

MYTH AND MYTHMAKING

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4

Paraśurāma and Time

Lynn Thomas

Introduction

Paraśurāma, the complex Bhārgava figure who comes to be viewed as the sixth avatar (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu, is associated with a large body of myths and has been the subject of a number of different studies (e.g. Gail 1977). Most of these studies have concentrated on the central myths which go to make up his story in the classical texts, or on later deeds assigned to him in the regional traditions of South and West India. One area of Paraśurāma's career which has remained relatively unexplored, however, is his intervention in the affairs of the avatars who follow him, Rāma Dāśarathi and Kṛṣṇa, as told in the narratives of the two epics. This involvement in stories subsequent to his own avatar period, and the strange relationship to mythical time which it confers on Paraśurāma, is the subject which I should like to explore.¹

I should like to thank Nick Allen, John Brockington and Freda Marchett for their comments on this chapter, and also Jim Benson for comments on a previous version.

¹ It should be pointed out that although the story of Paraśurāma first appears in the *Mahābhārata* and the main features are carried over into most subsequent tellings, he is not in fact consistently recognized as an avatar until the Purāṇic accounts, and only one of the epic references gives him that status: 12.326.77. This and all other references to the *Mahābhārata* are to the critical edition edited by V.S. Sukthankar *et al.* Although this change between epic and Purāṇic accounts is important for our understanding of the development of the myth, most of the important details of the deeds themselves remain the same in both. This means that the elements which make it suitable to be counted as an avatar story are already present, even where that status is not yet conferred. Consequently, I shall bring this awareness into my discussion of the epic accounts where relevant. A similar, though less important, problem is encountered with the name of this figure, for Paraśurāma is not used in the epics, where he is more commonly called Rāma Jāmadagnya, Rāma Bhārgava or simply Rāma. Again, however, for simplicity, I shall keep to the name Paraśurāma throughout. For further discussion of Rāma Jāmadagnya's association with this name, see Goldman 1972.

Intervention in *Mahābhārata* events

Paraśurāma's participation in the *Mahābhārata* events is less immediately obvious but far more pervasive, and I shall begin by simply presenting the material before going on to discuss my own and others' interpretations of it. Paraśurāma's presence is marked in the epic in two ways: in his involvement in the narrative events themselves; and in the importance that his previous deeds seem to carry for the text, where his massacre of *ksatriyas* is referred to so frequently that Goldman can call it 'a sort of trademark stamped across the face of the vast epic' (1977:140).

Although references to Paraśurāma's deeds are indeed scattered throughout the text, they are also mentioned at some specific points in the narrative which are worth noting here as I shall come back to them later. His actions are first recounted at the very beginning of the epic, where the Kaurava battlefield, Kurukṣetra, is identified as Samantapañcaka, the scene of Paraśurāma's massacre and lakes of blood:

At the juncture of the *tretā* and *dvāpara yugas* Rāma, the best of warriors, repeatedly destroyed the royal *ksatriyas*, urged on by his anger.

When he, radiant as the fire, had destroyed the *ksatriyas* in their entirety by his own strength, he made five lakes of blood in Samantapañcaka.

And when the juncture between the *kālī* and the *dvāpara* arrived, the battle between the armies of the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas also took place at Samantapañcaka.⁸

The identification of Kurukṣetra with Samantapañcaka is again made towards the close of the epic when, the fighting over, Kṛṣṇa leads the Pāṇḍavas over the battlefield now strewn with the dead and points out the lakes while telling them Paraśurāma's story (12.48.7 ff.). As well as this spatial juxtaposition of the scene of the Bhārata war with the scene of Paraśurāma's massacre, the *Mahābhārata* also states in several places that the warriors taking part in the war are descended from the remnant of *ksatriyas* that Paraśurāma left.⁹ Finally, Paraśurāma's deeds are further juxtaposed with the *Mahābhārata* events when

⁸ *tretādāvparayoh samdhau rāmāḥ śaśrabhrīrjān varāḥ| asakṛt pāṛthivam kṣatram jaghānamasacoditāḥ| sa sarvam kṣatram utśāḍya svayīrvaṇśaladyutīḥ| samantapañcake pañca cakṛva rudhracraḍān...|| antare caiva sampṛāpe kalidāvparayor abhāt| samantapañcake yuddham kurupāṇḍavasenoḥ||* Mbh.1.2.3, 4, 9.

⁹ Descended, that is, from those who were born from the widows of *ksatriyas* and the brahmins who impregnated them. For the identification with the *Mahābhārata* *ksatriyas*, see for example 2.13.2, 12.49.79.

Vaiṣampāyana narrates the tale at the start of his account of the incarnations of the epic's protagonists (1.58.4).

Whatever significance his previous deeds may have for the *Mahābhārata*, however, Paraśurāma is not simply presented as a figure from the past, but also takes a more immediate role in the events of the epic as a living character. He is present at several crucial points in the narrative, such as the royal consecration of Yudhiṣṭhira (2.49.11), for example, and at Kṛṣṇa's peace embassy to Hāstinapura, where it is he who identifies Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna as Nara and Nārāyaṇa and says it is futile to fight them (5.94.3 ff.). Interestingly, he is not at Draupadī's marriage contest (*svayamvara*), but his presence is significantly echoed when Karṇa asks Arjuna, who is disguised as a brahmin and fighting the assembled kings, if he is another Paraśurāma (1.181.16). As well as being present at these important episodes, Paraśurāma is also depicted as the weapons' master of three central warriors: Droṇa (1.121.16 ff.), Bhīṣma (5.178.17) and Karṇa (3.286.8). This has some significance for future events in the epic narrative: as Droṇa's teacher, he becomes indirectly responsible for the martial knowledge of the principal warriors on both sides of the war; and as Karṇa's, he is directly responsible for one of the curses which incapacitates the warrior at a crucial moment and allows Arjuna the victory.¹⁰

The Battle with Bhīṣma

Paraśurāma's most detailed and significant intervention in the *Mahābhārata* narrative, however, and the one I would like to look at in detail, is the battle with Bhīṣma where he champions the rejected bride, Ambā (5.174.23 ff.).¹² As with Paraśurāma's original massacre of *ksatriyas*, this episode is again closely connected with the Pāṇḍava/Kaurava battle, and forms a clear prelude to it, recounted just before the two armies march out. Like the main battle, it takes place at Kurukṣetra (5.178.31) and is similarly presented as a reluctant battle between a disciple and his teacher, with Bhīṣma asking for Paraśurāma's

¹¹ For the main account of Paraśurāma's curse, see Mbh.12.2-3; and for its application in the battle, specified only in variants to the critical edition, see 8.1123.

¹² Ambā and her two sisters had been abducted by Bhīṣma at their *svayamvara* as brides for his half-brother Viçitravīrya, who was then the king at Hāstinapura. The abduction had been carried out according to *ksatriya dharma* but Ambā, being secretly promised to another king, Śālva, begged to be released. Bhīṣma agreed, but when she returned Śālva rejected her, saying she was now Bhīṣma's. Not wanting to return to either Hāstinapura or her father's house in shame, Ambā vowed revenge on Bhīṣma and asked Paraśurāma to champion her. Although the battle between Paraśurāma and Bhīṣma is recounted just before the Bhārata war, it had in fact taken place many years previously, and Ambā herself, reborn as Śikhaṇḍin, goes on to fight in the war and is the cause of Bhīṣma's eventual death.

	<i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> 1.73-5	<i>Mahābhārata</i> 5.178-87
1.	RD meets PR after his wedding to Sītā (which occurs at 1.72.8 ff.)	Bhīṣma's battle with PR follows his abduction of Ambā at her <i>svayamvara</i> (recounted at 5.170,9 ff.)
2.	PR's appearance is accompanied by evil omens and imagery of the end of the world (<i>pralaya</i> ; 73.9-19)	The battle is accompanied by <i>pralaya</i> imagery and upheaval (182.5-10; 183.21-4; 185.15-21)
3.	The connection is made with PR's massacre of the <i>ksatriyas</i> (73.20)	The connection is made with PR's massacre (178.33-5 and <i>passim</i>)
4.	RD's father tries to dissuade PR (74.5-9)	Bhīṣma's mother tries to dissuade PR (179.22 ff.)
5.	RD expresses his respect for PR and says that he does not want to kill him (75.2,6)	Bhīṣma honours PR as his teacher and says he does not want to fight with him (178.15-16)
6.	Gods, <i>ṛṣis</i> , etc. witness the battle (75.9,10,18)	Gods, <i>ṛṣis</i> , etc. witness the battle (179.19)
7.	The world 'stood stunned' (75.11)	The world 'cried alas' (185.22)
8.	PR loses his strength to RD (75.11,12)	PR reaches the limit of his strength against Bhīṣma (187.3)
9.	PR admits defeat, acknowledges RD as Viṣṇu and honours him (75.12-23)	PR honours Bhīṣma (186.35)

Table 3. Parallels between the confrontation between Paraśurāma (PR) and Rāma Dāśarathi (RD) in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the battle between Paraśurāma and Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata*.

blessing before he fights, as Yudhiṣṭhira will in turn ask for his (5.180.14). The connection back to Paraśurāma's extermination of the *ksatriyas* is repeated again at this point, and Bhīṣma boasts that Paraśurāma could only accomplish that deed because there were no *ksatriyas* like himself alive then (5.178.36-7). After a battle lasting for a great many days, Paraśurāma reluctantly admits defeat and is persuaded by his ancestors to give up the fight:

Child, this is far enough in the battle with Bhīṣma. Desist Great-Armed One: withdraw from this battle.

This is enough, bless you, of your bearing a bow: relinquish it, O terrible Bhārgava, and practise austerities.¹²

This battle is important for our understanding of Paraśurāma's role, both in the *Mahābhārata* and beyond. When it is compared in detail with his confrontation with Rāma Dāśarathi in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, it becomes apparent that the two accounts bear striking similarities. I shall present these first in tabular form, to give a clearer overview of the parallels (see Table 3).

It can be seen from this table that each stage of the *Rāmāyaṇa* account (which is presented chronologically) finds a parallel in the longer *Mahābhārata* episode, even down to the connection with a *svayamvara* or wedding and the intervention of the protagonists' parents. Three areas are particularly significant for our understanding of the two conflicts, however: first, the eschatological emphases found in each narrative (stages 2,6,7); second, the link with Paraśurāma's own avatar deed (stage 3); and third, the manner of his defeat and his attitude to the vanquisher (stages 8,9). I shall look at each of these more closely.

Eschatological Emphases

In both accounts, the battle is witnessed by representatives of most of the world's inhabitants (gods, *ṛṣis*, etc.) and the cosmic significance of this not uncommon phenomenon is emphasized by phrases which suggest that the fate of the world is in the balance: the world was stunned (*viāhṛīte loke*, Rām. 75.11); the world cried 'alas' *hāhācīre loke*, Mbh.185.22). Both epics reinforce this sense of cosmic crisis by their use of the imagery of world destruction and other similarly appropriate descriptions. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, heralding the

¹² *vaiṣṇa paryāptam etāvad bhīṣmeṇa saha samyuge | vinardas te mahābāho vyapasyāhi raṇād itih | paryāptam etiād bhadrāṇ te tava kārṇakadhāraṇa | viśarjayatiād durdharaṣa tapas tapasya bhārgava ||* Mbh.5.186.13-4.

appearance of Paraśurāma,

... a wind arose shaking the whole earth and uprooting the beautiful trees.

The sun was engulfed by darkness and nothing could be seen in any direction. Everything was covered in ash and the army seemed stupefied.

Then, in that horrible darkness, the ash-covered army saw a man of terrible appearance, wearing a knot of matted hair.

Invincible as Mount Kailāsa, irresistible as the fire of time, he seemed to blaze with fiery energy.¹³

In the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma describes his battle with Paraśurāma:

Then, besieged by my arrows, great-souled Jāmadagnya discharged a terrible spear like a blazing meteor let loose by time, its burning tip filling the worlds with fiery light.

With blazing arrows I cut in three that spear which was approaching, brilliant as the sun at the final hour, and made it fall to the earth.

When it was severed, Rāma, blazing with anger discharged twelve other terrible spears...

... variously formed, blazing with terrible splendour like twelve suns at the end of the world.¹⁴

Or again, further on in the account:

Then Rāma of great vows, revived and filled with anger and impatience, manifested the supreme *brāhma* missile.

Thereupon, in order to counteract it, I (too) employed the supreme *brāhma* missile and it blazed out as if it was showing the end of the *yuga*.

Then nothing but fire appeared in the sky and all beings became pained, O King.

¹³ *vāyuh prādur bōhīva ha/ kampaṇa medhīṇ sarvāṇ pāṇyaś ca drumañ śubhāṇ/ tamasā samvṛtaḥ sūrya sarvā na prababhuḥ dīśa/ bhasmanā cōrtaṇ sarvaṇ samūḍhāṇ/ iva tad balan/ tasmīns tamasi ghore tu bhasmacchameva sā camū/ daḍaśa bhīmasaṅkṣaṇ jātānuḍalāhṛtaṇ/ kailāsaṇ iva durdharaṇ kālāgnim iva duḥkṣaṇ/ jvalanaṇ iva tejoḥit/ Rām.1.73.13-14, 16-17.*

¹⁴ *tataḥ śaktiṇ prāṇinō ghoratūṇāṇ aśvair mudho jāmadagnyo muktāṇ/ kālōrśīṭāṇ prajvalitāṇ ivokṣaṇ samūḍhagaṇ tejasvīrya lokāṇ/ tato haṇ tāṇ iśubhit dīpamānaḥ samāṇāṇ antakāṭakapīṭāṇ/ chitrā tridhā pāṇyaṇ āsa bhāma/ tasyāṇ chinmāyāṇ krodhādīpo 'tha rāmaḥ śaktir ghorāḥ prāṇinōd dvādaśānyāḥ.../... nānārupās tejaso- greva dīpta yathāhītya dvādaśa lokasaṅkṣaye/ Mbh.5.182.5-8.*

And the *ṛṣi*s, *gandharvas* and gods suffered greatly, O Bhārata, tormented by the force of the weapons.

Then the earth with her mountains, forests and trees trembled, and beings, tormented by heat, greatly despaired.

The sky was blazing, King, the ten directions smoked and the birds were not able to remain in the sky.¹⁵

Connections with Paraśurāma's Previous Deeds

The connection with Paraśurāma's annihilation of the *kṣatriyas* is made in the *Rāmāyaṇa* account by Rāma Dāśarathi himself:

I have heard of that deed you performed, Bhārgava. We honour it, brahmin, for you were acquitting your debt to your father.¹⁶

The link is also made in several other places (73.20; 74.6-8, 23-5). In the *Mahābhārata* account, the connection is even stronger. It is referred to several times during the conflict and is emphasized by the fact, already mentioned, that the duel is fought in the same place as Paraśurāma's previous slaughter, which will be the site of the greater battle to come:

[Bhīṣma speaks] Go, then. Return to Kurukṣetra, O you who love war. I will go there to fight you, strong-armed ascetic.

There where you previously performed the purification for your father, I, too, having killed you, will perform your purification, Bhārgava.¹⁷

¹⁵ *samāṁvāsas tadā rāmaḥ krodhānarsasamanvīḥ/ prāḍś cakre tadā brāhmaṇaṇ paramaśīstraṇ mahāvrataḥ/ itatas tat pratigṛhātārtham brāhmaṇa evāśīstraṇ uttamaṇ/ mayā pravṛtāṇ jayitṛa yugāntam iva daśayai/ tato vyomni prādur abhāt teja eva hi kevalam/ bhātāni caiva sarvāṇ jagnur ārtiṇ viśāṇ pate/ rṣayaś ca sagandharvā devatāś caiva bhārat/ samūḍhagaṇ paramaṇ jagnur asvatejōbhīṣṭīḥ/ itasā caḍā prthivī saparvata/ vanadrumā/ samāpīṭāni ca bhātāni viśādan/ jagnur uttamaṇ/ prajayitṛa nabho rājan dhīmānyante dīśo daśa/ na sīhātum antarikṣe ca śekur dāśāgṛhā tadā/ Mbh. 5.185.15, 16, 18-21. Pralaya imagery is also used of Paraśurāma at 5.174.23 when his name is first suggested to Ambā and he is described as 'radiant as the fire of time' (kāḷāgnisamatejasam).*

¹⁶ *śrutavāṇ asmi yat karma kṛtavāṇ asi bhārgava/ anurudhyāmanhe brahmaṇ piur āṇṛṇyaṇ āśīḥ/ Rām.1.75.2.*

¹⁷ *sa gaḍḍha vīnivarasva kurukṣetraṇ ranapriya/ tarraiyāṇi mahatāḥ yuddhāyā tvāṇ tapodhana/ api yatra twayā rāma kṛtaṇ śaucam purā pibh/ tārṭhāṇ api hatvā tvāṇ śaucam kurāśmī bhārgava/ Mbh.5.178.33-4.*

In both accounts, therefore, the present crises are presented in relation to the crisis that precipitated the slaughter in Paraśurāma's own avatar period.

Manner of Defeat

In the *Rāmāyana* narrative, as was shown, Paraśurāma's defeat can be understood in terms of the power of the avatar passing from him to Rāma Dāśarathi: when Rāma Dāśarathi picks up Viṣṇu's bow, Paraśurāma's strength leaves him, destroyed by the power emanating from Rāma (1.75.11-12). Once defeated, Paraśurāma relinquishes the one-sided belligerence which triggered the confrontation and acknowledges Rāma his superior: both his power and his position have been handed over. In the longer epic, although it cannot be a question of passing the power of the avatar – that would have to be to Kṛṣṇa or, by extension, Arjuna – the parallels with the *Rāmāyana* account suggest that a similar sort of 'handing over' is being presented, whatever this may mean in the *Mahābhārata* context. Thus, once again, Paraśurāma provokes the conflict with his intransigence in the face of Bhīṣma's arguments and seems certain of victory:

There your mother the Jāhnavī may see you, Bhīṣma, filled with hundreds of arrows by me, slain and fodder for vultures, herons and crows.¹⁸

When he is finally forced to admit defeat, however, his truculence once more evaporates and he greets Bhīṣma's victory with pleasure:

... and Rāma, the great ascetic, smiling affectionately said to me: In this world there is no *kṣatriya* walking the earth equal to you. You may be gone, Bhīṣma: you have greatly satisfied me in this battle.¹⁹

¹⁸ *tatra tvām nihataṃ maṭā mayā śaraśūtaṭam/ jāhnavī paśyātām bhīṣma gṛdhṛakṛakṛadāśaman/* Mbh.5.179.3. Bhīṣma only reluctantly agrees to fight after all attempts at pacifying the Bhārgava have failed (5.178.10-33). In the *Rāmāyana*, Paraśurāma similarly refuses to be conciliated by Daśaratha's pleas for his son (1.74-5.10). Although Paraśurāma's challenge to Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata* episode is caused by the fact that he is championing Ambā, it is a rather dubious point of *dharma* whether Bhīṣma is in fact the cause of her predicament: see 5.173.1 ff. and 176.1 ff., where the text discusses the issue, and 1.98.50-1, where Bhīṣma consults with brahmins before reaching his decision to release Ambā. Gail (1977:36-7) and Schuerer (1982:138-42) both discuss this issue.

¹⁹ *rāmaś cābhīyutmayan premnā mām uvāca mahābāhū/ tvaṣ samo nāsti loka 'smiṇ kṣatriyah/ prthivīcarah/ gamyātām bhīṣma yuddhe 'smiṇs toṣho 'haṃ bhīṣaṃ tvaṣā/* Mbh. 5.186.34-5.

Moreover, he goes on to apologize to Ambā with the words:

I am not able to surpass Bhīṣma, best of warriors, in battle, even though fully displaying my best weapons. This is the limit of my power: this is the limit of my strength. You may go as you wish, good woman – or what else can I do for you?²⁰

As with Rāma Dāśarathi, he must acknowledge that he has met his match and reached the limit of his supremacy.

Analysis of Paraśurāma's Role

How then are the similarities in these two accounts to be explained? Indeed, how are we to understand Paraśurāma's intervention in the events of the two epics at all, set as they are so far apart and so long after his own lifetime? Other scholars addressing this question have answered it quite simply, and it is important to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the answers they provide before going on to look at alternative interpretations.

The first person to look in any detail at Paraśurāma's involvement in the *Mahābhārata* was Suktankar (1936), who considered it as part of a broader concern: Bhṛgu myths in the *Mahābhārata* and the evidence they provide for an extensive Bhārgava redaction of the text. Suktankar's work has been very influential for subsequent interpretations of Paraśurāma's role and I shall therefore look at it in some detail.

Suktankar proceeds by working through the epic, section by section, commenting on the various signs of Bhārgava influence he comes across. In the process, he notes all of Paraśurāma's main interventions in the epic and, one by one, dismisses them as irrelevant to the narrative action. Of Paraśurāma's mention at the start of the narrative, he says: 'Strangely enough, already in the second chapter of the *Adiparvan*... we make our acquaintance with one of the Bhārgavas, the most famous of them, Rāma Jāmadagnya... a character which in *reality* has no connection whatsoever with the action of the sublime tragedy which is going to be unfolded in the epic' (p.4, Suktankar's emphasis). The Bhārgava's role as Droṇa's teacher is dismissed as 'only symbolic', on the grounds that Paraśurāma lived at the *ireṭā/dvāpara* juncture and thus could not have lived at the time of the *dvapāra/kalī* juncture as well. He is represented as alive in the *Mahābhārata* simply because 'once the symbol is accepted, it is

²⁰ *na cāiva yuddhi śaknōmi bhīṣmaṃ śāstrabhṛtām varam/ viśeṣayitum atyarham uttamāśrāṇi darśayam/ eṣā me paramā śaktir etan me paramam balam/ yatheṣāṃ gamyātām bhadre kin anyad vā karomi te/* Mbh.5.187.2-3.

treated as real, and the myth is worked out in great detail' (p.13). Paraśurāma's appearance with other sages at Yudhiṣṭhira's consecration is viewed as incidental: 'These static figures are like mural decorations, and of no special interest to us. We shall therefore ignore them.' (p.17). His intervention at Kṛṣṇa's embassy is 'an unnecessary digression' (p.35). References to Paraśurāma's massacre at crucial moments are also dismissed. Kṛṣṇa mentions it at the consecration 'quite irrelevantly' (p.17), and its recounting on the battlefield after the war is simply because the incident 'affords an easy opportunity for another repetition of the legend of Rāma's heroic exploit' (p.42). The encounter between Paraśurāma and Bhīṣma is likewise rejected: 'In another context Rāma is said to have fought with Bhīṣma, a fight which lasted for twenty-three days but was absolutely barren of any consequence' (p.25).²¹

For Sukthankar, therefore, the answer to the puzzle of Paraśurāma's involvement in the *Mahābhārata* is straightforward: he is there largely as the result of Bhārgava interpolation and neither he nor his story have any genuine significance for the textual narrative.

Goldman, in his continuation of Sukthankar's inquiry, *Gods, Priests and Warriors: The Bhṛguś of the Mahābhārata*, further develops these points. However, his understanding of the *Mahābhārata* material remains basically the same for our purposes. Paraśurāma's participation in epic events is the result of anachronism and interpolation, and accounts of his massacre of the *ksatriyas* serve primarily to emphasize the Bhārgava's control of the epic itself (1977:138 ff.).

In a later work (1984), Goldman goes on to discuss Paraśurāma's involvement in the *Rāmāyana*. Once again, he argues that the episode is an interpolation, forming part of 'a certain amount of originally unrelated and almost certainly later material [which] has been juxtaposed with the central part of the *Bālakāṇḍa*' (p.79). Conceding the psychological and literary importance of the story in the text, he continues (p.80):

Nonetheless, it is clearly a later interpolation, for the figure of Rāma Jāmadagnya is proper to the *Mahābhārata* in its expanded form and was a product of the Bhārgava redactors of that work. Since the older portions of the *Rāmāyana* are older than the *Mahābhārata* and the development of the figure of Rāma Jāmadagnya belongs to a relatively late stratum of the Bhārata corpus, it would follow that the episode of the encounter of the two Rāmas must be a late development in the *Bālakāṇḍa*.

²¹ Again, Sukthankar makes no connection between Paraśurāma's role in this episode and his confrontation with Rāma Dāśarathi, even in the vulgarate *Itanayakapuran* (Sukthankar is working from the vulgate). He describes the latter as a 'grotesque story' involving disrespect for a character held in esteem by the *Mahābhārata*, as such it belongs to legends 'quite inharmonious with the *Mahābhārata* context' (p. 21).

Other scholars concur with these points. Brockington, for example, argues that both the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* versions of the conflict with Rāma are interpolations (1984:315, 231). Karve agrees with Sukthankar about Paraśurāma's involvement in the *Mahābhārata*, and goes on to call the *Rāmāyana* account 'a grave anachronism... a forced unnatural entry for the double purpose of retrieving the honour of the *ksatriyas* and to declare to the world the godliness of Rāma [Dāśarathi]' (1932:129-30).

It would appear, then, that any attempt to invest Paraśurāma's interventions in the affairs of Rāma or the *Mahābhārata* with a genuine narrative significance has to fly in the face of a substantial body of opinion. The different components of the myth have been severally examined and dismissed as a set of discrete incidents bearing no meaningful relationship either to each other or to the narrative of the texts which contain them. Paraśurāma's appearance in the *Rāmāyana* is seen as a later addition with little relevance to the story. His appearance as a living character in the *Mahābhārata* is deemed the result of anachronism and Bhārgava enthusiasm. His conflict with Bhīṣma is again an irrelevant interpolation, and the accounts of his own massacre of the *ksatriyas* is no more than a Bhārgava 'trade-mark' (Goldman 1977:140) with no real significance for the story unfolding around it.

The arguments put forward in each of these instances certainly appear to hold some force, and to provide a substantial barrier to any narrative, rather than textual, explanation of Paraśurāma's role. However, their strength relies largely on the various instances being taken separately. When these elements are taken together and placed more firmly against their narrative background, the overall conclusions begin to look less convincing.

The role played by Paraśurāma's own story in the *Mahābhārata* narrative is the best illustration of the importance of context and juxtaposition. While Bhārgava enthusiasm for the story may indeed explain the sheer frequency with which it is told, when the context of these tellings is taken more carefully into account, it becomes apparent that Paraśurāma's past exploits are being presented as a deliberate backdrop to the Bhārata battle. As demonstrated above, Paraśurāma's story is not merely situated haphazardly in the more accommodating parts of the epic, which would have been sufficient for Bhārgava purposes, but rather is consistently found at highly significant points in the narrative: at the opening of the epic, repeated at the start of the list of incarnations which begins the narrative account proper, immediately before the battle begins (in the encounter with Bhīṣma); and immediately after the battle has ended, retold over the bodies of the slaughtered combatants. In other words, the story is told precisely where one would expect to find it if the narrators wanted to draw out a resonance with the events unfolding in the epic. Moreover, the connection is made explicit, especially in the first reference considered (1.2.3-9) where the battlefield for the current action is identified as the scene of Paraśurāma's previous slaughter. That the two elements should be read in context, therefore, could hardly be made more

obvious.

It is not surprising that the narrators should think to juxtapose Paraśūrāma's slaughter of the *ksatriyas* with the Bhārata battle in this way: at the very least it stands as an indication of the severity of the massacre about to take place, a severity seen only before at the hands of Paraśūrāma. However, other similarities also exist which the juxtaposition could well be intended to highlight. Not only is the scale of the carnage comparable, but so too is its purpose: a removal of the overabundant and adharmic kings who are oppressing the earth and threatening cosmic stability. That this process has some eschatological significance in each case is again made clear by the passage setting the two events at consecutive *yugāntas* (1.2.3-9); and I shall return to the implications of this below.

I shall now turn to the general question of Paraśūrāma's depiction as a living character so long after his original actions. Sukthankar's argument on this point runs as follows: Paraśūrāma cannot be alive at the time of the epic, therefore he is not alive at the time of the epic; the fact that he appears to be alive can only be explained by Bhārgava enthusiasm. This clearly begs the question. Once the circular reasoning is removed, a more straightforward reading of the material as it stands suggests that Paraśūrāma's portrayal as still alive is quite deliberate, and that this preternatural longevity is an essential part of his make-up. This is reflected in the epic's use of the epithet *cirañjīvan* ('long-lived') which implies an indefinitely extended life-span, well in excess of the generally elongated but finite terms of existence usually allotted to mythical characters. It is also reflected in the fact that accounts of Paraśūrāma's earlier deeds are left inherently open-ended: he is simply banished to Mount Mahendra with no mention made of an eventual demise. Purāṇic accounts of the banishment reinforce this continued existence, and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* is quite explicit about the possibility of future action:

Lotus-eyed Rāma, the illustrious Jāmadagnya, will promulgate
the Vedas in a future period.
He is dwelling even now on Mount Mahendra.²²

It is interesting to note, moreover, that this odd relationship with time, and the periods of 'dormancy' before future action which it involves, occur in another aspect of Paraśūrāma's myth, namely the circumstance of his birth. As was mentioned earlier, Paraśūrāma's conception comes about through an accidental mixture of *brahman* and *ksatra* power, a mixture which endows him with a fierce nature more suitable to a warrior than a brahmin. Bhṛgu, the

²² *jāmadagnyopi bhagavān rāmaḥ kamalalocanah| āgāmyai antare rājan varṇaṁṣiyati vai bhṛat|| āsīe 'dyāpti mahendradraui|| Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 9.16.25-6.

sage whose boon inadvertently led to this, explains the situation to Paraśūrāma's intended mother Satyawatī:

Your son shall be a brahmin with the conduct of a *ksatriya*; your mother's great son will be a *ksatriya* with the behaviour of a brahmin.²³

Satyawatī pleads that it should be her grandson rather than her son who is the war-like brahmin, and thus Paraśūrāma's birth is set in motion, but delayed a generation.

Once we accept the possibility that Paraśūrāma's longevity is deliberate, one of the major barriers to a meaningful exploration of his role in the epics is removed. However, another still remains: the objection that the various Paraśūrāma episodes are mere interpolations to the main narrative. This objection is particularly hard to refute in relation to the *Rāmāyana* episode where the evidence of interpolation is particularly strong. Although a recognition of this fact may be useful in determining the genesis and development of the episode, however, it remains largely irrelevant for an understanding of the role that the encounter plays in the narrative as a whole. Returning again to the importance of context, I would argue that the place of interpolation is at least as important as the fact of interpolation and it cannot be overlooked that the episode now forms the culminating event of the *Bālakāṇḍa* and marks the end of Rāma's boyhood. That the conflict with Paraśūrāma should make narrative sense in this situation has always been maintained by the tradition itself, which has come to view it as the highly significant moment when Rāma fully becomes the avatar.

The arguments against Paraśūrāma's appearances in the *Mahābhārata* are also weaker than they at first appear. If we accept that Paraśūrāma can indeed be alive at this time, it is no longer so fanciful to see him involved in epic events *per se*. Furthermore, his involvement is again not as haphazard as Sukthankar

²³ *brāhmanah ksatriyavriti vai tava puro bhaviṣyati| ksatriyo brāhmanācāro mānuṣa tava suto mahān|| Mbh.* 3.115.25-6.

²⁴ There are, of course, many issues involved in the status of interpolations in a text such as the *Mahābhārata*. Not only does its oral origins make the whole question of what is and what is not an interpolation a tricky one, but its character as a narrative also affects the way we view it. Considerations applicable to texts made up of collections, such as the *Rgveda* or the Hebrew Bible are less relevant to narrative literature, where any skilful addition becomes part of the continuous flow of the story. As such it is reasonable to ask what relevance it has to the story, that it should have been inserted at that particular point in the narrative and not another. Of course, considerations of textual expediency and narrative relevance tend to overlap in many cases, as when myths are told at the end of a book or episode, which is at once an easy place for interpolation and a highly charged moment in the story.

suggests. His role as weapons' master is fairly consistently maintained, as is his attendance at the various turning-points in the narrative, even to the extent of tangential reference being made to it at one of the few important events he misses.²⁵ Nor are his appearances on these occasions merely ones of static decoration. In at least one example he plays a more active and surely important role: when he recognizes the divine identities of Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa at their peace embassy, a role reminiscent of his recognition of Rāma's true identity in the *Rāmāyana* episode.

Having overcome some of the underlying objections to a meaningful analysis of Paraśurāma's role in the epics, I shall now consider the most complex and puzzling aspect of his involvement there, namely the parallels between his conflict with Rāma in the *Rāmāyana* and that with Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata*. As demonstrated, the two incidents show marked similarities, both in their constituent elements and in their underlying concerns. These were too consistent to be explained by simple coincidence. Yet it would be difficult to find any historical explanation which would adequately account for them, without having recourse to a scenario of textual borrowing that is both convoluted and chronologically unlikely. This leaves us, therefore, with the likelihood that the similarities in the two accounts arise from the fact that they are fulfilling similar functions.

One possible functional similarity emerges from the work of Adalbert Gail, one of the two people who have looked at Paraśurāma's conflict with Bhīṣma in any detail (1977:35-9). Gail provides a more sophisticated version of the argument that Paraśurāma's defeat indicates a reassertion of *kṣatriya* supremacy, an argument encountered earlier in relation to the *Rāmāyana* episode. He argues that what the conflict and its outcome in Bhīṣma's favour represent is not so much a reassertion of *kṣatriya* values as a reassertion of the values of a clearly demarcated *varṇadharmā*. Paraśurāma could not defeat Bhīṣma as he could the other *kṣatriyas* because the story is being told against a different ethos where it is no longer appropriate for a brahmin to take up arms, even in the cause of *dharma*. Thus Paraśurāma, a brahmin, cannot defeat and kill Bhīṣma, the best *kṣatriya* of his generation: only another *kṣatriya*, Arjuna, can do that.

Gail's arguments are attractive and certainly throw light on some aspects of the account. However, there are also problems with his interpretation. Bhīṣma's

²⁵ In the shape of Karna asking Arjuna whether he is another Paraśurāma as he fights the kings at Draupadi's *svayamvara* (see above). The other episode where Paraśurāma is absent is the dice game and here there is no mention made of him during the specific events involved. However, it is perhaps worth noting that the reference to his presence at the royal consecration occurs not in the original account of that event, but in Duryodhana's disgruntled description of its grandeur which forms the immediate preamble to the dicing.

own rather dubious relationship to *dharma* (as a *kṣatriya* who has made a vow of celibacy more appropriate to a brahmin) makes him an unlikely vehicle for reasserting the importance of *varṇadharmā*. Nor is it strictly correct to counterbalance Paraśurāma's defeat with Arjuna's victory, for although it may well be the *kṣatriya* Arjuna who will be the immediate cause of Bhīṣma's death as the text here states (5.186.19), in practice he can only achieve this with the help of the highly ambivalent figure, Ambā-Śikhandin. More important in this context, however, is the fact that Gail's reading of the conflict fails to take into account several elements which are significant both here and in the conflict with Rāma. In particular, it offers no explanation for the eschatological emphases, nor for the manner of Paraśurāma's defeat. Gail's analysis in terms of *varṇadharmā*, therefore, can only go part of the way towards finding a similarity of function between the two accounts.

Scheuer has more to say about the eschatological significance of the story and thus comes closer to my own concerns. Arguing that Paraśurāma's defeat by Bhīṣma is not there simply to highlight Arjuna's later achievement, Scheuer goes on to analyse it in terms of Paraśurāma's own avatar deed and the greater battle which is about to take place. Paraśurāma's involvement at this juncture tells us that once again the world is in a situation of dharmic crisis where the relationship between the top two *varṇas* is distorted. His defeat, however, tells us that the proper battle to re-establish dharmic balance is yet to come. The fight between Paraśurāma and Bhīṣma 'n'est qu'un prologue de la grande guerre des Bhāratas, sur le même champ de bataille' (1982:141). Scheuer's analysis of the function of this event thus helps both to account for the eschatological emphasis in the episode – it heralds the crisis of *dharma* in the world which will call for the intervention of an avatar – and also to highlight its role in the wider narrative context. However, Scheuer's concern is primarily with the *Mahābhārata*, and consequently he draws no parallels between this episode and the confrontation with Rāma in the *Rāmāyana*.

I shall now turn to my own analysis of the two conflicts. Several different strands emerge from the material under consideration, and I shall look at each of these in turn before attempting to draw them all together. I shall focus on the following elements of the myths: first, the conflict with Rāma in the *Rāmāyana*; second, the variation on this found in the vulgarate *Mahābhārata*, with some considerations that arise from this; and third, the conflict with Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata*.

The conflict with Rāma Dāśarathi in the *Rāmāyana* is the simpler of the two episodes and introduces the basic themes to be explored, namely, the manner of Paraśurāma's defeat and the eschatological emphases in the accounts. Several elements of the story feed into these themes and their significance will become clearer as I proceed. As was demonstrated, the conflict with Paraśurāma comes at an important point in Rāma's life, with his boyhood over and the events leading up to his own avatar deed about to begin. It was also shown that the

encounter is significant in the affairs of the world, and is eschatologically fraught. Further on in the account, the manner of Paraśurāma's defeat was seen to be distinctive, involving a ready capitulation and reverence for the victor. The ostensible function of this in the text is to allow Paraśurāma to recognize Rāma as Viṣṇu and to acknowledge him as such to the world. When the defeat is considered more from Paraśurāma's perspective, however, a different emphasis emerges, namely, that he is meeting with his own limitation: prior to the challenge, he was feared as the invincible scourge of warriors; after it, he feels his strength destroyed and must acknowledge that his days of supremacy are over. Thus, in the *Rāmāyana* account, both protagonists meet at a threshold in their own lives, a moment which is in turn seen as eschatologically charged and therefore crucial to the world. Little surprise, then, that the tradition should have interpreted this threshold as that between one avatar and another.

An interesting variation on this idea of limitation emerges from the version of the episode found in the vulgarate *Mahābhārata*, where the idea of threshold is expressed in spatial terms. In this account, the two Rāmas meet at a physical boundary, the borders of Daśaratha's domain, where the power of Rāma will restrict the Bhārgava:

Hearing that Rāma [Bhārgava] had arrived at the border of his domain, Daśaratha sent his son Rāma to honour him.²⁶

The word used for 'domain' here (*viśaya*) also highlights the interplay between spatial and existential threshold found in these two versions of the myth, as it means both sphere of influence or action as well as physical territory. The word appears elsewhere in Paraśurāma's story, at the end of his slaughter of *kṣatriyas*, when he is banished by Kaśyapa. It is found in the *Śāntiparvan* version of the tale where Kaśyapa says:

Rāma, you must not remain here in my domain at any time.²⁷

It is used again in the *Rāmāyana* when the story is retold by Paraśurāma:

When previously I gave the earth in gift to Kaśyapa, he said to me, 'You should not stay in my domain.'²⁸

²⁶ *taṁ vai daśarathah śrutvā viśayāntam upgacām/ preṣayām āsa rāmasya rāman/ putram pūruṣeṣṭam* // Mbh.3. Appendix 1.14.29-30. The idea of physical boundary is present in the *Rāmāyana* account but not emphasized.

²⁷ *na te mad viṣaye rāma vastavyam iha karhiṭi* // Mbh.12.49.58. Kaśyapa banishes Paraśurāma in order to preserve a remnant (*śeṣa*) of *kṣatriyas* (v.57).

²⁸ *kāśyapō mazaḥ datā yadā pūrvaṁ vasmūhārā/ viṣaye me na vastavyam iti māṁ/ kāśyapo bhavti* // Rām.1.75.13.

Here again, then, at an earlier stage in his life, Paraśurāma encounters a physical and functional boundary which he must not transgress.

Accounts of Paraśurāma's banishment by Kaśyapa highlight another noteworthy feature: Paraśurāma's unusual relationship to space. Kaśyapa banishes the Bhārgava after being given the earth as his sacrificial fee, and some accounts make it clear that the extent of this gift leaves nothing remaining:

He gave the eastern region to the *hoir*, the southern region to the *brahman*, the western to the *adhvanyu*, the northern region to the *udgāt*.

He gave the intermediate directions to the others and the middlemost space to Kaśyapa.²⁹

In the *Rāmāyana* version, Paraśurāma himself states that after his banishment he no longer has a place on earth:

Acting on the words of my teacher Kaśyapa, I promised that I would not spend a night on earth.³⁰

This suggests that Paraśurāma's banishment must be to some kind of spatial no man's land. This haziness of location can also be found in the regional variations of the myth which have grown up in West and South West India. In most of these, Paraśurāma is said to have reclaimed land from the sea for his place of exile. This idea is also found in the epic, where the ocean gives him a place to dwell after his banishment from the earth; that is to say, a place which is place to dwell outside the normal categories of space.³¹ While this connection with reclaimed land may well reflect historical and geographical considerations, as

²⁹ *dadau prācīṇaṁ dīśam hoire brahmane dakṣiṇāṁ dīśam/ adhvanyave prācīṇaṁ vai udgātre utarāṁ dīśam/ anyebhyovāntarādīśāḥ kāśyapōya ca madhyatāhi* // Bhārgavata-purāṇa 9.16.21-2.

³⁰ *so 'ham guruvacah kurvaṁ prthivīm na vase miśāmi/ iti praijñā kākutṣtha kṛtvā vai kāśyapasya ha* // Rām.1.75.14. Some accounts run counter to this trend and make Mahendra an earthly retreat, as is obvious from the fact that the Pāṇḍavas visit it and meet Paraśurāma there in the tour of the sacred fords (3.115-17). This visit is the occasion for the first long account of Paraśurāma's complete story and it is interesting to note that in this version Kaśyapa does not banish him, but rather the Bhārgava simply goes to Mahendra after his gift. This could suggest that the spatial anomaly grew up alongside the idea of banishment, both gaining strength as the myth developed.

³¹ Rām.12.49.49. For regional versions, see Karve 1932:115 ff., 136 ff.; Janaki 1966: 59 ff.; and Carpenter 1935:12 ff.

has been argued,³² it also serves to reinforce the idea that Paraśurāma's exile and continued existence involves him in an anomalous relationship not only with time but also with space.

Finally, I shall consider the more complex interaction with Bhīṣma in the *Mahābhārata*. The two main themes introduced by the *Rāmāyana* episode are even more pronounced here: the eschatological import of the conflict is emphasized more frequently, and the change in Paraśurāma after his defeat is more marked. The *Mahābhārata* account also reinforces the idea that Paraśurāma's defeat involves a boundary or limitation to his powers which he cannot go beyond. This is made clear in his words to Ambā:

I am not able to surpass Bhīṣma in battle...

This is the limit of my power; this is the limit of my strength...³³

Paraśurāma's acceptance of the defeat is also more strongly emphasized in this account, where he greets Bhīṣma's victory with positive pleasure.

In my preliminary discussion of the episode, these similarities were taken to suggest that the conflict with Bhīṣma was still essentially a process of 'handing over'. The question was raised, however, of what this could mean in the context of the *Mahābhārata* account. If the Bhārgava's opponent in this conflict were Kṛṣṇa or Arjuna, the similarities between the two episodes would be so marked that we could answer this simply: Paraśurāma is once again handing over the avatar status to the appropriate person for the current crisis. Thus his role would become clear as being some sort of guardian figure for the avatar power. However, his opponent is neither Kṛṣṇa nor Arjuna, but Bhīṣma, and I shall now explore what this choice could signify.

One clue lies in the episode's narrative context. The conflict with Bhīṣma is recounted on the very eve of the Bhārata battle and serves in many ways as a smaller model for the great war to come. The Bhārata battle is the result of the earth seeking relief from her oppression by over-abundant and adharmic inhabitants³⁴ and is clearly presented as the crisis which marks the juncture of the *dvāpara* and *kali yugas*, the outcome of which will determine the world's fate and its safe passage from one period to the next.³⁵ Such a situation of

dharmaic and eschatological crisis is typically the point when the avatar intervenes to restore order and thus allow the cycle of the *yugas* to continue. If the conflict between Paraśurāma and Bhīṣma is read against this background, as its place in the narrative suggests it should be, it would appear that although the avatar of the period may not be directly involved, the struggle with the Bhārgava is nevertheless once again taking place in a situation closely involved with the avatar's essential work: the restoration of cosmic order at the critical 'joints of time'.

In the *Mahābhārata* account, therefore, I would argue that it is principally the context of the conflict rather than the protagonist which lends it meaning. However, the choice of Bhīṣma for protagonist is by no means unsuited to this interpretation. Bhīṣma is the chief warrior among the Kaurava forces and will lead them into the battle to come. He is the common elder of the warring cousins and honoured by both sides as the grandfather of the tribe. Furthermore, he is also the person who is ultimately most responsible in human terms for the current crisis, for the very reasons which made him unsuitable for Gai's purposes: his vow of celibacy results in the disputed succession which leads to the war. It could be argued, therefore, that to some extent Bhīṣma represents the Bhārata situation itself. His role as protagonist serves to highlight the context of the conflict, namely the inauguration of the battle which marks the turning-point of the *dvāpara/kali yugānta*,³⁶ with all that this may imply for the significance of Paraśurāma's defeat.

Conclusions

It is now possible to begin drawing together the different strands that have emerged from this analysis. First, the story of Paraśurāma's own avatar deed does in fact have genuine significance for the narrative around it: it brings into focus the scale of the massacre about to take place; and suggests that the reasons for it are similar, namely, to relieve the earth of her burden of adharmic *ksatriyas*. In addition, Paraśurāma's appearances after this original *geṇe* are not simply the result of textual accident. This is borne out not only by the consistently significant points at which they occur in the narratives, but also by the fact that this extended existence is implicitly or explicitly written into accounts of his earlier life. The unusual nature of Paraśurāma's relationship to time, therefore, is an essential part of his characterization, reinforced and paralleled by a similar relationship to space.

³² According to Karve, for example, it is used as a charter myth to explain the physical characteristics of the Konkan (1932:116 ff.), while Charpentier argues that the stories reflect the historical process of brahminization in the South (1935:15 ff.). In relation to Paraśurāma's connection with the sea in these myths, it is interesting to note that in the epic his main enemy, Kārtavīrya, is called 'King of the Marshlands' (*ānūpātr*, Rām.3.116.19).

³³ *na... yudhi śaknōmi bhīṣman... viśeṣayitum... me paramā soktir... me paramaṇi balaṁ* // Mbh.5.187.2-3.

³⁴ See, for example, Mbh.1.58.25 ff.

³⁵ See, for example, Mbh.1.2.9 cited above and 12.337.42-3.

³⁶ See, for example, Mbh.5.47.59; 140.6-15. Elsewhere, both the dice game and the death of Kṛṣṇa are given as the moment of the turning.

Moreover, a logic has emerged in the temporal pattern of Paraśurāma's appearances which can now be unpacked. The date of the Bhāṅgava's slaughter of *ksatriyas* is rather vague in the classical texts which usually place it at an unspecified time in the past, or early in the *treṭāyuga*.³⁷ However, there is evidence from the regional variations to suggest that he came to be associated more precisely with the *kṛta/treṭā yugānta*. Babb, for example, working with villagers in Madhya Pradesh, notes that the agricultural festival of *akṛi* is associated both with the birthdate of Paraśurāma and with the commencement of the *treṭāyuga* (1975:141). According to Karve, the *śākta*-influenced Marathi version of the *Mahābhārata* puts Paraśurāma's mother Renukā at the *kṛta/treṭā yugānta*, to parallel Sītā at the *treṭā/dvāpara* and Draupadī at the *dvāpara/kali* (1932:138).³⁸ As the avatars seem to be associated fairly consistently with the *yugānta* junctures, and as that between the *kṛta* and *treṭā yugas* is the only one not firmly occupied by another avatar, it is not surprising to find Paraśurāma popularly located here in this way and doubtless other instances could be found in support of this. Paraśurāma's next appearance comes in the conflict with Rāma, clearly situated at the start of the crisis of the *treṭā/dvāpara yugānta*. He then reappears at the time of the Bhārata events which culminate in the conflict with Bhīṣma on the eve of the battle marking the *dvāpara/kali yugānta*. The only *yugānta* where we do not find him, therefore, is that between the *kali* and *kṛta yugas* and there he is replaced by a similar figure, the brahmin warrior Kalkin.³⁹ Paraśurāma's appearances, therefore, are by no means temporally haphazard but rather, they consistently occur at the critical junctures between the *yugas*.

Finally, the idea of limitation and boundary has been demonstrated in each of these instances. Paraśurāma acts in a clearly demarcated arena, reaches the limits of his task, and then disappears back to the spatial and temporal sidelines, where he will wait until his reappearance at the next *yugānta*.

³⁷ See, for example, Mbh. 13.4.1 which simply sets it in olden times (*purāṇa*) and Mbh. 12.326.77 which sets it in the *treṭā (treṭāyuge bhaviṣṭāni rāmo bhṛguśulohah)*. In the *Purāṇas* a similar picture emerges: the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* (2.3.73.90) sets Paraśurāma in the nineteenth *treṭāyuga* (with Rāma Dāśarathi in the twenty-fourth), while the *Bhāgavata* comes closest to the *yugānta*, putting his birth fourteen generations from the dawn of the *yuga* (9.14.49-15.5). As I have shown, one *Mahābhārata* reference places Paraśurāma's actions at the *treṭā/dvāpara yugānta* (1.2.3), but the evidence is much stronger for allocating this *yugānta* more consistently to Rāma Dāśarathi.

³⁸ *kṛte ca renukā kṛtyā treṭāyān, jānaki sūtī dvāpare draupadī kṛtyā mlechhaghe kalau* // Karve 1932: 138.

³⁹ This connection is strengthened by a reference in the *Kalkipurāṇa* to Kalkin learning at the feet of Paraśurāma (2.1-5, cited Janaki 1966:73). Scheuer discusses the similarities between Paraśurāma and Kalkin (1982:329-31). The importance of the mixture of *brahmin* and *ksatriya* power found in these brahmin warrior figures for our understanding of the essential nature of the avatar has been discussed by Biardeau (1976:182 ff.).

Taking all these steps together, therefore, I would argue that it is possible to arrive at an interpretation of Paraśurāma's role in which, as I suggested earlier, he does indeed stand as a guardian, supervising a 'passing-over'. However, rather than simply involving the power of the avatar, as was seen in the *Rāmāyana* episode, comparison with the conflict in the *Mahābhārata* indicates that Paraśurāma's stewardship is temporal, and that what he is guarding is, in fact, the end of the *yuga*, ensuring its passage into the crisis of the *yugānta* which will mark its turning. The logic of his presence in the *Mahābhārata*, therefore, becomes clearer: he stands there as one of the many *yugānta* 'motifs' which supply the epic with the eschatological context for the human tragedy unfolding.

Abbreviations

Mbh.	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
Rām.	<i>Rāmāyana</i>

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5

Menstruation Myths

Julia Leslie

Introduction

Sudhir Kakar, the Indian psychoanalyst, argues that for the majority of Indian women female sexuality is 'a utilitarian affair', its primary value lying in 'its capacity to redress a lopsided distribution of power between the sexes' (1989:3). Since ancient times, however, that unequal distribution of power has been explained by the dominant (and predominantly male) ideology in terms of the inherent nature of women. This traditional view of women may be found encapsulated in myths and stories, or it may be confronted directly in treatises on the proper behaviour of men and women according to sacred norms (*dharma*). At its simplest, this view maintains that women are inherently wicked, that they are possessed of an uncontrollable and threatening inborn sexuality, and that they are innately impure.

I shall explore the link between notions of female sexuality and the idea of an inherent nature of women, within the narrower context of traditional Indian discourses on menstruation. First, I shall set the scene with a brief sketch of the debate on the inherent nature of women. I shall then relate two epic stories about female sexuality (one positive, one negative), and the dominant myth about the origins of menstruation. Finally, I shall look at the discourse on menstruation, and its implications for female sexuality, within three different indigenous frameworks. A reasonably objective, if not entirely accurate, account of

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