

ROYAL SACRIFICES IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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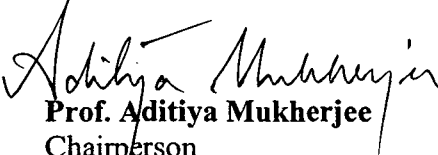
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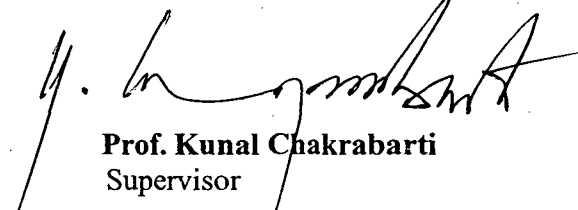
This is to certify that the dissertation entitled '**ROYAL SACRIFICES IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA**' submitted by me in fulfillment of the requirement of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of this University is my original work and has not been previously submitted, in part or full, for the award of any degree of this University or any other University.


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This dissertation is affectionately dedicated

To

TIRTHATANMOY DAS

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INTRODUCTION

Kaliprasanna Simha was one of the first translators of the *Mahābhārata* in Bengali. In one such work he describes an occasion of *durga puja* held in a *zamindar's* residence in Kolkata, where many people had gathered to enjoy the festivities. A part of the programme was a dramatic performance, in which some episodes of the *Mahābhārata* were being enacted. This excerpt related to the part where the *rājasūya* of Yudhisthira was being staged: “*ek jagyay rājasūya joggo hocche; desh-deshanter raja ra char dike ghire boshechen. Modhye tyana-pora hota-pota bamun ra agni kunder char dike boshe hoom kocchen. Raja der poshak o chehara dekhle, hothat bodh hoy jeno, ek dol daroan shakrar dokane pahara dicche.*”¹ [“A *rājasūya* sacrifice is being performed in one part (of the stage); kings from various countries are seated on all sides (of the sacrificial enclosure). The *hota* brāhmaṇas, wearing little pieces of cloth around their waists, are seated on four sides of the fire alter and are performing the (prescribed) rites at intervals. A quick look at the attire and appearance of the kings reminds one of a group of sentries guarding a jewellery store.] The point to note in this description is that the author selects the *rājasūya* sacrifice as a representative event of the *Mahābhārata*, which would acquaint the spectators with the essence of the text. The choice is significant from one who was thoroughly conversant with the contents of the epic.

Royal sacrifices were prescribed in Vedic and other Brahmanical texts and were actually in vogue, as we get to know of them from inscriptions and literary works.² In this essay, I

¹ Kaliprasanna Simha, *Hutum Pyuchhar Naksha*, Bangiya Sahitya Parishat, Kolkata, 1862, p. 34.

² P.V. Kane gives us a long list of the kings who performed these sacrifices from historical accounts. “In the *Harivaṃśā* (III.2.39-40), in the *Malavikagnimitra* (Act V, which speaks of the *Rājasūya*), in the *Sunga Inscription* from Ayodhya (E.I. vol. XX. p. 54) *Senapati Pusyamitra* is said to have performed the *Asvamedha* or *Rajasuya*. In the *Hathigumpha Inscription* (E.I. vol. XX. p. 79) king *Kharavela* is extolled as having

will look at the descriptions of royal sacrifices in the *Mahābhārata* and, on the basis of that, will attempt to draw out their socio-political and economic significance.

Broadly, religion can be looked at as a unified system of beliefs and practices, which unite a community. There are various kinds of acts or symbolic gestures that a particular religion employs to maintain its structure. This research takes into account the role of sacrifices in the Brāhmanical religion, which were an integral part of it. The beliefs and ideals of different civilizations are often formulated in their rituals more explicitly than in any other expression of their culture. The Latin '*ritus*', from which the word ritual originated means 'custom'. In simple terms, is a symbolic action. Sacrifice as a ritual act can be looked at from four points of view. One, sacrifice as belonging to the sphere of reciprocity, in terms of being a gift with the assurance of some sort of a return gift. Two, sacrifice as parting with something of one's own benefit, for the benefit of another, without any direct, essential correlation between renouncing one's own rights and acquiring something new. Three, sacrifice as a repetition of a primordial event and four, sacrifice as a form of symbolic sanctification of the world.³

performed the Rājasūya. In the Bilsad stone Inscription of Kumaragupta dated in the Gupta year 96 (415-6 A.D.) it is stated that his great ancestor Samudragupta performed the Asvamedha that had gone out of vogue for a long time. ...” The list contains names of many other kings. Cited in *History of Dhammasastra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*, Vol. II Part II, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1997, pp. 978-979.

³ Th. P. van Baaren, “Theoretical Speculations on Sacrifice”, *Nureen*, Vol. 11, Fasc. 1. (Jan., 1964), pp. 1-2.

I

The literature on sacrifice is enormous, but sociological and social-anthropological contributions to it are limited.⁴ Proceeding chronologically, I will first take up the work by H. Hubert and M. Mauss on the theme of sacrifice.⁵ Hubert and Mauss at the start of their work *Sacrifice : Its Nature and Function* made it clear that their intention was to define the nature and social function of sacrifice.⁶ They took off from the works of their predecessors, Tylor, Robertson Smith and Frazer, who were all primarily concerned with the origin of sacrifice. Hubert and Mauss tried to formulate a general theory of sacrifice. So, they proposed a formal and general definition of sacrifice, which was: "Sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned".⁷ They mainly use Brāhmanical, Semitic and Greco-Roman texts to propound this general theory. All these cultures were elite and literate ones. Therefore, they offered a partial view of the ritual act and ignored the various other religious systems which prevailed in non-literate societies.

Sacrifice acts as a medium of communication between the sacred and the profane through the ritual killing of the victim, burdened with the sins of society, or the sacrificer (the

⁴ E. E. Evans-Pritchard "Foreword", *Sacrifice, its Nature and Functions*, H. Hubert and M. Mauss, University of Chicago Press, 1964.

⁵ This study was first published in *L'Année sociologique*, Paris, 1898 and was entitled '*Essai sur la Nature et la Fonction du Sacrifice*'. It was translated from French to English by W. D. Halls and published in 1964.

⁶ Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*.

⁷ Ibid.

subject who benefits from the sacrifice), and hence frees him or society of certain evils. Hubert and Mauss illustrated what they called the scheme of sacrifice by describing how a person belonging to the profane world enters the realm of the sacrifice, which is a religious act. They chose the Vedic sacrifices of animals to exemplify this, as, they believed, it explained the ritual action best. It is much like the rites of passage, where the sacrificer is made pure for the sacrifice through various rites, and similarly the victim by being consecrated. They no longer remain a part of the mortal world. The priest, helps the sacrificer from committing ritual errors. The sacrificer has to have physical contact with the victim in order to have their “personalities” “fused together”.⁸ When the victim is actually killed, the divine element passes off from this world to the sacred, leaving the body behind.⁹ This is explained elaborately only in the Vedic texts, though there are rites like this in the Semitic and Greco-Roman world. So, can they really apply it to the other cultures as a general scheme of sacrifice? Mauss constructed a curve in the performance of a sacrifice, where it rises to a maximum degree of religiosity, remains static for a moment and then progressively descends.¹⁰ The descending curve refers to the exit rites where the sacrificer returns to the profane world. Mauss did not state it explicitly, but this understanding assumes a continuity which keeps the sacrificial act being continuously re-enacted.

Hubert and Mauss divided the functions of sacrifice into two categories – general and special. Mauss, who was influenced by Durkheim, sought to explain human action in

⁸ Ibid, pp. 32.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 35.

¹⁰Ibid, pp.45.

terms of the contribution it makes to society or its functions in the social set-up. Therefore, they tended to neglect the inherent social tensions underlying all sacrificial acts. In his previous work titled *The Gift*, Mauss emphasised the role of exchange relations in creating, reinforcing and serving a group morality. This approach also influenced his understanding of sacrifice. This is not to suggest that Hubert and Mauss explained sacrifice as only a contract and a form of gift. On the contrary, they maintain that sacrifice cannot simply be interpreted as a form of gift, a contractual procedure between the sacred and the profane. However, in their insistence of the integrative function of the sacrifice, they ignored how it can be used as an instrument of maintaining caste hierarchy, especially in the context of India. It is partly because they assumed that the rules of sacrifice and the function it performs apply equally to all societies. This is evident in such comments as: “ They [sacrifice] are all the same in essence, and it is this which constitutes their unity. They are the outer coverings of one single mechanism..”¹¹ Still, the book provides a basic structure of sacrifice with some explanations and definitions, which are useful to us.

J. C. Heesterman’s first work deals with the royal sacrifice called *rājasūya*.¹² It is an extremely thorough work, based on the data contained the Black Yajus school. According to Heesterman, the *rājasūya* was not a special type of sacrifice. It, “consisted of a series of ekahas (one-day Soma sacrifices), alternating with istis (offerings of cake and porridge) and an occasional animal sacrifice, all of a common type and only modified by

¹¹Hubert and Mauss, p. 18.

¹² J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājasūya described according to the Yajus Texts and annotated*, Mouton & Co., Hague, 1957.

the simple insertion of special rites such as the unction, the chariot drive, the dicing ceremony and the use of some special formulas.”¹³

The book presents details of the rites of the *rājasūya* and he interprets their social significance. Heesterman also explains the variety of symbolisms connected with it. For instance, he explains the chariot drive as a part of the *rājasūya* thus: “[C]hariat races and other games have often the function of regenerating the productive forces in the cosmos, of renewing the world...he chariot is in harmony with the number of seasons of the year : three horses, the chariot itself, the charioteer and the chariot fighter, making together six, the number of seasons. The renewing force roused by the chariot drive is the *vaja*..”¹⁴ He concludes: “[T]hrough his world encompassing tour the king rouses the *vaja*, the fertility powers, setting them in circular motion. By this circular motion the cosmos and with it the king himself who integrates the cosmos are reborn.”¹⁵ He cites many Vedic texts which refer to this symbolism, though not necessarily in connection with the *rājasūya*. This is only one example. Heesterman has interpreted all the twenty eight rites involved in the performance of the *rājasūya*.

Heesterman mentions that the king, who is the central character of this ceremony, is nothing but a common sacrificer or *yajamāna* to the officiating priest. Here, the relationship between the king and the *brāhmaṇa* assumes significance. Though he acknowledges that this is something of note and refers to the work of A. Weber, whose

¹³ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp.133.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.139.

view was that, the brāhmaṇa dominated the king, he does not agree with Weber. In the portrayal of the *rājasūya*, Heesterman has repeatedly stated that this ceremony was for consecration and not inauguration of the king. He probably wanted the Western readers to understand that the *rājasūya* was different from the ceremony of coronation.

Heesterman's next work is significantly different from his previous one. Titled *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*, it has a number of essays basically dealing with the religious culture of the Indian sub-continent. Tradition, according to Heesterman, is characterized by the "inner conflict of atemporal order and temporal shift"¹⁶ rather than by resilience and adaptiveness. In all the essays the author repeatedly espouses the motif of conflict, which maintains the social order. The conflict is basically between the two sources of power and authority, represented by the kings and the brāhmaṇas. The author clearly distinguishes between these two orders. He says that the brāhmaṇa, by virtue of his Vedic knowledge holds a hierarchical position, but by depending on patrons for material support for his survival, dilutes his position. To quote Heesterman, "the brahmin then, is the exemplar of the irresolvable tension that is at the heart of Indian civilization."¹⁷

Analysing the realm of Vedic sacrifice, the author argues that it is characterized by unpredictability: "There is clearly an unresolved tension here between universal order and individual enterprise."¹⁸ He speaks of sacrifice as a contest, and the conflict in the social set-up gets reflected in the sacrificial contest. The relationship of dependence

¹⁶ J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition : Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.44.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.88.

between the king and the brāhmaṇa becomes clear in the sacrificial ceremonies. This book is more sensitive to the historical context than the previous one, which looked at the rituals in their own terms.

In his third work, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, published in 1993, Heesterman addresses the question of sacrifice itself. He characterizes sacrifice as a combination of three major elements: killing, destruction and food distribution.¹⁹ There is a general consensus that sacrifice, as a means of communication with the gods, is a form of a gift to him. Heesterman distinguishes the notion of gift from the act of sacrifice by pointing to the destruction of the object. By citing the example of the sacrifice of the first fruits²⁰, he follows Walter Burkert in observing the irrelevance of the recipient and comments: “there was no gift to begin with but only abandonment in self-abnegation”.²¹ Mauss argued that gift establishes solidarity between receivers and givers, bringing about continuous circulation, which maintains a manipulable equilibrium. Heesterman does not believe in this idea of equilibrium. Reciprocity signifies certainty, but the world of sacrifice is characterized by uncertainty; hence the tension and conflict. For him sacrifice deals with “the insoluble conundrum of life and death”,²² which has no solution.

He connects the concept of sacrifice to the process of domestication of elements and other resources. Fire, cattle and other offerings for a sacrifice are under man’s control and

¹⁹ J. C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice: An Essay in Ancient Indian Ritual*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 9.

²⁰ Ibid, p.17.

²¹ Ibid, p. 18.

²² Ibid, p. 27.

are domesticated by him. The fire, which is used for cooking food, is also used for destruction and this reflects the inner tension. Similar is the case with the animals. Here he posits the polarity of *grāma* (village) and *araṇya* (jungle), and argues that sacrifice, typically, has its center in the village, which is the realm of the domestic. Therefore, sacrifice is paradoxical in all respects.

Next I discuss *Ritual and Mantras : Rules without Meaning* by Frits Staal. Staal looks at ritual from a different point of view. He begins with the assumption that rituals can be analyzed analogously with language. For him two things are important meaning and rules. Staal takes the Vedic *śrauta* rituals into account and tries to frame the rituals into a structure of grammar with clearly laid down rules. For instance he feels that Indian ritualists have always stressed the hierarchical structure in the organization of rituals. The *Śrauta Sūtras*, writes Staal, describe the main rituals in a particular order where a person is able to perform the later rituals only if he has performed the earlier ones.²³ Therefore he traces a pattern in the functioning of rituals. Staal does not differentiate sacrifice from the general scheme of rituals. He limits himself to animal sacrifice, preferring to call it ritual killing.

What is striking in Staal's analysis is that he feels ritual activity is meaningless and is undertaken for its own sake. To quote him, "ritual is pure activity, without meaning or goal."²⁴ However, Staal argues that even if it has significant side-effects. Ritual creates bonds between the participants, reinforces solidarity, boosts morale and constitutes a link

²³ Frits Staal, *Ritual and Mantras : Rules without Meaning*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1996, p. 101.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 131.

with the ancestors, just as several other institutions and customs.²⁵ What is specific about rituals is that these are syntactic structures with a variety of meanings artificially attached to them. But, for him the structures are more important than the people who abide by it. The author has ignored the context of the Vedic society where, on basis of the knowledge of the Vedas and the rituals the texts contain social hierarchies were determined. Staal concludes that as ritual is not a system of symbolic representations that refer to something else, it cannot be explained in terms of religion or society.

II

This essay explores the different aspects of social life that are discernible in the description of the royal sacrificial rituals in the *Mahābhārata*. We observe that the sacrificial rituals were used by different groups of people for the purposes of legitimation and for maintenance of hierarchical relations in society. The reasons why royal sacrificial rituals were performed are analysed. We also obtain an idea of the economic condition of the society described in the *Mahābhārata*. The sacrificial ceremonies also bring out interaction between the four *varṇas*. It can be observed that society was divided sharply among the different *varṇas*. Gender relations are also brought forth in this context. All these are indicators of social relations that we would try to comprehend.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 134.

I am aware of the constraints of this approach, as the epic cannot be situated in an exact time frame. Besides, various layers of it have been composed in different times. R.S. Sharma writes that the *Jaya* or *Itihāsa*, which is said to have developed into the monumental *Mahābhārata*, originally consisted of only 8800 verses. It was then enlarged into 24,000 verses and was called *Bhārata*. During the times of the Guptas, it finally took the form of the present text, and it consists of 100,000 verses. The critical edition of the epic has 78,675 verses. The problem, according to Sharma, are the immense interpolations, which lie embedded in the text. He opines: “[S]o long as the various strata of the text are not isolated from one another, it will be difficult to make use of the great epic for the reconstruction of any social or cultural sequence.”²⁶ Romila Thapar has also addressed this problem in her essay on the historian and the epic. Thapar looks at the historical function of the epic rather than its historicity. Thapar, having presented the range of suggested dates for the *Mahābhārata* (fourth millennium B.C. to seventh century B.C.) attempts to arrive at a more plausible time-frame. For this, she correlates the literary source with the archaeological evidence found in the Ganga-Yamuna *doāb* and areas surrounding that region. She shows how trying to date the epic through genealogies and lineages of various clans can be unreliable by delving into the problematic lineage patterns visible in the *Mahābhārata*. She brings out clearly that the existence of at least two different systems of political organization is reflected in the *Mahābhārata*, that of tribal chiefship and monarchy. She opines that the didactic sections of the text indicate a stratified state society with a monarchical form of government. She concludes by stating that the difference between the narrative and didactic sections of the text can be best

²⁶ R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, Macmillan India Ltd., Delhi, 1983, p.137.

understood if they are seen as reflecting transition between two kinds of societies. The epic is historical to the extent that it presents a view of the past not necessarily in a chronological order, but with many layers. The historian can, at best look at the various kinds of social formations that existed in the layers that the epic upholds.²⁷

Clearly in the *Mahābhārata*, we are looking at a society in transition. Various kinds of changes were taking place in various parts of the subcontinent. Therefore, it cannot be asserted that the entire subcontinent was transforming from one particular stage of polity into another. Since the dating of the various stratas of the epic has not been possible till date, a particular development cannot be assigned to a specific date. It is only for the sake of convenience that we refer to this society as the 'society of the *Mahābhārata*' as a frozen term. Historically, we are looking at the processes of social formations which are succinctly portrayed in the epic.

III

Two types of texts have been taken into account for this work - the descriptive texts like epics and the prescriptive ones. It has been suggested by scholars like E.W. Hopkins and V.S. Sukthankar, that two trends can be identified in the epic tradition of India – the original epic and the pseudo epic. While the narrative portions, which were part of the original one, told the tale, the remaining parts were filled with didactic statements. These

²⁷ Romila Thapar, "The Historian and the Epic", *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 614-615.

didactic portions dealt with issues like *rāja-dharma*, various moral practices and rules of society, and were essentially drawn from the *dharma śāstra* literature. These were interpolated later into the epics. The primary text for this work is the *Mahābhārata*. Occasionally the *Rāmāyana* has been cited for comparative purposes. Among the prescriptive sacred literature, has been the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, as it deals with the royal sacrifices in detail. The others that were consulted are the *Rig Veda*, the *Aitereya Brāhmaṇa*, the *Taitterya Brāhmaṇa* and the *Śāṅkhyāyana Śrauta Sūtra*.

The *Mahābhārata* mainly deals with the battle of the Bhāratas, but contains many diverse elements. The dating of the *Mahābhārata* is a matter of debate amongst scholars. According to Winternitz, the text could not have received its present form earlier than the 4th century B.C. and not later than the 4th century A.D. He feels that it is shown by literary and inscriptional evidence that by 500 A.D. the *Mahābhārata* had become a sacred text and was not essentially different from the one with which we are familiar.²⁸ He asserts that there are land grants of the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. in which sections of Book XIII of the *Mahābhārata* has been authority. The epic also contains many references to Buddhism, which indicate that it had acquired its present form only after its origin and spread. Therefore, Winternitz believes that it is impossible to date the whole of the *Mahābhārata*, and dates of every part has to be determined through close readings. Contrary opinions are not altogether missing. E.W. Hopkins also suggests that the *Mahābhārata* could not have come into being before 400 B.C. and it developed in five

²⁸ Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1927, pp. 463-465.

stages by 400 A.D.²⁹ Scholars like J.Dahlmann feel that the *Mahābhārata* is one unified work composed by a single poet in pre-Buddhist times, both as an epic and law book. Sylvain Levi explains that the *Mahābhārata* was a deliberate composition organically and artistically spread around a central fact and inspired by a dominant sentiment which penetrates and permeates it.³⁰ These scholars see the text as a scripture for the warrior caste, the *kṣhatriyas*. Winternitz does not completely agree with it, as he feels that the text also deals extensively with issues of morality, *ahiṃsā*, love towards all beings and the like. Alf Hiltebeitel feels that the *Mahābhārata* was written over a much shorter period than is usually believed. According to him, the epic was composed between mid 2nd century B.C. and the year zero.³¹ There have been attempts to date the central event of the epic, the war between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, but these have remained inconclusive.

The texts that prescribe directions for the performance of sacrifices are the *Brahmanas* and the *Śrauta Sūtras*. These texts are generally said to have been composed when society was transforming and becoming more complex.³² They deal with various things, but their common concern is the ritual of sacrifice. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, for instance deals with elaborate sacrifices such as the *rājasūya*, the *aśvamedha*, the *vājapeya* et cetera. M. Witzel has traced the development of the Vedic canon in terms of

²⁹ Hopkins views cited in Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001, pp.14-15.

³⁰ The views of Dahlmann and Sylvain Levi are cited in Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, p. 459.

³¹ Ibid, p.18.

³² "The Vedic texts may be divided into two broad chronological strata: the early Vedic (c. 1500-1000 B.C.) when most of the hymns of the *Rigveda* were composed; the later Vedic (c. 1000-600 B.C.) to which belong the remaining Vedas and their branches." D.N. Jha, *Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2000, p.43.

its social and political milieu. He argues that during the time of the composition of the *Brahmanas*, “the *kṣatriyas* and *brahmins* form a united ‘political’ front (*brahma-kṣatra*) against ‘the people’ (*viś*) and, of course, against the *sudra* and the aboriginal population (*dāsa, dāsyu*) in order to exploit them.”³³ The *Śrauta Sūtras* contain a very detailed description of several Vedic sacrifices. Though it is difficult to arrive at a conclusive date for the principle *Brāhmānas* and the *Śrauta Sūtras*, it is possible to place them within a certain time frame. The tentative period of the Vedic *Samhitās* and the *Brāhmaṇas* is 1400B.C. to 1000B.C. The *Śrauta Sūtras* especially the ones of *Āpastamba*, *Asvalayana*, *Baudhāyana*, *Katyayana*, *Śāṅkhyāyana* and *Latyayana* and others are dated roughly from 800B.C. to 400B.C.

IV

The first chapter of the book presents a detailed description of the sacrifices the *Mahābhārata* portrays. These are Janamejaya’s *sarpasattra*, Drupada’s sacrifice to obtain a son, the *rājasūya* of Yudishthira, the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice of Duryodhana and the *aśvamedha* of Yudhisthira. The epic begins with Janamejaya’s *sarpasattra* or snake sacrifice which is described in the *Ādi Parvan*. Janamejaya wished to avenge his father Parikṣit’s death by the snake Taksaka. He decided to perform a sacrifice which, if carried out properly, would compel all the snakes of the world to drop into the sacrificial fire. Taksaka was saved the very last moment through the intervention of a brāhmaṇa named

³³ M. Witzel, “The Development of the Vedic Canon and its Schools: The Social and Political Milieu”, *Inside the Texts Beyond the Texts: New Approaches to the study of the Vedas*, M. Witzel (ed.), Harvard Oriental Series Opera Minora, Vol 2, Cambridge, 1997, p. 294.

Āstika, who had descended from the snakes. The context of the snake sacrifice is very different from the other sacrifices, as it involves only the kṣatriyas and the learned brāhmaṇas. It is not a happy ceremonial occasion like the other sacrifices. On the contrary, it is very mysterious and invokes the element of fear in the reader. Drupada wished to obtain a son for the destruction of Droṇa. For that purpose, he performed a sacrifice, out of which Dr̥ṣṭadyumna and Draupadī were born. The *Sabha Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* describes the *rājasūya* of Yudhiṣṭhira. The sacrifice began after Yudhisthira had the ‘whole earth’ under his control and had acquired a vast amount of wealth through his conquests. He intended to distribute that wealth and celebrate the *rājasūya* with the consent of Kṛṣṇa, so that he could enjoy “the fruit of an excellent sacrifice”. He gave two reasons for the performance of this sacrifice, to be cleansed of his sins and to be installed on the throne along with his brothers. This prompted Duryodhana to perform a sacrifice, which was equivalent in merit to the *rājasūya*. This is the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice. The last royal sacrifice of the epic is the *aśvamedha* of Yudhisthira. This was performed right after the great battle of Kuruksetra, when Yudhisthira grieved the death of his cousins and decided to perform the horse sacrifice on Vyāsa’s advice for the expiation of his sins.

The second chapter deals with the question of political organization of society. I will discuss how rituals such as these brought out divisions in society and yet helped to maintain a balance between them. Both these sacrifices involve performance of rites which symbolize the acquisition of land. While the sacrificial horse is set free to roam about in territories of other kings accompanied by royal representatives in the case of the

aśvamedha, the *rājasūya* has the provision for the symbolic conquest of the four quarters of the earth and due anointment of the king. The brāhmaṇas helped the king to legitimise his power. The brāhmaṇas, officiating as priests, asserted the position of the king in front of the society. The relationship between these two groups will be explored in this chapter. The assertion of royal status required an extravagant show in presence of all his subjects and the representatives of other kingdoms. The sacrificial ceremony was probably held in such an elaborate manner primarily to satisfy this purpose. The invitees at the ceremony were treated according to their status which reflects the patterns of *varṇa* divided society. These royal ceremonies created opportunities for the subjects to come together and obtain a sense of a community. They were formal, significant and symbolically intended. Religion is an organized whole, within which individuals feel bound to each other by means of a common faith and when they practise the rites connected to them it helps to reassert that common belief (Durkheim). These also allowed the ruling class to connect with the people while making a display of their authority.

The third chapter brings out the economic aspects of the sacrificial ceremonies. Sacrificial ceremonies like the *rājasūya* and the *aśvamedha* involved mobilization of enormous wealth on part of the *yajamāna*, i.e., the king. Not only did the king spend generously from the royal treasury, the invited kings also brought in vast amounts of wealth in the form of presents for the host king. The royal sacrifices were, therefore, a platform for exchange of gifts. From the type of gifts brought by the invitees at the sacrificial ceremony, one can also obtain an idea of the structure of society. M. Mauss, in his study of gifts, addressed the question of reciprocity in the element of gift-giving. The

concept of gift-exchange, as is evident in these sacrifices, is typical of societies, which have moved beyond the stage of primitive exchange but not yet arrived at the stage of market and money economy. Gift-making ensures the circulation of goods and acts as a symbol of status. Sacrifice, which is generally assumed to be a form of contract using the victim (object of sacrifice) as a gift to the divine, also involves gift-giving in the society. Therefore gift-giving was supposed to operate at two levels, one between the divine and profane worlds, and the other between all strata of the profane world. A third type of gift-giving takes place between the brāhmaṇa and the *yajamāna*, in the form of *dāna* and *dakṣhiṇā* (gifts and fees). These economic aspects of the sacrifice will be looked into in this chapter.

The fourth chapter will focus on gender relations that were brought about by the organization and performance of the sacrifice. A particular provision in the ritual procedure of the *asvamedha* requires the chief queen to have symbolic intercourse with the dead horse. This is elaborately prescribed in the *Brāhmaṇa* and *Śrauta* texts and mention of it is also found in the epic. Royal sacrifices also demanded involvement of women from different groups of society, who were engaged in dialogue with the priests along with the queens. The significance of these and other related issues will be discussed in this chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

ROYAL SACRIFICES IN THE
MAHĀBHĀRATA

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This chapter describes the five royal sacrifices that were performed in the *Mahābhārata*. The epic starts with Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. After that we come across Drupada's sacrifice in order to obtain a son. These two sacrifices were done for the purpose of seeking revenge. Three other sacrificial rituals are spoken of, which were starkly different from the first two. It started with the royal consecration of Yudhiṣṭhira. Duryodhana wished to perform another *rājasūya*, but was not allowed to do so as long as Yudhisthira lived. So a *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice was performed by him. After the Kuruksetra war Yudhisthira grieved the death of his brothers, felt guilty and wished to cleanse himself of the sins committed. So the *asvamedha* or horse sacrifice was performed. These five sacrifices are performed by certain kings in the epic and are described in detail. There are other royal sacrifices that are mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. I have not spoken about them here, as there are no details following them, which makes them a passing reference only. The *Mahābhārata* also has references to sacrifices performed by brāhmaṇas. They have not been taken into account, as they do not fall within the ambit of this work.

This chapter does not delve into the socio-political and economic aspects of the sacrificial rituals. It describes each sacrifice, as it is embedded in the narrative of epic. That is to say the story of each sacrifice is told in this chapter. There is an attempt to compare the descriptions of the sacrifices with the prescriptive texts. The text especially used for this purpose is the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. There is an attempt to see how the descriptions of the epic match the prescriptions of the sacred literature.

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I.I

A ritual start

“ Thereafter the ritual unrolled according to the rules of a Snake Session. Each of the priests went religiously about his own task. All had donned black robes, and with their eyes red from the smoke, they made the oblations with the proper spells into the fire of sacrifice. ”³⁴

With Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice we enter the world of the *Mahābhārata*. Along with the account of the sacrifice, we are introduced to many other people, who form a part of this episode, with stories that *Rishi* Lomaharshana’s son, Ugrashravas³⁵ tells the great sages present at the hermitage of Naimisharanya. Ugrashravas starts the story by telling the audience his source of knowledge. He says, “I was at the Snake Sacrifice of the great spirited royal seer Janamejaya, son of Parikṣit, where Vaisampayana recounted all manner of auspicious tales of events, just as they had happened, in the presence of the king. They were tales that had first been recited by Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayana.”³⁶ The king Parikṣit, who ruled over the hereditary kingdom of the Kurus, met his death on account of the snake Takshaka. He was cursed to be bitten by Takshaka by Sringi, the son of a *rishi*, who the king had once insulted.³⁷ The king, according to the curse, was bitten by

³⁴ 47.15-20, *The Book of the Beginning, The Mahābhārata*, translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973.

³⁵ Popularly known as Sauti in the narrative of the *Mahābhārata*.

³⁶ 1.5-10, *The Book of the Beginning*.

³⁷ “This king of the world went about shooting deer, swine, hyena, buffalo, and other kinds of wild beasts. One day he shot a deer with a smooth arrow and, slinging his bow over his back, stepped into dense jungle. Like the lord Rudra after he had shot the beast of sacrifice in heaven, he pursued it bow in hand, searching everywhere. For no deer he had shot had ever run alive in the forest – this surely was a portent of King Parikṣit’s own death, that a deer he had shot should be lost. So this deer lured him deep into the forest, until the king, weary and thirsty, came upon a hermit in the woods. He was sitting in a cow pasture, where he fed himself on the

the snake and died.³⁸ On hearing the way Takshaka had killed his father, Janamejaya devised a way for the destruction of snakes and avenge Parikshit's death. He then expressed his desire for performing a snake-sacrifice and summoned his house priests for advice. The priests said, "Sire, there is a great Session that the Gods have devised for you. The Ancient Lore describes it with the name of the Session of the Snakes. No one but you, overlord of men, can be the offerer of this Session, thus declare the masters of

plentiful froth that trickled from the mouths of suckling calves. The king quickly ran to that hermit of strict vows, raised his bow, and being hungry and tired, put his question to him: 'Bhob Brahmin! I am King Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu. I shot a deer, and it disappeared. Have you chanced to see it?' But the hermit gave him no answer, for he was under a vow of silence then. The king became angry and picked up a dead snake with the end of his bow, draped it around the hermit's neck, and gazed at him. He still did not say anything to him whether good or bad. The king had spent his anger and was troubled to see the hermit in that state. Thereupon he went to his city, but the seer remained as he was. . . . When the prickly and ill tempered Srngin heard that his father was carrying a corpse, he was consumed with rage. . . . When the seer's son heard this, he stiffened like a pillar of the sky; his eyes bloodshot with anger and fairly blazing with rage, he was seized with fury. And glaring with heat, prey to vehemence of his anger, he touched water and cursed the king there and then. Srngin said 'That foul and evil king who has thrown a dead snake on my father's shoulder, aged and feeble though he is, him the great snake Taksaka, enraged and virulent with all the fury of his venom, shall hurl into the kingdom of Yama within seven nights from now, at the prompting of my word – that despiser of the Brahmins and disgrace of his line of Kurus!' 36.10-25 to 37.1-15, *The Book of the Beginning*.

³⁸ "The snakes followed the orders that Takshaka had given them and brought *darbha* grass, water and fruits to the king. And that powerful Indra among kings accepted everything. 'Now go', he said to them, when they had performed their rites. When the snakes disguised as ascetics, had departed, the king of men said to his ministers and friends: 'Now all of you must eat with me of this sweet fruit that the ascetics have presented!' As the king was about to eat the fruit with his ministers, O Saunaka, there appeared a small worm in the fruit he had taken, quiet tiny with black eyes and colour of copper. Picking it up, the grand king said to his ministers, 'The sun is setting, and I have no more danger to fear from poison. Now let the hermit's word come true – this worm may bite me! It shall be Taksaka himself, so that a lie be averted!' The councillors, prompted by Time, applauded him. And having spoken, the king placed the little worm on his throat and, doomed to die and robbed of his senses, gave a quick laugh. He was still laughing when Taksaka coiled around him – he had come out of the fruit that the king had been given. When the ministers saw their king entangled in the Snake's coils, their faces paled and they all wept with utter sorrow. And, hearing his hissing, the ministers began to flee; grief-stricken, they saw that wondrous Naga, the King of Snakes Taksaka, fly through the sky, a lotus-coloured streak that parted the hair of heaven." 39.25-30 to 40.1-5, *The Book of the Beginning*.

the Lore; and we possess this rite”³⁹ It was then agreed that a Snake- sacrifice would be performed and the preparations for the same started.⁴⁰ We are then directly taken to the performance of the sacrifice with the priests uttering *mantras*. We are told that the snakes were terrified and trembling with fear on account of the sacrifice:

“The snakes began to drop into the blazing flames, writhing and wretched and crying out to one another. They darted and hissed wildly coiled about with tails and heads as they fell into the radiant fire – white, black, blue, old, and young – screeching terrifying screams, they fell into the high blazing flames, hundreds of thousands and millions and tens of millions of the Snakes died powerless, O best of Brahmins, some tiny like mice, others fat like elephant trunks, or huge and strong like rutting bull elephants, all sorts of them in vast numbers, manycolored, poisonous, and loathsome, mordacious and powerful, they fell into the fire, punished by their mother’s curse.”⁴¹

We can well imagine the fear instigating nature of the sacrifice from the above descriptions. The atmosphere in the sacrificial grounds was filled with “a loud stench”⁴² due to the continuous burning of the snakes.

Takshaka, on hearing of the sacrifice, went to Indra to seek protection. Indra agreed to save him and let him hide in his home. Takshaka lived there in joy and happiness. Now, the king of snakes, Vāsuki, became very sad and worried due to the death of the snakes.

³⁹ 47.5-10, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁴⁰ “Upon this, the sacrificial priests measured out the terrain according to the scriptures to prepare the sanctuary of the sacrifice in the prescribed manner since they were all experts in ritual knowledge and most fully resolved. The oblation grounds, which were decked with the greatest opulence and attended by multitudes of Brahmins, were laid out well by the priests and further enriched with abundant riches and rice. After measuring the sacrificial terrain, as the precepts demanded it, they consecrated the king for the receiving of the Session of the Snakes.” 47.10-15, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁴¹ 47.20-25, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁴² 48.10, *The Book of the Beginning*.

He requested his sister, Jaratkāru, to ask her son Āstika to do something to save her and her brother Vāsuki from falling into the sacrificial fire.⁴³ So Āstika set forth to Janamejaya's sacrifice. Āstika pleased the king with praises and blessings and on hearing them Janamejaya bestowed him a boon. In the meanwhile, Indra had come to the sacrifice on being summoned by the sacrificial priests. The snake Takshaka hid himself inside Indra's garments. In the sacrificial grounds:

"Janamejaya said 'Priests! If Takṣaka the Snake is in Indra's keeping, then hurl him into the fire with Indra himself!' The priests said 'Takṣaka is coming soon now, O king, and he will be in your power. Already we hear his mighty roar as he hisses from fear! The Thunderbolt-Wielder has let him go, he falls from his lap; his body limp from our spells, he comes writhing in the sky, witless, hissing his harsh sighs.'⁴⁴

The *rishis* were now satisfied that Takshaka had come under their control and asked the king to grant the boon to Āstika. Just as Takshaka was about to fall into the fire, Āstika said, "If thou givest me a boon, then, Janamejaya, I choose that your Session be stopped and no more Snakes come down."⁴⁵ Though the king offered him wealth and riches in lieu of his wish, Āstika stayed unmoved and asked for the lives of his maternal relatives to be saved. Therefore realizing that there was no other option, the *sadasyas* present in the sacrifice told the king to grant Āstika his promised boon, which was to end the snake sacrifice.

⁴³ Jaratkāru had asked her son Āstika to save the snakes as she said that she was bestowed to Āstika's father by her brother for the sake of saving the snakes from a curse by the mother of all snakes, Kadrū which was approved by Brahmā. She said "When the sovereign of the Snakes Vasuki heard this promise, he gave me, oh my godlike son, to your great-spirited father, well before the event was to befall; and your father begot you on me. The time has come now, save us from our danger, save my brother from the fire! Let it not remain fruitless that I was given to your father – or think you otherwise?" 49.10-15, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁴⁴ 51.10-15, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁴⁵ 51.15, *The Book of the Beginning*.

After this the sacrifice of Janamejaya was stopped. It is said that “King Janamejaya Bhārata was greatly pleased and gave to the priests and *sadasyas* who had gathered there fees of riches by the hundred and thousands. Also he gave much wealth to the Bard Lohitākṣa, the builder who had predicted that a brahmin would become the cause that the sacrifice was stopped. Thereafter, according to the ritual that is found in the Rules, he performed the concluding ablutions”⁴⁶

The sacrifice of Janamejaya introduces us to the realm of violence which is integral to the world of sacrifice and the society of the *Mahābhārata*. It has been argued by C. Z. Minkowski that the narrative technique of the *Mahābhārata* is influenced by the principles of organization of the Vedic sacrifices or *yajñas*. The frame stories of the *Mahābhārata* and the whole epic itself makes use of sustained embedding, which is very similar to the embedding properties of *śrauta* sacrifices.⁴⁷ The epic opens with an incomplete sacrifice. We are not sure which is the prescriptive text for the Snake sacrifice, but J. Gonda has mentioned a ritual called the *śravaṇā(karman)* or *sarpabali* which is performed by householders, motivated by the fear of snakes, to propitiate them.⁴⁸ It seems from the descriptions that it is not a sacrificial ritual at all. It is mentioned in various *Grhyasūtras* and does not involve any sacrificial killing. It is rather

⁴⁶ 53.10-15, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁴⁷ C.Z. Minkowski, *Janamejaya's Satra and Ritual Structure*, Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol.109 No.3 (July-Sep 1989) pp.401-420.

⁴⁸ J. Gonda, *Vedic Ritual*, E.J. Brill, Leiden-Koln, 1980, pp. 422-423.

a *grhya* or a household rite, generally performed in the rainy season.⁴⁹ A mention of *sarpasattra* is found in the *Śrauta Sūtras*.⁵⁰ But, there too it does not involve any killings of snakes. Rather it is made up of ordinary ritual components of *sattras*, i.e. Soma sacrifices. The *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* mentions: “[A]t the *sattra* of the serpents an overnight rite is at the beginning and at the end, *agnistomas* are in the middle, the year consists throughout of tens and tens, the *visuvat* is twelve-versed.”⁵¹ The sacrifice of Janamejaya, moreover, is not a celebrative affair. It is dark and gloomy and as the descriptions say the atmosphere is full of stench. Though this is a royal sacrifice, there is no element of establishing royal power in it – its purpose is solely revenge. Therefore we can look at this sacrifice as an entry point to the epic as well as the sacrificial realm that it upholds.

I.II

The Great Sacrifice of Drupada

*“Thereupon a young maiden arose from the center of the alter...”*⁵²

⁴⁹ “One pays homage and sacrifices to the various classes of serpents, inviting them to wash, comb etc. themselves. Then *balis* (of various victuals, of barley-flour are offered to the serpents: AsvG. 10 (‘to me the serpents should do no harm’);” Ibid.

⁵⁰ The *Pañcaviṅśa Brāhmaṇa* (25.15), the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* (17.18), the *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* (23.14.18-9), the *Mānava Śrautasūtra* (9.5.4.37-9), the *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra* (24.4.50), the *Āśvalāyana Śrautasūtra* (12.5.1-5) and the *Lāṭyāyana Śrautasūtra* (10.20.10-2) all mention the *sarpasattra*. Cited in Christopher Minkowski, “Snakes, *Sattras*, and the *Mahabharata*”, Arvind Sharma (ed.), *Essays on the Mahabharata*, [J. Bronkhorst (ed.), Brill’s Indological Library, Vol. I], E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1991, p. 386.

⁵¹ XIII.23.6-8, *The Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtra*, translated by W. Caland, edited with an Introduction by Lokesh Chandra, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1980.

⁵² 155.40, *The Book of the Beginning*.

The king of the Pāñcālas, Drupada, was once insulted by Droṇa and hence wished his destruction.⁵³ He wanted to obtain a son by means of a sacrificial ritual who could avenge the disrespect that Droṇa had dared to show him. Drupada wandered about in many settlements of learned brāhmaṇas searching for one who was perfect to perform a ritual like this. At last he found two very learned brāhmaṇas – Yāja and Upayāja. After praising each of them, he asked the younger one, Upayāja, “Brahmin, is there a ritual by which I could beget a son for the destruction of Droṇa? If there is, I shall give you a myriad cows for its performance, or whatever else might please your heart..”⁵⁴ Drupada continued to court him in order to persuade him and after a year Upayāja suggested to the king that his elder brother Yāja was best suited to act as his priest. The king approached Yāja and he consented and started to prepare for the sacrifice.

⁵³ “From it the boy Droṇa was born to that sage, and he learned all the Vedas and their branches. Bharadvaja had a friend, a king by the name of Prsata, to whom a son had been born, Drupada. This Drupada went all the time to the hermitage, and the bull like baron played and did his studies with Drona. When Prsata died, Drupada became king....Joyously he received from Rama (Parasu Rama) that most highly regarded Brahma weapon, which is the best that men have. Thereupon the majestic Droṇa approached Drupada, and the tigerlike man said, ‘Recognize me, your friend!’ Drupada said, ‘No man of learning is a friend to the unlearned, no man with a chariot to one who has none, no king to a man who is not. An old friend – who needs him?’ The sage thereupon made up his mind against the Pancalya, and he went to the Elephant City of the chiefs of the Kurus. When he arrived there, Bhiṣma collected his grandsons and all kinds of treasure, and entrusted them as pupils to the wise Droṇa, who had arrived. Wise Droṇa assembled all his pupils and wishing Drupada ill, he said to them, ‘For my teacher’s fee there is something that is on my mind. When you have mastered weaponry, you shall give it to me; promise me that, blameless boys!’ When all the Pāṇḍavas had mastered the weapons and had finished the labor of study, Droṇa again spoke of his fee: ‘In Chattravati there is a king by the name of Drupada Parsata. Take his kingdom away from him and give it to me without delay!’ Thereupon the five sons of Pandu defeated Drupada in battle, and they fettered him with his ministers and showed him to Droṇa. Droṇa said, ‘Once more O king of men, I seek your friendship. You know, no king can be a friend to a man who is not! Therefore, Yajñasena, I have toiled for your kingdom. You shall be king on the southern bank of the Ganges, and I north of the river. That great insult was never to leave the king’s mind for an instant. He became dispirited and lean.’ 154.1-25, *The Book of the Beginning*

⁵⁴ 154.10, *The Book of the Beginning*

The sage instructed the king in the sacrificial rites for obtaining the son. He said, “The son that you desire, of great prowess and splendor and might, such a son shall be vouchsafed you.”⁵⁵ At the end of the offering, Yāja asked the queen to come to the place where the sacrifice was being held. As the queen was not prepared, Yāja offered the well-cooked oblation in the fire.

“And from the sacrificial fire there arose a youth who resembled a God, of the color of fire and terrifying aspect, wearing a diadem and a splendid shield, armed with sword, bow, and arrow, raising many battle cries. He ascended a superb chariot and went forth on it, and the Pāñcālas excitedly roared their approval. ‘This fear averting prince, who shall raise the fame of the Pāñcālas and dispel the king’s grievance, has been born for the destruction of Droṇa.’; thus spoke a great being invisible in the sky. Thereupon a young maiden arose from the center of the altar, the well-favored and beautiful daughter of the Pāñcālas, heart-fetching, with a waist shaped like an altar. She was dark, with eyes like lotus petals, her hair glossy black and curling – a lovely Goddess who had chosen a human form. The fragrance of blue lotuses wafted from her to the distance of a league, the shape she bore was magnificent, and no one was her peer on earth. And over the full-hipped maiden as soon as she was born the disembodied voice spoke: ‘Superb among women, the Dark Woman shall lead the baronage to its doom. The fair-waisted maiden shall in time accomplish the purpose of the Gods, and because of her, great danger shall arise for the barons.’ Hearing this, all the Pāñcālas roared like a pride of lions, and earth was unable to hold them so full of joy.”⁵⁶

After Drupada had his twin children, the brahmanas gave names to them. The son for his boldness, audacity and birth from Light, was called Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna. The daughter was named Kṛṣṇā for her dark complexion.

⁵⁵ 155.30-35, *The Book of the Beginning*.

⁵⁶ 155.35-45, *The Book of the Beginning*.

The motive of Drupada's sacrifice is vengeance of the king towards Droṇa. The aim of the sacrifice is not just to obtain a son, but a son who would be responsible for Droṇa's death. Thus, in a sense, the underlying theme of violence is present in this ritual as well. After the son when the daughter comes out of the alter, it was prophesied that she would be responsible for the destruction of the Kurus. The sacrifice in a way prophesied the beginning of a battle. And that is the essence of all sacrificial rituals.

I.III

The Royal Consecration

*Yudhiṣṭhira's councillors said "By means of this rite, through which the consecrated king attains to the stature of Varuna, he desires the full stature of a universal sovereign, scion of Kuru."*⁵⁷

After taking advice from his councillors on the performance the royal consecration, Yudhiṣṭhira sought approval from Kṛṣṇa.⁵⁸ Kṛṣṇa informed him of a powerful king named Jarāsaṃdha⁵⁹, who had established supreme status among other contemporary rulers and that many of them, like the mighty Śiśupāla, had taken his side. He said to Yudhiṣṭhira, "You who possess at all times the qualities of a universal sovereign, best of

⁵⁷ 2(21).12.10-13, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahabharata*, translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975.

⁵⁸ "I wish to perform the Royal Consecration. But you know full well that it cannot be achieved by the mere wishing for it. That king finds the Royal Consecration in whom everything is found, who is honoured everywhere and is the sovereign of all. My friends have said in assembly that I should perform the Royal Consecration; my final decision will be in accordance with your advice, Kṛṣṇa." 2(21).12.35-40, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

⁵⁹ "Jarāsaṃdha, has from his birth attained to universal sovereignty.."2(21).13.7, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

Bhāratas, can make yourself the sovereign of the baronage. But in my judgement, you cannot achieve the Royal Consecration as long as the mighty Jarasandha is alive.”⁶⁰ Kṛṣṇa then advised him to kill Jarasandha and later Jarasandha was killed by Bhīma.⁶¹ With Yudhiṣṭhira’s permission, the four younger Pāṇḍavas went out to conquer the world – Arjuna left for the north, Bhīma the east, Sahadeva the south while Nakula went west. They all returned victorious with the booty and made their brother Yudhisthira proud.

The sacrifice could now be performed and Yudhiṣṭhira asks Sahadeva and his councillors to collect all the sacrificial materials required. The sacrificial spot and shelters for the invitees were built. Invitations were sent out to all in the kingdoms.⁶² Yudhiṣṭhira’s brothers from Hastinapur along with Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Vidura and Kṛpa were invited. The descriptions of the arrangements are elaborate and everyone is said to be very satisfied and happy.

On the day of the ceremony of the Uñction, the brāhmaṇas, kings and the great seers led by Narada, came to the altar to pay their respects to Yudhiṣṭhira. They sat there as the

⁶⁰ 2(21).13.60, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

⁶¹ Kṛṣṇa suggests that he himself undertake a raid on Jarasandha with Bhīma and Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira agrees to his proposal. They travel to Magadha and go to Jarasandha’s palace. Kṛṣṇa tells him of his crime of imprisoning defeated kings and challenges him. Jarasandha accepts his challenge and wrestles with Bhīma. The wrestling goes on for thirteen days and on the fourteenth day Jarasandha is exhausted and Kṛṣṇa exhorts Bhīma. At his prompting Bhīma kills and tramples Jarasandha. After this Kṛṣṇa yokes Jarasandha’s chariot and sets the kings free telling them to support Yudhiṣṭhira’s Royal Consecration. 2(22).18-22, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

⁶² “Sahadeva on the king’s instruction dispatched the messengers saying ‘Invite in the kingdoms the Brahmins and landlords, and bring in the commoners and serfs who deserve honour!’ At the Pandaveya’s behest they brought the invitation to all the lords of the land, and he dispatched still more envoys.” 2(24).30.40-45, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

rites were performed one after the other. Bhīṣma then asked Yudhiṣṭhira to present guest gifts, which were honours to the kings present in the ceremony. The first gift was to be presented to the most deserving person and Bhīṣma suggested to Yudhiṣṭhira that it should be Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa accepted it according to the rules of the rite. But an unpleasant event occurred at this juncture. Śiśupāla, the king of the Cedis, refused give his consent to the honour given to Kṛṣṇa. He berated Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira in the assembly, and insulted Kṛṣṇa. Thus:

“This Vārṣṇeya does not deserve regal honour as though he were a king, Kauravya, while the great-spirited lords of the earth are present! This is no way to behave for the great-spirited Pāṇḍavas, arbitrarily to honor this Lotus-Eye, Pāṇḍava! ... It was not out of fear for the great-spirited Kaunteya that we all offered him tribute, nor out of greed to flatter him. He wanted sovereignty and proceeded according to law; so we gave him tribute and now he does not count us! ...”⁶³

There followed an argument between Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīṣma and Śiśupāla. Sahadeva said, “Is there anyone, kings, who does not tolerate that I honor Kṛṣṇa Keśava, the slayer of Keśin and of measureless prowess, I put this foot of mine on the head of any strong prince! Let him reply properly to my challenge!...”⁶⁴ Though everyone remained silent, it was evident that the kings present were angry. The ceremony of the guest gifts was completed. By then Śiśupāla had succeeded in rousing the kings and plotted to disrupt the sacrifice.

On observing this situation, Yudhiṣṭhira asked for Bhīṣma’s advice to prevent the disruption of the sacrifice. A heated dialogue ensued between Bhīṣma and Śiśupāla where Bhīṣma mentioned how Śiśupāla was destined to be killed by Kṛṣṇa from the time of his

⁶³ 2(25).34.1-15, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

⁶⁴ 2(25).36.1, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

birth. Śiśupāla's mother, an aunt of Kṛṣṇa, had asked a boon of him for the sake of her son and at that time Kṛṣṇa had said, "I shall forsooth forgive a hundred derelictions of your son, parental aunt, even though they may be capital offenses."⁶⁵ Back at the assembly, Śiśupāla continued in his outburst and started insulting Kṛṣṇa and his wife Rukmini. He was still speaking:

"...when the blessed Madhusūdana, scourge of his enemies, irately cut off his head with his discus. The strong-armed king fell like a tree that is struck by a thunderbolt... In a cloudless sky heaven rained forth and blazing lightning struck and the earth trembled, when Kṛṣṇa slew the Caidya. There were kings there who did not say a word and at these indescribable times stared at Janārdana. Others indignantly kneaded their hands. Others bit their lips, swooning with fury. But other kings secretly applauded the Vārṣṇeya. Some were enraged, others undecided."⁶⁶

The funerary rites for Śiśupāla was performed and his son was anointed the king of the Cedis. The royal consecration continued and was ended successfully by Kṛṣṇa. Finally, when Yudhiṣṭhira bathed at the removal ceremony, all congratulated him on his attaining sovereignty. The invited kings took his leave and returned to their respective kingdoms. All invitees along with Kṛṣṇa went away; only Duryodhana and Śakuni continued to live with them.

J. A. B. van Buitenen opines "the events of the *The Assembly Hall* follow fairly closely the principal moments of the very *rājasūya* ritual that is central to the book."⁶⁷ According to Brockington, the requirements of the *rājasūya* underlie the events of the *Sabhaparva*, thus providing a motive for the dice game. The game is an integral part of the ritual in the

⁶⁵ 2(26).40.20, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

⁶⁶ 2(26).42.20-30, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

⁶⁷ J. A. B. van Buitenen, (Introduction) *The book of the Assembly Hall*, *The Mahabharata*, pp.5.

epic just as much as in the prescriptive manuals.⁶⁸ The dice game must have been taken into account if we are considering the *rājasūya*, though it does not form a part of the actual ceremony. It seems that the *rājasūya* is extended over the entire *Sabhaparva*. J.C. Heesterman's first work was on the *rājasūya* and he discussed this sacrifice in detail.⁶⁹ According to Heesterman, the *rājasūya* was not a special type of sacrifice. It was rather, as the Vedic ritualist would consider, "a series of *ekahas* (one-day Soma sacrifices) alternating with *istis* (offerings of cake and porridge) and an occasional animal sacrifice, all of a common type and only modified by the simple insertion of special rites such as the unction, the chariot drive, the dicing ceremony and the use of some special formulas."⁷⁰

The epic descriptions mention the unction, but there is no reference to any animal sacrifices, though animal sacrifices were to be made according to the rules laid out. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* mentions the sacrifice of two animals, one for Aditi and the other for Maruts, in this regard.⁷¹ According to Heesterman, this animal sacrifice seems mainly concerned with the relation between the king-sacrificer and the people, as it puts Aditi on

⁶⁸ John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1998, pp. 16-17.

⁶⁹ J.C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājasūya described according to the Yajus Texts and annotated*, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ "Thereupon they seize a reddish-white (cow) which is clearly with calf, (as a victim) for Aditi. The mode of procedure regarding her is the same as that of the eight-footed barren cow. Now, Aditi being this earth, it is her embryo (child) he thereby causes him (the king) to be. The sacrificial fee for this (cow-offering) is just such a reddish-white cow that is clearly with calf. They then seize a dappled one, which is clearly with calf, (as a victim) for the Maruts. The mode of procedure regarding this one is the same. The Maruts being clans, he thereby makes him the embryo of the clans. The sacrificial fee for this (cow-offering) is just such a dappled (cow) that is clearly with calf." 5.5.2:8-9. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, translated by J. Eggeling, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1894.

a par with dominion and the Maruts with the people. It was basically intended to establish the superiority of the dominion and the king over the people. Apparently there was no animal sacrifice in Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya*. But a killing took place - the killing of Śisupāla. He was killed as he dared to question the authority of the paramount king. Though all of the assembled kings were rulers of their respective kingdoms, the one who performed the royal consecration was the supreme king, which in this case was Yudhiṣṭhira. Therefore, questioning Yudhiṣṭhira was to question the king of kings. This was something that was prohibited as the two sacrificial killings suggest. The epic says that though the other kings present were displeased over the killing of Sisupala, none of them uttered a word. They behaved like subordinate kings. And this was the whole purpose of the *rājasūya*. According to the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, the performer achieves through this sacrifice *sāmrājya* (overlordship), *bhaujya* (paramount rulership), *svārājya* (selfrule), *vairājya* (sovereignty), *pārameṣṭhya* (royal greatness), *māhārājya* (superior kind of kingship), *sārvabhaūma* (absolute power) and a very long life.⁷² Another point should be mentioned here. The White Yajur Veda expressly prescribes that the victims should be immolated as eight-legged (*astapadi*) victims.⁷³ It should also be mentioned that Sisupala was born with three eyes and four arms⁷⁴, which later fell off. Thus can Sisupala be considered the sacrificial victim for the royal consecration?

⁷² Found in N.N. Bhattacharya, *Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social Contents*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 54-55.

⁷³ 'For the special rules for an *astapadi* victim, cf. *Kātyāyana-Śrautasūtra*, 25,10,2ff.; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 4,5,2,1ff.' Cited in J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājasūya described according to the Yajus Texts and annotated*, pp. 200-201.

⁷⁴ 2.26.40.1, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

I.IV

The Vaiṣṇava Sacrifice

*Duryodhana said "When I watched the grand celebration of the Royal Consecration of the Pandavas, I was seized by a desire: fulfil it for me, son of the suta!"*⁷⁵

Yudhisthira had set Duryodhana free after he dismissed the Gandharvas during the cattle raid on Virata. Duryodhana admitted his defeat and Arjuna's triumph over them. Duryodhana related how Yudhisthira had set him free and in his shame decided to fast unto death. He opened his heart to Karṇa who suggested to him to hold a royal consecration. The house priest was called and the desire was expressed. But the priest said:

"The greatest of sacrifices cannot be performed in your family as long as Yudhisthira is alive, great Kaurava, best of kings. Also Dhṛtarāṣṭra, your long-lived father, is still alive. Therefore the rite is forbidden to you, great king. But, there is another great session, Sire, equal to the Royal Consecration. ..the sacrifice called Vaiṣṇava, which is familiar to good people. No one has offered with that one except ancient Viṣṇu. This great rite rivals that best of sacrifices, the Royal Consecration."⁷⁶

Duryodhana agreed to this proposal and ordered the preparations to begin. After the necessary arrangements for the ritual were made, Duryodhana was consecrated "according to the texts and in proper sequence."⁷⁷ The king and all his relatives were happy and the invitations to other kings, including the Pāṇḍavas, were sent out.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁵ 241.15-18, *The Book of the Forest, The Mahābhārata*, translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975.

⁷⁶ 241.25-35, *The Book of the Forest*.

⁷⁷ 242.5, *The Book of the Forest*.

⁷⁸ "Dhṛtarāṣṭra was filled with joy, and so were famed Vidura, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Kṛpa, Karṇa, and the glorious Gāndhārī. He dispatched swift envoys to invite the kings, O Indra among kings, as well as the Brahmins. They went out as ordered on fast mounts; and Duṣṣāsana said to one messenger who was starting, 'Go quickly to

Pāṇḍavas decline the invitation for the moment as they have to “keep our covenant until the thirteenth year has passed.”⁷⁹

The *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice is described as one, which many princes and brahmanas attended and were warmly welcomed. Dhṛtarāṣṭra was very happy and asked Vidura to look after the guests. “At his command sagacious and law-wise Vidura honoured all the classes according to rank, O enemy-tamer, and happily provided them with food, eatables and drink, and with fragrant garlands and manifold garments.”⁸⁰ After the ceremony was over, Duryodhana comforted his guests and distributed gifts and then bade farewell to the thousands of kings and brāhmaṇas. And there was, as is evident from the text, a discussion among common men about Duryodhana’s sacrifice. While some praised it, others did not.⁸¹ Duryodhana, after completing his duties, went inside the palace and was congratulated by Karna on the completion of the grand rite. Karṇa told him that he would applaud him again when the Pāṇḍavas have been killed in battle and he shall offer the royal consecration. To this Duryodhana replied, “You speak the truth hero: when the evil-

Dvaitavana, and invite the evil Pāṇḍavas according to the rules, and the brahmins in that great forest.” 242.5-10, *The Book of the Forest*.

⁷⁹ 242.10-15, *The Book of the Forest*.

⁸⁰ 242.20, *The Book of the Forest*.

⁸¹ “Scattering fried rice grains and sandalwood powder over him, the people said, ‘By good fortune, O king, has your rite been completed without hindrance.’ But other garrulous men told the king, ‘Your rite does not match the sacrifice of Yudhisthira! It does not equal a sixteenth fraction of his rite!’ So did some talkative men speak to their king. His friends, however said, ‘Your rite excels all others! Yayāti, Nahuṣa, Māndhātara, and Bharata have all gone to heaven when they were sanctified by offering up this rite!’” 243.1-5, *The Book of the Forest*.

spirited Pāṇḍavas have been killed, best of men, and the great rite of the royal consecration has been obtained, then you shall congratulate me again!”⁸²

In this sacrifice we find an equivalent of the royal consecration. But there is an element of contest too. Though it is equal in merits to the *rājasūya*, it is not the *rājasūya*. This would remind one of the conflict referred to by Heesterman, which is always present in tradition and which ultimately maintains the social order.⁸³ It is indicative also of the conflicts that will further arise in the epic on the issue of kingship. Therefore this sacrifice seems to be a moment in the era of the epic, which gives a direction to the flow of the narrative.

I.V

The Horse Sacrifice

“After cutting that horse into pieces, conformably to scriptural directions, they caused Draupadī of great intelligence, who possessed of the three requisites of mantras, things, and devotion, to sit near the divided animal.”⁸⁴

After the great battle at Kuruksetra, where many brothers and relatives of the Pandavas were killed, Yudhisthira was overwhelmed with grief. Vyāsa suggested that he should perform sacrifices to purify his sins and suggested the horse sacrifice along with certain others like the *rājasūya*, *sarvamedha* and *naramedha*. Yudhisthira agreed to Vyāsa’s

⁸² 243.10-15, *The Book of the Forest*.

⁸³ J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, p.2.

⁸⁴ Section LXXXIX, *The Asvamedha Parva*, *The Mahabharata* of Krishna-Dwipayana Vyāsa, Translated into English from Sanskrit by P.C. Roy, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1970, p. 170.

suggestion but said that a sacrifice like the *asvamedha* required an enormous amount of wealth, which was impossible for him to mobilise at that time.⁸⁵ Vyāsa replied, “This treasury (now) exhausted, shall be full. O son of Pritha, in the mountain Himavat there is gold which had been left behind by Brāhmaṇas at the sacrifice of the high-souled Marutta.”⁸⁶ The Pāṇḍavas set out to acquire that wealth and after observing various rites, finally obtained possession of it. With the gold, they returned to their capital.

With Vyāsa’s permission, Yudhiṣṭhira started to make arrangements for the sacrifice. The sacrificial horse was let loose for roaming around the earth according to its will, accompanied by Arjuna along with many brāhmaṇas and kshatriyas. When Yudhiṣṭhira heard that the sacrificial horse has turned back after its wanderings, he asked Bhīma to look for a sacrificial spot on consultation with the brahmanas.⁸⁷ Bhīma followed the king’s orders. To Yudhiṣṭhira’s delight, Arjuna returned after fighting many battles with various kings and tribes.

⁸⁵ “Yudhiṣṭhira replied:- ‘Beyond a doubt, the Horse-sacrifice purifieth princes. But I have a purpose of which it behoveth thee to hear. Having caused this huge carnage of kindred, I cannot, O best of the regenerate ones, dispense gifts even on a small scale; I have no wealth to give. Nor can I for wealth solicit these juvenile sons of kings, staying in sorry plight, with their wounds yet green, and undergoing suffering. How, O foremost of twice born ones, having myself destroyed the Earth can I, overcome by sorrow, levy dues for celebrating a sacrifice?...In this sacrifice, the Earth is the Dakṣiṇa: this is the rule that is prescribed in the first instance.’” Section III, *The Asvamedha Parva*, pp. 3-4.

⁸⁶ Section III, *The Asvamedha Parva*, p.4.

⁸⁷ “Thy younger brother, O Bhūmasena, is coming back with the horse. I have learnt this from those men who had followed Arjuna. The time (for the sacrifice) is come. The sacrificial horse is near. The day of full moon of Magha is at hand. The month is about to expire, O Vrikodara. Let therefore, learned brahmanas conversant with the Vedas look for a sacrificial spot for the successful accomplishment of the Horse-sacrifice.” Section LXXXV, *The Asvamedha Parva*, p.162.

The sacrificial rites began with the priests conducting these in accordance with the scriptures. The text says:

“Those foremost of regenerate persons followed the procedure as laid down (in the scriptures) and as it should be followed in those points about which no directions are given. Those best of regenerate ones, having first performed the rite called *Pravargya*, or otherwise called *Dharma*, then duly went through the rite called *Abhishava*, O king. Those foremost of Soma-drinkers, O monarch, extracting the juice of Soma, then performed the *Savana* rite following the injunctions of the scriptures.”⁸⁸

A description of the setting up of the sacrificial stakes and a *chayana* follow.⁸⁹ The animals were then tied to the stakes. The text mentions:

“Following the injunctions of the scriptures, the priests possessed of great learning then duly tied to the stakes both animals and birds, assigning each to its particular deity. Bulls, possessed of such qualifications as are mentioned in the scriptures, and aquatic animals were properly tied to the stakes after the rites relating to the sacrificial fire had been performed. In that sacrifice of the high-souled son of Kunti, three hundred animals were tied to the stakes set up, including that foremost of steeds.”⁹⁰

It is mentioned that *rishis* and *brāhmaṇas* were present and the Gandharvas singing and Apsaras were dancing in merriment. Then the ritual killing of the animals then took place.

“Having cooked, according to due rites, the other excellent animals that were sacrificed, the priests then sacrificed, agreeably to the injunctions of the scriptures, that steed (which had wandered over the whole world). After cutting that horse into pieces, conformably to scriptural directions, they caused Draupadi of

⁸⁸ Section LXXXVIII, *The Aswamedha Parva*, p.168.

⁸⁹ “When the time came for erecting the sacrificial stake, O chief of Bharata race, six stakes were set up that were made of Vilwa, six that were made of Khadira, and six that were made of Saravavarin. Two stakes were set up by the priests that were made of Devadaru in that sacrifice of the Kuru king, and one that was made of Sleshmataka....A number of golden bricks were made for constructing therewith a *Chayana*. ..The Chayana measured eight and ten cubits and four stories or lairs. A golden bird, of the shape of Garuda, was then made, having three angles.” Section LXXXVIII, *The Aswamedha Parva*, pp. 168-169.

⁹⁰ Section LXXXVIII, *The Aswamedha Parva*, p. 169.

great intelligence, who was possessed of the three requisites of *mantras*, things, and devotion, to sit near the divided animal. The brahmanas then with cool minds, taking up the marrow of that steed, cooked it duly, O chief of Bharata's race. King Yudhiṣṭhira the just, with all his younger brothers, then smelled, agreeably to the scriptures, the smoke, capable of cleansing one from every sin, of the marrow that was thus cooked. The remaining limbs, O king, of that horse, were poured into fire by the sixteen sacrificial priests possessed of great wisdom."⁹¹

The sacrifice was completed successfully and Yudhiṣṭhira gave a thousand crores of golden *nishkas* to the brahmanas, and to Vyāsa he gave 'the entire earth' as *dakshina*. Vyasa accepted it and returned it to Yudhisthira, asking for gold as *dakshina* for the brāhmaṇas. Yudhiṣṭhira bathed at the conclusion of the sacrifice and got cleansed of his sins.

The *Aśvamedha* or horse-sacrifice is one of the most elaborate sacrifices mentioned in the early Vedic literature, the epics, the inscriptions and the coins. The sacrifice seems to have changed over time. In the *Rgveda* it is primarily an eating ritual.⁹² But, according to N.N. Bhattacharya even the sacrifice mentioned in the *Rgveda* cannot be taken as its original form.⁹³ The *Atharvaveda* regards the *aśvamedha*, *rājasūya*, *vājapeya*, the *sattras* and several other sacrifices as *utsanna* or out of vogue. The Brāhmaṇa literature offers a quiet different picture of the *Aśvamedha*. Here, there is a marked political flavour to the sacrifice. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* has a list of kings and princes who performed this

⁹¹ Section LXXXIX, *The Aśvamedha Parva*, p. 170.

⁹² There are two hymns dealing with the *Aśvamedha* in the *Rgveda*. RV. I. 162-163.

⁹³ N.N. Bhattacharya, *Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social Contents*, pp. 4-5.

sacrifice.⁹⁴ Julius Eggeling, commenting on the portrayal of the *aśvamedha* in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, writes “.. the *aśvamedha* is not a mere sacrifice or a series of offerings, but it is rather a great state function in which the religious and sacrificial element is closely and deftly interwoven with a varied programme of secular ceremonies..”⁹⁵ A look at Yudhiṣṭhira’s horse sacrifice reminds us of Eggeling’s statement.

The purpose of performing the horse sacrifice seems to have differed in various cases. For instance, in the *Bala Kanda* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* the purpose of Dasaratha’s *aśvamedha* was to obtain progeny.⁹⁶ In the *Uttara Kanda* of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there is a description of a horse-sacrifice by Rāma, the purpose of which is not too clear, except that Rāma was guided by tradition and dharma. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states that the purpose of the *aśvamedha* is to fulfil all desires⁹⁷ and leaves it open. But not every ruler could perform the *aśvamedha*. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* mentions that kings who were consecrated with the *Aindra Mahabhiseka* could perform it.⁹⁸ Though Yudhiṣṭhira performs the

⁹⁴ XIII. 5. 4. 1-23, *The Satapatha Brahmana*.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Dasaratha said: “Grieving for the lack of a son, I know no happiness. The idea occurred to me of offering a horse-sacrifice with this object in view..” Srimad Valmiki *Ramayana*, Vol. I, translated by N. Raghunathan, Vighneswara Pub. House, Madras and Bangalore, 1981, p. 29.

⁹⁷ XIII. 4. 1. 1., *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, “..by sacrificing therewith he obtained all his desires, and attained all attainments; and, verily, whosoever performs the *Aśvamedha* sacrifice obtains all his desires and attains all attainments”.

⁹⁸ VIII. 12-13., *The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, RigVeda Brāhmaṇas: The Aitareya and Kausitaki Brāhmaṇas of the RigVeda, A.B. Keith (trans. into English), C.R. Lanman (ed.), Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 25, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971.

Aśvamedha for purification of his sins, the political aspect attached to this sacrifice is very clear. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states “Verily, the *aśvamedha* means royal sway..let him who holds the royal sway perform the horse sacrifice; for, verily, whosoever performs the horse sacrifice, without possessing power, is poured (swept) away..”⁹⁹ The *Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra* asserts that only a paramount king (*sarvabhauma raja*) could perform it (X. X. 1).¹⁰⁰ The *Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa* identifies the *Aśvamedha* with the kingdom (III. 8. 9)¹⁰¹ and in consonance with the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, states that ‘he who being weak, offers an *Aśvamedha*, is indeed thrown away..’. The territorial factor is of importance in this sacrifice, as the *dakshina* (fee) was supposed to be the whole earth. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states with regard to the sacrificial fees, “whatever there is towards the middle of the kingdom other than the property of the *Brāhmaṇa*, but including land and men, of that eastern quarter belongs to the *Hotri*, the southern to the Brahman, the western to the *Adhvaryu*, and the northern to the *Udgatri*; and the *Hotrikas* share this along with them.”¹⁰² This was the reason why Yudhisthira offered the whole earth to Vyāsa.

Elaborate descriptions for the performance of the *aśvamedha* is given in the *Mahābhārata*. It is mentioned in detail how the sacrifice was done according to the scriptures. For instance, how the sacrifice started with the various rites such as the *pravargya*, *abhishava* and *sravana*. Details are also given about the materials that the sacrificial stakes were made up of. What is striking is the details of the epic account for

⁹⁹ XIII. 1. 6. 3, The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in N.N.Bhattacharyya, *Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social Contents*, p 1.

¹⁰¹ P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra: Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law*, p. 1229.

¹⁰² XIII. 7. 1. 13, The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

example. The sacrificial stakes described in the *Mahābhārata* match completely the prescriptions in the Brāhmaṇa literature. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* prescribes the setting up of twenty-one sacrificial stakes, made of various kinds of wood, and it is done exactly like that in the *aśvamedha* of Yudhiṣṭhira.¹⁰³ We can observe that there is a strong familiarity of the authors of the epic with the Brāhmaṇa literature. With regard to the animals that were to be tied to the sacrificial stakes, the number mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* mentions talies more or less accurately with the same in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. It is prescribed:

“And, assuredly, he who spreads out the year in any other way than with the (victims) of the set of eleven (stakes) is deprived of his offspring (or subjects) and cattle, and fails to reach heaven. This set of eleven (stakes), indeed is just heaven and the set of eleven (stakes) means offspring (or people) and cattle;..Pragapati created the Virag; when created, it went away from him, and entered the horse meet for sacrifice. He followed it up with sets of ten (beasts). He found it, and having found it, he took possession of it by sets of ten: when he seizes the sets of eleven (beasts), the Sacrificer thereby takes possession of the Virag. He seizes a hundred, for man has a life of a hundred (years) and a hundred energies: vital power and energy, vigour, he thus takes to himself. Eleven decades he seizes, for the Trishtubh consists of eleven syllables, and the Trishtubh means energy, vigour: thus it is for the obtainment of energy, vigour. Eleven decades he seizes, for in an animal there are ten vital airs, and the body (trunk) is the eleventh: he thus supplies the animals with vital airs. They belong to all the gods for the completeness of the horse sacrifice, for the horse belongs to all the gods. They are of many forms, whence beasts are of many forms; they are of distinct forms, whence beasts are of distinct forms.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ ‘There are twenty-one sacrificial stakes, all of them twenty-one cubits long. The central one is of raggudala wood; on both sides thereof stand two pitudaru (deodar) ones, six of bilva wood (Aegle Marmelos) – three on this side, and three on that, - six of khadira (Acacia Catechu) wood – three on this side, three on that, - six of palasa (Butea frondosa) wood – three on this side, and three on that.’ XIII. 4. 4. 5. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

¹⁰⁴ XIII.2.5.4. Eggeling in his footnotes for this verse explains ‘After the 349 domesticated animals have been secured to the stakes, sets of thirteen wild beasts are placed on the (twenty) spaces between the (twenty-one)

The emphasis on the 'scriptures' is something one cannot overlook in the Aśvamedha Parva of the *Mahābhārata*. This is probably suggestive of the fact that there was an increasing brāhmaṇa emphasis in the edification of the text. This was probably due to Bhṛguization.

stakes, making in all 260 wild beasts. From the 150th beast onward these amount to 111 beasts which here are called eleven decades..' The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF
THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA* SOCIETY

II.I

The territorial aspect of the state as portrayed in the royal sacrifices

“Let him settle in a country which is open and has a dry climate, where grain is abundant, which is chiefly (inhabited) by Aryans, not subject to epidemic diseases (or similar troubles), and pleasant, where the vassals are obedient and his own (people easily) find their livelihood.”- Manu¹⁰⁵

The political paramountcy of the ruler in connection with the territorial factor becomes visible during the course of the one year wandering of the sacrificial horse in the *asvamedha*. The horse is let off to roam for a year, accompanied by four hundred guards. The guards include one hundred princes deserving to be seated on couches in the presence of the king, wearing armour. The other guards are armed with swords, arrows and thick clubs according to their rank.¹⁰⁶ In the *Mahābhārata*, with the permission of Vyasa, the sacrificial horse was let loose with Arjuna to accompany it.¹⁰⁷ It is said that when Arjuna was leaving the palace with the sacrificial steed, many brāhmaṇas, having sound understanding of the Vedas, and many *kshatriyas* accompanied him at the

¹⁰⁵ *Manu* VII, 69, *The Laws of Manu*, translated with extracts from seven commentaries by G.Buhler, The Sacred Books of the East, edited by F. Max Muller, Vol. 25, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1964.

¹⁰⁶ *Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa*, III. 8. 9 in P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra: Ancient and Mediaeval Religious and Civil Law*, p. 1231.

¹⁰⁷ “Yudhiṣṭhira told Vyāsa – ‘Let arrangements be made by thee, O regenerate one, about loosening this horse for enabling it to wander over the Earth at its will. It behoveth thee, O ascetic, to say who will protect this steed while roaming over the Earth freely according to its will.’...Kṛṣṇa said – ‘He who is born after Bhīmasena, who is the foremost of all bowmen, who is called Jishnu, who is endued with great patience and capable of overcoming all resistance,-he will protect the horse. That destroyer of the Nivatakavachas is competent to conquer the whole Earth.’” Section LXXII, The *Asvamedha Parvan*, p.138.

command of Yudhiṣṭhira. The epic also mentions that the entire population of Hastinapura came out to see Arjuna set out and the crowd was so thick that it was hardly possible for people to see him. Only his bow was visible to them. This situation points out that the *aśvamedha* was no ordinary sacrifice which was being performed. Second, it was a function which the entire population, belonging to all classes and social groups, viewed as a great ceremony of honour. That is the reason why they did not wish to miss such a splendid sight. Third, it reminds us of a situation which where warriors of a particular country leave for battle with other countries. People gather to wish luck to the warriors on whom their pride depend. Thus, this is not just a huge ceremonial function, it should be called a 'state' function. And, as it has been mentioned in the previous chapters, only the paramount ruler could perform it. Therefore, we can observe the psychological attachment of the people towards their place of belonging and their king who rules over it.

After this, there is a detailed description of the battles fought by Arjuna while following the horse. The entry of the sacrificial horse into a different territory implied a challenge to the ruler of that territory. The rulers of those kingdoms were either required to challenge the supremacy of the performer of the sacrifice or to subjugate themselves to him voluntarily. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* clearly points out: "Were unfriendly men to get hold of the horse, his sacrifice would be cut in twain".¹⁰⁸ In the epic, Arjuna, who is a mighty warrior armed with celestial weapons, is assigned the duty to protect the horse. It is evident from the descriptions that the horse went around the whole peninsula, which is

¹⁰⁸ XIII. 1. 6. 3. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

referred to as “roamed over the whole earth”. Since the horse set off from Hastinapura, it started from the north and then turned towards the east, proceeding towards south and then turning west. The principal battles are mentioned by the narrator but many others were fought by Arjuna. The horse wandered in the territories¹⁰⁹ of the Trigartas, the rulers of Pragjyotisha, a clan of the Saindhavas, Manipura, Magadha, the Chedis, Kasi, Anga, Kosala, the Kiratas, the Tanganas, the Dasarnas, the Dravidas, the Andhras, the Mahishakas, hillmen of Kolwa, Dwaravati and Gandhara. After this, the horse turned back towards Hastinapura. What is particularly noticeable here is the free use of the term ‘territory’ in cases of all the kingdoms.

In the *rājasya* we can observe this issue of the ‘state’. When Yudhishthira expresses a desire to perform the sacrifice, Kṛṇṣa informs him of Jarāsaṃdha who was probably the most powerful of all kings at that time and he had to be subjugated before Yudhishthira could perform the *rājasūya* and accordingly he is killed in a duel. After this, ‘all four quarters of the world’ are conquered by the four younger Pāṇḍavas. Arjuna goes north, Bhīma sets out for the east, Sahadeva for the south and Nakula towards the west. Here a detailed description is given of the peoples and places each of them conquers.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ The list of the wanderings of the horse is in the exact way as portrayed in the epic. It clearly brings forward the directions in which the horse was moving.

¹¹⁰ Arjuna goes up to the mountains defeating many kings and chieftains, as well as Dasyus, conquers Kashmir and subjugates the Bahlikas. He reaches lake Manasa and receives horses from the Gandharvas, but he could not enter the northern Kuru country and returns to Indraprastha. Bhima goes eastwards to Pancala, Videha, Dasarna, Cedi and conquers Kosala, Ayodhya, Malla, Kasi, Matsya, Malaya, Vatsa and Nisada. He goes on to Suhma and Magadha, defeats Karna and subdues Pundra and Vanga. Sahadeva conquers Surasena, Matsya and Pataccara. Nakula conquers Rohitaka, Madra and many ‘other countries’. 2(23).23-29, *The Book of the Assembly Hall*.

There is no indication of the territorial aspect in the three other royal sacrifices portrayed in the epic. The nature and purpose of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice and Drupada's sacrifice were very different. Duryodhana's *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice was a political sacrifice and it was almost equivalent to the *rājasūya*. The people who attended it were constantly comparing it with Yudhiṣṭhira's royal consecration. It is said that before the sacrifice started, all the rulers who were tributaries of Duryodhana, had to bring tributes for the sacrifice.¹¹¹ However, the names of the tributaries are not mentioned. It is probably because of the nature of the epic narrative, that the conquests of the Pandavas were glorified and Duryodhana's feats were under-mentioned. Or, perhaps, the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice did not require such elaborate conquests. Probably the sacrifice was not that expensive and the *dakshinas* were not as large. We cannot find a reference to this sacrifice in the sacred texts; therefore, nothing can be said with certainty.

II.II

Situating the polity of the *Mahābhārata* society according to the theories of 'state' in ancient India

These royal coronation and consecration rituals serve as an entry point into the political situation of the *Mahābhārata* society. The debate amongst scholars on the dating of the

¹¹¹ The house priest of Dhārtarāṣṭra said, "All the rulers of the earth that are tributary to you, prince, must bring their tribute and gold, both wrought and unwrought. With that you must fashion a plowshare, best of kings, and with it you must plow the ground of your sacrificial enclosure, Bhārata." 3(39)241.30, *The Book of the Forest*.

epic has been discussed earlier. It has been observed by historians that the tribal political set-up of the Rigvedic times was gradually giving way to the territorial aspect of the 'state' by the end of the Vedic period. According to Romila Thapar, the state is marked by a concentration of political authority, generally in the hands of an erstwhile senior lineage, of which one family claims complete power, a claim which is legitimised by the priests as being based, among other things on agencies other than human, such as an association with the gods. She opines that the Ganga valley in the mid-first millennium BC provides a useful case for the study of state formation in early India.¹¹² This is the approximate time around which the *Mahābhārata* was being written.

To get a clear idea of what kind of political situation or 'state' we are talking about, we must first look into the theories of the origins of the state, according to the brahmanical *sastras*. We come across the doctrine of *mātsyanyāya*, which describes a chaotic state where the big fish eats up the small fishes. This suggests, society, in its natural form, leads to the strong men dominating and exploiting the weak ones in the absence of a ruler. This is found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*¹¹³, the *Manusmṛiti*¹¹⁴, the *Arthaśāstra*¹¹⁵

¹¹² Romila Thapar, "The Evolution of the State in the Ganga Valley in the Mid-first Millennium BC", *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, p. 377.

¹¹³ "...whenever there is drought, then the stronger seizes upon the weaker, for the waters are the law" XI, 1.6.24, The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

¹¹⁴ "If the king did not, without tiring, inflict punishment on those worthy to be punished, the stronger would roast the weaker, like fish on a spit" *Manu* VII., 20.

¹¹⁵ With the help of *daṇḍa*, the ruler is to prevent might from proving right and to enable the weak to hold their own against the strong. In the absence of *daṇḍa* the strong would swallow up the weak and there would be anarchy everywhere. 1.4.13-15, *The Kautilya Arthaśāstra*, Part III, R.P. Kangle, University of Bombay, Bombay, 1965.

and to a certain extent in the *Śanti Parvan*¹¹⁶ of the *Mahābhārata*. There seems to be a strong need for a king in these texts. It is more probable that the authors of these texts were justifying kingship in a situation where kingship was not the dominant form of government, or at least had competitors. According to J.W. Spellman, the idea of *mātsyanyāna* had much more to it than simply justifying kingship. It underlay the concept of *varṇāśramadharmā*. The *varṇa* distinctions should be maintained; otherwise confusion amongst the castes will follow, resulting in anarchy.¹¹⁷ Another theory of the state, called the organic theory, holds that the state, like an organism, has several parts which, though separate, are interdependent. Each organ has a distinct function, with usually the head, being the most important, in a position to control. In brahmanical thought, this organic theory of the state is based on terms of the seven elements of the state. The general list for these seven elements are the ruler or sovereign authority (*Svāmin*), the minister (*amātya*), the territory of the State and its people (*rāṣṭra/janapada*), the fortified city or capital (*durga*), the treasury of the king (*kośa*), the army (*daṇḍa*), friends and allies (*mitra*). We get to know of this from the *Arthaśāstra* (which speaks of eight elements, including the enemy-*ari*)¹¹⁸. Then there is the sacrificial theory of the state, where the

¹¹⁶ “Thus, O king, in this world, whose course is such, everything is dependent on the rod of chastisement. There is a class of persons who are restrained by only the rod of chastisement from devouring one another...if chastisement could not inspire fear, then ravens and beasts of prey would have eaten up all other animals and men and clarified butter intended for sacrifice.” Section XV, *Śanti Parvan*, *The Mahabharata*, P.C. Roy (trans. into English), Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1970, p. 25.

¹¹⁷ J.W. Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India: A Study of Kingship from the earliest times to circa A.D. 300*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964. pp. 7-8.

¹¹⁸ 6.1.1, *The Kautiliya Arthaśāstra*.

state exists as a sacrifice in itself and as a means to secure salvation for its people.¹¹⁹

There is also the theory of kingship by *karma* according to which a person becomes the king on the basis of the good deeds in his past lives.¹²⁰

That the king was divinely appointed is also suggested by the scriptures. The *Ṛg Veda* makes a number of references to Indra as the protector of all beings in heaven and earth.¹²¹ It may very well be that the divine origin of kingship had its earliest trace here. Later, there are references to the divine status of the king in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*¹²², *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*¹²³ and in *Manu*.¹²⁴ In the *Śānti Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, we find

¹¹⁹ J.W. Spellman, p. 9.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

¹²¹ “Those born in heaven, in earth, and in the firmament, support me, whose name is Indra amongst the deities (by their offerings)...I wield for my strength the fearful thunderbolt.”(X.4.7.2.) “Indra, who art the best of all, quickly protect those who are diligent in worship: men know that thy protection is great...” (X.4.8.5) “May the gods who, coming from afar proclaim their affinity (with men), and beloved by men, (support) the generations of (Manu, the son of) Vivaswat;..” (X.5.3.1) “The gods, who, kings over all, and most exalted, have come to the sacrifice..” (X.5.3.5). The *Ṛg-Veda Samhita*, translated by H.H. Wilson, ed. By W.F. Webster, Vol. VI, Nag Publishers, Delhi, 1978.

¹²² “Then follows a cake on one potsherd for Surya. Now Surya, indeed, is yonder scorching (sun); it is he that governs all this world, now by means of a good, now by a bad (king); he assigns its place to everything here, now under a good, now under a bad (king): ‘Now that I have obtained the victory, may he, in his pleasure, govern me through a good (king), may he assign to me a place under a good (king)!’ thus he thinks; and for this reason there is a cake on one potsherd for Surya.” The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, II, 6.3.8.

¹²³ “Do ye proclaim him, O gods, as overlord and overlordship, as paramount ruler and father of paramount rulers, as self ruler and self rule, as sovereign and sovereignty, as king and father of kings, as supreme lord and supreme authority. The lordly power hath been born, the Ksatriya hath been born, the suzerain of all creation hath been born, the eater of the folk hath been born, ...the guardian of holy power hath been born, the guardian of law hath been born.” (VIII.12) “Varuna within the waters hath set him down, preserving order, for overlordship, for paramount rule...” (VIII.13) The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*.

¹²⁴ “For, when these creatures, being without a king, through fear dispersed in all directions, the Lord, created a king for the protection of this whole (creation). Taking (for that purpose) eternal particles of

a strong justification of the theory of divine kingship, though other theories are also found. It is said that sovereignty first began in the Krita age and before that people lived harmoniously with each other. After that, righteousness was lost and the Vedas disappeared. Then people sought protection of Brahma and he created the science of *dandanīti*. The gods then approached the lord Vishnu to know who deserved superiority above all. Vishnu told them of Prithu, who had sprung from the right arm of Vena. Vishnu entered the body of Prithu who was then crowned the king of the world by the gods, *brāhmaṇas* and the *rishis*.¹²⁵ Another theory, mentioned in the *Atharva Veda*, suggests that the king was appointed by the *ṛṣis*.¹²⁶ Another theory, that of social contract, provides the rationale behind the ethical notion that legitimate state authority must be derived from the consent of the governed. This envisages a situation where the sovereign is bound by a contract to protect society which in turn gives the sovereign his rights over them. But this would be a reciprocal situation and the people would have the right to depose a ruler in case they felt he was not right for them. U.N. Ghoshal refers to an original state of nature had degraded into human situation. In this evolutionary process, the institutions of property and state were created by a social contract and the

Indra, of the Wind, of Yama, of the Sun, of Fire, of Varuna, of the Moon, and of the Lord of wealth (Kubera). Because a king has been formed of particles of those lords of the gods, he therefore surpasses all created beings in luster." *Manu*, VII, 3-5.

¹²⁵ Section LIX, *Śanti Parvan*, *The Mahābhārata*, pp. 121-129.

¹²⁶ "Desiring what is excellent, the heaven finding seers in the beginning sat down in attendance upon ardor and consecration; thence (is) born royalty, strength, and force; let the gods make that submissive to this man." XIX, 41, *The Atharva-Veda Samhita*, translated by W.D. Whitney, Vol. II, The Harvard Oriental Series, ed. by C.R. Lanman, Vol. 8, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1962.

original homogeneous community was divided into four or five classes by the process of division of labour, under the law of *dharma* of those classes.¹²⁷

An important clause about the *rājasūya*, as stated by *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*¹²⁸, stipulates that the *ratnins* must give the kingdom to the ruler. This is found explicitly in the *ratninam havimsi* which is basically a set of *istis* which are performed in the house of each *ratnin* or dignitary who are of importance to the king for the maintenance of the political organization. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* says that there are eleven jewels or *ratnas* of the king. They are the commander of the army, *purohita* (the king's court chaplain), Indra (for he is the *kshatra* or ruling power), the queen, the *sūta* (court minstrel and chronicler), the *grāmanī* (headman), the chamberlain, the charioteer, the carver, Rudra and the courier. It is said that:

“ These are the eleven jewels (ratna) he completes; for of eleven syllables consists the Tristubh, and the Trishubh is vigour: it is for the sake of vigour that he completes the (eleven) jewels. Then as to why he performs the Ratnins: it is their king he becomes; it is for them that he thereby is consecrated, and it is them he makes his own faithful followers.”¹²⁹

It is important to note, it is said that it is for them that he is consecrated. It implies that the the council of ministers or advisors were of extreme importance to the position of the king. They were like parts of the king, without whose help the effective functioning of the 'state' was impossible. That is the reason why, in a political sacrifice like the *rājasūya*, there is a separate ritual (*ratninam havimsi*) that has to be performed by the

¹²⁷ U.N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas: The Ancient Period and the Period of Transition to the Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959, pp. 28-29.

¹²⁸ *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, I, 713 as found in Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājasūya described according to the Yajus Texts and Annotated*, p. 50.

¹²⁹ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, V.3.1.12.

ruler to keep the *ratnins* satisfied. The prescriptive texts mention different numbers and assign different functions to the *ratnins*. According to Heesterman:¹³⁰

“The ratnin episode is one of the few parts of the rajasuya that are directly and exclusively related to kingship. Even of the unctio, the central feature of the rājasūya, this cannot be said. In the ratnin episode the sacrificer is referred to as *rājan-* instead of, as is usual, *yajamāna-* or *suyamāna-*. The theme with which the present istis are concerned is the relation of the king to his subordinates, who represent the constituent elements of royalty.”¹³¹

Heesterman also argues that the names of the *ratnins* do not give us any clue to the actual organization of the government. He points out that royal consorts, government or household dignitaries, and artisans are randomly mixed up in the lists. R.S. Sharma has a different opinion on this issue. He feels that:

“...at the early stage, when life had not been so much compartmentalized and purely governmental functions were not completely differentiated from other functions, there is nothing incongruous about the lumping together of several functionaries. Several passages convey in no uncertain terms the political importance of the personages whom the king or chief visited in the *ratnahavimsi* ceremony. It is repeatedly stated that the king regards the ratnins as the sustainers of the realm, a point which has been stressed by several writers.”¹³²

According to him, the existence of numerous officials indicated that the kingdom had become predominantly territorial and the territorial character of the State can be inferred

¹³⁰ ‘The *Taittirīya Samhita* and *Kathaka Samhita* enumerate eleven ratnins; *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, *Maitrayani Samhita* and the *White Yajur Veda* have twelve ratnins....’. J.C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājasūya described according to the Yajus Texts and Annoted*, p. 49.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* p. 50.

¹³² R.S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1959, p. 142.

from the use of the term *rāṣṭra* in the sense of a kingdom in several places. However functions of the *ratnins* do not suggest a developed system of tax collection and exercise of coercion.¹³³ It is observed by R.S. Sharma that the *Śānti Parvan* upholds a form of government which can be called the 'State' that is *varṇa* divided, with a system of taxation, a professional army and an administrative apparatus based on the council of ministers and local administrators.¹³⁴

It is evident from the data gleaned from the sacrificial ceremonies that monarchy was not the only prevailing form of government. In the *rājasūya*, when the four Pāṇḍavas move out to conquer the four directions of the 'world', Arjuna is said to have defeated many kings and chieftains of mountain tribes. It is mentioned that he defeated the "seven Utsavasamketa tribes of Dasyus who live in the mountains".¹³⁵ Bhīma is also said to have defeated the "seven chieftains of the Mountain Men".¹³⁶ During the horse's wanderings for the *aśvamedha*, when Arjuna had to fight battles with those who stopped the horse as a challenge to the authority of the ruler who owned it, we come across many kings and tribes and clans whom Arjuna had to encounter. For instance, it is said that a battle was fought between Arjuna and the Saindhavas, "who still lived after the slaughter of their clan".¹³⁷ The Saindhavas gave him a tough challenge and as it appears from the descriptions they were strong and well equipped to fight him. Arjuna is also said to have subjugated the Dravidas, the Andhras, the Mahishakas and the hillmen of Kolwa, without

¹³³ Ibid. p. 146.

¹³⁴ R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, p. 140.

¹³⁵ 2.23.15, *The book of The Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

¹³⁶ 2.27.10, Ibid.

¹³⁷ Section LXXVII, *The Aśvamedha Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p.145.

much effort. And the others he fought were rulers of certain dominions. Therefore, both tribal oligarchies and monarchies must have existed side by side. Territorial monarchies were given far greater importance, as it is evident from the elaborate descriptions of sacrifices like the *aśvamedha* and the *rājasūya*. The *rājasūya* is a little different from the *aśvamedha*. The sacrificial fee for the horse sacrifice is the entire earth, and so it must be conquered by the king who is performing the sacrifice. But the *rājasūya* has no such requirement. It can well be that the four quarters of the earth were conquered to obtain the booty. The fact that the booty was procured was emphasized in case of the description of the *rājasūya* in the *Mahābhārata*. The booty would be necessary for the performance of the sacrifice. This is not to suggest that for the *aśvamedha* the booty or wealth was not important; it was essential. But most importantly, there was a compulsion to subjugate the earth. The *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice of Duryodhana, did not require any kind of territorial conquest for the performance of the sacrifice. But, wealth for the performance of the sacrifice was necessary. So all the rulers who were Duryodhana's tributaries were required to bring in wealth for the sake of the sacrifice. Therefore, by conquest or tributes, the finances for the performance of sacrifices by kings in the epic, were arranged.

What kind of polity is reflected in the *Mahābhārata*? According to Romila Thapar, the narrative portions of the epic seem to portray societies of tribal chiefships moving towards state system with monarchical form of government, while the didactic portions discuss *rāja-dharma* and *mokṣa-dharma* which are based on the *dharma-sastra* literature and were interpolated later. She writes:

“The distinction between the narrative and the didactic sections of the *Mahābhārata* can perhaps be explained if the text is seen as reflecting the transition between the two kinds of societies, a new age

reflecting on an age that has ended. The heroic world of chiefships had faded out and dynasties had taken over.”¹³⁸

Elsewhere, she asserts that the *Mahābhārata* reflects clan based societies and, to exemplify this, she cites the case of the Yādavas and Krishna, who was a close friend and adviser of the Pāṇḍavas. She writes that both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas had descended from Puru, while the Yādavas were descendents of Yādu, Puru’s elder brother, and hence there existed a distant kinship connection between them. She maintains that the reference to administering kingdoms were later interpolations.¹³⁹

R.S. Sharma opines that the *Mahābhārata* gives clear indications of the existence of two types of societies, one tribal and the other a territorial and *varṇa* divided state based one, with systems of taxation, army and administrative apparatus.¹⁴⁰ So it was a period of transition. In the lists given of the conquests in cases of both the *aśvamedha* and the *rājasūya*, we find mention of the names of the *janapadas* which were prominent during early sixth century B.C. H.C. Raychaudhuri cites an interesting account of the characteristics of the people of most of the *mahājanapadas* found in the *Karṇa Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁴¹ As H.C. Raychaudhuri puts it, it was “the interplay of two opposing forces, one centrifugal, the other centripetal, viz., the love of local (*janapada*) autonomy

¹³⁸ Romila Thapar, “The Historian and the Epic”, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, p. 627.

¹³⁹ Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the origins to AD 1300*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, Great Britain, 2002, p. 102.

¹⁴⁰ R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, p. 140.

¹⁴¹ Hemchandra Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India, From the Accession of Parikshit to the Extinction of the Gupta Dynasty: with a commentary by B.N. Mukherjee*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, p. 135.

and the aspiration for imperial unity.”¹⁴² Therefore, we can say that the territorial state was coming into being with the monarchical form of government. It was not well formed and was in a state of evolution. The descriptions of battle with the tribes make it obvious that they had a strong presence. What is of note, however, is that the lists of conquests during the two sacrifices bear more names of rulers than of tribes. This is probably suggestive of the fact that though they existed, the monarchical form was predominant and that the tribal oligarchies were facing a threat of being wiped out by them. It can also be pointed out from the descriptions of the conquests that most of them were not situated in the heartland of the Ganga valley; they were located more towards the mountains and the forests. The killing of Jarāsaṃdha, the powerful ruler of Magadha a threat to the supremacy of Yudhisthira, shows that Magadha had become prominent among the *janapadas*. Clearly, it was a time when the early states were transiting from *janapadas* to *mahājanapadas*. Therefore we can say that the *Mahābhārata* society was in a state of flux, evolving from tribal oligarchies to monarchies and within monarchies from *janapadas* to *mahājanapadas*.

II.III

The question of legitimation of the ruler

It is evident that monarchy was fast becoming the dominant form of government in north India. What we do observe from the various royal sacrifices is that a kind of divinity was bestowed on the king. During the course of the sacrifice, he was constantly compared to the gods or was brought in contact with the divine. The *Atharva Veda* has passages which

¹⁴²Ibid, p. 163.

invoke the gods to uphold the king, comparing him with Indra.¹⁴³ Therefore, the king was someone special to the gods and was blessed with divine qualities, which made him different from all others in society.

There are instances of temporary divinity of the king during the performance of the consecration ceremonies and sacrifices. In the *rājasūya*, on one occasion during the shooting of an arrow, he became one with Prajapati and ruled over many.¹⁴⁴ During the *aśvamedha* too, one passage says:

“Day by day, after speech has been released, when, on the completion of the Agnishomiya (animal sacrifices), the Vasativari (water) has been carried round (the sacrificial ground). The reason why they thus sing of him along with the gods is that they thereby make him share the same world with the gods.”¹⁴⁵

So, we observe that the king was gradually taking his place among the gods or was in occasional contact with them, thereby securing for himself a divine status. The *Mahābhārata* describes how, during the *rājasūya* the king is surrounded by great seers in the sacrificial grounds; he is compared to the gods and divine seers in the palace of Brahma.¹⁴⁶ The *aśvamedha* sacrifice is compared with heavenly affairs; the heavenly *rishis* and the music of the lute players are compared with the singing Gandharvas and

¹⁴³ “Be thou just here; be not moved away; like a mountain, not unsteady; O Indra, stand thou fixed just here; here do thou maintain royalty. Indra hath maintained this man fixed by a fixed oblation; him may Soma bless, and Brahmanaspati here.” The *Atharva Veda*, VI, 87.

¹⁴⁴ “And as to why a Raganya shoots,-he, the Raganya is most manifestly of Pragapati (the lord of creatures): hence, while being one, he rules over many; and because ‘pragapati’ has four syllables and ‘raganya’ also has four syllables, therefore a Raganya shoots. He shoots seventeen arrow’s ranges, because Pragapati is seventeenfold: he thereby wins Pragapati.” The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, V, 1.5.14.

¹⁴⁵ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII, 4.4.3

¹⁴⁶ 2(25).33.1, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

the dancing Apsaras.¹⁴⁷ After the completion of the sacrifice Yudhiṣṭhira is said to have acquired “the energy of Sakra himself”.¹⁴⁸ It is also stated that “king Yudhiṣṭhira, having bathed at the conclusion of his sacrifice and become cleansed of all his sins, shone in the midst of his brothers, honoured by all, like the chief of the celestials in the midst of the denizens of Heaven.”¹⁴⁹ In case of the *Vaiṣṇava* sacrifice, Duryodhana is not directly compared to any God, but it is mentioned that the sacrifice itself was performed by none other than Lord Viṣṇu.¹⁵⁰

Divine association conferred on the king power and legitimacy. This religious sanction was provided by the *brāhmaṇas* through the instrument of the performance of rituals as recommended in the sacred texts. David I. Kertzer, emphasizing the socio-political role of rituals, says that one of the reasons why ritual is such a potent means of legitimation is that it offers a way to unite a particular image of the universe with a strong emotional attachment to that image. Rituals, according to him, are built of symbols that embody certain views of how the world is constructed. But, at the same time, “by engaging people in a standardized, often emotionally charged, social action, rituals make these symbols salient and promote attachment to them”.¹⁵¹ In a society which lacked a well formed government, rituals like the *rājasūya* and the *aśvamedha*, helped to establish an authority for the maintenance of the cosmic and the social order. The *Mahābhārata* says if the

¹⁴⁷ Section LXXXVIII, *The Aswamedha Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p.169.

¹⁴⁸ Section LXXXIX, *The Aswamedha Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p.170.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p.171.

¹⁵⁰ 3(39).241.30, *The Book of the Forest, The Mahābhārata*.

¹⁵¹ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1988, p. 40.

king was divine, the brahmanas were the very deities of deities.¹⁵² The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* mentions, “Verily there are two kinds of gods; for the gods themselves are assuredly, are gods; and those priests who have studied and teach Vedic lore, are the human gods.”¹⁵³ Therefore as it comes out the *brāhmaṇa* class was a privileged one along with the *kshatriyas*.

The *brāhmaṇas* used the sacred texts to maintain their position at two levels - the kings and the others in society. We would look into how they conferred religious legitimation. The Weberian notion of power can be defined as the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action. Power is therefore an aspect of social relationships. An individual or a group does not hold power in isolation; they hold it in relation to others. Any power differentials would lead to a political situation. Power can be divided into two forms – authority and coercion.¹⁵⁴ We will look into the first form, that is authority. Authority is that form of power which is accepted as legitimate, that is right and just, and therefore obeyed on that basis. In the case of pre-modern societies, for power to be legitimate, it has to be sanctioned by an authority and the authority for the sanction of king, power in ancient India happens to be the priest. By purifying, consecrating and bestowing divine status on the king, they also magnified his position. They differentiated him from the rest of the populace. The king in turn upheld and protected the *brāhmaṇas*.

¹⁵² *Anuśāsana Parvan*, 47.41, cited in J.W. Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India: A Study of Kingship from the earliest times to circa A.D. 300*, p. 41.

¹⁵³ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, II, 4.3.14.

¹⁵⁴ M. Haralambos with Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1980, p. 98.

The *Mahābhārata* also mentions that it was the duty of the king to protect the *brāhmaṇas* and exempt them from punishments.¹⁵⁵ What is of note here is that religious authorities do not totally separate the king from the people. Kumkum Roy writes:

“..any emphasis on the divine character of the ruler alone would widen the disjunction between the ruler and the ruled, whereas for legitimation to be successful, it is necessary to focus on both the conjunction and disjunction between the ruler and ruled. The brahmanical tradition recognizes this problem and tries to overcome it by widening the basis of monarchy, relating it to other emerging social hierarchies on the one hand, and relating these hierarchies to one another on the other. Thus an attempt was made to arrive at an interrelated whole, with the ruler as a focus of unity.”¹⁵⁶

The relationship between these two classes in the context of legitimation is also very interesting. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* has a passage that poetically describes the different roles of the *brāhmaṇas* and the *kṣatriyas*:

“...(W)ere both to be Brāhmaṇas who sing, noble rank (or political power) would depart from him; for he – to wit, a Brahmana – is a form of the priestly office; and the nobility takes no delight in the priestly office (or priesthood). And were both to be Raganyas (nobles), spiritual lustre would depart from him; for he – to wit, the Raganya – is a form of noble rank, and spiritual lustré takes no delight in noble rank.”¹⁵⁷

This became visible when Yudhiṣṭhira offered Vyāsa the earth as the sacrificial fee for the *asvamedha*. Vyasa accepted it and returned it to the king saying, “O best of kings, the

¹⁵⁵ “..the Brāhmaṇas should be protected. If they become offenders, they should then be exiled beyond thy dominions. Even when deserving of punishment, thou shouldst, O kings, show them compassion. If a Brāhmaṇa becomes guilty of Brahmanicide, or of violating the bed of his preceptor or other revered senior, or of causing miscarriage, or of treason against the king, his punishment should be banishment from thy dominions. No corporal chastisement is laid down for them. Those persons that show respect towards the Brahmanas should be favoured by thee (with offices in the state).” Section LVI, *The Śanti Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p. 115.

¹⁵⁶ Kumkum Roy, *The Emergence of Monarchy in North India: eighth – fourth centuries B.C., as reflected in the Brahmanical Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, p. 16.

¹⁵⁷ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII, 1.5.2-3.

Earth which thou hast given me I return to thee. Do thou give me the purchasing value, for Brahmanas are desirous of wealth (and have no use with the Earth).”¹⁵⁸ Therefore, a clear division of roles between the two is emphasized. U.N. Ghoshal remarks in this context:

“(T)he development in later works of the doctrine of the two powers (the spiritual and the temporal) with its accompanying conception of a sharp contrast between their attributes and functions, and the attendant interpretation of their mutual relations in diverse and even contradictory terms. The accompanying theories of the Brahmana’s immunities and privileges..are based upon a number of high-sounding principles. Such are the conceptions of the Brāhmaṇa’s might, of his divine protection leading to his divinity, his subjection to the divine king and of the derivation of the temporal power from the spiritual.”¹⁵⁹

The offering of the *dāna/dakṣiṇa* also brings forth a relationship of economic dependence between the two social groups, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

II.IV

The relations between the four *varṇas* as visible from the sacrificial ceremonies

It is generally accepted that the division of society into four social classes, hardened into the *varṇa* system during the late *Ṛg-Vedic* times. The office of the king is a function of the *kṣatriya varṇa*. In the *Mahabharata*, Yudhiṣṭhira is the *dharmarāja* or the upholder of *dharma*. According to the brāhmanical texts, it is the duty of the king to maintain the *varṇāśramadharma*. It is mentioned by *Manu* that “the king has been created (to be) the protector of the castes (*varṇa*) and orders, who, all according to their rank, discharge their

¹⁵⁸ Section LXXXIX, *The Asvamedha Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p.170.

¹⁵⁹ U.N. Ghoshal, *A History of Indian Political Ideas: The Ancient Period and the Period of Transition to the Middle Ages*, p. 35.

several duties.”¹⁶⁰ The *brāhmaṇas* claimed the highest position in this classification. The king was beneath them in the hierarchy and as mentioned above, renounced all spiritual power. The *Mahābhārata* says “the king should from desire of pleasing his subjects, wait with humility upon the gods and the Brāhmaṇas..the king pays off his debt to duty and morality, and receives the respect of his subjects.”¹⁶¹

The *brāhmaṇas* were the only order which claimed access to the spiritual world. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states that the brahmana is born with spiritual lustre while the *rajanya* is born heroic, skilled in archery and a great car-fighter.¹⁶² The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* says:

“Prajāpati created the sacrifice; after the creation of the sacrifice the holy power and the lordly power were created;...The Brāhmaṇas are the offspring that eat the oblations; the Rajanya, Vaicya and Cudras those that do not eat the oblations. From them the sacrifice departed; it is the holy power and the lordly power pursued;...the weapons of the holy power are the weapons of the sacrifice; the weapons of the lordly power are the horse chariot, the corslet, the bow and arrow.”¹⁶³

This passage clearly suggests that religious performances were the distinctive function of the brahmanas. As mentioned above, it was with the religious performances that the brahmanas, more specifically the priests bestowed legitimacy upon the king.

In the royal sacrifices, which are described in length in the epic, we find references to the people of different *varṇas* who attended them. The Snake Sacrifice of Janamejaya was a

¹⁶⁰ VII.35, *The Laws of Manu*.

¹⁶¹ Section LVI, *Śanti Parvan*, *The Mahābhārata*, p. 114.

¹⁶² *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XIII, 1.9.1-2.

¹⁶³ VII, 19, *The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*.

fearful sacrifice which was attended by “multitudes of brahmins” alone. We only come across references to the Pancalas in Drupada’s sacrifice. Since it was a personal sacrifice done for the purposes of revenge, that too towards a brahmana (Droṇa), it was more like a household ritual. For the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice, the epic mentions that Duryodhana invited only the kings and brāhmaṇas. But it is also mentioned that “princes arrived from many a countryside, and lordly brahmins came to the city of Dhārtarāṣṭra. They were welcomed according to the texts and their class and rank..”¹⁶⁴ When the preparations for the *rājasūya* were on and invitations were being sent, Yudhisthira asked his councillors to “invite in the kingdoms the brahmins and landlords, and bring in the commoners and serfs who deserve honor!”¹⁶⁵ It is mentioned that when Yudhiṣṭhira entered the sacrificial terrain, he was “surrounded by thousands of brahmins, his brothers, his kinsmen, friends, ministers, and the barons who, lord of men, had assembled from many countries..”¹⁶⁶ It is repeatedly said that the brāhmaṇas came from almost all regions and were very well hosted. Well furnished cottages were built for them.¹⁶⁷ A list of the kings who attended the *rājasūya*¹⁶⁸ is also given and, we are told that beautiful quarters were provided to

¹⁶⁴ 3(39).242.15, *The Book of the Forest, The Mahābhārata*.

¹⁶⁵ 2(24).30.40. *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

¹⁶⁶ 2(24).30.45, *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁷ “From every realm flocked in the Brahmins, profound in all the fields of knowledge, learned in the Vedas and their branches. At the King Dharma’s orders, carpenters by the thousands built cottages for each of them and his party, filled with many foods and beds, cottages with all the virtues of every season.” 2(24).30.50, *Ibid*.

¹⁶⁸ “All the princes, led by the Teacher, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Bhīṣma, the wise Vidura, and all the brethren headed by Duryodhana were welcomed and honoured. So were, Subala, king of the Gandharas, the powerful Śakuni, Acala, Vrsaka, and that greatest of chariot warriors, Karna, Rta, Salya king of the Madras, and the great warrior Bahlika, Somadatta Kauravya, Bhuri, Bhurisravas, Sala, Asvatthaman, Kṛpa, Droṇa, and Jayadratha Saindhava, ...the glorious Bhagadatta king of Pragjyotisa, with all his barbarians who live down by the ocean, the mountain kings and King Brhadbala, Vasudeva of Pundra, the Vanga and the Kalinga,

them. In the *aśvamedha* also, Yudhiṣṭhira asked Bhīma to invite “the great kings of the Earth”. Many kings are mentioned to have come, but the list of the invitees is not given. A large number of “*munis*” (sages) are also said to have graced the ceremony. Luxurious apartments had been erected for the pleasant stay of the kings and the brāhmaṇas. But in the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice, we do not find any reference to apartments being erected. Instead, Duryodhana gave orders for the plowshare (needed for the purpose of the sacrifice) to be manufactured. Predictably, luxurious arrangements were made only for the two upper *varṇas*. No dwellings or pavilions made for the two lower *varṇas*. If, as is mentioned, the landlord, commoners and serfs came to the sacrifice from distant lands. They were expected to make their own arrangements. They would be included in the event, but would also be excluded from the privileges of that event. This was because of the status distinction of the *varṇa* ordered society.

Sacrifices such as the *aśvamedha* and the *rājasūya* were prolonged rituals which would be performed over one or two years. It has to be kept in mind that the king hosted his invitees for that long a time. In the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice, Vidura “honoured all the classes according to rank...and happily provided them with food, eatables and drink, and with fragrant garlands and manifold garments.”¹⁶⁹ During the *rājasūya*, it is mentioned that

Akarsa, the Vanavasyas and Andhras, the Tamils and Singhalese, and the king of Kashmir, Kuntibhoja of great splendor, and the powerful Suhma, all the other Bahlika champions and kings, Virata with his sons, and the great warrior Macella – kings and sons of kings and the lords of many countrysides. Sisupala of great gallantry, and berserk in battle, came with his son. Rama, Aniruddha, Babhru, Sarana, Gada, Pradyumna, Samba, and the valiant Carudesna, and Ulmuka, Nisatha, the heroic son of Pradyumna, and all the other warlike Vrsnis assembled in their sum. Still many other princes, natives of the Middle Country, came to the grand ceremony of the Royal Consecration of Pandu’s son.” 2(24).31.5-15, Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ 3(39).242.20, Ibid.

“..like the Gods, so did the brahmins become satisfied at this sacrifice with the great shifts of stipends and food, and, with all the classes, they rejoiced.”¹⁷⁰ “(N)o *śūdra* nor anyone without vows was near the inner alter at Yudhiṣṭhira’s habitation.”¹⁷¹ During the *aśvamedha*, there is a description of food made available to the people in general and the text says “large heaps of costly sweetmeats were kept ready for both the brāhmaṇas and the vaiśyas.”¹⁷² It is also mentioned of the horse sacrifice that:

“in that great sacrifice, O monarch, was seen the entire population of Jamvudwipa, with all its realms and provinces, collected together. Thousands of nations and races were there. A large number of men, O chief of Bhārata’s race, adorned with garlands and wearing bright ear-rings made of gold, taking innumerable vessels in their hands, distributed the food unto the regenerate classes by hundreds and thousands.”¹⁷³

It seems from the narrative that though the common people were invited, their hospitality was not of much importance to the king. After the *aśvamedha* sacrifice was over, the wealth in terms of the expensive ornaments, stakes of gold etc that were lying in the sacrificial compound was distributed among those who needed them. Here also, it is said that “after the Brāhmaṇas had taken as much as they desired, the wealth that remained was taken away by Kshatriyas and Vaiśyas and Śūdras and diverse tribes of Mleccchas.”¹⁷⁴ This one line description captures the essence of the hierarchical relations between the four *varṇas*. No matter what, the *varṇa* division was always maintained.

¹⁷⁰ 2(24).32.15, Ibid.

¹⁷¹ 2(25).33.10, Ibid.

¹⁷² Section LXXXV, *The Aswamedha Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p.163.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.164.

¹⁷⁴ Section LXXXIX, *The Aswamedha Parvan, The Mahābhārata*, p.171.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ECONOMY AS REFLECTED
THROUGH THE SACRIFICIAL
CEREMONIES

III.I

An account of the gift exchanges in the sacrifices

We get an idea of the economic structure of society depicted in the *Mahābhārata* from the royal sacrifices. This can be primarily observed in the exchange interactions among the host and the invitees in course of these ceremonies. The sacrifices of Janamejaya and Drupada were not exactly ceremonies, but even there, gifts in the form of *dakshina* were distributed by the respective kings to their officiating priests. We will discuss the concept of *dakshina*, later in the chapter. First, let us look at the various kinds of wealth the kings made and received from the people who attended the sacrifices. The first occasion for this kind of generous gift giving in the *Mahābhārata* is the royal consecration of Yudhiṣṭhira. Romila Thapar has analysed this data to assess kind of society that might have existed from the nature of the gifts brought to the sacrifice. The list of tributes include items like, sheep, fleeces of sheep, goats, cows, donkeys, gold-embroidered fur, deer-skin jackets, horses, camels, varieties of nuts, golden jars, slave girls, gems, gold, silver, blankets, jade vases, swords with ivory carved hilts, textiles, wool, silk, cotton, skins, asses, spears, lances, battle-axes, perfumes, wine, palanquins, beds, chariots, javelins, iron arrows, shafts, gold produced by Pipilaka ants, yak-tail plumes, honey, herbs, sandalwood, aloeswood, rare birds, dukula cloth, cloaks, elephants, pearls, beryls and conches. She opines that the list of tributes is indicative more of tribal chiefships than a system of regular commodity production.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Romila Thapar, "Some Aspects of the Economic Data in the *Mahābhārata*", in *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, pp. 633-635.

In the sacrifices of Janamejaya and Drupada, we do not observe any aspect of gift distribution, other than the offering of *dakshina*, therefore these sacrifices will not be discussed in this chapter. We will now discuss what the host kings gave away to the invitees in return, apart from all the elaborate housing and food arrangements, which have already been discussed in the previous chapter. In the *rājasūya* is an occasion for providing gifts to all the kings who had come and stayed in Yudishthira's kingdom for over a year. Bhīṣma told Yudhiṣṭhira that he was supposed to make these "presents of honor" to the "kings as each of them merits it. They declare that one's teacher, one's priest, one's relation, a *snātaka*, a friend, and the king are the six who deserve the *arghya*, Yudhiṣṭhira. They also declare that when they have come and stayed for a year, they are worthy of it. These kings have come to us quite some time ago: it is time now that the guest gift for each of them be brought in."¹⁷⁶ The most deserving person got the first gift. Bhīṣma suggested Kṛṣṇa's name. The king of the Cedis, Sisupala reacted to this and insulted Bhīṣma and Kṛṣṇa. Sisupala then challenged Kṛṣṇa and after heated arguments between them, his head is cut off by Kṛṣṇa. We do not exactly know what these guest gifts were; these are not mentioned anywhere. Was it some kind of precious gems or gold, which was offered according to the status of the guest? Can it be compared with a prize distribution ceremony, where the first prize is of higher value and confers more status on the recipient than the second?

We do not find any mention of guest gifts in the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice. For the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice, Duryodhana was advised by the house priest to ask his tributaries to bring their

¹⁷⁶ 2(25).33.25, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

“tribute and gold, both wrought and unwrought.”¹⁷⁷ It is stated that at the completion of the sacrifice, Duryodhana distributed many gifts among the kings.¹⁷⁸ In the *aśvamedha* of Yudhiṣṭhira, it is mentioned that the invited kings got many gems, horses, weapons and female slaves with them.¹⁷⁹ At the completion of the horse sacrifice, Yudhiṣṭhira is said to have distributed various gold ornaments in the sacrificial compound to the brāhmaṇas. After they had taken what they wanted for themselves, the remaining wealth was taken away by the *kshatriyas*, the *vaiśyas*, the *śūdras* and the diverse tribes of the Mlecchas.¹⁸⁰ This apart, Yudhiṣṭhira formally gave gifts to the invited kings before bidding farewell to them. It is mentioned:

“Unto those kings they made presents of various jewels and gems, and elephants and horses and ornaments of gold, and female slaves and cloths and large measures of gold. Indeed, Pritha’s son by distributing that untold wealth among the invited monarchs shone, O king, like Vaisravana, the lord of treasures. Summoning next the heroic king Vabhruvana, Yudhiṣṭhira gave unto him diverse kinds of wealth in profusion and gave him permission to return home.”¹⁸¹

To understand why this kind of exchange took place, we have to have an idea of the whole notion of the exchange system. For classical economists like Adam Smith¹⁸² humans are viewed as rationally seeking to maximize their material benefits, or utility

¹⁷⁷ 3(39).241.30, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

¹⁷⁸ 3(39).242.20, *Ibid*.

¹⁷⁹ Section LXXXV, *The Aśvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.162.

¹⁸⁰ Section LXXXIX, *The Aśvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.171.

¹⁸¹ Section LXXXIX, *The Aśvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.171.

¹⁸² “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.” Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, The Modern Library, New York, 1973, p.14.

from transactions or exchanges with others in a free and competitive marketplace. To show how exchange patterns operate in society, James George Frazer provided an exchange theoretic analysis of social institutions. While looking at a wide variety of kinship and marriage practices among primitive societies, he noted a clear preference of the Australian aborigines for cross-cousin over parallel-cousin marriages.¹⁸³ He offered an economic interpretation for this. In this explanation Frazer invoked the law of economic motives. Since there is no equivalent in property to give for a wife, an Australian aborigine is generally obliged to get her in exchange for a female relative, usually a sister or daughter. Thus, the material or economic motives of individuals in society in this instance, (lack of property and desire for a wife) explain various social patterns such as cross-cousin marriages. Frazer also postulated that once a particular pattern emanating from economic motives becomes established in a culture, it constrains other social patterns that can potentially emerge. Malinowski developed an exchange perspective in analysing the exchange relations among individuals in communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands, called the Kula Ring in the Western Pacific. Travelling one direction around the Ring, armlets were exchanged for necklaces moving in the opposite direction of the Ring. In any particular exchange between individuals, then, an armlet would always be exchanged for a necklace.¹⁸⁴ In interpreting this unique exchange network, he was led to distinguish between material or economic and non-material or symbolic exchanges. He recognized that the Kula was not only an economic exchange network but also a symbolic exchange, cementing a web of social relationships. However, distinguishing economic from symbolic commodities did not mean that the

¹⁸³ J.G. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, Macmillan, New York, 1919, p.199.

¹⁸⁴ B. Malinowski, *Agronauts of the Western Pacific*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1922, p.81.

Trobriand Islanders failed to assign graded values to the symbolic commodities. They made gradations and used them to express and confirm the nature of the relationships among exchange partners as equals, superordinates or subordinates. From Malinowski's functionalist framework, he interpreted the Kula to mean the fundamental impulse to display, to share, to bestow and enhance the tendency to create social ties. Marcel Mauss, after Malinowski's stress on psychological as much as social needs for exchange, formulated broad outlines of a collectivist or structural exchange perspective. Mauss questioned:

“What rule of legality and self interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?”¹⁸⁵

For Mauss, the individual engaged in an exchange represents the moral codes of the group. Exchange transactions among individuals are conducted in accordance with the rules of the group while reinforcing these rules and codes. Therefore, for Mauss, individuals are representatives of social groups.

This system of gift exchange during sacrificial ceremonies reminds one of a kind of 'potlatch', which is a North American Indian term. Differing explanations of the term has been provided such as, 'system for the exchange of gifts', and as a verb 'to feed, to consume'. For Mauss, potlatch is a festival where all kinds of goods and services were exchanged. He called this the “system of total services”.¹⁸⁶ The institution of total services does not merely comprise the obligation to reciprocate gifts that are received. It

¹⁸⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 4.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

assumes two other important obligations – the obligation to give presents and to receive them. In the description of the *rājasūya* we observe that the gift giving aspect of the entire ceremony has been described in details. Romila Thapar opines that it was in some ways a combination of potlatch and gift-exchange.¹⁸⁷ Contrary to modern theories of economics, which advocate the accumulation of wealth for capital formation, it was done to distribute accumulated wealth. Gift exchange was indicative of societies which had not become a market economy yet and money was not firmly established as a medium of exchange. Mauss writes that the potlatch system is seen between two phratries (two halves of a tribe, which at some point of time had separated and had developed independently thereafter) in the Pacific or North American tribes, where rituals, marriages, inheritance of goods *et cetera* are complementary and presume co-operation between the two halves of the tribe. Probably basing on this analysis of Mauss, G.J. Held argued that the two phratries in the *Mahābhārata* were the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas which were involved in a potlatch competition.¹⁸⁸ Held also postulated a connection between the *rājasūya* and the ensuing dice game. He felt that the dice game served as a rival potlatch. For Mauss, “the *Mahābhārata* is the story of a gigantic potlatch: the game of dice of the Kauravas against the Pāṇḍavas; jousting tournaments and the choice of bridegrooms by Draupadī, the sister and polyandrous wife of the Pāṇḍavas.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ “Some Aspects of the Economic Data in the *Mahābhārata*”, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, p. 632.

¹⁸⁸ Cited in Thapar, “Some Aspects of the Economic Data in the *Mahābhārata*”, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, p. 631.

¹⁸⁹ Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, p. 71.

There was also an element of status associated with the gift exchange that occurred in the sacrificial ceremonies. It was observed by Duryodhana during Yudhiṣṭhira's *rājasūya* that many kings were denied entry to the sacrificial compound, though they received expensive tributes. The list of the people denied admission is very long and consists of *kṣatriyas*, *brāhmaṇas*, *sūdras* and forest tribes. Probably on noticing that the crowd at the gate waiting to gain entry into the sacrificial compound was too large, Yudhiṣṭhira sent a message to them: "(T)he gatekeepers told them at the king's behest, 'If you bring revenue and good tribute, you will gain entrance'".¹⁹⁰ Thus, it is evident that many kings and other rich people came for the sacrifice uninvited. Therefore, in deciding who would be given entry, the question of the status of the person was also involved. Since, it is possible that these sacrificial ceremonies were a kind of potlatch and an occasion for gift exchange, it could well be that it was expected to be a fairly equal exchange. The host king might have kept riches which are more in value for distribution. And, along with distribution of the king's own wealth, receiving of wealth from the invitees was also involved. It seems that it was the exchange of one type of goods for another without the mediation of money, a system which had its obvious drawbacks.

III.II

The notions of *Dāna* and *Dakṣiṇā* as concepts of exchange

The reference to *dāna* dates back to the Rg Veda and its subsequent elaborations are enormous in content. P.V. Kane has cited Jaimini (IV.2.28) to define *dāna*. *Dāna*

¹⁹⁰ 2(27).48.15, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

consists of the cessation of one's ownership over a thing and creating the ownership of another over that thing and this last occurs when the other accepts the thing, which acceptance may be mental or vocal or physical.¹⁹¹ Thus, *dāna* is basically giving/bestowing. *Dakṣiṇā* on the other hand, involves gift or donation to the gods or priests. It can be symbolic oblations in case of the gods, which is the very essence of sacrifice, but in the case of the priests, it had to be objects of economic worth. Heesterman has argued that the *dakṣiṇā* was not a sacrificial fee. Rather, "it belongs to the sphere of the gift exchange system"¹⁹² analysed by Marcel Mauss. Romila Thapar opines that it might not have been a sacrificial fee at the beginning, but assumed that status by the time of *Manu Dharmasāstra* when gift exchange was no longer an essential part of the economic system.¹⁹³ She also traces the evolution in the concept of *dāna*. It had acquired the form of *dakṣiṇā*, which was concerned with the redistribution of wealth and, more specifically, a deliberate exchange.¹⁹⁴

The sacrificial ceremonies were occasions where we observe such gift givings. *Dakṣiṇā* used to vary from one sacrifice to another. The first such instance for giving of *dakṣiṇā* in the *Mahābhārata* is Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. Even though the sacrifice was stopped, *dakṣiṇās* were paid and accepted. It is said: "King Janamejaya Bhārata was greatly pleased and gave to the priests and *sadasyas* who had gathered there fees of riches by

¹⁹¹ P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law*, p. 841.

¹⁹² J. C. Heesterman, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration: The Rājāsūya described according to the Yajus Texts and Annoted*, p. 164.

¹⁹³ "Dāna and Dakṣiṇā as Forms of Exchange", *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, p. 522.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 526-527.

hundreds and thousands.”¹⁹⁵ When Drupada was looking for a brāhmaṇa, who could conduct a sacrifice for the sake of the destruction of Droṇa, he first approached Upayāja and offered him a large amount of wealth in the form of cows.¹⁹⁶ After a year, Upayāja refused Drupada saying that his brother Yāja was better suited to act as the priest for him. To Yāja, the king said: “I shall give you eighty thousand cows..”¹⁹⁷ as the sacrificial fee for the whole affair. On the occasion of the *rājasūya*, Yudhiṣṭhira bestowed huge amount of wealth on the sacrificial priests. The *rājasūya* is a series of rites and separate *dakṣiṇās* had to be paid for each of these. In the description of this sacrifice in the epic, not much is mentioned regarding *dakṣiṇās*. We are informed that Vyasa was the *Brahma*-priest; Susama- the chanter of Vedic hymns; Yajnavalkya acted as the *Adhvaryu*-priest and Paila took the role of the *Hotr*-priest. In fact, there is no mention of any kind of sacrificial fee to anyone at the completion of the sacrifice. In case of the *vaisnava* sacrifice of Duryodhana, there is no separate mention of any kind of *dakṣiṇā*. It is just said that he distributed much wealth among kings and brahmanas. Thus, we do not know whether it was *dakṣiṇā* or not, but it was certainly a kind of *dāna*. It also has to be kept in mind that the invited kings had got wealth and riches too. For the *aśvamedha* of Yudhiṣṭhira, Vyāsa told Yudhiṣṭhira to “make the *dakṣiṇā* of this sacrifice three times of what is enjoined. Let the merit of thy sacrifice increase threefold. The *Brāhmaṇas* are competent for the purpose. Attaining to the merits then of three Horse-sacrifices, each with profuse presents, thou shalt be freed, O king, from the sin of having slain thy

¹⁹⁵ 1(5).53.10, *The Book of the Beginning, The Mahābhārata*.

¹⁹⁶ 1(11)155.10, *Ibid*.

¹⁹⁷ 1(11)155.15, *Ibid*.

kinsmen.”¹⁹⁸ It is stated after that Yudhiṣṭhira fulfilled every wish of the priests officiating at the sacrifice and profusely distributed gifts of food and presents. In return, the priests, well conversant with the Vedas, duly performed every rite. After the completion of the sacrifice, the *dakṣhiṇā* was to be given by the king to the priests. Yudhiṣṭhira gave to Vyāsa the whole earth and gave the other priests large amounts of wealth.¹⁹⁹ Vyasa returned the earth to the king and said, “do thou give me the purchasing value, for brāhmaṇas are desirous of wealth (and have no use with the Earth)”. Therefore, millions of gold coins, trebling the *dakṣhiṇā* for the *aśvamedha*, was received by the sacrificial priests. Vyāsa, in turn, distributed it amongst other sacrificial priests who, receiving that unlimited quantity of riches, further distributed it among the *brāhmaṇas* according to the desire of each recipient.²⁰⁰ The wealth given by Yudhiṣṭhira to the priests was equivalent to the price of the ‘earth’. The epic mentions “the *brāhmaṇas* also divided amongst themselves, agreeably to Yudhiṣṭhira’s permission, the diverse ornaments of gold that were in the sacrificial compound, including the triumphal arches, the stakes, the jars, and diverse kinds of vessels.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Section LXXXVIII, *The Asvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.167.

¹⁹⁹ “Then Yudhiṣṭhira gave away unto the *Brāhmaṇas* a thousand crores of golden nishkas, and unto Vyasa he gave away the whole earth.” Section LXXXIX, *The Asvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.170.

²⁰⁰ Apart from the gifts provided for many of the subordinate rites performed in the *Asvamedha*, the Lat. (IX. 10. 15 – IX. 11. 4) prescribes that on the first and last of the three soma pressing days he should donate a thousand cows and on the second day he should donate all the wealth that belongs to the non-*brahmana* residents in one district (janapada) out of his realm, or he should donate to the host the wealth in the eastern part of the country conquered by him and the wealth in the southern, western and northern parts respectively to the brahma, adhvaryu and udgatr and their assistants or he should at least donate 48,000 cows to each of the four principle priests, 24,000, 12,000, 6000 to each of the four groups of three assistants of the principle priests in order. P.V. Kane, pp. 1236-1237.

²⁰¹ Section LXXXIX, *The Asvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.171.

The difference between the previous form of gift exchange between the host king and the invited kings and the present one is that the participants involved the brāhmaṇas and the kings were not of equal status. Indeed, this is not to suggest that the host king and the invitees were of equal political status. But, in this case, the exchange is not equal because the king by virtue of custom is expected to give, and the brāhmaṇas to receive. This exchange strengthened the bonds between these two classes of people. The sacrifice helped Yudhiṣṭhira to be absolved of the sins that he had incurred and made the brāhmaṇa priest satisfied with the *dakṣhiṇā* he received. In the portrayal of the *aśvamedha* also, the economic aspect of the relationship between the king and the brāhmaṇas is emphasized. The interdependence of these two classes of people, upon each other becomes visible in sacrificial-rituals like this. The ritual conferred legitimacy on the raja, and the hymns of praise articulated his power. The raja bestowed *dāna*/gifts in the form of wealth on the priests and acquired status in return.²⁰²

The specific use to which the wealth was put tended to convert the sacrifice into something of a potlatch, which we have discussed above. The more the wealth expended on the ritual, the more, it was assumed, would come back to the *yajamāna* through the pleasure of the Gods. Most importantly, it enhanced the status of the king, though at the cost of exhausting his treasury. It is clear that there was a division of duties according to the varnas. The brāhmaṇa was not supposed to rule, and so Vyāsa rejected the earth that Yudhiṣṭhira offered him. This suggests a complete separation of temporal power and spiritual authority. The two must work together, but at the same time the brāhmaṇa is

²⁰² Romila Thapar, "Sacrifice, Surplus, and the Soul", *Cultural Pasts: Essays in early Indian History*, p. 818.

warned in no uncertain terms against involvement with the king and his sacrality, which would jeopardize the brāhmaṇa's Vedic claim to transcendence.²⁰³

Therefore, we can observe gift giving and exchange at two levels. The first is between the divine and the profane, where the sacrificial object on part of the humans is an offering to the gods and consequently purification or elevation of socio-political status to the human performer is bestowed upon by the gods. The second is the exchange that takes place between humans, between the host and the invited kings, between the king and the sacrificial priests which include the invited brahmanas who were present at the sacrificial ceremony, and between the king and the entire set of people attending the sacrifice. In all the celebratory sacrifices, we have an account of the abundance of food and drinks for commoners. It is mentioned in the description of Yudhiṣṭhira's royal consecration that it was "abounding with rice, rich in foods, crowded by well-fed folk...and like the Gods, so did the Brahmins become satisfied at this sacrifice with the great shifts of stipends and food, and with all the classes they rejoiced."²⁰⁴ In the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice, Duryodhana asked Vidura to look after the peoples' satisfaction and the availability of food in the sacrificial compounds. The role of the commoners on such occasions has been described in the *vaiṣṇava* sacrifice thus:

"...the people sang the praises of the archer who was the first of kings. Scattering fried rice grains and sandalwood powder over him, the people said, 'By good fortune, O king, has your rite been completed without hindrance.' But other garrulous men told the king, 'Your rite does not match the sacrifice of

²⁰³ J.C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice*, p. 5.

²⁰⁴ 2(24).32.15, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

Yudhiṣṭhira! It does not equal a sixteenth fraction of his rite!’ So did some talkative men speak to their king.”²⁰⁵

In the horse sacrifice, there were “costly sweetmeats” kept ready for the people. It is stated that “thousands of nations and races were there. A large number of men..adorned with garlands and wearing bright ear-rings made of gold, taking innumerable vessels in their hands, distributed food unto the regenerate classes by hundreds and thousands.”²⁰⁶

In case of the political royal sacrifices like the *rājasūya*, *vaiṣṇava* and *aśvamedha* it was the presence of common people that indicated the success of the sacrifice; they spread the word around.

During sacrificial ceremonies that lasted for a year or two, there are references to narrative poems or eulogies being recited. It is mentioned in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* “whilst the fore-offerings of this (ishti) are being performed, a Brāhmaṇa lute-player, striking up the *uttaramandra* (tune) sings three strophes composed by himself (on topics such as), ‘Such a sacrifice he offered, - such gifts he gave.’”²⁰⁷ The *Mahābhārata* was told by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya during his *sarpa sattra*. It might well be that this was a ritual recitation which occurred during these sacrifices. We can observe that along with Vaisampayana, a bard was narrating the story. It was a glorified account of Janamejaya’s ancestors and also a heroic legend which was supposed to be recited daily. In the description of the *aśvamedha* sacrifice, an analogy is drawn, between the singers and lute players with the “Gandharvas singing in chorus and diverse tribes of Apsaras dancing in

²⁰⁵ 3(39).243.1, Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Section LXXXV, *The Aśvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.164.

²⁰⁷ XIII.4.2.8, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

merriment.”²⁰⁸ This is an example of the common people publicizing the sacrifice. These singers used to sing *gāthās* which glorified the generosity and heroic deeds of the king who performed the sacrifice. In the *Uttara Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, we notice the same trend: Lava and Kush go to Rāma’s horse sacrifice and sing the tale of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

In this chapter, we observed how the sacrificial ceremonies give us an idea of the economy. Gift exchange was an integral part of these royal sacrifices. The status of the person giving the gift was also associated with the kind of gift presented. The distribution of goods or rather a circulation of gifts among the host king and the invitees is also observed. This system of gift exchange reminds us of societies which have not entered into a standard form of medium of exchange, but they have arrived at a stage where goods have some kind of valuation. Sacrificial fees were also paid in some form of wealth, other than standard currency. The whole concept of gift giving operated at all levels in society.

²⁰⁸ Section LXXXVIII, *The Aśvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.169.

CHAPTER FOUR

GENDER RELATIONS IN THE
MAHĀBHĀRATA AS PORTRAYED
IN THE SACRIFICIAL RITUALS

This chapter looks at gender relations in society as exemplified in the performance of rituals described in the *Mahābhārata*. We inhabit culture as subjects. Culture embraces the entire range of practices, customs and representations of a society. In their prescriptive acts, stories and images, societies communicate what they perceive as good and bad, proper and acceptable and as radically other. In a word, culture is the location of values.¹ Gender relations, therefore, are an intrinsic part of culture. The term gender came into common English usage in the latter part of the twentieth century and came to be distinguished from the term sex. In the late 60s, the American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller published a book called *Sex and Gender*, in which he tried to differentiate between the two terms. He wrote, “[O]ne can speak of the male sex or the female sex, but one can also talk about masculinity and femininity and not necessarily be implying anything about anatomy or physiology.”² Gender, as is understood today is culturally formed in the context of a particular society. It has been argued that mentally and intellectually women are equal to men; sexually and emotionally they are complementary. The difference underlying pair bonding arises from the contrast in the way a man feels about a woman, and vice versa. Some of these feelings are culturally conditioned.³ Therefore, gender concepts are not static; these are continuously changing and must be understood in their particular cultural, political, social, religious and historical contexts. In this chapter, I will discuss the representation of gender in the

¹ Anna Tripp (ed.), *Gender: Readers in Cultural Criticism*, Palgrave, New York, 2000, pp. ix.

² Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, London, 1968, pp. ix.

³ Rajat Kanta Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001, pp. xiv.

sacrifice, performed to obtain a son. The Brāhmaṇa Yāja was the officiating priest in this sacrifice. At the end of the offering, for the successful accomplishment of the rite, the priest instructed the queen to come forward: “Stride forward to me, Queen Pṛṣatī! The time for cohabitation has come!”²⁰⁹ To this the queen replied, “My face is anointed, brahmin, I wear the holy scents. For the sake of a son am I importuned – stay, brahmin, favourable to me.”²¹⁰ Yāja, the sacrificial priest replied, “The oblation has been cooked by Yāja, has been enchanted by Upayāja. Why should it not bestow the wish? Stride forward or stay!”²¹¹ And soon after uttering this, Yāja offered the oblation in the fire, out of which arose a son and a daughter.

The term ‘cohabitation’ in context of a sacrifice, performed in order to obtain progeny, is note-worthy. It was customary for heirless kings to seek the favour and blessings of a Brāhmaṇa to get a son. The chosen Brāhmaṇa would be a guest in the palace, fed and waited upon by the daughter of the house.²¹² The ‘daughter of the house’ could also be the queen. This was probably why Drupada’s queen Pṛṣatī was preparing herself. The description of the sacrificial ceremony actually consists of the dialogue of Yāja with the queen. Descriptions follow after the son and the daughter emerged from the fire. It is evident from the joyous uproar of the Pāñcālas that many people were present. Evidently, there was no cohabitation, and yet the children were born. And yet, if the oblation had the power to beget children, as it supposedly did, why was cohabitation mentioned?

²⁰⁹ 1(11).155.30, *The Book of the Beginning, The Mahābhārata*.

²¹⁰ 1(11).155.35, *The Book of the Beginning, The Mahābhārata*.

²¹¹ 1(11).155.35, *The Book of the Beginning, The Mahābhārata*.

²¹² Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Orient Longman Private Ltd., Mumbai, 1995, pp. 43.

Next, we come to the *rājasūya*. There is a particular clause in the *rājasūya* sacrifice where the king pays tribute to the *ratnins* (courtly functionaries). These offerings are made to the king's subordinates who help him in conducting the royal affairs. Among the *ratnins* was the queen. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* states:

“(H)e goes to the dwelling of the Queen, and prepares a pap for Aditi; for Aditi is this Earth, and she is the wife of the gods; and that (queen) is the wife of that (king): hence it is for Aditi. And she, the Queen, assuredly is one of his (the king's) jewels: it is for her that he is thereby consecrated, and he makes her his own faithful (wife). The sacrificial fee, on her part, is a milch cow; for this (earth) is, as it were, a milch cow: she yields to men all their desires; and the milch cow is a mother, and this (earth) is, as it were, a mother: she bears (or sustains) men. Hence the fee is a milch cow.”²¹³

Therefore, it is to be noted that first, the queen was an important element of the polity and second, woman was compared to the earth which engendered life.

The dice game, which is an essential component of the *rājasūya*, has not been portrayed as a part of the sacrificial ceremony in the *Mahābhārata*. It took place after the sacrifice was over. In the opinion of many scholars like Heino Gehrts, the epic depicts an extended *rājasūya*.²¹⁴ It was in this dice game that Draupadī was staked by Yudhiṣṭhira. While staking her, Yudhiṣṭhira described Draupadī in the following manner:

“She is not too short or too tall, not too black or too red, and her eyes are red with love – I play you for her! Eyes like the petals of autumn lotuses, a fragrance as of autumn lotuses, a beauty that waits on autumn lotuses – the peer of the Goddess of Fortune! Yes, for her lack of cruelty, for the fullness of her body, for the straightness of her character does a man desire a woman. Last she lies down who the first to wake up, who knows what was done or left undone, down to the cowherds and goatherds. Her sweaty lotuslike face shines like a lotus. Her waist shaped like an alter, hair long, eyes the color of copper, not too much body

²¹³ V.3.1.4, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

²¹⁴ Cited in Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*, p. 16.

hair...such is the woman, king, such is the slender-waisted Pāñchalī, for whom I now throw, the beautiful Draupadī!...”²¹⁵

The first point which emerges in this context is that the wife is the possession of the husband. Manu declared this: “(I)n her childhood (a girl) should be under the will of her father; in (her) youth, of (her) husband; her husband being dead, of her sons; a woman should never enjoy her own will.”²¹⁶ Draupadī had raised a legal point. If Yudhiṣṭhira had lost himself first in the dice game then, according to Draupadī, he could not have staked her. But, she did not question the fact that was Yudhiṣṭhira’s right to stake her, had he been a free man. The second point relates to the way in which Yudhiṣṭhira described Draupadī while staking her. He described her physical beauty and her capability to serve well in explicit terms. We get an idea of how women were looked at by men, even though she had as high a status as that of Draupadī. That she was intelligent and well-bred were not considered worthy of mention. This indicates that these qualities in a woman were not as highly valued. Women, then were property and a source of pleasure for men. Thus, the role of women was confined household duties and reproduction. She was compared to the earth in the *ratnin* offerings, which suggests that she was important to the king as a jewel of his court. She (the woman/queen) had a role to play in the sacrifices of political import like the *rājasūya* and *asvamedha*. This indicates that she was included and not altogether marginalized. Manu declared: “(F)or women there is no separate sacrifice, nor vow, nor even fast; if a woman obeys her husband, by that she is exalted in heaven.”²¹⁷ But, being a *ratnin* is not just playing a part in a certain ritual – it involves a certain political

²¹⁵ 2(27).58.30-35, *The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Mahābhārata*.

²¹⁶ V.148, *The Ordinances of Manu*.

²¹⁷ V.155, *The Ordinances of Manu*.

position. Thus, from the descriptions of sacrifices in the *Mahābhārata*, the status of the queen cannot be understood in clear terms. She was both an important functionary and a commodity.

The *aśvamedha* of Yudhiṣṭhira had a unique ritual element. After the horse returned from its wanderings, it was sacrificed. According to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the four wives of the king walk would around the dead horse, fanning it.²¹⁸ They would walk around thrice from left to right and thrice from right to left, they would fan the horse.²¹⁹ It was a kind of a ceremonial mourning.²²⁰ The chief queen (*mahishi*) would then say: “ ‘I will urge the seed-layer, urge thou seed-layer!’ – seed, doubtless, means offspring and cattle: offspring and cattle she thus secures for herself. ‘Let us stretch our feet,’ thus in order to secure union. ‘In heaven ye envelop yourselves’ (the Adhvaryu says), - for that is, indeed, heaven where they immolate the victim; therefore he speaks thus, - ‘May the vigorous male, the layer of seed, lay seed!’ she says in order to secure union.”²²¹ A dialogue of sexual connotation would then follow between the four queens and the four priests: the chief queen with the *adhvaryu*, the *udgatri* with the king’s favourite wife, the Brāhmaṇ with the queen consort and the chamberlain with the king’s fourth wife.²²² According to other scriptures, the *hotr* would abuse the crowned queen in obscene language and she would return the abuse along with her one hundred attendant princesses. The other

²¹⁸ XIII. 2.8.4, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

²¹⁹ XIII.2.8.4, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

²²⁰ *Āśvalāyana* (X.3.1), *Āpastamba* (XX.9.6-8), *Lāṭyāyana* (IX.9.17), *Kātyāyana* (XX.6.15-16) cited in N.N. Bhattacharya, *Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social Contents*, pp.50.

²²¹ XIII.2.8.5, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

²²² XIII.2.9.1-9, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

queens too would do the same along with their young female attendants.²²³ After this the horse is cut to pieces, the queens would take out the fat with the help of needles, and the blood would be cooked and offered.²²⁴

The *Mahābhārata* describes this part of the sacrifice in the following manner: “(A)fter cutting that horse into pieces, conformably to scriptural directions, they caused Draupadī of great intelligence, who was possessed of the three requisites of *mantras*, things, and devotion, to sit near the divided animal.”²²⁵ Here the authors of the epic differ slightly from the prescriptive literature. The prescription required that the queen before the animal was cut into pieces, had union with the dead horse and engage in a sexual dialogue with the priest. The *Mahābhārata*, though apparently very familiar with the Vedic prescriptions, portrays a wrong sequence of events. More importantly, the epic barely mentions the queen’s union with the sacrificial horse, though it dedicates an entire *parvan* to the performance of this sacrifice. One wonders why a literary account like the *Mahābhārata* would prefer to ignore the details.

The provision of the queen’s role in the *asvamedha* relates to fertility, as the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* clearly suggests. It is supposed to bestow fertility on the sacrificer’s principle wife. The fertility aspect also connects with the political character of the *asvamedha*, as the king was responsible for the prosperity of his kingdom. That the king benefited from

²²³ *Āśvalāyana* (X.8.10-13), *Kātyāyana* (XX.6.18), *Vajasaneyi Samhitā* (XXIII.22-31), cited in P.V. Kane, pp. 1234-1235.

²²⁴ XIII.2.10-11, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

²²⁵ Section LXXXIX, *The Asvamedha Parva, The Mahābhārata*, p.170.

the symbolic sexual act of the chief queen is attested by the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*: 'It is the wives that anoint (the horse), for they to wit, (many) wives- are a form of prosperity (or social eminence): it is thus prosperity he confers on him (the sacrificer), and neither fiery spirit, nor energy, nor cattle, nor prosperity pass away from him.'²²⁶ Thus the king was viewed as manipulating the instruments of procreation and ensuring generation without actually participating in the process.²²⁷ This is an indicator of the all-powerful status of the king. The symbolic fertility aspect in this sacrifice shows that, like conquered territories, the queen was his property. In the personal domain, even if the woman had the power to create, i.e., to reproduce it is ultimately to the benefit of her husband. Even if we take the traditional view that man's creativity gets expressed in the external world and the woman's in the reproductive process, the symbolism of the *aśvamedha* almost negates it. Her power as a person capable of giving birth is acknowledged, is not respected. The image of the woman as an insignificant receptacle for the unilaterally effective male fluid is confirmed.²²⁸

²²⁶ XIII. 2. 6. 7, *The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

²²⁷ Kumkum Roy, *The Emergence of Monarchy in North India Eight – Fourth Centuries B.C.: As Reflected in the Brahmanical Tradition*, pp. 120-121.

²²⁸ Wendy O' Flaherty, *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980.

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