CHAPTER 5

Sūtas and Kuśilava

Let us return to a question posed at the beginning of Chapter 1. Given that the VR and the Mbh are in Sanskrit, and espouse ideals like varṇadharma and the exclusion of many sections of society from all kinds of privileges, knowledge and power, how did they become so widely known, popular and, indeed, revered? The major occasions at which the Rāma and Mahābhārata stories are recounted within the VR and the Mbh, and what might have happened at these were discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 4 was about the two figures who are credited with the creation of the VR and the Mbh. However, Vālmīki and Vyāsa are not shown performing their texts before audiences. I will now turn to those who are. I will focus on two types of bards—sūtas and Kuśilava. Ugrasravas and Saṃjaya -- two important reciters of the narrative in the Mbh — are described as sūtas. Kuśilava sing Rāma’s story within the VR. A number of venerable tellers of tales are referred to as paurāṇika, so a brief discussion of this term, too, seems necessary. In this chapter, I will attempt to work out connections between the changing meanings of the words sūta and kuśilava and the evolution of the Mbh and the VR, and more generally, the process of the crystallization of brahmanical texts that advocate the cause of monarchy.
Of the transmitters of information that I will deal with here, *paurāṇikas* are generally perceived as *brāhmaṇa*, or at least as high-caste reciters of *purāṇas*. But scholars have asserted that the terms *sūta* and *kuśilava* denoted despised social categories by the time of Manu. More explicitly, it has been argued that the *sūta* ‘had a high status’ in Vedic literature, where he is included among the eight *vīras* (brave men) and the twelve *ratnins* (jewels) who are closely associated with the *rājā*. Indeed, he is one of the *rājakṛts* (makers of the *rājā*). The *sūta*'s ‘high status’ is thus linked with his relationship with the *rājā*. We read that, by the turn of the Christian era, the *sūta* came to be presented as the product of a hypogamous union and is, therefore, accorded a ‘low status’ in texts like the *Manusmṛti*. As for Kuśilava, scholars have commented on the fact that Rāma’s sons, who are also the *brāhmaṇa rṣi* Vālmīki’s disciples, share a name with people who are described in uncomplimentary terms in brahmanical literature. If one starts off with these assumptions -- that of the low standing of the *sūta* and *kuśilava* by the time of Manu, and that of a decline in the status of the *sūta* over time -- the questions that one can pose are: if *sūtas* and other types of bards are presented as playing a seminal role in the dissemination of brahmanical texts, why have they also been portrayed as contemptible people in that tradition? And why did such tellers of tales publicly extol a system that was unkind to them? A search for answers to these questions results in more questions: did all sorts of bards form one social group? More specifically, can *sūtas* be distinguished from *kuśilavas*? Did *sūtas* constitute a single homogeneous category?

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1 See, for instance, Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, p. 651.
2 Thapar, ‘Genealogical patterns as perceptions of the past’, p. 719.
3 Ibid. Thapar also offers an explanation for the downgrading of the *sūta* in brahmanical literature. That will be discussed later in this chapter.
Can we really say that the status of all sūtas declined over time, and that all sūtas had been branded as lowly by the time of Manu?

II

Scholars have been aware of the diverse roles of sūtas. Irawati Karve, for instance, writes that they performed various 'functions at the court'. They were advisors and friends of rulers, charioteers and bards. Karve mentions sūtas who travelled to different places where people were likely to gather and told tales of rulers past and present. Yet, even while recognizing that sūtas performed a variety of functions, scholars have nevertheless by and large assumed that all sūtas constituted a single homogeneous social category, albeit one whose fortunes varied over time. I have worked out a tentative classification of the sūtas of the Mbh, whose cast includes a wider range of sūtas than the VR. This classification emphasizes two factors that mostly seem to overlap -- dependence on ksatriya rulers and status governed by parentage. Following this criterion, we can classify the sūtas of the Mbh into two basic types -- the first are part of the royal entourage or even important functionaries at the court, and are dependent on rulers for their livelihood; the second wander from place to place and do not seek regular royal patronage. It also seems that the former are, more often than not, presented as pratiloma sūtas to whom mixed parentage is attributed; and the latter are portrayed as paurāṇika sutas whose parentage is not mentioned, who are revered as wise men conversant

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with sacred texts and who transmit brahmanical lore orally -- a function that is most often associated with *brāhmānas*. Most references to the first type of *sūta* in the *Mbh* suggest that they are regarded as rather insignificant or 'lowly'. But *sūtas* of the second sort have not been portrayed as inconsequential or contemptible people. The *sūtas* of the *Mbh* may be classified as outlined in the attached chart:
I will briefly discuss each kind of sūta. The type labelled 'nameless panegyrists' are not uncommonly linked in the *Mbh* with māgadhās, or with māgadhās and bandins. We are told, for instance, that Dhrūtārāśtra mourns the fact that the exiled Pāṇḍavas are deprived of the comforts to which they are accustomed — they now sleep on the ground; and instead of waking up to the praises of bands of māgadhās and sūtas, Yudhiṣṭhira is woken up by the din the birds of the forest make before dawn. Or that after the Kurukṣetra war, on being repeatedly urged to shake off his grief, Yudhiṣṭhira goes to Hāstinapura in a procession, being praised along the way by his sūtas and māgadhās. Panegyrists seem to have been a feature of the royal household. They would recite a rāja or prince's genealogy and praise him and his ancestors, thus providing him with an encouraging environment, and spurring him on to new deeds of valour.

In Macdonell and Keith's *Vedic Index*, the word māgadhā is explained as a 'man of Magadha', and we are told that the māgadhās are 'a people ... of little repute' throughout Vedic literature. We also read that it is 'most improbable that ... the Māgadha is ... a member of the mixed caste produced by a Vaiśya marrying a Kṣatriya woman'. However, in *Manusmṛti* X.11, the māgadhā is said to be the product of the union of a vaiśya man and a kṣatriya woman. In Monier-Williams' *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, the māgadhā is described

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5 For example, the compound sūtamāgadhabandin occurs at *Mbh* V.196.18, VII.5.39, VII.50.39, VII.55.8, VIII.1.12, XIII.119.15, XIV.63.2 and XV.30.7. Sūtamāgadhā occurs at *Mbh* XII.38.43 and XV.46.5, and māgadhāsūra at *Mbh* III.225.10.

6 *Mbh* III.225.10.

7 *Mbh* XII.38.43.


9 Ibid., p. 117.
as the panegyrist of the rājā or one who informs the ruler of what occurs in market places. The word is also interpreted as ‘an unmarried woman’s son who lives by running messages’. Very briefly, we gather that in Sanskrit texts, even in Vedic literature, the māgadha is portrayed as disreputable. Clubbing the sūta who has been classified as a ‘nameless panegyrist’ with the māgadha implies the former’s low standing in the Mbh.

Another point that is worth noting is that, like the nameless sūta panegyrist, the māgadha is depicted as a transmitter of information. At times the rājā seems to have benefitted from this -- the māgadha’s chanting of the rājā’s praises and his informing the rājā about the goings on in bazaars may well have ensured him a job, albeit perhaps not an exalted one, at the court.

The bandin is said to be the descendant of a kṣatriya by a śudra woman. The word is translated as ‘panegyrist’, and Monier-Williams describes the bandin as ‘a ... bard ... (who sings the praises of a prince in his presence or accompanies an army to chant martial songs...)’. The term also denotes a captive. Perhaps bandins were prisoners, including prisoners of war, who were given the task of chanting the praises of the men who had vanquished and/or captured them. What more potent statement of a rājā’s power could there be than to have those who had once disrupted order or opposed him to be now eulogizing him?

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10 Monier-Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 805 (source not clear).
11 Ibid, p. 720 (Monier-Williams cites the Manusmṛti and the Mbh).
Thus, the māgadhā and the bandin seem to have been panegyrists and disseminators of information that benefitted the rājā, and they are presented as products of inter-varṇa unions in some brahmanical texts. In these senses, they resemble the sūta who is classified as a ‘nameless panegyrist’. The three are not identical, however. Their parentage is different. We have just mentioned the parentage of the māgadhā and the bandin. The Mbh tells us that the sūta is the offspring of a ksatriya man and a brāhmaṇa woman, and that the work of the product of this particular combination is the recitation of eulogies.¹⁵

The sūtas I shall deal with next are those labelled ‘charioteers’. In the Mbh, when the sūta Adhiratha’s adopted son Karṇa admits to Bhārgava Rāma that he had lied about being a brāhmaṇa, he also confesses that he was born a sūta, ‘right in between brāhmaṇa and ksatriya’ (brahmaksatrāntare).¹⁶ Sūtas who are chariot-drivers are thus presented as neither one nor the other, but as descended from the misalliance of brāhmaṇas and ksatriyas.¹⁷ What role did the charioteer play? Having access to a chariot meant that its driver could convey messages fast. But what we associate the charioteer with most often is accompanying the warrior in battle. In danger, the charioteer protected the warrior. The crises they coped with together probably made their relationship an intimate one. We can detect a sense of

¹⁵ Mbh XIII.48.10.
¹⁶ Mbh XII.3.26. Of course, Karṇa was not really born a sūta. He is the son of Sūrya, the Sun, and Kuntī. He was conceived and born before Kuntī was married. After being born he was abandoned, to be found and brought up by a sūta. Hence, Karṇa is referred to as sūtaputra, son of a sūta.
¹⁷ Fitzgerald, The Mahābhārata, Vol. 7, p. 787. Indeed, Śalya, a king, considers Karṇa to be lowly: sūtas, he says, are paricārakāḥ, ‘servants’ (Mbh VIII.23.36). Duryodhana praises Karṇa, and says that he does not regard him as one born into a sūtakula, a family of chariot-drivers (Mbh VIII.24.159). This clearly indicates the low status of sūta charioteers.
camaraderie between the warrior and his driver. The friendship of the warrior and the charioteer is likely to have made it possible for the latter to condemn the former’s lapses, although he seems to have done so in private.18 The driver also witnessed the warrior’s victories. Some charioteers probably described the feats of the hero after the war, and the sūta came to be associated with extolling the warrior’s successes and with composing eulogies. This said, in the Mbh, the sūta who acts as a charioteer does not seem to perform all the functions just mentioned. There do not, for instance, seem to be sūta charioteers who describe the hero’s feats and genealogy in detail after the war. This activity characterizes bards. Thus, there does not seem to be an overlap of functions of the sūta charioteer and the sūta bard in the Mbh. But sūtas who are not charioteers certainly recount the achievements of warriors. Ugrasravas, for instance, narrates the Kurus’ feats, and of course, a great deal else.

Now for the type that have been labelled ‘sūtas who attend on important ksatriyas or act as their messengers’. The prātikāmin (messenger) who conveys Duryodhana’s summons to Draupadī, after Yudhiṣṭhira stakes and loses his wife in the dicing match, seems to have been this sort of sūta. Duryodhana first tells Vidura to bring Draupadī to the sabhā. Vidura refuses, and predicts the end of the Kurus. Duryodhana then orders the prātikāmin to fetch the Pāṇḍava queen. That sūta (described as ‘a dog in a lion’s den’) tells Draupadī that

18 One must mention here a celebrated warrior-charioteer duo: Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva acts as his friend Arjuna’s charioteer in the Kurukṣetra war. As mentioned earlier, when Arjuna recoils from the prospect of fighting not only his kith and kin, but also a number of revered elders, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva explains to him the true dharma of life’s spiritual battle. He also reveals himself as the supreme god. In addition, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva fulfils the other duties associated with charioteers, and plays a far greater role in the Pāṇḍavas’ victory than an ordinary charioteer could. However, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is not classified as a sūta. For a ‘perversion’ of the ‘standard hero-charioteer model’, see the discussion of the Karna-Salya dialogue in Kevin McGrath, The Sanskrit Hero: Karna in the Epic Mahābhārata, Leiden, 2004, pp. 167-73.
Yudhiṣṭhīra had lost her to Duryodhana, and she now has to go to Dīrghatātra’s house. Draupādī in turn tells that son of a sūta (sūtaja) to go back to the Kuru assembly and ask who Yudhiṣṭhīra had lost first, himself or his wife. When the prātikāmin does so, Yudhiṣṭhīra is silent, but Duryodhana orders the messenger to bring Draupādī so that she can ask her question herself. As he is in Duryodhana’s service, the sūta conveys the message to the Pāṇḍava queen, but he is clearly distressed by what is going on, and his reservations about his master’s conduct are evident when he tells Draupādī that Duryodhana ‘will not protect our fortunes, if you have to come to the sabhā, O Princess’. The sūta also says that the fall of the Kurus has come. Functions apart, while we cannot categorically state that the prātikāmin is a pratiloma sūta in the Mbh, he is presented as an insignificant retainer at the Kuru court, the sort that would be regarded as a lowly mixed caste.

The sūtas who have been classified as ‘nameless reciters of religious lore’ are in evidence in a passage in the Arjunavanavāsa section of the Ādiparvan. The five Pāṇḍavas make a covenant with one another: if one of them sees the other when he is with their common wife, the one who intrudes on the other’s privacy must live in the forest for twelve months. When a brāhmaṇa is robbed of his cows and cries for help, Arjuna hears him and, looking for weapons, sees Yudhiṣṭhīra with Draupādī. After he has recovered the brāhmaṇa’s cows, Arjuna insists on going into exile. We gather that he leaves for the forest followed by brāhmaṇas who know the Veda and Vedāṅgas, those who ponder over the supreme soul.

19 Mbh II.60.1-12.
20 J.A.B. van Buitenen writes that this section of the Ādiparvan ‘can hardly be original’, and regards it as an ‘accretion’. See van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, Vol. 1, p. 1.
śūtas, paurāṇikas, forest-dwelling śramaṇas and brāhmaṇas who recite divine tales. We are told that Arjuna is surrounded by these and other companions with polished stories (ślaksṇakathāih). The fact that śūtas are mentioned as part of such an entourage suggests that at least some śūtas are being presented as having access to religious lore. As high-caste men who are entitled to transmit brahmanical knowledge orally?

There isn’t much information about the role of this type of śūta in the Ḍbh. But it seems reasonable to assume that aspirants to power, whose entourage such tellers of tales were a part of, are likely to have made use of their knowledge of religious lore — they may have been consulted on what constituted permissible or righteous conduct according to brahmanical texts, for example. Also, their support of a candidate would have suggested that the learned and the dharmic approved of him. A rāja or prince would undoubtedly have benefitted from association with men respected for their religious learning, but a link with the intrigues of the court and the scramble for power may have tarnished the image of a holy man. This appears to tie up with the projection of those teachers or transmitters of brahmanical lore who are not identified as supporters of one or another aspirant for power as ideal men of religion.

21 Ḍbh 1.206.1-4.
We encounter the Kīcakas in the Virātaparvan.²² The Pāṇḍavas and Draupadi have spent twelve years in exile in the forest, and have to spend a thirteenth year trying to live unrecognized. They decide to stay in the land of the Matsyas, and find employment at the court of their ruler, Virāṭa. The five Pāṇḍavas don disguises and assume new names, and Draupadi becomes the maid of Virāṭa’s wife, Sudeśnā. Sudeśnā is the sister of Kīcaka, Virāṭa’s senāpati (marshal)²³ and a sūta.²⁴ Kīcaka falls in love with Draupadi and pursues her. He boasts to her that he is the real power in the land.²⁵ Draupadi complains to Bhīma about her degradation, working as a servant. She tells her husband how she has been fending off Kīcaka and how he has humiliated her. Kīcaka must die, or she will drink poison. When Bhīma kills Kīcaka, the latter’s kinsmen, the Kīcakas, prevail upon Virāṭa to have Draupadi burn with their leader.²⁶ The Kīcakas are clearly an influential group. But they are referred to with disdain. Draupadi tells Bhīma that Kīcaka constantly propositions her, even though she has repeatedly rejected him – he is ruled by lust and passion, he is boorish and evil.²⁷ Draupadi does not only regard Kīcaka as immoral, she also calls him sūtaputra, obviously in contempt.²⁸ It seems that the Kīcakas are being presented as men with ‘lowly’ origins. Kīcaka is described as Matsya’s sūta,²⁹ which may suggest that he had started his career at the court

²³ E.g. Mbh IV.13.3.
²⁴ E.g. Mbh IV.14.4,21.
²⁵ Mbh IV.21.9. That Kīcaka is indeed a powerful man is borne out by the fact that when the report of his death reaches Hāstinapura, a cattle raid is suggested and undertaken.
²⁶ Mbh IV.22.4-8.
²⁷ Mbh IV.20.24-25.
²⁸ E.g. Mbh IV.13.17; IV.15.15-19,21.
²⁹ Mbh IV.29.2.
as a charioteer. The Klīcakas are the type of sūtas who could well have been regarded as pratiloma sūtas, but who had, because of their military strength and their relationship with Virāta's queen, risen above the ranks of insignificant sūtas.

As for Samjaya, he is an important and honoured member of the Kuru court. Samjaya is known for his trustworthiness, wisdom and learning. He is Dhṛtarāṣṭra's confidant. The blind king bares his innermost feelings to Samjaya: he grieves before him.30 Samjaya comforts Dhṛtarāṣṭra when he is distressed.31 He condemns the king's lapses, and particularly his failure to curb Duryodhana's unrighteous tendencies.32 Samjaya acts as the Kuru king's advisor. He is also referred to as the 'foremost of ministers'.33 Confidant and advisor apart, Samjaya acts as an envoy too: he makes peace between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Vidura when the two part ways and the king is disconsolate.34 After the Pāṇḍavas have lived out their years of exile, Dhṛtarāṣṭra also sends Samjaya to them to negotiate a settlement.35

Samjaya is one of the two main sūta narrators of the Mbh.Vyāsa grants him a boon that makes him an exceptional recounter of events during the great war.36 Samjaya is granted divine insight, extraordinary vision and hearing, an awareness of the thoughts of others, a

30 E.g. Mbh I.1.95-161. See also Emily T. Hudson, 'Listen but do not grieve: Grief, paternity, and time in the laments of Dhṛtarāṣṭra', in Brodbeck and Black, eds, Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata, pp. 35-52.
31 E.g. Mbh I.1.162-190.
32 E.g. Mbh I.1.183-185. See also Hudson, 'Listen but do not grieve', pp. 39, 42-44.
33 Mbh I.2.216. The term used is mahāmātra.
34 Mbh III.7.1-17.
35 Mbh V.22.
knowledge of the past, present and future, the ability to move through the sky, and inviolability to weapons in battle.\textsuperscript{37} Samjaya is an exceptionally gifted narrator, but he does not seem to have acted as a teller of tales during most of his life. In fact, he becomes a narrator for Dhṛtarāṣṭra because the latter is blind and because Samjaya is wise, learned and trustworthy.\textsuperscript{38} He is clearly special, for he is also granted divine eyesight by Kṛṣna Vāsudeva before the Kurukṣetra war, and is able to see the deity in all his glory.\textsuperscript{39} He is, therefore, different from ordinary sūtas at the court of Hāstinapura. One can ask whether Samjaya is presented as a character who was born in a family of sūtas that had served ksatriyas as ‘lowly’ panegyrists, charioteers or attendants. Is he someone who rises above his origins because of his outstanding personal qualities?

Finally, what can we gather about the itinerant sūtas of the \textit{Mbh}? There isn’t much information in the text about Lohitākṣa. We are told that he is a ‘master builder of much wisdom and well-versed in the arts of building’.\textsuperscript{40} He is also described as a sūtradhāra and

\textsuperscript{36} We discussed the Ugrāravas and Janamejaya frames of the \textit{Mbh} in Ch. 3, and mentioned that there are other frames too. What is of relevance for us here is the Samjaya frame – that sūta reports the battlefield events in Books VI to IX (and part of Book X), and this frame is the most integrated into the main narrative of the \textit{Mbh}. \textsuperscript{37} \textit{Mbh} VI.2.9-13, VI.16.5-10. See also \textit{Rethinking the Mahābhārata}, pp. 55-57.
\textsuperscript{38} Bṛṇa asks Dhṛtarāṣṭra if he would like to see the war – he could grant him sight. Dhṛtarāṣṭra replies that the thought of seeing his kin killed does not please him, and he would rather hear about the war. So, Vyāsa gives a boon to Samjaya that enables him to narrate the battle to the blind king. See \textit{Mbh} VI.2.5-13; Hildebeitel, \textit{Rethinking the Mahābhārata}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Mbh} V.129.13. Drona, Bṛṇa, Vidura and seers and ascetics at the Kuru sabhā too see Kṛṣna’s theophany.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Mbh} I.47.14. The expression used is \textit{sthapatiruddhisampanno vāstuvidyāvaiśāradāḥ}. Kumkum Roy points out that the Later Vedic \textit{sthapatī} performed sacrifices such as \textit{sattras}. In the context of the argument being made here, one may note that he is said to be endowed with \textit{brahmavarca} and \textit{tejas} (lustre,
paurāṇika. Paurāṇika denotes a teller of old narratives. Van Buitenen translates sūtradhāra as ‘Holder of the Cord’, and explains that ropes were used in measuring distances for construction. Van Buitenen writes that the combination of the two terms may seem surprising, but builders would have had their own oral tradition. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Lohitākṣa foretells that Janamejaya’s Snake Sacrifice will be disrupted on the basis of his knowledge of the place and time of measuring the sacrificial terrain. The repertoire of the sūtradhāra-cum-paurāṇika must have included lore about portents of failure. (And about how to avert failure?)

One can mention here that the sūtradhāra is also a central character in Sanskrit theatre, analogous to the modern director. He holds the thread that strings together the various incidents of a play. He is central to the pūrvarāṅga, the preliminaries of the play; and the

especially of the priestly kind), that are generally associated with brāhmaṇas. Roy writes that both the sthapati and the rituals with which he was associated were gradually marginalized, and in post-Vedic literature, the former is ‘secularized’ – he comes to be depicted as a master builder. That said, in the Mbh, Lohitākṣa appears to know a good deal about the sattra – a sacrificial session that brāhmaṇas alone could participate in. See Roy, The Emergence of Monarchy, p. 207.

41 Mbh 1.47.15.
43 Ibid., p. 445.

The Nāṭyaśāstra is believed to have taken the shape with which we are familiar by the second century A.D., and thus belongs roughly to the time when Lohitākṣa is introduced into the Mbh. For the date of the Nāṭyaśāstra, see Nāṭyaśāstra (A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Histrionics) Ascribed to Bharata-Muni (trans. with an introduction by Manomohan Ghosh), Vol. 2, Varanasi, 2003 reprint, p. 23.
pūrvarāṅga includes rituals to ward off all that may cause disruption of the performance. In the \textit{Mbh}, Lohitākṣa’s parentage is not mentioned, but it is worth noting that he is described as a sūtradhāra. It is also significant that, like Janamejaya's sacrificial priests, Lohitākṣa knows Takṣaka’s whereabouts, when that snake flees in fear from Janamejaya’s sattrā. The rtvīśs tell the king that the sāstras have revealed to them that Takṣaka is hiding in Indra’s dwelling. Lohitākṣa knows this because he has learned the purāṇa. The rtvīśs and the paurāṇika thus possess the same information. And, when his Snake Sacrifice ends, Janamejaya gives gifts to the rtvīśs, sadsyas and Lohitākṣa. One can ask whether Lohitākṣa is being presented as a more respectable sūta than ordinary pratiṣoma sūtas. His being a paurāṇika is crucial in this context.

Lomaharṣana, literally ‘hair-raiser’, is named after his ability to enthral his audiences and make their hair stand on end. That sūta is Vyāsa’s student. Ugrāśravas tells Saunaka that Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana once recounted Āstika’s story to the sages of the Naimiṣa forest. Vyāsa’s wise student, Lomaharṣana, was also asked by the brāhmaṇas to narrate it. Ugrāśravas says that he will now relate the tale to Saunaka and the other Naimiṣa rṣis, as he heard it from Lomaharṣana. A line of transmission is delineated: Lomaharṣana is Vyāsa’s pupil and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{45} See, for instance, Ananda Lal, ed., \textit{The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre}, New Delhi, 2004, pp.457, 368-69.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 457.
\item \textsuperscript{47} \textit{Mbh} I.51.5-7.
\item \textsuperscript{48} \textit{Mbh} I.53.11-13.
\item \textsuperscript{49} \textit{Mbh} I.13.7.
\item \textsuperscript{50} \textit{Mbh} I.13.6-8.
\end{itemize}
Ugraśravas’ source of information. And Vyāsa, Lomaharṣana and Ugraśravas recount Āstika’s ākhyāna before a brāhmaṇa audience. Lomaharṣana knows a great deal more than Āstika’s story. Saunaka states that Lomaharṣana had learned the entire purāṇa, which contains celestial tales and the original genealogies of the wise. Saunaka adds that the Naimiṣa rṣis had heard Lomaharṣana narrate those long ago. Here, too, Lomaharṣana’s audience consists of brāhmaṇas.

Ugraśravas is described as a sūta and paurāṇika, and as Lomaharṣana’s son (or sauti, son of a sūta). He recounts tales that he had heard from his father. However, as mentioned in Chapter 3, it is Vyāsa’s brāhmaṇa student Vaiśampāyana’s rendering of Mahābhārata stories that is mostly presented as Ugraśravas’ source in the Mbh. In Chapter 3, we drew attention to the etiquette followed in the interactions between Ugraśravas and the sages of the Naimiṣa forest, and argued that the sūta conducts himself as someone of a lower status than the brāhmaṇa sacrificers before whom he narrates the tales he knows. While it is generally assumed that the sūta was not a brāhmaṇa, perhaps one can look at this assumption afresh.

One may note, for instance, that in the first adhyāya of the first book of the Mbh, Ugraśravas tells the Naimiṣa rṣis that he will proclaim Vyāsa’s entire thought; that poets have told it before, others tell it now, and others will tell this itihāsa in the future; and that it is a great

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51 Elsewhere, Ugraśravas tells Saunaka that Lomaharṣana learned whatever was recited to him by brāhmaṇas like Vaiśampāyana. Here, the authority from whom Lomaharṣana learns is one of Vyāsa’s brāhmaṇa students, not Vyāsa himself. See Mbh I.5.4-5.

52 Mbh I.5.1-2.
storehouse of knowledge which is held by the twice-born. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this statement indicates that Ugrārāvās is entitled to transmit a text that belongs to brāhmaṇas before an audience of brāhmaṇa sages. Can we argue that he is being depicted as a brāhmaṇa? In Chapter 3 we also drew attention to Ugrārāvās' knowledge of nirukta (etymology), which has traditionally been the preserve of brāhmaṇa specialists. Additionally, given that the ancient rṣis of the Vedas are often referred to as kavi, it is significant that Śaunaka addresses Ugrārāvās as mahākave, when the Naimiṣa sage asks the sūta to recite the kathās that were told during the intervals of Janamejaya's Snake Sacrifice. In other words, a brāhmaṇa rṣi authorizes the designation of 'great kavi' for the paurāṇika sūta who recounts stories from the 'fifth Veda' at the sort of sacrificial session that brāhmaṇas alone can participate in. Doesn't this, too, suggest that Ugrārāvās is being presented as a brāhmaṇa. In Mbh XIII.151.39, Lomahārṣana and Ugrārāvās are mentioned in a list of primeval rṣis that also includes Atri, Vasiṣṭha, Parāśara's son, Viśvāmitra, Bharadvāja, Jamadagni, Śvetaketu, Devala and Cyavana. We are told that the recitation of their names can cleanse one of all sins. Finally, a southern Grantha manuscript closes the Ugrārāvās outer frame at the end of the Mbh by telling us that Śaunaka and the Naimiṣa maharṣis honour the sūta who circumambulates them, the sages pronounce the work 'accurately said' (samyaguktam), honour the vipra, and go home. The use of vipra for Ugrārāvās is worth noting. As mentioned in Chapter 4, vipra is a common term for brāhmaṇa in classical Sanskrit. This evidence reinforces our argument that Ugrārāvās is being portrayed as a

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53 Mbh I.1.23-25. Kavi is translated as 'poet'.
54 Pollock, The Language of the Gods in the World of Men, p. 75.
55 Mbh I.53.29.
56 Mbh XIII.151.40.
brāhmaṇa, and the paurāṇika sūta is quite different from the sūta who is accorded a 'low status'. That said, while Lomaharṣaṇa and Ugraśravaś recount itihāsa and purāṇa before brāhmaṇa audiences, we do not find them reciting the Veda publicly. In the hierarchy of the transmitters of sacred lore, they come below those who do.

III

To summarize and take the argument further: A study of the Mbh reveals that all its sūtas are not described in uncomplimentary terms. Itinerant paurāṇika sūtas are portrayed as venerable, wise and learned men, and it is they who have been shown as involved with the dissemination of brahmanical lore. We will now turn to the texts that document the loss for some of the standing that sūtas seem to have had as members of influential groups such as that of the ratnins. In investigating this, the word paurāṇika, which is used to qualify the term sūta, seems crucial, for it is used to distinguish a certain type of sūta from other sūtas. The circumstances of sūtas seem inextricably linked with the emergence of the rājā as the head of the political structure, the acceptance of monarchy as the ideal form of political organization, and with changes in brahmanism.

57 Hiltebeitel, Rethinking the Mahābhārata, p. 95 n. 13 cites Mbh XVIII, App 1, No. 2, lines 11-22.
The *sūta* of Later Vedic literature is closely associated with the *rājā* and the chariot: he drives the *rājā*’s chariot. The chariot was a means of speedy communication, transport and attack; and the *sūta*’s usefulness for the *rājā* would have stemmed in part from his mobility. The *sūta* could collect tribute for the *rājā*, who probably relied on him for military and material support. Since the *sūta* accompanied the *rājā* in a chariot, his report of the hero’s deeds would have been considered authentic. While these accounts are not recoverable, it is likely that they celebrated the *rājā*’s exploits; and *sūtas* are associated with the dissemination of heroic narratives that legitimized the power of *rājās*. In *Baudhāyana Śrauta Sūtra* XVIII.2, the *sūta* is considered a member of the viś, and his ability to communicate messages about the *rājā* effectively probably derived from his close links with the people.

The word *sūta* is sometimes derived from the root *su*, ‘to impel’; and V.S. Pathak draws attention to a passage from the *Kāthaka Samhitā* which indicates how the *sūta* may have impelled the *rājā*:

> By (the celebration) of the midday pressing and with the power endowed to him by Marut, Indra killed Vṛtra .... It (the Marutvatiya verse) strengthens the sacrificer and kills Vṛtra .... With the first Marutvatiya, he (the sacrificer or Indra) raises the thunderbolt, with the second he hurls and with the third he lays (the enemy) low .... Wishing to kill Vṛtra, Indra gave gifts to the gods [so

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58 Roy, *The Emergence of Monarchy*, pp. 181,186.
59 Ibid., pp. 186,193.
60 Ibid., p. 182.
61 Ibid., p. 193.
that they might come with full vigour for his assistance]. He killed Vṛtra with (the help of the gods and) the Marutvatiya hymns .... Therefore the king wins the battle with (the help of) the threefold (recitation) of the Gāyatrī by the sūtas and the grāmaṇīs. 63

The passage suggests that sūtas were entitled to recite Vedic verses, and their recitation is said to have strengthened the rājā and spurred him on to defeat his enemy. 64 The Later Vedic sūta seems to have played an important role in buttressing the rājā’s power in more ways than one. Indeed, he appears to have been part of the rājā’s core support group. He is described as arājanah rājakṛt, one who is not a rājā but is nevertheless a rājā-maker, 65 as one of the eight vīras in whose company the rājā’s consecration is performed, 66 as well as a ratnin whose support the rājā seeks during the Rājasūya. 67

The Arthasastra of Kauṭilya suggests that the fortunes of the sūta associated with the rājā did not remain constant. In using evidence from the Arthasastra, one must remember that the period of composition of the text continues to be debated: some scholars consider it a work of

62 Ibid.
64 Ibid, p.16.
65 SB III.4.1.7.
66 PB XIX.1.4.
67 SB V.3.1.5-6.
the age of the Mauryas, while others assign it a later date. It seems that some part of the *Arthaśāstra* was composed in the Mauryan period. Book II is mostly accepted as the earliest part of the text. For our purposes, it is important to note that both Book II and Book V tend to be used to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan period; and that Book III of the *Arthaśāstra* is generally believed to predate the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti* (A.D. 100-300).

The sūta and the *paurāṇika* are mentioned in Book V of the *Arthaśāstra* in the chapter that deals with the salaries of the functionaries of the state. We gather that both should receive one thousand (panas). One thousand *panas* is far from the highest salary. We are told that functionaries such as the *ṛtvij, mantri, purohita, senāpati* and the crown prince are entitled to forty-eight thousand (panas); some, including the chief of the palace guards and the director of stores, should get twenty-four thousand; others like the princes, the city-judge and the director of factories should receive twelve-thousand; still others such as the commandants of elephants, horses and chariot corps are entitled to eight thousand (panas). We are told that functionaries such as the superintendents of the infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants should receive four thousand (panas); and that the elephant trainer, the horse tamer and

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69 *Arthaśāstra* V.3. Citations are from the edition prepared by R.P. Kangle.

70 *Arthaśāstra* V.3.13.

71 *Arthaśāstra* V.3.3.

72 *Arthaśāstra* V.3.5

73 *Arthaśāstra* V.3.7.

74 *Arthaśāstra* V.3.9.

75 *Arthaśāstra* V.3.11.
breeders of animals, amongst others, are entitled to a salary of two thousand (pañás). The paurāṇika, the sūta, the māgadhā, and some others such as the fortune-teller, the astrologer, the king’s charioteer (sārathi) and agents appearing as householders should be paid one thousand (pañás). There are also those who are entitled only to five hundred, two hundred and fifty, one hundred and twenty or sixty pañás.

We need not take these figures literally. What we should note is that several categories of functionaries of the state are ranked higher than the paurāṇika and the sūta. These two seem to be far less influential than the sūta of the Vedic texts. We can perhaps say that the sūta was now not as essential in establishing and buttressing the power of the rājā as he was in the period for which we glean information from Vedic literature. And we can say that the sūta was probably more dependent on the rājā for a living than is suggested by the older texts. Or, in other words, the decline in the preeminence of the sūta seems to be linked with the gradual acceptance of monarchy.

Book III of the Arthaśāstra contains material akin to that in the Smṛtis. After describing the parentage of various mixed castes on the pattern of the Smṛtis, and mentioning that the sūta is born of the union of a ksatriya man and a brāhmaṇa woman, Arthaśāstra III.7.29 states:

\[ \text{paurāṇikastvanyah sūto māgadhāśca brahmakṣatrirādviśesah} \]

The text differentiates

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76 Arthaśāstra V.3.12.
77 Arthaśāstra V.3.13, 21, 22.
78 Arthaśāstra III.7.28.
between the *pratiloma* and *paurāṇika sūtas*. The nature of the distinction is not entirely clear. The statement could mean that the *paurāṇika sūta* is superior (*viśesa*) to the *brahmana* and the *ksatriya*. Or it might mean that the *paurāṇika sūta* is different (*viśesa*) from the *pratiloma sūta*, who is born of a *brahmana-ksatriya* union. It seems reasonable to conclude that, by the turn of the Christian era, there is evidence for four categories that are of relevance to us — those of the *paurāṇika*, the *sūta*, the *pratiloma sūta* and the *paurāṇika sūta*. The first two are functionaries of the state, the roles of the last two have not been delineated in the *Arthaśāstra*. But there is an attempt to distinguish the *sūta* with a mixed parentage from another type of *sūta*. A more respectable *sūta*? The *Arthaśāstra* documents the declining influence of the *sūta* at the court. One can perhaps also say that it records the beginning of the emergence of a type of *sūta* whose authority derives from his distancing himself from the world of the court — the *paurāṇika sūta*.

The *sūtas* we encounter in the chronologically early portions of the *Mbh*, that are generally believed to predate the very end of the pre-Christian era or the beginning of the Christian era, are attached to the court. We mostly find *sūta* charioteers and panegyrists, including Samjaya. Their parentage is not clearly stated in the early portions of the text. In the chronologically later parts of the *Mbh*, we encounter *sūtas* who are men of religion, *paurāṇikas*, *pratiloma sūtas* and *paurāṇika sūtas*.

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80 See Arvind Sharma, ‘Of *śudras*, *sūtas*, and *ślokas*: Why is the *Mahābhārata* pre-eminently in the *anuṣṭubḥ* metre?’, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, Vol. 43:3, 2000, pp. 274-75 n. 214. However, Sharma argues that ‘the *sūta* of the *purāṇas* is different (*viśesah*) from the other *sūta* because ... he comes from a different mix than the *sūta*, who is born from a *ksatriya* male and a *brahmana* female.’ (p. 275) In fact, the parentage of the *paurāṇika sūta* is not mentioned, and we cannot say that he too is a mixed caste.
The passage from the *Arjunavanavāsa* section of the *Ādiparvan* which mentions Arjuna’s departure into the forest with men learned in matters of religion includes *sūtas* and *paurāṇikas* in the Pāndava’s entourage. Like *sūta* charioteers and panegyrists, these men too are dependent on a king or prince for a living. But their social standing appears to be higher than that of *sūta* charioteers and panegyrists as they are considered worthy of being part of a group of men with religious learning. As we have stated earlier, this is significant, for the brahmanical tradition excludes many kinds of people from direct access to sacred knowledge. That said, as has been mentioned in the context of Book V of the *Arthasastra*, these men seem to be nowhere as influential at the court as the *sūta* of Later Vedic literature.

As we have noted earlier, the *pratiloma sūtas* of the chronologically later portions of the *Mbh* serve members of the royal family, and are dependent on *kṣatriyas* for a living. They are, more often than not, treated as insignificant retainers by their employers. The *paurāṇika sūta*, on the other hand, is respected even by the people who wield political power, people that this type of *sūta* seems to have distanced himself from. In other words, apart from their erudition, it was perhaps their detachment from the world of the court with its rivalries and intrigues that gave such tellers of tales the veneration they enjoyed. The honour they earned enabled them to influence even the world they had chosen not to participate in. The other point that becomes evident is that the word *paurāṇika* seems to have become crucial in determining the status of *sūtas*: those to whom this term came to apply appear to have been held in greater esteem than those to whom it did not. And in the previous section of this chapter, we drew
attention to some instances in the *Mbh* where it seems that Ugraśravas at least is being presented as a *brāhmaṇa*.

In the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, which post-dates the *Mbh*, the *paurāṇika sūta* appears to have been inducted into the social structure as a *brāhmaṇa* more clearly. We are told that Balarāma decides not to participate in the Mahābhārata war, and to bathe at sacred places instead. At one point, an inebriated Balarāma finds himself in an enchanting forest where learned *brāhmaṇas* are listening to a *sūta’s* recitation of *purāṇas*. Seeing Balarāma drunk, all the *brāhmaṇas* rise up and greet him, except *sauti*. An enraged Balarāma kills the *sūta* while the latter is ‘repeating the words of the Veda’. We gather that when Balarāma comes to his senses, he realizes that he has committed a very grave sin — the sin of brahmanicide. He knows he has to atone for that, and decides to undertake a twelve-year vow.\(^{81}\) Can we argue that this episode suggests that *paurāṇika sūtas* had elevated themselves to such an extent that they had come to be classified as *brāhmaṇas*? As has been indicated earlier, a knowledge of brahmanical lore and the ability to recount this well appears to have been a factor that enabled groups of people to aspire to and gain a higher social standing. The category of *paurāṇika* may have been an open category which absorbed upwardly mobile groups that were familiarizing themselves with an evolving brahmanical sacred lore.

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\(^{81}\) *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* VI.24-35. I have used the edition prepared by K.M. Banerjea, and drawn on F.Eden Pargiter’s translation.
To recapitulate and go further: The centuries that witnessed fluctuations in the fortunes of *sūtas* were also those in which monarchy came to be recognized as the ideal form of political organization in brahmanical texts, including the *Mbh* and the *VR*. And brahmanism continued to evolve during the period. It seems that, over time, the *sūta* lost his position as a preeminent member of the *rājā*’s core group, and as an indispensable legitimizer of the *rājā*’s power. Romila Thapar explains why this might have happened. She suggests that initially bards kept records of those in power, and these records may well have been preserved in Prakrit. The data originally maintained by bards were gradually taken over by *brāhmaṇas* who recognized the power involved in capturing and controlling the past. Thapar argues that this was not so difficult, given that the bard initially recorded data orally,82 and the *brāhmaṇa* had recourse to literacy.83 In other words, we can say that the non-literate bard lost out to the literate *brāhmaṇa* in the competition for the right to maintain records of those in power. Most bards do seem to have continued maintaining genealogies and recounting tales about *rājās* and their other politically powerful patrons, but they appear to have done so orally. *Brāhmaṇas*, on the other hand, used writing and Sanskrit; and when they appropriated and refashioned bardic lore they also downgraded many of those from whom they had purloined their material.84

The trend appears to have been that of the declining importance of *sūtas* who were attached to the court, and this coincided with the emergence of monarchy and its acceptance as the

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83 Indeed, as mentioned in Ch. 1, Thapar suggests that the word *sūta* may have been connected with the Prakrit term *sutta*, literally, ‘that which is heard’. She writes that this may refer to the oral preservation and transmission of material by the bard. See Thapar, ‘Genealogical patterns as perceptions of the past’, p. 719.
84 Kumkum Roy points out that while the *sūta*’s lore may have been increasingly taken over by *brāhmaṇas*, it continued to be used for the promotion of the institution of *rājya*. See Roy, *The Emergence of Monarchy*, p. 194.
best kind of polity. But, as we have noted earlier, the status of all sūtas did not deteriorate over time: the position of paurāṇika sūtas did not. The reasons for this become evident when one attempts to come to terms with the evolution of brahmanism. In the period under consideration, brahmanism exhibited an extraordinary resilience in the face of competition from more socially inclusive belief-systems like Buddhism, which attracted adherents and support from a range of social groups, even some politically powerful patrons.

One must ask how brahmanism widened its scope and managed to encompass vast sections of people in its fold. This was possible because of the evolution of texts like the Mbh and the VR which present themselves as works for a wide audience that included women and members of the lower castes. But who actually broadcast this literature so that it could become widely known? Just as the Buddha and Buddhist monks were propagators of the doctrine they subscribed to, the brahmanical order came to encompass groups of people who discussed and disseminated brahmanical precepts. The idea of allowing every section of society access to its texts had not characterized brahmanism to begin with, perhaps it was borrowed from belief-systems like Buddhism. But while hijacking the idea of reaching out to a vast audience, brahmanical literature and those who transmitted it were shrilly critical of the Buddhist preacher for doing just that.

Brahmanism came to be espoused, amongst other castes, by some types of bards. Can we suggest that, by the beginning of the Christian era, some bardic groups, or, more accurately, subgroups within bardic groups, may have begun to refashion themselves as brāhmaṇas? They would have arrogated to themselves one of the functions of brāhmaṇas -- the
dissemination of brahmanical doctrine. Here one may draw attention to the lines of transmission that are delineated in the \textit{Mbh} and other texts. The \textit{Mbh} describes Lomahar\={s}ana as Vy\={a}sa's student, and Ugra\={s}ravas recounts tales that he had heard from his father and Vai\={s}\={a}m\={a}payana, one of Vy\={a}sa's \textit{br\={a}hma\={n}a} disciples. The \textit{Brahmanda Pur\={a}\mathring{a}} tells us that Lomahar\={s}ana taught the \textit{pur\={a}\mathring{a}} to Atreya Sumati, K\={a}\={s}yapa Ak\={r}tavr\={a}na, Bh\={a}radv\={a}ja Agn\={i}varcas, V\={a}si\={s}\={i}ha Mitrayu, S\={a}v\={a}rni Somadatti and Sus\={a}rman S\={a}m\={i}sap\={a}yana. F.E. Pargiter writes that at least five of these pupils were \textit{br\={a}hma\={n}as}. The \textit{Brahmanda Pur\={a}\mathring{a}} informs us that Lomahar\={s}ana's son, Ugra\={s}ravas, also learnt the \textit{pur\={a}\mathring{a}} from his father. All this indicates that both \textit{br\={a}hma\={n}as} and \textit{paur\={a}nika s\={u}tas} (and not just the former) are being presented as custodians and transmitters of brahmanical knowledge, at least of the fifth \textit{Veda}, if not the first four. Clearly such \textit{paur\={a}nika s\={u}tas} cannot be classified among those \textit{s\={u}tas} whose status declined over time. Can we argue that they may have been upwardly mobile bards who had gradually brahmanized themselves? In their refashioning, these upwardly mobile tellers of tales seem to have drawn on ideas that were gaining respectability in an evolving brahmanism. Can we suggest that they particularly adopted the model of the itinerant preacher? Interestingly, the life of the Buddha was also emblematic of a shift in the idea of what an ideologue should do -- it stood for a movement away from the royal court to the life of a wandering seeker and teacher.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{85} This would not have been possible without the approval of \textit{br\={a}hma\={n}as}, and one must ask why the \textit{br\={a}hma\={n}as} might have given their approval. One must also ask how and where the brahmanizing subgroups within bardic groups learned Sanskrit.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{86} F.E. Pargiter, \textit{Ancient Indian Historical Tradition}, Delhi, 1962, pp. 22-23.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., p. 24.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.}
We are confronted with a paradox. Court-loyal sūtas appear to have been downgraded with the passage of time. In contrast, to use a contemporary term, the ‘Independents’ -- the paurāṇika sūtas -- garnered respectability. The paradox is further heightened by the fact that the ‘Independents’ seem to espouse the cause of kingship as an ideal even while distancing themselves from the life of particular courts. In the process, they appear to have acted as important disseminators of the brahmanical ideas of the time.

One may end this section by noting that movements that aim for higher status, and are confined to small groups, tend to confirm overall hierarchy. So it seems that the paurāṇika sūtas’ upward mobility would not have contradicted brahmanical ideals like varṇadharma. Indeed, the texts whose dissemination paurāṇika sūtas are associated with emphasize their commitment to brahmanical values. And these texts are attributed to Vyāsa – the foremost authority on the Veda, whose origins came to be portrayed as increasingly respectable as the Mbh evolved. It is not surprising that the paurāṇika sūtas who are associated with the transmission of Vyāsa’s work, too, are presented as respectable.

IV

Let us now turn to Kuṣa and Lava. They appear only in the Bāla and Uttara kāṇḍas of the VR, which Brockington assigns to the third stage of the evolution of the text and dates to the

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89 See Section IV of Ch. 4 of this dissertation.
first to third centuries A.D. As has been noted earlier, in the VR, they are presented both as Vālmiki’s disciples and Raṁa’s sons. While Kuśa and Lava are outstanding performers of their guru’s composition and are, in addition, described as being familiar with dharma and well-grounded in the Vedas, they are not typical ksatriya princes, for they do not participate in any sort of combat, nor do they wield weapons. That said, they are presented in a very favourable light in the VR. This is not surprising, given that they are the sons of an exemplary man-god, have been brought up by a righteous rsi and are trained by that sage to sing the Raṁaśya—a poetic work about ideal characters from an ideal realm. Hence, it is all the more puzzling that the twins are referred to together as Kuśilava in the VR, since the common noun kuśilava has rather negative connotations by the time Kuśa and Lava are introduced into the text.

In the Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra, for instance, we are told that vipras who are kuśilavas, cattle herders, traders, artisans, servants and usurers should be treated like śūdras.90 This statement not only suggests that some brāhmaṇas may have earned a living as bards, but also that this was not considered a suitable occupation for brāhmaṇas. According to the Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra, a man ignorant of the Veda cannot be a brāhmaṇa, neither can a kuśilava, a trader, one who takes orders from a śūdra, a thief or a physician.91 Here, too, kuśilava

91 Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra III.3. See the edition prepared by Patrick Olivelle.

While P.V. Kane dates the Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra to 500-200 B.C. and the Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra to 300-100 B.C., Olivelle argues that neither text can be placed before the middle of the second century B.C., and the Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra should be placed closer to the beginning of the Christian era, or even in the first century A.D. See Dharmasūtras: The Law Codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana and Vasiṣṭha (annotated text and trans. by Patrick Olivelle), Delhi, 2000, pp. 4-10.
appears to denote an occupation, rather than a fixed social group into which a person was born. It seems that some *brāhmaṇas* functioned as bards. However, one may note that this was not regarded as a profession that *brāhmaṇas* should adopt. The *Manusmṛti* records its authors’ disapproval of *kusilavas* when it tells us that the *rājā* should expel from the town such undesirable characters as *kusilavas*, gamblers, heretics, men who persist in bad actions and bootleggers, for these concealed thieves harm a king’s subjects.\(^92\) In the *Śāntiparvan* of the *Mbh*, too, we are told that the king should banish from the town *kusilavas*, wandering mendicants, drunkards and madmen, for they may cause damage.\(^93\) In Book II of the *Arthasastra*, *kusilavas* and some others like actors, dancers, singers and musicians are ordered not to create obstructions in people’s work.\(^94\) In the text’s third book, we are told that the *kusilava* is born of the union of a *vaidehaka* man and an *ambastha* woman.\(^95\) The *vaidehaka* is described as the offspring of a *vaśya* man and a *brāhmaṇa* woman, and the *ambastha* as the product of the opposite combination.\(^96\) *KuSilava* no longer suggests only harmful, disruptive elements in society, the term denotes people who belong to a despised mixed caste.

Is there another way of making sense of the *VR*’s *KuSilava*? While the word *kusilava* is not listed in the *Vedic Index*, given that Kuśa and Lava perform Rāma's tale at the king’s *Aśvamedha* in the *VR*, one may look for their predecessors in descriptions of the Horse

\(^{92}\) *Manusmṛti* IX.225-26.
\(^{93}\) *Mbh* XII.69.49.
\(^{94}\) *Arthasastra* II.1.34.
\(^{95}\) *Arthasastra* III.7.32.
Sacrifice in Vedic literature. In Chapter 1, we mentioned the two vīṇāgāthins or lute-players who sang the rāja’s praises every day while the sacrificial horse was away. According to the SB, the vīṇa suggests glory (śrī), and it was this that the vīṇāgāthins were believed to confer on the yajamāna through their performance. Since one of them was a brāhmaṇa and the other a rājanya, we are told that the rāja’s glory was guarded on either side by spiritual knowledge and power (brahmanā ca kṣatreṇa cobbhayataḥ śrīḥ parigrhitāḥ bhavati). This statement implies that the yajamāna had the support of the elite associated with spiritual attainments and of those known for their military strength. The brāhmaṇa sang about the sacrifices performed by the rāja and his generosity. And because the brāhmaṇa is associated with the fulfilment of the objects of sacrifice (iṣṭāpūrtam), he could ensure this for his patron. The rājanya recounted the rāja’s victories on the battlefield, for war is the rājanya’s strength (vīryam), and it was with this strength that he could endow the yajamāna. It seems that to say something in a ritual context is to bring it to pass. The gāthās (songs) of the lute-players, it appears to have been believed, could make the rāja’s exploits active again in his person, and in the minds of those who heard them. And, even though there is no direct information about who comprised the vīṇāgāthins’ audience, one can certainly argue that, in recounting the yajamāna’s achievements, they acted as his legitimizers.

Can one suggest that the vīṇāgāthins of the Vedic texts were reincarnated as the lute-playing Kuśa and Lava in the VR? As has been noted already, the twins seem to have had a dual

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96 Arthaśāstra III.7.27.21.
97 SB XIII.1.5.1.
98 SB XIII.1.5.3.
99 SB XIII.1.5.6.
identity. They are presented as the *brāhmaṇa* sage Vālmīki’s mouthpieces, they perform the tale he has composed exactly as he asks them to. And yet, whenever we encounter them, the twins are also presented as Rāma’s sons. So, like the viṇāgāthinś, they combine the attributes of *brāhmaṇaś* and *kṣatriyaś*. Like the viṇāgāthinś, they recount the *yajamāna*’s military achievements, and praise him for the sacrifices he has conducted and for his generosity. They bring Rāma’s tale alive, and with that, Rāma’s prestige and power seem to grow. Can we argue that the *VR* makes another connection with the Vedic *Aśvamedha* through the figures of Kuśa and Lava? But while a link is forged, the *kāvya* that Kuśa and Lava sing is clearly a very different work from the viṇāgāthinś’ short gāthāś,¹⁰¹ and Rāma a very different sort of rāja from his Vedic counterpart. Indeed, the poem that Kuśilava perform is on its way to becoming a Vaisnava text, and Rāma a *bhakti* god.

One can also ask whether the term *kuśilava* invariably has negative connotations. It seems that the word is used in a neutral way in the *Nātyaśāstra*, roughly at the time at which Kuśa and Lava are introduced into the *VR*. According to the *Nātyaśāstra*, the *kuśilava* is that member of a theatre group who is knowledgeable about the principles of instrumental music and skilled at playing instruments.¹⁰² However, perhaps partly due to the strong association of *kuśilavas* with disruptive tendencies, Kuśa and Lava are portrayed more emphatically as

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¹⁰⁰ *SB* XIII.1.5.6.
¹⁰¹ For the gāthāś of the *SB*, see Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, pp. 5-6.
¹⁰² *Nātyaśāstra* XXXV.106. See the edition prepared by Manomohan Ghosh.
ksatriya heroes in later texts like Bhavabhūti’s Uttarāmacarita, which probably belongs to the first half of the eighth century A.D.¹⁰³

The Rāma of Bhavabhūti’s play has commenced his Asvamedha. While the VR’s Kuśa and Lava come to the Naimisarṇa forest with their guru to attend the king’s yajña, in the Uttarāmacarita, the ritually consecrated horse protected by Lakṣmana’s son Candraketu wanders into Vālmiki’s āśrama. In Act V of Bhavabhūti’s play, Lava, insulted by the challenge that Candraketu’s soldiers have announced, pits himself, alone and on foot, against the army accompanying the horse. The twelve-year-old slaughters his adversaries. In the prelude to Act VI, Lava and Candraketu fight a ferocious battle, till Rāma himself arrives and intervenes.¹⁰⁴ As Lava withdraws the weapons he has been using, Rāma realizes that they are the same weapons that he himself had received from Viśvāmitra long ago. When the king asks the boy how they came into his possession, Lava says that the weapons revealed themselves to him and his twin brother, Kuśa.¹⁰⁵ The weapons suggest the boys’ pedigree, for in Act I, Rāma had uttered a blessing to the effect that they would serve Sītā’s children—his heirs.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ See Rāma’s Last Act by Bhavabhūti (ed. and trans. by Sheldon Pollock), New York, 2007, p. 29. I cite this edition of the Uttarāmacarita below.

One can ask whether the uncomplimentary portrayal of kuśīlavas was more of a problem because Rāma was regarded as an avatāra of Viṣṇu by the middle of the first millennium A.D. One may also keep in mind the early medieval context of people from varied backgrounds rising to royal authority and claiming ksatriya status and links with Rāma’s vaṃśa: it would have been necessary for Kuśa and Lava to be respectable ksatriyas.


¹⁰⁶ Uttarāmacarita, Act I: ‘At the painting exhibition’, pp. 82-85.
In the *Uttararāmacarita*, it is Kuśa and Lava’s martial character that is highlighted, rather than the bardic function they perform in the *VR*. That said, it is evident from a conversation between Lava and Janaka in Act IV that the boy is familiar with Rāma’s story till the king’s banishment of Sītā. And in Act VI of the play, at Rāma’s request, the twins recite a couple of verses from Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa*. One may note that Kuśa and Lava are not referred to as Kuśīlava/ kuśīlava, and they are not shown singing Rāma’s entire tale. Rāma’s story is performed in the *Uttararāmacarita* – in the last act, by celestial dancers. While Sītā is swallowed up by the earth in the *VR’s Uttarakanda*, Bhavabhūti’s text ends with Rāma and Sītā being reunited, and united for the first time with their two sons. In the *Uttararāmacarita*, the performance of Rāma’s story leads to a happy ending. Bhavabhūti revises the troubling episode of Rāma’s rejection of his wife, and his play attests to the vitality of the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition.

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Epilogue

We can begin this epilogue by asking whether the Rāma and Mahābhārata stories may have captured the imagination of millions of people for hundreds of years because there is something in them that everyone can respond to. They are both narratives about exemplary and dubious and downright demoniac conduct in the public realm, as well as tales of domestic tensions, personal relationships, love, fidelity and matters of the inner world. This seems to be the reason not only for the stories' extraordinary popularity but also the variety of renderings of these tales; for every teller, every social group has recounted them in a unique way, highlighting his/her/its distinctive concerns.

The Rāma and Mahābhārata narratives had been appropriated by the Buddhists at least from the time of the compilation of the Jātakas.¹ By the middle of the first millennium A.D., Jaina narrative literature included a version of Kṛṣṇa Vaśudeva's story as well as Pāṇḍava tales.² Jaina authors also made the Rāma story their own: they presented Rāma not as an avatāra of Viṣṇu, but as one of the thirty-two śālākā-puruṣas or exemplary Jaina laymen.³ It is evident that the Rāma and Mahābhārata narratives were not the

¹ I have discussed the Daśaratha Jātaka's rendering of the Rāma story in Ch. 1 of this dissertation. For Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayana in the Jātaka tales, see Sullivan, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipayana Vyāsa and the Mahābhārata, pp. 103–9.
exclusive preserve of brahmanism even during the period of composition of the *VR* and the *Mbh*. Indeed, we get a sense of interacting belief-systems when, for instance, the *Paumacariya* which ‘knows its Vālmīki’ sets out ‘to correct its errors and … [brahmanical] extravagances’. And it is necessary to try to understand the durability of the *VR* and the *Mbh*, and the spread of their versions of the Rāma and Mahābhārata stories in the context of diverse competing ideologies in the early historic period.

The frame stories of the *VR* and the *Mbh* suggest where and how their tales could have been transmitted, who the tellers and listeners may have been. They indicate that the texts’ composers were concerned with their reception. The Vālmīki/Kuśilava, Ugraśravas and Vaiśampāyana frames are regarded as ‘additions’ to the ‘original’ narratives of the *VR* and the *Mbh*. In these frames, *yajñas* are presented as the occasions for the dissemination of an evolving brahmanical Vaiṣṇava lore. The ‘core’ of the *Mbh* – the battle sequence of Books VI to IX – is also narrated using a frame story: Saṁjaya relates the events of the Kurukṣetra war to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. The court is the location of the dialogue between the *sūta* and the rājā, and this frame gives us the social context for the transmission of heroic lays.

It is important that the report of the Mahābhārata war presented by Saṁjaya at the Kuru court is enclosed by the stories told at *yajñas* by the brāhmaṇa Vaiśampāyana and a *sūta* of a different type from Saṁjaya, a *paurāṇika sūta* who is, in fact, portrayed as a *brāhmaṇa* in the *Mbh*. This framing structure points to the changing nature of the *Mbh*, it

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4 Ramanujan, ‘Three hundred Rāmāyanas’, p. 34.
suggests the text’s brahmanization. Indeed, both the Mbh and the VR were transformed over the long period of their composition, and this dissertation draws attention to some of the changes they underwent. It also draws attention to their attempts to link themselves with the Vedic tradition, and their refashioning of that tradition, especially in their presentation of the yajñas at which their stories are recounted and heard.

It is significant that a king features as the primary listener in three of the four frames we have just mentioned – at Rāma’s Aṣvamedha, at Janamejaya’s Sarpasattra and in the Saṁjaya-Dhṛtarāṣṭra dialogue. Indeed, the VR and the Mbh deal with issues of abiding concern to rulers – palace intrigue, determining the heir to the throne and righteous rulership. Scholars like Alf Hiltebeitel and James L. Fitzgerald have argued that these texts respond to actual historical situations, that they must especially be understood against an Asōkan or ‘greater Magadhan’ background. And the VR and the Mbh have, in turn, been invoked in real politics – when ruling dynasties have forged connections with their two major lineages, the Sūryavāṃśa and the Candravāṃśa; or when those seeking political power have espoused the ideal of Rāmarajya, for instance.

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5 Note that I have modified the argument that the transformation of the Mbh was directly related to the wresting of control over the text away from bards by brāhmaṇas, notably the Bhārgava brāhmaṇas. I have argued that subgroups within bardic groups may have begun to refashion themselves as brāhmaṇas by the beginning of the Christian era, and such upwardly mobile bards are associated with the transmission of the text in the ‘brahmanical additions’ to the Mbh.


7 See, for instance, Thapar, Exile and the Kingdom, pp. 24, 39 n. 104. Thapar also points out that dynasties linking themselves with the Sūryavāṃśa encouraged the propagation of the VR.
That said, the brahmanical-Vaiṣṇava 'additions' to the *VR* and the *Mbh* envisage a wider audience for these texts than rulers and those seeking political power. In discussing some of what the *VR* and the *Mbh* tell us about their transmission, this dissertation draws attention to differences in the major contexts of their performance, in those who tell their tales and those who listen. This is one way of trying to understand the phenomenal appeal of these two Sanskrit texts, and it is necessary to do so, for these are arguably the oldest and most prestigious renderings of narratives which continue to claim public attention.