

Introduction

God with an Axe

Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for with thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms.

—Jeremiah 51:20

Thine axe is bloody; what hast thou done?

—*Njals Saga*

The Paraśurāma Cycle

What follows is my own telling of the Paraśurāma cycle incorporating as many elements as possible taken from all of its collected variants. It is what Wendy Doniger calls a “macromyth” (1998, 93). The immediate purpose of this synoptic macromyth is to serve as a thematic key to the available corpus of Paraśurāma literature. First in this list is the *Mahābhārata*, a massive Indian epic composed between 500 BCE and 500 CE that tells the story of a dynastic war between the noble Pāṇḍavas (the brothers Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, Bhīma, Nakula, Sahadeva, and their shared wife Draupadī) and their treacherous cousins the Kauravas. Second is the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the other great Sanskrit epic, composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, that tells the story of the heroic Rāma Dāśarathī’s quest to rescue his wife Sītā from her kidnapper, the demon king Rāvaṇa. These are followed by the Sanskrit and vernacular regional compendia of myth, legend, and liturgy called the Purāṇas; subsequent temple legends and collected oral traditions; as well as modern plays, poetry, novels, films, television mini-series, and comic books.

The summary below will serve to introduce the figure of Paraśurāma along with the main characters and the basic sequence of events in his mythology. Some of the elements in this admittedly artificial telling of the story take significantly different forms in other versions (sometimes, for reasons that will become clear later, it is the king Kārtavīrya instead of the *gandharva* Citraratha who distracts Reṇukā at the river; sometimes the two women embrace the wrong trees instead of eating the wrong bowls of rice pudding, etc.), but all of the major episodes are present.

There was once a king named Gādhi who was the incarnation of Indra, the king of the gods, who had decided to take human form after Gādhi's pious father prayed for a divine son. In time, Gādhi had a beautiful daughter named Satyavatī, who one day caught the eye of the Brahmin ascetic Ṛcika. Although Ṛcika was a priest of the famous and powerful Bhārgava clan, Gādhi thought that an ascetic (even a Bhārgava ascetic) was too poor to marry his daughter, a member of the royal Kṣatriya class. After Ṛcika made two requests for Satyavatī's hand in marriage, Gādhi finally said that Ṛcika could marry his daughter only if he could pay the bride price of one thousand fast white horses each with one black ear. To Gādhi's surprise, Ṛcika paid the price (with help from the god Varuṇa), married the princess, and took her to live with him in the forest.

After their marriage, Ṛcika's clan patriarch Bhṛgu came to visit the couple. As a wedding gift to his new daughter-in-law, Bhṛgu offered Satyavatī whatever she desired. Satyavatī asked that she might give birth to a righteous Brahmin son, and that her mother might give birth to a son who would be a powerful Kṣatriya warrior. Bhṛgu agreed and for Satyavatī he infused a *caru* (a bowl of rice pudding) with saintliness, piety, wisdom, and all the qualities that make a good Brahmin. For her mother he infused another *caru* with valor, strength, martial prowess and all the attributes of a brave warrior. He then told each woman to take her *caru* and consume it after performing the ritual for giving birth to a son.

The women did what they were told, but they accidentally mixed up the dishes and each ate the rice pudding meant for the other. Some time later when Bhṛgu had returned, he perceived their mistake and predicted that Satyavatī would give birth to a Brahmin who would act like a Kṣatriya and her mother would

give birth to a Kṣatriya who would act like a Brahmin. Satyavatī was horrified and begged Bṛghu to defer the prediction for one generation, to her grandson. Bṛghu agreed and Satyavatī gave birth to the Brahmin Jamadagni, while her mother gave birth to Viśvāmitra, a king who would later become a Brahmin ascetic.

Jamadagni, like his father, married a princess. Her name was Reṇukā and after they were wed she went to live with him in his forest hermitage, where she gave birth to five sons, of which Paraśurāma, inheritor of the mixed nature intended for his father, was the youngest. One day Reṇukā went out to the stream to collect some water, and as she was filling her pot, she saw a *gandharva* (a celestial musician or forest spirit) named Citraratha bathing in the water and engaging in erotic play with his concubines a little farther downstream. Distracted by her momentary attraction to Citraratha, Reṇukā spilled the water she was collecting and left a wet spot on the front of her clothes.

When she returned to the hermitage Jamadagni saw the wet spot on his wife's clothes and deduced her mental infidelity. He became enraged and one by one he ordered each of his sons to cut off his mother's head. The four oldest were too horrified at their father's words to speak, let alone obey, so Jamadagni cursed them to become dumb like animals. Only Paraśurāma obeyed his father's command without hesitation and cut off Reṇukā's head with his axe (*paraśu*). Pleased with his son's loyalty, Jamadagni granted the boy whatever he desired, and Paraśurāma asked him to resurrect his mother, lift the curse on his brothers, and cause everyone to forget the entire incident. Jamadagni granted all this, along with long life and victory in battle.

Some time passed and a Kṣatriya king named Arjuna Kārtavīrya, who had received one thousand arms as a boon from the gods, came to the hermitage of Jamadagni while on a hunting trip and demanded hospitality from Reṇukā. With the help of her husband's divine "Wishing Cow" that could magically provide anything its owner desired, Reṇukā was able to provide the king and his hunting party with an elaborate feast. Impressed with her abilities, Kārtavīrya decided he wanted the cow and stole it from the hermitage.

Paraśurāma, who was away on a journey, returned to find the cow missing and went after Kārtavīrya to avenge the theft. When he caught up to him, Paraśurāma cut off Kārtavīrya's thousand

arms with his arrows before finally killing him. But while he was still away and the hermitage was unprotected, the slain king's sons sneaked in and killed Jamadagni in retaliation. When Paraśurāma returned to find his father dead, he swore revenge on all Kṣatriyas, vowing to wipe them out twenty-one times over. In fulfillment of his vow, he killed twenty-one generations of Kṣatriyas and filled five lakes with their blood before, his rage spent, he made a sacrifice in which he gave away the earth that he had conquered and went into exile to spend the rest of his days in meditation. Meanwhile, Brahmin men impregnated the Kṣatriya widows to produce a righteous generation of kings.

Some of the Kṣatriyas had been saved by sages or animals that hid and protected them in the forest. And when Paraśurāma was through killing, they came out of hiding and repopulated the earth, which had been suffering with no warriors left to protect it. Later, Paraśurāma intervened in the events of the great *Mahābhārata* war that would once again nearly wipe out all the Kṣatriyas on earth. He trained the warriors Bhīṣma and Drona in the martial arts and the use of magical weapons. He also trained the warrior Karna, but cursed him to die in battle after learning that Karna had hidden the fact that he was a Kṣatriya during his tutelage.

Forced into exile because he had given away the earth in sacrifice, Paraśurāma went to the ocean and hurled his axe out into the water, forcing the ocean to recede and create a new strip of land on which he could live, since it had not been part of the earth when he gave it away. Paraśurāma settled the new place by establishing temples, bringing in Brahmins to perform the Vedic rituals, and setting up schools to teach martial arts. Eventually he returned to his meditations and withdrew from the world, where he has the status of an undying *cirañjīvin* (immortal).

The Argument, Purpose, and Structure of This Book

ARGUMENT

The first part of my argument is this: The Paraśurāma myth was created by Brahmins as a narrative response to the decline of sacrificial performance and the rise of post-Vedic sectarian religions after the Buddhist Mauryan empire