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# THE MAUSALAPARVAN BETWEEN STORY AND THEOLOGY

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores the accounts of the destruction of the Yādava clan in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and subsequent retellings in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa and in the vernacular Mahābhāratas of the Northeast, Orissa and Assam. It argues that the questions posed in the Sanskrit Mahābhārata about whether Kṛṣṇa knew about the impending destruction of his clan and whether he might have stopped it continue to be asked in the retellings, as the episode provided a testing ground for understandings of the powers of God and the role of a Supreme Deity in human affairs.

## I Introduction: The questions

The *Mausalaparvan* describes the destruction of the Yādava clan and the death of Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa. The action in the text is swift and the story told in a mere nine chapters. Despite its brevity, the *Mausalaparvan* raised many fundamental religious questions as it was told and retold over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> I will argue here that it was also significantly altered in the process as the tradition refined its understanding of the nature of God and the limits of divine power.

The proximate cause of the extermination of the Yādavas is a curse leveled by one or more angry sages, depending on the version. Some Yādava youths try to trick the sages by dressing Sāmba up as a woman and pretending “she” is pregnant. They ask the sages whether the child will be a girl or a boy. Omniscient, the sages see through the trick and angrily proclaim that Sāmba will give birth to an iron club that will be the cause of their destruction. In some accounts, Kṛṣṇa is included in the curse; in others, the curse extends to the entire Yādava clan with the exclusion of Kṛṣṇa and his brother. In the Sanskrit text and some of the later versions, we see that the death of the Yādavas is “over-determined”, or

1 Buddhists told a similar story of a genocide, the destruction of the Śākya, the clan of the Buddha, and raised similar questions. I have explored the relationship between the two traditions in a paper, “Karma, Curse, or Divine Illusion: The Destruction of the Buddha’s Clan and the Slaughter of the Yādavas” delivered at Harvard University, March 2006.

at least multiply determined; the Yādavas also die because of the curse of Gāndhārī, who accused Kṛṣṇa of having stood by and ignored the slaughter of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas. Thus we read in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, how Gāndhārī, overwhelmed by grief, curses Kṛṣṇa:<sup>2</sup>

O Govinda, because you ignored my relatives, the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas, as they slaughtered each other, you will kill your own relatives.

Thirty-six years from now, O destroyer of Madhu, you too will find yourself bereft of your relatives and your children, who have all been slain. Your counselors killed, you will wander in the forest, where you will meet your death in a most ignominious way. (11.40–41)

The *Mausalaparvan* in addition describes the humiliating defeat of Arjuna, whom Kṛṣṇa had entrusted with taking the women and children from Dvārakā to Hastināpura. They are attacked along the way by a band of ruffians, and Arjuna, the great warrior, finds himself unable to defend them.

The first questions that are raised by these horrific events are acknowledged in the Sanskrit text itself. What really caused the death of the Yādavas? Was it the curse/curses? Does this mean that Kṛṣṇa, the supreme God, actually lacked the power to avert a curse? Or did he have that power and chose not to use it? And if that is the case, what does this say about a God who stands by, as Gāndhārī accused him of doing, and watches while people die painful deaths? Moreover, what purpose could the further destruction of the Yādavas have served? We know that the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa was meant to remove the terrible burden felt by the Earth, and the great battle in which the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas were slain was part of that purpose. But the death of the Yādavas seems almost gratuitous. Is there also some inexplicable and blind force, call it Time or Fate, or a curse, that directs the affairs of men, and in this case even God? Or was the destruction of the Yādavas also part of some larger divine plan? More broadly we might ask, are terrible events like genocide random or part of some overarching plan, which we might not understand?

The subsequent tradition in its retellings of the *Mausalaparvan* wrestled with all these questions. It also raised new ones, with which the Sanskrit epic

2 Yasmāt parasparam ghananto jñātayaḥ kurupāṇḍavāḥ  
Upekṣitās te govinda tasmā jñātīn vadhiṣyasi//40  
Tvam apyupasthite varṣe śattriṃśe madhuśūdana  
Hatajñātir hatāmātyo hataputro vanecaraḥ  
Kutsitenābhyupāyena nidhanaṃ samavāpsyasi//41.

seemed not to be terribly concerned. The concern of the later storytellers no doubt reflects a somewhat different religious environment. Thus later storytellers, preoccupied with theorizing about the nature of God's body and the nature of images, asked what happened to Kṛṣṇa's corpse. In the Sanskrit text, 16.8.31, Arjuna simply cremates the bodies of Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa. This occasioned considerable problems for later interpreters. One commentator suggested that the body that was cremated was merely a likeness of Kṛṣṇa, for God's marvelous body could never be burned.<sup>3</sup> In the Oriya tradition, the body is not cremated, but is preserved and worshipped. It eventually becomes the "image" of Jagannātha of Purī, and much of the Oriya *Mausalaparvan* is an account of this transformation.

Another direction in which the story was developed concerned the relationship between the individual details of the plot. What if any was the connection between the hunter who shoots Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa? Is the meeting of the hunter with Kṛṣṇa simply a coincidence? In a way, asking this question is another way of asking, was Kṛṣṇa's death a random, chance event, or was it, too, somehow necessitated? This question becomes increasingly significant as the importance of the curse of Gāndhārī as the cause of the destruction of the Yādavas receded in the retellings and the curse of the sages assumed prominence. While Gāndhārī had cursed Kṛṣṇa to die an ignominious death, the curse of the sages in the Sanskrit epic, at least, did not include Kṛṣṇa or Balarāma. There the sages tell the Yādavas:

Since you have been so wicked and cruel, consumed by anger, you will bring about the destruction of your entire clan, with the exception of Rāma and Janārdana. (16.2.9)<sup>4</sup>

Assuming that the curse of the sages was meant to include Kṛṣṇa raises still other problems. In that case, one might well ask what relationship if any existed between the hunter's arrow and the iron bolt that was supposed to bring about

3 This is cited in the notes to the critical edition p. 48, vāsudevasya śarīraṃ svargārohaṇa-samaye janamohanārthaṃ kṛtaṃ kṛtrimaṃ śarīraṃ/ saha-javiśvarūpadehasya dāhāyogāt/ "As for the body of Vāsudeva, when he ascended to heaven, an image of it was made to befuddle people. For it is impossible that his true body, which is in fact the entire universe, could burn."

4 Yena yūyaṃ sudṛvṛttā nṛṣaṃsā jātamanyavaḥ/  
ucchettāraḥ kulaṃ kṛtsnam ṛte rāmajanārdanau//6/2/9.

the death of the Yādavas according to the curse of the sages.<sup>5</sup> And the questions simply multiply. If Kṛṣṇa's death, too, is to be a result of the curse of the sages, who assign the destruction of the Yādavas to the Yādavas themselves, how are we to explain the presence of the hunter in the story as the agent of Kṛṣṇa's death?

As early as the retelling in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, an effort was made to tie these events together and thus leave nothing to chance. The arrow the hunter made came from a piece of the iron bar that had been swallowed by a fish (11.30.33; 11.1. 23). In the Assamese and Oriya versions even that connection is not tight enough. The hunter turns out to be a rebirth of the monkey Aṅgada, who had vowed to avenge his father Vālin's death at the hands of Rāma, by killing Rāma in his incarnation as Kṛṣṇa. The world of these vernacular *Mausalaparvans* is a world of intersecting realities, each one tightly controlled by past events and carefully constructed to explain future events. We shall see that in particular in the Oriya *Mahābhārata* nothing is left to chance or to any inexplicable force.

In what follows, I consider some of the retellings of the *Mausalaparvan*, the kind of questions they raise, and the answers that they give. Two of the texts I treat are from the Northeast: the Assamese *Mausalaparvan*, composed by Pṛthurāmadvija, which I consider only briefly, and the Oriya *Mūṣalīparvan* of Sārālā Dāsa, which I treat in greater depth. Both were influenced by one of the most important Sanskrit retellings, the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, chapters 1, 6, and 30–31. I begin my discussion with the Sanskrit epic and the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* and move from that to the vernacular epics.

## II The Sanskrit epic

The Sanskrit epic self-consciously explores the question whether or not Kṛṣṇa had the power to avert the curse. It also links the destruction of the Yādavas with the great battle of the *Mahābhārata* in that it offers the same rationale for both killings: Kṛṣṇa must lighten the burden of the earth. That Kṛṣṇa knows before-

5 For an illuminating discussion of coincidences, causes and necessity see Richard SORABJI, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory*, chapter 1, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp. 3–26.

hand what will take place and allows it to happen is also abundantly clear from the Sanskrit text. Thus when Gāndhārī levels her curse at Kṛṣṇa, he responds:<sup>6</sup>

Having heard those terrible words, the high-minded Vāsudeva, smiling gently, said to Gāndhārī, ‘O lovely one, I alone can destroy the Vṛṣṇi clan. I know all of this. You are not telling me anything new, O warrior woman. The Yādavas cannot be killed by other men, not even by the gods or demons. And so they will destroy each other.’ When Kṛṣṇa had finished speaking, the Pāṇḍavas were distraught and totally terrified, and abandoned the slightest vestige of hope for their own survival. (11.25.43–46)

The last sentence, telling us of the Pāṇḍavas horrified reaction to Kṛṣṇa’s speech, signals to us that we are to take Kṛṣṇa’s words to Gāndhārī at face value; Kṛṣṇa’s words are not ironic. He knows that his relatives will kill each other and he knows that this is something that cannot be stopped; Gāndhārī’s curse is not so much the primary cause of the destruction as the mere instrument of a destruction that has been ordained by some higher power. This is also the way in which a later author understood the passage. The *Bālabhārata* of Amaracandrasūri has Kṛṣṇa reply, “The destruction of my clan has already been ordained by fate. I feel no sorrow on that account, and you should also not grieve for these warriors who have been slain by Fate.”<sup>7</sup> A comparison of this section with its counterpart in the Oriya *Mahābhārata* is telling. In the Oriya Kṛṣṇa does not in fact know that his clan must be destroyed, nor is its destruction part of his plan or of a higher plan to which he is privy. In these accounts, as we shall see, the destruction of the Yādavas is something that the gods engineer in order to free Kṛṣṇa from his deluded attachment to his wives and children. It is time for Kṛṣṇa to return to heaven, but he will not do so as long as his family is alive. In the Oriya, Kṛṣṇa’s words are ironic:

- 6 Tacchrutvā vacanaṃ ghoram vāsudevo mahāmanāḥ/  
uvāca devīm gāndhārīm iṣad abhyutsmayanniva//43  
saṃhartā vṛṣṇicakrasya nānyo mad vidyate śubhe/  
jāne ‘ham etad apyevaṃ cīṇaṃ carasi kṣatriye//44  
avadhyās te narair anyair api vā devadānavaiḥ/  
parasparakṛtam nāśam ataḥ prāpsyanti yādavāḥ//45  
ityuktavati dāśārhe pāṇḍavās trastacetasaḥ  
babhūvur bhr̥śasaṃvignā nirāśāścāpi jīvite//46.

I take the verb car here in the sense of “know” a common Prakrit meaning of the verb.

- 7 Harir āha purā hasann asau mama daivād bhavitānvayakṣayaḥ/  
śucam emi na tena śoca mā tvam apīmān bhavitavyāhatān//141.

When Kṛṣṇa heard those words he was delighted and said, “You have given me a perfect curse, mother! I never do anything to harm anyone and no one on earth can do me harm. They will destroy each other-this can never be, mother! At this Gāndhārī was embarrassed.<sup>8</sup>

Returning to the Sanskrit text, we are repeatedly told that Kṛṣṇa knew what was going to happen and could have stopped it, but chose not to avert the course of fate. “The lord of the world did not wish to change what had been ordained” (16.2.14).<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere we learn that Kṛṣṇa realized that Gāndhārī’s curse was about to come to fruition and that he wished to see it come true and thus ordered the Yādavas to make a pilgrimage to Prabhāsa (16.3.21)<sup>10</sup>. We will return to the question of why Kṛṣṇa tells the Yādavas to go to Prabhāsa; later retellings found this curious and requiring some explanation. Again in 16.4.11 Kṛṣṇa is said to know that the Vṛṣṇis will be destroyed but not to wish to stop that destruction.<sup>11</sup> The reason why he does not try to stop them is also given: he knows that Time is against them (16.4.30; the phrase is repeated in 16.4.42).<sup>12</sup> Everything that happens is a result of the curse of the sages, which in this reading is inexorable (16.4.38).<sup>13</sup> That Kṛṣṇa knew exactly what would happen is repeated in 16.5.17. At the end of the *parvan*, Vyāsa attempts to console Arjuna. He tells him,<sup>14</sup>

- 8 Nārīparvan, p. 9.  
 e vacana śuṇi kṛṣṇa uluśāi gātra  
 voile ucita śāpa delu āgo māta/  
 ānara aniṣṭa karināhiṃ ketevele  
 ke accehi pramāda mote deva ravitale/  
 āpaṇe āpaṇe marāmari hvantu sata  
 evacana goṭi kebhe na ghaṭu go māta/  
 kṛṣṇaṅkara vākye gāndhārī pālāka lāja.
- 9 Kṛtāntam anyathā naicchat kartum sa jagataḥ prabhuḥ.  
 10 Cikīrṣan satyam eva tat//.  
 11 Jānan vināśaṃ vṛṣṇīnāṃ naicchad vārayitum hariḥ//.  
 12 Jānan kālasya paryayam  
 13 Brahmaṇḍakṛtaṃ sarvam.  
 14 Brahmaśāpavinirdagdā vṛṣṇyandhakamahārathāḥ  
 vinaṣṭāḥ kuruśārdūla na tañ śocayitum arhasi//25  
 bhavitavyaṃ tathā taddhi diṣṭam etan mahātmanām/  
 upekṣitaṃ ca kṛṣṇena śaktenāpi vyapohitam//26  
 trailokyam api kṛṣṇo hi kṛtsnaṃ sthāvarajaṅgamaṃ/  
 prasahed anyathā kartum kimu śāpaṃ manīṣiṇām//27.



The Vṛṣṇis and the Andhakas, great warriors, all, have been burnt up by the curse of the sages. They are gone; you must not lament them. Such was the Fate that had been ordained for these great men. Kṛṣṇa stood by at their destruction, although he could have averted it. For Kṛṣṇa could change the entire universe of moving and unmoving creatures; averting a curse leveled by human beings is a trifling matter for Him.

The death of the Yādavas followed a plan that Kṛṣṇa chose not to stop. Its rationale is provided by Vyāsa's next statement that Kṛṣṇa has now gone to his own place, having completed his task of removing the burden of the world.

These passages make clear that in the Sanskrit epic Kṛṣṇa, the all-knowing God, nonetheless bows to a higher power or plan; in some cases this is the force of Time, or Fate. Kṛṣṇa is as indifferent to the suffering of the Yādavas as Gāndhārī accused him of being to the suffering of the Kurus and Pāṇḍavas. In fact he even joins the fracas that results in Yādava deaths and himself kills some of his relatives (16.4.34).

To an extent the *Mausalaparvan* echoes questions that reverberate throughout the *Mahābhārata* about the efficacy of human effort in the face of Fate; the *Mausalaparvan* merely substitutes God for mere mortals as it asks about the power of Fate.<sup>15</sup> That the text raised many questions for subsequent generations is clear from one of its most important retellings, that of the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, to which I now turn.

### III The Bhāgavata purāṇa

The *Bhāgavata purāṇa* introduces a new factor into the discussion. The Yādavas are not only struck down by Fate in the form of the curse of the sages; they are also deluded by the *māyā* of Kṛṣṇa (11.30.12 and 13). They strike each other, having been deprived of their reason by Kṛṣṇa. (11.30.17)<sup>16</sup> Mention of the curse is repeatedly coupled with mention of Kṛṣṇa's deluding power (11. 30.24)<sup>17</sup> It is also made explicit that the destruction of the Yādavas was part of Kṛṣṇa's larger plan to rid the earth of its unwanted burden (11.30.25). In the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* Kṛṣṇa's power lies behind the curse and works in consort with it. This is also the case when we come to the question of Kṛṣṇa's death. In the Sanskrit epic, when

15 A convenient summary of some of these arguments can be found in the *Sauptikaparvan*'s opening chapters.

16 Kṛṣṇamāyāvimūḍhānām (30.13) Mukundena vimohitā (30.17).

17 Brahmaśāpopasṛṣṭānām kṛṣṇamāyāvṛtātmanām (30.24).



the hunter had realized his error and fallen at Kṛṣṇa's feet, the text tells us only that Kṛṣṇa consoled him (16.5.21). In the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* Kṛṣṇa frees the hunter from any taint of sin by telling him that he was actually the author of his own death. Thus he tells the despondent hunter,<sup>18</sup>

Do not be afraid, Jarā. Get up. This was my wish. (11.30.39).

And to Dārūka, his charioteer, he explains that everything that has happened, from the destruction of the Yādavas to his own impending death, was simply a creation of his own creative/illusionary power, his *māyā* (11.30.49).<sup>19</sup>

Kṛṣṇa is the active agent of the events that transpire, rather than the passive observer that he was in the Sanskrit epic. Moreover, those events are not quite what they seem. All of this is part of Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*, his power to make things appear to be one thing or the other and that both deludes us and teaches us at the same time. This gives Kṛṣṇa's failure or unwillingness to avert the curse, and his death, a different implication. Kṛṣṇa is not intentionally cruel here, nor is he morally reprehensible. It is God's nature to perform the drama of creation and destruction, remaining Himself untouched in the process. The *Bhāgavata* is most explicit about this in its treatment of Kṛṣṇa's death.

The death of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavata* has several significant differences from the Sanskrit epic. At least as read by its commentators, the *Bhāgavata* does not allow Kṛṣṇa's body to be burned. It tells us that Kṛṣṇa entered heaven without burning up his own body through the fire of meditation.<sup>20</sup> Śrīdhara explains that normally this is what Yogins do; they perform an auto-cremation through the power of their meditation, a process better known perhaps from Buddhist sources in which Pratyekabuddhas and certain monks enter *nirvāṇa* in literally a blaze of glory. Śrīdhara further explains that Kṛṣṇa's body is the entire universe; to burn his body would be to destroy the world.<sup>21</sup> The text goes on to equate all of what has happened with the very process of creation and destruction of the universe, which is a product of Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*. In so doing it both raises and answers the question of Kṛṣṇa's ability to stop the destruction and his refusal to do

18 Mā bhair jare tvam uttiṣṭha kāmā eṣa kṛto hi me//.

19 Manmāyāracanām etām vijñāyopaśamaṃ vraja (30.49).

20 Yogadhāraṇayā āgneyyā adagdhvā dhāmāviśat svakam// 31.6.

21 Lokābhirāmām lokānām abhirāmo 'bhito ramaṇaṃ sthitir yasyām tām/ jagadāśrayatvena jagato 'pi dāhaprasaṅgād ityarthah// on 31.6. I noted earlier that the notes to the critical edition cite a commentator who says much the same. Many of the additions to the Mahābhārata reflect the theology of the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*.

so, the question that had most plagued the Sanskrit epic. It is in God's very nature to create and destroy, without ever being tainted in the process.

Furthermore, that creation is not "real"; it is a stage show in which God is the prime actor. The *Bhāgavata* tells us that Kṛṣṇa's birth, life and death among the Yādavas was itself just a display of his *māyā*, a drama enacted for the purpose of an audience, his devotees. This is its real point of similarity with the process of creation, maintenance, and destruction of the world, which are equally nothing but a display of Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*; he creates the world, enters into it and destroys it, as an actor puts on different roles, but remains unaffected by them. Supremely powerful, so powerful that he could bring the dead back to life or cause the bodily assumption of the hunter Jarā to heaven, Kṛṣṇa did not want to stay on earth. He acts out his own death in order to teach his devotees a lesson. Here is the text in its own words.<sup>22</sup>

O king, his birth, life and death among the Yādavas was just a display of his *māyā*, like that of an actor. Having created the world by himself, he enters into it, sustains it and in the end destroys it, by his own great power, in fact, untouched by any action.

And thus the Lord, sole cause of the origination, maintenance, and destruction of the world, moving and still, possessed of every power, did not want to let his body stay in this mortal world. For he wanted to show his devotees the true path, pointing out to them the worthlessness of a mortal body.

Śrīdhara further explains that Kṛṣṇa wanted to make sure that his devotees understood that the true goal of religious practice is not to enjoy earthly pleasures, even with a divine body gained through yogic practice; the true goal is release from earthly pleasures and the attainment of heaven.

Several themes emerge from this discussion and I summarize them here. The *Bhāgavata* is far more secure in its theism than the *Mahābhārata*. The destruction of the Yādavas is not just part of some larger plan of the gods that Kṛṣṇa executes; he is its prime agent. But he is a unique agent, one who is unstained by his acts. All of this was a display of his *māyā*, his power to create illusions. There is also a unity to the *Bhāgavata* retelling that the *Mahābhārata* lacks; the

22 Rājan parasya tanubhr̥jjanāpyayehā māyāvidāmbanam avehi yathā naṭasya/ sṛṣṭvā tmanedam anuviśya āvihṛtya cānte saṃhṛtya cātmanahimnōparataḥ sa āste//31.11.

Tathā 'pyaśeṣathitisambhavāpyayeṣv ananyahetur yadaśeṣaśaktidhṛk/ naicchat praṇetum vapur atra śeṣitaṃ martyena kim svasthagatiṃ pradarśayan//31.13.

In my translation of verse 11 I follow the commentary of Śrīdhara.

arrow that the hunter fashions comes from the iron bolt, and so Kṛṣṇa's death is drawn into the framework of the curse of the sages. At the same time, it is a manifestation of his Divine Will; it is his theatrical production staged to teach mortals what the goal of religion must be. And if Kṛṣṇa's death is nothing but a stage show, so must we interpret the destruction of the Yādavas, with which it is of a piece.

This effort to tie the events together and provide them with a single philosophical and theological interpretation did not, however, answer all the questions for every member of the text's audience. If we turn to the introduction of book 11, chapter 1, in which the story of the Sāmba's false pregnancy and the curse of the sages is told, we see that important questions remained. Śrīdhara, for example, still searches for an explanation of the destruction of the Yādava clan. The plot of God's drama must have some comprehensible rationale behind it; there has to have been a reason why the Yādavas were destroyed. Śrīdhara suggests that Kṛṣṇa wanted to show the transitory nature of material success, for the Yādavas had great wealth and power and yet came to such a terrible end. He also explains that the Yādavas were themselves divine incarnations and had to be returned to their own original form.<sup>23</sup> This seems to contradict the text's own statement that Kṛṣṇa thought that the burden of the earth had not yet been removed since members of his own clan remained (11.1.3). Śrīdhara, glossing this verse, as if to express his dissatisfaction with this explanation, emphasizes that we cannot ever understand God's deeds.<sup>24</sup> The text seems to share some of Śrīdhara's hesitations with the simple explanation that the Yādavas, too, had to die to remove the burden of the earth, for it tells us in several places that the Yādavas were actually wicked; left alone they would have destroyed the world (11.6.29–30). It is in these asides, I would argue, that we can see the tradition grappling with some of the religious and ethical questions our text raises. Other questions would have to wait for the commentaries and later retellings. The rea-

23 Śrīdhara is not the only commentator who finds the text's explanation of the destruction of the Yādavas wanting; Rādhāramaṇa says that the Yādavas can only be conceived of as a burden to the earth in the sense that they might crush the earth with their sorrow if Kṛṣṇa died before they did. Śukadeva offers that the Yādavas had to be destroyed precisely because they were so righteous; the demons hate righteousness and would have attacked them.

24 Thus he asks the hypothetical question, wouldn't the Yādavas, realizing that Kṛṣṇa intended their destruction, have turned against him? He answers this by stressing that the text calls Kṛṣṇa *aprameya*, beyond the range of ordinary knowledge. Śrīdhara on 11.1.3.

son for Kṛṣṇa's suggestion that they all make a pilgrimage to Prabhāsa is a case in point.

In the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* terrible omens appear in Dvārakā, portending the destruction of the Yādavas and their city. Kṛṣṇa suggests that they go to Prabhāsa. The reason for the pilgrimage is particularly puzzling in the Sanskrit epic, which merely says that Kṛṣṇa desired to make the curse of Gāndhārī come to fruition and thus ordered the pilgrimage. The *Bhāgavata* elaborates on the decision and has Kṛṣṇa tell the Yādavas that if they wish to survive they must go to Prabhāsa, for that was where the Moon, who had been cursed with dropsy, was released from his curse (11.6.34–38). This seems a piece of wily deception on the part of Kṛṣṇa, who both knows that the curse is ineradicable and wants it to happen. Śrīdhara finds the episode curious and offers us this explanation,<sup>25</sup>

In saying “Let us go to Prabhāsa”, the Lord was thinking in this way. These people are parts of the gods and deserve to return to their rightful lordship, rather than straightaway attaining release. If they die here in Dvāravatī they will gain ultimate release. Therefore I will take them to Prabhāsa, which grants great wealth and success.

In this way, Śrīdhara attempts to find a coherent explanation for the death of the Yādavas and other incidental details of the plot.

From this discussion it should be clear that the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* retells the events of the *Mausalaparvan* with its own emphases. There is no conflict here between blind Fate or a curse and Kṛṣṇa's will. Kṛṣṇa does not stand aside to allow the curse to take its course. He is the prime agent, who simply uses the curse as a ruse, an *apadeśa* or *vyāja* by which he carries out his plan of destroying the Yādavas (11.1.5). The *Bhāgavata* also describes the destruction of the Yādavas and Kṛṣṇa's own death as a display of his *māyā*, his creative illusionary power, which is responsible for the appearance and disappearance of the world. The death of the Yādavas is not just one act in the long drama of the epic, but a metonymic indicator of all events, all deaths and destructions, which God orchestrates, and by which he is untouched. One might add that these events are also beyond the range of our comprehension. As a mini-creation, maintenance and destruction, Kṛṣṇa's life among the Yādavas now evades rational inquiry. It is no longer appropriate to ask, why? We have seen that the commentators did

25 Prabhāsaṃ yāsyāma iti vadato 'yam abhiprāyaḥ/ ete devāmsāḥ svādhikārān eva arhanti na tu sadyo mokṣaṃ/ dvāravatīyāṃ mṛtā mucyeraṃs tasmād abhyudayaphalaṃ prabhāsaṃ neṣyāmi/.

not find this entirely acceptable and that they continued to interrogate the text. They remained uncomfortable, for example, with the suggestion of the text that the righteous Yādavas were actually wicked and therefore had to be destroyed, and they sought other explanations.

Jīvagosvāmin, the 16<sup>th</sup> century commentator and follower of Caitanya, was so uncomfortable with the incidents of the *Mausala parvan* that he used the concept of *māyā* introduced by the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* in effect to deny that the destruction of the Yādavas had ever happened. The Yādavas were eternal companions to Kṛṣṇa and as such could never be born nor die. This was all a display to teach people the power of the curse of Brahmins, it was a magic show, as unreal as a magician's conjuring. For Jīvagosvāmin this *māyā* is not the mysterious power of the Lord as it is in the *Bhāgavata*, but a truly deceptive appearance.<sup>26</sup> As we turn now to the Oriya retelling, we shall see an entirely different understanding of the events emerge, offering an entirely different explanation of why the Yādavas had to be destroyed and of Kṛṣṇa's role in the slaughter. In this version, it is Kṛṣṇa who emerges as wicked, lustful and addicted to pleasures, so pathologically attached to his wives and children that they must be destroyed to remove his infatuation and allow him to return to heaven.

#### IV The Oriya *Mahābhārata*

The Oriya *Mahābhārata* has several different versions/explanations of the death of the Yādavas and the death of Kṛṣṇa, not all of which are compatible with each other. Thus, for example, in some versions Kṛṣṇa knows that he must destroy his clan and is the active author of their destruction, while in other versions he seems to be as much in the dark as the other Yādavas are of some larger plan to get him to leave the world by destroying his family, the source of his attachment to the mortal realm. Here I can only discuss a few versions of the events as examples of the different interpretations this text offers. As the *Mausalaparvan*, or *Mūṣalīparvan*, as it is called, opens, Kṛṣṇa has just returned after being summoned to Vaikuṇṭha by Mahāviṣṇu. It seems that he has been told that he must leave the earth and return to heaven; unable to leave his family, he has been instructed to destroy them and terminate his existence as a human being (p. 2)<sup>27</sup>

26 *Kṛṣṇasandarbhā*, etext, p. 92, section 123.

27 The edition of the Oriya *Mahābhārata* that I have does not have verse numbers. References are to page numbers.



We see the strength of Kṛṣṇa's attachments as the text describes a grand festival over which he presides, surrounded by his huge clan of children, grandchildren, and their children. He begins to cry at the thought of what is to come (2–3). This is clearly a God who loves and feels remorse at what must happen, strikingly different from the aloof or indifferent Kṛṣṇa of both the Sanskrit epic and the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*. Akrura sees Kṛṣṇa's sadness and asks him what is its cause. Kṛṣṇa explains that once the earth had come to Viṣṇu complaining of its burden. Viṣṇu had plucked two hairs, a black and a white one, and said that they must be born as the black and white ones. He then lists some of his births, coming to the present birth as Kṛṣṇa and Saṃkarṣaṇa. He admits that he had been unfaithful to his wives and addicted to sexual pleasures (a common refrain in the Oriya *Mahābhārata*), but now he finds that he is deeply attached to his family and cannot bear to leave them. As time goes on, though, Kṛṣṇa begins to be anxious to go and seeks some way in which to cause the demise of his family (5). Omens appear in Dvārakā, and a sinister creature, called a *kokuā* stalks the city and its inhabitants. They flee the city one night, attempting to avoid the *kokuā*. They take refuge somewhere on the banks of the Yamunā (6), where Sāmba throws a stick, aiming for the *kokuā*, but hitting Sātyaki instead. The stick then ricochets and hits a Kadamba tree, from which an intoxicating sap oozes. On Kṛṣṇa's orders they all drink the sap (6–7). The text ascribes the unusual flow of sap to Kṛṣṇa's *māyā*; this is his ruse to bring about the destruction of his clan (7). That night the warriors begin to brag to each other about their exploits in the Bharata war, much as they had in the Sanskrit epic, and a fight breaks out. At one point the drunk Yādavas pluck some reeds and strike each other with them. And here the text introduces us to the curse of the sages, an account of which had in fact been given earlier in the *Āśramika parvan*. Here we are told simply that they are reaping the curse of the sages; the iron bolt that Bhīma crushed had become this thicket of reeds. The narrator tells us how great the power of Fate is, that the Yādavas met their death in this way. Kṛṣṇa seems both aware of his actions and himself in a drunken stupor; at one point he passes out. When he comes to he sees all the dead warriors. Pradyumna is still alive, but he dispatches him with his cakra and remarks that now the burden of the earth has surely been lightened (8). He then goes to the forest, where he will meet his own death. The description of his death emphasizes that no one can evade what Fate has in store for him (12).

It is possible to interpret this section of the text as itself conflating two different accounts of the death of the Yādavas. In the first one, Kṛṣṇa himself causes their death in order to cut his attachment to them and allow himself to

leave the mortal world. He does this by leading them to the magic Kadamba tree and getting them drunk. At the end of this story, however, the text seems suddenly to introduce a second version: the curse of the sage and the motif of Fate. Kṛṣṇa now becomes more acted upon than actor; drunk himself, he kills his family members and then withdraws. The story of the curse is tied up with themes we have seen in the other texts examined thus far: removing the burden of the earth, the inexorable nature of the curse and the ambiguous position of Kṛṣṇa in the events that ensue upon the curse.

The situation is only further complicated when we look at the account of the curse in the *Āśramikaparvan*. The controlling force in the story is not Kṛṣṇa, as it was in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, but Vidhātā or Brahmā. Vidhātā asks the sage Aṣṭavakra why Kṛṣṇa is tarrying on earth and has not returned to heaven, even after he has accomplished his task of removing the earth's burden. He tells Aṣṭavakra to go and do whatever is necessary to make Kṛṣṇa return to Vaikuṇṭha (33). Aṣṭavakra goes to Dvārakā, where the children taunt him. The story here then closely follows the Sanskrit epic, with Sāmba and the fake pregnancy. Kṛṣṇa even recalls here the curse of Gāndhārī and knows that he now must reap what he himself had sown; having destroyed her family, he must now endure the destruction of his own clan (34). The text tells us that no one, even God, can evade the power of a curse (37). The curse of Aṣṭavakra includes Kṛṣṇa; a part of the iron bar becomes the reeds, but another part is swallowed up by a fish and given to the hunter Jāra. He makes an arrow out of it. While this was also the case in the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, here the text goes even further in its search for explanations and connections. Jāra the hunter is said to have been the monkey Aṅgada in his past life; there he had sworn to avenge the death of his father Vālin at the hands of Rāma by killing Rāma in his next incarnation, the present one of Kṛṣṇa (37). Kṛṣṇa is trapped in the inexorable world of vows and curses; nothing is random and not even God can break the causal chains.

The Oriya *Vanaparvan* offers still another explanation of the death of Kṛṣṇa (200–201). The story is told in the form of a prediction. Viṣṇu will be born on earth as Kṛṣṇa; addicted to pleasures, he will fight with Indra and eventually abandon all semblance of decency and have sex with married women. He will have a large family to whom he is attached and will fall under the spell of delusion. As we might have expected, the resolution of the problem is to be found in a curse, but it is a completely different curse. Now we are told how Viṣṇu once hid the river Ganges under his toenail. Furious at this, Brahmā cursed him, saying that an arrow would strike him on the foot. In yet another version of the same incident, Brahmā is simply horrified at Kṛṣṇa's immoral



behavior and flings a book at him. In anger, Kṛṣṇa kicks Brahmā and Brahmā retaliates with a curse, saying that Kṛṣṇa will die by being struck with an arrow on the very foot that kicked Brahmā.<sup>28</sup> Continuing the story, we again have two versions. The most coherent one relates how Brahmā was born as a hunter because he had lusted after a Śabarī woman; he becomes Jāra. A second version has Brahmā born as the grandfather of Jāra, who is the rebirth of Aṅgada. It is clear that the text is struggling to keep several different stories together: here the curse is Brahmā's curse, and in the logic of these stories, the offended Brahmā is the one who retaliates. At the same time, however, the story of Jāra and Aṅgada was too well known to be ignored; it too had to be accommodated. I would characterize the tangled web of these connections as a typical example of epic "over-determination". Where one curse (Aṅgada's curse to Rāma) would have sufficed, we now have a second one, Brahmā's curse to the lascivious Kṛṣṇa. As I remarked earlier, we can see this trend already in the Sanskrit epic version of the *Mausalaparvan*; the Yādavas are cursed both by Gāndhārī and by the sages. Either one of the two curses would have sufficed. The additional story of Brahmā and Kṛṣṇa exemplifies another common practice in the epic retellings, namely to leave no detail unexplained. Here the new story explains why Kṛṣṇa must be struck in the foot and not some other part of his body; he angered Brahmā by hiding the Ganges in his foot or by kicking him with his foot. Kṛṣṇa is now killed because a) he was lustful and too attached to his family; b) he angered Brahmā by hiding the Ganges or kicking him; c) he had killed the monkey Vālin when he was Rāma.

The Oriya *Mausalaparvan* devotes much of its space to the treatment of Kṛṣṇa's body and its worship as Jagannātha in Purī, but I will stop with these stories. It is clear that the Oriya text is a complex document that elaborates on some of the themes we have seen in the Sanskrit texts, but does so without providing a single overarching narrative. It asks why the Yādavas had to be destroyed and probes Kṛṣṇa's role in their destruction. It offers more than one answer. On the one hand, it repeats the traditional story that the Yādavas are destroyed as part of the task of removing the burden of the earth. Kṛṣṇa is a passive witness to that destruction which is brought about through the curse of Aṣṭavakra. In this narrative, even Kṛṣṇa cannot escape the power of a curse. On the other hand, the Yādavas are destroyed because Kṛṣṇa has become too attached to them. He will not leave the earth, although his mission is complete. In

28 This is given as the main text in the edition edited by Dr. Artavallabha MAHANTY, Cuttack: Janakalyana Press, 1960, p. 176, with the other version as a variant in a note.

seeking for an explanation to the death of the Yādavas that goes beyond the general notion of lightening the burden of the earth, the Oriya text follows the commentators of the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, who also did not accept that the righteous Yādavas were a burden to the earth. There is really more than one sub-version of this version; in one case Vidhātā tells Aṣṭavakra that he must do something to make Kṛṣṇa give up his family and Aṣṭavakra destroys them through his curse. In another version, Kṛṣṇa himself must do the job. This Kṛṣṇa is a God who sorrows and feels despondent at what he must do. He remains, however, a God who is subject to a greater design that he does not entirely control. He is also a God whose behavior the text repeatedly calls into question. The Kṛṣṇa of the Oriya *Mahābhārata* is a womanizer, a very imperfect mortal, as well as a great God. And this brings us to yet another explanation that the text offers: Kṛṣṇa is killed in punishment for his lustful behavior. The text is moving away from the Sanskrit epic and Gāndhārī's curse into a nexus of stratagems that foreground adultery, ties to women and children, and lustfulness. What is consistent in all of its stories, however, is that this is a tightly connected and controlled universe. Everything has its cause and nothing is random or arbitrary.

Before I conclude, it is instructive to look briefly at one more version of the story: the Assamese *Mausalaparvan*, which also struggles to make sense of the destruction of the Yādavas. In verse 35131 the gods tell Kṛṣṇa that his task is done and he must return home. This makes him realize that he must destroy his own clan. We learn later that this was part of his removing the burden of the earth (35262 and 35485). But the text does not simply retell the story without question. In this version Balarāma accosts Kṛṣṇa and chastises him for not trying to stop the fight (35180). When he is unsuccessful in his efforts, he realizes that this must all have been some kind of scheme or trick that Kṛṣṇa exploited (35188). The Assamese text is far closer to the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* than to its Oriya counterpart. It explores in greater detail Arjuna's failure to protect the women and offers further stories of curses and lessons to be learned, but on the whole it stands somewhat in between the Sanskrit epic and the *Bhāgavata purāṇa*, and perhaps closer to the Sanskrit epic. The Kṛṣṇa of the Assamese *Mausalaparvan* is more passive witness to the curse than he is its author; while extra connections are made, and Jāra is Aṅgada, they seem irrelevant to the general tone of the story.

## V Conclusion

The *Mausalaparvan*, brief as it is in the Sanskrit epic, was the starting point for a discussion of complex questions that took place in retellings of the epic and in learned commentaries. In the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* and its commentators and in the vernacular retellings, we see the religious tradition grappling with many fundamental questions: about the nature of God and divine will; about the limits of divine powers, and about the underlying order or lack of order in our world. This paper has attempted to highlight some of the issues the texts raise and their answers. The Oriya *Mahābhārata*, in its multiple layering of stories and its multiple answers, is as literature the most complex of the texts I examined. At the same time, I would argue that in its thoroughgoing search for a strict causal explanation for every event, it is perhaps the simplest in its vision of the world. The Sanskrit epic left open many questions; the Oriya retelling attempts to answer them by describing a world that is rigidly ordered. It is, by and large, a world in which everything and everyone is subject to the same laws; even God cannot escape a curse. It is a world of marked symmetries, for example, in the law of karma (Kṛṣṇa destroyed Gāndhārī's family and now must suffer the destruction of his own family). Every curse and vow reflects the same symmetry; having kicked Brahmā, Kṛṣṇa will die by a blow to the same foot that caused the offense. There are no accidents in this world; the meeting between Kṛṣṇa and the hunter is not a chance encounter, and his striking Kṛṣṇa with his arrow is not a mistake. The hunter and his prey are united by a close causal chain; the hunter is avenging a past wrong, and his weapon, too, was predicted and foreordained by a curse. Even the place on the body where he strikes Kṛṣṇa is not left to accident. There is a slight glimpse of an independent Kṛṣṇa at the beginning of the *Mausalaparvan*, when we see Kṛṣṇa return from heaven and ponder how he will destroy his clan, but the very fact that he must destroy them in the first place suggests a plan in which he is a mere pawn. In many ways the Oriya text and the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* have offered us diametrically opposed answers to the same questions. In the *Bhāgavata purāṇa* curses are not mechanically operating laws; they are ruses, stratagems of an all-powerful God, who mysteriously unfolds for us the drama of life, a drama that is by definition incomprehensible and not capable of being analyzed into a rigid series of causes and results.

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