CHAPTER 3

Telling the Mahābhārata of Vyāsa:

A sattra in a holy forest and a theatre of the macabre

What would your reaction be
if someone were to come up to you
and say,

My father died of snakebite.
When? Oh, I was too young then.
I don't even remember,

But I'm going to avenge his death
by killing
every single snake that lives....

And once it had been settled that a Snake Sacrifice would be held to achieve that

All the great rishis and maharishis,
so-called
great thinkers, all

the finest minds of our age...
seem strangely silent

and worried about just one thing:
how to wangle a job for themselves
as officiating priests.

....And the heart sinks
when you realise that even someone
like the great Vyasa himself

looks upon the event,
especially,
as a not-to-be-missed opportunity

to unleash his self-indulgent epic
on an unsuspecting world....

\[1\] Arun Kolatkar, Sarpa Satra, Mumbai, 2004, pp. 27, 33, 35.
The transmission of the *Mbh* is the subject of this chapter. Like the *VR*, the *Mbh* is in Sanskrit, but presents itself as a text for a much wider audience than would have had access to that language. As has been mentioned in Chapter 1, the *Mbh* describes itself as the ‘fifth *Veda’’, and while the first four *Vedas* could only be heard by men of the three ‘twice-born’ *varṇas*, this ‘fifth *Veda*’ was not to be their domain alone. The text also presents itself as a new *Veda* for a new age, indeed, as the most relevant source of knowledge for the lawless Kaliyuga. The *Mbh* informs us that when the divine *rṣis* placed the four *Vedas* in one scale on a balance and the *Bhārata* on the other, in both weight and size the latter was the greater, and that it is called the *Mahābhārata* because of its size (*mahat*) and its weight (*bhāra*). This etymology indicates a written book, but, like the *VR*, the *Mbh* suggests that it was not meant to be read by people silently by themselves – it was to be recounted aloud before an audience that heard it and responded

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2 *Mbh* 1.57.74 and XII.327.18.

3 The *Mbh* describes itself as a text for all four *varṇas* in XII.314.45. As noted in Ch. 1, the last section of the last book of Kisari Mohan Ganguli’s translation of the *Mbh* tells us that even *candrālas*, the paradigmatic untouchables, are cleansed by listening to the *Bhārata*. Women, too, form part of the text’s audience here.


5 *Mbh* 1.1.208-209.
to it. And as in the previous chapter, I shall cite evidence from within the text to discuss its dissemination.

In this chapter, I will draw on the beginning of the *Mbh*. Recent scholarship has mostly agreed on 400 B.C. to A.D. 400 as the broad period of composition of the text. In his introduction to the *Adiparvan*, van Buitenen writes that '[w]hen we look at the main story, it is reasonably clear that originally it could hardly have begun before 1.90, and all that went before, roughly half the entire book, was added at a later time.'

The portion of the *Mbh* that I will focus on in this chapter -- 1.1-61 -- is generally regarded as an 'accretion', and may be very roughly dated to the first couple of centuries A.D. This period, along with the very end of the pre-Christian era, is also the broad timeframe suggested for the sections of the *VR* that are discussed in detail in the previous chapter. And, as in the case of the *VR*, the cusp of the pre-Christian and Christian eras has been linked with the Vaisnavization of the *Mbh*.

Both the *VR* and the *Mbh* deal with intrigues at court, involve a long period of exile which is brought about by underhand means, and both culminate in a major war. But the two texts differ strikingly in their tenor and, in this chapter, I argue that the contrast

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6 Note, however, that Alf Hiltebeitel disagrees with the view that the *Mbh* was originally an oral epic which was later written down. Rather, he argues that, orality in the text is 'a literary trope that should be understood against a background of ... writing'. Drawing on Narayana Rao's work on 'oral literacy', Hiltebeitel attributes the composition of the *Mbh* to literate scholars 'proud of their ... ability to possess a written text of what they perform orally'. See Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, pp. 4, 21-23. Cf. Ch.1, Section II.

between them is connected with what they tell us about their transmission. But first, the most obvious dissimilarities between the two works. Rāma, the hero of the VR, is the perfect man, the ideal son, the ideal brother and the ideal ruler. Like him, Sītā, Laksmaṇa, Bharata and Hanumān are seen as the perfect examples of their social roles. The VR does not view the war between Rāvaṇa and Rāma with ambiguity — Rāma fights his demoniac opponent without qualms and achieves a clear-cut victory. What is more, the war takes place very far from the land of Rāma’s ancestors — Lāṅkā falls, but no one from Ayodhyā dies for it. Rāma and Ayodhyā remain unsullied. Rāma returns to his kingdom to rule it with great righteousness. Dharma holds sway during his reign, as it had in the Kṛtayuga. And, in the VR, Rāma’s Āsvamedha is a celebration of his might, majesty, goodness and godhood.

The Mbh, on the other hand, tells of a fratricidal war, and views it with persistent reservation. The Pāṇḍavas have grave hesitations before deciding to fight. They win through subterfuges — Yudhishthira, renowned for his truthfulness, tells a lie; Bhīma, celebrated for his strength, wins in single combat only by hitting his enemy below the belt. The ‘good’ triumph, but they have been tainted; and their victory comes at the cost of the destruction of their kin. The Mbh is not a work that presents characters who can be unreservedly regarded as models for human behaviour; nor does the text present unambiguous truths. The moral ambiguities of the Mbh may be understood in the context of the text’s statement that the Kuruksetra war marked the juncture of the third and fourth yugas. The Mbh makes a connection between the events of the war and the decline in

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8 Mbh 1.2.9, for instance.
that characterizes the Kali age. When Bhīma strikes Duryodhana below the belt, clearly violating the code of a mace-fight, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva tells an incensed Balaraṁa:

‘Know that the Kaliyuga has arrived and the promise of the Pāṇḍava [has been fulfilled]. Let the Pāṇḍava be considered to have made good his hostility and his promise.’

The Pāṇḍavas win the Mahābhārata war because Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is on their side, and we are told ‘yataḥ Kṛṣṇas tato jayah’, ‘where Kṛṣṇa is there is victory’. Kṛṣṇa ensures the Pāṇḍavas’ victory via trickery in battle. Indeed, he instigates and condones foul play. For instance, it is Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva who convinces Yudhiṣṭhira to utter the lie that leads to the killing of Droṇa. The *Mbh* tells us that the supreme deity Nārāyaṇa is white in the Kṛtayuga, red in the Tretāyuga, yellow in the Dvāparayuga and black in the Kali age, and also that Nārāyaṇa incarnates himself as Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. A ‘devious’ black god seems suited to the start of the Kaliyuga, the dark age in which the distinction between dharma and adharma is at its weakest. In the corrupt fourth yuga, the victory of the ‘good’ cannot but be incomplete. The aftermath of the Mahābhārata war is dominated by a sense of horror, which especially torments Yudhiṣṭhira. He inherits a kingdom echoing with the wails of women grieving the loss of husbands, sons and brothers.

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9 *Mbh* IX.59.21.
10 See, for example, *Mbh* IX.61.30.
12 *Mbh* I.61.90, for instance.
13 James L. Fitzgerald contrasts the *Mbh*’s Yudhiṣṭhira with Aśoka Maurya. He draws attention to Aśoka’s famous Major Rock Edict XIII, which speaks of the ruler’s remorse over his bloody conquest of Kaliṅga.
Asvamedha is not ‘a cheerful postwar celebration’. Indeed, ‘[t]he mood of the Asvamedhika Parvan is grim, not exultant’.14

The difference between the VR and the Mbh is evident from the major contexts of their performance. Both are presented in the intervals of sacrifices – the Rāmāyana during Rāma’s Asvamedha, the Mahābhārata during King Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra and rṣi Saunaka’s twelve-year sattra. Rāma’s Asvamedha was discussed in some detail in the last chapter. Here one need only mention some of the main points made there to highlight the contrast with the sacrificial sessions during which the Mahābhārata is narrated.

Rāma’s Horse Sacrifice has been visualized as a gigantic melā involving the participation of an enormous number and range of people. The images that linger are of the wanderings of the sacrificial horse, Sītā’s descent into the earth, and an extended period of festivities as well as the transmission of ‘serious’ messages.

and notes that the edict not only fails to renounce violence, it actually threatens its use. Fitzgerald writes that

[a] fundamental problem with Aśoka’s rule (from the point of view of brahmins unhappy with it …) must have been his apparently blithe embrace of, propagandizing for, and enforcement of a relatively thoroughgoing observance of ahimsā (including the proscription of brahmin animal sacrifices) while neither relinquishing nor justifying his own use of judicial and military violence.

Fitzgerald argues that the brahmaṇa authors of the Mbh implicitly accuse Aśoka of ‘having bought his aśokatva (his “being free of grief”) cheaply, in the currency of … nāstika “Dharma”, without … any genuine … penance’. They also created the figure of Yudhiṣṭhira, who, unlike Aśoka, confronts the consequences of war. And the deeply depressed Yudhiṣṭhira performs a Horse Sacrifice as expiation for the evil he has accumulated from killing. See Fitzgerald, The Mahābhārata, Vol. 7, pp. 118, 136-39; quotes from p. 138 and p. 137.

14 Jamison, Sacrificed Wife/ Sacrificer’s Wife, p. 76.
The *Mahābhārata*, on the other hand, is first told in the intervals of a sacrifice aimed at destroying the world’s snakes. Unlike Rāma’s Horse Sacrifice, the Snake Sacrifice is a grim spectacle. And in the descriptions of Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra, one cannot discern the presence of joyous country and city folk, merchants and shopkeepers, actors and dancers, women and children. Nor can one hear the sounds of gossip, banter and merriment. The sūta Ugraśravas\(^{15}\) hears *Mahābhārata* stories at Janamejaya’s sacrifice, where they are recounted by Vyāsa’s *brahmaṇa* pupil Vaisampāyana\(^{16}\) amidst ksatriyas and brāhmaṇas, and the slaughter of snakes.\(^{17}\) Ugraśravas then makes his way, via several *tīrthas* and *āyatanas*, to the Naimiṣa forest where some brāhmaṇa *ṛsis* are seated at the twelve-year *sattra* of Saunaka. These sages constitute the audience of the tales narrated by the sūta. There is an austerity about this scene, which presents a contrast to the sights and sounds of Rāma’s Aśvamedha. But before we begin a detailed discussion of the two sacrifices during which the *Mahābhārata* is said to have been recounted within the *Mbh*, some preliminary remarks about the *sattra* would be in order.

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\(^{16}\) According to Bruce M. Sullivan, the name Vaisampāyana suggests *ksatriya* or *sūta* status. It is derived from *visampā* (‘protector of people’/king/ruler) and would mean ‘king’s descendant’. See Sullivan, *Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata*, p. 10 n. 35.

\(^{17}\) In its final chapter, the *Mbh* locates Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra in Taksasila – in XVIII.5.29, that is where Janamejaya returns from to Hāstinapura after the rite. However, the *Ādi parvan* does not mention this location.
The term *sattra* is usually translated as a ‘sitting’ or a seated sacrificial ‘session’. It is not found in the *Rg Veda*. Texts of the Later Vedic corpus suggest that the performance of *sattras* was believed to secure and legitimize the sacrificers’ control over produce and productive resources – food, domesticated and wild animals, for instance – and, more generally, ensure the *yajamānas’* *samāddhi* (‘prosperity’). While at least some *sattras* that appear in Later Vedic texts have, on occasion, been understood as communal sacrifices, it is generally held that such sessions were ‘exclusive affairs’. *Sattras* were *soma* sacrifices which lasted for more than twelve days. There was a subclass of *sattras*, known as *sāmvatsarikas*, which would go on for a year or more, and long sessions reduced the possibilities of the active participation (as *yajamānas*) of common people. Those who performed a *sattra* were to be of equal status, and the *Kātyāyana Śrūta Sūtra* and Jaimini specify that all had to be *brahmans*. There were to be not less than

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18 Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 94.
22 Ibid.; Minkowsky, ‘Janamejaya’s *sattra* and ritual structure’, p. 413.

In this respect, Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra is anomalous, since it clearly has a non-*brahmaṇa* *yajamāna* – the *kṣatriya* ruler Janamejaya.

Note that Jaimini also states that *brahmaṇas* of the Bhrigu, Sunaka and Vasiṣṭha *gotras* are not entitled to perform *sattras*. (See Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. 2, Part 1, pp. 153, 482.) If this prescription had
seventeen and not more than twenty-four sacrificers,\textsuperscript{25} and each one was a \textit{yajamāna} as well as a \textit{ravg} (priest).\textsuperscript{26} All shared the benefits of the \textit{sattr} equally and, as an extension of these features, there was no provision for giving and receiving \textit{dakṣīṇā} (the ‘sacrificial gift’).\textsuperscript{27} 

P.V. Kane describes the Gavām-ayana (‘way of the cows’) as the ‘model’ of all \textit{sattr} of a year or more,\textsuperscript{28} and some of the observations made about this sacrifice illumine the nature of Śaunaka’s twelve-year session. Kane contrasts the ‘weary days and months’ of ‘solemn’ sacrifice with the rites performed on the penultimate day -- the Mahāvrata -- which was ‘welded on to’ the \textit{sattr} ‘as a relaxation’.\textsuperscript{29} Those performing a \textit{sattr} had to observe certain rules while the session was going on. The \textit{sattr} had to remain in the sacrificial enclosure.\textsuperscript{30} They had to abstain from sexual intercourse, jesting with women, falsehood and anger. They could not run, dive into deep water, climb trees or enter a boat


\textsuperscript{26} Even though in a \textit{sattr} all were \textit{yajamānas} \textit{ravg}s, one of them became the \textit{grhapatī}, the leader of the group. See Kane, \textit{History of Dharmaśāstra}, Vol. 2, Part 2, pp. 1241-42.

\textsuperscript{27} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{28} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{29} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{27} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 85.


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\textsuperscript{28} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{29} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{30} Minkowsky, ‘Janamejaya’s \textit{sattr} and ritual structure’, p. 417.
or chariot. They had to eschew singing, dancing and instrumental music. There were also rules to be followed about what food could or could not be consumed.\textsuperscript{31}

Whatever the duration of a \textit{sattrra}, the daily activity at the session involved the pressing of \textit{soma} before dawn, at noon and at sunset. C.Z. Minkowsky draws attention to ‘intervals’ between the ritual action at \textit{sattras}. For example, when the midday \textit{soma} pressing was finished, the period till the beginning of the evening \textit{soma} ritual could be used for other activities. However, the activities that were considered permissible were limited, and we have noted that the \textit{sattrins} were expected to spend their time in the sacrificial enclosure while the \textit{sattrra} was going on. Minkowsky writes that \textit{karmāntaras}, ‘breaks in the action’, could have been a time to recount tales.\textsuperscript{32} He argues that the \textit{sattrra} is an appropriate setting for telling the \textit{Mahābhārata}, ‘because a [long] \textit{sattrra}, with its regular actions and regular breaks between actions, would provide a believable context for such a long story.’\textsuperscript{33}

That said, there appears to have been a gravity about the atmosphere of \textit{sattras}, and Śaunaka’s twelve-year session is no exception. \textit{Sattras} do not seem to have involved the feasting, entertainments and festivities that continued throughout Rāma’s Aśvamedha. That occurred only on the ‘wild Mahāvrata day’,\textsuperscript{34} and even this does not feature in descriptions of Śaunaka’s \textit{sattrra}. The events of the Mahāvrata day have been called

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{32} Minkowsky, ‘Janamejaya’s \textit{sattrra} and ritual structure’, pp. 416-17.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 413.
\textsuperscript{34} Jamison, \textit{Sacrificed Wife/ Sacrificer's Wife}, p. 145.
\end{footnotesize}
‘bacchanal[ian]’. They included mock-fighting, lewd and insulting dialogue, ritual copulation, chanting, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments. The Mahāvrata day involved the participation of people other than the yajamānas. For instance, the sacrificers’ wives formed a ‘band’ and played musical instruments, and

...a group of eight female slaves (dāsi) carrying water jars circle the mārjāliya ... singing, making ritual exclamations, slapping their thighs and stamping their feet. This is clearly a low-budget version of the four hundred female attendants of the queens in the Aśvamedha. Though their songs are not bawdy (at least superficially) – rather a joyous celebration of cows, bees, soma, and other good things – they are punctuated with exotic cries (e.g. hillu hillu), apostrophes (hai mahā 3), and announcements (idam madhu ‘here is honey’). The net effect must have been rather like that of the great crowd of women at the Aśvamedha: to create a swirling, resounding, disorienting spectacle ....

Kumkum Roy points out that brahmanical texts (even some early ones which are classified as ‘later Vedic’) are ambivalent about sattras, and espouse alternatives to them. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa (henceforth SB) XII.1.3.23, for instance, tells us that ‘nowadays’ truth, effort, austerity, faith, yajña and offerings can produce the results that the performance of a sattra yielded in times past. Indeed, if a sattra were undertaken ‘nowadays’, the sacrificers ‘would crumble away even as a jar of unbaked clay would

35 Ibid., pp. 98, 145.
37 Jamison, Sacrificed Wife/ Sacrifier’s Wife, p. 98.
38 Roy, The Emergence of Monarchy, p. 86.
crumble away if water were poured into it.\textsuperscript{39} And \textit{SB} XII.4.1.1 equates the performance of the \textit{agnihotra} or daily fire sacrifice with that of a long \textit{sattra}. Roy argues that such statements suggest a `changing situation' -- established ritual practices were not openly challenged and continued to be of \textit{symbolic} importance, but their \textit{performance} was discouraged. She asks whether the performance of \textit{sattras} might have been marginalized because their \textit{yajamanas} could come from non-priestly categories. And, `the ritual, by suggesting an inherent equality of status, would have run counter to the [brahmanical] tendency to legitimize social differences.'\textsuperscript{40}

The \textit{sattra} was, nevertheless, a hallowed Vedic institution, and it is not altogether surprising that it features in the very first chapter of the \textit{Mbh}, which text, it should be remembered, describes itself as the fifth \textit{Veda}. The first verses of the \textit{Mbh} tell us of \Ugrašravas' arrival at Śaunaka's twelve-year \textit{sattra} in the Naimiṣa forest. Scholars like J.A.B. van Buitenen have discerned a Vedic precedent for this session\textsuperscript{41} -- Prajāpati's twelve-year \textit{sattra} in the Naimiṣa forest in the \textit{Pañcavimsa Brāhmaṇa} (henceforth \textit{PB}).\textsuperscript{42} That session was to have four three-year segments, but we are told that it was discontinued after the third of its four parts. At the end of nine years, the Naimiṣīyas declared: `Whoever of our descendants completes this rite will thrive'.\textsuperscript{43} \textit{PB} XXV.6 ends with the statement: `Therefore, the \textit{brahmaṇa}s perform this \textit{sattra}, wishing to finish it.'\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{39} Citations are from the edition edited by A. Weber. I have drawn on the translation by Julius Eggeling.
\textsuperscript{40} Roy, \textit{The Emergence of Monarchy}, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{41} van Buitenen, \textit{The Mahābhārata}, Vol. 1, p.2.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{PB} XXV.6. I have used W. Caland's translation.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{PB} XXV.6.5. See also Minkowsky, `Janamejaya's \textit{sattra} and ritual structure', p. 416.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{PB} XXV.6.5.
Not unexpectedly, it is *brāhmaṇas* who are to complete the god Prajāpati's session, for they are, after all, gods who walk the earth.\textsuperscript{45}

**III**

As already noted, the *Mbh* opens with Ugrāravas' arrival at the twelve-year sacrificial session of *kulapati*\textsuperscript{46} Śaunaka\textsuperscript{47} and a group of *brāhmaṇa rṣis*. Ugrāravas is described as Lomaharṣana's son, a *sūta* and *paurāṇika*.\textsuperscript{48} We find that the *tapasvins* (ascetics) of the Naimiṣā forest gather around him to hear wonderful tales. Ugrāravas bows properly to them and folds his hands. The sages invite him to sit down, which he does after them.\textsuperscript{49} One of the *rṣis* now asks the *sūta* where he has come from. Ugrāravas answers that he attended Janamejaya's Snake Sacrifice, where he heard Vaiśampāyana narrate *Mahābhārata* tales that had first been proclaimed by Vyāsa.\textsuperscript{50} He then journeyed to many...

\textsuperscript{45} For a discussion of *brāhmaṇas* as gods on earth, see Chakrabarti, *Religious Process*, pp. 122-32.

\textsuperscript{46} Here, *kulapati* denotes the leader of the group.

\textsuperscript{47} This is not the first time that we encounter Śaunaka in Sanskrit literature. A Śaunaka appears as a teacher in the *Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*. The name Śaunaka may also represent a Vedic school, rather than a particular person. Indeed, the *Atharvaveda* has come down to us in two schools—the Paippalāda and Śaunaka. See A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol. 2, Delhi, 1995, p. 396; and Frits Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights*, New Delhi, 2008, p. 136.

\textsuperscript{48} The terms *sūta* and *paurāṇika* are discussed in Ch. 5 of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{49} *Mbh* I.1.3-5. Note the etiquette followed.

\textsuperscript{50} *Mbh* I.1.8-10.
holy sites, including Samantapāṇcaka, where the Mahābhārata war was fought. From there, he has travelled to see the Naimiṣa sages, for he regards them as brahman itself.

Noting that the rṣis have completed various rituals of their sattra and are seated at ease, Ugrasravas asks them what they would like him to tell them about. They ask for the purāṇa proclaimed by Vyāsa, which was revered by the gods and brāhmaṇa rṣis when they heard it. The Naimiṣa sages elaborate that they wish to hear Vyāsa’s saṃhitā of the itihāsa of Bhārata, that excellent ākhyāna which Vaiśampāyana recited at his guru’s command at Janamejaya’s sacrifice, which is adorned by the meaning of the Veda (vedārthair bhūṣita), supported by various śāstras (nānāśāstropabṛṃhita), dharmic, holy and the dispeller of all danger of sin.

Note that the ascetics of the Naimiṣa forest ask to hear a narrative that had the approval of the gods and brāhmaṇa rṣis. It is described as Vyāsa’s saṃhitā, a purāṇa, an itihāsa and ākhyāna. The term saṃhitā is used deliberately. It commonly denotes a compilation of Vedic hymns, and the Naimiṣa rṣis’ request suggests a continuity between the four Veda saṃhitās and Vyāsa’s text. The terms purāṇa, itihāsa and ākhyāna are found in the Vedic corpus. In Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad II.4.10, for instance, itihāsa and purāṇa are included with the four Vedas and the Upaniṣads in a list of different kinds of knowledge. Might this imply that they were distinct from the four Vedas and

51 Minkowsky suggests that Ugrasravas has not interrupted the rite, but rather has arrived during an interval in it. See Minkowsky, ‘Janamejaya’s sattra and ritual structure’, p. 405.
52 For the rṣis’ request, see Mbh I.1.15-19.
54 I have used the bilingual edition of the principal Upaniṣads prepared by S. Radhakrishnan.
Upanisads? They are, nevertheless, linked with the Vedas. For example, in Chāndogya Upaniṣad VII.1.2, itiḥāṣa-puṟāṇa is called the fifth Veda. Nārada tells Sanatkumāra that he knows the Rgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda and the Atharvāna as the fourth, and the itiḥāṣa-puṟāṇa as the fifth. And, according to Yāṣka's Nirukta, the aitiḥāṣikas were 'scholars who tried to explain the contents of the Vedic hymns and the nature of the Vedic deities by referring to itiḥāṣa or traditional accounts of events that were supposed to have happened sometime in the past.'

The word puṟāṇa means 'old' and, in Later Vedic literature, it often occurs with itiḥāṣa, literally, 'thus (iti), indeed (ha), it was (āsa). It seems that both itiḥāṣa and puṟāṇa codified narratives of the past. The term ākhyāṇa has been translated as 'a tale, story, legend', 'telling, communication', 'the communication of a previous event'. Ākhyāṇas were cycles of stories that often commemorated heroes. They were recounted on ritual occasions – at the Horse Sacrifice, for instance. And one series of narratives recited at the Āśvamedha during the period when the sacrificial horse was let loose to wander is referred to as the pāriplava-ākhyāṇa, 'revolving' ākhyāṇa, so called because it was repeated every ten days. The exact relationship of ākhyāṇa with itiḥāṣa and puṟāṇa is unclear. But the former is linked with the latter two categories of text – for example,

56 Lipner, Hindus, pp. 146-47, 125; Chakrabarti, Religious Process, p. 44.
57 Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 129.
60 Ibid., p. 77.
when we are told that the lore recounted during the pariplava cycle included itihäsa and puräna, which were to be recited on the eighth and ninth days of every ten-day session.\textsuperscript{61} The Naimiśa rṣis thus use terms loaded with Vedic meanings, but they are clearly asking Ugrāravas for a narrative that is, nevertheless, distinguished from the Vedic corpus proper. Can one discern an attempt to rein in and brahmanize diverse traditions? From the discussion below, it will be evident that Ugrāravas’ text does, in fact, evolve in accordance with the demands of the Naimiśa rṣis, with their collaboration.\textsuperscript{62}

Ugrāravas responds by saying that he will proclaim Vyāsa’s ‘entire thought’ (matam kṛtsnam); and that ‘poets (kavyāḥ) have told it before, others tell it now, and others will tell this itihäsa in the future’. He also declares that it is a great storehouse of knowledge (mahajñānānam), which is held (dhāryate) by dvijas.\textsuperscript{63} Note that Ugrāravas does not volunteer to repeat Vaiśampāyana’s narrative verbatim; and that while a line of transmission is delineated, it is evident that we are dealing with a less fixed work than the VR. Note also that Ugrāravas states that the text he will relate belongs to dvijas (brāhmanas). Might this imply that paurāṇika sūtas like Ugrāravas were, in fact, brāhmaṇas?\textsuperscript{64} This seems possible, given the nature of the sattra, which was, after all, basically a brāhmaṇa affair. The sūla who recounted ancient lore at such events seems,

\textsuperscript{61} See, for instance, SB XIII.4.3.12-13.

\textsuperscript{62} Or alternatively, can one discern an attempt to open up the brahmanical tradition to diverse narratives? Brahmanization would have been the next step. And one may ask why new narratives needed to be inducted, and transformed.

\textsuperscript{63} Mbh 1.1.23-25.

\textsuperscript{64} For more on this, see Ch. 5. See also Mbh 1.1.50, where we are told that some brāhmaṇas learn the Bhārata beginning with Manu, others learn it from the tale of Āśīka, and still others from the story of Uparicara.
however, to have had a lower status than the *sattra’s yajamānas*. This is suggested by the protocol followed by Ugrārāvas and the sacrificers at the time of the bard’s arrival – the *sūta* displays the deference expected of a guest who is socially inferior to his hosts.

Ugrārāvas begins his storytelling with a cosmology. He speaks of the creation of the world out of primeval darkness, and of its periodic destruction. He touches on the origin of the lineages of the Kurus and the Yadus, of Bharata, Yayāti and Ikṣvāku. And we are told that this, and indeed, everything has been incorporated in the *Mbh (iha sarvamanukṛāntam)*. Ugrārāvas summarizes his brief account with the statement that the wheel of existence turns, without beginning and without end, causing creation and destruction, beginningless and endless. The résumé of the events that led inexorably up to the slaughter of the Mahābhārata war is followed by the insight that whatever one might do, time (*kāla*) is always ‘cooking’ us. What one has here is a particular understanding of time and history. In the perspective of the *Mbh*, time may ultimately be cyclical, but the narrative in the text essentially moves forward, with time ‘cooking’/‘maturing’ all its characters, pushing the world relentlessly towards a blood-bath that

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65 *Mbh* I.1.48.
66 *Mbh* I.1.38.
67 *Mbh* I.1.67-190.

This expression recurs almost at the very end of the *Mbh* – when the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī, having survived the war, witnessed the deaths of their sons, ruled a realm and abandoned it, begin their long walk up to heaven.

68 The root *pac* may be translated as ‘to cook’ or ‘to ripen, mature, bring to ... completion’. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 575.
ushers in a new era – the corrupt Kaliyuga. This seems a rather bleak view of time and history. But the important point is that the *Mbh* reveals an attempt to capture and order the past or, to put it another way, a ‘historical consciousness’ – even if this is ‘embedded’ in the work and needs to be ‘prised out’.70

The first *adhyāya* (chapter) of the first book of the *Mbh* has a *phalasruti* towards its end. Ugraśravas declares, for instance, that those who learn even a quarter couplet of the *Bhārata* and have faith in it, will be purified of their sins; one who has this *Veda* of Kṛṣṇa recited will be cleansed even of the crime of abortion; one who listens to its first chapter shall obtain a long life, fame and an entrance into heaven. However formulaic, the *phalasruti* suggests a belief in the innate power of the ‘fifth *Veda*’ to produce specific beneficial results – the ancient audience of a heroic tale could hardly be expected to believe that hearing or learning or reciting the work would free them of all sins and transport them to heaven. It also provides some relief from the vision of the verses that precede it. But not for long. The opening chapter of the *Mbh* ends with a rather unsettling verse:

‘Austerities are not dregs; study is not dregs, nor are the natural rules of the *Veda* or [even] the forceful plundering of riches – but they all become dregs when they are overpowered by reality.’72

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69 Note that, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva reveals himself as kāla, who has embarked on the course of annihilation. See *Bhagavadgītā* 11.32.

70 Thapar, ‘Society and historical consciousness’, pp. 123-54.

71 *Mbh* 1.1.205. Kṛṣṇa is the island-born Kṛṣṇa – Vyāsa, the seer of the ‘fifth Veda’, the *Mahābhārata*.

The next adhyāya\(^73\) contains a list of the titles of the one hundred Minor Books of the \textit{Mbh}, as well as a summary of its eighteen Major Books. One may note that Ugrāravas is the main speaker here, and he responds to queries put to him by the Naimiṣa ṛṣīs. For instance, the ascetics ask him about Samantapāṇi, and he answers their question, telling them that it was the place where Bhārgava Rāma made five lakes with the blood of the ksatriyas he had slaughtered, as well as the site where the armies of the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas were annihilated by time (kāla), which made the Kauravas its tool.\(^74\) It is evident that Ugrāravas’ text evolves in compliance with the demands of his audience.

Unlike Vālmiki’s \textit{Rāmāyana} and, indeed, the four \textit{Vedas}, Vyāsa’s ‘fifth \textit{Veda}’ is not transmitted intact, syllable by syllable, word for word.

Among other narratives, the third adhyāya\(^75\) has Ugrāravas telling the Naimiṣa seers about the Bhārgava brāhmaṇa Uttanka informing Janamejaya that the snake Taksaka had killed his father, Parikṣit. Uttanka exhorts the king to burn that snake at a Snake Sacrifice in order to avenge the death of his father – and also, incidentally, to do Uttanka the favour of avenging him for having been robbed by Taksaka.\(^76\) The Uttanka-Janamejaya encounter precipitates the \textit{telling} of Vyāsa’s ‘entire thought’ by Vaiśampāyana at

\(^{73}\) This is the second Minor Book of the \textit{Mbh}.

\(^{74}\) \textit{Mbh} 1.2.1-12 and 1.2.25.

Here, again, we can discern a particular view of time. \textit{Kāla} moves unceasingly, pitilessly, using whatever means it can in its march towards Kaliyuga.

Also note that, in the \textit{Bhagavadgītā}, after identifying himself as \textit{kāla}, Krṣṇa Vāsudeva tells Arjuna: ‘I have already killed them. Be merely my tool..... Slay Drona, Bhīṣma, Jayadratha, Karṇa and the other fine warriors.’ See \textit{Bhagavadgītā} 11.33-34.

\(^{75}\) This is the third Minor Book of the \textit{Mbh}, \textit{Pausya}.

\(^{76}\) \textit{Mbh} 1.3.190-192.
Janamejaya's Sarpasattra. But the *Mbh* next returns to Ugrasravas' arrival at Saunaka's sattra.

In the fourth *adhyāya*, the outer frame of the text (with which the first *adhyāya* began) seems to start all over again. But there are, in fact, important differences. Now, when Ugrasravas asks the Naimisa *rṣis* what they wish to hear, he is told to wait for Saunaka who, it appears, is still performing some rituals. The ascetics also inform the sūta that Saunaka already knows the tales of gods, asuras, men, snakes and gandharvas—stories that doubtless form part of Ugrasravas' repertoire. When Saunaka has finished his rituals, and taken his place among the other *rṣis* who have already seated themselves, he

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For Uttanka as a Bhārgava, see, for instance, *Mbh* XIV.57.37.

78 This is the beginning of the fourth Minor Book, *Puloman*, which ends with the twelfth *adhyāya*.

79 The inner frame is that of Janamejaya's Sarpasattra where the *Mahābhārata* was first recounted by Vaiśampāyana. It is Vaiśampāyana's rendering that is mostly regarded as Ugrasravas' source, and the Ugrasravas narrative is termed the outer frame. There are other frames too, which enclose parts of the *Mbh*, but here we are only concerned with the 'outer' and 'inner' ones delineated above.


81 *Mbh* I.4.4.

82 *Mbh* I.4.9-11. Hilttebeitel notes that we are not told whether Ugrasravas is given a seat or left standing. See Hilttebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 103. This episode, again, suggests that the paurāṇika sūta
addresses Ugraśravas. In the fifth *adhyāya*, Saunaka asks the *sūta* whether he too, like his father Lomaharsana, had learnt the complete *purāṇa* (*purāṇamahākīlam*), for that contains divine tales and the original genealogies (*ādivamśāh*) of the wise. 83 Saunaka reveals that the Naimisa sages 84 had heard those from Lomaharsana long ago, 85 and then directs Ugraśravas to first recount the Bhārgava genealogy from among the tales he knows. The *sūta* assures Saunaka that he has completely learned (*adhitam ... samyak*) what his father learned, which had been completely learned and recounted long ago by such *brāhmaṇas* as Vaisampāyana. Ugraśravas then begins his rendering of the Bhārgava genealogy as it is found in the *purāṇa*. This, we now discover, is Saunaka’s own genealogy. 86 And it is something Saunaka has heard before, just as some *brāhmaṇa* sages mentioned in the first *adhyāya* had heard the *purāṇa* proclaimed by Vyāsa.

The term we have translated as ‘genealogy’ is *vamśa*, a word that means ‘the bamboo cane or any cane’, ‘joint’, ‘the line of a pedigree or genealogy (from its resemblance to the succession of joints in a bamboo), lineage’. 87 *Vamśa* can refer to any list of succession – of teachers, sages, ruling clans, descent groups or dynasties. It is well known that, while genealogies present themselves as records of the past, their preservation, or even invention, can derive from the needs of the present. They become

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83 *Mbh* 1.5.1-2.
84 Saunaka uses the expression *asmābhīḥ śrutāḥ* (‘heard by us’). See *Mbh* 1.5.2.
85 This, and even more the fact that Saunaka addresses Ugraśravas as *tāta* (‘my boy’) in *Mbh* 1.5.1, suggest that the *sūta* is younger than the Naimisa *rṣi*; that could have been a reason for the protocol followed in the interactions between the bard and the sacrificers.
86 *Mbh* 1.5.3-6.
significant at times that witness the entry of new social groups or the ascendance of a
former underdog, or in periods of competition when existing authority feels threatened. The stories that Śaunaka asks Ugraśravas to narrate are about an unconventional line of brāhmaṇas – the Bhārgavas, who are an important presence in the inner and outer frames of the Mbh.

Bṛgū, the progenitor of the Bṛugus/Bhārgavas, is not included in the list of the seven primeval rsis, seers to whom the Veda is said to have been revealed. The Bṛgus are bracketed with the Aṅgirasas in Vedic literature, the compound Bṛgu-aṅgirasa also comes into use. The compilation of the Atharvaveda is attributed to the Bṛgu-aṅgirasa. The Atharvaveda is often separated from the other three Vedas, and not accorded an authority equal to the latter, perhaps because of the distinctiveness of its contents. It is a text inextricably linked with yātu, sorcery; and the Bṛgus, by extension, a group associated with black magic.

In the Mbh, the Bhārgavas act in ways that do not conform to the norms of conduct for brāhmaṇas set forth in the literature on dharma, including the Mbh itself. They are

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87 Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 910.
88 Thapar, ‘Genealogical patterns as perceptions of the past’, pp. 709-10, 712.
89 Ibid., p. 742.
90 Ibid.
91 The Bṛgu-aṅgirasa were sometimes excluded from the ‘three Vedas’, into which they seem to have been assimilated when the ‘four Vedas’ were established. See Staal, Discovering the Vedas, p. 136.
92 See, for instance, Thapar, ‘Genealogical patterns as perceptions of the past’, p. 742; Lipner, Hindus, p. 31.
93 See especially Goldman, Gods, Priests, and Warriors.
associated with violence – they are sometimes hostile to *kṣatriyas*, and sometimes even to the gods. Bhārgava Rāma, for instance, is said to have destroyed the *kṣatriyas* of the earth over and over again. The Bhārgavas are military *brāhmānas*, peerless warriors who trespass on the *kṣatriyas*’ field of expertise. They seem to be a cause and product of *varṇasaṃkara*, confusion of *varṇas*, for we find Bhārgava men taking *kṣatriya* wives. Texts such as the *Manusmrīti* tell us that a son begotten by a *brāhmaṇa* on a wife of the next lower *varṇa* is a member of his father’s *varṇa*, but a somewhat despised one.  

According to this dictum, several Bhārgavas, including Rāma, would be classified as degraded *brāhmaṇas*. What is more, Bhārgava Śukra’s daughter Devayāṇī marries the *kṣatriya* king Yayāti. Sukra himself serves as the priest of the demonic *asuras*, masters of *māyā*. The Bhārgavas too are associated with magic and sorcery. And it is not entirely surprising that the leading priest at Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra is a Bhārgava born in Cyavana’s lineage – Candrabhārgava, ‘Wrathful Bhārgava’, for the Snake Sacrifice appears to be a rite of black magic designed to annihilate an enemy. It is in the intervals of this *sattrā* presided over by a Bhārgava that the *Mahābhārata* is first recounted. One

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94 *Manusmrīti* X.6.  
Vyāsa too is born of a *brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya* union. However, the Paurava king Uparicara’s/ Vasu’s daughter Satyavati has a *liaison* with the *brāhmaṇa* sage Parāśara, and Vyāsa is their *illegitimate* child. See Ch. 4 of this dissertation.  
95 This is a *pratiloma* marriage.  
Note also that Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva has Bhārgava blood: Yayāti begets two sons on Devayāṇī – Yadu and Turvasu, and Kṛṣṇa is descended from Yadu. Given the Bhārgavas’ association with violence, especially violence vis-à-vis *kṣatriyas*, it is not entirely surprising that Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva encourages the quarrels that lead to a war which results in the near-total annihilation of *kṣatriyas*. See, for instance, *Mbh* 1.1.92-94.  
96 For the *asura-māyā* association, see, for example, Roy, *The Emergence of Monarchy*, p. 303.  
97 Thapar, ‘Genealogical patterns as perceptions of the past’, p. 742.  
98 *Mbh* 1.48.5.  
99 Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*, p. 115.
can ask whether he might have had something to do with the way the story is told in this setting of sacrificial destruction.

Ugrasravas' narrative of the Bhrgus includes the story of Śaunaka's ancestor Ruru who sacrificed half his life to revive his bride, who had died of snakebite, and Ruru's consequent hatred of snakes. We gather that, whenever he saw a snake, a fury possessed Ruru, and he clubbed the animal to death. The fourth Minor Book ends with Ruru being discouraged from killing living creatures. He is told that ahimsā and kṣamā (forbearance) are the dharma of a brāhmaṇa. Wielding the staff and violence (ugratvam) do not become brāhmaṇas – they are associated with kṣatriyas. And it was a kṣatriya – Janamejaya -- who terrorized and slaughtered snakes by holding a Sarpasattra. A brāhmaṇa – Āstīka – rescued the frightened snakes. The fifth Minor Book – The Book of Āstīka – discusses Janamejaya's Snake Sacrifice in some detail, and that sattrā, at which Vaisampāyana recounted Mahābhārata tales that were heard by Ugrasravas, is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

However, here one may note that Āstīka, too, has a Bhārgava connection – he learns the Vedas and their branches from a Bhārgava. The conspicuous presence of the Bhārgava

100 Mbh I.5.7-8 provide a genealogy: Bhrgu > Cyavana > Pramati > Ruru > Šunaka. Šaunaka's father is not named. See also Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, p. 113 n. 68.
101 Mbh I.11.11-17, I.12.
102 Mbh I.44.18.

Āstīka's name can perhaps be derived from Āstīka ('Vedic' / "those who say "it is" "). As noted earlier, the Mbh associates itself repeatedly with the Vedas, and is critical of nāstikas/nāstikyam. Āstīka is suitably Vedic, and he stops a sattrā that has a Vedic precedent but must have, nevertheless, been 'an abomination'. See Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, pp. 162-63; van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata,
brahmāṇas in the narratives about the telling of the Mahābhārata suggests that they are being presented as playing a significant role in shaping the text. Can one argue that, as no character in the central story of the ṛṣi is unmixed, as its values are ambiguous, the tales of a group of brahmāṇas associated with the codification and transmission of the work too highlight a major theme of the text – dharmasūkṣmatā, the subtle nature of dharma that mixes good and bad, right and wrong in every individual and every collective entity?

It is not entirely surprising that the Bhārgavas are linked with the Veda of Kṛṣṇa, the dark one, born out of wedlock of an inter-varṇa union. Is it not appropriate that unconventional brahmāṇas be associated with the making of the Veda of Kaliyuga, the age in which conventional dharma is flouted, when, in fact, the distinction between dharma and adharma is blurred? And the Bhārgava genealogy seems to suggest the ascendance of that set of brahmāṇas (or whoever they represent), and their power over a text about changing times – about the end of a yuga and the beginning of a new one.

Now for a final comment on, and an example from, Ugrāravas’ performance at Śaunaka’s sattra. Much of the interaction between the paurāṇika sūta and Bhārgava Śaunaka occurs till the fifty-third adhyāya of the Ādi parvan, through The Book of Astika.103 The interaction in The Book of Āstika, for instance – where Śaunaka asks for a story, Ugrāravas provides a résumé, then is prevailed upon to give a fuller narrative, but is also interrupted and queried about certain points -- suggests that the sūta’s text

Vol. 1, p. 4. For a different, but not contradictory, etymology of Āstika, see the end of Section III of this chapter.

103 For other parts of the Mahābhārata where Śaunaka seems to be listening, see Hildebrand, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, p. 95 n. 13.
developed in accordance with the demands of listeners. I shall cite only one instance of the audience’s participation – it is taken from *The Book of Astika*.

Jaratkāru the celibate *brāhmaṇa* ascetic roams the earth, abstaining from food, living off the wind, accumulating *tapas*. One day, he sees his dead ancestors hanging in a cave with their faces down, and they tell him that they have fallen from heaven because Jaratkāru has not produced a son to continue their lineage. Jaratkāru’s unwillingness to marry leads him to suggest a condition that he assumes will prove insuperable. He promises his ancestors that he will marry a virgin with his name if she is offered to him by her relatives. But the snake Vāsuki’s sister happens to be named Jaratkāru. We are told that, long ago, the snakes’ mother Kadrū had cursed her sons to be burnt in the fire at Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra. When Vāsuki heard the curse, he sought a way of saving his kind from extinction. He learnt from the snake Elāpatra that Brahmā had endorsed Kadrū’s curse, for that god felt that there were too many evil snakes; and that Janamejaya would, without doubt, hold a Snake Sacrifice. However, Brahmā had also prophesied that Āstika, the son of the *rṣi* Jaratkāru and a maiden of the same name, would save the snakes from annihilation. Elāpatra suggested that Vāsuki present his sister to the ascetic Jaratkāru at the right time. So, Vāsuki guarded his sister and kept her safe for the seer. Brahmā later repeated some of what Elāpatra had said. Vāsuki instructed several snakes to keep a close watch on Jaratkāru, and to inform him when the seer was ready to take a wife.

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When Ugraśravas has built the story to the point where Vasuki prepares to introduce his sister to the male Jaratkāru as his only possible wife, Śaunaka asks the sūta to tell him the etymology (*niruktam*) of 'Jaratkāru'. Ugraśravas replies:

> ‘Jara, they say, means “destruction” and kāru denotes “horrible”. His body was horrible, and the wise one gradually caused its destruction by severe *tapas*, so it is said. Likewise, O *brāhmaṇa*, Vasuki’s sister is called Jaratkāru.’

On hearing this, Śaunaka bursts out laughing and says, 'It fits (*upapannamiti*)!'

To continue the story, the male Jaratkāru keeps his promise – he marries the female Jaratkāru. He abandons his wife later, but assures her that there is (*asti*) a child in her. By fathering Āstika – so named because his father left his mother saying *asti* – Jaratkāru has provided an heir for his ancestors and a saviour for the snakes.

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105 *Mbh* 1.36.2.

106 *Mbh* 1.36.3-5.

The fact that the *paurāṇika sūta* has some grasp of *nirukta*, one of the six *Vedāṅgas*, seems relevant. The *Vedāṅgas* have traditionally been the preserve of specialist *brāhmaṇas*. Might Ugraśravas’ knowledge of *nirukta*, again, suggest that *paurāṇika sūtas* were *brāhmaṇas*? See Lipner, *Hindus*, p. 80. See also Ch. 5 of this dissertation.
Scholars have identified a Vedic prototype for Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra – a Snake Sacrifice described in PB XXV.15. In contrast to Janamejaya’s session in the Mbh, this Vedic Sarpasattra is a sacrifice by snakes, not of snakes; and Takṣaka (the object of Janamejaya’s ritual in the Mbh) and Janamejaya are included in the list of officiating priests. According to PB XXV.15.4, ‘[t]hrough this (rite), the serpents vanquished death’, by casting off their skins. So, in the PB Sarpasattra, the serpents obtain immortality by themselves. In contrast, in the Mbh, their lives are saved by Āstīka – the son born of the union of a brāhmaṇa and a snake woman, but classified as a brāhmaṇa. A brāhmaṇa’s

107 Mbh I.43.38, I.44.20.


109 The PB’s Janamejaya is a snake, the son of Kutasta, and cannot be identified with Parikṣit’s human son. For Parikṣit’s son Janamejaya in Later Vedic literature, see van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, Vol. 1, p. xxv. SB XIII.5.4.1-3 tell us that Janamejaya Parikṣit with his brothers Ugrasena, Bhīmasena and Śrutasena, performed the Horse Sacrifice.

We gather from Mbh I.3.1-18 that, when Janamejaya and his brothers Śrutasena, Ugrasena and Bhīmasena were attending a long sattra, a dog, a son of the bitch Saramā, came near. The brothers beat the dog, who ran howling back to his mother and told her that they had thrashed him though he had neither looked at nor licked the offerings. Saramā then went to the sacrificial grounds, and told Janamejaya that since her son was beaten without doing wrong, Janamejaya would suffer an unseen danger. Janamejaya searched for a priest who could pacify the evil he had incurred. He finally found Somaśravas. Janamejaya instructed his brothers to do whatever the priest asked them to, and they did so. We are not told what rite Somaśravas performed, but we can ask whether he might have conducted the Horse Sacrifice, the expiatory ritual that Janamejaya and his brothers are said to have held in the SB.

Note also that, Janamejaya invites Āstīka to his Horse Sacrifice at the end of his Sarpasattra, and Āstīka agrees to come. See Mbh I.53.15-16.
intervention is crucial in the later text. *PB* XXV.15.4 also tells us: ‘They who perform it [this sacrifice] vanquish death.’ In the *Mbh*, that is not quite what happens. Janamejaya holds a Sarpasattra to avenge his father’s death. But, just as Parikṣit failed to carry out his ‘ritual’ of protection from snakebite,\(^{110}\) so Janamejaya fails to complete his session. Āstīka stops it. However, the performance of the Snake Sacrifice gives way to telling the story of the Snake Sacrifice. When Āstīka goes back to his snake relatives after stopping the sattra, they offer him a boon. He asks them to grant that anyone who recites his tale never be in danger from snakes.\(^{111}\) So, recounting the story of the Sarpasattra, in fact, becomes a way of doing what Parikṣit and Janamejaya could not do: it guards those who recite it, or listen to it, from death by snakebite.\(^{112}\)

\(^{110}\) Parikṣit had draped the lifeless carcass of a snake around a rṣi’s neck, and the seer’s son cursed the king: Parikṣit would be killed by the snake Takṣaka within seven days. The king was warned about this, and he sought to protect himself from the snake. He had a platform built on a pillar which was well-guarded. He summoned physicians who knew about curative herbs, and all around he posted brāhmaṇas familiar with magic spells. On the seventh day, Takṣaka dispatched several snakes in the guise of ascetics to take fruit, leaves and water to the king; and Parikṣit accepted all that they brought. As he was about to eat what they had presented, a small worm appeared in the fruit he had taken. The sun was setting, and the king assumed that he no longer stood in danger from Takṣaka. Robbed of his senses, doomed to die, Parikṣit placed the worm on his neck. As the king mocked the curse he thought he had averted, Takṣaka coiled around him and killed him – he had come out of the fruit Parikṣit had been given. See *Mbh* 1.36.8 – 1.40.4.

\(^{111}\) *Mbh* I.53.18-20.

\(^{112}\) O’Flaherty, ‘Horses and snakes’, p. 32.

C.Z. Minkowsky points out that the end of The Book of Āstīka also includes spells to guard against danger from snakes (I.53.22-23). Indeed, the *Mbh*’s Sarpasattra is linked to a vast network of material, both Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic, which is concerned with warding off and/or curing snakebite. For instance, in Sihi village in Faridabad district of Haryana in Delhi’s neighbourhood, a mound with habitation debris going back to 1000 B.C. yields large quantities of iron slag. These remains of metal working are locally believed to be the bones of snakes that perished at Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra, and Sihi’s inhabitants hold that the sacrifice was held in their village. Practitioners of traditional medicine believe the Sihi slag has exceptional healing properties, particularly as an antidote to poison.
Now for more on the Snake Sacrifice of the *Mbh*. Incited by Uttanka, and seeking to avenge the death of his father,\(^{113}\) Janamejaya resolves to hold a Sarpasattra.\(^{114}\) He is applauded by his *mantrins* (ministers).\(^{115}\) Janamejaya’s *purohita* and *rtvijś* (sacrificial priests) support him. Indeed, they tell the king that the gods themselves devised a great *sattra* for him, which is called the Sarpasattra in the *purāṇa*. They inform Janamejaya that he alone can undertake this sacrifice, so the *paurāṇikas* declare. The priests also tell

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\(^{113}\) Christopher Minkowsky discerns a basis for the animosity between Takṣaka and the Pāṇḍavas, and argues that Takṣaka need not be regarded as a disinterested instrument for the working out of a sage’s curse: Minkowsky points out that the location of the Sarpasattra of the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra*, which predates the *Mbh*, is Khāḍavaprapthā. In the *Mbh*, Krsna Vāsudeva and Arjuna burn down the Khāḍava forest, and mercilessly massacre its inhabitants, including its snakes. Takṣaka escapes because he is in Kurukṣetra, his son is saved by Indra, but Takṣaka’s wife and other snakes perish. Minkowsky also writes that the Sarpasattra is transformed in the *Mbh*: a *yajñā* that confers immortality on its performers is turned into a revengeful rite that destroys tens of millions of snakes. And he notes the change in the site of the sacrifice – from Khāḍavaprapthā in the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* to Takṣāśilā in the *Mbh*. See Christopher Minkowsky, ‘Snakes, *sattras* and the *Mahābhārata*’, in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, Delhi, 2007 (first published in 1991), pp. 390-91.

\(^{114}\) *Mbh* I.3.177-195, I.45-46. Kadrū’s curse is another cause of Janamejaya’s sacrifice, and this is evident from *Mbh* I.47.25, I.49.5-8, for example.

\(^{115}\) *Mbh* I.47.1. Etymologically *manrin* means one who is concerned with *mantra* or secret counsel, and the term is generally translated as ‘minister’. In the hierarchy of prominent officials at a king’s court, *mantrins* seem to form a more select group than *sacivas*. In fact, *Mbh* XII.86.7-10 tell us that the rāja should have thirty-seven *sacivas* but only eight *mantrins*, and it is amid the latter that he should discuss and settle policy. See Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India*, pp 79,81; Cf. *sacivas* in Ch. 2, Section III of this dissertation.
the king that they know the rite. Janamejaya asks *brāhmana mantra*-scholars to collect the ingredients for the sacrifice. Priests measure out the sacrificial terrain according to the *śāstras* to prepare the sanctuary in the correct manner. The place of sacrifice is filled with a large multitude of *brāhmanas*, it is decked with great opulence and has abundant rice and riches. After the sacrificial terrain is measured, Janamejaya is consecrated for the Sarpasattra. However, before the Snake Sacrifice begins, a wise master builder, later specified as Lohitākṣa, speaks up. On the basis of his knowledge of the place and time of the measuring of the sacrificial terrain, he predicts that the *sattra* will not be completed, and that a *brāhmaṇa* will be the cause of its disruption; whereupon Janamejaya orders that no stranger be allowed to enter.

Thereafter the sacrifice unfolds according to the rules of a Sarpasattra. The priests, all dressed in black, their eyes red from smoke, go about their tasks – making oblations, chanting *mantras*; and snakes start falling into the sacrificial fire. At that rite, where the *rtvijś* are led by Candabhārgava, where Vyāsa is a *adasya* (seated attendee), in the midst of his sons and pupils, where Uddālaka, Śvetaketu, Nārada and many other

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116 *Mbh* I.47.6-7.
117 *Mbh* I.47.11.
118 *Mbh* I.47.14. Following van Buitenen, *sthapati* has been translated as ‘master builder’. See van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 1, p. 113. For more on this term, see Ch. 5 of this dissertation. This master builder is also described as a *sūtradhāra*, *śūta* and *paurāṇika*. For these terms, again, see Ch. 5.
119 *Mbh* I.47.14 -16.
120 *Mbh* I.47.17. This is van Buitenen’s translation of *yajakāh*. See van Buitenen, *The Mahābhārata*, Vol. 1, p. 113.
121 *Mbh* I.48.5-6 name four *rtvijś*: Candabhārgava is the *hotr*, Kautsārya Jaimini the *udgātr*, Sārgarava the *brahman* and Bodhapingala the *adhvaryu*. 
brahmāṇas of strict vows are sadasyas too, 122 hundreds of thousands and millions and tens of millions of snakes perish. White, black, blue, many-coloured, old and young snakes; some seven-headed, others double-headed, still others five-headed; some tiny as mice, others gigantic, tall as mountaintops; all die powerless, punished by their mother’s curse. Rivers of snake-fat and snake-marrow flow. The smell of burning snakes spreads. The terrified screams of snakes that were falling into the fire, of those that were still hovering in the sky, and of those that were being cooked by the blazing flames reverberate all around. Taksaka, however, seeks shelter with Indra, and that god grants him refuge. 123

As other snakes fall ceaselessly into the sacrificial fire, Vāsuki tells his sister Jaratkāru that it is time for Āstīka to intervene. Jaratkāru summons her son, and speaks to him about Kadru’s curse. She also reveals that Brahmā had foretold that Āstīka would free the snakes from their mother’s curse – the time has come for him to save his kinsfolk from Janamejaya’s sacrificial fire, she says. Āstīka assures his mother and uncle that he will do so. He then sets off for the sacrificial site. On reaching it, Āstīka is stopped at the entrance initially, and then gains access by impressing the king, rtviṣ and sadasyas with his praise of the sacrifice. Janamejaya wishes to grant him a boon, but is warned by the sadasyas and Candabhārgava that Taksaka has not yet perished. When the king urges the priests to bring that snake to the sacrificial fire swiftly, the rtviṣ tell him that the śāstras and the fire reveal that Taksaka is in Indra’s dwelling. Lohitākṣa confirms this. Janamejaya prods Candabhārgava to summon Taksaka, and that priest chants

122 Mbh 1.58.7-10.
incantations till Indra himself appears, with a terrified Taksaka hiding in his clothes. As the priests mutter mantras, the snake begins to be drawn towards the sacrificial fire, writhing, hissing with fear.\(^{124}\)

The rtvijs tell the king that the rite is now nearing its proper end, and he can grant Āstīka a boon. So, Janamejaya asks the brāhmaṇa to choose one. But this is premature. Just as Taksaka is about to fall into the blazing flames, Āstīka speaks up: he asks the king to stop the Sarpasattra. Janamejaya offers the brāhmaṇa gold or silver or cows or anything else he might want instead. But Āstīka remains firm, even though the king presses him to choose another boon. And the brāhmaṇa stays Taksaka in the sky, so that the snake hovers in mid-air and does not fall into the sacrificial fire. Then, urged by the sadasyas, Janamejaya agrees to bring his Sarpasattra to an end. The announcement of the rite’s termination is greeted with joyous applause.\(^{125}\) The king is pleased and gives great riches to the rtvijs and sadasyas, as well as to Lohitakṣa.\(^{126}\) After honouring him, Janamejaya sends Āstīka home. The king also asks the brāhmaṇa to come back when he has his Horse Sacrifice (vājimedha), and Āstīka agrees to do so.\(^{127}\) Two sacrifices are contrasted here: the Snake Sacrifice and the Horse Sacrifice. The former is a ghastly rite of black magic: it has to be stopped before it reaches the end that Janamejaya has planned, and its termination is applauded by the righteous. The latter, on the other hand, could be a festive

\(^{123}\)Mbh I.48.14 -17.


\(^{125}\)Mbh I.51.14 -23, I.53.1-10.

\(^{126}\)Mbh I.53.11-13. Minkowsky points out that, in this respect too, Janamejaya’s sacrifice is different from Vedic sattras. As mentioned earlier, no daksinā was given at the latter. However, Janamejaya pays substantial daksinā. See Minkowsky, ‘Snakes, sattras and the Mahābhārata’, p. 387.
occasion, as is Rāma’s Horse Sacrifice described in the previous chapter. And the Horse Sacrifice always seems to be endorsed by the virtuous.

But what of the recitation of the Mahābhārata? Śaunaka asks Ugrāravas to narrate the stories (kathāḥ) that were told to the sadasyas during the intervals of the Sarpasattra. The sūta tells Śaunaka that, while brāhmaṇas told stories based on the Veda in the pauses between the rites of the Snake Sacrifice, Vyāsa told the Bhārata ākhyāna. Again, note that Vyāsa’s ākhyāna is distinguished from the tales based on the (four) Vedas. Śaunaka asks to hear the Mahābhārata ākhyāna that made the Pāṇḍavas famous, and which was ‘born from the oceanic mind of the great seer’ Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana. Ugrāravas agrees to tell it from the very beginning.

The sūta then recounts how he had heard the Mahābhārata. Vyāsa had appeared at Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra accompanied by his students. On entering the sadas (sitting area), the sage had seen the king sitting there, surrounded by many sadasyas, by the lords of various janapadas and by rtviṣas. When Janamejaya and all the sadasyas had honoured Vyāsa as was appropriate, the king had asked the seer to relate how the great,

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127 Mbh 1.53.14 –16.
128 Mbh 1.53.29-30. Śaunaka addresses Ugrāravas as mahākave in 1.53.29. The implication of the use of this term for the sūta is discussed in Ch. 5 of this dissertation.
129 Mbh 1.53.31. In fact, Vyāsa does not narrate his text at Janamejaya’s sacrifice – Vaiśampāyana is its reciter.
130 Mbh 1.53.32-34.
131 Mbh 1.53.35-36.
132 Mbh 1.54.1, 7-9.
destructive war had come about, for Vyāsa had been a witness to the deeds of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. The sage had instructed his student Vaiśampāyana to tell the king how the conflict in the family occurred, as he had heard it from his guru, that is, from Vyāsa himself. And we are told that Vaiśampāyana narrated the entire itiḥāsa to Janamejaya, the sadasyas and all the kṣatriyas present. His text is described as the itiḥāsa of the breach of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas, which brought about the destruction of the kingdom. Note that the narrative is again presented as a tale of destruction, which ties up with the Mbh’s view of history and of kāla as a force that propels the world towards the carnage that ushers in a new age. Indeed, one can say that the story of the annihilation of kṣatriyas is told, along with its sub-plots, in an appropriate context -- the intervals of sacrificial slaughter. And before an appropriate audience.

Janamejaya is present, of course. So is Lohitākṣa, and it seems likely that Janamejaya’s mantrins are too. We noted the presence of a large multitude of brāhmaṇas at the Snake Sacrifice – some ātvijās and sadasyas are mentioned by name. Importantly, Vyāsa is a sadasya there. His presence would have added lustre to the occasion, for he is depicted as a revered rṣi, the one who divided the Veda into four parts. And that seer is credited with the composition of the itiḥāsa of the conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas. His asking Vaiśampāyana to recount the narrative of the breach in the family would have lent authority to the latter’s text. But this is not the only role Vyāsa plays in shaping the

133 Mbh 1.54.18-20.
134 Mbh 1.54.21-22.
135 Mbh 1.54.23-24.
136 Mbh 1.54.5.
Mahābhārata. He is also the ancestor of the text's major protagonists. It seems appropriate that Vyāsa is present when Vaiśampāyana recounts the story of his guru's family to Janamejaya who is, after all, Vyāsa's descendant and the son of Parikṣit, whose death is a cause of the Snake Sacrifice at which the itihāsa is narrated. Adhyāya 54 of the Ādiparvan also mentions the presence of other ksatriyas and lords of janapadas: given the subject-matter of the work recited, it is not surprising that they too form part of Vaiśampāyana's audience.

In adhyāya 55 of the Ādiparvan, Vaiśampāyana declares that he will proclaim Vyāsa's 'entire thought'. But he proceeds to give a brief summary of the events of the Mbh, focusing on the rivalry between the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas in which the Pāṇḍavas had triumphed. It is clearly stated that the Pāṇḍavas' victory was preceded by great devastation, and that they survived to rule a desolate realm. Janamejaya wants to hear the full story in all its detail, not a mere precis; and Vaiśampāyana agrees to relate Vyāsa's 'entire thought'. He praises the Mahābhārata and its composer, and says that 'Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana, desiring to do good, composed this to give wealth, fame, long life, merit and heaven, while he spread throughout the world the fame of the great-spirited Pāṇḍavas and other warriors'. Vaiśampāyana also announces that 'what is here, on dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa, exists elsewhere; but what is not here is nowhere else.' And it is after

\[\text{137} \ Mbh \ 1.55.2. \ matam \ kṛṣṇam, \ again.\]
\[\text{138} \ Mbh \ 1.56.1-3, 12. \ Note, \ again, \ that \ the \ Mbh's \ view \ of \ history \ is \ a \ rather \ bleak \ one. \ Also \ note \ the \ role \ of \ the \ audience \ in \ shaping \ the \ text.\]
\[\text{139} \ Mbh \ 1.56.25-26.\]
\[\text{140} \ Mbh \ 1.56.33.\]
this declaration that Vaiśampāyana begins the Mahābhārata story in earnest in adhyāya 57, with the tale of Satyavati’s father, Uparicara.\textsuperscript{141}

A final point before a summary of the argument. It has already been mentioned that the end of the pre-Christian era and the first couple of centuries of the Christian era are associated with the Vaiṣṇavization of the Mbh. Mbh 1.58 – I.59.6 and I.61 are important in this regard. They tell the story of the earth’s burden:

Having been defeated in battle by the gods, the demons fall from their realm and take birth on earth. They spring from men as well as a variety of other creatures – asses, camels, elephants and beasts of prey, for instance. They oppress people of the four varṇas, slaughter every sort of creature, harass rsis, tyrannize the earth. When the demons continue being born, the earth seeks refuge with Brahmā. To save her, Brahmā orders the gods to incarnate themselves on earth with a part (aṁśa/bhāga) of themselves. The gods take birth in the lineages of brāhmaṇa rsis (brahmarsivamsa) and the families of royal sages (pārthivarsikula) for the destruction of their enemies and the well-being of the worlds. So, Dharma, for instance, descends with a portion of himself as Yudhisthira, the Wind as Bhīma, Indra as Arjuna, the Aśvins as Nakula and Sahadeva, and Nārāyaṇa as Vāsudeva. The adhyāya on ‘Partial Incarnations’ (adhyāya 61) also includes a list of the demons who take birth among men – Jarāsandha, Śiśupāla, Šakuni and Duryodhana feature in the list.

One may note that the tale of the earth’s burden is typical of stories told in the Purāṇas to account for the appearance of Viṣṇu’s avatāras on earth and, taken with the list of

\textsuperscript{141} Indeed, according to Mbh I.1.50, this is one of its ‘beginnings’.
'Partial Incarnations', Vaisnavizes the _Mbh's_ account of the cause of the Kurukṣetra war. Like the _VR_, the _Mbh_ is transformed.

To summarize and take the argument a little further: The outer frame of the _Mbh_ has a _paurāṇika sūta_ recounting _Mahābhārata_ stories before an extremely exclusive audience. Indeed, even in texts that predate the _Mbh_, the _sattra_ is a rather distinctive sacrificial session – distinctive because all its participants are of equal status; indeed, they all tend to be _brāhmaṇas_. While the _yajamānas_ of the _sattras_ of the _Śrauta Sūtras_ have wives, such women are neither visible nor audible at Šaunaka's _sattra_. In fact, in the _Mbh_, we have only Ugrāśravas and an audience of _brāhmaṇa rṣis_, some of whom already know at least parts of the text that is narrated. But listening to information again and again, repeating what one has absorbed, asking questions and answering them is a way of perpetuating the knowledge one has acquired, of strengthening a tradition. This is what

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142 For the period of the history of Vaiśṇavism when three cults centred on Viśnu, Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva evolved and merged, see Jaiswal, *The Origin and Development of Vaiśṇavism*. We find evidence of the merging of Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva in the list of 'Partial Incarnations'.

143 Jamison, *Sacred Wife/ Sacrificer's Wife*, p. 31 ff.

144 However, Hildebeitel writes that, if we assume that the _Mbh_ follows the ritual texts, we should also assume that 'such missing characters from Sørensen's _Index_ ... as Mrs Janamejaya and Mrs Šaunaka and the other wives of the _rṣis_ of the Naimiśa forest would have heard Vaiśampāyana's rendering of _Mahābhārata_ stories and Ugrāśravas' recitation. See Alf Hildebeitel, 'Among friends: Marriage, women,
seems to be happening at Saunaka’s sattra. Additionally, while Ugrasravas’ text is recounted at a hallowed Vedic ritual, and refers constantly to things Vedic, it is clearly different from the *Veda*. Thus, a tradition is also being transformed, renewed. And the portion of the *Mbh* that deals with Saunaka’s *sattra* appears to date to the first couple of centuries of the Christian era. The portion on the Sarpasattra discussed in this chapter, too, seems to have been added to the *Mbh* at about that time. Again, one can discern the process of the refashioning of an old institution in this part of the text.

Vaiśampāyana, however, performs before a larger and more varied audience than Ugrasravas does. The Sarpasattra may well have had participants other than those who are specifically mentioned – one can ask, for instance, whether those who carted rice and riches for the sacrifice were present; whether rulers had come with their retinues; and about who attended to the *brāhmaṇas* who came to the Sarpasattra. This said, the event and its audience present a sharp contrast to Rāma’s *Aśvamedha* and those who participate in it. The texts presented by both Ugrasravas and Vaiśampāyana cannot be relished or fully understood by all; they are too complex, too full of ambiguities to provide easy

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145 Brian Black addresses the issue of what Saunaka can learn from listening to Ugrasravas if he is already familiar with the sūta’s repertoire of tales. Black reminds us that Janamejaya’s hearing of Vaiśampāyana’s stories about his ancestors coincides with his ending his Sarpasattra. Black asks the following question: ‘Does this suggest that Shaunaka can put an end to the cycle of violence that haunts his family’ by listening to narratives about his ancestors? See Brian Black, ‘Educating Shaunaka: The *Mahābhārata*’s representation of the *Veda*, Seminar on ‘Revisiting Transitions’, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 8 March 2007.
morals; their performance contexts are not those that can be used to socialize and instruct
women, children and the lower castes.

Indeed, to this day, in many parts of India, the *Mbḥ* in its entirety tends not to be recited
(or even stored) inside a house. It is read/ recounted outside, in a porch, for instance —
and even then, not from beginning to end. In fact, only *portions* of the *Mbḥ* are very well-
known, the *Bhagavadgītā* being the most obvious example. But comparatively few
people know the whole text. The *Mbḥ* has been retold in a variety of ways but, again, it is
generally *portions* of it that are adapted, rather than the whole text. Is this simply because
the *Mbḥ* is an enormous and unwieldy text? Or is it also because it is seen as dangerous —
as a work that generates and fuels discord and violence?

*When these sacrificial jamborees come to an end,*
*the officiating priests,*

*honoured guests, vedic wizards*
*and other*
*intellectual superstars of the show*

*go back to their respective homes,*
*ashramas or whatever,*
*bearing wealth beyond measure ....*

*After the mandatory*
*ritual bath*
*to mark the conclusion of the sacrifice,*

*kings return to their capitals,*
*reminding themselves*
*that they also have kingdoms to govern ....*

*When these things come to an end,*
*people find*
*other subjects to talk about*

*than just*
the latest episode of the Mahabharata
and the daily statistics of death;

rediscover simpler pleasures —
fly kites,
collect wild flowers, make love.

Life seems
to return to normal.
But do not be deceived.

Though, sooner or later,
these celebrations of hatred too
come to an end

like everything else,
the fire — the fire lit for the purpose —
can never be put out.

The fire that Aurva got up,
for example,
to avenge the massacre of the Bhrugus,

still burns at the bottom of the sea,
where he threw it
at the instance of his ancestors.

And the fire that Parashara produced
for the destruction
of rakshasas

still rages, they say,
in the great forest beyond
the Himalayas

where the great sage tried
to dispose of it
when he stopped the sacrifice

at the urgings of Poulastya;
and there, to this day,
they say, it continues to consume

rakshasas
rocks

146 Kolatkar, Sarpa Satra, pp. 79, 81-84.