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Fate, *Dharma*, and Dispassion: Demonic Dialogues in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*

Abstract

This paper analyses a group of dialogues in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, centred on Indra's conversations with demonic figures such as Prahrāda, Bali, and Namuci. These so-called "demonic dialogues" exhibit shared structural and thematic features: a narrative frame grounded in Yudhiṣṭhira's existential inquiry, the demons' fall from a previously exalted status, and a distinctly fatalistic worldview. These passages, often marked by textual layering, may reflect editorial efforts to reconcile fatalistic discourse – typically attributed to defeated demons – with karmic and dharmic moral reasoning, particularly in later redactional strata. Within this framework, the figure of Śrī – the goddess of royal splendour – functions as a narrative motif: her departure from the demons and alliance with Indra works in the frame of karmic retribution worldview. The paper argues that these dialogues – through their interplay of *dharma* and fate, asceticism and kingship – serve as vehicles for ascetic spiritual instruction, particularly the cultivation of dispassion. They likely represent successive layers of composition, structuring earlier mythic material into didactic narratives.

Dialogical Structuring of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* Tracts

Formally, the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (=MokṣDhP) is structured around two narrative frames. The first is the external frame, consisting of the dialogue between Bhīṣma and Yudhiṣṭhira, which links the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* to the *Rājadharmaparvan* (MBh 12,1–128) and the *Āpaddharmaparvan* (MBh 12,129–167). The second is the internal dialogical frame, within which Bhīṣma introduces a series of didactic episodes in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's inquiries. The *Mokṣadharmaparvan* comprises 63 such episodes, referred to by Bhīṣma mostly as *saṃvādas* 'dialogues'¹ or *gītās* 'songs'.² Collectively, these 63 episodes encompass 186 *adhyāyas*, making the MokṣDhP the largest *upaparvan* in the *Mahābhārata*, accounting for approximately 9% of the entire epic.

In addition to the dialogical framing, there are instances of thematic groupings among these separate episodes, suggesting a deliberate arrangement, most likely by the hand(s) of a redactor or redactors. In his unpublished dissertation, James Fitzgerald (1980: 297–303) identified four groups of tracts organised around particular themes.

- 1) The most prominent group of such texts appears in MBh 12,215–221: a series of dialogues unified by the narrative theme of Indra's conversation with the demonic kings Prahrāda, Bali, and Namuci, all of whom lost their elevated positions and became ascetics espousing fatalistic doctrines.
- 2) The second group comprises tracts centred on the theme of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), found in MBh 12,252–262 and 264.

1 These dialogues typically unfold between a questioner and a respondent who assumes the role of teacher or instructor. Among the respondents are prominent figures cited by Bhīṣma as authoritative sources.

2 Manuscript colophons also employ terms such as *upākhyāna* 'subtale' and *kathana* 'narrative', among others.

- 3) The third consists of texts related to the theme of Kṛṣṇaite Vaiṣṇavism (MBh 12,200–210).
- 4) The fourth group includes chapters concerned with the teachings of Sāṃkhya and Sāṃkhya-Yoga, which are dispersed throughout the MokṣDhP (MBh 12,291–296; 298–306; 289–290; 187–188; 266–267).

Here, I would like to propose a reorganisation of Fitzgerald’s scheme by identifying an additional pattern according to which certain texts within the MokṣDhP appear to be grouped. By focusing on the interlocutors and principal characters of the dialogues, one can observe that specific tracts are arranged in a manner that aligns with, and further develops, Fitzgerald’s framework.

- 1) An earlier group of dialogues shares certain features with the demonic dialogues. These include MBh 12,168 (the Song of Senajit), to which the related “Song of Senajit” from the *Rājadharmaparvan* (MBh 12,26) may be appended, along with a cluster of three additional dialogues: MBh 12,171 (The Song of Mañki), 12,172 (The Dialogue of Pahrāda and Ājagara), and 12,173 (The Dialogue of the Jackal and a Kāśyapa).³ To this group, one may also append two related episodes – both involving the demon king Prahḷāda – found outside the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*: MBh 3,20, which presents a dialogue between the demon king Bali and his grandfather Prahḷāda, and MBh 12,124 from the *Rājadharmaparvan*, featuring a conversation between Indra, disguised as a pious brāhmaṇa, and the demon Prahḷāda.
- 2) A group already identified by Brockington (2000: 78) consists of two dialogues spread across four *adhyāyas*, centred on the

3 Fitzgerald (1980: 240–242) already pointed out the thematic link of this cluster to the Song of Senajit and the Song of Mañki. Cf. Negribs 2022: 199.

figure of Vṛtra: 12,270–271 (The Song of Vṛtra), 12,272–273 (The Slaying of Vṛtra). This grouping appears to be affiliated with the principal corpus of “demonic dialogues”.

- 3) MBh 12,291–308 comprises dialogues that appear to be deliberately grouped and centres on the figure of King Janaka and the teachings of Sāṃkhya and Yoga. This grouping partially corresponds to Fitzgerald’s fourth category. The group is preceded by two chapters – one devoted exclusively to Yoga (*Yogavidhi* “The Rule of Yoga,” 12,289) and another to Sāṃkhya (*Sāṃkhyakathana* “The Story of Sāṃkhya,” 12,290).⁴ Additionally, there are three “stray” dialogues featuring Janaka that lie outside the main Janaka corpus: MBh 12,211–212 (The Teaching of Pañcaśikha), 12,268 (The Dialogue of Māṇḍavya and Janaka), and 12,279–287 (The Song of Parāśara).⁵
- 4) The group centred on the figure of Śuka (MBh 12,309–320) consists of three tracts⁶ and immediately follows the final chapter of the Janaka cycle.⁷ This group also includes a dialogue with Janaka in 12,313. There is another major Śuka dialogue that is not adjacent to 12,309–320, the *Śuka-anupraśna* (MBh 12,224–247).

4 For a discussion of the textual history and narrative structure of the Janaka dialogues, see Andrijanić (2021).

5 MBh 12,211–212 presents Pañcaśikha’s teachings to Janaka (Motegi 1999; Bronkhorst 2007: 309–328). MBh 12,268 is a brief dialogue in which Janaka instructs Māṇḍavya that desire leads to suffering, whereas the renunciation of desire leads to bliss. MBh 12,279–287, the Parāśara’s Song (*Parāśara-gītā*), is regarded by Fitzgerald (1980: 314) as a possible later interpolation into an already redacted version of the MokṣDhP, though he stops short of making this assertion definitive.

6 Brockington (2000:80) treats this as a single story about Śuka, and calls it the *Śuka-carita*.

7 12,309 “The Barleygruel Lesson (Śuka and Vyāsa)”; 12,310–315 “The origin of Śuka” and 12,316–320 “Śuka’s Flight”.

I see no reason to doubt that these tracts were deliberately and systematically grouped. Even the two chapters preceding the Janaka cycle, which deal with Sāṃkhya and Yoga, may be regarded as an introduction to this body of teachings on Sāṃkhya and Yoga, conveyed to Janaka by various teachers, including Pañcaśikha, Vasiṣṭha, Yājñavalkya, and the nun Sulabhā. Furthermore, it appears that these dialogues possess a complex textual history; however, their final arrangement reveals careful composition – presumably by redactors who thoughtfully organised and reworked older material available to them.

Fitzgerald's four groups of MoksDh texts: 1. kṛṣṇaite vaiṣṇavism 2. ahimsa 3. demonic dialogues 4. sāmkhya-yoga pairs

168	The Dialogue of a Brāhmana and King Senajit	258	The Song of Cīrakārika	
169	The Dialogue of Father and Son	259	The Dialogue of Dṛumatsena and Satyavat	Ahimsā
170	The Song of Sāmyāka	260–262	Kapila and the Cow	
171	The Song of Maṅki	263	The Story of Kuṇḍadhāra	
172	The Dialogue of Prahrāda and the Ājagara	264	Censure of the [Animal] Sacrifice	Ahimsā
173	The Dialogue of the Jackal and the Descendent of Kaśyapa	265	The Four Questions	
174	A tract on karmaṇ	266	Description of Yoga Conduct	Sāmkhya-Yoga
175–185	The Dialogue of Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja	267	The Dialogue of Nārada and Asita	
186	The Rule of Conduct	268	The Dialogue of Māṇḍavya and Janaka	
187	A Discourse on the Supreme Self	269	The Song of Hārīta	
188	A Discourse on Yoga	270–271	The Song of Vṛtra	
189–193	A Discourse on jāpaka	272–273	The Slaying of Vṛtra	
194–199	The Dialogue of Manu and Brhaspati	274	The Origination of Fever	
200	The origination of all beings	275	The Dialogue of Nārada and Samaṅga	
201	Safety and Fortune in all Directions	276	The Declaration of What is Best	
202	[Viṣṇu's] Play within the Earth	277	The Dialogue of Sāgara and Aṛiṣṇanemi	
203–210	The Adhyātma Account of the Vṛṣṇis	278	The Dialogue of Bhava and Bhārgava	
211–212	The Teaching of Pañcasīkha	279–287	The Song of Parāśara	
213	Praise of Restraint	288	The Song of the Goose	
214	Praise of Fasting, living on Nectar	289	The Rule of Yoga	Sāmkhya-Yoga
215	The Dialogue of Indra and Prahrāda	290	Sāmkyakathana	
216–218	The Dialogue of Indra and Bali	291–296	The Dialogue of Vasiṣṭha and Karāla Janaka	
219	The Dialogue of Indra and Namuci	297	The Instruction of Janaka	
220	The Dialogue of Indra and Bali	298–306	The Dialogue of Yājñavalkya and Janaka	Sāmkhya-Yoga
221	The Dialogue of Śrī and Indra	307	The Dialogue of Pañcasīkha and Janaka	
222	The Dialogue of Jaiṣṭhavya and Asita	308	The Dialogue of Sulabhā and Janaka	
223	The Dialogue of Vāsudeva and Ugrasena	309	The Barleygruel Lesson Śuka Vyāsa	
224–247	Śuka's Questioning of Vyāsa	310–315	The origin of Śuka	
248–250	The Dialogue of Mṛtyu and Prajāpati	316–320	Śuka's Flight	
251	The definition of Dharma	321–339	Nārāyaṇīya	
252–256	The Dialogue of Tulādhāra and Jājali	340–353	The Story of a Gleaner	
257	The Song of Vicakṣṇu			Ahimsā

Adapted grouping of MokṣDh texts: 1. kṛṣṇaite vaiṣṇavism 2. demonic dialogues 3. ahimsā 4. Vṛtra's group, 5. Janaka dialogues 6. Śuka's group

168	The Dialogue of a Brāhmaṇa and Senajit	resembles Dem. dialogues
169	The Dialogue of Father and Son	
170	The Song of Śanyāka	
171	The Song of Manki	resembles Demonic dialogues
172	The Dialogue of Prahrāda and Ājagara	
173	The Dialogue of the Jackal and a Kāśyapa	
174	A tract on karma	
175–185	The Dialogue of Bhṛgu and Bharadvāja	
186	The Rule of Conduct	
187	A Discourse on the Supreme Self	
188	A Discourse on Yoga	
189–193	A Discourse on Jāpaka	
194–199	The Dialogue of Manu and Brhaspati	
200	The origination of all beings	
201	Safety and Fortune in all Directions	
202	[Viṣṇu's] Play within the Earth	Kṛṣṇaite Vaiṣṇavism
203–210	The Adhyātma Account of the Vṛṣṇis	
211–212	The Teaching of Pañcāsikha	
213	Praise of Restraint	
214	Praise of Fasting; living on Nectar	
215	The Dialogue of Indra and Prahrāda	
216–218	The Dialogue of Indra and Bali (I)	
219	The Dialogue of Indra and Namuci	Demonic Dialogues
220	The Dialogue of Indra and Bali (II)	
221	The Dialogue of Śrī and Indra	
222	The Dialogue of Jaigīṣavya and Asita	
223	The Dialogue of Vāsudeva and Ugrasena	
224–247	Śuka's Questioning of Vyāsa	
248–250	The Dialogue of Mṛtyu and Prajāpati	
251	The definition of Dharma	
252–256	The Dialogue of Tulādhara and Jājali	
257	The Song of Vīcakhnu	Ahimsā
258	The Song of Cirkārīka	
259	The Dialogue of Dymatsena and Satyavat	Ahimsā
260–262	Kapila and the Cow	
263	The Story of Kuṇḍadhāra	
264	Censure of the [Animal] Sacrifice	Ahimsā
265	The Four Questions	
266	Description of Yoga Conduct	
267	The Dialogue of Nārada and Asita	
268	The Dialogue of Māṇḍavya and Janaka	
269	The Song of Hārta	
270–271	The Song of Vṛtra	Vṛtra's group, resembles
272–273	The Slaying of Vṛtra	Demonic dialogues
274	The Origination of Fever	
275	The Dialogue of Nārada and Samaṅga	
276	The Declaration of What is Best	
277	The Dialogue of Sāgara and Aṛiṣṭanemi	
278	The Dialogue of Bhava and Bhārgava	
279–287	The Song of Parāśara	
288	The Song of the Goose	
289	The Rule of Yoga	
290	Saṁkhyakathana	
291–296	The Dialogue of Vasiṣṭha and Karālā Janaka	
297	The Instruction of Janaka	
298–306	The Dialogue of Yājñavalkya and Janaka	Janaka dialogues
307	The Dialogue of Pañcāsikha and Janaka	
308	The Dialogue of Sulabhā and Janaka	
309	The Barleygruel Lesson Śuka-Vyāsa	
310–315	The origin of Śuka	Śuka's group
316–320	Śuka's Flight	
321–339	Nārāyaṇīya	
340–353	The Story of a Gleaner	

Common features in the Demonic dialogues

Adhyāyas 12,215–221 comprise a group of five dialogues in which Indra appears as one of the interlocutors. Strictly speaking, in the final dialogue – between Indra and Śrī – Indra does not address a demon directly, but instead engages in conversation with Śrī (Splendour) regarding demons in whom she had previously resided. Across these five dialogues, certain distinctive features emerge that are common to all.

- 1) First, all dialogues are embedded within the outer narrative frame of Yudhiṣṭhira's question to Bhīṣma concerning action and agency, the consequences of one's actions, and the proper way to cope with these consequences, particularly when they are adverse. This outer frame is connected to the second dialogue layer introduced by Bhīṣma. Yudhiṣṭhira initially inquires whether a person is truly the agent of his actions – a theme that permeates all five dialogues.
- 2) Secondly, the principal interlocutors in this second dialogue layer are Indra and various demonic figures – namely Prahrāda, Bali, and Namuci. In the final dialogue, Śrī appears as Indra's interlocutor, though her speech centres on her reasons for departing from the demons. Notably, in Indra's initial dialogue with Bali, Śrī is described as leaving Bali's body.⁸
- 3) Thirdly, a common element in these texts concerns the circumstances in which the demons find themselves. Each of the demons has previously suffered a major misfortune – they have lost their exalted status and wealth, and now lead secluded, ascetic lives. In light of this, Indra questions each of them as to whether they mourn the loss of their former position. In response, they each deliver a discourse on renunciation and detachment from worldly life.

8 MBh 12,218.1.

- 4) Fourthly, a significant feature is the fatalistic tone of these speeches, which appears to challenge the doctrine of karmic retribution. Rather than affirming human agency, the demons advocate for the supremacy of fate's arbitrary turns. In these dialogues, the demons espouse *kālavāda* – the doctrine of Time (*kāla*) – which they present as the true agent behind the events of their lives, rather than individual human action.⁹

Several of these characteristic features – though never all four – also appear in some other dialogues.

- 1) The dialogue between Indra and Prahrāda (12,124) from the *Rājadharmaparvan* shares the second and third features with the demonic dialogues from the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*: the interlocutors are Indra and the demon Prahrāda, who loses his splendour (*śrī*), just like Bali in both of the Bali dialogues (12,118 and 12,121). However, there is a notable absence of a fatalistic outlook here.
- 2) In the *Śāntiparvan*, we encounter two songs attributed to Senajit (*Senajitgītā*).¹⁰ The first appears in the *Rājadharmaparvan* (MBh 12,26),¹¹ where King Senajit, overwhelmed by grief, delivers an ascetic discourse on dispassion. The second occurs at the outset of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* (MBh 12,168). In the first *Senajitgītā* (12,26), Senajit is overwhelmed by an unspecified grief and

9 Vassilkov (1999) argues that *kālavāda* forms part of an older heroic-warrior didactic tradition. He defines this phenomenon as “heroic pessimism” or “epic fatalism” (Vassilkov 1999: 27). In the demonic dialogues, however, *kālavāda* serves more as a means of cultivating dispassion and appears to be more closely aligned with ascetic discourse. This shift is perhaps explained by the narrative context: the demon kings, once warriors, have been defeated and subsequently adopt an ascetic mode of life.

10 For details of these two episodes, especially their Buddhist connotations see Negribs 2022: 145–169.

11 Vassilkov (1999: 17) identifies MBh 12,26–28 as passages concerned with *kālavāda*, the doctrine of cyclical time – a list that also encompasses the demonic dialogues.

expounds fatalistic doctrines. The second *Senajitgītā* is narrated by Bhīṣma in response to Yudhiṣṭhira's inquiry into how one may overcome sorrow – a question notably reminiscent of those posed in the demonic dialogues. Senajit, having lost his son, is consoled by an unnamed Brāhmaṇa whose speech carries a distinctly fatalistic tone. These dialogues exhibit three of the four features characteristic of the primary group of demonic dialogues: it includes a similar outer frame narrative (feature 1); the protagonist, Senajit, has experienced a profound personal loss (feature 3); and the teaching adopts a fatalistic worldview (feature 4). The only notable difference is that neither of the interlocutors is a demon.

- 3) The Song of Maṅki (*Maṅkigītā*, MBh 12,171) is introduced with- in a similar narrative frame: Maṅki, having lost his wealth invest- ed in a pair of bullocks killed in an accident, articulates a fatalistic worldview. This tract likewise exhibits two of the four features: Maṅki has undergone a significant misfortune (feature 3) and articulates a fatalistic worldview (feature 4).
- 4) In the dialogue between the demon Prahrāda and a *muni* named Ājagara (MBh 12,172), the latter preaches a worldview grounded in fate, claiming that pleasure, pain, gain, loss etc. are preordained (*vidhiniyata*).¹² This dialogue exhibits two of the four features, one interlocutor is a demon (feature 2) and the tract articulates a fatalist worldview (feature 4).
- 5) In the Dialogue of the Jackal and a Kāśyapa (MBh 12,173), a brāhmaṇa descended from Kaśyapa engages in conversation with a jackal, who is ultimately revealed to be Indra in disguise. The teachings of Bali, Prahrāda, Namuci, and Maṅki are explicitly cited at the outset, clearly establishing a connection between this tract and the group of demonic dialogues. Notably, since these

12 MBh 12,172.30.

demonic dialogues occur later in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, after the dialogue, this may suggest the relative lateness of the tract. This dialogue exhibits only one of the four shared features – namely, the presence of Indra as an interlocutor – yet the explicit reference to other demonic dialogues further reinforces its affiliation with that group. This dialogue also shares one characteristic with the dialogue between Indra and Prahrāda from the *Rājadharmaparvan* (12,124), where Indra also appears in disguise.

- 6) The final set of related texts comprises two tracts concerning the demon Vṛtra, Indra's legendary adversary from *Ṛgveda* 1,32 and other hymns. These tracts are positioned later in the MokṣDhP, in MBh 12,270–273. Like the other demons, Vṛtra espouses *kālavāda*; however, his teaching in the second chapter of the *Vṛtragītā* (MBh 12,271) is strongly influenced by the doctrine of karmic retribution. This chapter transitions into a Māhātmya (glorification) of Viṣṇu, delivered by Sanatkumāra, who assumes the role of teacher in Vṛtra's stead. The second Vṛtra tract (MBh 12,272–273, Slaying of Vṛtra) is narrated as Bhīṣma's response to Yudhiṣṭhira's perplexity as to why Indra ultimately slew Vṛtra, despite his apparent saintliness. While a detailed analysis lies beyond the scope of this section, it may be noted that the Vaiṣṇava orientation and the shift from fatalism to karmic retribution suggest the relative lateness of these Vṛtra chapters. The Song of Vṛtra exhibits two of the four shared features: first, the demonic character of Vṛtra, closely associated with Indra, and second, its fatalistic worldview (*kālavāda*).
- 7) An additional dialogue worth mentioning is the exchange between the demon king Bali and his grandfather Prahlāda in MBh 3.29 – a moral discourse on revenge and forgiveness. The only feature it shares with the core group of demonic dialogues is the identity of its main protagonists.

From this a possible answer why these chapters are not grouped together with the main body of demonic dialogues can be sketched. All these five dialogues lack some of common properties. Some of them also might be later; clear indication for such a claim is for instance “Dialogue of the Jackal and a Kāśyapa” where Prahrāda, Bali, Namuci and Mañki are mentioned.¹³ The point here is that Prahrāda, Bali, and Namuci – as demons slain by Indra – are often mentioned together,¹⁴ whereas Mañki is not a demon but a person suffering misfortune. The fact that he is mentioned alongside them suggests that the author may have been aware of a connection between these passages. The fact that they are mentioned together suggests that the author(s)/redactor(s) were familiar with all of these dialogues and likely that they had already been incorporated into the MokṣDhP collection. The absence of Vṛtra suggests that the Vṛtra tracts (12,270–273) may have been incorporated at a later stage, after the Dialogue of the Jackal and a Kāśyapa (12,173). This supports Brockington’s view (2004: 110) that the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* exhibits a general chronological progression from its earlier to its later sections.

Demonic dialogues and their textual correspondences

In addition to their shared narrative and doctrinal features, chapters 12,215–221 also exhibit certain textual parallels, which will be examined in the following paragraphs.

The Dialogue Between Indra and Prahrāda (MBh 12,215)

The Dialogue of Indra and Prahrāda (*Indra-Prahrāda-saṃvāda*, MBh 12,215) begins with Yudhiṣṭhira’s question concerning whether a human being is truly the agent responsible for the fruits of his actions. Bhīṣma responds by narrating a dialogue between Indra and Prahrāda.

¹³ MBh 12,173.3.

¹⁴ MBh 3,165.18; 5,16.14; 12,160.27.

According to Paul Hacker (1959), who outlined a comprehensive portrait of Prahrāda/Prahlāda, in the later Vedic texts and in the Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa literature, Prahlāda appears as a powerful demon king. In the MBh, however, he is transformed into a sage and learned ascetic, and his demonic characteristics gradually recede. The development of Bali's character may, in a sense, be seen as parallel to this transformation. In MBh 12.215, Prahrāda is depicted as a great sage and knower of the supreme bliss of the Self, residing in an abandoned dwelling (*śūnyāgāra*)¹⁵ – a motif that later recurs in the depiction of Bali.

Notably, the eleventh *śloka* of this dialogue partially overlaps with 12,219.3 (Indra's conversations with Namuci) and 12,220.18 (Indra's second dialogue with Bali).

Prahrāda 12,215.11	Namuci 12,219.3	Bali II 12,220.18
<i>baddhaḥ pāsaiś cyutaḥ</i> <i>sthānād dviṣatām vaśam</i> <i>āgataḥ </i>	<i>baddhaḥ pāsaiś cyutaḥ</i> <i>sthānād dviṣatām vaśam</i> <i>āgataḥ </i>	<i>baddhaś ca vāruṇaiḥ</i> <i>pāsair vajreṇa ca</i> <i>samāhataḥ </i>
<i>śriyā vihināḥ prahrāda</i> <i>śocitavye na śocasi 11 </i>	<i>śriyā vihīno namuce</i> <i>śocasy āho na śocasi </i> <i>3 </i>	<i>hṛtadāro hṛtadhano brūhi</i> <i>kasmān na śocasi 18 </i>
Bound by fetters, fallen from position, under the control of enemies, deprived of splendour, Prahrāda, though you should grieve, you do not grieve.	Bound by fetters, fallen from position, under the control of enemies, deprived of splendour, Namuci, are you griev- ing, or are you not grieving?	Bound by Varuṇa's snares, struck down by Thunderbolt, bereft of your wife and fortune – tell me why do you not grieve?

In the dialogues with Namuci and Bali, this *śloka* is more contextually appropriate than in the Prahrāda dialogue, where the central question concerns only human agency. In contrast, the other demonic dialogues

15 MBh 12,215.5; 7.

focus on the issue of how one should act in times of loss. Since this is the only verse in the Prahrāda dialogue that explicitly portrays him as having lost his former position – aside from the more ambiguous verse 28, in which he states that he feels no sorrow – it may be suggested that the verse was adopted from the Namuci or Bali dialogues, likely to better align the Prahrāda dialogue with the thematic concerns of those other tracts – namely, the question of how one confronts misfortune. Notably, Prahrāda does not directly address any question concerning personal loss or the appropriate conduct in such circumstances. The only verse in which he refers back to Indra's initial inquiry and affirms that he feels no sorrow is 12,215.28. Rather, Prahrāda's discourse remains focused on the issue of agency, as introduced at the outset of the dialogue.

Prahrāda maintains that there is no such thing as human agency (*puruṣārtha*), nor is there an independent agent (*svakāraka*). A person is not responsible for his/her destiny through his/her actions, but rather it is his/her inherent nature (*svabhāva*), which governs all behaviour.¹⁶ Since virtue and vice do not arise from righteous action, but rather stem from person's inherent nature (*svabhāva*), there is no justification for pride in one's supposed achievements.¹⁷ Here, the doctrine of *svabhāva* serves as a form of spiritual didacticism, suited to an ascetic perspective disinterested in worldly affairs.

It is important to note that in the *Rājadharmaparvan* (12,124), Prahrāda appears as a demonic king who rules over the three worlds. Following Bṛhaspati's advice, Indra disguises himself as a Brāhmaṇa and obtains a boon from Prahrāda. In this disguise, Indra requests to receive Prahrāda's noble qualities. As a result, virtue (*śīla*), *dharma*, truth (*satya*), conduct (*vr̥tta*), strength (*bala*) and splendour (*śrī*) leave Prahrāda's body and enter Indra's.¹⁸ All these forms take on physical shapes through wondrous manifestations.

16 MBh 12,215.15–16.

17 MBh 12,215.24.

18 MBh 12,124.46–54.

This episode is significant for the subsequent dialogue between Indra and Bali, in which goddess Śrī departs from the demon's body – this time Bali's – and enters Indra's. The *adhyāya* 12,124 is narratively coherent, providing a clear explanation for Śrī's departure from Prahrāda. However, in the first Indra–Bali dialogue, Śrī's departure is more narratively ambiguous.

The First Dialogue Between Indra and Bali

The first dialogue between Indra and Bali (MBh 12,216–218) follows the Prahrāda dialogue and spans three chapters.

The name Bali appears for the first time in *Gaṇapāṭha* 4,1.136,¹⁹ where the derivative formation Bāleya (descendant of Bali) is explained. Bali appears also in Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya*²⁰ where examples *balibandham ācaṣṭe* “He narrates the binding of Bali” and *balim bandhayati* “He causes Bali to be bound” occur. This suggests that the figure of Bali, along with some form of mythic narrative concerning his imprisonment, was already known around 150 B.C., at the time the *Mahābhāṣya* was composed.

The battles of certain heroes in the *Mahābhārata* are frequently compared to the combat between Indra and Bali.²¹ Bali is depicted as the defeated figure: in MBh 3,165.15, Arjuna mentions that during his visit to Indra's heaven, he rode in the same chariot on which Indra had once vanquished Bali. Similarly, in MBh 7,1.25, the Kaurava army, bereft of Bhīṣma, is likened to the Asura army at the moment of Bali's defeat. In *Mahābhārata* 9,30.8 Bali is also bound (*baddha*) by the “high spirited one”, evidently Indra who is mentioned in the same

19 Tripathi 1968: 46.

20 Vārtika 6 on Pāṇini 3,1.26. Kielhorn/Abhyankar edition, vol. II, p. 34, Poona 1972–1996.

21 Droṇa and Sātyaki fight like Indra and Bali (MBh 7,93.2 and 7,145.32), Karṇa and Arjuna like Sureśa and Vairocana in MBh 8,65.5 (Bali is Vairocana, Virocana's son), Indra and Vairocana (8,63.5; 7,149.25) etc. For the rest of references cf. Tripathi 1968: 49. In 7,24.20 it is also mentioned that Bali charged against Indra and Agni.

verse.²² The narrative can clearly be reconstructed as a conflict between Indra and Bali, in which Bali is ultimately defeated and bound.

As shown by G.C. Tripathi (1968), the old Vedic myth of Viṣṇu's three strides across the universe develops in the *Mahābhārata* into the Vāmana legend, in which Bali – an ancient adversary of Indra – is introduced as Viṣṇu's opponent, thereby concentrating a group of demonic beings, traditional enemies of the gods, into a single figure, Bali. In MBh 12,326.74–76, Nārāyaṇa declares that he will incarnate on Earth when Bali seizes the three worlds from Indra, in order to restore Indra's sovereignty. In MBh 3,100.21, the gods praise Nārāyaṇa for incarnating in the form of a dwarf and casting Bali out of the three worlds.²³ In the Trivikrama legend, Viṣṇu, disguised as a dwarf, begs the tyrannical demon king Bali for as much land as he can cover in three strides, and having been granted this chosen gift, he transforms into a giant, and encompassing the entire universe in three strides, demands the rule over the universe. According to Tripathi (1968: 47), in the Purāṇas, Bali is associated exclusively with the Trivikrama myth, whereas in the *Mahābhārata*, Bali exhibits an additional dimension beyond this myth. Thus, as Tripathi (ibid.) suggests, a distinct legend concerning Bali appears to have existed independently, which was at some point assimilated into the Trivikrama narrative.²⁴

Hospital (1984) also distinguishes two separate myths relating to Bali. First is, according to Hospital, “myth A,” the story of Vāmana, the Dwarf incarnation of Viṣṇu. This myth Hospital distinguishes in

22 MBh 9,30.8

kriyābhyupāyair indreṇa nihatā daityadānavāḥ |

kriyābhyupāyair bahubhir balir baddho mahātmanā || 8 ||

Through ploys and devices Indra slayed the Daityas and Dānavas.

Through numerous ploys and devices the great-spirited one bound Bali.

23 The motif of Viṣṇu in the form of a dwarf appears already in the Brāhmaṇas, although the figure of Bali is not yet mentioned at this stage (Tripathi 1968: 33–39).

24 Jaiswal (1967: 124) suggests that King Bali may have been the object of a cult, and that the myth of the dwarf *avatāra* was devised, at least in part, to suppress this cult.

three phases.²⁵ The second is “myth B”, the conflict between Bali and Indra (without Trivikrama), in which Bali is defeated and bound. This myth occurs in *Mahābhārata*, and is best represented in our demonic dialogues.

The first chapter of the Indra–Bali dialogue opens with Yudhiṣṭhira’s question concerning a king who, having been struck down by the rod of Time and deprived of his splendour (*bhraṣṭaśrī*), now roams the earth – what should be the state of his mind?²⁶ In response, Bhīṣma narrates a dialogue between Indra and the demon Bali. Just as Prahrāda (12,215), Bali is portrayed as dwelling in a deserted house (*śūnyāgāra*).²⁷ When Indra encounters Bali – who appears in the form of a donkey – he recounts Bali’s former glory, his subsequent downfall, and pointedly asks whether he grieves over his current state. Notably, the phrase *śocasy āho na śocasi* “Do you grieve, or do you not grieve?”²⁸ from 12,216.13d and 16d is repeated by Indra in 12,219.3d where he asks the same question to the demon Namuci. Bali responds in an offended tone, declaring that his wealth is concealed in a cave, and briefly notes – in a single verse – that the wise neither grieve over suffering nor rejoice in success (12,216.26). This is not a didactic sermon, however, but rather a critique of Indra, whose question Bali perceived as an insult.

In the following *adhyāya* (12,217), Indra once again recalls Bali’s former glory, reiterating in a condensed form what he had already declared in the previous *adhyāya* (12,216). Notably, *śloka* 12,216.15 is here repeated verbatim (as 12,217.2).²⁹

25 For the “myth A”, phase 1, milieu I and II, see Hospital 1984: 24–58; for phases 2 and 3, see pp. 78–154; for the “myth A” in *Skanda-Purāṇa*, see pp. 155–185.

26 MBh 12,216.1

27 MBh 12,216.8–9, 12,216.12.

28 The same sentence appears again in Bali dialogue 12,217.3d–4d.

29 MBh 12,216.15 = 12,217.2

yat tad yānasahasreṇa jñātibhiḥ parivāritaḥ |

lokān pratāpayan sarvān yāsy asmān avitarkayan ||

He who – surrounded by his kinsmen and a thousand chariots – sets forth,
blazing through all the worlds, without so much as a thought for us.

This time, Bali does not answer in an offended tone, but responds with a sustained sermon, the central theme of which is the impermanence of the material universe. For this reason, one should neither cling to pleasure nor succumb to despair in misfortune. Bali ultimately declares that all things are subject to Time (*kālavaśa*). In 12,217.25³⁰ Bali exclaims that Time takes away and brings forth all things; everything is ordered by Time, not by human effort (*pauruṣa*).

In the third and final *adhyāya* of the Indra-Bali dialogue (12,218), the goddess Śrī appears as a third interlocutor. Indra observes her departing from Bali's body (12,218.1), supposedly because Bali had abandoned truth, charity, religious vows, asceticism, courage, and righteousness – qualities in which Śrī resides.³¹ Śrī also said that Bali had shown contempt for Brāhmaṇas and handled ghee in a state of ritual impurity.³² As a result of these transgressions, Bali was overwhelmed by Time, and Śrī abandoned him in favour of Indra. A similar motif appears in *Mahābhārata* 3,27.12–14, where it is stated that Bali enjoyed prosperity and his *śrī* was never lacking – until he wronged the brāhmaṇas, at which point he fell into misfortune.

MBh 3,27.13

*anūnam āsīd asurasya kāmair; vairocaneḥ śrīr api cākṣayāsīt |
labdhvā mahīm brāhmaṇasaṃprayogāt; teṣv ācaran duṣṭam ato vy-
anaśyat || 13 ||*

Virocana's Asura son never lacked in comforts, his fortune [*śrī*] was never wanting;

30 MBh 12,217.25

*kālaḥ sarvaṃ samādatte kālaḥ sarvaṃ prayacchati |
kālena vidhṛtaṃ sarvaṃ mā kṛthāḥ śakra pauruṣam || 25 ||*
Time takes everything away; time brings everything into being.
Everything is distributed by time; do not, O Śakra, rely on human effort!

31 MBh 12,218.12

*satye sthitāsmi dāne ca vrate tapasi caiva hi |
parākrame ca dharme ca parācīnas tato baliḥ || 12 ||*

32 MBh 12,218.13cd

abhyasūyad brāhmaṇān vai ucchiṣṭaś cāsprśad ghṛtam || 13 ||

He gained all earth allied with the brahmins; When he did them ill,
he came to grief.³³

In this verse, as in 12,216.14, *śrī* might not appear as an embodied goddess, but rather in a more abstract sense – as royal splendour. A similar theme appears in Yudhiṣṭhira’s original question to Bhīṣma (MBh 12,215.1), where he asks how kings bereft of splendour (*śrī*) endure misfortune. Could these earlier formulations have prompted the later narrative in which Śrī is portrayed as a personified deity departing from the demon’s body? The narrative incongruity surrounding Śrī’s departure in 12,216–218, along with the evidently later composition of 12,221, may lend support to such a hypothesis.

In the *Harivaṃśa*,³⁴ there is a late description of Śrī-Lakṣmī³⁵ entering Bali. This episode, omitted from the Critical Edition, is likely of later origin and appears to narrate a mythic prehistory intended to explain how the goddess of prosperity could have come to inhabit the body of a demon king.

The narrative in 12,216–218 appears somewhat incongruous. In the preceding chapter (12,217), Bali is portrayed as a sage and ascetic, with no indication of any shortcomings – least of all the claim that he renounced asceticism. Indra states that, having once “glowed with *śrī*” (*dīpyataḥ śrīyā*, 12,216.18), Bali later became *śrīyā vihīna* – “deprived of *śrī*” (12,216.14). Taken literally, this raises the question of how Śrī could subsequently be depicted as departing from him. It appears more plausible that the term *śrī* in 12,216 is employed in a more abstract sense – denoting royal splendour – while by 12,218, this splendour is transformed into a personified figure in the form of the goddess Śrī.

33 Tr. van Buitenen MBh 1975: 273.

34 In the Chitrashala Press edition (1936), this passage appears in *Bhaviṣyaparvan* 3,65.8–14. In the Poona Critical Edition, however, these *śloka*s have been relegated to Appendix I, 42B.2445–2462.

35 Śrī and Lakṣmī were most likely originally distinct deities; they begin to converge in the Upaniṣads and are fully merged in later tradition, where Viṣṇu’s consort is referred to by both names (Gonda 1993: 214).

It also appears that the departure of Śrī from 218 refers to earlier events – namely, the defeat of the Asuras and their consequent loss of eminent status. Consequently, the narrative in 12,218, in which Śrī departs from Bali following his sermon, appears incongruous – possibly reflecting a narrative that was originally independent of 12,216 and 12,217, but later appended due to the recurrence of the same characters. Furthermore, the 217 and 218 appear to juxtapose two distinct worldviews: a fatalistic one, in which all events are predetermined and governed by Time, irrespective of individual actions (in 217); and a dharmic one, wherein the demons' transgressions determine the loss of Śrī. The dharmic perspective – where karmic retribution plays a crucial role – is evident in the account of Śrī's departure in 12,218, where her withdrawal is attributed to Bali's transgressions, and his loss of splendour is presented as a consequence of his past actions. In contrast, the fatalistic worldview is articulated in Bali's own sermon in 12,217.

It may be proposed here that the three *adhyāyas* represent three distinct accounts. The first, 12,216, depicts Indra's search for Bali and contains a detailed inquiry into Bali's response to the loss of his former glory. Bali appears quite offended and angry; only in verse 12,216.27, he briefly states that the wise and tranquil neither grieve in misfortune nor rejoice in fortune. In the *adhyāya* 12,217, Indra recapitulates and summarises his earlier question (12,217.2 even repeats 12,216.15), to which Bali now responds at length by expounding a fatalistic doctrine centred on Time. Here, Bali is portrayed as a wise ascetic, unshaken by the unpredictable turns of fate, in a completely different fashion than in previous chapter. In 12,218, Śrī is shown to abandon Bali due to his alleged transgressions – although these are not explicitly mentioned in the preceding chapters. It may be inferred that this refers to a prior event, referring to the Asura's deviation from *dharma* and reflecting a worldview grounded in karmic retribution. The inclusion of this episode may represent a redactional response to Bali's heterodox fatalism in 12,217 and his indignant reaction to Indra in 12,216.

This also raises the question of the relationship between the Indra–Bali dialogue and the Indra–Prahṛāda dialogue from the *Rājadharmaparvan* (MBh 12,124), as in both cases the goddess Śrī abandons the demon and aligns herself with Indra. Both dialogues appear to presuppose an underlying “myth” or a myth-like floating motif in which splendour (*śrī*), later personified as the goddess Śrī, departs from the demon’s body. However, in 12,124 her departure is the result of Indra’s trickery, whereas here, in 12,218, it is attributed to the demon’s transgression of *dharma*.

It may be proposed that the narrative from the *Rājadharmaparvan*, in which Prahṛāda loses Śrī due to Indra’s trickery, more faithfully preserves the mythic scheme. By contrast, the version found in 12,218 reflects a context in which karmic retribution plays a central role in a moral and didactic discourse. It might even represent a “dharmic” re-interpretation of an earlier myth, adapted in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* as a template for promoting dharmic values.

A possible reconstruction of the development of the narrative that may be proposed here is that the departure of Śrī pertains to an ancient event in which, during the conflict between the Devas and Asuras, the Asuras were deprived of their power and wealth. In this light, the demonic beings – bereft of their former glory – become ideal subjects for exploring how one responds to the loss of power. Narratively, they offer a framework for didactic reflection on maintaining equanimity in times of misfortune, particularly through a perspective of detachment from the vicissitudes of fate. It comprises a heterodox fatalistic account – appropriately articulated by a demon – and its subsequent critique and dharmic reinterpretation within the framework of karmic retribution.

The Dialogue Between Indra and Namuci

Namuci is an ancient demonic figure who already appears in the *Rk-Saṃhitā* and the Brāhmaṇas. Bloomfield (1893: 146), who provided

a detailed account of Namuci in Vedic literature,³⁶ outlined the key elements of the story as follows: a battle between Indra and Namuci followed by a pact between them; Namuci intoxicates Indra with *surā* and deprives him of his strength, enjoying both a life of pleasure and the Soma. Indra, with the assistance of the Aśvins and Sarasvatī, circumvents the agreement and takes his revenge on Namuci; the Aśvins and Sarasvatī then recover the Soma from Namuci. The story is taken up in MBh 9,42.28–37, where Indra circumvents the pact stipulating that Namuci cannot be killed by day or by night, nor by anything wet or dry. Indra beheads Namuci with foam in the dawn, but Namuci's severed head continues to haunt Indra, prompting him to perform a sacrificial ritual at the confluence of the Sarasvatī and Āruṇā rivers.

Following the dialogue with Bali, a conversation between Indra and the demon Namuci (12,219) ensues. The frame narrative here is notably brief, consisting of only three verses. From the outset, Namuci is described by Bhīṣma as devoid of splendour (*śriyā vihīna-*), in the same manner as Prahāda and Bali.³⁷ This reinforces the claim that the departure of Śrī occurs during the demon's exalted position, rather than after adopting an ascetic mode of life, as seen in the discourse with Bali. Namuci is thus an ascetic, knower of existence and non-existence of beings (*bhavābhavajñam bhūtānām* 219.2).

The *triṣṭubh* verse 12,219.8 also appears in the *Sabhāparvan* as 2,57.8. In the *Sabhāparvan*, the verse is spoken by Duryodhana and functions as a quotation of a *triṣṭubh* floating verse inserted into an *anuṣṭubh* context – just as in the Indra-Namuci dialogue, where *anuṣṭubh* verses surround it. It is possible that this was a floating verse commonly used in didactic discourse to reinforce a particular

36 The myth of Indra and Namuci is attested across a wide range of Vedic literature, with its most representative formulations found in both Saṃhitā and Brāhmaṇa texts. Key passages include RS 1,53.7; 2,14.5; 5,30.7–8; 6,20.6; 7,19.5; 8,14.13; 10,73.7, and especially 10,131.4–5; AV 20,21.7; 20,29.3; VājS 10,33–34; 19,71; 20,68; TaiS 2,6.13; MaitS 3,11.4; TaiBr 1,7.1.6–7; ŚBr 12,7.1.10–12; 12,7.3.1–3, PañcBr 12,6.8 etc.

37 The phrase *śriyā vihīna-* “deprived of splendour” is used both for Prahāda (12,215.11) and Bali (12,216.14).

argument: in *Sabhāparvan*, to support Duryodhana's critique of Vidura; in *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, as part of Namuci's spiritual instruction.

MBh 12,219.8

*ekaḥ śāstā na dvitīyo 'sti śāstā; garbhe
śayānaṃ puruṣaṃ śāsti śāstā |
tenānuśiṣṭaḥ pravaṇād ivodakaṃ;
yathā niyukto 'smi tathā vahāmi || 8 ||*

Only One is the Ordainer, there is no other Ordainer; Ordainer ordains a man in the womb.

And at His ordain, as a liquid flows down from a slope, I flow as impelled.

MBh 2,57.8

*ekaḥ śāstā na dvitīyo 'sti śāstā; garbhe
śayānaṃ puruṣaṃ śāsti śāstā |
tenānuśiṣṭaḥ pravaṇād ivāmbho; yathā
niyukto 'smi tathā vahāmi || 8 ||*

Only One is the Ordainer, there is no other Ordainer; Ordainer ordains a man in the womb.

And at His ordain, as water flows down from a slope, I flow as impelled.

An especially noteworthy verse is 12,219.20, which states that a mortal cannot attain that which is unattainable even through the power of Vedic *mantras*, wisdom, or any human effort (*pauruṣa*); hence, he should not grieve. This again reflects a fatalistic perspective, yet it is important to recognise that such fatalism functions as a didactic device, intended to cultivate dispassion in the face of the vicissitudes of fate.

The Second Dialogue Between Indra and Bali

The second dialogue between Indra and Bali (MBh 12,220) also begins with a question from Yudhiṣṭhira, asking how one should act in the face of terrible loss. In the sixth verse (12,220.6), Bhīṣma states that he will respond with another (*punar*) Bali-Indra dialogue.³⁸ This suggests that the second Bali-Indra discourse – at least in terms of its frame narrative – presupposes knowledge of the first dialogue, which may indicate that it was composed and inserted at a later stage into

38 MBh 12,220.6

*atraivodāharantīmam itihāsaṃ purātaṇam |
balivāsavaṣaṃvādaṃ punar eva yudhiṣṭhira || 6 ||*

the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* collection.³⁹ The narrative context, however, is entirely different: following the war between the gods and the Asuras, and after Viṣṇu's three strides, Indra encounters Bali in a mountain cave on the shore of the ocean.⁴⁰ Then Indra asks a similar set of question as in the introduction to the first dialogue. This time Bali answers immediately, without being offended, as in the first dialogue. He exclaims (12,220.26) that his doings are not responsible for his present wretched state nor are Indra's past deeds responsible for his present might and splendour. *Paryāya* 'revolving, circulation, turning' and *kāla* 'Time' govern all turns of fortune, and not *karman*. Right conduct (obedience to parents, reverence to gods and virtue) will not bring happiness; while asceticism and charity will not save the one who is oppressed by Time.

Here is an example of one verse from Indra-Namuci dialogue that is remarkably similar to a verse in the Indra-Bali 2 dialogue:

Namuci (MBh 12,219.13)

pariyāyair hanyamānānām abhiyoktā na vidyate |

duḥkham etat tu yad dveṣṭā kartāham iti manyate || 13 ||

There is no prosecutor for those struck down by circulations (of Time), but this is the suffering when one thinks "I am the doer" thus being his own enemy.

Bali 2 (MBh 12,220.33)

pariyāyair hanyamānānām paritrātā na vidyate |

idaṃ tu duḥkham yac chakra kartāham iti manyate || 33 ||

There is no protector for those struck down by circulations (of Time), but this is suffering, Śakra, when one thinks "I am the doer".

39 This supports Brockington's hypothesis that the lateness of MBh 12,220 and 12,221 is indicated by their exceptional length, since the length of an *adhyāya* may suggest its later incorporation into the MokṣDhP collection (Brockington 2004: 99).

40 In 12,216 he resides in a form of a donkey in an empty house, surrounded by animals. In MBh 12,326.76 and in most purāṇic versions of the Trivikrama myth, Bali is sent to the netherworld (Cf. Tripathi 1968: 52).

The Bali version is narratively better integrated in the surrounding verses, as the verse from Indra-Namuci dialogue does not have any correspondence to its surrounding; so it may be assumed that it is borrowed (either from Bali-Indra 2 or some common source) and interpolated. The discourse is concluded with lengthy fatalistic exposé on *kāla* (220.88–116).

The Dialogue Between Indra and Śrī

Following the Indra–Bali dialogue, the goddess Śrī reappears as Indra’s interlocutor in MBh 12,221. While this chapter may not, in formal terms, be classified among the demonic dialogues, if Śrī’s first dialogue with Indra is understood as part of Indra’s exchange with Bali, then this subsequent dialogue might likewise have originally belonged to the same narrative cycle, even though it has lost its explicit formal connection to the Bali episode.

The link, however, remains evident in two respects:

- (a) in both instances, the dialogue with Śrī follows immediately after the conclusion of the Bali episode;
- (b) in the second dialogue, Śrī declares that she had resided among the Asuras, who had strayed from the path of righteousness, but now chooses to dwell with Indra and the gods.

The dialogue is embedded within the frame narrative of Yudhiṣṭhira’s question to Bhīṣma concerning a man’s former virtuous state and his eventual downfall. Bhīṣma responds by recounting a conversation between Śrī and Śakra (Indra). Śrī explains to Indra that she dwells among those who are modest and generous. She had formerly resided with the Asuras while they upheld *dharma*, but having since transgressed it, she has abandoned them. When Indra requests clarification regarding their conduct, Śrī initially recounts their earlier virtues. However, as the age progressed, they lost these qualities. She then proceeds to deliver an extended moral discourse on their current reprehensible behaviour. As a result, Śrī renounces the Asuras and chooses instead to reside in Indra’s realm, among the gods.

In this discourse, Śrī does not merely abandon individual Asuras such as Prahrāda (MBh 12,124) or Bali (MBh 12,218), but rather explicitly withdraws from the entire race of Asuras due to their collective misconduct. Important distinctions should be noted: in MBh 12,124, Śrī departs as a result of Indra's deception, whereas in MBh 12,218 and 12,221, her departure is prompted by the Asuras' own transgressions.

Śrī as the divine embodiment of kingship

Gonda (1993: 213), citing Gerda Hartmann's 1933 doctoral dissertation, notes that Śrī was originally a goddess of fertility, prosperity, and related phenomena, and may have pre-Āryan origins. Indra is from early on associated with *śrī́*; in RS 1,81.4 he grasps his thunderbolt "for splendour" (*śriyé*). On the other hand, Vedic 'splendour' *śrī́* is early on associated with kingship. In a hymn (RS 6,26.8) king Pratar-dana's son is attributed the *kṣatraśrī́* "splendour of dominion" and the status of being *śréṣṭha* (af Edholm 2017: 42).

Śrī first appears as a goddess in the *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā*,⁴¹ and she can be understood as embodying "well-being" and "prosperity," concepts already closely linked to kingship in Brāhmaṇa literature. In ŚBr 2,4.4.6, the king is said to be married to Śrī, who chooses a powerful ruler as her consort of her own will. In ŚBr 11,4.3.1ff, Śrī is described as having been deprived of ten attributes, which are subsequently restored to her by ten gods – Indra, for example, returns her strength

41 According to Mislav Ježić (personal communication), VājS 31,22 (*śrī́śca Lakṣmī́ś ca patnyāṃ ahorātre pārśve nakṣatrāṇi rūpam Aśvinau vyāttam*) offers evidence that Śrī and Lakṣmī are two goddesses, but connected as wives of one god (Puruṣa?). In Ježić's opinion, Śrī is probably goddess of dawn (splendour) and Lakṣmī (mark, beauty) probably goddess of night. Therefore day and night immediately follow. Asterisms are connected with the night, and Aśvins accompany Uṣas. Later on, both are wives of Viṣṇu, the Sky god, and then become one goddess.

(*bala*).⁴² In his discussion of the relationship between *śrī* and kingship, Gonda (1956: 131) argues that *śrī* resides within the sovereign, and that it is on account of *śrī* that the king is said to receive the highest honour (*satkriyā*, “respectful treatment”). In Manu 7,11, *śrī* is said to dwell in the king’s benevolence (*prasāda*).⁴³

According to Gonda (1957: 34), in *rājasūya* texts⁴⁴ *Śrī* has to be attained by the king; she is identical with earth and *aiśvarya* ‘sovereignty’. Besides her relations to Kubera (Gonda 1993:195, 202), having in mind her connection to kingship, *Śrī* bears a special connection to Indra. In the process of change of perspective from Indra to Viṣṇu, *Śrī* can be attributed to Indra or Viṣṇu and identified with originally distinct godly figure of Lakṣmī. Alf Hiltebeitel (1990: 149) showed that *Śrī* is connected with royalty in the sense that she is specifically concerned with a formulation of royal virtues. Hiltebeitel (1976: 148ff), drawing on ŚBr 13,2.6.1–7.20 and the context of the Aśvamedha sacrifice, identifies the role of three queens who anoint parts of the horse’s body. These ritual acts serve to confer upon the king *tejas* ‘splendour’, *indriya* ‘power’, and *paśu* ‘cattle’. As the horse roams, these three royal virtues symbolically depart from the king – along with *śrī*. Subsequently, the queens restore these virtues to the king, functioning as repositories of royal power and themselves being identified with *śrī*.

Af Edholm (2017) offers a comparative analysis of Avestan *xvarənah-* in Yašt 19 and *śrī*,⁴⁵ arguing that certain similarities likely trace back to the Proto-Indo-Iranian period.⁴⁵ Particularly noteworthy is the figure of *Śrī* in the epic tradition – a mobile embodiment of royal fortune, who bestows her presence upon or withdraws from successive kings depending on their personal virtues. In this regard, the epic *Śrī*

42 Agni/*anna*; Soma/*rājya*; Varuṇa/*sāmrājya*, Mitra/*kṣatra*; Indra/*bala*; Bṛhaspati/*brahmavarcaśa*; Savitr/*rāṣṭra*; Pūṣan/*bhaga*; Sarasvatī/*puṣṭa*; Tvaṣṭar/*rūpāni*.

43 Olivelle 2005: 154.

44 Cf. AiBr 7,20.5. For other references see Gonda 1957: 34.

45 According to Mislav Ježić (personal communication), these two concepts are comparable, but it is not the same concept – both are only semantically comparable, but not etymologically cognate, and therefore it is hazardous to think of a Proto-Indo-Iranian origin.

bears a striking resemblance to the Avestan *xvarənah-*, splendour of kings and other great beings that similarly adheres to, or departs from, rulers according to merit (Af Edholm 2017: 60ff).

Concluding remarks

In the *Mahābhārata*, numerous references point to an older narrative concerning the battle between Indra and certain demons – most notably Bali, who is said to have been defeated and bound, as mentioned in the *Mahābhāṣya*. These accounts may derive from Vedic myths concerning the rivalry between the Devas and Asuras. Later, in the Trivikrama myth, it is Viṣṇu – not Indra – who emerges as Bali's opponent. This change of perspective is not unexpected, as the *Mahābhārata* sometimes reassigns exploits traditionally attributed to Indra to Viṣṇu.⁴⁶ The narrative framework of the battle between Indra and the Asuras appears to serve as a literary setting for incorporating themes of particular concern to the authors of the *Mokṣadharmaparvan*, such as the cultivation of dispassion. This mythic context also accommodates fatalistic doctrines, since ascetic teachings on dispassion are particularly resonant when events are portrayed as whimsical and unpredictable. This fatalistic worldview is conveniently placed in the mouths of demonic figures, and may be read as a subtle critique by the authors or redactors, who were possibly more aligned with the *karman*-based theory of retribution.

The doctrine of *karman* is indeed present within these dialogues, often intertwined with fatalism. Yet fatalism is not explicitly rejected as heretical; instead, it coexists with *karman* without sharp doctrinal

46 For this transfer of exploits to Viṣṇu and other gods and relation of Indra and Viṣṇu see Brockington (2001: 70–71, 79). Gonda (1993: 33) gives good examples of Viṣṇu being an aide to Indra in the Vedic literature, where they share some exploits already in the RS (10,113.2; 2,22.1 etc.). In the epics Viṣṇu, from being an assistant, develops into the greater god, who needs to get Indra out of difficulties (Gonda 1993: 34ff). On the question of the transfer of divine attributes in the RS, see Ježić 1988 and Ježić 1987: 97–99.

disapproval. The operation of *karman* is most clearly evident in the motif of Śrī's departure from the demons in 12,218 and 221, which occurs as a consequence of their transgression of *dharma*.

This may represent a later development. In what appears to be an earlier version of the narrative, found in *Rājadharmaparvan* 12,124, Śrī leaves the demon not because of moral failings, but due to Indra's deceptive actions. In a transitional phase, seen in 12,216–218, Śrī departs from Bali in a narratively awkward moment – not after his defeat, but following his acceptance of an ascetic lifestyle and a dialogue with Indra. In the final stage of development, found in 12,221, Śrī withdraws from the Asuras because they have violated *dharma*, thus offering a more explicit expression of *karman*-based retribution as the governing moral logic of the narrative.

A Sketch of the development of Demonic Dialogues

- 1) An ancient legend from the Brāhmaṇas, centred on the conflict between gods and demons, evolves into the motif of Indra's battle with the Asuras. Indra emerges victorious, whether through force or deceit. One prominent Asura is Bali, who is defeated, bound, and stripped of his wealth and status.
- 2) This mythological frame is adapted in the *Mokṣadharmaparvan* to introduce teachings on dispassion, now conveyed through a fatalistic worldview. The demonic perspective becomes a vehicle for spiritual reflection on the unpredictability of worldly outcomes and cultivating dispassion.
- 3) The ancient personification of royal splendour, Śrī, connected with prosperity and regal virtue, is introduced. She departs from the demons and joins Indra. An earlier version, in which she leaves due to Indra's trickery, is superseded by a reinterpretation in which her departure results from the Asuras' negative *karman*. The entire episode of Śrī's departure may be interpreted as a continuation

of the narrative of the demons' fall from splendour (*śrī*), which becomes personified in the embodied figure of the goddess Śrī.

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