Chapter 2

Varṇadharma

The word varṇa is derived from the root vṛ, meaning ‘that which covers’. This term means ‘colour’ or ‘light’ in most passages of the RgVeda.¹ But in some passages of the RgVeda the word varṇa is associated with groups of people with a skin of dark or fair colour. One RgVedic hymn indicates that the word varṇa was also used in the sense of social order.² This hymn places dāsas lower in varṇa hierarchy. The only two prominent varṇas of the RgVeda are the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas. The mention of the four varṇas in the Puruṣasūkta hymn³ of the RgVeda attests the fact that the four varṇa structure was already in the making at later stages of the RgVedic period. The hymn narrates that brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas and śūdras emanated from primeval man’s mouth, arms, thighs and feet respectively. It is important to note that the term varṇa was still not associated with the four orders. G.S.Ghurye points out that the particular limbs associated with these categories, and the order in which they are mentioned, probably indicate their status in the contemporary society, though no such interpretation is directly given in the hymn.⁴ It may be conceded that different groups had come into existence. But there is nothing to indicate that these distinctions had crystallized.

The catuvarga structure had become the order of society during the later Vedic period. Moreover, these four varṇas were by then vertically placed in social hierarchy. The upper two varṇas – brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas – were advised to join hands in order to control the other two varṇas. The brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya could maintain their hold over society only by maintaining their unity. The concept of purity and impurity had emerged by then. The śūdra was not allowed to do some specific works related to yajñas. The duties and privileges of the four varṇas were being laid down.⁵ The division was, however, not strictly defined. No restrictions were imposed on interdining and intermarriage.

The distinctions had clearly emerged in the post-Vedic period, so much so that the term varṇašramadharma was used to refer to the totality of the duties of different varṇas, though some duties were considered common to all varṇas (sadhāraṇaṃdharma)

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¹ R.V. 1.73.7ff, cited in P.V. Kane, History, Vol. 2, Part. 1, p.25.
⁴ G.S. Ghurye, Caste and Race in India, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1999, p.44.
such as forbearance, veracity, restraint, purity, charity, self-control, non-violence, obedience towards one's teacher, visiting places of pilgrimages, sympathy with the afflicted, reverence towards gods and brāhmaṇas and freedom from anger. A.L. Basham writes that the implication of the phrase, varṇaśramadharma, is that dharma is not the same for all. There is indeed a common dharma, a general norm of conduct, which all must follow equally, but there is also a dharma appropriate to each class and to each stage of life of the individual. This phrase confirms that man was unequal in the brāhmaṇical society. This was one of the most striking features of the brahmical society.

Before we proceed further, it would be interesting to discuss the etymology of the four varṇas briefly. Although, etymological meaning may not necessarily correspond with the practical use of the term, it would certainly provide us with some useful insights into its original meaning. The term brāhmaṇa is derived from the root brahman. Brahman generally means 'prayer' or 'hymn' in the RgVeda. The transition of meaning from brahman (prayer) to brāhmaṇa meaning the class of those who composed or recited prayers is natural and easy. The root is bṛh – to grow, increase, and expand. Monier-Williams maintains that brāhmaṇa is derived from brahman which means 'development of soul or spirit'. Kṣatriya is derived from the root kṣatra. Kṣatra means valour. The word kṣatriya is very frequently applied as an epithet to several gods, for they had valour and protected the domain from enemies. Kṣatriya, in the Mahābhārata, is derived from kṣata and trai, meaning one who protects from wound and injury. The word vaiśya occurs only once in the RgVeda. However, its roots viś meaning 'people' occurs quite frequently. Kane argues that viś cannot, in almost all hymns of the RgVeda, mean vaiśya but means the 'people' or the āryan people. In this regard, Hopkins is of the opinion that viś, in the Vedic sense 'clansman', was later confined to members of such families of the āryan folk who did not renounce farming and trading to live an altogether priestly or military life. So far as the root of śūdra is concerned Monier-Williams maintains that the word is of doubtful derivation.

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6 A.L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, Rupa & Co., Delhi, 1990, p.138.
9 P V. Kane, History, Vol.2, Part.1, p.30
10 Mābh. 12.59.128.
12 Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit, p.1085
2.1. *Varṇadharma* in the *Dharmaśūtras* and the *Smṛtis*

2.1.1. *Varṇadharma* of the Brāhmaṇa

The *caturvarṇa* structure had taken such a deep root by the time the *Dharmaśūtras* were composed that all *Dharmaśūtras* record different duties and privileges of the four *varṇas*. They all begin with the proposition that the four *varṇas* – brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaisyas and śūdras – should be arranged in a descending scale of social hierarchy. Whether it is Gautama and Baudhāyana, who are considered the oldest among *Dharmaśūtra*-writers, or Āpastamba and Vasishtha, who came later, they all are unanimous on the *dharma* to be followed by the brāhmaṇas. Baudhāyana enjoins that Brahman placed its majesty in the brāhmaṇas, together with the duties and privileges of studying, teaching, sacrificing for themselves, and others, charity, and accepting gifts for the protection of the *Vedas*.\(^\text{13}\) Āpastamba generally agrees with Baudhāyana when he discusses the *dharma* of the four *varṇas*. He adds:

> Among the four *varṇas*—the brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaisyas and śūdras—each preceding *varṇa* is superior by birth to the one following. For all, except śūdras, initiation, the study of the *Vedas*, and kindling of sacred fire are ordained. Service of the other three orders is prescribed for the śūdras. The higher the *varṇa* he serves, the greater the merit he earns.\(^\text{14}\)

Vasistha calls the first three *varṇa dvija* i.e. twice-born. He enumerates that the brāhmaṇas have six lawful occupations – studying the *Vedas*, teaching the *Vedas*, sacrificing for himself, sacrificing for others, giving alms, and accepting gifts.\(^\text{15}\) Manu, who has been assigned a date immediately after the *Dharmaśūtra*-authors and is considered the earliest among *Smṛtikaras*, broadly agrees with his predecessors on *varṇadharma*. He repeats the divine origin theory of the four *varṇas*, which was first propounded in the Puruṣaṣūkta hymn of the RgVeda. Manu argues that the lord made separate innate activities for those born of his mouth, arms, thighs and feet in order to protect this whole creation.\(^\text{16}\) According to him, a brāhmaṇa should teach, learn, sacrifice for himself and others, give and receive.\(^\text{17}\) Manu explains further why a brāhmaṇa is superior to the other three *varṇas*. A man is said to be purer above the navel. Therefore, the mouth of the Brahman, by virtue of it being the highest part of the body, is the purest part. The brāhmaṇa is born from the Brahman’s mouth, so he is the most superior. He is

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\(^{13}\) *BDh.* 1.10.18.2.

\(^{14}\) *ApDh.* 1.1.1.4-7.

\(^{15}\) *VDh.* 2.2; and 2.13-14. see also *Vīṣṇu.* 2.1-2; 2.4 and 17

\(^{16}\) *Manu.* 1.87; see also *BDh.* 1.10.18.6; *VDh.* 4.2.

\(^{17}\) *Manu.* 1.88.
Moreover, the gods and ancestors eat their offerings through his mouth. He is the best of men because he is traditionally regarded as such. 18 However, among brāhmaṇas, learned men are the best. Among the learned brāhmaṇas, those who understand their obligations are superior. Among those who understand their obligations, they who fulfil them are the best. Among those who fulfil their obligations, they are the best who know the Vedas. 19

Thus, according to the Dharmaśastras, the ideal livelihood for the brāhmaṇa comprises teaching the Vedas, receiving gifts, and officiating sacrifices for others. The importance of sacrifice and ritualism contributed to the growth of prestige of the brāhmaṇa. The privilege of officiating at sacrificial ceremonies and other religious rites were exclusively reserved for him. The other three varṇas are ordered to live according to the teaching of the brāhmaṇa. Though the various privileges of the brāhmaṇa are sanctioned by the law-givers, they insist time and again that he shall keep to the moral discipline of his varṇa and perform his duties scrupulously. Otherwise he risks his authority and privileges. It is decreed that a brāhmaṇa who digresses from this path is equal to a śūdra and as such there can be no harm in neglecting such a brāhmaṇa. 20

We notice that these rulings become more stringent in the Smṛtis. The ideal set for a brāhmaṇa is one of poverty, of plain living and high thinking, of forsaking the active pursuit of riches and cherishing cultural preservation and advancement. The general rule is that a brāhmaṇa, when not in distress, should acquire wealth just sufficient to maintain himself and his family, and to enable him to perform his dharma. 21

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18 Manu. 1.92-96.
19 Manu. 1.97. Gautama maintains that such is the brāhmaṇa’s greatness that he recognizes no teacher who is a non-brāhmaṇa. Only in times of distress can a non-brāhmaṇa teach a brāhmaṇa. But a brāhmaṇa pupil surpasses in venerability as soon as he has completed his studies. G Dh. 7.3. This was against the general norm of respectability, according to which, pupils must always venerate the teacher.
20 V Dh. 3.3. and 3.9. Baudhāyana believes that a brāhmaṇa who does not perform prayers twice a day should be made to work like a śūdra by the king. B Dh. 2.4.7.15. He states that the brāhmaṇa, who tends cattle, lives by trade, works as an artisan, actor, servant or usurer should be treated like a śūdra. B Dh. 1.5.10.24. Similarly Vasiṣṭha maintains that by selling flesh, lac and salt a brāhmaṇa at once becomes an outcast. He becomes equal to a śūdra by selling milk for three days. V Dh. 2.27. Vasiṣṭha asserts that brāhmaṇas, who neither study nor teach the Vedas, nor keep the sacred fires, become equal to śūdras. V Dh. 3.1. Vasiṣṭha quotes Manu to say that a dvija who does not know the Vedas cannot be called a brāhmaṇa. He is not a brāhmaṇa who lives by trade, lives as an actor, and obeys a śūdra’s command, who is a thief and who practices medicine. V Dh 3.3. The king shall punish that village where brāhmaṇas, unobservant of their sacred duties and ignorant of the Vedas, subsist by begging, for it feeds robbers. V Dh. 3.4. The brāhmaṇas who are not acquainted with the Vedas, and who have not fulfilled their duties, who subsist only by the name of their varṇa, cannot form a legal assembly for codifying the sacred law. However, the proclamation of even three or four learned brāhmaṇas must be distinctly recognized as the sacred law, and not the decision of a thousand brāhmaṇas who are fools. The sin of neglecting a brāhmaṇa is not incurred in the case of a fool, who is ignorant of the Vedas. V Dh. 3.5-9.
21 Manu. 4.3.
brāhmaṇa householder is allowed to accumulate as much grain as would be needed to satisfy hunger for three days, but not more.\textsuperscript{22} In fact, one who accumulates material goods sufficient to meet his requirement for a day is the best brāhmaṇa.\textsuperscript{23} A donor is asked to ensure that the donee is worthy of donation. If an unlearned man accepts a gift, it is reduced to ashes.\textsuperscript{24} Manu explicitly states that a gift to a brāhmaṇa who has not studied the Vedas, or who is avaricious and deceitful is fruitless and leads the donor to hell.\textsuperscript{25} If a brāhmaṇa, devoid of learning and penance desires to accept a gift, he sinks into hell. Manu says that even though a brāhmaṇa is entitled to gifts, he should not resort to this method again and again, since he loses his spiritual power (attained by the study of the Vedas) by accepting gifts.\textsuperscript{26} Manu sums up the factors behind a brāhmaṇa's premature death. Death comes to a brāhmaṇa on account of not studying the Vedas, idleness, giving up the conduct prescribed for him in the Dharmasāstras, and faults arising from partaking of prohibited food.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, Yājñavalkya is of the opinion that the creator created the brāhmaṇa for the preservation of the Vedas, for the satisfaction of the pitṛs and for the safeguarding of dharma. Indeed, a dvija who does not chant the Vedic mantra is considered more impure than even a śūdra.\textsuperscript{28} Though birth alone appears to have become the preponderant factor in the varṇa structure, personal conduct had not entirely lost its relevance. One wonders whether the above-mentioned restrictions were only pious wishes, which were seldom imposed.

\textbf{2.1.2. Varṇadharma of the Kṣatriya}

Baudhāyana says that Brahman placed its strength in the kṣatriyas, together with the duties and privileges of studying, sacrificing for themselves, using weapons and protecting people and treasure, for the growth of good governance.\textsuperscript{29} According to Vāśiṣṭha, there are three lawful occupations of a kṣatriya: studying, sacrificing for himself and bestowing gifts. His special duty is to protect people and he should earn his livelihood accordingly.\textsuperscript{30} Manu states that a kṣatriya should protect his subjects, give gifts, have sacrifices performed, study and should remain unaddicted to sensory

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Manu. 4.7.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Manu. 4.8.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Manu. 3.97.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Manu. 4.188-191.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Manu. 4.186.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Manu. 5.4.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Yāj. 1.198.
\item \textsuperscript{29} BDh. 1.10.18.3.
\item \textsuperscript{30} VDh. 2.15-17.
\end{itemize}
The special duty of a kṣatriya was to protect people. This was also the means of his livelihood according to the traditional scriptures. But Hopkins, who is considered an authority on the epic, makes a slightly different observation. He stipulates several strata within the kṣatriyas. He argues that the highborn and rich from the warrior-caste formed an aristocracy apart from the poor members of their own caste, who could not boast so high a descent. The latter, formally acknowledged as equal of the former, were practically on par with a caste below them. Hopkins further argues that the regular means of livelihood for a poor warrior, as also for a poor priest, was to join the working community. He might take up his caste duties as soon as he was able to support himself by them. The ordinance that the brāhmaṇa may live by the occupation of a kṣatriya, and he may practice the profession of a vaiśya on the failure of the occupation of a kṣatriya, strengthens the above-mentioned argument. Thus, just as a brāhmaṇa is permitted to engage in trade during the period of crisis, so too is a kṣatriya. But both are prohibited to deal in some goods. A kṣatriya could master the Vedas and teach, and he could become a teacher when no brāhmaṇa was available to educate pupils. However, for a kṣatriya it was more important to be trained in the Veda of bow. We find that when a preceptor was sought for the young Kurus and Pāṇḍavas, he was desired to teach them the skill of archery and not the Veda.

The kṣatriya is next to the brāhmaṇa in the social hierarchy. A kṣatriya is the earthly sovereign but his sovereignty does not extend to the brāhmaṇa. Though Gautama quotes the Vedic text, which declare that the kṣatriyas, assisted by the brāhmaṇas, prosper, and that the union of the two alone upholds the moral order, yet he lays down that when a king and a brāhmaṇa pass along the same road the road belongs to the latter. Between a hundred years old kṣatriya and a ten years old brāhmaṇa, the latter is said to be superior.

2.1.3. Varṇadharma of the Vaiśya

Brahman placed the power of work in the vaiśyas, along with the duties of studying, sacrificing, and charity, cultivating the soil, trading and tending cattle, for the growth of productive labour. The lawful occupations of a vaiśya are the same as those of a kṣatriya. However, he should not practice in arms. A vaiśya should earn his livelihood

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30 Manu 1.89
31 E.W. Hopkins, The Social, p.47.
32 GDh. 7.6-7.
33 GDh. 6.25. see also ApDh. 2.5.11.6.
34 ApDh. 1.4.14.25.
35 BDh. 1.10.18.4.
from agriculture, trading, tending cattle, and lending money on interest. Like the brāhmaṇas and the ksatriyas, the vaiśyas also were not one uniform group. There were different sections within this varṇa, with different aims, needs and practices. They were the cattle-raising population, agriculturists, traders, carpenters etc. However, they had no exclusive rights over their profession. Moreover, the brāhmaṇas and the ksatriyas, as priests and rulers, encroached upon their profits. Almost all the economic activities of society were dependent on them. Hopkins points out that the priestly class formed an undivided whole, except for internal distinctions of studies whereby one member may be more learned than the other. Similarly, the warrior-caste, except for the plutocratic distinctions, and special ability acquired by specific members in special acts of warfare was also a political unit. The slave caste consisted of many equally reckoned slaves. But, according to him, this was not the case with the vaiśya. Here we have class within caste, radically different in their occupation and socially apart. Hopkins appears to be closely guided by the texts. Indeed, none of the varṇas was one monolithic group and, elsewhere, Hopkins himself admits this distinction.

The vaiśya, though traditionally classed with the first two varṇas, is grouped on many occasions with the śūdras. Only one common formula of welcome is to be used for a vaiśya and a śūdra guest. Both of them are to be fed together with one’s servant. Out of the eight forms of marriage, the two prescribed for the vaiśya are the same as those recommended for the śūdra. According to Vāśiṣṭha when a brāhmaṇa marries outside his varṇa, his sons by a vaiśya and śūdra wife shall inherit equal shares. It is clear that the vaiśyas’ economic status does not correspond to their social position. In comparison with the higher classes, the vaiśyas’ position is rather insignificant, yet the category definitely marks off from the śūdras.

2.1.4. Varṇadharma of the Śūdra

The name of the fourth varṇa, śūdra, occurs only once in the Rgveda. Marked distinctions were drawn between ārya and dāsa in the Rgveda. In the later Vedic literature this distinction was also seen between the ārya and śūdra. The distinctions that were there between ārya and śūdra, now appeared between dvija and śūdra in the

38 E.W. Hopkins, The Social, p.47.
39 BDh. 1.11.21.13.
40 GDh. 5.41-45.
41 GDh. 5.45; see also Manu. 3.112.
42 G.S. Ghurye, Caste, p.63.
43 VDh. 17.50.
Dharmasūtras. The first three varṇas were called dvijas because they went through the initiation ceremony which was symbolic of rebirth. This privilege was denied to a śūdra. A śūdra was, therefore, called ekajāti (once born). Education was a must for a brāhmaṇa, for he had to teach. The kṣatriya and the vaśya are imparted education. Perhaps it was thought that soldiers and commoners must be enlightened so that they could discharge their duties properly. No such need was felt in case of a śūdra, for all he was required to do was to serve others and to follow their commands. He was not allowed to define his course of action.

Gautama ordains that a śūdra is to be supported, to be fed, and to be clothed with the remnants and castaways of food and clothes by the three varṇas. He is commanded to show respect to even an ārya younger than him, by rising from his seat. In the Vedic period, the dāsa was described as the ‘black people’; in the period of the Dharmasūtras, the śūdra is given a similar appellation. Vasiṣṭha declares him to be a śmaśān. Therefore the Veda must not be recited in his presence, neither advice nor the remnants of offerings to the gods should be given to him. The contents of law must not be expounded to him, nor must he be asked to perform a penance. R.S. Sharma is of opinion that apparently such a dictum was meant to keep the śūdras in complete ignorance of the law by which they were governed.

Moreover, a śūdra can not perform a yajña. He can neither listen to, nor recite the Vedic texts, nor can he practice austerities. He is categorically denied the right to initiation and consequently the first stage of an individual’s life (āśrama), the studentship. Out of the other sacraments, marriage is the only one that is explicitly applicable to the śūdra. So great is the feeling against a śūdra performing a sacrifice that Gautama exhorts a person to cast off his father if he has either performed a sacrifice with the money given by śūdra or has officiated at such a sacrifice. Gautama, however, permits the śūdra to use nāmaḥ on special occasions. He quotes another authority who allows a śūdra to offer pākayajñās, i.e., minor sacrifices to be offered in the fire kept at home. This implies that religious rites were not synonymous with the major Vedic

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44 Vasiṣṭha, p.9 cited in Ghurye, Caste, p.56.
45 G Dh. 10.57-60.
46 G Dh. 6.11.
47 V Dh. 18.18.
48 V Dh. 18.13-14.
49 R. S. Sharma, Śudras in Ancient India, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1990, pp.133-34.
50 G Dh. 20.1.
51 G Dh. 10.64.
52 G Dh. 10.65.
yajñas. Ghurye remarks that we cannot attach much significance to the permission given to the śūdra to offer these sacrifices. It only means that the brāhmaṇa was not entirely unwilling to open up certain channels through which fees might flow to him, even if the donor might be a śūdra.\textsuperscript{53} The utter disregard shown to the śūdras is further brought out by the fact that if a śūdra intentionally listens to the Vedas, his ears should be filled with molten lead and lac; if he utters the Vedas, his tongue should be cut off, and if he masters the Vedas, his body should be hacked.\textsuperscript{54} A brāhmaṇa was asked not to eat food brought by an unclean śūdra.\textsuperscript{55} However, Āpastamba allows a śūdra to cook in a brāhmaṇa household, provided he is supervised by a member of the dvija varṇa and observes certain hygienic rules.\textsuperscript{56}

However, some passages may point to a different socio-economic position of the śūdra. For instance, while stating that a student should pay the fee to the teacher for teaching him the Vedas, Āpastamba commands that the teacher can accept the fee from an ugra, or a śūdra, if he is facing troubled times. Immediately after this, he quotes another authority, who ordains that it is lawful for a teacher to take daksīna from an ugra or a śūdra at any time.\textsuperscript{57} But such provisions appear to be made to benefit the brāhmaṇa teacher only. In another passage, while discussing how a student should salute his teacher, Āpastamba instructs that a brāhmaṇa shall salute stretching forward his right arm on a level with his ear. A kṣatriya should salute holding his arm with the chest, a vaiśya by holding his arm on the level with waist, a śūdra holding it low.\textsuperscript{58} This may indicate a state of affairs when even a śūdra was admitted to Vedic education, which was theoretically denied to him. This may also imply that except for those sections of curriculum that are related to the performance of yajñas, a śūdra is allowed to study. According to R.S. Sharma, it appears that the Dharmasūtras sought to establish a divorce between literate education, which is confined to the members of the twice-born varṇas, and technical training.\textsuperscript{59} This also means that educational rights were not considered synonymous with Vedic studies. Baudhāyana’s injunction that Vedic study impedes the pursuit of agriculture and vice-versa\textsuperscript{60} would naturally affect not only the śūdras but also

\textsuperscript{53} G.S. Ghurye, Caste, p.61.
\textsuperscript{54} GDh. 12.4-6.
\textsuperscript{55} ĀpDh. 1.5.16.22.
\textsuperscript{56} ĀpDh. 2.2.3.4-8.
\textsuperscript{57} ĀpDh. 1.2.7.20-21. The word ugra denotes the offspring of a vaisya man or a dvija and a sudra woman, who perpetrates dreadful deeds. – Haradatta. Cited in George Buhler(tr.), The sacred, p. 27, fn.20.
\textsuperscript{58} ĀpDh. 1.2.5.16.
\textsuperscript{59} R.S. Sharma, Śūdras, p.134.
\textsuperscript{60} BDh. 1.5.10.30.
those vaiśyas who carried on agriculture. Although we have no idea how far such a policy worked in practice. Yājñavalkya's explicit permission to a śūdra to perform five sacrifices with namaskāra-mantra indicates that religious rites were not always equated with Vedic yajñas. Elsewhere, Manu permits a śūdra to practice different branches of arts and crafts, like carpentry, painting etc., when he is unable to maintain himself by serving the twice-born. Viṣṇu, on the other hand, considers it to be a normal vocation of a śūdra.

This certainly does not mean that there is no hostility towards the śūdra. A śūdra is not allowed to amass wealth, even if he has the ability to do so, as this perturbs the brāhmaṇas. Perhaps it is feared that a wealthy śūdra, on account of his pride of wealth and ignorance, may forget his assigned dharma and may think himself superior to others. Manu ordains that a śūdra cannot commit any crime that can cause him to fall, nor does he deserve any transformative ritual. He has no authority to carry out duties, nor is he forbidden to carry out duties. A śūdra, who wants to carry out the duties of good men without reciting Vedic mantra, is praised. However, theoretically, the most important duty of a śūdra is to serve others. Manu's instruction, that a snātaka should not dwell in the country of a śūdra ruler points to the existence of such a rule. He further prescribes that a brāhmaṇa should not accept gifts from a king whose lineage is not kṣatriya. On the other hand, Viṣṇu, a law-giver, is mentioned as the progenitor of the śūdras. This may mean that birth does not always decide the profession of a man. In other words, experiences in practical life need not and do not always conform to the mandates of the scriptures.

To sum up, each man has his own distinct set of dharma. It is emphasized that it is better to do one's own dharma badly, than to do another's well. This epigram, elaborated so beautifully in the Bhāgavad-Gītā, is a leading theme of the brahmanical social thought. For each man there is a place in society. Each one has one's own duties and rights. Such a strict understanding seems to be the inevitable outcome of the

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61 Yaj. 1.121.
62 Manu. 10.99-100
63 Viṣṇu. 2.14. Viṣṇu also lists some of the duties common to all varṇas. These are forbearance, veracity, restraint, purity, charity, self-control, not to kill any living being, obedience towards one's teacher, visiting places of pilgrimage, sympathy with the afflicted, reverence towards gods and brāhmaṇas and freedom from anger. Viṣṇu. 2.16-17.
64 Manu. 10.129.
65 Manu. 10.126-127.
66 Manu. 4.61.
67 Manu. 4.84.
68 Manu. 3.198.
69 Manu. 10.97.
termination of the flexibility of social functions. A man is tempted to stick to his svadharma, for if he does so, he would be born in the next higher varṇa in his successive birth. While a man of a higher varṇa would be born in lower ones as a result of his neglect of his prescribed duties. According to such a dictum, a conscientious practice of duties, proper to one’s own varṇa, leads to birth in a higher varṇa. Thus, a person could aspire to attain a higher status in society. Failure to act according to one’s varṇadharma means birth in a lower varṇa, resulting in a degraded social status.

2.2. Varṇadharma in the Didactic Sections of the Mahābhārata

The epic Mahābhārata repeats the divine origin theory of the origin of the four varṇas, which was first mentioned in the RgVeda, as follows:

The brāhmaṇa has sprung from the mouth of Brahman. The kṣatriya has sprung from his arms and the vaśya from his thighs, for waiting upon these three orders, the śūdra emerged from his feet. Originally created thus, the brāhmaṇa took over on the earth as the lord of all creatures. His duty was to preserve the Vedas and other scriptures. Then, for ruling the earth, wielding the rod of chastisement, and for protecting all creatures, the kṣatriya was created. The vaśya was created for supporting the two orders and himself by cultivation.

The theory of the divine origin of the four varṇas is often repeated with special stress on the origin of the śūdra from the feet of the creator. It would be interesting to note here that there are indeed two theories. The second theory as told by Bhṛgu informs us that in ancient times there was no distinction between the varṇas:

All were brāhmaṇas as Brahman created them all. But those brāhmaṇas who deviated from their path of dharma and became imbued with anger, harshness and love of sensory enjoyments became kṣatriyas, and those amongst them who got themselves involved in cattle rearing and agriculture became vaśyas. Those who ceased to have purity of behaviour and indiscriminately pursued any profession for maintaining themselves became śūdras. Thus, desire alone brought about the fall of the ignorant. Bhṛgu says that the brāhmaṇas, who are always devoted to the Brahman scriptures and practising vow and restraints, are capable of understanding Brahman. Their penances, therefore, never go fruitless. But they who fail to understand it fall away and become members of an inferior varṇa.

Thus, once created, each varṇa is expected to adhere to its own dharma. Indeed, dharma is deemed as the pivot of social functions, for it sustains society. Such is its nature that whatever dharma is followed by creatures, they obtain corresponding fruits.

Some conducts, such as the suppression of wrath, truthfulness of speech, justice,

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70 ApDh. 2.5.11.10-11.
71 Mbh. 12.73.4-8.
72 Mbh. 12.181.10-16.
73 Mbh. 12.21.6.
forgiveness, begetting children upon one’s wedded wife, purity of conduct, avoidance of quarrel, simplicity, and maintenance of dependents, are common to all the four varṇas. These conducts are also known as sanātanaadharma. However, some specific duties belong exclusively to each varṇa, as discussed below.

2.2.1. Varṇadharma of the Brāhmaṇa

Bhīṣma recounts that practising self-restraint has been declared to be the first duty of a brāhmaṇa. Study of the Vedas, and patience in undergoing austerities, are his other bounden duties. While observing his duties, a brāhmaṇa scholar should marry and beget children. Although he can do so only if he acquires wealth without indulging in any improper (adharmic) act, he should also practise charity and perform sacrifices. A brāhmaṇa is not expected to amass wealth. Even if he does so, although through proper means, he is asked to distribute it among deserving people and his relatives. The ideal set for a brāhmaṇa is a life of comparative poverty. He is expected to possess a very high standard of moral, ethical and spiritual qualities. He is forbidden to follow many worldly pursuits. He should depend on the generosity of his patrons. The occupations, which he can adopt in normal times, are limited to two, namely, yajna and adhyāpana (teaching). Another source of his income is pratigraha (acceptance of gift). A brāhmaṇa following any other occupation is condemned. In fact, the occupation of teaching is held in high esteem, but it is possibly the least remunerative profession of a brāhmaṇa. The students lived with the teachers, and at the completion of their education they gave him fee (dakṣīṇa). This fee could not have amounted to any great sum, for a student is asked to pay what he can afford to pay. A brāhmaṇa is entitled to pratigraha, but he is asked not to resort to this method again and again. For, gifts erode his spirit and power, which he has gained through the study of the Vedas. The study and teaching of the Vedas is his highest moral obligation. And it is his knowledge of the Vedas that elevates him to the superior position.

A more lucrative profession for a brāhmaṇa is officiating as a priest in Vedic yajñas. The job of a priest is, perhaps, not as respectable as the other occupations recommended for the brāhmaṇa. Bhīṣma groups the acārya, ṛtvik, and purohita along
with a king's servants. The basis of this grouping is that all of them receive a salary and are liable to leave the king if the salary (vṛti) is stopped. The brāhmaṇas are divided into two groups – pravṛttas (engaged in all sorts of activities for acquiring wealth) and nivṛttas (those who do not receive gifts). The latter group is considered more respectable. It is admitted that there are brāhmaṇas who are engaged in agriculture, in rearing cows, who are beggars, thieves, actors and dancers. The brāhmaṇa who practice as physician is also esteemed low, so much so that he is included in the list of people, who are unfit to be witnesses (a palmist, a dishonest trader, a gambler, a physician, a friend and a dancer).

Elsewhere Bhīṣma adds that archery, destruction of foes, agriculture, trade, tending cattle and serving others are improper activities for a brāhmaṇa. A brāhmaṇa should avoid the service of the king, wealth obtained through agriculture, companionship with any but his wife, and usury. A brāhmaṇa becomes equal to a śūdra if he is corrupt in his conduct, if he is a dancer, if he weds a śūdra woman or digresses from his prescribed code of conduct of duties. Such a brāhmaṇa, irrespective of his knowledge of the Vedas, should be ignored on the occasion of worship of gods. If the food, dedicated to gods and pītrs, is given to a debased brāhmaṇa, it confers no merit to the donor. He is a true brāhmaṇa, Vyāsa states, who clads himself with whatever comes his way, who subsists upon whatever he gets, and who sleeps on whatever spot he finds. He is a true brāhmaṇa who is afraid of bad company as of a snake, who is afraid of the full measure of gratification (from drinks etc.) as of hell, and who is afraid of women as of a corpse. He is a true brāhmaṇa who is never glad when honoured, who is never angry when insulted, and who has given assurance of compassion to all creatures. A true brāhmaṇa casts an equal eye upon all creatures, he is devoted to truth, he endures with fortitude, he is free from fear and desire, he is unattached to all things and his life is for the practice of righteousness. Thus, a true brāhmaṇa takes soma drink in sacrifices, he is self-
restrained, he is of excellent conduct, he has compassion for all, he does not desire to appropriate wealth, and he is free from sinful acts. A true brāhmaṇa is gentle, benevolent and forgiving.\textsuperscript{89}

A brāhmaṇa can claim this top position only if he has fulfilled certain requirements. In other words, birth is not the sole criteria to determine a person’s brāhmaṇhood. A brāhmaṇa by birth can fall from his exalted status if he acts contrary to his prescribed dharma.\textsuperscript{90} A brāhmaṇa is powerful enough to make a deity into a non-deity and vice-versa. A man may become a king if the brāhmaṇas want him to be one, and he who is not wanted by them may be deposed from kingship.\textsuperscript{91} None but the brāhmaṇa is the highest being on the earth.\textsuperscript{92}

Thus, the status of the brāhmaṇa is the most eulogized one. His dharma is the most discussed. This is not surprising, for our sources are brāhmaṇical scriptures. But this could not have been the sole reason behind the importance given to the brāhmaṇas. As P V. Kane argues, had the other classes not shared these ideas, no amount of iteration

\textsuperscript{89} Mbh. 12.63.7-8.
\textsuperscript{90} It is frequently emphasized that a brāhmaṇa in order to remain a brāhmaṇa must conform to a certain minimum code of conduct. One can make out the basic thrust from any such exemplification. For example, Bhīṣma says, the following kinds of brāhmaṇas are ineligible to attend a śrāddha ceremony. All brāhmaṇas who have been outcasts on account of heinous sins, who are idiots, and out of mind do not deserve to be invited in śrāddhas, in which offerings are made to either the deities or the pitṛs, despite their being born as brāhmaṇas. The brāhmaṇas, who practice as physicians, who receive regular pay for worshipping the images of deities established by the rich, those who are not observant of vows from pride or other false motives, and those who sell soma, do not deserve to be invited. Those brāhmaṇas who are, by profession, vocalists, or dancers or players or musicians, or reciters of sacred books or warriors and athletes, do not deserve to be invited. Those brāhmaṇas who pour libation to the sacred fire for śūdras, or who are preceptors of śūdras, or who serve śūdra masters, do not deserve to be invited. The brāhmaṇa who is paid for his service as preceptor, or he who attends as a pupil upon the lectures of some preceptor because of some allowance that is granted to him, does not deserve to be invited, for both of them are regarded as sellers of Vedic lore. The brāhmaṇas who have śūdra wives, even if possessed of every kind of knowledge, do not deserve to be invited. Those brāhmaṇas who are destitute of the domestic fire, and who they who attend upon corpses, they who are thieves, and they who have otherwise fallen away do not deserve to be invited. The brāhmaṇas whose ancestors are not known or are vile, and who are paṇīka-putrās should not be invited. The brāhmaṇa who gives loans of money, or who subsists upon the interest of the loans or who lives by sale of living creatures, does not deserve to be invited. Persons who have been subjugated by their wives, or they who live by becoming the paramours of unchaste women, or they who abstain from their morning and evening prayer do not deserve to be invited to śrāddhas. Mbh. 13.24.14-23.

Immediately after the above passage, Bhīṣma gives the list of those brāhmaṇas who deserve to be invited to śrāddhas. He says: those who observe their rites and ceremonies, who are possessed of merit, conversant with Gāyatrī should be invited, even if they happen to betake themselves to agriculture for a living. If a brāhmaṇa is well born, he is worthy of being invited to śrāddhas notwithstanding his profession of arms for fighting the battle of others. However, the brāhmaṇa who engages himself in trade for a living should be avoided. One who is not observant of vows, or who is addicted to falsehood, who is thief, or who subsists by the sale of living creatures or by trade in general, also becomes worthy of an invitation, if he happens to offer everything to the deities first and subsequently drink soma. The brāhmaṇa, who having acquired wealth by foul or cruel means subsequently spends it in adoring the deities, becomes worthy of an invitation to śrāddhas. Mbh. 13.24.24-33.

\textsuperscript{91} Mbh. 13.33.16
\textsuperscript{92} Mbh. 12.56.22.
on the part of the brāhmaṇa would have given them the influence, which they wielded.\textsuperscript{93}

It is true that they had neither any military force of their own nor any other power to back them, other than the authority that they derived from their knowledge of the Vedas. Madeleine Biardeau appropriately points out that the brāhmaṇa is not only responsible for Vedic knowledge through his teaching and his advice, he is also responsible for maintenance of dharma.\textsuperscript{94} In fact, the process of internalization through education is much more powerful than any military power. Perhaps that is why the authority of the brāhmaṇa resurfaced and reestablished itself despite several challenges from heterodox forces.

The brāhmaṇas are regarded as both the custodian and creator of the scriptures. They are expected to shoulder the burden of teaching and preserving the vast literature, and to survive on gifts, which are voluntarily made. It is true that many among them could not have lived up to the high ideals set for them. But there must have been a few who made as near an attempt as possible to fulfil the set 'ideals'. It was the greatness of the latter that could have contributed to the glorification of their whole order. They could claim to be great only if they did not hanker after temporal power and made their knowledge available to all for a scanty and uncertain return. It is said that when a brāhmaṇa has more corn than he would require for satisfying his needs for three years, then he should offer a sacrifice with that wealth. For, accumulation of wealth is a calamity for a brāhmaṇa.\textsuperscript{95} If a brāhmaṇa set about accumulating wealth, he loses the glorious status accorded to a brāhmaṇa.\textsuperscript{96} P.V. Kane argues that this sense of superiority made the military class feel that they were not all in all and had to look up to some other class as superior to themselves.\textsuperscript{97} One can speculate that the military power of the kṣatriyas and the spiritual power of the brāhmaṇa could check and balance each other.

It is admitted that some brāhmaṇas are employed in agricultural pursuits, some are engaged in the keep of kine, some amongst them live upon alms, some are even thieves. Some of them are fond of quarrels and disputes, some are actors and dancers, and some are competent to achieve all feats, ordinary or extraordinary.\textsuperscript{98} They are of diverse aspects and behaviour. Inspite of this diversity, the brāhmaṇa should always be

\textsuperscript{93} P.V. Kane, \textit{History}, Vol.2, Part.1, p.136.
\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Mbh.} 13.47.22.
\textsuperscript{96} Vyāsa, cited in P.V. Kane, \textit{History}, Vol.2, Part. 1, p.111.
\textsuperscript{97} P.V. Kane, \textit{History}, Vol.2, Part. 1, p.137.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Mbh.} 13.33.10-12.
praised, for in respect of his origin he is elder than the pîrûs, the deities, human beings, the snakes and the râkṣasas. Generally, all the brâhmaṇas should be worshipped, though it is added that only the brâhmaṇas who are of righteous behaviour deserve reverence.

However, in another passage, Bhīṣma says that the brâhmaṇa becomes an object of adoration by birth alone. He is entitled, as guest, to eat the first portion of all cooked food offered by the householder. From him flow all the great objects of life such as righteousness, wealth, pleasure, and emancipation. The brâhmaṇa is the mouths of deities, for deities eat the food taken by him. Bhīṣma adds that a brâhmaṇa should never do anything else other than what has been ordained for him. The brâhmaṇa should protect others by preserving dharma. He is sure to obtain what is rightly advantageous for him by conducting himself in this way. A brâhmaṇa should never do what is laid down for the śûdras, for he loses his merit by doing so. Although a brâhmaṇa is worthy of respect by the mere fact of his birth, he has to guard his conduct at all times since a slight departure from the prescribed conduct would immediately lead to his disgrace and a fall from his vârya.

2.2.2. Varna-dharma of the Kṣatriya

The kṣatriya follows the brahmaṇa in the social order. Bhīṣma narrates his duties thus:

A kṣatriya should give, but not beg; should perform sacrifices but not officiate as priests in other sacrifices. He should study the Vedas but should never teach. He should protect the people from danger, prove his prowess in battle, and destroy robbers and wicked people. The kṣatriya, who performs sacrifices, knows the Vedas, gains victory in battle, and acquires heaven after death by his merit. A kṣatriya, if he returns unwounded from the battle, is a wretched kṣatriya, according to the wise. The highest duty of a kṣatriya is to protect people, and on account of this, he accomplishes all religious merits.

It appears that a kṣatriya has no choice but to join the army under the vârya rule. But it is difficult to imagine that every kṣatriya is absorbed in the standing army, although available evidences suggest that the kṣatriya has no other profession in the normal situation. The loyalty of soldiers is emphasized. If a frightened soldier, while fleeing, is killed by the enemy, he receives all the sins of his master, and the master receives all his merits. The army is necessary not only for defence but also for waging

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99 Mbh. 13.33.14-15
100 Mbh. 13.32.13; and 13.33.13.
101 Mbh. 13.35.1-3.
102 Mbh. 13.35.6-7
103 Mbh. 12.60.13-20.
104 Manu. 7.94-95.
wars. It is noteworthy that for purpose of defence, not only the kṣatriya but every citizen is expected to fight, irrespective of his varṇa.\textsuperscript{105} Even a śūdra leader, in times of distress, has to be obeyed. Bhīṣma says that he who leads to safety must be honoured even if he is a śūdra.\textsuperscript{106}

A kṣatriya is expected not to beg or to accept gifts. R.S. Sharma comments that although not asking for anything is regarded as befitting the kṣatriya dharma, and this belief existed from times immemorial, it is evident that this is a survival of a tribal stage of society, when the chief did not ask for gifts but received them voluntarily from his kinsmen.\textsuperscript{107} Hopkins remarks that in a varṇa divided society, such a theory certainly helped the brāhmaṇa to acquire near monopoly of receiving gifts to the exclusion of the other three varṇas.\textsuperscript{108} In normal times, a kṣatriya is never engaged in any productive work. Hopkins draws three fundamental rules for warrior-conduct from the epic, which are so often urged that they appear to constitute the warrior’s private code towards his fellow beings. The first is the guest-law; every guest is inviolable. The second is the law of not forgetting a kindness. The third is the law of sacredness of a refugee.\textsuperscript{109}

Yudhiṣṭhira considers the dharma of the kṣatriya sinful; but the kṣatriya must follow it, because to give it up and adopt any other profession would be condemned. He points out that the śūdra is engaged in serving others, the vaiśya in trade, the brāhmaṇa begs, while the kṣatriya lives by killing. The kṣatriya must kill, for it is his traditional dharma.\textsuperscript{110}

The military-role of the kṣatriyas must not lead him to believe that the earth belongs to him. In fact, everything that exists in the universe belongs to the brāhmaṇa in consequence of his birth and precedence. He is the foremost of all beings; he deserves the veneration of all.\textsuperscript{111} A kṣatriya is made the ruler not because of his ability to rule. In fact, as a woman, in the absence of her husband, accepts his younger brother for him, even so the earth, in consequence of the refusal of the brāhmaṇa, has accepted his next-born, the kṣatriya, for her lord.\textsuperscript{112}

It is said that the nature of dharma is so subtle that some kṣatriyas, even by doing sinful acts, have attained blessed ends.\textsuperscript{113} P.C. Roy explains that the allusion is to such

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Mbh.} 12.79.18; see also \textit{Mbh.} 12.96.5.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Mbh.} 12.79.37-39.
\textsuperscript{107} R.S. Sharma, \textit{Material Culture}, p.144.
\textsuperscript{108} E.W. Hopkins, \textit{Social Position}, p.36 fn.*
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Mbh.} 5.71.3-4; see also 12.98.1-2.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Mbh.} 12.73.10-11.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Mbh.} 12.73.12; see also 13.8.21.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Mbh.} 12.79.32.
men as Utanka and Parasara who, even though they performed such cruel acts as the snake-sacrifice and Rākṣasa-sacrifice, were nonetheless entitled to heaven. So the kṣatriya kings, by invading the kingdoms of their foes and slaying thousands of men and animals, are nevertheless regarded as righteous and ultimately go to heaven.\textsuperscript{114}

2.2.3. Varṇadharma of the Brāhmaṇa and the Kṣatriya towards each other

A good deal of literature in the \textit{Mahābhārata} is devoted to the brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya relationship. It is said that the kṣatriyas are incapable of ruling the earth without cultivating the good will of the brāhmaṇas. Moreover, the brāhmaṇas are high-souled beings, they are the deities of the very deities.\textsuperscript{115} A kṣatriya king is often reminded that a brāhmaṇa is the highest of all beings. In a house where brāhmaṇas do not eat, the \textit{pitṛs} refuse to eat. When the brāhmaṇas are gratified, both \textit{pitṛs} and deities are also gratified. Those particular offerings in sacrifices with which one gratifies the brahmanas go to gratify both the deities and \textit{pitṛs}.\textsuperscript{116} The brāhmaṇa is the cause of that sacrifice from where all created beings have sprung. They are never vanquished who follow the brāhmaṇas. Indeed, victory is always theirs. The prowess of the kṣatriyas, who scorch everything with their energy, might become neutralized when they encounter the brāhmaṇas.\textsuperscript{117} It is stressed that if the kṣatriyas do not conduct themselves especially towards the brāhmaṇas, the \textit{Vedas} themselves will subjugate them. As fire has sprung from water, and iron from stone, so has the kṣatriya sprung from the brāhmaṇa. The energy of fire, iron and a kṣatriya are irresistible. But when they come into contact with the sources of their origin, their force becomes neutralized and their strength is destroyed.\textsuperscript{118} Therefore, however great and irresistible the might of the kṣatriyas may be, it is quelled as soon as it is directed against the brāhmaṇas.\textsuperscript{119} Moreover, protection of the brāhmaṇas equals the merit gained by the study of the \textit{Vedas} with attention, performance of the most austere penance, and by throwing one’s body into a blazing fire at the end of the fast. Those who protect the brāhmaṇas succeed in attaining the high regions of bliss hereafter.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{114} P.C. Roy (tr.), \textit{Mahābhārata}, 12.79., p.182 fn.
\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Mbh.} 13.35.21.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Mbh.} 13.34.7-8.
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Mbh.} 13.34.14-15.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Mbh.} 12.79.21-22.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Mbh.} 12.79.24-25.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Mbh.} 12.79.26-30.
It is obvious the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas are the most powerful social group. Although it is repeatedly stated that the brāhmaṇas are decidedly superior to the kṣatriyas, there is an element of uncertainty in the frequency of assertion itself. Therefore, it is understood that an arrangement for mutual co-existence is necessary for their survival, as well as for the preservation of the “ideal” social order. Emphasizing the need of friendship between the brāhmaṇa and the kṣatriya, Bhīṣma says that when a brāhmaṇa forsakes the kṣatriya, or the kṣatriya forsakes the brāhmaṇa, destruction overtakes the people. He quotes a dialogue between Aila’s son and Kaśyapa to emphasize his argument:

Ruin overtakes the kingdom of a kṣatriya when brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas contend each other. Robbers infest that kingdom, confusion prevails and all good men regard the ruler as maleccha. Neither sacrifices are performed, nor prosperity thrives. The children do not study the Vedas, when brāhmaṇas abandon kṣatriyas. Wealth ceases to increase. The kṣatriyas who abandon brāhmaṇas become impure in blood. They assume the nature of robbers. The brāhmaṇa and kṣatriya are naturally connected with each other. The kṣatriya is the cause of the brāhmaṇa’s growth and the brāhmaṇa causes the prosperity of the kṣatriyas. When each helps the other, both attain great prosperity. If their friendship breaks, confusion sets over everything. The four orders of men become confounded and destruction overtakes all. If a brāhmaṇa, who is like a tree, is protected, it then showers gold and honey. If, on the other hand, it is not defended it showers tears and sin. 121

Madeleine Biardeau aptly comments that the kṣatriya, the holder of temporal power, is the offerer of sacrifice par excellence. However, he cannot hope to ensure prosperity of his territory and success of his arms without the services of the brāhmaṇa. The brāhmaṇa carries out the appropriate rites for the kṣatriya and advises him on important decisions. Conversely, the brāhmaṇa depends more or less completely on the prince, a kṣatriya, for his maintenance. Biardeau says further that a brāhmaṇa cannot fulfil all his duties as a brāhmaṇa unless he lives under the reign of a good prince, a kṣatriya, who pays well for his services. So every good prince needs an ideal priest and vice-versa. Thus there is a perfect reciprocity. 122

2.2.4. Varṇadharma of the Vaiśya

The vaiśyas form the third order in society. In the RgVeda ‘vis’ were the common people, other than the brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas. A.K. Majumdar argues that from the later Vedic literature it appears that the vaiśyas were more numerous than the brāhmaṇas or the kṣatriyas. They were entitled to perform sacrifices; they reared cattle and supported the

121 Mbh. 12.74.8-14.
community by paying taxes. Their status was inferior to that of the brahmanas and the kṣatriyas.\textsuperscript{123} Bhūśma recounts their duties as follows:

The vaiśya should make gifts, study the Vedas, perform sacrifices, and acquire wealth by fair means. He should also protect all domestic animals as a father protects his sons. Anything else would be improper for him. He would obtain great happiness by protecting the domestic animals. The creator having created the domestic animals bestowed their care upon the vaiśya. The lord conferred the care of all creatures upon the brāhmaṇa and the kṣatriya.\textsuperscript{124}

Bhūśma further explains how a vaiśya is to earn his livelihood.

If he keeps six kines for others, he may take the milk of one cow as his remuneration. If he keeps a hundred kines for others, he may take a single pair as his fee. If he trades with others’ wealth, he may take a seventh part of the profit as his share. But he should take sixteenth part of the profit if he trades in hoofs. If he engages in cultivation with seeds supplied by others, he may take a seventeenth part of the yield as his annual remuneration. A vaisya should never desire to tend cattle. However, if a vaisya desires to tend cattle no one else should be employed in that task.\textsuperscript{125}

The vaisya, though entitled to initiation and to perform sacrifices, is but only a poor third to the brāhmaṇa and the kṣatriya. Referring to the condition of the vaisya, R.S. Sharma points out that the varṇa division assumed significance in the sense that only those who practised farming and reared cattle and carried on trade were generally the source of all taxes.\textsuperscript{126} This tax-giving varṇa was vaisya. They were almost exclusively identical with the taxpayers to the exclusion of the other three varṇas. It is said that a vaisya who gives a part of his agricultural product to the brāhmaṇa is released from sin.\textsuperscript{127} They had to support both the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas. Hopkins also draws our attention towards this fact. He argues that the soldiers were practically exempt from taxation, since they were not 'protected', but did protect, and therefore it would be clearly against the theory of taxation to demand tax from the military caste. The priests were exempt by divine law. He concludes that only the people caste (vaisya) was meant to be taxpayers.\textsuperscript{128}

The Mahābhārata, like the Dharmaśāstras, has little to say about the vaisyas. There is no elaborate description of their status and occupation. They do not have to maintain an ethical standard like the brāhmaṇas, nor do they have to face danger in the battlefield like the kṣatriyas. They are also not relegated to the position of sūdras. All the

\textsuperscript{124} Mbh. 12.60.21-23.
\textsuperscript{125} Mbh. 12.60.24-26.
\textsuperscript{126} R.S. Sharma, Material Culture, p.141.
\textsuperscript{127} Mbh. 13.113.16.
\textsuperscript{128} E.W. Hopkins, Social Position, p.33.
lucrative vocations are their monopoly. A.K. Majumdar opines that they had only to show outward respect for the upper two varṇas, and in return were allowed to occupy the most comfortable position in the caste-hierarchy.¹²⁹ So far as their social position is concerned, the negative evidence does not necessarily mean that the vaiśyas are not considered an important section of society. Since the epic is concerned mainly with the heroic saga of kings and the divine virtues of the great brāhmaṇas, the vaiśyas, however significant, have no major role to play in the growth of the stories.

2.2.5. Varṇadharma of the Śūdra

The Śūdra is given the lowest rung in the varṇa-hierarchy. Bhīṣma explains a sudra's duties thus:

> The creator assigned to a Śūdra the duty to serve the other three varṇas. By this service he can attain great happiness. He should wait upon the three varṇas according to their order of seniority. Moreover, a Śūdra should never amass wealth, lest by his wealth, he makes the members of other three varṇas obedient to him. He would incur sin by this.¹³⁰

A brāhmaṇa can instruct the twice-born (dvijas), but he should never impart instruction to a Śūdra. A brāhmaṇa incurs sin by doing so, for the course of morality is exceedingly subtle and incapable of being comprehended by persons of unclean souls.¹³¹

It is emphasized that a Śūdra is to be maintained by the other three varṇas. He is to be fed, and clothed with the remnants and castaway food and clothes of the upper three varṇas.¹³² A Śūdra should never abandon his master, whatever the degree of distress the latter may suffer.¹³³ It is reasonable to speculate that such an injunction was intended to serve the interest of those who employed the Śūdras as agricultural labourers. It is said that the Śūdra can have no property, and his master, at will, can appropriate his wealth.¹³⁴ Although he has no right to initiation he certainly can perform pākayajñās uttering swāha, and the namaskāra mantra. Dakṣina, known as purṇa-patra, is a prominent feature of such sacrifices offered by Śūdras.¹³⁵ It is said that all varṇas have the right to perform yajñās provided they all have faith in it, for faith is the crucial factor.¹³⁶ G.S. Ghurye comments:

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¹³⁰ Mbh. 12.60.27-30.
¹³¹ Mbh. 13.10.61-64.
¹³² Mbh. 12.60.31-33.
¹³³ Mbh. 12.60.35.
¹³⁴ Mbh. 12.60.35.
¹³⁵ Mbh. 12.60.36-37.
¹³⁶ Mbh. 12.60.39.
It is apparent from the narrations that the śūdra had no right to perform any of the important sacraments. As he could not kindle the sacred fire, his marriage was certainly not regarded as a sacrament, intended for the fulfilment of religious duties but only a sexual union. As the minor sacrifices called the pākayajñas were to be offered in the domestic sacred fire, and as some law-givers do not give him the right to kindle this fire, we cannot attach much significance to the permission given to śūdra to offer these sacrifices. It only means that the brāhmaṇa was not entirely unwilling to open up certain channels through which fees might flow to him, even though the donor might be a śūdra.\(^{137}\)

Ghurye points out that the utter indifference shown to the śūdras is further brought out by the fact that out of the eight forms of marriage the two forms recommended for the śūdras are entirely devoid of religious content. In fact, one of them may be termed rape, and the curious justification offered for this prescription is that the śūdras are not particular about their wives.\(^{138}\) Though, theoretically, the position of the śūdras is very low, there are evidences to show that at least some of them are well to do.

A śūdra named Paijavana gave a daksīṇa consisting of a hundred thousand purna-patras, in one of his sacrifices, in accordance with the ordinance called Ainḍraṇeṇa.\(^{139}\)

In spite of references that do not necessarily conform to the normative regulations, it is clear that according to the law-givers, conscientious practice of the duties proper to one’s varṇa is the only righteous conduct. It leads to birth in a higher varṇa and thus to a better social position. Failure to act according to one’s varṇa meant birth in a lower varṇa, and a degraded social status. The epic tells us that the upward march from one varṇa to another in succeeding births can continue till a person is born a brāhmaṇa. So, a person can do his good only by sticking to his varṇadharmā.\(^{140}\)

### 2.3. Vyavahāra in the Mahābhārata

In the previous sections we observed how things ought to be; it was an ideological injunction, rather than a descriptive narrative. But as Bruce Lincon reminds us, “an ideology -any ideology- is not just an ideal against which social reality is measured, or an end toward the fulfilment of which groups and individuals aspire. It also serves to persuade members of a given society of the rightness of their lot in life, whatever that may be, and of the social order.”\(^{141}\) However, practical life has a sort of flexibility, so

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\(^{137}\) G.S. Ghurye, *Caste*, pp.60-61.

\(^{138}\) G.S. Ghurye, *Caste*, p.61.

\(^{139}\) *Mbh*. 12 60 37-38.

\(^{140}\) *Mbh*. 13 29 4-16.

the reality does not necessarily conform to the injunctions or the ideals of the scriptures. This possible flexibility does not mean that the fixity and universality of ethics are entirely negotiable. But when situational constraint requires some modification, it is permitted, provided suitable recompense is made in the form of remorse or guilt. Indeed, the interpretation of dharma depends entirely on kāla, deśa and acāra. Jitendra Nath Mohanty differentiates between two types of thinking about practical matters of dharma:

One is dogmatic, and the other is critical. Dogmatic practices include duties and virtues. Many Dharmashastras list and classify them according to varṇa, āśrama, or with regard to one’s relation to others, to members of one’s family, to other varṇas, to the community at large, to the king, to the holy men.¹⁴²

Further, Mohanty adds:

Critical thinking about practice asks: how are the words of the text which are supposed to prescribe the duties and virtues (and prohibit the opposite) to be interpreted... Is it enough, from a moral point of view, to do one’s duty, or it is required that the agent must be doing his duty in a certain manner with certain attitude, in a certain spirit? Is dharma, righteousness, living in accordance with prescribed and the prohibited, a necessary means to moksa, or spiritual freedom and if so, why?¹⁴³

We find that the above mentioned dilemmas often arise when dharma is comprehended through lived-in-situations. It is known that narratives, even though fictional, mirror the social reality more closely than the normative and didactic texts. This is so especially in case of the Mahābhārata for the authors make no attempt to idealize the characters of the protagonists. The characters, though heroic, are also human. The study of these personalities would help us to understand the ‘actual’ and ‘practical’ nature of dharma.

2.3.1. Varṇadharma of the Brāhmaṇa

Let us begin with the brahmaṇa, who was considered the custodians of dharma. He was expected to possess high moral and spiritual standards, and to lead an exemplary life. The brahmaṇa had his own distinct set of duties and functions such as to study and to teach the Vedas, to perform sacrifices for himself and for others, to give and to receive. Moreover, a brahmaṇa was characterized as one who was by nature self-controlled, benevolent, non-violent, honest, a scholar and upholder of the Vedas, and giver of abhaya. A brahmaṇa was advised not to seek for the duties of the kṣatriya such as

punishing, looking fierce and protecting the subjects. Thus, the studying and teaching of the *Vedas* was considered as the foremost duty of the brahmana. Even though all *dvijas* had access to Vedic education, only the brahmana had the privilege to teach.

Knowledge of the *Vedas* empowered the brahmana. Brian K. Smith puts it thus:

> Through the powers conferred on the brahmana by virtue of the study of the *Vedas* he may command certain pre-requisites from the ‘world’ he is so instrumental in ‘developing’. People should respect the brahmana, give him gifts, and should not oppress him politically or subject him to the ultimate punishment to which others are liable. Vedic learning thus underwrites some of the social status and privileges of the brahmana’s claim.

Apart from the knowledge of the *Vedas*, the brahmana also knew the creator, i.e. Brahman. Indeed, the word brahmana means one who knows Brahman. It is stated that brahmanas such as Marici, Atri, Angirasa, Pulastya, Pulaha, and Kratu were the six spiritual sons of Brahman. It is reiterated time and again that the brahmanas was the mouth of the creator and therefore the gods accepted offerings through him. Bhrgu said that the brahmanas were always devoted to the Brahman scriptures and by virtue of practising vows and restraints, they were capable of understanding Brahman. The brahmanas, for example Markandeya, knew the secret of the creation of the universe. They enjoyed their exalted status in the varna hierarchy also because of their association with Brahman. Some brahmanas had the power to revive the dead i.e. they knew *mrtasamjvīnīvidya*. For instance, Jamadagni restored Reñukā to life. The issue of death and resurrection was the focal point of the Śukra – Kaca story.

The brahmana was given the responsibility to teach. He was the teacher of all the upper three varnas, but it was not mandatory to teach all. For instance Paraśurāma had taken a vow not to teach any non-brahmana. However, Kṛṣṇa learnt archery from Paraśurāma under the pretext that he was a brahmana, since Paraśurāma would not have taught him otherwise. When Paraśurāma discovered the truth, he cursed Kṛṣṇa that

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146 Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe*, p.33.
147 *Mbh.* 1.60ff.
149 *Mbh.* 3.185-188. Markandeya narrated the details of the creation to Yudhishthira.
150 *Mbh.* 1.71-73. passim. Śukrācarya’s knowledge of reviving the dead gave dānavas an edge over gods. Wendy O’Flaherty says that the demon priest serving a demonic demon upholds the *svadharma* of demons and *svadharma* of priest but comes into conflict with eternal *dharma*. Wendy D. O’Flaherty, *The Origin of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, Motilal Banarasidas, 1976, p.138. But Śukrācarya is not condemned for serving the demons.
Karna's knowledge would fail him at the grave hour of his need. While Parasurama's curse deprived Karna of his knowledge at the time of need, Drona's demand for guru-dakshina deprived Ekalavya of his art of archery. Drona asked Ekalavya for the thumb of his right hand as guru-dakshina. Ekalavya cut it off and gave it to his guru, and lost his art. Ekalavya, a Niśāda, who, despite being spurned by Drona, regarded himself, in his own mind, as a disciple of Drona. He had taught himself so well that he excelled all the students of the brāhmaṇa teacher. However, Drona asked this self-taught and devoted youth for his right thumb, which was indispensable to archery. Thus, Drona kept his promise to Arjuna that Arjuna would be the greatest archer of all his disciples.

Vedic knowledge also meant sacrificial know-how. The brāhmaṇas were the only group who could officiate at others' sacrifices. Perhaps such a dictum inspired Louis Dumont to argue that brāhmaṇas, being in principle priests, occupy the supreme rank with respect to the whole set of castes. Brian K. Smith adds that the brāhmaṇas derived economic as well as status advantages from their exclusive claim to priesthood and divinity. However, according to J.C. Heesterman, the source of the brāhmaṇa's supremacy appears not to be priesthood but precisely the opposite - the abstention from priestly activity, or renunciation. Heesterman argues that the ideal brāhmaṇa must not be a priest because priestly activity is a source of degradation and impurity for a brāhmaṇa. Indeed, priesthood is a quintessential source of impurity. One may say that a renouncer got the utmost respect as he was held in awe because of his detachment from worldly affairs. Nevertheless, a brāhmaṇa enjoyed a venerable status even as a purohitam. For instance, the kings always carefully heard Vasiṣṭha and Vaiśampāyana.

The epic is full of legends that remind us that a brāhmaṇa's spiritual and ritual power should never be underestimated. In fact, the spiritual power of the brāhmaṇa was

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152 Mbh. 12.3. passim The story informs us that once when Paraśurāma fell asleep on Karna's lap, an insect bit Karna on his thigh, but Karna bore the pain and did not move for fear of waking up his teacher. Meanwhile, the warm blood trickling from the wound woke up Paraśurāma, and he at once recognised that Karna could not be a brāhmaṇa, for a brāhmaṇa could not have borne that physical pain. Paraśurāma cursed Karna since he had deceived his teacher. However, Paraśurāma had willingly taught ksatriya Bhīma, a non-brāhmaṇa, at the request of Gahgā. Mbh. 1.123.24-38.


155 Brian K. Smith, Classifying the Universe, p.33-34.

156 In order to demonstrate why this is so, Heesterman draws a distinction between classical and pre-classical ritual. In the pre-classical situation, the brāhmaṇa is a priest who performs a necessary function for a patron by accepting all his impurity. In the classical situation (the period of the Brāhmaṇas and Sūtras), the brāhmaṇa has escaped from his dangerous and degrading role; he is no longer a priest accepting the impurity. J.C.Heesterman, "Brāhmaṇa, Ritual and Renouncer", in The Inner Conflict of the Indian Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual Kingship and Society, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985, pp.26-27
considered superior to the military power of the kṣatriya. Vasiṣṭha, a brahmana, defeated his rival Visvāmitra, a kṣatriya, without any use of arms. When Visvāmitra had killed his sons, Vasiṣṭha did not yield to wrath. We are told that afflicted at the loss of his sons, he did not engage in any dreadful act to destroy Visvāmitra. Even when Visvāmitra seized his cow, Nandini, Vasiṣṭha did not leave his vow of forgiveness. He told a crying Nandinī, “a king’s might lay in physical strength and the brahmana’s in forgiveness”.¹⁵⁷ Nandini attacked Visvāmitra’s troops on all sides. She created a huge army, which defeated Visvāmitra’s troops. Visvāmitra was astonished at this wonderful brahmaṇa prowess. Defeated, Visvāmitra immediately decided to renounce the kingdom and to practise penance to attain brahmanahood. Another such great brahmaṇa depicted in the epic is Cyavana, son of the great sage Bhṛgu. Cyavana forced Indra to include the Aśvins in the divine pantheon.¹⁵⁸ Cyavana, unlike Vasiṣṭha, showed anger and vengeance that did not fit a brahmaṇa. Probably, the rules were somewhat relaxed in the case of the brahmaṇa ascetics.

Another illustrious brahmaṇa in the epic is Aurva. We are told about his greatness thus:

There was a great king called Kṛta-vīrya, for whom the Vedagyan Bhṛgus officiated at the sacrifices. Once the king’s descendants were in need of money. They learned of the wealth of the Bhāṛgavas and approached them as beggars. Some of the Bhṛgus hid their vast wealth in the earth, while some gave the wealth to the kṣatriyas. However, a kṣatriya discovered the hidden wealth. The kṣatriyas got angry at the Bhāṛgavas’ action. In wrath, they started killing all the brahmaṇas indiscriminately. When the Bhṛgus were thus being massacred, their wives went to Himavat Mountains in fear. One of them hid her glorious embryo in her thigh in order to perpetuate her husband’s line. The kṣatriyas came there. The embryo split the thigh and emerged like the mid-day sun blinding all the physicians of the gods, are regarded as sudras. R.S. Sharma, Śūdras, p.81.

¹⁵⁷ Mbh. 1.165.28.
¹⁵⁸ Mbh. 3.123. passim. One day the Aśvins saw the beautiful wife of Cyavana, Sukanyā. They enquired about her. They wondered how could her father give her to a decrepit man. They suggested to her to choose one of them instead of Cyavana. Sukanyā rejected the offer, as she was firmly devoted to her husband. Pleased with her devotion, the Aśvins bestowed her husband with youth. Cyavana, in return, promised to make his benefactors, the Aśvins, drinker of soma, right in front of Indra, the king of gods. Indra vehemently opposed Cyavana’s proposition on the ground that the Aśvins were not fit to be members of the divine pantheon. Indra threatened to hurl the vajra upon the sage if he continued to champion the cause of the Aśvins. Before Indra could do so, Cyavana paralyzed him. He created Mada, a monster, to attack Indra. The monster started devouring all the gods, for he could not single out Indra. Terrified, Indra was forced to capitulate ignominiously.

R.P. Goldman argues, the association of Cyavana with the Aśvins and the sage’s hostile encounter with Indra for their sake is particularly suggestive. It would appear that the Aśvins, the supernatural benefactors of Cyavana, might be special divinities of a clan. If that clan or group were to be sanskritized or brought into the brahmanical fold at an early date, they might conceivably bring their own gods with them into the pantheon. If this were attempted, the orthodox priest might be expected to offer just such objections as are put into the mouth of Indra. Yet, if the sanskritized group were powerful and influential enough, perhaps associated closely with a powerful ruling family, there is every reason to believe that they might be successful. R.P. Goldman, Gods, Priests, and Warriors, The Bhṛgus of the Mahābhārata, Columbia University Press, New York, 1977, pp.145-146. R.S. Sharma quotes Hopkins to say that the twin Aśvins, physicians of the gods, are regarded as sudras. R.S. Sharma, Śūdras, p.81.
kṣatriyas. Terrified, the kṣatriya lords sought the grace of that lady for the sake of their sight. The brāhmaṇas told them that it was not she, but her son who had taken away their sight. She suggested them to seek his mercy. Aurva was satisfied with the kṣatriya’s obeisance, and restored their sight.\textsuperscript{159}

However, Aurva did not forget the incident and resolved to destroy the entire wicked world to avenge the wrong done to the Bhārgavas by the kṣatriyas. In the meantime, his ancestors appeared before his eyes to pacify him. They told him that the kṣatriyas were not to be blamed for their slaughter, as they themselves had desired death at the hands of a kṣatriyas.\textsuperscript{160} Such was their greatness that even death could not touch them. Therefore, in order to reach the heavenly abode, they were forced to cause their own death. Aurva then tried to justify his anger, thus:

A man who suppresses anger, which has arisen from a good reason, is incapable of protecting the three highest social orders. Kings, who are desirous of attaining heaven, should use anger properly to punish the bad and protect the good. When there is someone to check evil among the people, no evildoer remains among them. But when a single wicked man is not checked, many others may also engage in evil actions.\textsuperscript{161}

Though Aurva intended to protect the world from sin, in order to do so he was in fact trying to destroy the whole world. However, the departed ancestors successfully dissuaded Aurva. The most interesting feature of the episode is the extraordinary statement of the pitṛs, that they themselves deliberately provoked their own massacre. How else could puny kṣatriya ever aim to kill the brāhmaṇas.

Thus the stories bear witness that the respective functions of the four varṇas were not always strictly specialized, as the brāhmaṇical theory would like us to believe. There were brāhmaṇas who rivalled kṣatriyas in śāstras or, in fact, excelled in it. Although Aurva was unable to seek revenge on the murderous sons of Kṛtvārīya, Rāma Jāmadagnya pursued his revenge to its bloody conclusion. Parasurāma was one of the most violent brāhmaṇa characters of the epic. He killed his own mother, an act that seems to have no parallel in the epic.\textsuperscript{162} Parasurāma was guilty of strihatyā. In his case, the crime was surely aggravated by being an act of matricide. However, since he was merely obeying his father, his sin is absolved. The major weight of Parasurāma’s murderous temperament was, however, borne by kṣatriyas. Parasurāma appears to have

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Mbh.} 1.169-171. \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{160} The Bhṛguś were not helpless. Indeed, that wealth which was hidden by us was done so to anger the ksatriyas exclusively to provoke their hostility. We, great brāhmaṇas, were desirous of heaven. What was use of money for us? Since by no means death was able to take us, we perceived and agreed upon this device. One could not attain auspicious worlds through suicide. Considering this, we did not kill ourselves. Neither the ksatriyas nor the seven worlds could vitiate the glory of our austerities. \textit{Mbh.} 1.170.14-21.
\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Mbh.} 1.171.1-10.
\textsuperscript{162} \textit{Mbh.} 3.116.1-18.
been the first brāhmaṇa to be renowned as a warrior, though he had taken up arms to avenge a private wrong. He slaughtered warriors no fewer than twenty-one times. The story behind the massacre of the kṣatriyas by him is as follows:

Once, when all the sons of Jamadagni had gone out, Kārtavīrya, the lord of Anupa, reached Jamadagni’s hermitage. Jamadagni was practising tapasyā, so his wife Reṣulā offered due respect. Kārtavīrya was unhappy with the respect offered to him so he ab ducted the calf of the cow whose milk was used for the oblations. Paraśurāma was informed about this incident. While he was engaged with Kārtavīrya in battle, the king’s kinsmen ran to Jamadagni. They slew the great sage. When Paraśurāma got back to the hermitage, he saw his father dead. Enraged at this action, the valourous and mighty hero started slaughtering all the kṣatriyas. This action was repeated twenty one times. Thus, conquering the earth, he presented it to the sacrificial priests.

Paraśurāma clearly violated the varṇaśrama dharma by taking up the violent career of a warrior. Earlier, his ancestors, by marrying kṣatriya princesses, had brought about varṇaśamkara – the mixing of social groups that was so abhorrent to the brāhmaṇical norms. Such a behaviour contrasts strongly with the normative tradition of the epic, which is brought out when Kṛṣṇa emphasizes the tradition of mandatory acceptance of one’s svadharma:

Better is one’s own duty imperfectly done than another’s duty well done.
Better is death in one’s duty; another’s duty is dangerous.

It is interesting to note here that the unbrāhmaṇical conduct of Paraśurāma was mainly the result of preordained fate. The legend traces the deviance of both Paraśurāma and Viśvāmitra to a single cause. What is noteworthy is that the outcome of the stories is different in the two cases. Viśvāmitra, the Kuśika prince, actually became a brāhmaṇa. On the other hand, Paraśurāma’s story does not suggest that the Bhārgava hero actually renounced his varṇa to become a kṣatriya. Perhaps, it was possible for a kṣatriya, in exceptional circumstances, to become a brāhmaṇa, but a brāhmaṇa would never condescend to be recognized as a kṣatriya, thus asserting a brāhmaṇa’s superiority over a kṣatriya. The stories also suggest certain complementarity of roles, emphasizing the overlapping concerns of both the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas in maintaining the order of which they were the principal beneficiaries. Mr. Muir raises a question — Is the legend intended to account for a real fact? Was Paraśurāma of a sacredotal tribe, yet by profession a warrior, just as Viśvāmitra was conversely of a royal lineage, and yet a

163 Mbh. 12.49.2; see also 13.4.55-56.
164 Mbh. 3.116.19-29; and 3. 117. 1-15.
165 B.G. 3.35.
166 Mbh. 13.4. passim and 13.55. passim.
priest by profession. Similarly the lives of Droṇa and Kṛpa did not confirm to the normative strictures meant for ideal brāhmaṇaś. They remained in the royal court, taught āstāravyā to the princes and participated in the great battle. Moreover, they were killed while fighting – a feature that is generally associated with the kṣatriyas.

Parasurāma’s activities may be a reflection of the brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya tension, centring on a struggle for status against a strong uncertainty as reflected in the brāhmaṇical obsession of the kaliyuga. The extraordinary ferocity of Bhārgava Rāma could have served as an instrument to emphatically assert the superiority of the brāhmaṇas over the princely clan. The brāhmaṇas had the power of tapa; sages like Vasiṣṭha, Kaśyapa, Cyavana, Jamadagni, and Aurva represented the fearsome might of brāhmaṇical austerity. However, tapa by itself was obviously not considered sufficient to keep the kṣatriyas under control. R.P. Goldman rightly comments, “The very ubiquity of such figures serves to weaken the power of the theme.” Therefore, Parasurāma had to humiliate the kṣatriyas with their own weapons. His objective was not only to put them in their place; but also, by ridding the earth of them, to usurp their place. In taking the earth from the kṣatriyas and giving it to the brāhmaṇas, he fulfilled his purpose. In reality, it was not the earth or worldly sovereignty that the brāhmaṇas overtook from the kṣatriyas. Rather, it was the social, moral and ritual prerogative, which was reclaimed by the brāhmaṇas. Through repeating the legend of Parasurāma’s slaughters for twenty-one times, the brāhmaṇa editors were able to project their significance before the audience. However, Parasurāma was aware of the gravity of his sin.

Following the footsteps of Parasurāma, Droṇa also took revenge on Drupada. He trained the Kuru princes and defeated Drupada through them. He also participated in the great war. Madeliene Biardeau asks, “Should we say that Droṇa has chosen to become a warrior, and in doing so, at least he becomes a great sinner?” She adds, this is far from obvious. It appears that it was conceived possible, even if extra-ordinary that a

167 Cited in John Wilson, Indian Caste, Deep Publication, New Delhi, 1976, p.272
168 R.P. Goldman, Gods, p.139.
169 It is said that he enquired from the rṣis, skilled in the scriptures, and the gods, what was that which most perfectly cleansed deeds of violence, since he felt some compunction for whatever he had done. The rṣis replied, let the brāhmaṇas be the objects of your liberality, as the authority of the Vedas required. They asked him to consult other brāhmaṇa rṣis in this regard. Parasurāma, accordingly consulted Vasiṣṭha, Agastya, and Kaśyapa. They suggested that he should bestow upon brāhmaṇas cows, land, and other kinds of properties, especially gold. Parasurāma, the legend concludes, thus addressed by Vasiṣṭha and others, gave gold to the brāhmaṇas, and was freed from the sin. Mbh. 13.85. passim. (P.C. Roy’s tr.).
brāhmaṇa could be a leader in war. It is noteworthy that none except Bhīma questioned the unbrahmanical conduct of Droṇa. Bhīma repudiated him thus:

You brāhmaṇas teach that non-killing is the highest dharma, but you are fighting. You are a brāhmaṇa only by birth; by profession you are a butcher. For the sake of wealth you have shamelessly adopted the profession of killing, and brought ruin to us.

Droṇa’s son, Aśvathāma, was also guided by revenge. He killed the sleeping children of the Pāṇḍavas and others. He attempted to destroy the race of the Pāṇḍavas, but Kṛṣṇa nullified his attack. Kṛṣṇa condemned Aśvathāma to an unceasing life of solitude, wandering and ignominy. There are many more instances in the epic regarding the confusion about svadharma of the varṇas.

The brāhmaṇa, being the chief upholder of varṇadharma, was expected to maintain it in its purest form. He could do so by marrying a savarna woman, since a son born to parents of different varṇas was known as varṇasainkarā—a terrible feature of the kāliyuga. Many renowned brāhmaṇas were married to kṣatriya women, despite the tension between them and the warriors. Cyavana’s marriage to Sukanyā is not condemned. The act, even though a digression, did not deprive him of his ascetic power. Cyavana was not an exception in taking a kṣatriya wife.

The king gave his daughter to the decrepit sage, Cyavana, without hesitation, but only because of his fear of the sage. The marriage of Cyavana is of interest in the context of the contradiction of the Dharmashastras. Although anuloma was permitted, especially in case of marriage to one in the immediate lower varṇa, it was not esteemed very high. According to Manu, the offspring born of a union in which the wife is of lower varṇa than her husband are said to be apasadas, or somewhat degraded members of his father’s varṇa. R.P. Goldman

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171 This belief becomes clear from the incident when the Pandavas went disguised as brahmanas to Draupadi’s svayamvara. None thought that it was impossible for the brāhmaṇas to handle weapons. It was only after the deed was done that the defeated warriors made a rule that no priest should enter such contests. Mbh. 1.179-180. passim.

172 Mbh. 7.165.28-32.

173 Rṣiṇi married Satya, the daughter of king Gadhi of Kānyakubja (Mbh. 3.115.17.), Jamadagni married Reṇukā, the daughter of king Prasenjit of Ayodhya (Mbh.3.116.1-2.). But the offspring of these couples are not condemned as varṇasainkaras in the epic.

174 Mbh. 3.121-122. passim. Lomaśa narrated this story to Yudhishṭhira as follows. Once, a sage named Cyavana, was practising penances near a lake. He was motionless for a long time on one spot. After some period he was covered with a pile by ants and he appeared like an ant-hill. Thus, closed on every side he continued on his tapasyā. A king named Śaryāṇa, accompanied by his daughter and other attendants, arrived at that lake for diversion. His daughter Sukanyā, while wandering about, came upon the ant-hill containing the sage. The wise Bhārgava opened his eyes and was delighted to see the beautiful maiden. Sukanyā could see only a pair of bright eyes and out of curiosity she pierced them with a thorn. The wrathful sage got furious. He caused physical suffering to the royal army. The king interrogated the reason. When he found out the reason, he went to the sage and pleaded forgiveness. Cyavana was willing to do so, provided greedy and foolish Sukanyā was handed over to him. Śaryāṇa agreed and gave his daughter to the sage.

175 Manu. 10.6.
comments that according to this dictum, Aurva, Jamdagni and Parasūrāma are, at the
least, to be considered brāhmaṇapāsadas, or degraded brāhmaṇas. The Mahābhārata informs us that Vyāsa was born of a fisherwoman, Parāśara of a svapaka woman, Kapilajalā of a čandāla woman, Vasiṣṭha of a gaṇīkā and muniśreṣṭha Mandapāla was the son of a boatwoman. In the end, as a justification for this kind of list, it is said that the origins of the ṛṣis, rivers, pious people, great souls and bad character of a woman cannot be discovered. The list testifies that the brāhmaṇas married kṣatriya as well as ā́dva women. Moreover, there is at least one case of pratiloma marriage. Śukra, a brāhmaṇa, himself solemnized the marriage of his daughter Devayāni to Yayāti, a prince, when she wished to marry him. Yayāti was hesitant to accept a brāhmaṇi as his wife. He argued, "The wise know that a brāhmaṇa is more to be avoided than an angry snake of virulent poison, or blazing fire of spreading flames. The snake kills only one. The sharpest weapon slays but a single person. The brāhmaṇa, when angry, destroys the whole kingdom."

He could not wed her unless her father bestowed her to him. Śukra, knowing the wish of his daughter, absolved Yayāti from sin. The king then married Devayāni according to the rites of the scriptures. This is one of the few pratiloma marriages on record in the brāhmaṇical literature. R.P. Goldman says that Parasūrāma was guilty of matricide, Śukra was guilty of ingestion of a brāhmaṇa, and was a drinker of liquor. The first one, according to the Smṛtis, is an upapātaka or sin of the second degree; the others are mahāpātakas, the cardinal sins. All such acts were strictly forbidden for the brāhmaṇas.

Thus, the brāhmaṇas were not always above board. The legend of Śukrācārya illustrates the above point. However, such lapses on the part of the brahmanas did not reduce their greatness. A tale narrated in the Vaṇaparva asserts their eminence. A prince of Haihaya race was out hunting. He saw a muni with the skin of a black antelope as his upper garment. The prince killed him, mistaking him for a deer. Pained at what he had done, the prince's senses were paralyzed with grief. He, along with other Haihaya chiefs reached the hermitage of Ariṣṭanemi, son of Kaśyapa. The sage was surprised, for how

178 Mbh. 1.76.24-25.
179 The priest of the asura kingdom was full of remorse for drinking wine as it had made him an accomplice in a brahmicide and to share his extraordinary knowledge with a person of the enemy camp. Afflicted with grief, and desirous of doing that which would be beneficial to the brahmanas, he uttered, "From this day onward, any foolish brāhmaṇa, who, in his delusion, drinks wine, shall be condemned in this world and the next as one devoid of dharma and as a slayer of the brāhmaṇas." Mbh. 1.71.54-55.
could a kṣatriya kill a brāhmaṇa. The chiefs went back to the spot and found no dead body. The person, whom they believed killed, emerged alive. The chiefs were bewildered. The sage explained that death had no power over the brāhmaṇas. They performed their sacred duties; therefore, they had no fear of death. They entertained their guests with food and drink. They served their dependents with plenty of food. They themselves partook of what was left. Therefore, they were not afraid of death. They were peaceful, austere, charitable and forbearing. They visited sacred shrines. They lived in sacred places. Therefore, death held no terror for them.\footnote{Mbh. 3.182. passim.}

We can gather from the above that the social position of the brāhmaṇa was greatly consolidated. This pre-eminence had secured him many social as well as divine privileges. And if this brāhmaṇical lustre and spiritual force was found to be not enough, there was a Parasurāma, a brāhmaṇa, who could overpower the martial prowess of the kṣatriyas. However, in the end, Parasurāma was humbled and humiliated by Rāma, for digressing from his prescribed duty. N.K. Dutt says that it was better for the brāhmaṇical cause that Parasurāma gave up his military life or that many Parasurāmas did not arise in the rank of the brāhmaṇas, as otherwise the brāhmaṇas would have courted and received more defeats like that sustained by Parasurāma at the hands of the kṣatriya Rāma.\footnote{N.K. Dutt, Origin and the Growth of Caste in India, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1968, p.44} Numerous stories illustrate the glory of the brāhmaṇas, but they were expected to work hard to maintain that glory. Any straying away from their specified sphere of action and encroachment upon other peoples’ field was likely to invite reciprocity of treatment. It also threatened the hold of the brāhmaṇa over the non-brāhmaṇa.

2.3.2. Varnadharma of the Kṣatriya

The Mahābhārata records two different tales of the emergence of the kṣatriyas after Parasurāma made a clean sweep of the varṇa. Vaiśampayana, a brāhmaṇa sage, narrates that only women of the kṣatriya varṇa were alive and the varṇa was in imminent danger of becoming totally extinct. When the earth was thus bereft of kṣatriya manhood, the kṣatriya women, casting aside their pride, approached the brāhmaṇa sages. Thus, thousands of kṣatriya women conceived from their union with pious brāhmaṇas. So sprung up a new generation of kṣatriyas\footnote{Mbh. 1.58.5-7.} In this legend, the brāhmaṇas appear in the role of the de facto creators of the kṣatriyas, after exploits of the Bhārgava Rāma. However, in another version of the same incident, the narrator, Kṛṣṇa – a kṣatriya –
while admitting that there was a general slaughter of the kṣatriyas, said that some kṣatriyas had escaped death at the hands of the Bhārgava Rāma. They emerged from their places of concealment and resumed sovereignty.\textsuperscript{184}

The kṣatriya thus emerged to confine himself to protect, to fight for righteousness apart from studying the Vedas, performing sacrifices and giving gifts. The kṣatriyas included the kings, kinsmen and companions of the kings, and warriors. They were conceived primarily not only as rulers, but also as warriors and soldiers. They were expected to be proficient in the use of arms, and this distinguished them from the common people. This feature also distinguished the kṣatriyas of the Mahābhārata from the kṣatriyas of the Vedic age, as they were no longer simply a class of rulers but were also professional soldiers. Kṣatriyas could receive salary and war booty but not any other gift, which was the sole prerogative of the brāhmaṇas. The regular pay and allowances due to soldiers are discussed.\textsuperscript{185} The emergence of the DhanurVeda also points to the direction of profession of soldiers. The story of Kāpavya shows that tribesmen, who were not kṣatriyas, could also fight as soldiers; and sometimes men of other varṇas attained a high military status, as illustrated by the example of Kīcaka.\textsuperscript{186} G.C. Pande points out that although such a technique was easier for the kṣatriyas to learn, it was also accessible to others.

The kṣatriyas had a definite code of morality to guide them. They were expected to be hospitable. They were expected not to refuse protection to a refugee, not to forget a good deed or an injury, and not to refuse a challenge. “However, just as a brāhmaṇa had ceased to be a homogenous priest, the kṣatriya had, in the pursuit of war and diplomacy, acquired, side by side with their proclaimed code of chivalry, a ruthless code of expediency also.”\textsuperscript{187} This is reflected in the contradiction between the professed morality called kṣātradharma and the actual disregard of moral principles for the sake of nīti. G.C. Pande explains the point thus: although the Kaṇikaniti has been disregarded in the Critical Edition, the practices of Duryodhana and Sakunī illustrate the kind of nīti, which came to be merely a mask for immortality or adharma.\textsuperscript{188}

The high watermark of epic idealism is reached in the magnificent conception of the Perfect Man, which has never been equalled in the whole range of epic poetry, the

\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Mbh}. 12.49.2-3.
\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Mbh}. 2.5.38-39.
\textsuperscript{188} G.C. Pande, “The Socio-Cultural...”, p.130.
character of Devavrata Bhīṣma, son of Sāntanu.  

This central character of the *Mahābhārata* fulfilled a very subtle demand. He was, by birth and circumstances, a warrior. The duties of a warrior implied the constant and relentless use of concentrated force for the protection of people. Bhīṣma acted selflessly in accordance with the theoretical code of morality as understood by him. He did not aim at more pleasure or less pain. His duties were divorced from all personal interests. Once Bhīṣma learnt of his royal father’s infatuation for a young woman, whose father wanted succession rights reserved for her offspring, he not only forswore his claim to the throne; but by pledging life long celibacy, also shut out the possibility of any son of his claiming the throne in future. The sacrifice was so vital, and the provocation to it so trivial, that when he made this vow, flowers rained from the sky on Devavrata and invisible voices were heard calling him Bhīṣma, Bhīṣma. Thus he got the nickname Bhīṣma, “the terrible.”  

As a reward, Sāntanu gave his son a boon that he would die at will. Madeliene Biardeau interprets the incidences connected with Bhīṣma’s life thus:

> If it is connected with other facts of the *Mahābhārata*, it can be read as a brāhmaṇic feature in Bhīṣma, for a brāhmaṇa cannot be killed in fight, he can only die of his own accord, especially if he has yogic power (like Drona, for instance). Moreover, this man, who has no progeny of his own, is called Pīṭumāha by everybody. Sure enough this may seem natural that his grandnephews call him so since he is their parental great-uncle. But Pīṭumāha is, at the same time, the well-known title of Brahman, and applied to Bhīṣma, it might point to his Brāhmaṇaical behaviour as well. He acts as a brāhmaṇa in that he renounces the life of the householder, though, as a kṣatriya, he has no right to do so.

Bhīṣma’s sacrifice represented filial devotion. But, by giving up marriage, progeny and kingship he actually violated his svadharma. Wendy O’Flaherty aptly says that:

> *Svadharma* is as complex as the caste system; absolute eternal dharma (*svātana*) is rather like the ten commandments- easily memorized, not so easily followed... Absolute dharma demands that all of us behave properly in certain general ways, in addition to the particular requirements of our social class and stage of life. It soon becomes apparent, however, that the two forms of morality cannot always be resolved; indeed, even within the so-called “absolute” category there are irreconcilable contradictions.

When Vichitravirya died issueless, Satyavatī’s only hope was Bhīṣma. She approached him and commanded him to beget offspring upon the widows of Vichitravirya for the perpetuation of the line. Bhīṣma admitted that Satyavatī’s command

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190 *Mbh.* 1.94.90.
191 *Mbh.* 1.94.94.
192 Madeliene Biardeau, “The Salvation...”, p.82.
was sanctioned by *dharma*. But, true to his vow, he did not allow any concession to celibacy. He repeated his pledge to Satyavati. In a long statement, he told her that he would never renounce truth even if the earth quit its fragrance, fire its form, sun its heat, and moon its coolness, etc. Even the kingdom of the three worlds was meaningless to him when compared to truth.\(^{194}\) He told Satyavati that breach of trust by a *kśatriya* was never applauded in the treatise on *dharma*.\(^{195}\)

Thus, kśatriya Bhīṣma considered it his duty to stick to his vow of celibacy and responsibility of the kingdom even, at the expense of *dharma* itself. Bhīṣma knew very well that the Pāṇḍavas were righteous. He blessed Yudhīṣṭhira and wished him victory when the latter approached him before the break of the war. As the head of the Kuru family Bhīṣma fulfilled his duty as adviser by giving fearless and unambiguous counsel. He tried to maintain peace between warring cousins. But against his advice, war was decided. Bhīṣma, despite his firm conviction in the matter of the justice of the Pāṇḍavas’ cause, obeyed the call of his monarch like a true soldier. He was without any mental reservation. He told Yudhīṣṭhira about his obligation towards Duryodhana because of his economic dependence. For men were slaves of money, and the Kaurvas had tied him up with their money.\(^{196}\) He fought valiantly and whole-heartedly, notwithstanding his unshakable belief in the ultimate victory of his opponents. He never violated the codes of conduct of the battle. He knew women should not be killed. He told Yudhīṣṭhira and Duryodhana alike that Sikhandin was a woman in the previous birth, and he would not kill her even if he had to give up his life.\(^{197}\)

\(^{194}\) *Mbh.* 1.97.1-18.

\(^{195}\) *Mbh.* 1.97.24-25.

\(^{196}\) *Mbh.* 6.41.36.

\(^{197}\) *Mbh.* 6.94.16-17. Bhīṣma’s helplessness was more acute when Draupadi was being dragged in the Kuru’s court. He and other wise people present in the assembly were unable to restrain Duryodhana from sending Duḥśāsana, to bring Draupadi in the assembly. Draupadī wanted to know whether she had been won or not; whether Yudhīṣṭhira first lost her or himself. *Mbh.* 2.60.7. Vikarṣa was astonished at the silence of the elders. It was extremely perturbing for Bhīṣma, as he was supposed to be the custodian of righteousness in the Kaurva’s court. He answered Draupadi that a wife must obey her husband, but a husband did not have the right to stake his wife. He admitted that due to the subtle nature of *dharma* he was unable to give a proper reply to Draupadi. He told Draupadi that only Yudhīṣṭhira was well equipped to answer her question, for he could give up the entire world, but not the truth. Bhīṣma ultimately resorted to the subtle nature of *dharma*. He said that the course of morality was so subtle that even the illustrious and wise were unable to understand it. Moreover, in the world, what a strong man called morality was regarded as such by others, whatever it might be. *Mbh.* 2.62. *passim.*

Perhaps Bhīṣma had realized the importance of issues involved in her question and he chose not to give a reply to her. Realizing his own complex position and his inability to answer her question, in all earnestness Bhīṣma referred her to Yudhīṣṭhira who he treated as an authority on the matter. Iravati Karve assesses his character thus: Bhīṣma was famed as a man completely unselfish, wise, true to his word — as a man who lived for the good of his clan, not himself. And Bhīṣma was trying his utmost to live up to this role. When a man does something for himself his actions are performed within certain limits — limits set by a jealous scrutiny of others. But let a man set out to sacrifice himself and do good to others, and the normal limits vanish. He can become completely ruthless in carrying out his objectives. Iravati Karve, *Yuganta*, p.17.
Undoubtedly Bhīṣma sacrificed everything for his clan. Moreover, he brought up children of other men and found brides for them.\(^{198}\) When Vyāsa predicted great destruction, Satyavatī, with her two daughters-in-law, retired to the forest. The reign was in the safe hands of Pāndu. After all, \textit{kṣatriyadharma} required that a \textit{kṣatriya} should move on to \textit{vānaprastha} after discharging his worldly duties. Perhaps Bhīṣma thought that he was immune to these rules because he belonged to that category of men who sacrificed themselves for the benefit of others. Iravati Karve opines:

During the first part of his life circumstances had forced him into deeper and deeper involvement with the affairs of his family. He had no choice; he had to fulfill the duties thrust upon him. But during the last phase of his life it appears as if he had deliberately sought upon responsibilities that were not even his... But did he have a choice after all. Having taken up a life-long burden to see Hastināpur in safe hands, he could not lay it down at any time. His decision to stay was inevitable.\(^{199}\)

T.S. Rukmani maintains that the Bhīṣma’s personal life was a triumph of \textit{dharma}. However, his dilemma was being on the side of Duryodhana, and thus being a party to all the adhārmic action of the Kaurvas.\(^{200}\) In terms of absolute morality (\textit{sanātanadharma}) injustice was done to the Pāndavas, and Bhīṣma was well aware of it. Therefore, in consonance with \textit{sanātanadharma} he gave his blessings to the Pāndavas. But when conflict arose between \textit{sanātanadharma} and his \textit{svadharma} as a \textit{kṣatriya}, he chose to follow the latter.\(^{201}\)

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\(^{198}\) Having set aside the joys and privileges of a parent and a sovereign, he was made to bear the full responsibilities of both. He had not merely to bring up his own half brothers, but also their sons and grandsons, acting as their guardian and ruling the kingdom as a regent during their minority. Bhīṣma abducted three princesses of Kāśi – Āmbā, Ambikā and Ambalikā – to get them married to Vicitravrīya. Bhīṣma considered it his duty to get Vicitravrīya married. However, the eldest among the three, Āmbā had already chosen Sālva for her husband. Obviously, she did not agree to marry Vicitravrīya. Bhīṣma sent her to Sālva, the king of Saubha. But Sālva declined to marry a compromised Āmbā, on the ground that she had been in the company of others. Āmbā argued that Bhīṣma was honour-bound to marry her, but Bhīṣma reiterated his vow of celibacy. Āmbā was incensed. Her only desire was to avenge herself of the wrong done to her. Consequently, she approached Parasūrāma, the teacher of Bhīṣma, for help. Parasūrāma also failed to persuade his disciple to marry Āmbā. He fought a fierce duel with Bhīṣma but without any positive result. Due to utter frustration and extreme hatred, Āmbā embraced death to be born again as Sikhandīn in order to exact her revenge on Bhīṣma. Bhīṣma wanted to ensure the perpetuity of his clan. However, in his enthusiasm to perpetuate his house, he wronged an innocent woman who later becomes the cause of his death. \textit{Mbh.1.95. passim; 5.176-188. passim.}

\(^{199}\) Iravati Karve, \textit{Yuganta}, pp.21-22.


\(^{201}\) Siśupāla was the only person who openly reproached Bhīṣma. In the \textit{rājasuyayajna} held by Yudhīśhṭhira, there was a discussion on the selection of the chief guest. Initially, Siśupāla suggested Bhīṣma’s name since he was possessed of virtue and mortality. He was also the oldest among the Kurus. But Bhīṣma insisted that it was not he but Kṛṣṇa who was worthy of being the chief guest. Siśupāla never liked Kṛṣṇa. He lost his temper at Bhīṣma’s suggestion. He called Bhīṣma a blot on the name of \textit{kṣatriya}. He reminded him of his immoral acts. If only Bhīṣma had known the ways of morality, if only his mind was guided by wisdom, he would never have abducted Ambā. Vicitravrīya was a virtuous man, Siśupāla continued, so he...
While Bhīṣma's personality inheres characteristics of a brāhmaṇa, Viśvāmitra, a kṣatriya, openly renounced kṣatriyahood to become a brāhmaṇa. He was so impressed with Vasiṣṭha's spiritual power that he practised severe austerities and finally attained it. Brahmanhood empowered Viśvāmitra to send Trisāṅkū to heaven. When Indra found Trisāṅkū, a Candāla, standing with his mortal form, he pushed him out from heaven and Trisāṅkū started falling down towards the earth. Viśvāmitra saw this and his anger knew no bounds. He started to create a new heaven, with duplicate devas, for Trisāṅkū. Frightened, Indra approached Viśvāmitra and promised him that he would give Trisāṅkū a seat in heaven itself. This legend reminds us of the story of Cyavana and the Āśvins where the former threatened Indra for a similar cause.

Viśvāmitra was not the only example of a kṣatriya acquiring the characteristics of a brahmana. Dumezil has delineated the striking brahmanic features in Yudhiṣṭhira. Dumezil sees Yudhiṣṭhira, the son of Dharma, as a representative of the brahmaṇa varṇa; Bhima and Arjuna, born from Vāyu and Indra respectively, as two representatives of the warrior class; and the twins, sons of the Āśvins, as standing for the third ‘function’, that is, the productive classes of society. Yudhiṣṭhira stood for moral integrity and righteousness. Being the son of Dharma, he was by nature wise and righteous. Still, his life was devoted to learning and unravelling the intricacies of dharma. Time and again, his knowledge of dharma was tested. He emerged victorious in all the discussions.

did not marry Ambā when he came to know her wish. Ultimately, the dejected girl was forced to commit suicide. Bhīṣma again failed to fulfil his duty of begetting sons from his brother’s widows. Such kind of celibacy was fruitless. Śisupāla argued that worship, study, sacrifice, did not equal in merit even one-sixteenth part, which was obtained by the possession of a son. Therefore, all the vows and merits of sonless Bhīṣma was fruitless. Mbh. 2.37. passim.

Bhīṣma was a wise man and he knew all this; he still preferred to stick to the supreme kṣatriyadharmā of never breaking a vow.

Vasiṣṭha was a great sage. He had a divine cow. This cow yielded anything that was desired of her. Once Viśvāmitra visited Vasiṣṭha’s aśrama. He was surprised to see this wonderful cow. He queried about the detail and was so tempted that he wanted the cow, named Nandini, in exchange of his kingdom. Vasiṣṭha refused to exchange Nandini for anything even if it was a kingdom. Viśvāmitra, then, tried to take the cow by force. Nandini got alarmed at the sight of Viśvāmitra’s troops. However, Vasiṣṭha did not turn away from his vow of forgiveness. He was sure that the kṣatriya’s might lay in physical strength, the brahmaṇa’s in forgiveness. Nandini attacked Viśvāmitra’s troops on all sides. She created a huge army, which defeated Viśvāmitra’s troops. Viśvāmitra was astonished at this wonderful brahmaṇa prowess. He was disgusted with kṣatriya prowess. He admitted that brahmaṇa prowess was true prowess, and asceticism was true strength. He abandoned his large kingdom, and regal splendour and set his mind on asceticism. Mbh. 12.165. passim.

He became a brahmaṇa finally through austere penances and marched upwards from the kṣatriya varṇa. It is apparent, however, that this story is designated to teach a lesson to the kṣatriya that his physical prowess was futile before the spiritual force of the brahmaṇa.

Mbh. 1.65.27-42.


One may recall the instance when he rescued his brothers by satisfactorily answering the questions of disguised Yakṣa as follows. Yakṣa enquired: what were the divine attributes of brahmanas and kṣatriyas? What virtuous practices of theirs resembled those of the pious? What were their human attributes? And
Dharma draws out the innermost thought of Yudhiṣṭhira. Through his discrete understanding of dharma and reasons, he helped his brothers to regain their lives. He also helped Nahuṣa to set himself free from a curse. Yet, his discretion came to no avail when it came to the application of dharma in a real life situation. At moments of crisis, he was inert, innocuous, non-aggressive, indecisive and panicky. He was an irresponsible gambler. Buddhadeva Bose explains his passion for dice as “a pretext for the only means for escape from the world around him”.  

Peter Hill comments that perhaps more important than his material losses, Yudhiṣṭhira also lost all sense of his dignity; for, despite his initial reluctance, once the game started Yudhiṣṭhira showed certain signs of the gambler’s mania to redeem what had been lost. Almost everyone sensed this. When pratiharī was sent to fetch the enslaved Draupadī, he explained to her that Yudhiṣṭhira had been intoxicated by gambling (dyutamadene). None of the elders approved his staking Draupadī. Bhīma was the most vocal in registering his protest. Bhīma could accept the loss of their kingdom and their own personal freedom. But he felt that his elder brother had transgressed all limits when he staked and lost Draupadī. This was one of the lowest

what of theirs resembled those of the impious? Yudhiṣṭhira answered: the study of the Vedas was the divine attribute of the brāhmaṇa. Their asceticism was like the virtuous practices of the pious. Death was their divine attribute. And slander by them was like the behaviour of the impious. It was arrows and weapons that constituted the divinity of the kṣatriyas. Sacrifices resembled the virtuous practices of the pious. Fear was their human attribute. And their abandoning the distressed was like the practice of the impious. Further, Yakṣa asked whether by birth or learning or by good character, study of the Vedas or by what a person became a brāhmaṇa? Yudhiṣṭhira replied that neither birth nor learning made one a brāhmaṇa. There was no doubt that only good character was the cause of brāhmaṇahood. He who maintained his conduct unimpaired, was never impaired himself. Teachers and pupils, in fact, all who studied the scriptures, if addicted to wicked habits, were to be regarded as illiterate wretches. He only was learned who performs his duties. Even he who had studied the four Vedas but whose conduct was wicked could not be distinguished from a sudra. He who performed the agnihotra and had his senses under control, was called a brāhmaṇa.  

Dharmarāja also rescued Bhīma from Nahuṣa, who was in the form of a serpent. Sage Agastya cursed Nahuṣa when he insulted the sage. The sage, on Nahuṣa’s request, said that he could be released from the curse only if a wise person conversant with relation between the soul and supreme being would be able to answer his question. Yudhiṣṭhira’s apt answers on dharma of different varna relieved Nahuṣa from the curse. Mbh. 3.177-178. passim. Yudhiṣṭhira had from beginning revealed himself as exceptional because he was unlike any kṣatriya in conduct.  

206 Buddhadeva Bose, The Book, p.23. Bose says that Yudhiṣṭhira was not a brave and bright child. If any pupil failed to graduate in Droṇa’s school, it was Yudhiṣṭhira. Droṇa called him worthless. He was generally overshadowed in his youth by the feats of Bhīma and Arjuna. Bose argues that the game of dice does not bring about his fall, or if it does, it is only from his worldly status, not from his character. His moral nature, instead of undergoing any disintegration, unfolds itself, develops, and achieves its fullness simply as a result of the forest exile caused by gambling. Buddhadeva Bose, referring to Yudhiṣṭhira’s answer to Yakṣa, says that some of his answers are utterly startling. When he designates evacuation of the mind’s filth as bathing, protection of animals as giving, wishing happiness of others as kindness, then we seem to hear his own individual voice speaking at last, transcending the śāstras. pp.20,23 & 38.


208 Mbh. 2. 60.4.
orders of deeds. So angry was he that he asked Sahadeva to fetch fire to burn off Yudhiṣṭhira’s arms. However, Arjuna reminded Bhīma that he should obey the elder brother. Arjuna argued that Yudhiṣṭhira was forced by circumstances. He had to accept the challenge. Bhīma also agreed that Yudhishtira had abided by the kṣatradharma in accepting the challenge.209 The matter of objection was the manner in which Yudhiśṭhira had gambled when he did have a choice. Interestingly, even after this debacle, he could re-live his pleasure of gambling at Virāṭa’s court where he was in the guise of a brāhmaṇa. Madeliene Biardeau argues:

To be a brāhmaṇa and a dice expert makes a strange combination. Given the constant comparison between the dice game and the war, it is possible to look at such a brāhmaṇa as a mock duplicate of the brāhmaṇa warrior, that is, as the kind of mixture the epic considers as dangerous and exemplifies in Droṇa.210

Yudhiṣṭhira regained his losses because of Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s boons to Draupadī. But he was soon given another opportunity to lose. He again felt he had no choice but to accept Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s invitation to return to the gambling hall. If he was to abide by the requirements of dharma, as he understood them, obedience to his uncle and the king was called for, even if the consequences could only be disastrous.211 He could not ignore a challenge and remain consistent with dharma. How could a king of his kind, who protected his own dharma, turn away when challenged? “The difficulty of Yudhiśṭhira was the sure knowledge that his obedience to dharma could only bring ruin and destruction. It is perhaps for this reason that Yudhiṣṭhira, faced with the prospect of finding fault with the dharma, chose to place the ultimate blame on the placer who exercised power over what befell mortals.”212 He not only lost his kingdom but was also exiled for thirteen years as a consequence of gambling the second time. His sternest critics were Bhīma and Draupadī during the exile. Time and again Bhīma would remind

209 Mbh. 2.61.1-6; see also 2.60.43. Yudhiṣṭhira could forsake the world but not dharma. His virtues were so great that he easily upstaged other characters of the epic. His words were considered final on most occasions, such as on Draupadī’s marriage to the five brothers. However, his gambling lapse proved that even the Dharmaputra was not above fault. He had no doubt from the beginning that dicing would be the greatest folly. When Vidura brought Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s invitation; Yudhiśṭhira was much disturbed. He was even more perturbed when he heard that Śākuni would play for the Kauravas. He knew fully well that there would be deceit, trickery and quarrel. However, he must agree to gamble primarily because it was Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s command and a son should always obey the father. Secondly, he had pledged an eternal vow never to refuse any challenge (of dice). Yudhiṣṭhira felt that there was more to it and argued that the placer (distasya) had directed the gambling. Mbh. 2.52-60. passim.

Bhīma is just the opposite of Yudhishthira. He advocated karma to be the supreme goal of a man. (Mbh. 12.167.) He killed Jarasandha, Kīcaka, Duryodhana and others so that the good might prevail over the evil. He had no dilemma about his duties.

211 Peter Hill, “Individual...”, p.16.
212 Peter Hill, “Individual ...”, p.16.
Yudhishthira that despite their being the most powerful, they were rendered helpless due to the evil of his gambling.\textsuperscript{213}

Worse was yet to come. At Kṛṣṇa’s instigation, Yudhishthira uttered a white lie with the purpose of causing the death of Droṇa. Droṇa’s death was a must if the Pāṇḍavas, the righteous side, were to win the war. However, an armed Droṇa could not be killed. Therefore, Kṛṣṇa asked Yudhishthira to tell Droṇa a lie that Aśvatthama was killed, in order to disarm him. As a result of the fatal falsehood, though he hastened to add kunjaro (an elephant),\textsuperscript{214} his chariot wheels, which had always run a little above the surface of the earth, were immediately lowered to the ground. Thus his fall from the state of being endowed with god-blessed transportation was made visibly manifest. He forsook his allegiance to sanātanadharma, in order to ensure the victory of the Pāṇḍavas and to secure dharma as a social order.

In the Kañçaparva, Yudhishthira fled the battle-field after being painfully humiliated by Karṇa in an armed engagement. Karṇa addressed him jeeringly as a Veda-studying brāhmaṇa.\textsuperscript{215} He did not give a befitting reply to his enemy; rather he flared up in anger and told Arjuna that all his boastfulness about being the finest archer in the world was a lot of non-sense, because the war was dragging on. Instead of leading the army, being the eldest among his brothers, he insulted Arjuna and slighted his Gāndīva-bow. The bow was a gift to Arjuna from Agnī, the fire-god. He held it so dear to his heart that he had promised to kill any one who would ever speak ill of Gāndīva. So Arjuna would have had to either kill his elder brother or break his promise. The kṣātrakadharma prompted him to choose the first alternative. Promise keeping was, indeed, a strong obligation for it was classed as protecting the truth. Kṛṣṇa made Arjuna understand that dharma was at least sometimes dictated by the constraints or the contingency of the situation. Arjuna could insult his elder brother and thus keep his promise since it would be tantamount to killing him in spirit without actually killing him physically.\textsuperscript{216} There were similar incidents, which indicate that quite often Yudhishthira

\textsuperscript{213}\textit{Mbh}.3.34.6-13. Draupadī also poured her anguish at many places. Yudhishthira’s explanations of his actions could never convince her. When she was molested and kicked by Kīcaka, while disguised as a chambermaid at King Virāṭa’s court, she could not restrain herself. She asked Bhīma, what pity didn’t a woman deserve who had Yudhishthira for her husband? \textit{Mbh}. 4.17.1. She said further, revile your eldest brother- the gambler -- it was his doing that has put us into this never-ending trouble. For who but a gambler would give up his kingdom, all property and himself, and gamble for forest. \textit{Mbh}.4.17.10-11.

\textsuperscript{214}\textit{Mbh}. 7.164.106-107.

\textsuperscript{215}\textit{Mbh}. 8.49. \textit{passim.} (P.C. Roy’s tr.).

\textsuperscript{216}\textit{Mbh}. 8.68-69. \textit{passim.} (P.C. Roy’s tr.).
 blamed *daiva* or others whenever a crisis occurred, and he rarely acted to solve the crisis.

Buddhadeva Bose compares Yudhīṣṭhira with Arjuna thus:

Arjuna is like an underdeveloped adolescent to whom an enemy means he who is to be killed; to whom the earth and its women are to be enjoyed; and to whom aggrandizement is the purpose of all action. There is no gulf between his intention and his deeds. No hesitation ever lowers his uplifted arm – except just once, at a crucial moment in the history of mankind.\(^2\) \(\ldots\) On the other hand, Yudhīṣṭhira is perpetually in conflict with his own self. He has to oppress himself far more than he oppresses others. He is divided between his situation and his wishes, caught in the conflict of the contrary pulls of his duty towards others and his duty towards himself, always in a state of unrest. He has no relief from self-doubt and perhaps that is why he is held prisoner to Kṛṣṇa's irrefutable arguments and irresistible personality.\(^3\)

Yudhīṣṭhira was all along uncomfortable with *kṣatriya dharma*. He had mourned the cruelty of *kṣatriya dharma*, but had to follow it. In his words, there was no *dharma* more sinful than the *kṣatriya dharma*.\(^4\) Greg Bailey says that Yudhīṣṭhira's continual reluctance to play his ordained social role in the mode required by his *kṣatriya* paternity is justifiably famous. But in the scholarly literature it tends to be interpreted as a reflection of the confusion he has about his own role, whether to be a brāhmaṇa or to be a *kṣatriya*, his mythical paternity allowing both possibilities. This interpretation would also feed into the theme of the intermixture of *varnas*, hence the confusion of *dharmas*.\(^5\) On the other hand, Peter Hill argues that the epic bards, by ultimately not just attributing to Yudhīṣṭhira a degree of freedom of action but also making him at least partly responsible for his own plight, help to make the king of Dharma the most human of the *Mahābhārata*’s many heroes.\(^6\)

Unlike his elder brother, Arjuna fought many battles to establish righteousness. He discharged *kṣatriya dharma* perfectly, though he also had his own moments of doubts. The great battle was about to begin and Arjuna's limbs failed at the prospect of slaying his own kinsmen. His concern over bloodshed was soon overtaken by an anxiety about

\(^{2}\) Buddhadeva Bose, *The Book*, p.70.


\(^{4}\) *Mbh.* 12. 98.1.


\(^{6}\) Peter Hill, “Individual ...”, p.20. Indeed, *dharma* is a very elusive term.

R.N. Dandekar puts it thus: Dharma may mean Vedic ritual, or religion and ethics in general, or caste rules, or civil and criminal laws. But the underlying basic idea is everywhere the same. *Dharma* seeks to resolve the inevitable conflict between the real and the phenomenal, the spiritual and the material, the eternal and the temporal. It recognizes that, while striving after the ideal, man cannot afford to overlook the actual. *Dharma*, therefore, lays down a way of life, which aims at securing the material and spiritual sustenance and growth of the individual and the society. R.N. Dandekar, *Insights into Hinduism*, Ajanta Publication, New Delhi, p.69.

Yudhīṣṭhira appears to have developed into a true *kṣatriya* during the last few days of the war. He wanted to see Karna dead, he told a lie to win the war, and he had no pity for the dying Duryodhana.

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varnasamkhara and pollution of dharma. However Kṛṣṇa’s answers brushed aside all his objections. It was the dharma of a kṣatriya to fight, and if Arjuna did not, he would incur sin and dishonour. A kṣatriya was a born warrior. His duty was to put down his life for the sake of dharma. A true warrior offered his life to protect dharma, and in doing so, he followed the god who descended himself in order to save dharma. Kṛṣṇa added that if Arjuna were to be victorious, he would enjoy the earth, and if he were slain, he would obtain heaven.

Madhavan M. Deshpande maintains that in order to get Arjuna back on his feet, Kṛṣṇa has to deal with all aspects of Arjuna’s psychological breakdown, from his pseudo-wisdom and pretence of self-confidence to fear, uncertainty and ignorance. Ruth C. Katz notes thus:

Personally the hero fights to win kingdom and wealth or, failing these, heaven and glory. The Mahābhārata’s heroic ideal is, not, however, primarily selfish: the selfish Kauravas are the villains of the epic. Rather victory or death is seen as the duty of a kṣatriya. The hero fights for the good of all creatures, the support of dharma, so described; Dharma is established among kṣatriyas, which is full of clear happiness, self-evident, free from deception, beneficial to the whole world.

Mbh. 7.64.5

Arjuna had won many battles for the Pāṇḍavas. He acted as the main warrior in the digvijaya and as the guardian of the sacrificial horse in its year of wandering during the rājasūya yajña of Yudhiṣṭhira, but this great hero failed to protect the widows and others of Kṛṣṇa’s clan after Kṛṣṇa’s death. Arjuna was able to get over the moral problems with the help of Kṛṣṇa, although Kṛṣṇa, a kṣatriya himself, did not follow...
ksātradharma. He escaped from Mathurā when Jarāsañdhī attacked.²²⁹ He rushed to kill Bhīṣma, though he had promised not to take up arms in the battle.²³⁰ He never lost, even though he was never heroic in the battle. He won through trickery. Perhaps his superhuman image permitted him to behave unlike a true kṣatriya without risking his status and power.

In juxtaposition to Kṛṣṇa, Rāma – another supreme being – acted like a perfect kṣatriya. Rāma accomplished all the tasks that he regarded as his duties. He placed his dharma above love and hate. He did not hesitate to hurt even those nearest to him to abide by dharma. However, even the maryādāpurussottam could not always stick to kṣatriyadharma. For instance, at the time of exile, he was told that as a kṣatriya it was his duty to install himself and govern the people. Rāma quickly said that he abjured kṣatriya morality, for it was a fact that it was adharma in the garb of dharma.²³¹

Thus, it was one thing to know dharma and totally another to act on it. Theoretically, there was no question that the brahmāṇa could ever take temporal power in his hands. Similarly it was considered adharma for the kṣatriya to strive for the authority of his superiors. In practice they both appear to vie for each other’s privileges. They do not appear to strictly adhere to the prescribed code of duty and morality from which they derived their authority. One must honour one’s varṇa duties, but the concept of duty changed from person to person and place to place. Therefore, Vasiṣṭha considered forgiveness to be his dharma, while Parasurāma and Droṇa deemed revenge to be their dharma, sticking to the vow of celibacy was dharma to Bhīṣma, while gambling was Yudhiṣṭhira’s dharma and so on it goes.

1.3.3. Varṇadharma of the non-brahmaṇa and the non-kṣatriya

The privileged have always decided their set of duties. Let us now study the duties of the not so privileged sections of the Mahābhārata, through the characters, who are neither brahmāṇas nor kṣatriyas. One such important person is Vidura. If Yudhiṣṭhira was the son of Dharma, Vidura was Dharma himself who was born on the earth as a result of the curse of a brahmāṇa sage Anīmāṇḍavya. The brahmāṇa sage was accused of theft. He was impaled, although he was innocent. He summoned Dharma, the lord of Justice, and told him that the only sin he could recollect was that he had pierced a little fly on a blade of grass. From then onwards he had practised penances a thousand fold. The brahmāṇa

²²⁹ Mbh. 2.13.65.
²³⁰ Mbh. 6.102. passim.
²³¹ Ramāyaṇa, 1.109.20. See also Rāmopakhyāna, Mbh.3.258-276. passim.
sage asserted that killing of a brāhmaṇa was a heinous crime. The sage, then, cursed Dharma to be born a śūdra in the form of the learned and sinless Vidura.\(^{232}\)

Vidura belonged to the śūdra varṇa.\(^{233}\) Karṇa was a śūta through adoption.\(^{234}\) Sanjaya, who described the progress of the war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, was also a śūta.\(^{235}\) Yuyutsu, born of a vaiśya woman and publicly acknowledged as Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son was a śūta,\(^{236}\) so was Kīcaka, the general of the Virāṭa army and the brother of Sudesāṇā, the queen of Virāṭa.\(^{237}\) The sūtas were charioteers, warriors, and the repositories of the lore and genealogies of kingly families. The kṣatriya kings had a feeling of closeness and kinship with the sūtas. The sūtas lived within the enclosure of the kings’ palaces. In many cases the kṣatriyas and sūtas were actually half-brothers like Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura, Dhuryodhana and Yuyutsu. Not only were they near-equals of the kṣatriyas, but some, like the Kīcaka, were actually a threat to the power of the king. Though completely dependent on the kṣatriyas for their maintenance, they could assume the role of advisers, as Vidura and Sanjaya did. Sanjaya even took an active part in Duryodhana’s war councils. A beautiful sūta woman, like Sudesāṇā, could become a kṣatriya queen, but the kṣatriya never gave his daughter to a sūta. The relation between both was never one of complete equality. It remained that of a patron and a retainer. As the name suggests, Vidura was a knowledgeable and wise man. Despite being the sons of the same father, he was placed lower in status as compared to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, for he was the son of a maid. Dhṛtarāṣṭra loved Vidura dearly. But it was the love of a patron. At any time of day or night he could call Vidura. Vidura was a brother of the king, but a brother who could claim no rights except that of bare maintenance. However, his social status did not hinder him from speaking what he considered to be right. Thus, while others, in Kaurva court, sat silently watching the degradation of Draupādi, Vidura registered his protest vociferously.\(^{238}\)

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232 Mbh. 1.57.77-81.
233 Mbh. 1.57.81.
234 Mbh. 1.57.82.
235 Mbh. 1.1. passim. (P.C. Roy’s tr.)
236 Mbh. 1.63. passim. (P.C. Roy’s tr.).
237 Mbh. 4.16.1.
238 When Yudhishthira lost Draupādi in gambling, Duryodhana addressed Vidura, “O kṣatta, bring Draupādi, the dear and loved wife of the Pāṇḍavas. Let the unfortunate one stay where our serving-women are.” Mbh. 2. 59.1. Vidura replied to him, “Do you know, o wretch that by uttering such harsh words you are provoking so many tigers to rage. Wretch, do not further provoke them lest you go to the region of Yama. In my judgement, slavery does not attach to Kṛṣṇā. For she was staked by the king after he had lost himself. No man should utter such words as are disapproved by the Vedas and lead to hell and annoy others. The learned should never utter such words. The sons of Pṛthū never use words such as these. It is only low men that are like dog who use harsh words towards all classes of people. Alas! The son of
None of the kings present in the assembly, for fear of Duryodhana, uttered a word, good or evil. Vīkarna, a son of Dṛtarāṣṭra, was the only one who supported Vidura. Though unlike Vidura, Vīkarna categorically stated:

I will say what I regard just and proper. It has been said that hunting, drinking, gambling, and too much enjoyment of women, are the four vices of a king. This son of Pāṇḍu, while deeply engaged in one of these vicious acts, urged by deceitful gamblers, made Draupadī a stake. The innocent Draupadī is, besides, the common wife of all the sons of Pāṇḍu. And the king, having first lost himself offered her as a stake. Reflecting upon all these circumstances, I regard Draupadī as not won.  

In a court where the king himself was supporting *adharma* by being a silent observer of the event, it was a great task to voice protest against it. Even Bhiṣma, the oldest among the Kurus, spoke ambiguously. In fact, Vidura was the only man who, time and again, reminded Dṛtarāṣṭra of his faults and his blind affection for his sons.  

Indeed, he was a true ally of king Dṛtarāṣṭra. He always supported the cause of the Pāṇḍavas for he knew they were right. But he did not undergo any serious mental conflict, which would have forced him to leave the Kaurva camp. At the same time he never cared for the king’s displeasure and unhesitatingly asserted the futility of greed, and the need for justice and the eternity of truth. It was none of his fault that Dṛtarāṣṭra failed to profit from his wisdom. Even at the end of the war he was quick to point out to the grieving Dṛtarāṣṭra that his misfortune was the fruit of his own actions and that he must endure the resultant pain with courage.

Dṛtarāṣṭra does not know that dishonesty is one of the frightful doors of hell. Without doubt, he will be the cause of the destruction of the Kurus”. *Mbh*. 2. 59.2-12.  

During the course of the gambling, he addressed Dṛtarāṣṭra thus: "O' great king, listen to what I say, although my words may not be agreeable to you, like medicine to one who is ill and about to breathe his last. A jackal is living in your house in the form of Duryodhana. You know it that amongst the Bhojas, they abandoned, for the good of the citizen, a son that was unworthy of their race. The Andhakas, the Yādavas and the Bhojas uniting together, abandoned Kansa, and afterwards, when at the command of the whole tribe, the same Kansa had been slain by Kṛṣṇa, all the men of the tribe became exceedingly happy for a hundred years. So at your command, let Arjuna slay this Suyodhana, let the Kurus be glad and pass their days in happiness. In exchange of a crow, O great king, buy the peacocks – the Pāṇḍavas; and in exchange of a jackal, buy these tigers. For the sake of a family, a member may be sacrificed; for the sake of a village a family may be sacrificed, for the sake of a province a village may be sacrificed and for the sake of the whole earth a province may be sacrificed”. *Mbh*. 2.55.1-10.  

Duryodhana blamed him for siding with the enemies, stating that the Kaurvas had tended him like a serpent on their lap. He compared him with a cat who wished evil unto him who cherished it. He told Vidura that there was no sin graver than that of injuring one's master. Vidura replied to him, "If you wish to hear words that are agreeable to you, in respect of all acts, good or bad, you should ask women, idiots and cripples or a person of that description. A sinful man speaking words that are agreeable may be had in this world. But a speaker of words that are disagreeable, though sound as regimen, or a hearer of the sane, is very rare. He, indeed, is a king's true ally who, disregarding what is agreeable or disagreeable to his master, bears himself virtuously and utters what may be disagreeable, but necessary as regimen". *Mbh*. 2.57.15-17.
However, acutely aware of his social status he never ventured to speak more than what was necessary. His clear understanding of *dharma* helped him to remind himself of his own status, while he advised his brother and patron. He neither approved of the king’s acts, nor did he leave his side. And, here we observe the difference in the concept of *dharma* as perceived by Bhīṣma and Vidura. To the former, *dharma* was allegiance to the throne; to the latter it is the assertion of justice while remaining personally loyal to the king. Perhaps his detachment from the events leading to the crisis enabled him to look at them rationally. We notice that Bhīṣma never stood up and spoke against the adhārmic acts of Duryodhana. “In fact, one feels that if he had felt strongly about Duryodhana’s acts, he would have spoken up. The characters in the *Mahābhārata* are used to saying what they feel like, and therefore, one has to conclude that if Bhīṣma suffered any moral conflict he chose to suppress it.”

One may say that Bhīṣma, at all cost, had to adhere to what he thought of as his *varṇadharma*, but Vidura was not restricted by any such specific regulations; so he could speak on behalf of Dharma as morality. On the other hand, Yudhiṣṭhira’s dilemma was that while he tended to think like Vidura, his *varṇadharma* came in the way. His dilemmas led to crises, not only for him but also for others.

Compared to Vidura, Karna had a more painful life. His mixed status encouraged the Pāṇḍavas’ and Draupadi’s contempt for him, sustained the bitter resentment that ultimately led to his tragic destruction. His life resembled Vidura’s in many ways. Vidura was a brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇdu. They shared a father. But Vidura was born of a slave girl, which was his gravest disability. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇdu could enjoy the throne in spite of physical deformity. Vidura was sound in limb and mind. Yet, he was deprived of the kingdom because he was a sūta. However, he was brought up for what he was, and treated with kindness. There was no secrecy about his parentage. His birth was quite legitimate according to norms prevailing in those times. Sukthankar

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Irvati Karve says that we never see Vidura bewailing his sorrows or loss. In fact, in comparison with other characters in the *Mahābhārata*, it might be said that his life was a happy one. He lived in his house, spending his time in reflection, meditation, and worship. Irvati Karve, *Yuganta*, p.70.

We cannot claim that his life was untouched by the tragedy of the *Mahābhārata*. He detested cruelty and injustice. Yet, while Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s son Yuyutsu openly joined the Pāṇḍavas, *Mbh. 6.43. passim*. P.C. Roy’s tr.), Vidura, who constantly argued with Dhṛtarāṣṭra on behalf of the Pāṇḍavas, chose to remain with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, though he did not fight in the battle. When necessary, he censured Dhṛtarāṣṭra, but in his sorrow, Vidura was always present to comfort him. Perhaps he could keep himself free from mental conflicts because of his discrete understanding of *dharma*. We never see any dichotomy between his speech and his actions. Because of his righteousness, Kunti chose to stay with him rather than in the royal palace when the Pāṇḍavas were exiled. Keśa considered him the only person, in Hastināpur, who could be an host when the former visited the capital for a peaceful negotiation with the Kauravas before the battle. *Mbh. 5.89.41*.
observes that placed in an inferior and unenviable position from birth he had overcome his ego, subduing it completely and sublimating it. He was gifted with an insight into the mysteries of life. He was respected by all for his wisdom. His benign presence and wisdom helped to tone down the conflict and mitigate the sorrows, which he could not altogether prevent.

But Karna’s problem lay in the fact that initially he did not know his parentage. And when he was informed of it, it was too late. He had no definite position in society. He struggled throughout life to gain what he thought was his rightful status. His bitterness lay in not having achieved that. He was not allowed to be trained in weaponry because he was a sūta. He had to go disguised as a brāhmaṇa to be accepted as a pupil by Parasurāma. Parsurāma was well pleased with the might of Karna’s arms, his affection, his self-restraint, and his services. One day, the tired son of Jamadagni, placing his head on Karna’s lap, slept soundly. While his preceptor was sleeping, a frightful blood-thirsty worm bored through Karna’s limb. Though his limb was bored through, Karna did not quiver, lest Rāma would be awoken. When at last Karna’s blood touched Rāma, he wrathfully addressed Karna—“O fool, no brāhmaṇa can endure such agony. Thy patience is like that of a kṣatriya. Tell me the truth”. Karna, fearing to be cursed, revealed his true identity. Rāma cursed him that since he was not a brāhmaṇa the Brahman weapon would not dwell in him when he would be engaged with a warrior of equal strength.

Education in the art of war was open only to brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas. Despite this, Karna had managed to attain some excellence in these arts. His extraordinary skill in warlike arts was not enough for his being accepted as a kṣatriya. He was not allowed to compete with Arjuna when Droṇa planned to exhibit the skills of his pupils. Iravati Karve says that Karna had acquired the skills of the kṣatriyas, but he could not master their value frame. When he wanted to compete with Arjuna, his name and family was asked. Duryodhana came to his rescue. He addressed the gathering that a warrior did not need to pronounce his ancestry. However, if Arjuna was unwilling to fight anyone who was not a king, he would give the kingdom of Aṅga to Karna. And, Duryodhana forthwith crowned him. No one protested against Duryodhana’s announcement.

Karna was readily accepted as the king of Aṅga. Still, that was not enough for his desired status of kṣatriyahood. He was denied the right to compete in Draupadi’s

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243 *Mbh.* 12.3.25-32
244 *Mbh.* 1.126.32.
245 Iravati Karve, *Yuganta*, p.142.
246 *Mbh.* 1.126.34-35.
swayamvara because he was a sūta. A kṣatriya princess could be married to either a kṣatriya or a brāhmaṇa. Karṇa’s enmity was unconsciously but inevitably directed against his brothers, the Pāṇḍavas. But it was focussed especially against their common wife Draupadī. Draupadī could have been his, had he not been uncremoniously cast away in his childhood. When Vikarṇa objected the staking of Draupadī, Rādhya was the only person who declined Vikarṇa’s argument. Vikarṇa argued, on Draupadī’s behalf, that it was not seemly to put to shame a gentle woman in this manner and that she could not be made a slave. According to Karṇa, Draupadī was included in all the possession of Yudhīṣṭhira. So the question did not arise whether or not Draupadī had been justly won? Moreover, God had ordained only one husband for one woman, Karṇa said, but that woman had many husbands. Therefore, it was certain that she was an unchaste woman. To bring her into the assembly, therefore, attired though she was in one cloth, even to uncover her was not at all an act that could cause surprise. It was Karṇa’s idea to take off the attire of Draupadī. It was Karṇa who induced the Kaurvas to degrade Draupadī, for until he spoke none had even thought of it. Karṇa was an outsider. The quarrel was between cousins over a kingdom. Karṇa not only participated in it, but he was so totally involved that he forgot all human ethics.

Duryodhana befriended Karṇa by crowning him as the king of Aṅga. But his friendship with Duryodhana did not enable him to reach equality with the kṣatriyas. There could never be equality in such kind of friendship. Duryodhana had his own interest in befriending Karṇa, in whom he found a match for Arjuna. Karṇa always remained a trusted and close retainer. He was tied to Duryodhana more out of gratitude than affection. Iravati Karve points out that when Kunti approached him to reveal his true identity and requested him to join the Pāṇḍavas, he promised her to kill none of the Pāṇḍavas, except Arjuna. Karṇa was hurting Duryodhana’s cause by this promise. This offer was inappropriate in this context. It has to be said that he ignored Duryodhana’s need and was carried away by a false notion of his own greatness.

When Kunti told him the history of his birth and asked him to join the side of the Pāṇḍavas, Karṇa declined. Probably, Karṇa realized that he could not play the role befitting his new identity. Therefore, he rejected it. Earlier Kṛṣṇa had asked him to join the Pāṇḍavas. Kṛṣṇa promised him all that he had ever desired in his life and more. He

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247 Mbh, 1.189. passim. (P.C. Roy’s tr.)
248 Mbh. 2.61.30-35.
249 Mbh. 2.61.38.
250 Iravati Karve, Yuganta, p.151.
251 Mbh. 5.138-139. passim.
would have become a kṣatriya of the highest rank and also a king, by accepting Kṛṣṇa’s offer. Instead, he said that it was impossible. He had spent his whole life among the sūtas. He could not break away from them. He could not be persuaded. All his victory was dedicated to Duryodhana. Here, he appears to be a noble man, a true friend, a man tied to his foster family by love and duty, and an incorruptible vassal. He was not in any doubt as to what to do. His mind was crystal clear and there was no dilemma.

V.S. Sukthankar is of the opinion that Karna was generous to a fault. But his generosity, which has become proverbial, was but a pose, a clever artifice to outdo the accredited nobility in their vaunted virtue, liberality. He wanted to hear himself lauded to the skies by the begging fraternity, as a compensation for the taunts and sneers of the highbrow nobles at the Kaurava court, all proud of their birth. One cannot claim that he had true generosity of heart. His pleasure in humiliating and persecuting the innocent Draupadi, his reply to Kunī when she revealed to him the truth about his birth, and his participation in the adharmic killing of Abhimanyu reflects his un-resolved dharmapāla (dilemma). Taking advantage of his vow of not refusing any request of a brahmana, Indra, in the guise of a brāhmaṇa mendicant, begged of him his natural armour and the earrings, which had made him invincible otherwise. The sun god, his father, had already warned him about Indra and asked him not to oblige the king of gods. Karna disobeyed his father and chose to surrender his invincibility.

Ultimately the opportunity came when Karna could have fulfilled his long cherished wish to kill Arjuna. But as the battle ensued, Arjuna gained and Karna was streaming with blood. His armour broke. His chariot sank. Karna jumped down to free the wheel from the mud. He pleaded for time, asked his opponent to wait until he had freed the wheel. He pointed out the code of battle, it was unrighteous for a man to fight

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252 Mbh. 5.139.9.
254 Mbh. 3.294.35-38. Iravati Karve quips, “Why did Karna have this urge to show such extreme generosity to Indra? Was this due to the insecurity he felt about his own position. Did he want to prove himself better than kṣatriyas?” Iravati Karve, Yuganta, p.148. Whatever may be behind his generosity, this action of his proved to be fatal in the battlefield. Karna refused to join an army led by Bhīṣma and was out of battle for ten days because Bhīṣma had put him in the second category of warriors, since he had never driven a chariot. He had only fought from a chariot. It was apparently necessary to know the finer points of chariot driving in order to shoot arrows effectively from a moving chariot. Karna’s pride deprived his friend, Duryodhana, of whatever help he could have rendered during the first ten days of war. Iravati Karve, Yuganta, p.151.
255 Karna’s chariot getting stuck was also a result of a brāhmaṇa’s curse. Once while he was practicing with his bow in the forest, a brāhmaṇa’s cow was accidentally hit and killed. The brāhmaṇa then cursed Karna saying: “In battle your chariot wheel will get stuck in the mud, and you will be killed even like this innocent cow which you have killed.” Mbh. 8.66.42. Thus, the Mahābhārata depicts the end of Karna as one that was destined to happen.
from a chariot against a man on foot. It was unbecoming behaviour in a cavalier like Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa questioned his understanding of dharma. He inquired why did Karṇa not remember this dharma when he incited Duhsasana to strip Draupadi? Did he recall his dharma when six people, including himself, in their chariots killed young Abhimanyu, standing alone on the ground? According to Kṛṣṇa, Karṇa did not deserve any mercy or justice when he had shown none either to Draupadi or to Abhimanyu. Kṛṣṇa, thus, induced the unwilling Arjuna to kill Karṇa by reminding him of his duty to undo the wrong done to the Pāṇḍavas.

Kuntī acknowledged her motherhood before the world, but this was done after Karṇa's death. And she did so in order that at least Karṇa's last rites may be performed, even if the first rites had been neglected. This was to save Karṇa from the hell in which he had lived throughout his life. However, it could not help Karna, for all his life he had pined for a kṣatriya status. Sukthankar comments: When one remembers the circumstances of Karṇa's birth and early life, one can readily understand his behaviour as also his fate.256

None could escape the result of one's own destiny. However, the story of Dasyu chief Kāpavya proves the opposite, i.e., a person could gain a higher status through his deeds. The Dasyu chief, Kāpavya, was a Niṣāda by birth. His life-story is one of the episodes, which informs us that a man could regain a higher status in the same life by virtue of his deeds. Kāpavya was a robber, born of a kṣatriya father and Niṣāda mother. He was a practitioner of kṣatriya duties. He was intelligent, kind, courageous, conversant with the scriptures, devoted to brāhmaṇas, worshipper of aged and preceptors. He protected the ascetics. Though a robber, he still succeeded in winning felicity in heaven. He was also well acquainted with all the practises of the Niṣādas. He respected those brāhmaṇas who had retired from the world and resided in the woods. One day, many thousands of robbers desired to elect him as their leader. The robbers found him to be wise, brave and respectful. They asked him to protect them. Kāpavya accepted the responsibility and commanded them not to kill any woman, child and ascetic. They should not destroy the houses of deities, pīṭras and should always worship guests. He asked them to fight for the welfare of the brāhmaṇas, and for truth. He told the robbers about the dangers that could occur on insulting the brāhmaṇas, for, a man who spoke ill

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256 V.S. Sukthankar, On the Meaning, p.53.
of the brahmanas and wished for their destruction, was himself destroyed and would fail to attain the three worlds.\textsuperscript{257}

King Kāpavya thus instructed his kinsmen. R.S. Sharma maintains that these instructions clearly underline the role of the converted Kāpavya in assimilating people to the brāhmaṇical social order, which was based on agriculture. It is significant that the Niśādas were not only asked to protect and respect the brāhmaṇas, who were the ritualistic and ideological leaders of the varṇa-divided society, but were also asked to protect cattle, very essential for agriculture. Sharma points out that tribal people, who were a beef eating community, did not realize the values of agriculture, and in a way Kāpavya asked them to appreciate the importance of plough cultivation.\textsuperscript{258} Kāpavya introduced danda, discipline and order – three vital organs of the state. He strictly instructed that those who secure their subsistence by bringing the state in jeopardy, whosoever they may be, would be perished like worms, which festered on the corpse and were destroyed when the corpse was destroyed. On the other hand, those who followed the rules of the Dharmaśāstras immediately achieved their goal despite their being a Dasyu.\textsuperscript{259} Thus, Kāpavya, a Niśāda chief, attained kśatriyahood because he protected the interests of the brāhmaṇical society. He advocated in favour of the rules of the Dharmaśāstras. Afterwards, there was no fear from wicked men in the woods. People were able to live under his security. Therefore, Bhiṣma did not hesitate to call him kṣātradharmanupalakah.\textsuperscript{260}

Similarly, the well-known episode which records Viśvāmitra’s attainment of brāhmaṇhood underlines that in some cases, the varṇa structure, though rigid, was flexible enough to allow a man to attain another varṇa through his actions. As the epic is chiefly concerned with the lives of great kings, and grand priests, there is not much room for the other two varnas. But some episodes show that at least some of the vaiśyas and sūdras enjoyed a high regard. Once, a brāhmaṇa named Jājali, who was proud of his spiritual power, thought that he had won great merit. An invisible voice from the sky told him that he was not even equal to Tulādhara in point of righteousness. Jalali was filled with wrath. Desirous of meeting Tulādhara, he left for Kaśi where that vaiśya lived. He inquired from Tulādhara how he had got the knowledge of dharma? Tulādhara said that dharma was nothing other than universal friendliness, founded upon total harmlessness

\textsuperscript{257} Mbh. 12.133. passim.
\textsuperscript{258} R.S. Sharma, Material Culture, p.147.
\textsuperscript{259} Mbh.12.133.21-22.
\textsuperscript{260} Mbh. 12.133.23-26.
towards all creatures. No dharma was greater than doing good to all creatures in thought, word and deed. He neither praised nor blamed the acts of others for there are divergent courses of conduct. In fact, whatever fruits were enjoyed by penances, by sacrifices, by practising liberality, by speaking the truth, and by paying court to wisdom, might all be had by practising the duty of harmlessness. A person, who gave unto all creatures the assurance of harmlessness, obtained the merit of all sacrifices and at last won fearlessness for himself as his reward. Tulādhara said that he was not a brāhmaṇa. He did not blame sacrifice. However, he pointed out that some people who were covetous and fond of wealth, without having understood the true meaning of the declaration of the śrutis, and proclaiming things that were really false but appeared true, had introduced sacrifices. The consequence of all this was theft and evil acts. He meant to say that the performance of sacrifices depended upon wealth. And the acquisition of wealth led to the commission of many evil acts. Tulādhara emphasized; it should be known that only that sacrificial offering which was acquired by righteous means would gratify gods. He mourned the fact that the brāhmaṇas, having given up the sacrifice that was ordained for them (yoga), had betaken themselves to the performance of sacrifices that were for kṣatriyas (in which injury is inflicted to living animals). He eulogized the sacrifices in which animals were not offered.261

Tulādhara’s insistence on extreme non-violence was anti-Vedic. Such a bold and original outlook was praised in the epic. It shows that vaiśyas were no longer ready to follow the lead of the brāhmaṇas.262 This attitude of preaching as a brāhmaṇa was not confined to a vaiśya. Even a sūdra of the lowest type could teach ethics to a brāhmaṇa. Once, a brahman was informed that his virtue was not really a virtue. He was asked to see a fowler in Mithilā who knew what true virtue was. The brahman, named Kauśika went to Mithilā to meet the fowler, Dharmavyādha, who was also a philosopher. Dharmavyādha was careful to point out that he was selling meat, because his forefathers followed the same trade. But he did not slaughter animals himself, nor did he eat meat. He observed fast during the day and ate only at night. He spoke the truth, discharged his duty carefully, and gave gifts. He lived upon what remained after serving the gods, guests and those who depended on him. He never spoke ill of anyone. He advocated that all the four orders should rigidly adhere to their respective duties. Dharmavyādha accepted that his deeds were very cruel. But he blamed destiny for it, as destiny was all-powerful and it was difficult to evade the consequences of one’s past actions. He was,

261 Mbh. 12.253-256. passim
however, always assiduous in eradicating the evil. Those animals, which were slain by
him, also acquired mokṣa. They constituted the food of other creatures. He pointed out
that agriculture was considered to be a praise-worthy occupation, but even there, great
harm was done to animal life; and in the operation of digging the earth, numberless lives
were destroyed. He argued that it was the dictum of the aged that the ways of
righteousness were subtle, diverse and infinite. It was proper to utter untruth when life
was at stake. Moreover, untruth sometimes led to the triumph of truth, and the latter
dwindled into untruth. Whatever was conducive to the good of all creatures was to be
considered to be the truth. It is significant to note that the fowler himself was placed so
low because of his cruel deeds in his previous birth. In his previous birth, he was a
brāhmaṇa. One day he killed a rṣi. The rṣi cursed him to be born as a cruel fowler in the
śūdra varṇa. After begging pardon, the rṣi replied that though a śūdra, he would remain a
pious man, and would attain great spiritual perfection. Kauśīka admitted that a brāhmaṇa
who was vain and haughty, who was addicted to vices and engaged in evil and degrading
practices, was like a śūdra. On the other hand, a śūdra, who was always adorned with
virtues such as righteousness, self-restraint, and truthfulness, was like a brāhmaṇa. The
fowler concluded that a man became a brāhmaṇa by his character, and by his own evil
karma a man attained an evil and terrible doom.263

There is an interesting episode related to a śūdra, who, contrary to the traditional
custom, became an ascetic and performed sacrifices. He was not punished for this breach
of his varṇadharma, but was rather rewarded by being born as a prince in the next birth.
The brahmana sage, however, who acted as a priest for him at his sacrifices, received a
lower rank on rebirth and became a purohita.264 It must be noted that good deeds did not
always fetch a reward for the low-born. For instance, one may recall how Ekalavya, a
Niṣāda, was deprived of his right thumb, and as a result of which he lost his mastery over
archery. He paid for his excellence.

The story of Mātaṅga illustrates the moral dilemmas faced by varṇasaṅnakaras.
Mātaṅga was the son of a brāhmaṇa father and a śūdra mother. Therefore, he was a
candāla by birth. Mātaṅga was not aware of this. He believed that he was a brāhmaṇa.
One day his father asked him to collect articles required for sacrifice. He failed to do so.
His action was ridiculed by a she-ass, who attributed his failure to his low varṇa. When
he came to know about his true origin, he set himself for severe penances to acquire the
status of a brāhmaṇa. He ultimately gained the desired status.265 Even though
brāhmaṇhood, the most cherished status, was difficult to attain, several episodes prove it

263 Mbh. 3.198-203. passim.
264 Mbh. 13.10. passim.
265 Mbh. 13.28-29. passim.
was not unattainable. However, renowned brāhmaṇas and the royalty did not necessarily suffer like Mātarīga. For example, Vyāsa was the son of a brāhmaṇa sage and a śūdra woman. According to the Mahābhārata, a brahmaṇa’s son by a śūdra wife was a pārasāva. His duty was to serve others. But Vyāsa was acknowledged as a great brāhmaṇa sage. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu were sons of a brāhmaṇa sage and kṣatriya princesses, but they were accepted as kṣatriyas. On the other hand, Vidura, the son of a brāhmaṇa sage, was assigned a low place because his mother was a sudra. Vichitravirya was also born of a sudra mother, Satyavatī, yet he enjoyed the status of a king. These variations prove that whatever the customs might have been regarding mixed varṇas, it certainly did not have the force of law behind it.

Thus, the epic reflects variations. Norms were rigid. A deviant was warned that a slight digression would invite the severest of punishments. But the vyavahāras tell us that the law was flexible when it came to practice, and it quite often accommodated digressions. This did not mean that deviants were not reprimanded. Actions were surely followed by their consequences. If a man got away with digression in this birth, he definitely got his due in his next birth. This dictum was, beyond doubt, the most significant force behind the maintenance of varṇadharma.

266 Mbh. 13.48.5-6.