MEAT-EATERS AND GRASS-EATERS
An Exploration of Human Nature in Katha and Dharma Literature

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It may not have been always so, but at least since the second half of the 20th century there appears to be a consensus in western countries and among people influenced by liberal and enlightenment values in other parts of the world that differences among peoples can be bridged and conflicts can and indeed should be resolved. This was the guiding principle behind the creation of the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II, and the Nobel Prize for Peace is a symbol of this collective aspiration of humanity. The difficulty of implementing that lofty principle is evident in the former Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, in Rwanda and Somalia, in Sri Lanka and Kashmir, and now in New York and Afghanistan, as well as in numerous other places where ethnicity, language, and religion define intercultural conflicts.

But these are practical difficulties amenable to solution, we like to believe; they do not invalidate our basic premise. We continue to have unshakable faith in the principle that all human beings are created equal, that we should judge people by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin. Beneath differences of race, language, belief, dress, and cuisine, we are all brothers and sisters in a single human race. The cry of "égalité" echoes from the French revolution to the women's and civil rights movements.

It is not my intention to challenge this principle; I too am a child of this age and subscribe to that principle. Having lived my adult life in three continents, I consider myself instinctively as a citizen of the world. My question, however, is whether people in the past—and many even today—especially ancient and medieval Indians, also subscribed to such a principle. My
answer is that such a principle would have been anything but self-evident to them, that the entire social theory of ancient India was, indeed, based on just the opposite—that there are profound and irresolvable differences between social groups, that certain groups of people are in natural conflict with others, conflicts that are by definition not amenable to resolution.

At one level, then, my inquiry will be an exploration of human nature—or better, human natures—within a variety of ancient Indian discourses. This exploration may also throw some secondary light on the anthropological realities facing peace-makers today—human equality, universal human rights, and the erasing of ethnic and religious differences are not self-evident values flowing from our basic human nature but a moral high ground that must be fought for and conquered each day.

I

Given the focus of this volume, let me begin with the Bhagavad Gita. Its setting, significantly, is a war. The opposing armies are arrayed in battle. Arjuna surveys the scene and, filled with despondency, resolves: “I will not fight” (BhG 2.9). Arjuna’s charioteer is Krishna, god become incarnate to reestablish dharma, the normative and normal state of affairs, the moral imperative for human society. Krishna’s divine advice fills the rest of the text, and his advice takes the form of an exhortation to fight. God is on the side of war.

Krishna presents many arguments as to why Arjuna must fight, but the most significant, I think, is his assertion that it is Arjuna’s svadharma as a warrior to fight.

Recognizing, moreover, that this is your svadharma, it is not right for you to vacillate; for there is nothing more splendid for a warrior [Katsiya] than a righteous [dharmya, “in accordance with dharma”] war. It is a wide-open door to heaven encountered serendipitously, fortunate are the warriors, O Pṛthu, who are presented with such war” (BhG 2.31-32).

The expression svadharma means “duty specific to an individual” in terms of intersecting identities: gender, caste, stage of life, and the like. The expression is also firmly rooted in the belief that svadharma derives from, or is equivalent to, svabhava, one’s own inherent nature. Duty is not merely a contingent moral response to a set of circumstances but a categorical imperative flowing directly from one’s innate and immutable nature. One man’s duty to fight is as natural to him as another man’s duty not to fight; some are by nature predators, as we will see below, and others are by nature prey. Arjuna’s decision not to fight is based on personal moral conscience. Krishna’s admonition reminds Arjuna both that dharma is not within the purview of such a conscience and that such a conscientious objection will ultimately prove to be futile; nature is immutable and nature will make us act accordingly irrespective of our feeble efforts:

Suckled by the activity specific to you, an activity springing from your own nature (svabhava), you will inevitably perform precisely what you foolishly seek to avoid (BhG 18.60)

That one’s propensities, activities and duties flow from one’s nature and are, therefore, unavoidable, is articulated in an interesting and informative principle repeated frequently in the Pāñcaratna, a book of animal tales and political insights containing high culture and folk wisdom: there can be no association, the refrain goes, between grass-eaters and meat-eaters. The Pāñcaratna takes us into the imagined world of animals, a world that quite naturally divides itself into grass-eaters and meat-eaters, into prey and predator. This imagined animal kingdom, however, is a metaphor for human society. The above refrain of the Pāñcaratna points to an underlying sociological principle: there are some groups in society that are naturally predatory, while others are by nature prey; and there can be no association, alliance or friendship (all of which are indicated by the Sanskrit term mithāra) between them. This principle takes up a theme found already in the ancient Vedic texts: the whole world consists of eaters and food—the powerful and the weak, the big fish and the small fish, the oppressors and the oppressed—a theme that has been explored in detail by Brian Smith (1990) and to which I will return later. This sort of situation, moreover, is not contingent; it is not a situation that can or should be changed. It is a natural or cosmogonic fact with which we have to live.

In almost all the stories of the Pāñcaratna where meat-eaters and grass-eaters strike up a friendship, the grass-eater ends up dead, not so much because of the meat-eater’s gluttony or perjury but because of a variety of circumstances that conspire toward that end. Such incompatible friendships are fated to end disastrously. In the very first and most extensive of the Pāñcaratna stories, a story that frames much of the book, Sārjīṭaka, an ox stranded in the forest becomes close friends with the lion-king Piṅgalaka. In spite of the goodness and good will of both, however, the jackal minister
Damanaka conspires to have Sañjvaka killed by Pañgalaka.

In a parallel story, it is the stranded camel, Kathanaka, who strikes up a friendship with the lion Madhotaka. When the lion is injured and unable to procure food for himself or for his entourage, his ministers—a jackal, a leopard, and a crow (all meat eaters)—conspire and the camel ends up on their dinner table \( (Pañcatalastra, 46-48) \).

Then there is the story of the crow who wanted to befriend the wise and learned mouse Hiranyakha. The mouse tells the crow:

> The impossible is impossible;  
> Only what's possible can a man do;  
> cars don't go in water,  
> or boats on dry terrain.

> The things that are found to join in the world,  
> Only those things should the wise seek to join;  
> You are the eater, and I am the food;  
> what friendship can there be,  
> between the two of us? \( (Pañcatalastra, 75) \)

The belief that there is natural and inborn enmity and conflict between different species is best illustrated by the stories about the mongoose and the snake, stories which every Indian child knows and into whose message they are socialized. Book Five of the \( Pañcatalastra \) (pp. 157-58) contains the famous story of the Brahmin who bludgeons his pet mongoose to death in the mistaken belief that it had eaten his baby boy. The Brahmin leaves the house telling the mongoose to guard the child.

Not long after the Brahmin had left, the mongoose saw a black cobra coming out of its hole and making its way towards the boy. When he saw the snake, his eyes became bloodshot with anger, and his lips, teeth, and paws quivered vehemently. He sprang at once upon the snake and tore it to pieces. Then, seeing the Brahmin returning, he could not contain his joy and ran outside with bloody mouth and paws to show him what he had done.

The rest, as they say, is history! The mongoose, however, killed the cobra not simply to protect the child but because the two are natural and mortal enemies.

Another story specifically invokes this natural enmity between the mongoose and the snake:

In a certain Arjuna tree there lived a pair of herons. Now, every time they had chicks a huge snake would crawl through a hollow in the tree and devour the chicks even before they had a chance to grow their wings. The male heron became so depressed he lost his mind. He gave up eating, went to the bank of a lake, and sat there dejected.

A crab happened to see him there and said to him: 'Uncle, why do you look so sad today?' The heron told him what had happened, how his chicks had been devoured. The crab comforted him, saying: 'Look, my friend, I know a way to kill the snake. You know the mongoose den. Spread pieces of fish in an unbroken line from their den up to the hole where the snake lives. Greedy for that food, the mongooses are bound to reach that hole and discover the snake. Because of their natural enmity, they are sure to kill it.'

The heron did as he was told. The mongooses followed the track of the fish and, recalling their ancient enmity, killed the snake. \( (Pañcatalastra, p. 64) \)

The \( Pañcatalastra \) posits a similar natural enmity between owls and crows, the conflict between them being the central theme of Book Three dealing with War and Peace. Here the enmity is placed in \( illo tempore, \) in the mythic times of the beginning, when the birds were electing their king. The owl was about to be anointed as king when a passing crow happened to see this and rashly commented:

> Why, where are all the other birds—the swans, the ducks, the ruddy geese,  
> the curlews, the peacocks, the cuckoos, the pigeons, the pheasants? Have  
> they all been wiped out that you would consecrate as king this ugly-looking  
> owl? And further:

> With that crooked beak and those squinty eyes,  
> With a look that is unpleasant and cruel,  
> His face looks dreadful when he's not enraged;  
> God knows what he'll do when he's in a rage! \( Pañcatalastra, p. 113) \)

So started their inborn enmity.

These innate and natural differences breeding deep and abiding enmities are not contingent, like the falling out between friends or lovers. They are not occasioned by specific acts or identifiable behavior patterns. If you are an owl you will not be inclined toward friendly relations with a crow; if you are a mongoose you will try to kill the next snake you happen to come by. This philosophy is nicely encapsulated in the story of the mouse Hirany-
yaka and a crow that I have already mentioned. The mouse expounds the philosophy of friendship and enmity. Natural enemies can never become friends. Hiranyakya tells the crow:

“Look, my man. You are my enemy. So how can you expect me to be friends with you? As it is said:

Never form an alliance with a foe,
Even though he is closely tied to you.
Water, though very hot,
Will still put a fire out.”

The crow: “Come, my friend. How can we be enemies? We haven’t even seen each other! Why do you utter such nonsense?”

Hiranyakya then smiled and said: “As you know, my friend, scriptures tell us that there are two kinds of enmity in this world, natural and incidental: You happen to be my natural enemy.”

The crow: “Describe them to me, sir. I want to hear the defining characteristics of the two types of enmities.”

Hiranyakya: “Incidental enmity is sparked by a specific cause, and that type of enmity is removed by doing a favor proportionate to that cause. It is totally impossible, however, to remove natural enmity. Natural enmity itself is of two types, enmity from just one side and enmity from both sides.”

The crow: “How are they different from one another?”

Hiranyakya: “When each would kill the other and each would eat the other, then there is enmity from both sides, because each can cause harm to the other. Such, for example, is the enmity between lions and elephants. When without provocation the one killed and eats the other, while the other does no harm to him, does not injure him, and does not eat him, that is enmity from just one side and for no reason. Such, for example, is the enmity between horses and buffaloes, between cats and mice, and between snakes and mongoose. Does a horse harm a buffalo, or a snake, a mongoose, or a mouse, a cat? So, why try to create an impossible alliance?” (Pârâsâññiya, pp. 76-77)

The lesson in all these stories is that nature and natural propensities always triumph over contingent and accidental qualities such as learning, virtue, inner character and the like. And of course it is possible to fake learning and holiness. The Pârâsâññiya and other similar texts such as the Hitopadesa are full of stories of hypocritical animals, especially cats and tigers, standing on two-legs gazing at the sun and faking holiness to obtain an easy meal. The Pârâsâññiya does not tire telling us that whatever you do to a dog’s tail—oil it, massage it, treat it with heat—it will always return to its natural position; you cannot straighten a dog’s tail.

A story that illustrates this principle nicely is that of the mouse turned into a girl (Pârâsâññiya, pp. 131-33). Once a childless Brahmin was taking a bath in the Ganges and a baby mouse fell into his hands from the beak of a falcon. Filled with pity, he changes the mouse into a girl and takes her home to his barren wife. The girl grows up and the Brahmin is determined to give her in marriage to the most powerful of the gods. So he summons the sun, who gives the excuse that the rain cloud is more powerful than he because it covers him. The Brahmin goes to the rain cloud who says that the wind is more powerful because it blows him either and thither. The wind says that the mountain is more powerful because it cannot shake it. The mountain says that mice are more powerful because they dig holes into it. So the Brahmin finally summons the mouse, but the mouse protests: “How can she enter my tiny hole?” So the Brahmin changes the girl back into a mouse and marries her off. The cosmos conspires to make sure that the mouse returns to her natural state.

Giving up the Sun, Rain, Wind, and Mountain, who sought to be her husband,
The mouse-girl reverted to her own kind—
For one’s own nature is hard to transcend. (Pârâsâññiya, p. 131)

The dangers inherent in the interaction between incompatible groups is wonderfully illustrated by the story of “The Crow and the Sparrow,” a nursery tale that is told in different versions by mothers to their little children throughout India. Alan Dundes (1977) has produced an interesting study based on this tale offering a Freudian interpretation of caste and untouchability. Here is the simple Ramayana version translated by A. K. Ramamurthy:

Sister: Crow and Sister Sparrow are friends. Crow has a house of cowdung; Sparrow, one of stone. A big rainstorm washes away Crow’s house. So she comes to Sparrow and knocks on her door. Sparrow makes her wait—first because she is feeding her children, later because she is making her husband’s and children’s bed. Finally she lets her in and offers her several places to sleep. Crow chooses to sleep in the chickpea sacks. All night she
munches chickpeas and makes a khaun-khutum noise. Whenever Sparrow asks her what the noise is, Crow says, “Nothing really. Remember, you gave me a betel-nut! I’m biting on it.” By morning, she has eaten up all the chickpeas in the sack. She cannot control her bowels, so she fills the sack with her shit before she leaves. Sparrow’s children go in the morning to eat spare peas, and muck their hands up with Crow’s shit.

Sparrow is angry. When Crow comes back that night to sleep, she (Sparrow) puts a hot iron spatula under her (Crow) and brands her behind. Crow flees, crying Ki, Ki in pain.4

Even if we do not accept Dunsen’s Freudian interpretation, this nursery tale is, on the one hand, aimed at socializing children into dangers of association between incompatible groups (sparrow is Brahmin, crow is outcasti), and on the other, is a commentary on that very incompatibility. When you become friends with people of other groups and bring them into your home; your food ends up as the others’ shit, and you end up with their shit on your hands.

II

Let me now turn from the colorful stories of the Pañcatantra to the dry prescriptions of the Dharmāstras. The sociology of the śāstras is firmly based on Vedic precedents and ideology. The Puruṣa hymn of the Rigveda (10.90) has been called the first constitution of India, and its sociological principle has been followed faithfully by the later śāstras. It lays down the original cosmogonic reason why society is constructed the way it is, why it is internally differentiated into hierarchically arranged groups. From the Puruṣa offered in sacrifice there emerged the differentiated universe—earth, mid-space, and sky; sun, moon, and stars; animals and birds; horses, cows, goats, and sheep; and most significantly the hierarchical components of society. The four varnas of Bṛähmāṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, and Śūdra emerged from the mouth, the arms, the thighs, and the feet of the primeval Puruṣa, respectively. Vedic stories of origin are designed to point out the reason why something is constituted the way it is, why something or someone has the particular functions and uses, especially ritual uses, that thing or person has. Why do we use barley or Udumbara wood in a sacrifice—because, then follows the origin of barley or the Udumbara tree. Likewise, the Puruṣa tale shows the origin of social classes from the primordial sacrifice; their essential natures and their socio-ritual roles are determined by the part of Puruṣa’s body from which they originated. These social classes are as distinct as, or have as diverse natures as, the sun and the moon, earth and sky, horses and cows.

The differentiation of social classes into the powerful and the powerless, into predators and prey, is articulated in the Vedic texts using the metaphor of eaters and food. The Vedic texts repeatedly call the Brahmins and especially the Kṣatriyas—that is, the unified upper crust of society consisting of the priestly and political powers—the eaters, and the Vaiṣyas and the Śūdras—that is, the commenter and working classes—the food. The Kaṇḍālikā Upaniṣad (2.9) contains this petition: “The Brahmin is one mouth of yours [i.e., of the creator god Brahma]; with that mouth you eat the kings. Make me a food-eater with that mouth. The King is one mouth of yours; with that mouth you eat the Vaiṣyas. Make me a food-eater with that mouth.” In the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (7.29) we see social hierarchy described from a Kṣatriya viewpoint; a Brahmin is a seeker of food and to be moved at will; a Vaiṣya is a tributary to another, eaten by another, oppressed at will; and a Śūdra is the servant of another, removed at will, to be slain at will. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (13.2.96-8) compares the common people to the vagina and the royal power to the penis, the people to the corn and the royal power to the deer, juxtaposing nicely the acts of sexual and dietary dominance. The social fact of the higher and the powerful eating the lower and the weak is expressed in the well-known maxim of the fish [maṣṭyāṇya], where the big fish eat the small fish. Manu (5.29) articulates this ecological principle well: “The immobile are food for the mobile; the fanged for the fanged; the handless for the handed; and the timid for the brave.”

The Puruṣa story is not only narrated or alluded to repeatedly in the Dharma literature, it also serves as the implicit ideological basis for much of the Dharmic social discourse. Manu (1.87) for example states: “As the Brahma sprang from his mouth, as he was the first-born, as he possesses the Vedas, he is by right the lord of this whole creation.” Sheldon Pollock (1993), in his polemenic piece “Deep Orientalism?,” has noted the racist underpinnings of the varna and caste systems and the biogenetic basis of case differentiation. Whether we agree with Pollock’s characterization of caste as “racist” or not, I think it is clear that what would today be called the “biological” or the “genetic” formed the ideological basis for varna differentiation and of the social ideology in the Dharmāstras. Social differentiation and hierarchy are not contingent realities but rooted in the very constitution of social groups. In his study of the Indian philosophical discours-
es on este, Halbfass (1991, 364) notes:

The śāktīnāms [universals] thus signify structures of the universe, biological species, and other basic forms within the real, empirical world that remains unaffected by the periodic destructions of the world and always reappear at the beginning of a new epoch. For this reason, and in the face of the ancient cosmological associations of the varṇa doctrine, it would seem natural that the four castes were also viewed in the sense of such invariant prototypes.

Not all philosophers pursued this path; but some, such as Kumārila, the well-known Mīmāṃsakist, did. The use of animal species to represent social groups in folk tales, it appears, is more than mere metaphor; Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas are as different as horses and goats.⁵

Let me offer some examples of this way of thinking. The first one comes not from a Dharmāśāstra but even more tellingly from a grammatical text. The 2nd-century BCE grammarians Patanjali (on Pāṇini 2.2.8) describes a Brahmāna as “white in color, of pure conduct, with hair that is yellowish or reddish brown.” Note the connection between outer skin color and inner purity of conduct, a feature common in the Dharma literature, which refers to Śūdras as “the black varṇa.”⁶ Not just the color of the skin differentiated the varṇas, each is also assigned different propensities, virtues, and vices. The Vaiṣṇava Dharmasūtra (6.23-24) makes these telling remarks about the difference between a Brahmān and a Śūdra:

Discipline, austerity, self-control, liberality, truthfulness, purity, vedaic learning, compassion, erudition, intelligence, and religious faith—these are the characteristics of a Brahmān.

Bearing long grudges, easy, mendacity, reviling Brahmāns, slander, and ruthlessness—these should be recognized as the characteristics of a Śūdra.

Some texts explain the differences between varṇas using the Śāktika theory of gunas within the context of rebirth. Manu (12. 42-51) lists groups of beings—animals, mythical demons and gods, and humans—among whom one takes birth depending on one’s dominant guna. Śūdra is listed under beings where tamas or darkness predominates, rajas or energy dominates in Kṣatriyas, and sattva or goodness/light in Brahmānas. Vaiśyas are left out of the list. The Bhagavad Gītā (18.41-44) makes the most explicit statement regarding the distribution of gunas among the varṇas, the differences in their inherent nature (svabhāva), and the resultant differences in their propensities and proper occupations:

The activities/occupations (karma) are distributed among Brahmānas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras, O Parāśara, in accordance with the qualities (guna) arising from their respective natures (svabhāva).

Tranquillity, self-control, austerity, purification, patience, uprightness, knowledge, wisdom, and belief (āśīra)—these are a Brahmāna’s activities born/resulting from his nature (svabhāva).

Bravery, ardor, resolve, skill, not flinging in battle, generosity, and majesty—these are a Kṣatriya’s activities born from his nature.

Plowing, cattle herding, and trade are a Vaiśya’s activities born from his nature. The activity of service is for the Śūdra also born from his nature.

That social roles and inner dispositions are based on one’s nature is nicely illustrated by Mana (8.414), who, while speaking of the emancipation of a Śūdra slave, makes this telling observation:

Even when he is released by his master, a Śūdra is not freed from his slave status; for that is innate in him and who can remove it from him?

The bio-genetic underpinnings of the Dharma social thought is perhaps best illustrated in its explanation of the so-called mixed varṇas; an explanation that was clearly intended to account for the diversity and proliferation of castes (jāt) within the ideological framework of the four varṇas. This is not the place to describe the system fully, but the basic principle is that the different mixed varṇas are generated by intermarriage among the four basic varṇas. Thus, the child of a Brahmāna father and a Śūdra mother is a Pārāśara, whereas the child of a Śūdra father and a Brahmāna mother is a Cāḍāla. The hierarchical ordering of these hybrid groups is determined by possibly the most significant rule of Dharmāśātric classification: the rule of anūtama and pratiloma. Literally, “along the hair” and “against the hair,” paralleling the English “with the grain” and “against the grain,” the rule establishes the legitimate and illegitimate directions of sexual relationships. When the male is hierarchically superior to the female, the union is anūtama and legitimate, whereas the opposite is pratiloma and illegitimate. The untouchable Cāḍāla occupying the bottom of the social hierarchy is the product of the worst pratiloma union: a male Śūdra having sex with a female.
Brāhmaṇa. Just as crossing a horse and a donkey creates the hybrid mule, so the crossing of varnas create the hybrid castes. This is not my own illegitimate inference; it is stated explicitly by Medhātithi, the most renowned commentator of the Māṇava Dharmasūtra. At the very beginning of this treatise, the seers ask Manu: “Please, Lord, tell us precisely and in the proper order the Laws of all the social classes, as well as of those born in between” (Manu 1.2). In explaining why the author of the text mentions “those born in between (antaraprabhava)” as a separate category, Medhātithi says: “It is improper to list them under the caste (jāti) of either the father or the mother. Just as a mule born from the union of a donkey and horse is neither a donkey nor a horse but a different species (jāti).”

In some ways the Dharma ideology assimilates lower castes with outcastes, that is, people who have fallen from their castes due to grievous infractions, thus infusing a moral dimension to caste. This is further sustained by the rebirth ideology according to which sinners are reborn as low caste people.

“To whom does a son belong?”—there has been a longstanding debate about this in India. The question is posed frequently using agricultural imagery: does the son belong to the owner of the seed, that is, the biological father, or to the owner of the field, that is, the husband of the mother? This debate is nicely framed by Vasiṣṭha (17.69):

People are in disagreement, some saying: ‘A son belongs to the husband of the woman,’ and others: ‘A son belongs to the man who fathered him’ (A 2.13.5 n.). They produce evidence in support of both positions:

Position I: ‘Even if a bull fathered a hundred calves on someone else’s cows, the calves belong to the owner of cows; the bull has spilled his semen in vain.’

Position II: ‘Diligently guard this progeny of yours, lest strangers sow their seeds in your field; in the transit to the next world, a son belongs to the man who fathered him. Otherwise a husband makes this progeny of his worthless for himself.’

To put this in modern terms, is “son” a biological or a cultural category? The image of seed and field strongly favors the cultural: you cannot plant a mango seed in someone else’s field and lay claim to the fruit of the resultant tree. The fruit belong not to the owner of the seed but to the owner of the field. There is a strong case for considering “son” to be a cultural creation rather than a biological product. On this is based the Dharmic customs of levirate (niyoga), the pustikā (that is, the appointment of a daughter to beget a son for her father), and adoption. But in all these we see the biological intruding: in niyoga the wife is inseminated by the husband’s brother or close relative; in pustikā the child is that of one’s own daughter married to a man of one’s varna; and one adopts only a close relative or a boy of one’s own varna.

Clearly, biology is an important factor in the social position and the inner character of children. Vasiṣṭha again speaks about the impossibility of hiding one’s parentage:

You can know by their actions all those who have been secretly conceived and who are tainted with the attributes rising from relationships in the inverse order of class (prajñas), because they are devoid of virtue and good conduct. (Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra 18.7)

The irresolvable and innate differences among social groups was not mere theory or theology; it intruded also into the ancient Indian system of criminal justice. A crime is punished not purely on the basis of the crime but on the basis of the social position of the perpetrator and the victim. Equal justice under the law is an untenable position within this ideology. For defaming a Brāhmin a Śūdra’s tongue is cut out, while a Kṣatriya and a Vaiśya pay different types of fines. “If someone kills a Kṣatriya, he should give a thousand cows to erase the enmity, a hundred if he kills a Vaiśya, and ten if he kills a Śūdra” (Aṣṭavānśika Dharmasūtra 1.24.1-3). Social position is also a factor in how witnesses in a court of law are interrogated and how their testimony is evaluated. “The judge should question a Brāhmin, saying ‘Speak; a Kṣatriya, saying ‘Speak the truth’; a Vaiśya, with a reference to cows, seeds, and gold; but a Śūdra, with a reference to sins that cause loss of caste’” (Manu 8.88).

Note that a Brāhmin is expected to speak the truth without being told to do so, whereas a Vaiśya has to swear by his property and a Śūdra is admonished as to the dire consequences of speaking falsely. A Brāhmin’s testimony also counts for more: “When witnesses are in disagreement, the king should accept the testimony of the majority; when they are equally divided, the testimony of those distinguished by superior qualities; and when men with superior qualities are in disagreement, the testimony of Brāhmīns’ (Manu 8.73). Inequality before the law is a direct outcome of inequality of nature or svabhāva.
To conclude this discussion of śāstras, let me cite an interesting example from the grammarian Pāṇini (2.4.9): veśāṁ ca varāhah śāṃvatikah—the rule states that dvandva (co-ordinative) compounds are declined in the singular (rather than the normal dual) when the two component words refer to entities that are in perpetual opposition to each other. Patañjali, commenting on this sūtra, cites these telling examples of such conflicts: śramaṇa/săhakaṇnaṃ (ascetic and Brahmin); kākolakā (crow and owl); śvaśūdha (dog and jackal). The later commentary Kāśka explains varāha (“opposition”) as vair (“enmity”) and gives these examples of such natural and eternal enmity: cat and mouse; snake and mongoose; and horse and buffalo—pairs that we have already encountered in the Pāñcatantra.

III

Finally, let me present “the other side.” Indian history and literature offer numerous counter-examples to the ideology that I have outlined above, an ideology that I believe was in many respects the dominant one at least and especially within the Brahmanical tradition. Let me once again return to the Pāñcatantra where the old debate rages over what is more important: nature or nurture, pedigree or character. The crow is still trying to convince the mouse Hiranyakas to be his friend, and argues:

I have listened to all you have said. But still I am single-minded about this: I am going to make friends with you. And I know it is possible, for as it is said:

All metals unite when they’re melted down;  
Birds and beasts unite when there’s a cause;  
Even fools unite out of fear and greed;  
But righteous people unite at first sight.

What’s more,

An evil man is like an earthen pot,  
easy to break, hard to restore;  
A virtuous man is like a golden pot,  
hard to break, easy to restore. (Pāñcatantra, p. 78)

Verse after verse is cited by various proponents of character in defense of the proposition that a man must be judged by the nobility of his character rather than the accident of his birth:

A man’s nobility comes not  
from the quality of his birth;  
The essence of mortal men  
rests on how they conduct themselves. (Pāñcatantra, p. 67)

Examples of religious movements aimed at discounting birth are found throughout Indian history, from Buddhism and Jainism to later Bhakti sects. Clearly, this was an argument that was never fully settled either in India or elsewhere in the world.

To present one view as “the Dharmaśātric position,” moreover, does not do justice to the richness of this literature. As I wrote in the introduction to my translation of the four Dharmasthār (Olivelle: 1999),

The expert tradition of Dharma during the centuries immediately preceding the common era appears to have been vibrant and dynamic as shown by the numerous contradictory opinions of experts recorded in the extant Dharmaśātras. Such diversity of opinion belies the common assumption that ancient Indian society was uniform and stifling under an orthodoxy imposed by Brahmins. If even the experts recorded in these normative texts disagree so vehemently, the reality on the ground must have been even more chaotic and exhilarating.

Parallel to the debate on nature versus nurture is that between fate and human effort, between the activists and the fatalists, whether fate is ascribed to astrological (divine) or karmic forces. Sociologists have pointed to the belief in rebirth and karma as factors in the economic backwardness of South Asian countries and their intractable poverty. Although fate and karma are the central components of the dominant Indian theodicy, the Pāñcatantra offers fine counter-examples that demonstrate the fallacy of the sociological theory (see Olivelle 1997, xxxvii). Here is the word Maṇḍharaka’s advice to the mouse Hiranyakas:

To a man who works hard wealth and allies  
flock of their own accord,  
Like frogs to a pond, and birds to a lake  
that is full and well-stocked.

Hard worker, not a procrastinator;  
Knows how to act, not addicted to vice;  
Brave and graceful, a firm and faithful friend—  
Fortune on her own seeks out such a man,  
to be her place of residence.
Irresolute, lazy, relying on fate,
And without an ounce of virility—
Fortune dislikes embracing such a man,
Like a sexy young wife, her aged spouse.

Even a fool can gain wealth in this world,
When he is capable of bold action.
No one respects those scared of bold action,
Although they have minds like Bhraspati’s.

—(Pañcatantra, p. 93)

Concluding Postscript

Arjuna’s initial decision not to fight in spite of his warrior status is clearly an expression of individualism, of placing individual conscience above societal demands. It is, furthermore, an affirmation of and allegiance to a universal ethic (adhisthāna-dharma) as opposed to a contextual ethic (svadharma), possibly even to an ethic of non-violence (ahimsa). The literary persona of Arjuna as presented in the Bhavad Gītā—and here we proceed from historical questions—is used to present a theological argument; Arjuna’s initial decision is a foil for presenting Krishna’s sustained argument in rest of the book.7

In the first chapter Arjuna is presented as representing the new religious doctrine based precisely on the centrality of the individual and the claims of a universal ethic. At the time of the Gītā there were historical individuals both within the Brahmanical tradition and especially in the new ascetic movements such as Buddhism and Jainism who espoused similar views. This challenge to the Brahmanical interpretation of human nature, society, social organization, and an individual’s place within the social hierarchy was clearly becoming intense after the Āśākta reform and the growing prominence of these new religions. Krishna’s teaching as presented in the Bhavad Gītā is intended to refute these new doctrines.

In the rest of the book Arjuna’s initial refusal to fight is cast in broader theological terms: the abandonment of ritual and social activities (karma), the turning away from one’s religious and social obligations (svadharma), and the adoption of a non-active mode of live (saīhīnya). In other words, Arjuna’s decision is the occasion for a discourse on the conflict between responsible engagement in activity (karmayoga) and its total renunciation (karmasaīhīnya) and for the exposition of Krishna’s teaching against the renunciation of the world (saīhīnaya).

At the end of the book, we find Arjuna according to the Brahmanical viewpoint as presented by Krishna. Arjuna returns to his warrior persona and to the battle at hand. As in the hands of the Brahmin the mouse-girl returns to her own nature and finally becomes a mouse, so Arjuna in the hands of the author of the Bhavad Gītā gives up his brief indulgence in individualism and returns to his native warrior nature; the paths of return are different but the outcome is the same.

Beyond the theological arguments for and against a universal ethic and the significance of the individual and his or her aspirations, there is also a belief repeated often in the Pañcatantra and in the Dharmaśastras that it is, in fact, impossible to transcend one’s nature. Nature always triumphs over nurture and individual aspirations:

A dog’s curved tail returns to its curved state,
However much one applies oil or heat. (Pañcatantra, p. 35)

Grass-eaters will always be grass-eaters and meat-eaters will always be meat-eaters; there is no possibility of any real or sustained association or friendship between them. Nature (svadharma) defines an individual’s habits, activities, and duties. “Far better it is,” says the Gītā (18.47), “to do one’s own duty (svadharma) inadequately than another’s duty (paradharna) perfectly; one incurs no stain by performing the activity determined by one’s own nature (svadharma).” Trying to counter one’s nature is not only immoral but also futile, as Arjuna and the mouse-girl found out, “for one’s own nature is hard to transcend” (Pañcatantra, p. 131).

Endnotes

1. This principle is at the root of the statement in BhG 3.30 that it is better to do one’s own duty (svadharma) imperfectly than to do someone else’s perfectly. On the connection between svadharma and svadharma, see also Halbfass 1988:355.
2. The principle that one’s innate nature is impossible to transcend is repeated in the Mahābhārata (3.9.11): “The propensity (śīla) that a man is born with does not leave him until death.”
3. See Pañcatantra, pp. 36, 44, 47, 56.
4. Cited from Dundes 1997:34. Dundes provides texts of several versions of this folk tale from different parts of India. Note that I am dealing here only with the ideology of caste and not with the realities of social groups on the ground. The reification
of caste in the Brahmanical ideology is not always matched by the reality on the ground, where there is evidence of social mobility throughout Indian history.

5. See the connection and correlation between different animal species and different varṇas in the Vedic literature as detailed by Brian Smith (1994). On the connection between social power, animal classifications, and dietary regulations, see Olivelle 2002.

6. Āpāstanātha Dharmasūtra 1.27.11; Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra 1.2.11.

7. The Gītā's creation of Arjuna's persona is similar to that of Julius Caesar by Shakespeare or of Jesus by the gospel writers. Indeed, in the Śantī Parvan of the Mahābhārata, within the very similar context of Yudhisthira's refusal to accept the throne, Arjuna plays quite a different role in cajoling his older brother to abandon his fairheartedness.

Bibliography


Pursuing the Gita: From Gandhi to Doniger

Ramesh N. Rao

Like the Bible and the Koran, the Bhagavad Gītā is both a "great book" and a popular best-seller. From scholarly translations to popular presentations, and from esoteric interpretations to psychological analyses, the Gītā has attracted lofty praise as well as harsh disapproval. It has evoked from its commentators flights of inspiration and devotion as well as agnostic meanderings and suspicious speculation. The Gītā has been translated and commented upon by myriad authors, from Gandhi3 to Khushwant Singh,2 and from Annie Besant2 to Swami Prabhupada.4 Gandhi believed that the Gītā was not a historical work but that under the guise of describing warfare it explored and explained the struggle that each person wages within himself or herself. Gandhi saw the Gītā as a statement about what is right and wrong, just and unjust, and whether to meet life head-on or to retreat. Others, like Wendy Doniger of the University of Chicago, believe that the Gītā is a “dishonest book,” and that it encourages and celebrates violence and warfare.5 Gandhi, as is well known, was a proponent of non-violence. He says of the Mahābhārata and the Gītā: "The author of the Mahābhārata has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance, and has left them nothing but a legacy of miseries." Some will dismiss Gandhi’s interpretation of the Gītā as skewed to fit his own ideas of nonviolence, but they will not go to the extent that Professor Doniger does in labeling the work “dishonest.” Nor will they blame Krishna (God) for the destruction of the human race, as she does. Given these diverse views, who shall we listen to, and what shall we make of the Gītā?

In recent months there has been a resurgence of interest in the Bhagavad Gītā. For example, a current movie, "The Legend of Bagger Vance," is a restructured form of the Gītā in which the battlefront becomes a golf course. The golf course in question: a foggy, windy Kewee Island off the coast of Sa-