oblations that their descendants offer to him. The obligation to have progeny is one's duty to one's ancestors; *pitṛ ṛna* - one's debt to one's ancestors. This is the last of the triad of obligations.

The celibate does not recognize this debt to his ancestors. By not having progeny he jeopardizes the continuity of the lineage and also the well-being of his ancestors. He not only stands out of the realm of the sensual but also the arena of the social. He is a constant challenge to not only the social but also the cosmic order. Viśvāmitra, for instance, was a king who sought to attain godhood through his asceticism. He failed to become a god, but succeeded in attaining brahminhood. He fell in his celibacy and as a consequence was instrumental in founding the Bharata lineage. Bhīṣma in contrast was a god who was born as an earthly king. He renounced his claim to the kingdom and vowed to be a celibate and as a consequence the lineage of the Bharatas floundered.

The fragility of the lineage is a central preoccupation of the *Mahābhārata*. The continuous oscillation between dissolution and regeneration, where every lineage is rescued from extinction, by means legitimate or illegitimate, is a recurring motif in the *Mahābhārata*. This is true of the story of Bhīṣma, Jaratkāru, Takṣaka, Parikṣit. And in a sense, this is also the story of Śakuntalā and Bharata. Bhīṣma, the last of the Vasus, was to be

sacrificed like his brothers in the Ganges by his mother and sent back to heaven, releasing him from earthly life. But his father's query to his mother as to the meaning of her action made her leave him behind on earth as an heir to the Bharata lineage. But his vow of celibacy threatened the continuation of the Bharata lineage. His brothers died childless. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu were born to their wives through Vyāsa, by Bhīṣma's step-mother invoking the principle of levirate. Dhṛtarāṣṭra's blindness forbade him from inheriting the throne. The curse on Pāṇḍu made it impossible for him to have offspring and the Pāṇḍavas were born to his wives through Kunti's spell. Abhimanyu was the only surviving offspring of the Pāṇḍavas. While in his mother's womb he had learned to penetrate a battle formation, but he had never learned how to come out of one. During the Kurukṣetra war he broke into a formation and died trapped inside, unable to emerge out of it. His posthumous son Parikṣit was still-born. Kṛṣṇa resuscitated him and the Pāṇḍava line continued. He incurred the wrath of a sage who cursed him to be killed by nightfall. Parikṣit was bitten by Takṣaka at just the moment when he thought he had outlived his curse. His son Janamejaya, to avenge his death, vowed to put an end to the race of Snakes and performed the snake sacrifice. Takṣaka was the last of the snakes to be sacrificed by Janamejaya when Āstīka intervenes and lets Takṣaka live and the race of Snakes continue. Jaratkāru's asceticism threatened the continuity of his lineage. He took a wife at the

behest of his ancestors and fathered Āstīka. Āstíka saved not only his father's but also his mother's lineage from extinction.

A sacrifice may be performed for two purposes. It may be performed by the individual with the intention to attain a specific desired end, mundane or supramundane. This is to allow the expansion of the sacrificer within the universe. The intention of the sacrifice is the *sankalpa*, and the desired consequence is the fruit, *phala*.

In contrast to the above kind of sacrifices, which are performed with the intention of fulfillment of personal desired ends, there are sacrifices which are performed for the welfare and well-being of the lineage or the community. These sacrifices are further magnified, and are performed not merely for the welfare of the community, but are viewed as being instrumental in the maintenance of the social and cosmic process; in order to "hold the universe together" or "keep the wheels of the universe rolling." The sacrifice is in a sense reified, and the entire cosmic process is seen as being maintained by and dependent upon the proper performance of the sacrifice. The sacrifice continuously renews and recreates the cosmos and it generates the power that keeps the universe going; a power derived from the creative potency of the sacrificial act. The sacrifice is paramount, and it sustains the universal cosmic process, both human and non-human, both mundane and supramundane. The entire cosmic process is seen as an ongoing sacrifice:

Beings thrive on food
Food springs from rain
Rain emanates from sacrifice
It is from action that sacrifice stems.

Know then that,
From Brahma action emerges
Brahma from the sound of the imperishable OM.
Thus is the all-pervading Eternal
Everpresent in the sacrifice.[25]

The sacrificial acts thus can be performed for two ends. Either for personal fulfillment, or for universal, cosmic maintenance. Strictly speaking, the latter sacrifice does not have a desired end or intention, as it is the sacrifice which sustains the cosmic process. In keeping with the dual purpose of the sacrifice, the sacrificial acts are classified accordingly. Those acts which are performed for personal fulfillment and individual expansion are known as *kāmya karma*, or desired acts. In contrast there are the sacrificial acts that are performed in order to maintain the universal cosmic process. And since these sacrificial acts sustain the cosmic order they do not have any desired end from the standpoint of the sacrificer. These are social acts that maintain the regular, ongoing social and cosmic process and are hence enjoined acts or *niyata karma*. These acts are not motivated by personal desires but are prescribed to the person by tradition, in keeping with his place in the larger scheme of things. He is seen in this view not as an agent, an autonomous locus of desires and actions, but as a part of a larger unity and order of things, social and cosmic. The *niyata karma* are enjoined acts and are not optative like the *kāmya*

karma. Consequently, these acts are not universal and open to everyone, in the sense that anyone who has a specific desire and the means to do so can perform it. Instead, these are strictly defined in terms of the person's station in life and his place in the order of things. These acts are what tradition lays down as proper and required of a person depending on his class and stage in life; this is the *varnāśramadharma*. These are not open to all, but depend upon and change according to the person's station in life. This is the *svadharma* of the person. *Dharma is that which sustains.* Tradition embodies it in a corpus of canonical texts known as *smṛiti - the remembered.*

Underlying this are two diametrically opposed views of a person and his place in the scheme of things. The first, is that of a person as an agent and the locus of desire and action, involved in the complex sequence of desire-intention-action and its consequence. The agent desires the fruit, performs the sacrificial act with the intention of attaining it, and through the supramundane consequence of the sacrifice accrues the fruit, thus attaining his personal expansion and fulfillment in the universe. The other view, sees the person not as an agent, a locus of desire and action, but rather as a part of the larger order of things - not the agent of action, but merely the instrument of it; the person, not in-himself, but among-others. The sacrifice, in this case, is not an act of supramundane intervention, resorted to and aiming towards fulfillment of

person's desire and expansion, but is rather a creative process of renewing and sustaining the cosmic process.

This dichotomy is reflected in the structure of the sacrificial ritual in terms of the relationship between the *yajamāna* and the *yājakas* or the *ṛtviks*. The *yajamāna* is the one for whose benefit the sacrifice is performed. The *yājakas* on the other hand are those who actually perform the ritual sacrifice. They are hired ritual specialists who perform the sacrifice on behalf of the *yajamāna*. Though the sacrifice is a collective endeavor involving several *yājakas*, with each specialist performing his prescribed task, it is nonetheless construed as a single act. Further, though the *yājakas* are the ones who actually perform the sacrifice, it not seen as their action but that of the *yajamāna*, insofar as the fruit of the action accrues not to them but to the *yajamāna* on whose behalf the sacrifice was performed. The *yajamāna* is the sole agent of the sacrificial act - *kartṛ* - and the *yājakas* are merely his hired instruments.[26]

The ascetic is one who has renounced all desires in the world. He consequently is free of all obligations to the world. Having renounced the world he participates in neither of the two forms of sacrifice; neither to expand his person in the world nor to keep the wheels of the world rolling. Standing out of the social and the cosmic order, he is bound by neither the desired nor the enjoined acts. But this act of renunciation is itself an act of will on his part. It is the instance of a will turned inward, an intention that is directed away from any desired end.

In him the nexus between intention and act, *sankalpa* and *karma* is severed. He is an instance of pure will, a will that is not directed towards any end; a free agent, whose actions are governed neither by his desires nor the constraints of the world. "The strong-willed great ascetic" is the autonomous agent and the individual par excellence.

It is out of this tension within the concept of sacrifice and its opposition to the notion of ascetic renunciation that Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā* draws out a form of thought, in the process radically reconstituting them. Kṛṣṇa does not speak of an act of sacrifice in the sense of the performance of the rite of sacrifice, but instead of an act of sacrificing. This metaphorical shift is effected by juxtaposing the concept of sacrifice along side that of the notion of ascetic renunciation. The shift in the semantic field is brought about by counterposing at the primary level, action as understood as an intended act of desire, *kāmya karma*, as against ascetic renunciation, or *karma sanyāsa* as the giving up of desire and consequently of all action. It is out of this interaction that Kṛṣṇa constitutes a new concept of action, simultaneously embodying aspects of both and transcending them.

This is achieved by not only severing the nexus between the intention and the act, *sankalpa* and *karma*, as embodied in the orthodox notion of sacrifice as *kāmya karma*, but also the negation of the will and agency that is central to the ascetic notion of renunciation; by speaking of an act that is devoid not

only of desire and intention but also agency. While retaining the centrality of the act it modifies it by giving up its essential link with desire and intention. Out of the traditionally opposed and mutually incompatible notions of sacrifice and renunciation, the other dimensions of the new concept are generated. The act now is seen as being simultaneously both a sacrifice and a renunciation - the act in which the desire is renounced and intention is sacrificed - *kāmasankalpavārjitah*. The act as a sacrifice is retained along with renunciation, but it is now an act in which desire, intention and agency are renounced and sacrificed - the renunciation of desire and the consequence of action and the sacrifice of agency. What was hitherto mutually opposed, sacrifice and ascetic renunciation, are fused together to bring forth an entirely new concept of act embodying aspects of both. Every act is performed without the intention of attaining a desired end or the presumption of agency, *niṣkāma karma*. Through the renunciation of desire, intention of the act and the sacrifice of agency, every act becomes an act of sacrifice, since every act is now performed as a sacrifice - sacrifice not of the substance to the fire, but the sacrifice of the agency and intention that were hitherto seen as essentially constituting the act. And to the extent hitherto every sacrificial act was seen as inherently associated with intention and desire, every act now becomes an act of sacrifice. Every act a sacrificial act; an act of sacrifice; a sacrifice of the act.

These acts of sacrifice, devoid of intention and desire, now become the sacrificial acts of the other kind - no longer acts of sacrifice performed for the fulfillment of personal ends, *kāmya karma*, but the sacrificial acts performed solely "to keep rolling the wheel that has been set in motion."[27] These are the *niyata karma*, the enjoined acts, fixed for the person by the tradition, as per his *svadharma*. These are all, each one of them sacrificial acts, for these are the acts in which the individual will is surrendered to the dictates of tradition and personal desire and agency have been sacrificed for the well-being of the whole.

This view of the act as a sacrifice, performed to keep the wheels of the universe moving with the actor renouncing his agency and intention is underpinned by the metaphysics that Kṛṣṇa expounds to Arjuna. - "The Lord has not created into people either agency or the acts, or the union of act and fruit; that is the doing of Nature" [28]; "actions are performed by the three forces of nature, but deluded by self-attribution, one thinks: "I did it!"" [29]

This metaphysical view of the cosmos is demonstrated to Arjuna by Kṛṣṇa in his theophany when he reveals his cosmic form. In his vision of the cosmic form, *viśva rūpa darśana*, Arjuna sees Kṛṣṇa as embodying within him the past, the present and the future. He is the sustainer of the cosmos and the ultimate agent of all action in it. All actions and their consequences in the Universe are preordained by Him. In his vision Arjuna glimpses into the future and sees all the warriors he had loathed to kill

already destroyed by Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa usurps all agency in the cosmos and asks Arjuna to be merely his instrument. Kṛṣṇa is the *yajamāna* of the cosmic sacrifice, its sole kartr. Arjuna and others are but his *yājakas* carrying out their prescribed tasks, mere instruments: "Of these warriors arrayed in both sides...I have already slain them ages ago. Be merely my instrument in this, Left-handed Archer!"[30]

Whereas throughout the *Mahābhārata* it is the knowledge of the past that moves the agent to act, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* it is the knowledge of the future, the foreknowledge of the inevitability of the events to come as revealed to him by Kṛṣṇa, that motivates Arjuna's action in the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. It is this knowledge of the true nature of agency in the social and cosmic order and of one's place in it that is *the sacrificial fire of knowledge - jñānāgni* - to which desire, intention and personal agency are sacrificed. This is *the knowledge sacrifice - jñānayajña.*

There is a progressive enlarging of vision or omniscience in the *Mahābhārata* culminating in the cosmic omniscience of the *visva rupa darsana.* The local omniscience of the eye-witness in the arena of the narrated event as it unfolds at the present moment which is characteristic of the narrative at every level enlarges in the narration of the Kurukṣetra war into the global omniscience of its narrator. Saṃjaya, the narrator of the war, by the grace of Vyāsa, has a divine insight, "a vision beyond the range of the senses and hearing from afar and knowledge of

thoughts of others, and of past and present, and awareness of portentous happenings, and power to move through the sky."[31] And within his narration of the war, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, in Kṛṣṇa's theophany when he reveals his cosmic form, this global omniscience explodes into the cosmic omniscience of the *viśva rūpa darśana;* a vision of the past, the present and the future of the entire cosmos.

That Kṛṣṇa's theophany in the *Mahābhārata*, wherein he reveals the story of the cosmos, occurs while in his role as Arjuna's charioteer, between the two armies about to clash, in the middle of the sacrificial field of Kurukṣetra, is no accident either. For the bards of the *Mahābhārata* who recite the genealogies during the sacrifices are also *sūtas* - charioteers.[32]

"Today I reveal to you" says Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna displaying his cosmic form as the ultimate agent of all action and asking Arjuna to go into battle. *Today* is the day of the commencement of the great *Mahābhārata* war. It is the day the *Dvāpara Yuga* ends and the *Kali Yuga* begins. Standing on the threshold between two Eons, Kṛṣṇa reveals his cosmic form, embodying the past, the present and the future, and declares:[33]

> I am Time
> the creator
> grown old to destroy.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* is an icon of the *Mahābhārata;* an icon of an icon, embedded within it and encompassing it.

References:

1. *The Mahābhārata I. The Book of the Beginning Translated and edited by* J.A.B. van Buitenen.Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1973 I.56.34 p. 130

2. A.K.Ramanujan (Repetition in the *Mahābhārata*, unpublished, 1988) has stated that the *Mahābhārata* is a tradition insofar as it is actively present in the collective consciousness of Indians. As he puts it:"No Indian ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time." The present paper, however, argues that the maintenance of tradition - *parampara* - is the central concern of the *Mahābhārata* and that this concern is embodied in its textual structure.

3. *MhB*.1(7)65.17-66.17; pp. 161-3

4. *MhB.* 1(5)45.26-33; p.112

5. Jan Vansina *Oral Tradition as History.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 1985, p.30

6. *MhB.* 1(6)54.20-23; p.126

7. Roman Jakobson *Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb* in *Selected Writings II* Mouton, The Hague, 1971, pp. 133-36.
*Cf.*Richard Bauman *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual studies of oral narrative.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.2

8. *MhB.* 1(5)49.1-5; p.115

9. M.M.Bakhtin *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* translated by Vern W.McGee *Eds.*Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist Austin: University of Texas, 1986, pp. 61-95.

10. *Speech Genres*, p.76

11. M.M.Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination Four Essays by M.M.Bakhtin* Edited by Michael Holquist Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p.255

12. *Dialogical Imagination*, p.30

13. *MhB.* 1(5)25.25-26,p.83

14. *The Bhagavad Gita* (40) 18.73 - (41).1

15. J.L.Austin *How to do Things with Words* Edited by J.O.P.Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Second edition. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962. pp. 98 ff.

16. *Dialogic Imagination* p.344

17. *The Laws of Manu*, I 58-60

18. *Speech Genres*, p.126

19. *MhB.* 1(6)54.21-22; p.126-7

20. Bauman has shown based on his study of oral narratives that new episodes can be introduced into the narrative by exploiting the structural opportunity provided by what he, following Genette, calls *ellipsis* or by breaking durative action. pp. 90-93.

21. Wendy Doniger first drew my attention to this aspect of the *Mahābhārata* when she gave a course on the *Mahābhārata* at the University of Chicago in Spring 1987.

22. The mutual dependence of these two *paramparas* is brought out in several instances in the *Mahābhārata*. The best example, however, is Karna. He was Kunti's illegitimate child, born before she was married to Pāṇḍu. She had abandoned him and Karna had been brought up by a charioteer. The tragedy of Karna's life is that although he was a brother to the Pāṇḍavas and belonged to the same lineage, they had reviled him as he did know his genealogy. What makes his situation all the more poignant is that he is referred to by them as *sūta putra* - charioteer's son - and as a *suta* he should know not only his, but everyone else's genealogy. The legitimacy of the *guru parampara* is also brought out in Karna's case. Karna had learned from Paraśurāma certain arts by telling him that he was a brahmin. Parasurama sees through the deception and curses him that the knowledge that Karna had acquired from him should fail Karna at the moment he needs it most. The story of Ekalavya is similar. He had gone to Drona to learn from him the art archery. Drona had declined to teach Ekalavya as he was not qualified for it since he was not born a kshatriya. Undaunted, Ekalavya considers Drona his teacher and masters the art by practicing it in front of a clay image of his guru. When Drona learns of this, he demands his teacher's fee in the form of Ekalavya's right thumb, thus withdrawing from Ekalavya the knowledge of archery which Ekalavya purportedly had learned from him.

23. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah *Culture, Thought and Social Action - an anthropological perspective* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 156-61
*Cf.*Michael Silverstein *Metaforces of Power in Traditional Oratory* Unpublished paper, 1982.

24. *MhB.* 1(5)41.20-30; p.105

25. *BhG.* 3.14-15

26. For an excellent discussion of this relationship see Daya Krishna *Yajna and the doctrine of karma: a contradiction in Indian thought about action. Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, Vol. VI No.2 1989.*

27. *BhG.* 3.16

28. *BhG.* 5.14

29. *BhG.* 3.27

30. *BhG.* 11.33

31. *BhG. (39)16.7-9*

32. Dr.E.Annamalai pointed out to me that this situation corresponds in modern times to that of chauffeurs who are privy to all gossip.

33. *BhG.* 11.32

Acknowledgements

The title of this paper is my tongue-in-cheek homage to J.A.B. van Buitenen. While I disagree entirely with his "loose-leaf-file" view of the structure of the *Mahābhārata*, I have nonetheless been influenced by his book of the same title. I must thank several people who have helped me in writing this paper. Wendy Doniger first started me thinking along these lines and, under strange circumstances, compelled me to *finalize* it. Zulfiquar Ahmad and Raja Sundararaman commented on earlier drafts. R.Ramachandra as a "native" scholar has consistently resisted my analysis, forcing me to clarify my position further. Michael Silverstein for everything that he has taught me; and that is a great deal. *But this paper is for Inger.*