# FIVE India's Epics

## *Writing, Orality, and Divinity*

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India has two great Sanskrit epics and many oral regional folk epics. This chapter will highlight scholarly work of the last few years as it bears on written, oral, and religious dimensions of these classical and folk texts.[1] It will not attempt to address all oral epics, but rather those that have some close intertwinement with the Sanskrit epics, even though scholars differ as to the degree and kind of the intertwinement. A pervasive issue is the relation between the Sanskrit versions and other Indian "tellings," which are in both Sanskrit and the vernacular languages. The debate in Rāmāyaṇa studies, but also applicable to *Mahābhārata* scholarship, is well defined by Paula Richman as a question of whether one should privilege the classics (1991, 8–9). While Richman wants to see all Rāmāyaṇa variants as equal tellings, Robert P. Goldman argues that it is still reasonable to regard the Sanskrit text as the ultimate source of all versions of the tale in existence (1984, 39). A range of questions about oral and written texts is crucial at all points, as are the parallels between the body of scholarly literature on these topics and the development of Western hermeneutics on the Bible and Homer. The work of two scholars, Ruth C. Katz and Stuart H. Blackburn, one a Mahābhārata specialist and the other a scholar of South Asian oral epics, will figure centrally, both for the similarities I



will note between them and for the clarity that their positions open for debate.

### *Level, Development, Text, Sect, Oral, Written*

Katz's *Arjuna in the Mahābhārata* (1989) develops a hermeneutic stance instructive both for what it recapitulates and what it opposes. Her understanding of the Mahābhārata is organized around a theory of levels. She begins with a "heroic" level and ends with a "devotional" one and identifies a mediating function for a "human" level. Katz takes pains to argue that Arjuna's character complications do not arise from the historical superimposition of one layer on another (271). But there are many points where she speaks not of a dialectic interior to the text but of a stratified chronology such as the possibility of "Krishna [being] either absent or not yet fully divinized" in the earliest heroic core (11–12, 23 n. 28). Katz's views parallel those of Blackburn on epic development (discussed below).

Katz seeks to show how "the devotional level of Arjuna's character relates to its heroic level through the mediation of its human level; that is, how devotion restores Arjuna's heroism, which is threatened by his "humanity" (14). Yet it looks like it should be the devotional level that mediates in this formation, as in her more summarial claim that she has shown how Arjuna is a hero and a human being "at the same time"—one who, "in addition . . . plays a third role, which totally reverses the meaning of the other two: he is the religious devotee par excellence. . . . In a dialectic, his heroism and humanity play against one another, being resolved by bhakti (devotion)" (271).

The heroic level is unified around Arjuna as sacrificer: "The metaphor of Kurukshetra as a sacrifice captures the central meaning of the epic at the heroic level" (115, 117–18). It also takes in the link between dharma and victory, which is felt as automatic on the heroic level (243), and a harmony between fate and effort (226). This level of pure heroism, where heroes win justly and do not doubt their prowess, emerges from comparing Arjuna with other figures of "Indo-European/Semitic heroism." Katz draws here on the monomythic hero type of Joseph Campbell (1956) and F. R. S. Raglan (1936) and on Georges Dumézil's concept of a bipartite Indo-European warrior function that opposes refined chivalric Arjuna-Indra-Achilles-type heroes to brutal robust ones of the Bhīma-Vāyu-Heracles type (Dumézil 1969, xi, 59, 82–83, 90). Katz finds Arjuna in the latter, more

purely heroic mode, at points where the hero forgets his nobler self and fights in crude, triumphal rages (139, 142, 145, 161), acting out a "berserker ideal of martial ecstasy [that] . . . represents a way of thinking anterior to the extant epic" (73). Katz's notion of a dialectic between the heroic and the human levels speaks from this developmental standpoint: "Sooner or later traditional heroism (that idealization of joyful, conquering masculinity) will betray its weakness toward real life" (272).

The priority of the heroic level raises questions of historicity, as when Katz views Arjuna's role in the cataclysmic burning of the Khāṇḍava Forest as originating from "a historical burning of forests for the purpose of conquest or land-clearing, the animals killed representing the local tribes wiped out during the expansion" (78). Katz favors ethnographic reconstruction of the history of the text, viewing it as what Goldman chidingly calls an "ethnological *roman à clef*" (1984, 27). But she does not argue for the historicity of the main epic story, as have some who take the notion of a heroic age to imply historically identifiable narrative kernels for the two epics. Although she says the main narrative's historicity ultimately does not matter (1989, 32–33, 48 n. 18), she repeatedly argues for historicity, but only of selective figures, processes, and events. Most persistent is her case for the historicity of Arjuna's grandson Pariksit and great-grandson Janamejaya: "Behind the symbolism of Parikshit as a remnant surely stands his historical role" (225; cf. 179).

Since the publication of Katz's book, the notion that Parikṣit and Janamejaya would be historical figures gains some support from Michael Witzel, who views the two as consolidators of the first Indian state, the Kuru state in the region of Kurukṣetra (1997, 260–66, 278). But as Katz correctly sees, even if these two are historical, this would not guarantee the historicity of the stories the epic tells about them or their forebears. From here, however, reasonable speculation turns into a typical narrative fabrication from wayward bits and pieces: this royal family may have been a late invading people "from the north" who "legitimized" themselves through their claim of a connection with Arjuna (13, 30, 94) and probably gave the epic its "historical devotional leaning" as "a family of Vishnu devotees" whose god was Kṛṣṇa (256–57). The "original intent" of the epic, as "reflected in the character of Arjuna," is thus "to report the establishment of Parikshit's effective kingship on the basis of the religious devotion of his ancestors" (268). Katz finds it tempting to connect this royal family's piety with the



Vaiṣṇava Pañcarātra sect, but finds it more likely that it "participated in a pre-Pancharatra form of Vaishnavism" and that what she regards as Pañcarātra material "entered the epic only later, adhering to sectarian devotional material already there" (256–57). The pre-epic literature that mentions Parikṣit and Janamejaya, however, offers nothing about sects, their coming from the north, or their devotion to Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa. Katz is reiterating, without acknowledging them, some of the ideas that have come down from the historicizing, not to mention racializing, theories of some of the founding figures of epic scholarship, who worked from "Indo-Germanic," Euro-American Protestant, and Indian nationalist perspectives that all too easily dovetailed on these issues.[2]

One other feature of the heroic level needs mention: its connection with a bardic oral tradition. Katz turns the concept to advantage by invoking the thesis of Albert Lord, so influential in Homeric studies, that oral epic bards make use of stock metric formulae to fill out verses without substantially altering or enriching their meaning (21 n. 6, citing Lord 1960). This ties in with Katz's notion of a loose oral core, with its complement, the priority of oral to written versions. According to Katz, Arjuna's actions in the war books are sometimes heroic, sometimes human, and at other times a devotee's: "The building up of contradictions and repetitions that one finds here is in part a result of expansion of the text through the centuries on the basis of a loose oral core." The use of these constructs becomes clear only in relation to the two expansionist levels.

The human level is occasionally contrasted directly with the heroic. "Where they become fully caught up in human issues, the epic poets accept the moral ambiguity of the Kurukshetra War and understand it, even as they mourn it, by way of a pessimistic view of dharma which is precisely opposite that emphasized at the heroic level" (175). The notion that the king creates the age is heroic; notions of realism and practicality, requiring the king to adapt to his age by *nīti*, or policy, are human (185–86). But the human level is identified not so much through this dialectic as through a kind of empathy: perhaps *Verstehen*, though the term is not used. The human emerges wherever "one may truly identify with Arjuna's human emotions" (186). Most human traits are said to be typical of the human condition (129, 136). But distinctions are unstable. At one point, "His humanity having been established . . . Arjuna returns to his heroic role during his search for revenge" (138). At another, the night-raid sequence

"caps the battle books and puts an end to the heroic and human cycle of revenge" (249). Revenge starts out as heroic but, being also ambiguous, turns out to also be human.

Ultimately, however, the defining trait of the human is mortality. We shall note a similar emphasis in Blackburn's notion of the death event as the generative point in the development of oral epics, but for Katz the issue is not how epics start developmentally, but how they mature spiritually. The hero-human transformation is said to transpire in the *Bhagavadgītā*: Arjuna is unprecedented among Indo-European epic heroes for his refusal to fight "out of disgust with war . . . a protest against the endeavor of war itself" (127). It is Arjuna's capacity for reason that "prepares him for a humanizing shift from a purely martial man to a man sensitive to the human condition" (133). Instructed to abandon desire for the fruits of his actions, Arjuna can move from the heroic level to "lowered expectations characteristic of the human condition" (133). One could, of course, read the *Bhagavadgītā* rather differently: does not Kṛṣṇa teach Arjuna to abandon lower expectations (the desire for fruits) by subordinating them to higher ones? Katz modernizes Arjuna into a war protestor, a likeable rethinker of the Indo-European heritage, and personalizes his humanity.

Katz positions herself against Dumézil and Madeleine Biardeau, who "ignore Arjuna's humanity entirely" (18). Biardeau, who idealizes the hero, is the worst offender (19). My work, in particular *The Ritual of Battle* ([1976] 1990), is taken as straddling the two camps (18–19). It is, however, one thing to say that epic characters reveal human depth, or, as A. K. Ramanujan charges, even that divine/human connections should not be overemphasized at the expense of "the architechtonic complexity of the *human* action of the epic" (1991, 434 n. 4); it is another to distinguish a human level from heroic and devotional ones. If one is going to talk about the humanity of Indian epic characters, one needs not only empathy but an anthropology of Indian categories and contexts. Devotion is no less human than heroism; bhakti requires more than a Westernized reader response.

This brings us to the devotional level. Rather than an Indian anthropology, Katz supplies a Christian one that begins with a contrast of Arjuna with Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. Following the euhemeristic model of divinization so influential in Indian epic studies (both classical and folk), Katz says that in the cases of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, "the hero has become a god, and the human element, although present under the surface, is submerged. In this sense, Arjuna is special, for more than any other Indian hero he is both fully human and fully related to divinity" (1989, 272–73). This christological formulation is made explicit: "One may say, then, that Arjuna plays a Jesus-like role in the Indian epic context insofar as he unites humanity and divinity; thus it is not surprising that Arjuna and Jesus share a common name": "Nara ('Man') for Arjuna and the Son of Man for Jesus" (274; cf. 275 n. 6). Aware that Arjuna is an incarnation of Nara/"Man," Katz views the epic's strand of Nara-Nārāyaṇa mythology as originally independent of any link with Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa or Indra and Viṣṇu (215–16, 218, 240) and suggests that "the identification of Arjuna and Krishna with Nara and Narayana appears to be connected with the worship of Narayana by the Pancharatrins (or some related group)" (220). Although the identification of Viṣṇu as Nārāyaṇa "is reiterated throughout the extant *Mahābhārata*" (215), the Nara/Nārāyaṇa connection thus derives from a late level of sectarian reworking.



Katz thus understands the formation of the *Mahābhārata*'s devotional level as the historical product of sectarian (and other groups') textual interpolations. Since "there was no interdiction on interpolations, poets of various schools of thought could add what they wished to it, and they did so in huge amounts" (11). This was done by "various special interest groups" (149). This approach is bold in taking what Katz calls Viṣṇu-Śiva opposition as the result of sectarian influence. Katz argues that there is no Viṣṇu-Śiva opposition at the heroic level; that is, between heroes who incarnate these gods or represent their opposition. Katz conceives of this opposition only in terms of what she supposes to be sectarian oppositions in the form of rivalry between gods. Thus Aśvatthāman, who incarnates a portion of Śiva, "is more than just a human rejector of Krishna devotion; he seems, rather, to have become an arch-rival god" (1991, 42). Katz does not credit persistent structural rapports between Viṣṇu and Śiva found throughout the Mahābhārata that register a mythologically and theologically significant "opposition of complementarity": one that is arguably rooted in the epic's bhakti rereading of the Vedic sacrifice and has nothing originally to do with sects (Biardeau 1976, 114, 187, 211–12).

The nature of such oppositions brings us back to the question of formulae, which becomes important for Katz's treatment of the night raid in the Mahābhārata's *Sauptika Parvan*. Aśvatthāman incarnates Śiva's destructive

role and Kṛṣṇa incarnates Viṣṇu's "beneficent role of preserver and re-creator" in a "division of labor [that] reflects the standard mythology" of the *pralaya*, the eschatological cosmic dissolution (1989, 252). Katz argues that the *Sauptika Parvan* thematizes this opposition "in a form particularly appropriate for Vishnu's devotees: the Shaivic sacrifice that is pralaya . . . is considered horrible and is condemned; later Vishnu rights it" (ibid.). An obvious question arises: if it "reflects the standard mythology," why attribute it to a sect? Katz's answer is to reiterate her polarizing view of the destructive role of Śiva: "Ashvatthaman's role here, that of Shiva at pralaya, is viewed negatively, from the perspective of the Pancharatrins, Vishnu devotees, whose god opposes Shiva/Ashvatthaman and saves the universe in this sequence" (253). Katz says that the *Sauptika Parvan* presents the pralayic Śiva in a manner that is paralleled "nowhere else in the central epic narrative" (252). But she supports this by a long note that tries to dismiss numerous passages where Śiva's connection is expressed by conventional formulae (259–60 n. 13), as if such formulae somehow don't count.

### *Formula, Interpolation*

Katz draws two more familiar supports to her project of stratifying the "extant epic," a term that she shares with James W. Laine (1989, 25–26) and that was recently used for both epics by John Brockington (1998, 20, 34, 44, etc.). It should now be clear, however, that use of this term relies on the free hand of scholars to think degradingly of the haphazard by-products of textual accumulation and to imagine their favorite variety of prior stages in which there would have once been something more originally and authentically "epic" (for Brockington, "the epic proper"; 33), something that would have undergone adulteration before it became "extant." For Katz, one support is Lord's aforementioned thesis about stock metric formulae in oral epic, which has had its greatest influence in Homeric studies but has also widely influenced scholars of the classical Sanskrit epics (notably Brockington 1998) and Indian oral epics as well (notably Smith 1991). The other, drawn from the higher criticism of nineteenth-century scholarship on sources, strata, and interpolations, has prevailed as critical orthodoxy in modern biblical studies (Rowley 1963, 9–10). It may be said that they grew organically from within scholarly traditions that were addressed to questions raised about distinctive features of Homer and



the Bible, but not of Indian epics. Yet they have become virtually axiomatic in scholarship on Indian epics and have served as vehicles for imagining them in terms that globalize the methods without addressing the distinctiveness of the texts. They also carry evolutionistic and theological baggage with them.

Drawing on Lord's thesis, Katz takes up the notion of a loose oral core as a means to demythologize the Mahābhārata's heroic level. It is necessary, she says, to distinguish between "mythic associations from purely literary associations, the latter being qualities that are attributed to the character or situation formulaically only" (106). Here we have a text of five thousand pages whose literary character is of no more than secondary interest. Formulae that mention mythic themes in this fashion would appear to be a more or less random stock of available meter-fillers. For a phrase to be formulaic in this way is for it to be the opposite of being chosen deliberately by an astute and innovate Lordian oral poet (112). Such reflex formulae would thus be accounted for as *merely* formulaic on the heroic and human level (242). Especially targeted as *mere* are formulae evoking the pralaya and associations between Arjuna and Śiva.

Katz here is dismissing arguments that Biardeau and I have made (78, 110, and 120 n. 22). I am charged with having overestimated Arjuna's associations with Śiva, which are "essentially formulaic," "either this or an interpolation" (119–20 n. 17). For Katz, pralayic allusions and affinities are significant for heroes (and only for Aśvatthāman, not for Arjuna) only at the "devotional level" of the *Sauptika Parvan*. But if Katz's sectarian detachment of this parvan and her notion of a supervening devotional level are not convincing, then there is nothing left to distinguish such literary "mere formulae" from significant ones.

Katz speaks of a "building up of contradictions and repetitions" resulting from the "expansion of the text through the centuries on the basis of a loose oral core" (271). Even by this admission, most of the "extant" Mahābhārata would result from written composition. As James L. Fitzgerald says, it may seem highly probable that the Sanskrit text of the Mahābhārata was extracted from an improvisational oral tradition" (1991, 154). But the Poona Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata—that is, more or less, Katz's "extant epic"—has convinced Fitzgerald that a "single Sanskrit version of the '*Mahābhārata*,' fixed in writing, was at the base of the entire manuscript tradition" (152). Franklin Edgerton argued the point even

more strongly: "But this text was nothing 'fluid'! To be sure we must at present, and doubtless for ever, remain ignorant about many of its details. But we should not confuse our ignorance with 'fluidity.' . . . It is not an indefinite 'literature' that we are dealing with, but a definite literary composition" (1944, xxxvi–xxxvii). Fitzgerald suggests a date for this archetype's composition between 100 B.C.E. and 350 C.E., "undertaken by some royal house for important symbolic and propogandistic purposes"; and he views the *Bhagavadgītā* as the "center and heart of our text," not an interpolation into a prior text (154), as does Katz, who sees it as the product of another sect, the *Bhāgavatas* (1989, 226). These dates would seem to be a little late, and are under review by several scholars, Fitzgerald included. But the important point is that new questions have been broached around the subject of writing, requiring new answers from those who want to maintain a prior oral tradition while acknowledging literary effects and the encompassment of the oral into the written (see Brockington 1998, 59, 115–17, 396; Vassilkov 1999). If, however, we do have a composition of written art in its entirety, it would be impossible to distinguish significant from insignificant formulae on the basis Katz seems to be proposing.

But what kind of text do we have? If methods generated in scholarship on bardic poetry, Homer, and the Bible begin to distort the Mahābhārata, one does well to look at texts closer to it. The Mahābhārata is a text of mixed genres that many have called "encyclopedic." While making reference to numerous genres, Veda, Upaniṣad, Saṃvāda ("dialogue"), Śāstra, Purāṇa, and so forth, it also *is* each of those genres. As comparable with Purāṇa, one can go a certain way with Velcheru Narayana Rao, for whom purānas have an originally oral character distinctive for being "a kind of oral literacy" or "literate orality," with the composition done by "scholars . . . proud of their knowledge of grammar and their ability to possess a written text of what they perform orally" (1993, 95). But what would such a "literate orality" mean before there was writing? To be sure, Veda and Purāṇa are oral genres before they become "mixed" ones in the Mahābhārata. It is this mixture of genres that is "fixed" in the written archetype. Indeed, an interpolated northern passage tells us a story of how this happened, imagining Vyāsa (reputed author of both the Mahābhārata and the post-epic Purāṇas) not only as a composer and arranger but a poet who



stumps his amanuensis Gaṇeśa with enigma verses to catch his breath in the heat of his composition, which is also a dictation.

As a poem, however, the Mahābhārata is most like the Rāmāyaṇa. In each of the Sanskrit epics, a Brahman author is among the first heroes of his own composition. While creating his new poem, he tells "old stories" (*purāṇā*) and "just so stories" (*itihāsa*) along the way, and in each case bards (*kuśālavas*, *sūtas*) are among those who disseminate the poem. Thus Rāma's sons Kuśa and Lava are the first *kuśīlavas*; and Ugraśravas, after he has heard the Brahman Vaiśampāyana, one of Vyāsa's five direct disciples, recite the *Mahābhārata* at king Janamejaya's snake sacrifice, relays it to the Ṛṣis of the Naimiṣa Forest. Each of the Mahābhārata's overlapping narrations is said to be of Vyāsa's "entire thought" (*Mbh* 1.55.2; 1.1.23), which we are never there to hear Vyāsa impart himself, neither to these narrators nor anyone else. Similarly, we never hear Vālmīki impart the Rāmāyaṇa to Kuśa and Lava. Whereas Vālmīki is inspired to compose by the god Brahmā and the divine minstrel Nārada, the *Mahābhārata* poets construct Vyāsa's authorship still more daringly in relation to overlapping functions of the deity: like Kṛṣṇa, Vyāsa is an incarnation of a portion of Nārāyaṇa (Mbh 12.337.4 and 55); in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa tells us he himself "is Time" (Kāla), while Vyāsa is a kālavādin, "one who preaches Time" (Vassilkov 1999, 18–19). But Vyāsa's authorship is also related to a disciplic function and a bardic function. However these epics were composed, we may say that even if the authors and bards were real individuals known by the names just mentioned, which is highly doubtful, both are fictional characters within the texts themselves.

Yet it may be that those who did compose the epics gave hints of that process in describing the relations between poets, bards, other transmitters, and audiences. Both epics portray their poets, unlike their bards, as being concerned with the longevity of their poems. The epics give us no reason to think of the stories going through a prior "bardic" transmission such as many scholars like to imagine, most notably Brockington (1998, 19, 394–95). The transmission is in each case the reverse: from Brahmans to bards. Unlike their Brahman authors, the bards also do not get much chance to intervene in the stories. Yet the authors can change the course of events.

Current Rāmāyaṇa scholarship is led by the Princeton translation project, headed by Goldman and Sally Sutherland, and with major contributions from Sheldon I. Pollock. From Pollock, we meet another arresting

term for what becomes accessible through a critical edition: not an *extant epic* but a *monumental poem*: "When we speak of 'Vālmīki,' we are using the name as a convenient shorthand way of referring to the composer of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, which we have before us in the critically edited text" (Pollock 1986, 25). The Baroda Critical Edition provides us, says Pollock, with "the most uniform, intelligible, and archaic recension of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*" (1984b, 92). Pollock sees a prior oral Rāmāyaṇa, but agrees with Fitzgerald about the Mahābhārata: critical editorial choices of the "best" version are more necessary for the Rāmāyaṇa than the Mahābhārata, since for the latter, "a written archetype must have existed" (1984b, 89 n. 20).

Although Pollock builds on Lord's theory of oral formulaic poetry (1984b, 83, 88; 1991, 22 n. 36), he observes that Lord's model of oral transmission cannot account for "the type and quality of manuscript congruence in important sections of the *Rāmāyaṇa*," and that "broad arguments from the nature of oral poetry in general should not be applied uncritically to the Indian evidence" (1984b, 87 n. 13). At this point, apparently prior to his writings on the divinity of Rāma (1984a, 1991), Pollock still refers to the presumed prior oral Rāmāyaṇa as "secular heroic poetry" influenced by "the mnemonic tradition of vedic transmission" (1984b, 87 n. 13). Once he has taken up the theme of Rāma's divinity, however, the problem shifts. In this context, he makes the noteworthy observation that in passages where the divine king is said to be like a number of different gods, "these are not to be thought of simply as shared characteristics, much less as figures of speech, but as equivalences or, better, substantival identities" (1991, 64–65; cf. ibid., 300 n to 3.38.12). This is a start toward reformulating the question of formulae in the textual context. Ultimately, however, once Pollock shows how carefully the theme of Rāma's divinity is tacitly structured into the poem, he gives us very little reason to see the Rāmāyaṇa's archetype as more inherently oral than that of the Mahābhārata.

As to interpolation theory, the most biblically influenced support for Katz's stratification project, Pollock's Rāmāyaṇa scholarship is more decisive. Pollock has adroitly taken on the tyranny of interpolation theory, which in Rāmāyaṇa studies has had its greatest champions in Jacobi (1893; trans. Ghosal 1960) and Brockington (1984). These two have applied their full energies to stratifying the stages of Rāma's divinization,[3] and Brockington continues to present a theory of "growth and development" in which the word *late*, often qualified by *relatively*, becomes a refrain in his treatment of both epics (1998, 130–58, 377–97, and passim). Pollock's response centers on Rāma's divinity, but has wider ramifications. Pollock says that no indigenous critique exists doubting Rāma's divinity as a feature of the poem's "fundamental 'organic' unity" (1991, 15), yet such "were the arguments and suspicions of Western scholars from their earliest acquaintance with the poem": in particular, "the suspicion . . . that those portions of the epic explicitly positing Rāma's status as an incarnation of Viṣṇu were deliberate, and unassimilable, sectarian interpolations" (ibid.). Pollock traces interpolators' guides to the Rāmāyaṇa from the 1840s to the present that can be closely paralleled in Mahābhārata scholarship on Kṛṣṇa (1991, 29 n. 28; cf. Hiltebeitel 1979; 2001, 1–3). As he says, drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer (1993, 300–307), "It is a notion of peculiar tenacity and prevalence, which now, through the operations of what is referred to rather darkly as *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* (that interpretive consciousness shaped by past interpretations) conditions the response many readers will have to the text" (1991, 17).



Pollock insists that "higher criticism" has only given unsatisfactory reasons for assessing passages as interpolations that bear on Rāma's alleged deification. Rather, he sees that Rāma's *not knowing* that he is divine until he has killed Rāvaṇa is carefully structured into the poem by the narrative necessity of Rāvaṇa's boon that he can only be killed by a man, or someone who at least *thinks* that he is a man. Ironically, this feature of the Rāmāyaṇa has allowed its textual critics to divide passages into "divinizing" versus "human" ones only by misunderstanding the poem—Brockington, for instance, by seeing the key passages as "second stage" ones (1998, 444, 471, 476). Their argument, says Pollock, "has a sense of the 'divine' that is unthinkingly ethnocentric. What is 'contradictory' in the behavior of 'human incarnations' . . . may be so only according to a narrow theological rationalism" (1991, 19). Texts raise questions about "contradiction" that provide "the source of religious mystery and the object of theological reflection" and "make promptings and suggestions" that we should "listen to," rather than "drowning [them] out with our own querulous presuppositions" (20, 21). Indeed, "we must rethink our own sense of what constitutes contradiction" (20) as well as our concept of interpolation (18), which, he says,

> often serves, not to introduce altogether new narrative material, but instead to expand or make manifest the elliptical or latent; . . . Why should it have proved so perfectly easy to "transform" fundamentally a "heroic epic" according to a later theological program, and to do this without a trace of resistance? Perhaps it has not been transformed at all. (19)

All this is quite remarkable and may even have begun as counterintuitive considering that it comes from a scholar whose Marxist theoretical grounding is well known.

In directing attention to "the poem's 'structured' message residing in certain higher-order narrative features," to meanings "inscribed . . . in the logic of the story" (1991, 19), Pollock also shows that "a substantial number of passages long under suspicion" as sectarian interpolations "have received text-historical vindication from the critical edition" (17). This applies not only to book 1, with its many "digressions," seeming contradictions, and "Vaiṣṇava interlude[s]" (Goldman 1984, 76) that have supplied so much grist for the interpolators' mill, but to books 2–6, which have generally been viewed as less stratified and in which text-critically-demonstrable interpolations exist, but "are still strikingly rare" (Pollock 1991, 17–18). I would add that these arguments also apply, mutatis mutandis, to the Mahābhārata.

Yet here Pollock makes a move that must be scrutinized. Both he and Goldman (1984, 58–59) recognize that it is impossible, textually, to reconstruct an originally undivine Rāma, but both see a prior order of exaltation to the religious one. For Goldman, the first exaltation is psychological in origin: rooted in "powerful fantasies . . . central to the formation of the Indian personality, family, and society" (59) that precede Rāma's divinization (43). For Pollock, it is political. The epics address a political problem "effectively" through family imagery, "perhaps even more effectively than [through] the ascription of divine status to the king" (1986, 21). Between politicization of the family and divinization of Rāma, the former is thus the better means, "perhaps," to achieve the above-mentioned political ends, but both are part of the same underlying "ideology" (ibid.). This "political theology" provides Pollock's key to the Rāmāyaṇa's "meaningful unity," which he discerns through a "'mythic' reading of the narrative" that "derives largely from the Indian tradition itself, from the political



theology of pre-modern India, and from more general ideological functions of literary production" (43). As he says in a 1993 article, the Rāmāyaṇa is thus "read mythopolitically" (1993, 262).

Pollock views the Rāmāyaṇa as "an imaginative inquiry into the nature of kingship and the peculiar, transcendent nature of the king" (1991, 63). He shows convincingly how the text's portrayal of Rāma reflects, and is in turn an articulation of, classical Indian formulations concerning the divinity of kings. In the Rāmāyaṇa's political theology, the king "is functionally a god because like a god he saves and protects; he is existentially or ontologically a god because he incorporates the divine essence" (47). He has further the godlike power to chastise and to liberate at the same time (50–51, cf. 71–74). These points are all carefully supported by textual references. But the political reading has afforded a hasty assessment of pre-modern Indian religion via strategies of postmodern criticism, literary theory, and political subtexts. The claim that the monumental Rāmāyaṇa promotes a unique political theology is made by detaching that theology, however tenuously, from the bhakti theology of avatars. Having observed that, according to Rāma himself, "Kings are gods who walk the earth in the form of men" (1991, 46), Pollock attempts to trace a further development of this political theology: "Gradually, however, the conception of the divine king basic to the story of Rāma was influenced by two factors already mentioned." First, Viṣṇu came to be associated with the king "perhaps initially as a result of their functional identity"; second, "in Vaiṣṇava theological circles there developed the theory of the avatara, a doctrine of vast absorptive, syncretistic force, which views every manifestation of divine power as testimony to the omnipotence and immanence of Viṣṇu" (52). It is this "gradually" that serves Pollock to posit a secondary consolidation of the monumental Rāmāyaṇa's political theology around such devotional concepts. But as Pollock himself shows, such a gradual process is purely hypothetical: the identification with Viṣṇu and the theology of divine descent "have so fundamentally conditioned the transmission of the poem that it cannot be proved on textual grounds that the composer of the monumental *Rāmāyaṇa*, from which all versions and recensions of the work derive, was ignorant of or indifferent to the equation of Rāma and Viṣṇu" (52). In other words, we may just as well regard this identification, and the mythology of divine descent as well, as secure features of the Critical Edition, and thus of the monumental Rāmāyaṇa.

Yet Pollock pursues these mythic morphemes only in the direction of Rāma the king, and not that of Rāma the avatar. The latter concept is grafted onto a prior political theology. It may be true sociopolitically to say that only a king can be the "extraordinary new creature" to protect the Brahmanical world order; but, mythologically, it is hardly the case that "only" the king does this (42). It is also a function of the avatāra. And not all avatāras are kings. Indeed, Rāma is unique among Viṣṇu's major avataras in being a king. This is a key point in reflecting on the two epics. One cannot fruitfully contrast their portrayals of the ideal king without factoring in their portrayals of the avatāra, which are far more complex than Pollock has indicated. Unlike the Rāmāyaṇa, in which the ideal king is the avatar who cannot know himself to be such until he has slain Rāvaṇa at the war's end, the Mahābhārata splits the ideal king (Arjuna) and the avatar (Kṛṣṇa) as reincarnations of the pair Nara-Nārāyaṇa, leaving the one to learn of the other's divinity before the war (cf. Peterson 1986).

Pollock's king-avatar formulation is precisely the opposite of Biardeau's, who writes of the avatāra as the "divine model of the king" (1976, 171). For Biardeau, the ideal king, under the universalization of bhakti, must act, especially as a warrior, for the welfare of the world (or the rescue of the earth), subordinating his dharma to that of the Brahmans and incorporating within himself the avatar's triple complementary rapports between his brahman and kṣatra (or Brahman and Kṣatriya) powers or dimensions, his affinities with Viṣṇu and Rudra-Śiva, and his cosmogonic and pralayic functions (1976, 171–203, esp. 182–84).

### *Oral Epics, Deification*

How, then, have the connections between Sanskrit classical epics and oral epics been interpreted? I restrict myself to scholarly debates about regional martial epics that make their own connections with the classical epics through traditions that their heroes and heroines reincarnate characters and traits from either the Mahābhārata or the Rāmāyaṇa, or both, as in the case of *Devnārāyaṃ* (Malik 1998, 148, 215–21). The scholarship under discussion was first brought into focus in Blackburn et al's 1989 *Oral Epics in India* and has been discussed elsewhere by Aditya Malik (1998) and myself (1999).

Blackburn himself (1989, 16) proposes a "'nucleus' model of development" that distinguishes two developmental patterns, both of which work



by "adding motifs to the core story," "either by grafting independent stories onto the core or by accumulating motifs" (21, 16). The first pattern, which covers most martial epics in his schema, goes through three stages: 1. Death and deification; 2. Supernatural birth; 3. Pan-Indian identity. The second pattern, which concerns mainly romantic epics not under discussion here, skips stage 1 and has only stages 2 and 3, which converge to tell how the hero becomes the stuff of an epic.

Like Katz, Blackburn begins with mortality and a corresponding a priori definition of the "human" as the source of epic. The "overall effect" of the three-phase process in the first pattern is to "obscure the human origins of the hero/god with a prior divine existence" (1989, 22). As with so many Sanskrit-epic scholars, a Western notion of the human thus becomes the basis for a theory of deification, a term that for Blackburn covers three variations: local worship of a deceased hero, divine birth, and pan-Indian identity. With the latter, we are again open to a theory like Katz's of sectarian capture of epic portions: the further that ritual-based oral epics develop beyond local community bonds to become linked with pan-Indian deities, says Blackburn, "the greater the chance that they will be swallowed whole by some form of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, or Śākta worship" (27).

Blackburn cites Jan de Vries (1963, 243) and C. M. Bowra (1952, 9–27) on the death lament as "a kind of 'pre-epic' poetry" (1989, 22 n. 13) for local, violently slain heroes. Epical or ballad songs and stories about such figures are found in India and elsewhere. Our problem lies in imagining the transition required by Blackburn's theory to account for the "development" from such stage-1 songs to stage-2/stage-3 epics. He draws from others (Kamal Kothari 1989; John D. Smith 1989) in treating Rajasthani epics from this perspective, but explains the *Elder Brothers Story* (Beck 1982) and *The Epic of Palnāḍu* (Roghair 1982) largely on his own.

These two South Indian oral epics supply examples of "grafting" to the core: they "grew by adding events from the political history of adjacent regions and by absorbing shorter folk narratives" (1989, 17). In *Elder Brothers*, "the episode involving the heroes' births follows the standard sequence of motifs until evil threatens at the moment of their births. Then the supernatural element appears," when Viṣṇu rescues them. Accordingly, the heroes' "human origins . . . disappear when their story spreads and they become gods" (23–24). In *The Epic of Palnāḍu*, the prenatal miracles and avatāric themes at the birth of Brahma Nāyuḍu are evidence that

"geographical spread of a story opens it up to supernatural elements, especially in the birth episode" (24). This supernatural connection is secondary: "although Brahma Nāyuḍu is sometimes made an avatar of Viṣṇu in the Palnāḍu epic, this only occurs in those variants with the greatest geographical diffusion, that is, the literate retellings" (25). Blackburn cites Gene H. Roghair (1982, 109–10) on this point, but Roghair, despite straining to argue for the historicity of Brahma Nāyuḍu as a social reformer, does not say that Brahma Nāyuḍu's avatar status derives from literate retellings. In fact, Brahma Nāyuḍu is Viṣṇu's avatar in the *oral* version he has collected. Blackburn's theory creates further problems for him in trying to identify this epic's "real hero." Having problematized Brahma Nāyuḍu's candidacy, he turns to the impetuous Bāluḍu as "perhaps the real hero of the epic" (1989, 24). The phrase registers that Bāluḍu fits most closely Blackburn's death-and-deification model. The "real hero" construct is reminiscent of Katz's primary "heroic level" and the aforementioned monomyth theories of Campbell.

My position is that "deification" covers too many variations in divine/human interaction and generalizes from euhemerist principles. Clearly, deaths are nodal points in epics, especially martial ones. But it is fruitless to single out one death in a "multideath" epic as the "real" one, and unsound to posit that oral epics are *generally* or *necessarily* about heroes who actually lived. Blackburn's theory underemphasizes the complexity of the interrelation *between* heroes. Epics deal with all kinds of heroes, male and female, and with the rapports not only between them but between them and other beings, including deities.

At the further ends of Blackburn's developmental process, then, having gone through stages 2 and 3, are complex oral epics in which heroes and heroines have been "divinized." Among these are a number of regional martial epics whose stories link the heroes, through reincarnations, with the heroes of the classical epics. How has this linkage been understood? According to Blackburn and Joyce B. Flueckiger, links through reincarnations are "not necessarily evidence of a common history for the Sanskrit and folk epics, nor do the resemblances always represent an imitation. . . . Rather, references to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* or their heroes are often simply a means of legitimizing the folk epics" (1989, 8). This recalls Katz's notion that the "historical" family of Janamejaya "legitimized" itself by claiming descent form the Pāṇḍavas. Blackburn and Flueckiger cite



*The Epic of Pābūjī* as an example of "legitimization," and the testimony of John D. Smith, who says that when northern oral epics explain how classical heroes come to figure in a story, "in most cases it amounts to no more than the taking up of a loose end" (1989, 182). Determined to argue that oral epics have an integrity independent of the Sanskrit epics, Blackburn and Flueckiger find that "character-based commonalities between folk and Sanskrit epics are admittedly superficial." Thus, "even where there are extensive borrowings from the Sanskrit epics, folk epics carry new meanings because they live in new social settings" (1989, 8). Now the closing point should win universal agreement. But the dismissive generalizations about classical and oral-epic linkages discourage reflection on the "superficial" "borrowing" process. As Jonathan Z. Smith has shown, notions of "borrowing" and "dependency" are simply negative comparative strategies (1990, 47).

Ironically, one thus finds that rather than examining more closely the trivialized links between Sanskrit and oral epics, this branch of oral-epic scholarship links itself with the generalizations of scholars who have written about the Sanskrit epics. The same "historically effected consciousness" (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) that drives and permeates the interpretation of classical epics also affects scholarship on India's oral epics. Smith, for example, supports his "loose ends" explanation by treating what he calls "doubtful" aspects of *Pābūjī*'s connections with the Rāmāyaṇa as essentially "metaphoric" or non-"literal" formulae and accretative interpolations that do not help him in his quest for the historical Pābūjī (1991, 83–84, 91–94). For him, beneath the "loose ends" that oral epics pick up from the Sanskrit epics lies a deeper unity on the level of "ideology"—as with Pollock, a usage of the term *ideology* to disclose a dark underside to the ostensibly religious.

Smith's "picture" is of a "remarkably consistent" ideology that "differs radically from conventional *bhakti* theology" (1989, 176), and it is especially "found in the Sanskrit and martial epics" (193, 178), which attribute human suffering to the gods, "who pass evil into the world in order that they should be free from it in heaven" (176). "Epic heroes, and by extension we ourselves, are the gods' scapegoats" (193). This ideology is "in essentials a single, coherent" one that "varies remarkably little from time to time and place to place" (ibid.). Smith claims to uncover this stark and covert ideology as something "far-removed from Kṛṣṇa's celebrated

explanation of his own presence on earth" (176) in *Bhagavadgītā* 4.8 as restorer of dharma from age to age and, implicitly, as avatar. When Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna to act without desire for the fruits of his actions, he has base desires of his own in championing the self-interest of the gods. By lumping all gods together in this charge and ignoring bhakti hierarchies, Smith ignores the very bhakti structures that he attempts to expose as hypocritical.

As with the scholarship on classical epics, there is thus a general failure in work on oral epics, or at least these regional, martial oral epics, to get beyond linear models and come to grips with certain complexities of the texts. I will address two of these: straitjacketing notions of the "epic" genre, and peripheralization of the significance of bhakti and avatāra.[4]

Clearly, "epic" is for India an etic or "outsider" category, no less for oral epics than for classical ones. More than this, as Malik observes, while no Indian Sanskrit or vernacular terms correspond to *epic*, oral epics are themselves, like classical epics, multi-genred: in the case of *Devnārāyaṇ*, the "oral narrative structure of the text . . . is composed of epistemological categories such as 'remembrance,' on the one hand, and aspects of 'speech genres' such as 'repetition,' 'dialogue,' and 'reported speech,' on the other." Further, there is the category of "divine testimony" (*parcyo*), and a visual narrative (*paṛ*), as well as the oral one (1998, 10–11; cf. 100–108). Indeed, oral performances are called "reading the paṛ" (*paṛ vācṇo*); that is, simultaneously "decoding" its iconic images and "reconstructing" their meaning, so that one may even speak of "reading" the "writing of the *paṛ*" (*paṛā kā lekh*) (ibid., 16–11), a "reading" and "writing" that provides "*literary* design" to the "divine testimony," and "extends into the realm of *presencing* the divine" (16–21, 109).

Such considerations raise the question of how deep the difference is between verbal "written" manuscripts and a pictorial scroll. As with the free ride given to the notion that the Sanskrit epics have a prior oral core, too much has been made, beginning with Albert Lord himself, of the notion that authentic oral epics and the oral poets who produce and transmit them must be free of the contamination of writing (Lord 1960, 23–25, 79, 109). Neither Indian nor Yugoslav oral bards, such as we know them, have composed oral epics in cultures free of writing. Indeed, virtually all the oral epics that Lord describes in *The Singer of Tales* have, as major turning points, the delivery of letters and other written documents (35–95, 224–33), something Lord fails to theorize other than to identify it as a "theme" (68–98).



As to bhakti and avatāra, the complexity of India's regional oral martial epics lies not just in their links with the classical epics through reincarnations and divine-human incarnations (like that of Viṣṇu in Brahma Nāyuḍu, mentioned above), but with a larger "grammar" or "intertextuality" in which these concepts are played out in relation to other texts, both oral and written, including but not limited to devotional texts, and in both Sanskrit and the vernaculars (Malik 1998, 102–14). Temporal and spatial dislocations also make way for these linkages to be reenplotted into regionally defined terms. My contention is that the linkages and the dislocations must be understood together. On this matter, I limit myself to a discussion of how the goddess figures in these inter-epic complexities, and how, until only recently, this scholarship has addressed her.

Work on martial oral epics is virtually unanimous on one point: females are the primary instigators of destruction. No matter how many forces are at work driving the heroes toward their doom, central among them are the motivations of goddesses and heroines (Beck 1982, 182; Kothari 1989, 114; Roghair 1982, 135; Schomer 1989, 147; Smith 1986, 59; 1989, 182, 190; 1991, 96–98; Malik 1993, 280). Most explanations have focused on gender relations and sexual fantasies, although Brenda E. F. Beck and Karine Schomer go beyond this. Part of the problem is that these formulations isolate gender, sexuality, goddesses, and heroines as if they pose a set of problems unique to themselves, but secondary, in the "developmental" sense, to the primary martial epic world, which, again echoing Katz's primary "heroic level," is thought to be about males and death. Thus Blackburn, and the others who share his vision on this point, situate the goddess, and heroines linked with her, as one of the primary contributors to the secondary and tertiary processes of deification. For Kothari, stating the matter most baldly, the heroine-goddess's great importance lies in placing "the epic on a different plane than the historical reality of the male heroes" (1989, 115). In other words, heroines and goddesses mythicize historically real men (cf. Beck 1982, 32; Roghair 1982, 125–26; Schomer 1989, 146). Smith, for whom Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the goddess all come into Indian epics as belated explanations for the dumping of "celestial garbage" (1989, 176), also transposes this schema back on the classical epics. Whereas Viṣṇu and Śiva remain pretty much their same selves from classical to

oral epics, "Goddesses are relatively unimportant in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, but they play a major role in many vernacular epics" (1989, 182).

This position is untenable. As Dumézil recognized, the *Mahābhārata* unfolds from Viṣṇu's response to the plea of the goddess Earth (Bhūdevī) to lift from her, lest she sink back into the ocean, the burden of demons who have incarnated themselves upon her as kings (1968, 33–257, esp. 168–69). The same goddess Earth gives birth to Sītā from a furrow, and opens a pit to reclaim her when she leaves the world in the Rāmāyaṇa. Draupadī, incarnation of the goddess Śrī in the *Mahābhārata*, is born from an earthen fire altar (*vedi*). At her birth, a heavenly voice announces that she will be the cause of the destruction of the warrior class. More classical epic examples could be cited. The point, however, is not just to disagree with Smith and others who view the goddess as unimportant in the classical epics, but to move on from her evident importance to understand the ways in which she figures in relation to Śiva, Viṣṇu, and the theology of divine incarnations, not only in the classical epics but in oral regional martial epics that reenplot these paradigms in dislocated "shatter zones," where the focus turns to relations between virgin goddesses and heroines and the region's land (see Hiltebeitel 1999, 37–43; Malik 1998, 87, 114, 119–30). By moving goddesses and heroines to secondary and tertiary levels of a presumed order of development, scholars of India's oral epics, like scholars of her classical epics, have bewilderingly treated both oral and classical epics as if they originally did without them.

*Notes*

1. This chapter revises and expands upon Hiltebeitel 1995, somewhat redefining its focus around the three issues of the subtitle.

2. See Hiltebeitel 1979, 67–83; and 1998, especially on the intriguing scholarship of C. V. Vaidya.

3. Katz's great predecessor in Mahābhārata interpolation "analysis" is Hopkins, who finds the same route to explaining the "deification" of Kṛṣṇa in his epic studies ([1901] 1969), which he later reinforced for both Kṛṣṇa and Rāma in his comparative studies (1918, 209–17; 1923, 310–12).

4. Prior to his 1998 study, Malik was the only near-exception. He stated in 1993 his intention to examine the oral epic hero and incarnation of Viṣṇu, Devnārāyaṇ's "association with the *'avatāra'* sequence, within the larger context of classical and folk-religious patterns found in Hinduism" (1993, 392). But he ends up endorsing Blackburn by arguing for two prior "co-terminous" perceptions about society (organized around a king/deity) and divinity (deified hero), from which the avatar complex is detached as a purāṇic "feature" that "may well be of marginal importance to members of the cult" (400). Malik supplies no argument to support this would-be marginality and seems to have richly revised these views in his 1998 study (cited in the references).



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# SIX The Purāṇas

## *A Study in the Development of Hinduism*

— GREGORY BAILEY

The Purāṇas are a huge body of literature composed principally in the Sanskrit and Tamil languages but also represented in vernacular forms through translations and reworkings of older versions originally composed in Sanskrit or Tamil. Individual Purāṇas are bulky, unwieldy, and sometimes stylistically inelegant, but for all that they contain picaresque myths and legends replete with sex, humor, color, and drama; they include extensive details of rituals, customs, and lifestyle information and multitudes of case studies that reveal how the normative teachings of the culture that the Purāṇas reflect should be applied in practice. As with all literary documents in India, the dating of the Purāṇas is notoriously difficult, and this has been a source of exasperation for the many scholars who have shown an inclination to work on them. It is generally accepted that the earliest Sanskrit Purāṇas may date as far back as the fourth century A.C.E., but the various schools of scholarship out of which recent Purāṇic studies have formed have been extremely reluctant to posit an original datable form to any given Purāṇa, preferring instead to focus on each individual Purāṇa as an evolving text and attempting to discover some of the compositional principles that give shape to this evolution.

When reading the Purāṇas, what we find is a collection of texts filled with symbols of the past mixed easily with startlingly new literary and