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Danielle Feller
danielle.feller@unil.ch
(University of Lausanne, Switzerland)

Adding Insult to Injury
Whipping Stories from the *Mahābhārata*

ABSTRACT: In the *Mahābhārata* (MBh), whipping is mainly resorted to by charioteers while driving their horses and the terms designating whips are therefore frequently found in the war-books. Used metaphorically, the expression "whip-like words" designates cutting, hurtful speech. Excessive whipping of draught-animals is considered cruel and is seen as a sign of low birth. When humans are whipped, this is regarded as particularly insulting, since such treatment is usually reserved for animals, but the outcome for the offenders is unequal: kings who whip brahmins are swiftly punished and cursed, whereas brahmins who flog kings get away with it scot-free. Such tales are most frequently found in the MBh's *Anuśāsanaparvan*, where they serve to underscore the brahmins' superiority.

KEYWORDS: *Mahābhārata*, whipping, cruelty, domestic animals, brahmins versus *kṣatriya*s

Introduction

When I was kindly invited to contribute to this volume on "Shades of Violence: Aggression and Domination in Indian Culture," I decided to examine the ways in which humans exert their domination over

domestic animals[1] in the great Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata* (MBh).[2] My attention was drawn to a few realistically depicted scenes where draught-animals are cruelly whipped, so I decided to restrict my investigation to the topic of whipping. Unexpectedly, far from limiting the scope of this study, whipping took me further afield than I expected. As it turned out, not only animals are yoked and beaten, but the same happens to human beings as well. Being whipped like a draught-animal is of course singularly humiliating, hence the title of this article: "Adding insult to injury." The MBh presents us with stories in which either brahmins are beaten by kings—who are then swiftly cursed for their insolence; or *kṣatriya*s are yoked and whipped by brahmins—who get away with it. Using the whip on other human beings to degrade and dehumanize them shows the extent to which some kings, but especially the brahmins, were prepared to go to demonstrate their superiority. Such scenes illustrate very graphically the ever-on-going rivalry between the two highest classes. The topic of whipping thus rises above the mere anecdotal and becomes a part and parcel of the epic's grander scheme to underscore the brahmins' might.

Unlike what was—and unfortunately sometimes still is—practiced in many other cultures, in ancient India flogging does not appear to have been a common punishment for human beings, be they slaves, criminals or sinners. Although this text does not shy away from other types of corporeal punishment, the *Manusmṛti*[3] prescribes whipping only in a single instance:

> A virgin who pollutes (another) virgin must be fined two hundred (*paṇa*s), pay the double of her bride-price, and receive ten whip-lashes. (*Manusmṛti* 8.369)[4]

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1 The topic of animals in India is thoroughly investigated in a collection of articles edited by Balbir and Pinault (2009), but none of these focus on the Sanskrit epics.

2 References will be given throughout to the critical edition of this text (Sukthankar et al. 1933–1966). Unless otherwise mentioned, the translations are my own.

3 Translations are by Doniger and Smith 1991.

4 *kanyaiva kanyāṃ yā kuryāt tasyāḥ syād dviśato damaḥ |*
śulkaṃ ca dviguṇaṃ dadyāc chiphāś caivāpnuyād daśa || *Manusmṛti* 8.369 ||

Instances from other law-books are even more difficult to find. The *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* does not prescribe actual whipping, but "beating with a stick" (*daṇḍa-tāḍanam*) in few instances involving transgressions perpetrated by *śūdra*s, farmhands or herdsmen (e.g., 2.27.15; 2.28.2–3). In 12.7, the *Gautama Dharmasūtra* uses the verbal adjective *daṇḍya* (lit. "to be beaten with a stick") for similar offences.[5] From this meagre evidence, we can conclude that whipping or beating was not only very rarely prescribed as a punishment for human beings but was also restricted to men from the lower classes and to sexually misbehaving women. In general, outside the context of penal rules, the Law books speak firmly against physical violence—except in the case of pupils and sons, who may be beaten for the sake of instruction (!) (See *Manusmṛti* 4.164).

Literal and metaphorical whipping in the great epic

Let us now turn to the evidence found in the MBh, starting with a few preliminary remarks concerning the terminology: the two terms most frequently used to designate whips in the great epic are *kaśā*, f. "whip, rein, whipping, rope" and *pratoda*, m. (from the root *pra-tud-* "to strike forward"): "goad or long whip."[6] Even though they serve the same purpose, whips and goads have of course quite different shapes: a whip designates a rope-like instrument with a handle, and a goad is basically a sharp-pointed stick. But in Sanskrit the two terms *kaśā* and *pratoda* semantically overlap. In the case of *pratoda*, especially when used alone, it is not always quite clear which instrument is meant, although sometimes the context allows us to decide.

Stories in which whipping is the central motif are not very frequent in the MBh. Mostly, whips or goads are referred to rather

The term *śiphā*, f. designates "a fibrous and flexible root (used for making whips, etc.); a lash or stroke with a whip or rod". (Cf. Monier-Williams dictionary, with reference to this verse for the second meaning.)

5 Ed. Olivelle 2000.

6 Cf. Monier-Williams dictionary.

matter-of-factly and without negative connotation in the case of charioteers driving their horses or other draught-animals, to instigate these animals to greater speed. These terms naturally occur most frequently in the war-books, where the great warriors fight from their chariots. For instance, while fleeing, the Kauravas speed up their horses using whips, goads, and loud shouts:

> Your soldiers fled quickly, instigating their horses with goads, the tips of their bows, the cries of "hum" correctly conveyed, by striking them on their backs with whips, and by means of loud shouts. (MBh 7.64.58–59b)[7]

Breaking the charioteers' whips by targeting them with arrows is a favorite tactic of war, effectively hindering charioteers from driving their horses efficiently. This happens quite often to Kṛṣṇa, who has chosen not to fight in the great war but to serve as Arjuna's charioteer:

> He (Duryodhana) hit Vāsudeva in the center of his chest with ten (arrows), and, after breaking his whip with an arrow, he made it fall on the ground. (MBh 7.78.2)[8]

Or,

> But Bhūriśravas, enraged, broke Hari's whip, and hit Arjuna with seventy-three arrows. (MBh 7.79.32)[9]

Accordingly, both *pratoda*s and *kaśā*s are often found strewn on the ground with other war paraphernalia when the battle is over:

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7 *pratodaiś cāpakoṭībhir huṃkāraiḥ sādhuvāhitaiḥ* |
kaśāpārṣṇyabhighātaiś ca vāgbhir ugrābhir eva ca ||
codayanto hayāṃs tūrṇaṃ palāyante sma tāvakāḥ || MBh 7.64.58–59b ||

8 *vāsudevaṃ ca daśabhiḥ pratyavidhyat stanāntare* |
pratodaṃ cāsya bhallena chittvā bhūmāv apātayat || MBh 7.78.2 ||

9 *bhūriśravās tu saṃkruddhaḥ pratodaṃ cicchide hareḥ* |
arjunaṃ ca trisaptatyā bāṇānām ājaghāna ha || MBh 7.79.32 ||

> And here, heaps of goads, whips, as well as thongs are found strewn on the battleground, O Māriṣa! (MBh 6.51.32)[10]

Whips may occasionally serve as weapons as well. Thus, when Arjuna displays prolonged reluctance to slay Bhīṣma, Kṛṣṇa impatiently rushes from his chariot, whip in hand, to finish him off himself. Arjuna restrains him in the nick of time. Evocative of Doomsday and reminiscent of certain *Bhagavadgītā*[11] passages, the impressive extended comparison between the Great Lord and a lion pouncing on its prey makes the whip in his hand seem like deadly claws:

> Holding his whip in his hand, powerful, repeatedly roaring like a lion, the lord of the earth seemed to tear the earth asunder with his feet; his eyes reddened by rage, of immeasurable splendour, Kṛṣṇa, intent on his kill, devoured, so to say, your soldiers' minds in the great battle. (MBh 6.102.54–55)[12]

There are quite a few passages in the great epic where whips and whipping are used as a figure of speech: in metaphorical language, the *karmadhāraya* compound *vāk-pratoda*, "whip-like words" (literally, "the whip [which consists of] speech") is frequently used to denote deeply hurtful, cutting language. The image is of course particularly expressive and readily understandable: just as a whip physically cuts to the quick and prompts the whipped animal to speedy movement, so the cutting words psychologically wound the person to whom they are addressed and instigate him or her to take speedy action. This happens for instance after the war, when Yudhiṣṭhira exhorts Duryodhana to come out of a lake in which he is hiding and fight:

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10 *pratodānāṃ kaśānāṃ ca yoktrāṇāṃ caiva māriṣa* |
rāśayaś cātra dṛśyante vinikīrṇā raṇakṣitau || MBh 6.51.32 ||

11 See esp. *Bhagavadgītā* 11.26–29 (= MBh 6.33.26–29).

12 *pratodapāṇis tejasvī siṃhavad vinadan muhuḥ* |
dārayann iva padbhyāṃ sa jagatīṃ jagatīśvaraḥ ||
krodhatāmrekṣaṇaḥ kṛṣṇo jighāṃsur amitadyutiḥ ||
grasann iva ca cetāṃsi tāvakānāṃ mahāhave || MBh 6.102.54–55 ||

> Then the intelligent (Duryodhana), being struck repeatedly by (Yudhiṣṭhira's) goad-like words, could not stand this speech, as an excellent horse (cannot suffer) the whip. (MBh 9.31.34)[13]

Unable to bear his enemy's taunts, the proud Duryodhana finally comes out of the water and agrees to fight his last battle.

In MBh 5.165, Bhīṣma explains to Duryodhana the relative worth and valour of their various allies, measured in terms of *ratha* ("chariot," i.e., a warrior who fights alone on a chariot), or *ati-ratha* (lit. "super-chariot" or great hero), or *ardha-ratha* ("half-chariot," i.e., one who shares his chariot with another warrior). Bhīṣma says that Karṇa, who has lost his divine armour and earrings and incurred the brahmin Rāma Jāmadagnya's curse, is merely an *ardha-ratha*, which is of course singularly insulting for the great hero (MBh 5.165.6). Karṇa (here called Rādheya, "son of Rādhā," by the name of his adoptive mother), who has been listening to their discussion, reacts with fury:

> When Rādheya heard this, his eyes popped in anger, and he said to Bhīṣma, great king, lashing him with whiplike words, "Grandfather […] you cut me angrily down with words like arrows at your whim…" (MBh 5.165.9–10a; transl. by van Buitenen 1978)[14]

Karṇa's words are whips, whereas Bhīṣma's are arrows: these two different metaphors subtly underscore the difference in rank between Karṇa, the adoptive son of a whip-wielding charioteer, and Bhīṣma, the super-*kṣatriya* who of course fights using a bow and arrows.[15]

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13 *tathāsau vākpratodena tudyamānaḥ punaḥ punaḥ* |
vācaṃ na mamṛṣe dhīmān uttamāśvaḥ kaśām iva || MBh 9.31.34 ||

14 *etac chrutvā tu rādheyaḥ krodhād utphullalocanaḥ* |
uvāca bhīṣmaṃ rājendra tudan vāgbhiḥ pratodavat ||
pitāmaha yatheṣṭaṃ māṃ vākśarair upakṛntasi || MBh 5.165.9–10a ||

15 This distribution of "weapons", in this case between the higher *kṣatriya* and the lower *vaiśya* class, is also found in *Manusmṛti* 3.44, in the context of rules concerning marriage: "When a woman marries a man of superior class, a woman of the ruler class (*kṣatriyā*) must take hold of an arrow (*śara*), a commoner (*vaiśya*) girl of a whip (*pratoda*)".

The unbreachable gulf between *kṣatriya* and *sūta* is already very cruelly demonstrated earlier on in the verbal exchange that takes place between Karṇa and Bhīma at their very first meeting. Bhīma mockingly sends Karṇa back to his whip, when he sees that the latter is preparing to fight a duel against Arjuna:

> "Son of a *sūta*," [Bhīma] said, "you do not have the right to die in a fight with a Pārtha! You better stick to the whip that suits your family. You have no right to enjoy the Aṅga kingdom, churl, no more than a dog has a right to eat the cake by the fire at a sacrifice!" At these words a slight tremor started in Karṇa's lower lip, and he sighed and looked up to the sun in the sky. (MBh 1.127.6–8; transl. by van Buitenen 1973)[16]

Bhīma is of course unaware that Karṇa is his elder brother: they share the same mother Kuntī-Pṛthā, which makes Karṇa by rights a Pārtha too. Karṇa's father is Sūrya the sun-God, which explains why Karṇa looks up to the sun as if to call upon him to witness the ignominy he is submitted to. We see that Bhīma uses extremely offensive and hurtful language towards Karṇa, telling him that he is not even worthy to die at Arjuna's hands, completely ruling out the possibility that Karṇa might win the fight; then comparing him to a dog unworthy of eating the sacrificial oblation and driving Karṇa to the verge of tears—as his sighs and his trembling lower lip betray. But more to the point for our present discussion, we see that Bhīma is in effect advising Karṇa to stick to his whip instead of fighting with nobler weapons. The whip is here described as *kulasya sadṛśas*, "suitable to your family." The *sūta*s or charioteers—said to be born of a forbidden (or *pratiloma*) union between a brahmin woman and a *kṣatriya* father (cf. *Manusmṛti* 10.11)—belong of course to an inferior caste, one deemed, at

[16] *na tvam arhasi pārthena sūtaputra raṇe vadham |*
kulasya sadṛśas tūrṇaṃ pratodo gṛhyatāṃ tvayā ||
aṅgarājyaṃ ca nārhas tvam upabhoktuṃ narādhama |
śvā hutāśasamīpasthaṃ puroḍāśam ivādhvare ||
evam uktas tataḥ karṇaḥ kiṃ cit prasphuritādharaḥ |
gaganasthaṃ viniḥśvasya divākaram udaikṣata || MBh 1.127.6–8 ||

least by Bhīma, to be unworthy of fighting a *kṣatriya*. Thus, wielding a whip is seen here as the sign of a low birth, of someone whose job requires him to deal with animals.

Indra, Surabhi and the whipped bullock (MBh 3.10)

In all the above non-metaphorical references to whipping, no special cruelty seems to be attached to the deed: charioteers whip their horses to make them move faster, without intent to inflict serious harm. They use their whips routinely as instruments of their trade. But two stories found in the great epic stand out in this regard: in these, whipping is exerted against helpless animals in an exceedingly cruel, even sadistic way. In both cases, the whipper is a low-caste man, and his behaviour is condemned as heart-rending, fierce, and even as symptomatic of his low station in life. The first such story is found in MBh 3.10, where it is told by the sage Vyāsa to his son, King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, when the latter piteously confesses that he cannot help but love and support his own son, Duryodhana, even though he is quite aware of his evil nature. Vyāsa shows sympathy and agrees that love for one's children is indeed one of the most powerful emotions in the world. He tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra the following story to illustrate his point.

Once upon a time, he says, the divine Surabhi, mother of all cows, went crying to the god Indra because one of her sons (a bullock) was being tortured at the plough and struck with a whip or goad (*pratoda*), although he was already excessively feeble and exhausted. Surabhi tells Indra:

> Look at that dreadful peasant beating up with his goad that weak little son of mine who smarts under the plough! When I see one already so exhausted being beaten, I am seized with compassion, overlord of Gods, and my heart is aroused. There is the strong one who carries a heavier yoke, and there is the other of little strength and vigor, emaciated, held together by his veins. He is beaten with the goad and prodded again and again, but he can hardly pull the load; look at it, Vāsava! That is why I grievously and

sorrowfully cry out and from compassion shed these tears from my eyes. (MBh 3.10.10–14; transl. by van Buitenen 1975)[17]

Indra is highly astonished that she should feel such pain for just one of her sons, when she has thousands of them. But Surabhi replies that she feels the greatest compassion for the weakest among them. Indra then rains a torrential shower, forcing the farmer to stop his work, thereby bringing temporary relief to the feeble bullock.[18]

It is interesting to note that the same tale, with minor differences and quite similar wording, occurs in *Rāmāyaṇa* (Rm) 2.68.15–25:[19] incensed at his mother Kaikeyī's scheming to send Rāma into exile, Bharata tells her this story as an example of how even a mother of thousands—Surabhi—suffers when but two of her sons are treated with cruelty.[20] How much greater, then, must be Kausalyā's suffering, who is now deprived of her only son, Rāma? Both versions of the story are quite similar in content and intent—showing how strong parental love can be. The only significant difference is that the Rm's version does not tell us if Indra does anything to alleviate the poor bullocks' suffering.

The word used in both versions of the story for the "fierce" farmer who is ploughing his field is *karṣaka*, from the root *kṛṣ*- "to draw or

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17 *paśyainaṃ karṣakaṃ raudraṃ durbalaṃ mama putrakam* |
pratodenābhinighnantaṃ lāṅgalena nipīḍitam ||
etaṃ dṛṣṭvā bhṛśaṃ śrāntaṃ vadhyamānaṃ surādhipa |
kṛpāviṣṭāsmi devendra manaś codvijate mama ||
ekas tatra balopeto dhuram udvahate 'dhikām |
aparo 'lpabalaprāṇaḥ kṛśo dhamanisaṃtataḥ |
kṛcchrād udvahate bhāraṃ taṃ vai śocāmi vāsava ||
vadhyamānaḥ pratodena tudyamānaḥ punaḥ punaḥ |
naiva śaknoti taṃ bhāram udvoḍhuṃ paśya vāsava ||
tato 'haṃ tasya duḥkhārtā viraumi bhṛśaduḥkhitā |
aśrūṇy āvartayantī ca netrābhyāṃ karuṇāyatī || MBh 3.10.10–14 ||

18 One may of course wonder why Indra does not resort to a more radical solution to relieve the poor beast. As in other places in the epics, Indra seems to be losing his power as the war-like king of the gods and appears as a "mere" god of rain.

19 References are given to the Critical Edition of the text (Bhatt 1960–1975).

20 Here both bullocks who pull the plough are weak and cruelly beaten.

make furrows, plough; to cause pain, torture, torment."[21] *karṣaka*, "husbandman," accordingly means both "ploughing" and "tormenting." Indeed, the act of ploughing entails torturing the earth, the animals who live in it, and even those who pull the plough, as we see from this tale which can be read as a manifesto for humane treatment of draught animals.[22] This vignette, which allows us a glimpse into Indian rural life, should be seen in the context of increasing glorification and protection of cows—extended here to the cows' male offspring.[23]

In this story, the pathos is greatly enhanced because the whole piteous description of the bullock's suffering is given in the voice coming from the mouth of the holy Surabhi. Surabhi, the "sweet-smelling," is a goddess, the daughter of Dakṣa (sometimes of Brahmā) and one of the many wives of the demiurge Kaśyapa. She is said to be the mother of all cows (see MBh 1.6.65 and 1.93.8–9; Rm 3.13.27). As in this narrative, her physical appearance is not always clearly described. Sometimes, she is undoubtedly imagined as a woman,[24] but mostly she is represented as a cow.[25] Since Vedic times, cows have been renowned for their affection towards their offspring, so much so that the term *vatsa*, "calf," has become fixed as a term of endearment.[26]

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[21] See Monier-Williams dictionary. The term occurs in Rm 2.68.22.

[22] Balbir (2009: 813) quotes equally pathetic scenes from Jain texts, especially from the *Kuvalayamālā*, explaining that "le bovin, compagnon quotidien et privilégié du villageois dans ses tâches, est, de ce fait, celui dont les souffrances sont le plus souvent évoquées."

[23] This motif occurs more frequently in the MBh's 13th book, which contains several stories meant to extol and sanctify the cows. See MBh 13.51; 13.69–70; 13.75–82.

[24] For instance, in MBh 13.82.26–29, Surabhi is said to perform a severe penance "standing on one foot" (*vyatiṣṭhad ekapādena*, MBh 13.82.28), surely an impossible position for a quadruped!

[25] See MBh 13.128.10ab, which states that "Brahmā emitted Surabhi, the milk-yielding ambrosia cow" (*surabhīṃ sasṛje brahmāmṛtadhenuṃ payomucam*). MBh 13.151.7 mentions "the goddess Surabhi, the somic cow" (*saumyā gauḥ surabhir devī*). Surabhi is said to be made of *soma* or *amṛta*, because, according to these passages, Brahmā vomited after consuming a surfeit of *amṛta*, and the cow was born of it. The cows' milk is thus like ambrosia.

[26] The derived term *vātsalya*, "affection (towards offspring)" subsequently gave its name to the *vātsalya-rasa*, the flavour of parental love or tenderness. This *rasa*

This poignant story, showing to what great lengths Surabhi, as the mother of all bovines, is prepared to go to protect her young immediately resonates with other stories told in both epics, demonstrating how cows suffer when harm is done to their offspring. In these tales, kings forcefully grab the calves of cows belonging to certain great sages. This motif appears prominently in the story of the brahmin sage Jamadagni and King Arjuna Kārttavīrya (MBh 3.116.20–3.117.9; 12.48–49), and in the story of sage Vasiṣṭha and King Viśvāmitra (MBh 1.164–165).[27] In MBh 3.116.21 and MBh 12.49.40 ff., King Arjuna Kārttavīrya or his sons carry away the calf of Jamadagni's cow. When the sage's son, Rāma Jāmadagnya, comes home and sees the crying cow, he fetches back her bellowing calf after cutting off King Arjuna's one thousand arms. The king's evil sons retaliate by murdering the sage Jamadagni. To avenge his father's death, Rāma then slaughters the entire *kṣatriya* race twenty-one times in a row. In MBh 1.164–165, Vasiṣṭha's wish-fulfilling cow provokes King Viśvāmitra's greed. When Vasiṣṭha refuses to give her to him, he seizes her calf. The cow gets enraged when she sees that the king's soldiers have fettered her calf and are taking it away by force (MBh 1.165.30). She then creates, out of the orifices of her body, whole armies which exterminate Viśvāmitra's forces and his sons.

As we see, such attempts on the part of kings to take by force the brahmins' cows and calves always initiate serious hostilities between brahmins and *kṣatriya*s, and usually result in great bloodshed. While the topic of the animosity and rivalry between *kṣatriya*s and brahmins is of course not directly evoked in the story of Surabhi and her weak bullock-son—who is tormented by a farmer and not by a king—it cannot fail to occur to the minds of the readers or listeners of this tale who are aware of the larger epic context. It also announces,

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came into existence only in the post-Abhinavagupta times. It is notably prominent in the writings of the Vaiṣṇava thinker Rūpa Gosvāmin, where it forms the fourth level (out of five) of the *bhakti-rasa*. See David Buchta (*Rasa Theory*, https://www.academia.edu/1648222/Rasa_Theory; pp. 627–628).

[27] Both stories also occur elsewhere, but sometimes in an abridged form, and they do not always mention the cows' calves.

in a way, some of the other stories which will be dealt with later in this study, and in which the struggle between the two highest social classes is the central theme.

Mataṅga and the donkeys (MBh 13.28–30)

The second story in which excessive and cruel whipping is inflicted on a domestic animal is found in MBh 13.28–30. The 13th book of the great epic, the *Anuśāsanaparvan* or the "book of teachings," continues Bhīṣma's advice to Yudhiṣṭhira after the war. Here Bhīṣma expounds on the greatness of brahmins and illustrates the difficulty, indeed impossibility, of becoming a brahmin if one has not been born one. The story is as follows:

A young man called Mataṅga, officially a brahmin's son, is sent by his father to fetch sacrificial implements. He sets off on a cart drawn by a young donkey who strays off the road to join his mother's side. Mataṅga gets enraged beyond measure:

> With his whip,[28] (Mataṅga) again and again slashed the young donkey on the nose, because he was going off to his mother's side. The mother donkey, full of affection for her son and seeing him cruelly wounded, said: "Do not grieve, my son, the one who is driving you is an untouchable. There is no cruelty in a brahmin, a brahmin is said to be benevolent. He is the teacher and instructor of all beings, why would he hurt (anyone)? But this evil-natured one has no pity (even) on the young. He is paying tribute to his own birth. Birds of a feather flock together!" (MBh 13.28.9–12)[29]

[28] Here we can confidently translate *pratoda* as "whip" since a goad could probably not reach the donkey's nose.

[29] *sa bālaṃ gardabhaṃ rājan vahantaṃ mātur antike |*
niravidhyat pratodena nāsikāyāṃ punaḥ punaḥ ||
taṃ tu tīvravraṇaṃ dṛṣṭvā gardabhī putragṛddhinī |
uvāca mā śucaḥ putra caṇḍālas tvādhitiṣṭhati ||
brāhmaṇe dāruṇaṃ nāsti maitro brāhmaṇa ucyate |
ācāryaḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ śāstā kiṃ prahariṣyati ||

Mataṅga is naturally upset when he hears the donkey-mother's words and asks her what she means by it. She explains that he is really a barber's son, and not the son of a brahmin:

> You were born an untouchable (sired) by a low barber in a lustful brahmin woman; that is why your brahmin-hood was destroyed. (MBh 13.28.16)[30]

The context does not explain how this female donkey can speak and communicate with a human, nor how she came by such knowledge. But what she says is certainly in accordance with the *Dharmaśāstra*s. For according to the texts of Law, the son of a brahmin woman and of a *śūdra* man—the offspring of the lowest *pratiloma* (against the grain) type of union—is indeed said to be an untouchable (see *Manusmṛti* 10.12). Devastated at the news, Mataṅga starts a terrible penance which lasts for hundreds of years. He repeatedly asks Indra to make him a brahmin, but Indra always replies that this is impossible. When he is about to breathe his last, Mataṅga finally changes his wish and is made into a divine being. As we see, the point of the story is that it is easier to become a god than a brahmin.

Several indices in this tale alert us to the fact that Mataṅga cannot possibly be a brahmin. The first is his name, *mataṃ-ga*, "going wilfully" or "roaming at will," "an elephant,"[31] which already points to an "unbrahmanical" lack of restraint. According to a (1st century?) Buddhist text, the *Mataṅgasūtra* (also called *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*), the Mātaṅgas, or descendants of Mataṅga, are precisely a clan of *caṇḍāla*s.[32] In the later tantric literature, the name Mātaṅgī is given to an outcaste goddess who "is associated with pollution and leftovers

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ayaṃ tu pāpaprakṛtir bāle na kurute dayām |
svayoniṃ mānayaty eṣa bhāvo bhāvaṃ nigacchati || MBh 13.28.9–12 ||

30 *brāhmaṇyāṃ vṛṣalena tvaṃ mattāyāṃ nāpitena ha* |
jātas tvam asi caṇḍālo brāhmaṇyaṃ tena te 'naśat || MBh 13.28.16 ||

31 See Monier-Williams dictionary.

32 See Kotyk 1995. In Bāṇa's *Kādambarī*, the chief of the Śabaras (tribal hunters) who kill the young parrot's father is also called Mātaṅgaka.

(stale food). In the 15th-century *Caṇḍīpurāṇa* of Saralādāsa, Mātaṅgī has the donkey as her *vāhana*," as Ferrari (2015: 68–69) informs us.[33]

The second indication of Mataṅga's unbrahmanical nature is precisely his association with donkeys: these were despised animals in ancient India, considered inauspicious, lustful, and impure.[34] Their discordant braying was considered a sign of ill-omen, like the jackal's howls, and they were associated with death, especially in premonitory dreams.[35] The belief in their supposedly lustful nature probably originates from the size of the male donkeys' genital organs, and from the fact that they can impregnate both mares and jennies. Asses were therefore considered to be super-virile animals.[36] The purportedly lecherous nature of these animals explains why donkeys were frequently used as a means of punishment for sexual offenses. For instance, lesbian or adulterous women were shaved and paraded naked on a donkey (cf. *Manusmṛti* 8.370; *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 21.1–4).[37] If a brahmanical student shed his semen, he had to "put on the skin of a donkey and go begging from seven houses, proclaiming his own act" (*Manusmṛti* 11.123).[38] Asses were also closely associated with untouchables. As Manu 10.52 declares: "dogs and donkeys should be their wealth" (*dhanam eṣāṃ śvagardabham*). This connection makes them highly polluting and explains why brahmins were not supposed to drive on a cart drawn by asses. If they did, they had to expiate the deed, as stated in *Manusmṛti* 11.203: "If a priest intentionally rides in a carriage drawn by camels or by donkeys, […] he is

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33 As Ferrari (2014: 67–70) remarks, many inauspicious goddesses ride an ass or are associated with this animal from Vedic times onwards.

34 About asses in ancient India, see Ferrari 2014: 67 ff., and Taylor 2007: 70–74.

35 See for instance Rm 2.63.14 and 5.25.18–19.

36 See Ferrari 2015: 72: "In the *Maitrāyaṇīsaṃhitā* (3.1.6: 7, 16) 'the ass is the most virile animal of all' […] 'whilst being one, doubly impregnates' (i.e., the mare and the jenny) (ŚB 6.3.1: 22–23; cf. AB 4.9)".

37 This practice survives up to modern times, as revealed in the Dalit writer Kausalya Baisantri's Hindi autobiography: *Dohrā abhiśāp* [The Double Curse]. Delhi: Kitabghar Prakaśan, 1999. See Browarczyk 2013: 300.

38 *etasminn enasi prāpte vasitvā gardabhājinam* |
saptāgārāṃś cared bhaikṣaṃ svakarma parikīrtayan || *Manusmṛti* 11.123 ||

cleaned by suppressing his breath."[39] The above considerations show that Mataṅga's connection with donkeys makes his brahminhood improbable from the start.

The last indicator of Mataṅga's low birth, as explained by the donkey-mother, is supposedly his cruelty itself. Again, her statement finds corroboration from Manu, whose description closely tallies our story:

> An unknown man, of no (visible) class but born of a defiled womb and no Aryan, may seem to have the form of an Aryan, but he can be discovered by his own innate activities. Un-Aryan behaviour, harshness, cruelty, and habitual failure to perform the rituals are the manifestations in this world indicating that a man is born of a defiled womb. (*Manusṛmrti* 10.57–58)[40]

As the mother donkey tells her son, Mataṅga cannot possibly be a brahmin, since brahmins are gentle by nature and would never whip a young one so cruelly on the nose, an especially sensitive spot. We may of course wonder if it is a real consolation for the young donkey to learn that his tormentor is not a twice born, but the crucial point made here by this story is that cruelty—even against a supposedly impure and inauspicious donkey—is frowned upon as a sign of low birth, whereas gentleness is said to be the mark of a brahmin. This is a point we shall have occasion to qualify below.

Śakti and Kalmāṣapāda (MBh 1.166)

As we have seen, whipping is an infrequent punishment, even for criminals or sinners. In all the passages we have examined so far, whipping

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[39] *uṣṭrayānaṃ samāruhya kharayānaṃ tu kāmataḥ* |
[…] *vipro* […] *prāṇāyāmena śudhyati* || *Manusmṛti* 11.203 ||

[40] *varṇāpetam avijñātaṃ naraṃ kaluṣayonijam* |
āryarūpam ivānāryaṃ karmabhiḥ svair vibhāvayet ||
anāryatā niṣṭhuratā krūratā niṣkriyātmatā |
puruṣaṃ vyañjayantīha loke kaluṣayonijam || *Manusmṛti* 10.57–58 ||

is always inflicted on animals, not on humans. Yet there are a few tales in the great epic where human beings are being whipped. One such story occurs in MBh 1.166.[41] One day, Kalmāṣapāda, king of Ayodhyā, went on a hunting expedition in the forest. Hungry and thirsty from the hunt, he suddenly found his narrow path blocked by the brahmin Śakti, the eldest son of the great sage Vasiṣṭha. The king addressed Śakti rudely:

> "Get off the path, it is ours!" said the king who was undefeated in battle. Attempting to soothe him, the seer spoke to him in a kindly voice, but he did not give way as he walked the path of the Law. Nor did the king give way, out of pique and anger with the hermit; and when the seer refused to clear the path, that great king in his folly hit the hermit with his whip like a Rākṣasa. Stung by the whip lash, the excellent hermit, Vasiṣṭha's son, was enraged and cursed the good king: "Since you strike an ascetic like a Rākṣasa, you shall from this day be a man-eater, degenerate king! You will roam this earth and feed on human flesh. Now avaunt, worst of kings!" Thus he was cursed by Śakti, whose power was his prowess. (MBh 1.166.5–10; transl. by van Buitenen 1973)[42]

According to the Law books, in such circumstances, the brahmin has the right of way. As Manu states in 2.138–139, if a king and a Vedic graduate (*snātaka*) meet, right of way must be given (*panthā deyo*)

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[41] For this story, see Feller 2023: 296 ff.

[42] *apagaccha patho 'smākam ity evaṃ pārthivo 'bravīt* |
ṛṣis tu nāpacakrāma tasmin dharmapathe sthitaḥ |
nāpi rājā muner mānāt krodhāc cāpi jagāma ha ||
amuñcantaṃ tu panthānaṃ tam ṛṣiṃ nṛpasattamaḥ |
jaghāna kaśayā mohāt tadā rākṣasavan munim ||
kaśāprahārābhihatas tataḥ sa munisattamaḥ |
taṃ śaśāpa nṛpaśreṣṭhaṃ vāsiṣṭhaḥ krodhamūrcchitaḥ ||
haṃsi rākṣasavad yasmād rājāpasada tāpasam |
tasmāt tvam adya prabhṛti puruṣādo bhaviṣyasi ||
manuṣyapiśite saktaś cariṣyasi mahīm imām |
gaccha rājādhamety uktaḥ śaktinā vīryaśaktinā || MBh 1.166.5–10 ||

to the *snātaka*.[43] Śakti is therefore in his right. Nevertheless, he first speaks soothing words and only retaliates when the king lashes out at him with his whip. This passage highlights the motif of the brahmins' gentleness and forbearance, as opposed to the king's irascibility and impatience. Śakti's defense takes the form of a curse commensurate with the offense: since the king behaves like a Rākṣasa, he is turned into an actual Rākṣasa. Kalmāṣapāda's outrageous behaviour is at least partly explained by his hunger and fatigue from the hunt, which allow him to be overcome by anger (*krodha*), pride (*māna*) and mental confusion (*moha*). These—brought about by hunting, a frowned-upon addiction—are the cardinal passions that a king must be beware of.

This single whip lash administered by the misguided king to the brahmin Śakti unleashed a singularly devastating string of consequences: the king, first cursed by Śakti to turn into a Rākṣasa, saw this curse subsequently compounded by another brahmin's curse, to whom he had fed human flesh unwittingly (MBh 1.166.31–32). Under the sway of these two curses, Kalmāṣapāda, craving human flesh, first devoured Śakti himself,[44] soon followed by his ninety-nine younger brothers. The sage Vasiṣṭha's biological lineage—and, perhaps even more importantly, his Vedic line[45]—was thus threatened with extinction. Fortunately, Śakti's wife happened to be pregnant at the time of her husband's death and managed to protect her unborn child from Kalmāṣapāda, thus ensuring the continuation of Vasiṣṭha's descendance and of his Vedic tradition. King Kalmāṣapāda was delivered from his curse twelve years later by Vasiṣṭha, who forgave him his crimes. But the king could have no progeny, for during his years as a Rākṣasa, a brahmin woman had cursed him to die if he

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43 By *snātaka*, we may probably understand any brahmin who has completed his Vedic studies.

44 This is a rare instance when a brahmin's curse backfires on its author.

45 Vasiṣṭha is of course a *ṛṣi* or Vedic seer. He is the renowned author of several Ṛgvedic hymns, especially of the whole 7th *maṇḍala*. If his family's lineage were to disappear, it is likely that the memory (and transmission) of these hymns would fade as well. See Feller 2023: 301, ff.

ever again lay with his wife (MBh 1.173).[46] Therefore, Kalmāṣapāda begged Vasiṣṭha to beget a child on his wife. Vasiṣṭha agreed, thus saving the king's lineage. However, the story does not end there: after Śakti's son, Parāśara, was born, he learned what had happened to his father and decided to take revenge by performing a Rākṣasa-sacrifice.[47] Nearly all the Rākṣasas were exterminated, but fortunately, the assembled sages intervened and put a stop to the massacre of innocent Rākṣasas (MBh 1.172.11). As we see, in a single stroke—quite literally speaking—king Kalmāṣapāda nearly wiped out three lineages: Vasiṣṭha's, the Rākṣasas' and his own.

Agastya and Nahuṣa (MBh 13.102–103)

Another story where a king whips a brahmin is found in MBh 13.102–103. Bhīṣma tells Yudhiṣṭhira the story of king Nahuṣa and the sage Agastya. This tale is mentioned not less than three times in the great epic, in more or less developed forms.[48] The virtuous King Nahuṣa, Bhīṣma says, was appointed to be the new Indra, because the "real" Indra had left his position and gone into hiding. Nahuṣa was first a just ruler, but by and by he became puffed up with pride due to his lofty

[46] The brahmin woman gave this curse to Kalmāṣapāda because, coming upon the couple as they were making love in the forest, he had ruthlessly devoured her husband despite her anguished entreaties.

[47] Parāśara's rather faulty logic seems to be that since the king had carried out his gory murders in the shape of a Rākṣasa, all the Rākṣasas as a class should be held responsible.

[48] See also MBh 3.176, where Nahuṣa (in the form of a huge snake) tells Bhīma and Yudhiṣṭhira that he fell from heaven due to Agastya's curse (3.176.14), without entering into details as to how it happened; in MBh 5.9–17, the story is told more extensively and also explains why there was a need to instate Nahuṣa as Indra—because the real Indra had been overcome by the sin of killing a brahmin (having slain both Triśiras and Vṛtra), and had become minute and powerless. In this version of the story, Nahuṣa yokes Agastya to his chariot and, as Agastya explains, gets cursed after touching him on the head with his foot (*atha mām aspṛśan mūrdhni pādenādharmapīḍitaḥ*, MBh 5.17.11). There is no mention of whipping here.

position, and he even went so far as to make the divine sages draw his chariot in turn. One day, it fell to Agastya to draw the heavenly chariot. The sage Bhṛgu was becoming rather fed up with the whole affair and devised the following stratagem. Since Nahuṣa had received from the god Brahmā the boon to subdue anyone whom he set his eyes on (cf. MBh 13.102.16–17), it was planned that Bhṛgu would hide in Agastya's matted hair, invisible to Nahuṣa, and then curse him. Agastya agreed, and allowed himself to be yoked to Nahuṣa's chariot:

> And Agastya did not get angry even though he was yoked by Nahuṣa. And the king drove him on with a whip, Bhārata, but the great-souled one (still) did not get angry; then, the king of the gods (Nahuṣa), furious, hit Agastya on the head with his left foot. When Agastya was hit on the head, Bhṛgu, hiding in (Agastya's) matted hair, grew furious and forcefully cursed the evil-minded Nahuṣa, saying: "Since, out of anger, you hit the great sage on his head with your foot, therefore quickly go to earth, having become a snake, you evil-minded one!" Then, having been told so, Nahuṣa indeed fell, having turned into a snake. (MBh 13.103.19–23)[49]

Yoking a sage to a chariot and whipping him as if he were a beast of burden is already offensive enough, but the last straw here is that Nahuṣa hits the sage with his left foot—the left side being considered as particularly inauspicious and impure. The offending king is then swiftly punished by means of a curse: Nahuṣa falls down from heaven, metamorphosed into a giant snake. He is subsequently freed from his curse by Yudhiṣṭhira, a story told in MBh 3.176. The form taken by the

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[49] *na cukopa sa cāgastyo yukto 'pi nahuṣeṇa vai* |
taṃ tu rājā pratodena codayām āsa bhārata ||
na cukopa sa dharmātmā tataḥ pādena devarāṭ |
agastyasya tadā kruddho vāmenābhyahanac chiraḥ ||
tasmiñ śirasy abhihate sa jaṭāntargato bhṛguḥ |
śaśāpa balavat kruddho nahuṣaṃ pāpacetasam ||
bhṛgur uvāca
yasmāt padāhanaḥ krodhāc chirasīmaṃ mahāmunim |
tasmād āśu mahīṃ gaccha sarpo bhūtvā sudurmate ||
ity uktaḥ sa tadā tena sarpo bhūtvā papāta ha | MBh 13.103.19–23 |

punishment may first seem somewhat puzzling: why is Nahuṣa cursed to become a snake? A look at Manu may enlighten us:

> If a man raises his hand or a stick [against a man belonging to a higher caste], he should have his hand cut off; if in anger he strikes with his foot, he should have his foot cut off. (*Manusmṛti* 8.280)[50]

Since Nahuṣa raises both hand and foot against the sage, he is logically cursed to turn into a snake, a creature which has neither hands nor feet. The two stories we have just examined illustrate how hazardous it is for a king—even for Indra himself—to strike a brahmin. In both cases, the offender is swiftly punished by a curse commensurate with his crime and turned into a sub-human, cruel-natured being. But as a matter of fact, both Kalmāṣapāda and Nahuṣa are let off the hook rather lightly—comparatively speaking—for the Law books contemplate also other, more enduring forms of punishments for priest-beating. *Manusmṛti* 4.166, for instance, declares:

> If, in a rage, he intentionally strikes (a priest), even if it is only with a blade of grass, he is born in the wombs of evil people for twenty-one births.[51]

Cyavana, Kuśika and his wife (MBh 13.52–56)

If the two stories we have just examined deal with kings who manhandle brahmins, in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* we find two other stories staging the reverse situation: a brahmin sage yokes a royal couple—respectively the wife only—to a chariot and makes them drive him about, whipping them mercilessly. The first story is found in MBh 13.52–56. Yudhiṣṭhira questions Bhīṣma about the antecedents of Rāma Jāmadagnya. He particularly wants to know why Rāma could be a brahmin,

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[50] *pāṇim udyamya daṇḍaṃ vā pāṇiccedanam arhati* |
pādena praharan kopāt pādaccedanam arhati || *Manusmṛti* 8.280 ||

[51] *tāḍayitvā tṛṇenāpi saṃrambhād matipūrvakam* |
ekaviṃśatīm ājātīḥ pāpayoniṣu jāyate || *Manusmṛti* 4.166 ||

when he was born in the royal lineage of king Kuśika. Bhīṣma then tells him the following story. One day, king Kuśika and his wife were visited by the sage Cyavana. Cyavana settled in the royal household and started making extraordinary demands on the royal couple. The sage would sleep for the longest time, watched by the king and queen, then suddenly disappear, only to reappear and go to sleep again. Then he would ask for food but burn up the lavish dishes offered to him. Kuśika and his wife served him with total devotion for days and nights on end, foregoing all rest and food. Although they were completely exhausted and emaciated, they never got impatient or upset with him. One day, Cyavana yoked them to the king's heavy war-chariot and made them drive him through their kingdom under their subjects' horrified eyes, beating them with a vicious "three-pronged goad[52] with tips made of diamond-needles" (*tridaṃṣṭraṃ vajrasūcyagraṃ pratodaṃ,* MBh 13.53.32a) and giving away all their wealth:

> Even when they were suddenly driven onwards by a sharp-pointed goad and struck on the back and hips, they drew him unperturbed. Trembling, starved, emaciated for fifty nights, the heroic couple somehow drew that magnificent chariot. Severally and severely wounded, dripping with blood, they looked like two *kiṃśuka* (flame of the forest) trees in bloom, o King! (MBh 13.53.41–43)[53]

Finally, Cyavana declared himself pleased with the royal couple, healed their wounds, and gifted them boons. He bestowed young age and divine beauty on them and allowed them to spend time in a heavenly

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[52] This "three-pronged goad" reminds us of Śiva's trident (*triśūla*). Śiva is also known as *paśupati*, the lord of domestic animals (*paśu*), a condition which the hapless couple is here reduced to.

[53] *tau tīkṣṇāgreṇa sahasā pratodena pracoditau |*
pṛṣṭhe viddhau kaṭe caiva nirvikārau tam ūhatuḥ ||
vepamānau nirāhārau pañcāśadrātrakarśitau |
kathaṃcid ūhatur vīrau daṃpatī taṃ rathottamam ||
bahuśo bhṛśaviddhau tau kṣaramāṇau kṣatodbhavam |
dadṛśāte mahārāja puṣpitāv iva kiṃśukau || MBh 13.53.41–43 ||

forest. When the king ventured to ask him why he had behaved in this extraordinary manner, Cyavana explained that he had heard that in the future there would be a great confusion of caste between *kṣatriya*s and brahmins in Kuśika's line.[54] He had therefore decided to curse Kuśika and destroy his future lineage to prevent this from happening. But since the king and his wife behaved so blamelessly, he had to give up the idea because he could find no valid reason to curse them (!). As we see, the sage's justification for his outrageous behaviour is both far-fetched and far-removed in time, and hardly seems to justify the barbarous treatment inflicted on the long-suffering pair.

Durvāsas, Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī (MBh 13.144)

The same theme is taken up again in a nearly identical form in MBh 13.144. Yudhiṣṭhira questions Kṛṣṇa about the greatness of brahmins and how one should worship them. Kṛṣṇa then tells him a story he once told his own son Pradyumna. One day, Pradyumna came to him, enraged against certain brahmins, and asked his father to explain to him why brahmins were supposed to be so superior and respectable? After launching into a panegyric of brahmins, Kṛṣṇa proceeded to tell him the following story. One day, the sage Durvāsas[55] was roaming the three worlds, asking all and sundry who would dare to take him home and offer him hospitality, warning people that he was an excessively irascible host and difficult to please.[56] Since no one was com-

[54] Probably an allusion to the complicated history of Viśvāmitra and Rāma Jāmadagnya, both descendants of Kuśika: Viśvāmitra is born a king and becomes a brahmin, while Rāma Jāmadagnya is a brahmin who behaves like a warrior.

[55] Literally, "he who has bad clothes". Durvāsas is said to be clothed in bark or rags (*cīravāsā*), the ascetics' attire, in MBh 13.144.12.

[56] Durvāsas is well-known for his irascible nature. He is the one who curses the unfortunate Śakuntalā in Kālidāsa's play *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* (act 4, verse 1) when she fails to receive him with due rites of hospitality, being lost in thoughts about king Duṣyanta. But when served with devotion, he can be very generous. For instance, after she served him well in her father's house, he gifts Kuntī the boon whereby she may have a child from any god she chooses (MBh 1.113.32–35; 3.287–289).

ing forward to invite him, Kṛṣṇa decided to offer him his hospitality. Durvāsas came to his home and started behaving in the most bizarre fashion: eating tons of food, burning up things and even the servant girls! One day, after asking for rice-gruel, he made Kṛṣṇa smear his body with it, which he did without batting an eyelid. But Durvāsas did not stop there, as Kṛṣṇa tells his son:

> Then, he saw nearby your fair-faced mother, and, smiling, he smeared her too with gruel. Then the sage quickly yoked her to a chariot, her body smeared with gruel, and, after climbing onto the chariot, he went out of my house. Under my very eyes, that wise twice born one, blazing with the colour of fire, struck the young Rukmiṇī with a whip, as if she were an ox fit to be harnessed to a cart! But I did not harbour slightest ill-feeling born of spite (towards him). Then he went outside by the great royal highway. (MBh 13.144.23–26)[57]

He went on whipping the poor Rukmiṇī mercilessly under the townspeople's eyes, till she stumbled and fell on the path. Enraged, Durvāsas jumped down from the chariot and ran away, with Kṛṣṇa and Rukmiṇī in hot pursuit and begging him to come back. Pacified, he declared himself pleased with their exemplary behaviour, restored everything he had broken or burnt, and gave them boons. To Rukmiṇī he gifted eternal youth and beauty, promising her that she would be Kṛṣṇa's spouse even in the next world. To Kṛṣṇa he promised that for all times to come he would be the beloved of the whole world. Kṛṣṇa would also be invulnerable on all the places of his body which he had smeared with gruel, but unfortunately, he had forgotten to smear the

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[57] *sa dadarśa tadābhyāśe mātaraṃ te śubhānanām |*
tām api smayamānaḥ sa pāyasenābhyalepayat ||
muniḥ pāyasadigdhāṅgīṃ rathe tūrṇam ayojayat |
tam āruhya rathaṃ caiva niryayau sa gṛhān mama ||
agnivarṇo jvalan dhīmān sa dvijo rathadhuryavat |
pratodenātudad bālāṃ rukmiṇīṃ mama paśyataḥ ||
na ca me stokam apy āsīd duḥkham īrṣyākṛtaṃ tadā |
tataḥ sa rājamārgeṇa mahatā niryayau bahiḥ || MBh 13.144.23–26 ||

soles of his feet.[58] After narrating this episode, Kṛṣṇa added that after his encounter with Durvāsas, he had always behaved with the utmost respect towards the brahmins, and he earnestly urged his successive interlocutors (Pradyumna and Yudhiṣṭhira) to do likewise.

Stephanie Jamison, who deals with these two stories in her book "Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife" under the paradigm of "The Exploited Host," remarks:

> [E]ven a guest with benevolent intentions, a "good guest," can bring hardship on his host, and the potential for abuse of the host's mandated generosity is great. A "bad guest" can literally get away with murder. (Jamison 1996: 164)

She further comments on how these "houseguests from Hell," as she aptly calls them (*ibid*.: 168), subject their hosts "to a very public, almost symbolic act of humiliation," especially noting how often the women are made to bear the brunt of these ascetics' extraordinary demands. This is of course particularly striking in the case of Rukmiṇī, who alone is yoked to the chariot and goaded on. Interestingly, Jamison (*ibid*.) compares her smearing with rice milk to "a ritual, almost sacrificial act, as if a preparation of the woman as an oblation." Perhaps indeed, had her conduct been less exemplary, she would have ended up consumed by the fire of Durvāsas' wrath, like her servant-girls. Rukmiṇī's smearing with rice milk and being made to draw the chariot also reminds us of the punishment recommended by certain Law books for sexually misbehaving women, who should be smeared with ghee and paraded on a donkey (e.g., *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 21.1–4). The way in which the virtuous Rukmiṇī is treated here is thus doubly insulting. Jamison concludes her analysis of such stories with the following remarks:

> I have by now examined enough Mahābhārata stories to demonstrate more than amply the value attached to yielding without complaint to any

[58] The passage thus provides an etiological explanation for Kṛṣṇa's strange manner of death, struck in the foot by a hunter's arrow (see MBh 16.5).

> demand of a guest, no matter how bizarre or painful. All the stories have the same basic structure: a visitor behaves outrageously and makes excessive demands, and when the host has sufficiently demonstrated that he can be pushed much further than seems fair, the visitor reveals himself as a divine figure, often Dharma and rewards the compliant host.
>
> The disguised divinity of the guest in these stories is a crucial feature. There is more of an incentive to practice unquestioning hospitality if every guest, especially the more trying among them, may actually be a god in disguise—as no doubt the Visiting Brahman lobby was well aware. (*ibid*.: 169)

These remarks are undoubtedly true and apply perfectly to some stories about "testing gods" who appear in disguise to put their devotees' faith on trial and then reward them if they behave as expected. However, in the above two stories we see that the brahmins are *not* in disguise. Not only do they appear quite straightforwardly in their own person, but they are even more powerful than gods, since Kṛṣṇa himself, who is systematically showcased as the supreme being in the MBh, submits without demur to the utmost humiliation inflicted by Durvāsas. As the townspeople murmur:

> "Only the brahmins will be victorious, and no other class at all! What other man would remain alive here, after climbing on this chariot?" (MBh 13.144.28)[59]

Besides, even though in the end the brahmin sages richly reward the *kṣatriya*-couples, their boons seem only grudgingly bestowed: Cyavana openly admits that he had come to curse Kuśika and destroy his lineage and sounds rather regretful that he did not achieve his end; Durvāsas' self-proclaimed aim in life is apparently to go about cursing everyone, and he offers no excuse for his behaviour. On the contrary, he seems proud of it! The inhuman, even sadistic way in which the

[59] *brāhmaṇā eva jāyeran nānyo varṇaḥ kathaṃ cana* |
ko hy enaṃ ratham āsthāya jīved anyaḥ pumān iha || MBh 13.144.28 ||

sages treat the hapless couples, which is very graphically elaborated upon in both stories, is given little or no valid justification at all.

Conclusions

As we see, we have come a long way from charioteers whipping their horses on the battlefield, to brahmin sages flogging kings yoked to their chariots. If we now recapitulate the tales we have examined so far, we can conclude with the following remarks: passages in which whipping occurs reveal that whipping, provided it is exercised with restraint, is "normal" only in the case of animals. This explains why, when a human being is beaten, he or she must first be brought down to the level of an animal. This happens even in some instances where whipping is merely used as a figure of speech, as in MBh 9.31.34 (quoted above). The comparison between Duryodhana, intolerant of Yudhiṣṭhira' goad-like words, with a horse who cannot bear the whip, shows that even metaphorical whipping can at times degrade the recipient of the verbal lashes to the rank of an animal. Elsewhere, in stories where humans are flogged in an actual deed, they are first reduced to the status of draught-animals, made to draw a cart, and whipped on from behind. Rukmiṇī is even explicitly compared to an "ox fit to be harnessed to a cart" (*rathadhuryavat,* MBh 13.144.25). The only exception is when the sage Śakti meets Kalmāṣapāda face to face on a narrow path and gets a whiplash from the king. This situation is probably explained by the fact that the king is driving his chariot, and impulsively uses the whip he is holding in his hand.

In many passages, wielding the whip denotes a low birth, as an untouchable, a farmer, or a charioteer. The only one who seems to escape this rule is Kṛṣṇa, who uses the whip as Arjuna's chariot-driver in the great war. Kṛṣṇa's function as a charioteer must of course be read metaphorically, as the Great Lord leading the sacrifice of war (see Feller 2004: 280). When *caṇḍāla*s or farmers mercilessly whip defenseless draught-animals, this is condemned as cruel. Yet at the same time, such cruelty is said to be characteristic of their low birth.

Doing harm is thus an inherent part of their job, one that they cannot be blamed for. Indra does not punish the cruel farmer: he merely produces violent rains forcing him to stop his work for the moment. As for the *caṇḍāla*s, both the Law books and the mother donkey voice the opinion that they are cruel by nature, and Mataṅga is not punished for his behaviour either: indeed, for him, learning about his low birth is punishment enough. In both stories, the ones who take pity on the tortured beasts of burden and take appropriate steps to make the cruel treatment stop are the victims' mothers. As elsewhere in Sanskrit literature, *karuṇa* or compassion is expressed by women: the voice of pathos is female.[60]

If we now turn to the instances where humans are whipped, we see that this happens only in the case of kings whipping brahmins, or brahmins whipping kings (and their wives). *Kṣatriya*s and *brāhmaṇa*s are of course the two classes who constantly vie for superiority in the epics. We see however that the outcome of their actions is unequal: if a king whips a brahmin, he is swiftly punished for this disrespectful behaviour and cursed in an appropriate fashion. But if a brahmin whips a royal couple after yoking them to a cart, they bear it meekly and literally take it lying down, for which they are richly rewarded. The moral of such tales is that if the fancy takes him, a brahmin sage needs little or no excuse for his outrageous conduct. Such stories are of course told in the context of self-professed praise of brahmins, a recurring topic throughout the great epic, but one which is particularly prominent in the *Anuśāsanaparvan*. They are meant to prove that brahmins are hierarchically above the kings, and here this superior position takes the symbolic, indeed, hyperbolic form of a sage yoking a royal couple to a chariot, flogging them, and making them draw him through town for all to see.

Furthermore, some of these narratives betray a reversal of habitual values: usually, the *kṣatriya*s are shown to be energetic and war-like, whereas the brahmins embody ideals of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and restraint (*kṣamā*). We remember the donkey mother's words to her son:

[60] See Feller 2009 and 2020.

> "There is no cruelty in a brahmin, a brahmin is said to be benevolent. He is the teacher and instructor of all beings, why would he hurt (anyone)?" (MBh 13.28.11)

The donkey mother's words are starkly belied in the stories where brahmin sages treat kings and queens in a merciless fashion. As we see, these tales betray internal contradictions in the MBh, even within a single book like the *Anuśāsanaparvan*: in some passages, cruel behaviour—like flogging defenseless animals—is said to be typical of the lower castes and considered to be unworthy of brahmins; in others, brahmins are fully justified when they behave in the same inhuman way, even on the flimsiest of motives. One wonders if, in their zeal to demonstrate their own superiority and power over all the other castes, and especially over kings, the brahmins did not sometimes get carried away and over-shot their self-set goal, ultimately discrediting instead of aggrandizing themselves.

These narratives also illustrate how intimately the *Anuśāsanaparvan* (which contains most of our stories) and the texts of Law, especially the *Manusmṛti,* are related and how the 13th book of the MBh articulates its discursive and narrative strategies. The *Anuśāsanaparvan* is not merely a *Dharmaśāstra* of sorts, enumerating lists of rules and precepts: as we have seen, it also contains numerous stories that are meant as illustrations of these laws, or, to go a step further, as mythical legitimization for the rules it lists. Such tales transpose the man-made moral and social precepts onto a mythical plane and make them appear as God-given and indisputable. Also, much to our delight, these very striking and graphical narratives make the 13th book of the great epic vastly more entertaining to read—and, to its own advantage, its lessons easier to remember—than dry enumerations of dos and don'ts.

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