

FATHERS, SONS, AND RHINOCEROSES: MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE *PĀṆḌAV LĪLĀ*

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Pāṇḍav [Skt. *pāṇḍava*] *lilā* is a ritual dramatization of *Mahābhārata* that is performed in the Garhwal region of the Himalayas. A central episode in this tradition is the slaying of Arjuna by his son Nāgārjuna, a tale that parallels the well-known battle between Arjuna and Babhravāhana in the Sanskrit versions of the *Mahābhārata*. Goldman has interpreted that version in Freudian terms, as a positive oedipal narrative at the heart of *Mahābhārata*. I propose a sociocultural interpretation of the episode, based upon local child-rearing patterns and indigenous theories of family, person, and caste.

IT IS NOT, HOWEVER, THE CONTENTS of a myth that makes its analysis Freudian. It is the method.¹

INTRODUCTION

India's great epic *Mahābhārata*² dominates the culture of the former central Himalayan kingdom of Garhwal. Numerous local places are associated with events in the story, local Rajputs believe they are directly descended from the protagonists of the epic, and *Mahābhārata* is consistently invoked to explain everything from the origin of warts to the significance of Dravidian cross-cousin marriage. But the most significant deployment of the epic is in *pāṇḍav lilā*, a regional tradition of ritual drama

in which amateur village performers recite, dance, and enact portions of *Mahābhārata*.

Pāṇḍav lilā is a form of self-representation, a ritual drama in which an idealized image of self and society is publicly represented and valorized. Elsewhere, I have shown how *pāṇḍav lilā* represents local ideas of what it is to be Rajput³ and female.⁴ In this essay, I will explore its representation of masculinity, violence, and the relationship between fathers and sons. This is a profitable exercise, because the most significant of the many episodes dramatized in *pāṇḍav lilā* is the battle between Arjuna and his son Nāgārjuna. For reasons that will become clear in due course, this episode is known as "the Rhinoceros" (H. *gainḍā*).

A parallel episode is found in the Pune edition of *Mahābhārata*,⁵ where Arjuna's son is called Babhravāhana. That version has been analyzed in the pages of this journal by Robert Goldman.⁶ Part of my purpose in this essay

This essay is dedicated to my father, who was diagnosed with cancer as it was being written, and died before it was published. Earlier versions were presented at South Asia Seminars at the University of Washington and the University of Chicago; the Institut für Religionswissenschaft at the University of Bern, Switzerland; the Department of Anthropology at HMB Garhwal University in Srinagar, Garhwal; and at the conference "Gender, Religion and Social Definition" at the School of Oriental and African Studies. I would like to thank my colleagues around the world for their helpful comments, especially Frank Conlon, Ed Gerow, Bob Goldman, Nabila Jaber, M. C. Joshi, Julia Leslie, McKim Marriott, Axel Michaels, Margaret Trawick, and Atul Saklani. Research was funded by grants from the American Institute of Indian Studies and the University of Canterbury.

¹ Hillman 1991: 130.

² Most Indian names are transcribed according to the Sanskrit norm, except for reported speech in Hindi and Garhwali, or where otherwise noted.

³ Sax 1995.

⁴ Sax 1996.

⁵ xiv. 78–81. This edition is conventionally referred to as the "critical edition," but I refer to it as "the Pune edition" in order to emphasize that it is but one of many versions of the epic. As the editor himself, V. S. Sukthankar, wrote: "The essential fact in Mahābhārata textual criticism is that the Mahābhārata is not and never was a fixed rigid text, but is fluctuating epic tradition . . . To put it in other words, the Mahābhārata is the whole of the epic tradition: the entire Critical Apparatus" (1933: cii). The Babhravāhana episode, of course, occurs in many of the versions of the epic on which the critical edition is based; for example, in the Bombay edition, it is found at xiv.79ff.

⁶ Goldman 1978.

is to provide an alternative to Goldman's interpretation, but in order to do so I must first set the stage by describing the mythology and performance of the Rhinoceros in some detail. After doing so, I will summarize Goldman's Freudian analysis of the corresponding episode in the Pune edition of the epic, then offer my own interpretation by taking into account Indian patterns of child rearing and Hindu theories of personhood, family, and caste. I conclude that the episode represents a resolution of the ambivalent relationship between father and son, a celebration of the martial virtues of Rajputs, and a means of resisting death by ensuring the immortality of the patriline.⁷

THE PĀṆDAV LĪLĀ OF GARHWAL

Pāṇḍav līlā, the play (*līlā*) of the Pāṇḍavas (protagonists of *Mahābhārata*) is found in the erstwhile Hindu kingdom of Garhwal, which now lies entirely within the borders of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.⁸ Garhwal is bordered by Tibet to the north, Himachal Pradesh to the west, the north Indian plains to the south, and the districts making up Kumaon, another former Hindu kingdom, to the east. *Pāṇḍav līlā* is unknown in any of these adjoining areas, but well known within Garhwal, suggesting an historical link between the drama and the former kingdom.

Pāṇḍav līlās are performed during the winter, and are comprised of four main elements: drumming and chanting (which accompanies all public rituals in Garhwal) by the Das caste of musicians; competitive bardic recitation of *Mahābhārata* in the vernacular; individual and group dancing by the Pāṇḍavas and members of their "army," in which the dancers are conventionally regarded as possessed by their respective characters; and discrete *līlās*, dramatizations of vignettes from the epic. There is however considerable regional variation: in some districts *pāṇḍav līlā* is performed only in the month of

Kārttik, elsewhere only in Pauṣ or Māgh; its duration ranges from half-day performances accompanying other, more primary festivals to full-blown performances of up to twenty-one days; in some districts bardic recitation is well developed, while elsewhere it is attenuated or even absent; musicians' instruments vary significantly between regions⁹; and in one valley, the Kauravas rather than the Pāṇḍavas are the chief focus of worship.¹⁰ Given such regional variation, it is remarkable that one episode is consistently dramatized or at least alluded to in performances throughout Garhwal. That episode is the Rhinoceros, and this is the Rhinoceros tale:¹¹

THE RHINOCEROS TALE (AS TOLD BY BACHAN SINGH)¹²

King Agnidhar's son Utkal was sick, so he sent for his brahman priest, Ātmadev. Ātmadev pleaded that he was too old to come, and he sent his son Vidyādhara to the king's palace, directing him not to accept any gift from the king except for red garments. However, it was fated that only in this way would the king's son get relief. The king tempted Vidyādhara with a golden scythe and a golden staff, and the brahman youth accepted them along with the red cloth.

But God did not approve of this. He took the form of a cow along the path, and when Vidyādhara approached he threw rocks at her, but she did not give way. So he

⁹ In eastern Garhwal, musicians typically use the *dhol*, a two-headed drum played with one stick and one hand, and the *damāūm*, a single-headed drum played with two sticks; while in western Garhwal a large "battle-horn" (*raṇa simha*) is sometimes used, and the *damāūm* is replaced by a gong (*bhainā*).

¹⁰ Sax 1996; forthcoming (a).

¹¹ Most of what follows is based on research on the left bank of the Alakananda River and in the Pindar River basin, where the Rhinoceros achieves its greatest elaboration. For convenience' sake, I will refer to this area as Chamoli. The Rhinoceros also predominates in Nandakini District and perhaps in the Paikhandā region. In the interest of accuracy, it should be noted that parts of Chamoli District located on the right bank of the Alakananda specialize in the *cakravayūha* or "circular array," the encirclement and death of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu during the great battle. I suspect that these regional variations correlate with the ancient division of Garhwal into petty chiefdoms, each with its own fort or *gadhi*, hence the name Garhwal (*gadhwaī*), "land of forts."

¹² Bachan Singh "Shastri-ji" is a loremaster from Toli Village, Malla Chandpur, Chamoli District. The version translated here was told in Hindi, and parenthetical glosses are in that language, except where otherwise noted.

⁷ My emphasis in this essay is on father-son relationships, which is consistent with *pāṇḍav līlā* itself, where the majority of the parts are played by men. However the female roles of Kuntī and Draupadī are also of great importance. A measure of this importance is found in the fact that, even in the ever-increasing number of villages where men have taken over women's roles because it is thought improper for women to dance publicly, the role of Kuntī is nevertheless always played by an elderly woman.

⁸ At the time of writing, it appears likely that the Government of India will create a new state, called Uttarākhāṇḍ, of which Garhwal will be a part.

struck her with the golden scythe and killed her, and the cow cursed him, saying "Go, brahman. You were born in a brahman family, but you killed me. Go! You will now take birth in a demon's home."

Many years later, Vidyādhara took birth in the home of a demon named Keśi. And Keśi named him Sūrya. One day, Keśi and his wife went to the jungle to eat meat and drink liquor. They stayed there overnight, while their son was home alone, crying with hunger. At that moment, Atri Muni and Anasūyā Devī were flying through heaven in their flower cars. Anasūyā said to her husband, "A child is crying from hunger." She landed her flower car, and fed him a spoonful of nectar. The next day, the parents of Sūrya the demon came home. They said, "Eat, son." He said, "I'm not hungry." They asked why, and he said, "You two went to the jungle and stayed there for two days. In the meanwhile a man and woman came from the sky and fed me something, and my hunger and thirst have been satisfied." So his mother and father sent him to search for the couple who had helped him.

Sūrya scrambled and climbed and crawled to Atri and Anasūyā's mountain ashram. Atri said to Anasūyā, "Devī, I told you that day not to feed him, now see what trouble has come. I will change his name." He taught him some mantras and gave him some good clothes and named him Devāsura. When Devāsura learned the mantras, he remembered his previous life: how he had been born in a brahman's home, had taken the gifts of gold, killed a cow, and been cursed to be reborn as a demon.

He told all of this to Atri Muni, who said, "Go, son, you are guilty of bovicide. There are 360 rivers in India: go bathe in all of them, then return to me." Devāsura did so, returned to Atri Muni and asked him to liberate him from his demonic body. Atri told him to search out a pilgrimage place with a great boulder on the banks of the Ganges, where he would be liberated. So Devāsura searched and he searched and he searched and he searched, and finally he found the great boulder at Gayā. Then he summoned all the gods, and they dug a large, deep pit and placed him at the bottom, and rolled a big stone over the top of it, and performed a sacrifice on top of the stone. When only Devāsura's bones were left, they joined them together to make an effigy.

Then Viṣṇu said to his charioteer Dvāruka, "Go, and grab whatever you first see in the bazaar and bring it here." The first thing he saw in the bazaar was a cake of jaggery, so he took it and brought it back. They mixed it with honey to make flesh. By the power of their mantras, they established breath in it. Then they put the ash from the sacrifice¹³ between his eyes, and it grew and

grew until it formed a horn. Since he became manifest in Gayā, he was called Gayāsura, the demon (*asura*) from Gayā. And because of the horn he was called "rhinoceros." He was the Rhinoceros Demon of Gayā (*gayāsura gainḍā*).¹⁴

When the gods saw him, they were afraid and didn't know what to do with him, so they said, "Let's give him to Indra, king of the gods." Indra made a copper pavilion for him, and put him inside. He was too mean and dangerous to be let out, so they pushed his fodder into the copper pavilion with a crooked stick, and his drinking water flowed in through an opening at the base of the wall.

Then came the third age (*dvāparyuga*). Once upon a time, King Pāṇḍu took his bow and went to hunt in a jungle where a *ṛṣi* and his wife had taken the forms of deer so that they could enjoy sexual relations.¹⁵ Pāṇḍu shot the stag, and the *ṛṣi*'s wife resumed her human form and said, "Look what you've done, you've killed my husband!" She cursed him: "Should you ever have sex with your wife, your head will split."

So the Pāṇḍavs were not born of Pāṇḍu's seed. Mother Kuntī recited the mantra of Dharmarāj, and Yudhiṣṭhira was born. She recited the mantra of Vāyu, and Bhīma was born. She recited the mantra of the Aśvin Kumāras, and Nakula was born. Once when King Pāṇḍu was observing the eleventh day (*ekādaśī*) fast, he thought, "I have two wives, but I have never enjoyed them sexually." His heart began to beat for his second wife Mādrī, and he forced himself on her, had intercourse with her, and Saḥadeva was conceived.¹⁶

Now in former times, when a man died, his wife would burn herself to ashes together with him on his funeral pyre, and become a *sati*. But the gods said, "Mother Kuntī is one of the deities—she can't be a *sati*. And Mādrī is pregnant. She can't be a *sati*, either." So

¹⁴ According to popular religious literature available in Gayā, Gayāsura was a demon who performed asceticism until he received the boon that anyone who touched his body would go to heaven. Soon the netherworld (*yamaloka*) began to be depopulated as all its residents went to heaven, so the gods went to Viṣṇu, who directed Brahmā to do a sacrifice (*yajña*) on the body of Gayāsura. Afterward, Gayāsura tried to rise up but was prevented from doing so by the gods. Yama placed a stone on top of him to keep him down, and Gayāsura promised that he wouldn't get up anymore if Viṣṇu and the other gods would continue to dwell on top of him (Pandeya n.d.; Prasad n.d.).

¹⁵ Literally, "so that he could give her *ṛtudāna*," the householder's obligation to have monthly intercourse with his wife after her period. In Garhwal, this is a polite euphemism for sex.

¹⁶ See below, p. 288.

¹³ H. *yajña-tilak*, black ashes from burnt barley and sesamum.

King Pāṇḍu wasn't cremated for ten months, not until Sahadev was born.¹⁷ In our Hindu religion, we break the skull of the cremated corpse, because the *dhananjaya vāyu* is inside it, and if it is not released, it becomes a ghost, but if the skull is broken, it flies away. So because king Pāṇḍu's skull was not broken, he became a ghost.

Now about this time, Nārada the *ṛṣi* was wandering in the forest and he saw King Pāṇḍu on the path. He said, "King Pāṇḍu is dead. How is it that he has appeared to me on the path?" So he went to the Pāṇḍavs' capital and said to King Yudhiṣṭhira, "Your father has not reached heaven. I've seen him on the path. You perform a *nārāyaṇ-bali*¹⁸ and he will reach heaven." So Yudhiṣṭhira asked Nārada "How should I do it? What do I need?" and Nārada said, "You need the earth from an elephant's footprints, soil from Malari, barley from Jauras,¹⁹ sesame from Sesame Grove, gold from Tibet, and the hide of a rhinoceros."²⁰ So the Pāṇḍavs held a council, and decided that they would do Pāṇḍu's *nārāyaṇ-bali śrāddha*. Mother Kuntī called her four sons, but Arjun wasn't there. Why not?

Once upon a time, they would tell stories in the Pāṇḍavs' capital of Hastināpur. At that time, Arjun was just a child: he filled their hookah and so forth. Afterwards, Lord Kṛṣṇa would stand up and ask if anyone would like to go to the gates of death. But everyone refused; none

of them wanted to go, because they knew that whoever goes to the gates of death does not return.

Mother Kuntī asked Arjun what stories they were telling there, and he said that he didn't understand the stories, but afterwards Śrī Kṛṣṇa would arise and ask if anyone was willing to go to the gates of death, and they would all refuse. Mother Kuntī said, "Son, one day you agree: tell Śrī Kṛṣṇa that you will go to the gates of death." So one day Arjun said to Śrī Kṛṣṇa "Yes, I'll come," and the gods were upset by this.

There was a girl named Vasudantā, the daughter of Vāsuki the serpent (*nāga*). She performed asceticism for Śiva for twelve years, seeking the boon of a husband. If she didn't get that boon, the earth would burn up from the falling of her tears, so Śiva-jī concocted an enchantment . . .

Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Arjun came to Śiva's realm. Śrī Kṛṣṇa began to play the drum, and Arjun began to dance the Kañcanī dance. Śiva-jī was charmed, and said, "Kañcanī, tell me what boon you seek." Arjun said, "First you give your oath." Śiva gave his oath, saying

I swear once, I swear twice.
May Brahmā and Viṣṇu,
the Banyan and Pipal trees, bear witness:
if my oath wavers, may I go to hell!²¹

"Tell me what you want!" And Arjun said, "I want Vasudantā for my wife." Then Śiva-jī asked Vasudantā what she wanted, and she said she wanted a husband like Arjun. So Śiva placed Vasudantā's hand in Arjun's and said, "This is your wife." And he placed Arjun's hand in Vasudantā's and said, "This is your husband." Then they returned to Hastināpur along with Śrī Kṛṣṇa.

At Caupanthī Caukhāl (lit., "four paths, four passes"), Vasudantā said, "Revered husband, we are husband and wife only because Śiva-jī gave us to each other as a boon. Let us visit my father Vāsuki in Nāgīlok (Skt. *nāga-loka*), and he will marry us properly. He'll erect a banana tree, make an altar, bind us together with a cloth and lead us around the fire altar.²² Then we'll be man and wife." From there, Vasudantā and Arjun went to Nāgīlok and Śrī Kṛṣṇa went to Dvāraka . . .

Now mother Kuntī said, "Arjun should bring the rhinoceros skin, but he's not here." He had gone to Nāgīlok. She sent a letter to Dvāraka saying "Hey brother's

¹⁷ In India, human gestation is traditionally reckoned to last ten months.

¹⁸ The *nārāyaṇa-bali* is mentioned in the standard Hindu ritual manual *Dharmasindhu*. In Garhwal, it is performed for a person whose last rites have not been properly done. An effigy made of *dūba* or *kuśa* grass is placed on a bier and taken to the cremation ground, while chanting "*Rām nām satya hai, satya bolo garya hai* (Rama's name is truth; speak truth, this is everyone's destiny)." All other, related rites are observed, including tonsure and *kapāla-kriyā*.

¹⁹ These places are in Garhwal's neighboring province of Kumaon. They are at high altitude, and are associated with the Bhotiyas, trans-Himalayan traders and transhumant pastoralists.

²⁰ It is said that a rhinoceros-hide ring may be substituted for the more conventional *kuśa*-grass ring in *śrāddha*, the obligatory mortuary rite, and that such rings were often employed in Garhwal in times past. According to Claus Peter Zoller, in some parts of Kumaon, brahmins use either a ring made of rhinoceros-bone or a small piece of rhinoceros hide during their *śrāddha* performances (personal communication). The *Mānavadharmasāstra* (3.272) gives a list of oblations to the ancestors, asserting that those of rhinoceros flesh are most effective, satisfying the ancestors forever and thus obviating the need for future *śrāddhas*.

²¹ *ed bācā, do bācā*
baramā viṣṇu bākī
baḍ pīpal sākhi
bačan jālegā to narak paḍegā

²² Elements of an orthodox Hindu wedding.

son Kṛṣṇa, Arjun was with you. Where has he gone?" And Śrī Kṛṣṇa sent an answer saying "Father's sister, your son has gone to Nāgīlok with Vasudantā."

So Mother Kuntī rolled some body dirt in a ball, breathed life into it, and made two bumblebees. She wrote a letter to Arjun and placed it beneath their wings. Then she said, "Go, bumblebees, to where my Arjun is." So the bumblebees went to Nāgīlok: *gaum-gaum-gaum-gaum*. Arjun was sleeping next to his wife on his cloth bed. She was fanning him with a yak-tail whisk.²³ When the bumblebees alighted, she thought they might bite him, so she struck them with her whisk, but then they multiplied a thousandfold. They became a thick cloud that blotted out the sun. Vasudantā thought, "Oh God, what will I do now?" and fled.

Now Arjun's conch-shell Devadatt was lying on his chest, and it sounded a note from the breath of his nostril. Arjun awoke and said, "Where have these bumblebees come from?" He struck the earth and said: "If they are from my mother, let them become as many as were sent from Hastināpur. If they are from my enemy, let their number remain as it is." The thousands of bees became two, and alighted on Arjun's lap. He stroked them, and found the secret letter. His mother had written, "Son, come quickly. Your father Pāṇdu is stuck between heaven and earth. We are performing his mortuary rites—come quickly! If you're eating rice, then come here to wash your hands, if you're getting dressed, then come here to button your shirt."

Arjun said to his wife Vasudantā, "My mother has sent these bumblebees—I must go to Hastināpur." Vasudantā said, "The male species is very bad. You will forget me and marry again. Give me your token." Now, Arjun had a special ring that enabled him to travel very quickly, and on it his ten names were written. He left it with her, and so it took him twelve years to reach Hastināpur. And the child Nāgārjun was born in Nāgīlok and grew to be twelve years old.²⁴ When Arjun reached Hastināpur he touched his mother's feet, asked her what was wrong, and she said: "Nārad the ṛṣi told us that your father is stuck between heaven and earth. Now you must do his *nārāyaṇ-bali*. It requires the hide

of the rhinoceros demon of Gayā. You go and bring it from Indralok."

Meanwhile, Nāgārjun had grown to be twelve years old. He laughed and played with the people of the city. The other children teased him, calling him a bastard.²⁵ He went crying to his mother, and told her how the other children teased him. He said, "Mother, who is my father?" and she said, "You have no father." He said, "Then how was I born?" and she replied, "I ate some roots, flowers and fruits." He said, "Then why don't you eat some more and have another child—why are you telling me such a story?" She said, "Look at this ring. There's a copper plate inside: read it. On it is written that your father is Arjun, who lives in Hastināpur. And your grandfather is Indra, who lives in Amarāvati." So he asked, "Which is furthest, Hastināpur or Amarāvati?" His mother answered, "Your grandfather's house is closer; your father's house is very far away."

He said, "I'll go to Amarāvati." He went there, and did obeisance to his grandfather. Indra was disturbed; he said, "Why does he call me grandfather?"²⁶ Nāgārjun answered, "I am Arjun's son." Indra said, "Why are you calling me by this false name? If you are Arjun's son, then go give some water to the rhinoceros and bring him here. He is fed with a crooked staff and watered by a trough. No one can untie him. If you are Arjun's son, then bring him here."

Nāgārjun said: "If I am truly Arjun's son, then he won't kill me. But if I'm a bastard then he will surely kill me." He went to the rhinoceros and called out, "I am Arjun's son." The rhinoceros answered him, and then he went in, stroked him, untied him, and led him to water. The rhinoceros drank, then Nāgārjun brought him back and tied him up again. Indra said, "Yes, this is definitely Arjun's son. My troubles [i.e., caring for the rhinoceros] are over." Indra had a new hat and suit of clothes made for Nāgārjun, gave him sweets and fried grain.²⁷ "Go," he said. "And take the rhinoceros with you."

Meanwhile, Arjun came to his father Indra's palace in search of the rhinoceros. He did obeisance to Indra, who said, "Who are you?" Arjun said, "I'm Arjun, your son."

"Why have you come?"

"I've come to get the rhinoceros."

"Your son has taken him to Nāgīlok."

"What son?"

²³ In the drama, Vasudantā fans the rhinoceros with a whisk. Is some kind of equivalence being established here between the two sacrificial "victims," Arjuna and the rhinoceros?

²⁴ It is rather odd that Arjuna gave up his ring and thus took so long to reach Hastināpura. This detail is anachronistic: it facilitates the aging of Nāgārjuna, so that he will be an adult when Arjuna confronts him, but what did Arjuna's family do for twelve years while they waited for him?

²⁵ Gwli. *cor-jār putra*, lit., "son of a thief."

²⁶ Note how fathers (and grandfathers) consistently fail to recognize their sons (and grandsons) throughout this story.

²⁷ Such prestations are typically made in Garhwal to close kin upon their departure after a visit.

"No, no, he's taken the rhinoceros to Nāgilok."

Arjun got angry: "What son?"

Arjun returned to Hastināpur and said to Mother Kuntī, "Mother, a thief has stolen our rhinoceros and taken him to Nāgilok." Mother Kuntī said, "Go to Nāgilok and bring him back." Arjun got angry with his mother and said, "You always send me to such difficult places! First you sent me to Indralok, now to Nāgilok!" He left angrily, and didn't even do obeisance to his mother. At the place where four paths and passes meet, he saw eight different ways, and didn't know which way to go.

He returned and said, "Mother there are eight paths there; which one should I take?" She said, "Son, that's what happens to children who do not respect their parents' word. Go back to that place. My little sister, Mother Earth lives there—summon her and ask her which way to go. She has a son named Bhūmāsūr and his son is named Bhagadatt. He will go with you." So Arjun returned, called on Mother Earth and asked her which way to go. She said: "This is my grandson Bhagadatt. He will go with you."

Where the four paths and passes meet, in one place there are nothing but stairs, stairs, stairs . . . that path goes to heaven. And where there are elephant prints, that path goes to Amarāvati. And bull hoofprints go to Gandhamādan Mountain, where Śiva lives: Mt. Kailās. And where there is cow manure, that road goes to Grassy Wood. And where there are single footprints, that road goes to the Monoped Kingdom. And where there is the sign of a stick that's been dragged, that path goes to Nāgilok. So Arjun followed the path to Nāgilok.

Now on the day that Śiva-jī gave Vasudantā to Arjun, he also gave her a quiver full of arrows as a dowry. Arjun and Vasudantā had left it at a place called Dharmasīlā.²⁸ So when Arjun went to Nāgilok to get the rhinoceros, he stopped at Dharmasīlā and took out the blood-drinking arrow. When he reached Tāluka Pond, he built a hunting blind in a tree.

Now the rhinoceros woke up very thirsty, every morning. Nāgārjun would untie him, send him to Tāluka Pond, and say "Drink your fill and return." When the rhinoceros drank, he would first offer some water to heaven, then to the underworld, and only then would he drink.²⁹

²⁸ This detail is repeated in many tellings of the story throughout Garhwal, emphasis being laid on the fact that during his first sojourn in Nāgilok, when he fathered Nāgārjuna, Arjuna had been without weapons. He is armed only when he comes to hunt the rhinoceros.

²⁹ Roughly, what orthodox Hindus are supposed to do: this is a very devout rhinoceros.

Arjun was sleeping in the blind, and when the rhinoceros cast the water toward heaven, some of the drops fell on Arjun's chest, and he awoke, thinking, "Where has this rain come from?" He saw the rhinoceros drinking water, and shot him. As the rhinoceros died, he bellowed forth, and from the noise of his cry the earth trembled: "tha-ra-ra-ra!"

Nāgārjun said, "Oh mother, someone has killed my rhinoceros." So he went to that place, and said, "Who are you? You thief—you've killed my rhinoceros! If you are a true kṣatriya, then come forth to do battle!"

They were father and son, and they both had the same weapon—the one that Śiva had given to Vasudantā. They shot their arrows, but the arrows did not strike home. They met in mid-air, and then returned. They fought fiercely, but the arrows did not strike home. So Nāgārjun went to Kaliyā the ironsmith, and had him make the *gurū*-less arrow (*nigur bhāṇ*), the arrow that doesn't obey the word of the *gurū*, that kills anyone, that has no discrimination (*vivek*). He struck Arjun with that arrow, and Arjun fell mortally wounded. Then Nāgārjun took Arjun's *gāṇḍapī* (Skt. *gāṇḍīva*) bow, went to his mother, and said, "I have brought the weapon of him who killed my rhinoceros."

She gasped: "Son, you've killed your father. This is his bow!" Then Mother Kuntī came there, and so did Śrī Kṛṣṇa. They revived Arjun with the "laughing barley" and the "speaking leaves."³⁰ Then Nāgārjun fell at his feet and said, "Oh father, I didn't know you were my father." Nāgārjun lifted Arjun on to his shoulders and carried him about, dancing and playing. He said, "Please forgive me for my errors." Then Arjun took the rhinoceros hide and did Pāṇḍu's last rites with it, and Nāgārjun came with him.

RITUAL

By itself, this episode might seem rather obscure and unimportant.³¹ However the Rhinoceros tale is not only a

³⁰ "Laughing barley" (*haimṣaṇ junyāḷ*) and "speaking leaves" (*bulānī pātī*) are stock phrases for magical substances in Garhwali literature. Informants in Chamoli are unable to gloss these terms, but according to Claus-Peter Zoller, they are still used in religious rituals in Bangan, to the west of the Tons River basin, especially in the worship of the god Mahāsū (personal communication).

³¹ J. D. Smith has recorded a parallel, though much less coherent or developed, Rajasthani "folk *Mahābhārata*" in which Arjuna slays a rhinoceros in order to make a shield from its hide so as to deliver Pāṇḍu from Nāgaloka, and is slain in the attempt by Nāgiya, his son by a Nāga princess (Smith n.d.).

myth, but also a public ritual performance that lies at the very heart of *pāṇḍav lilā*. In Chamoli District, where the episode achieves its greatest elaboration, the Rhinoceros metonymically designates an entire performance. People do not normally speak of going to see a *pāṇḍav lilā*, but rather of "going to see the Rhinoceros." The story is competitively recited by local bards several times during every performance, and its culmination in Arjuna's slaying of the rhinoceros and subsequent battle with his son is represented via both dance and drama. In half-day performances,³² a rhinoceros is made by inserting four small bamboo "legs" into a pumpkin, which is decorated with leaf "ears," soot "eyes," and often a black moustache. (Few if any of these mountain dwellers have ever seen a rhinoceros, so the representation is a bit odd.) The performance culminates when Arjuna slays the rhinoceros and is in turn slain by Nāgārjuna, then magically revived and reconciled with him (see below). Full-blown, nine-day performances include a number of elaborate enactments, including the uprooting and erection of the *sami* tree, the slaying of various demons, and blessing-visits to individual households by the Pāṇḍavas and their entourage,³³ but here too the culminating episode is the slaying of the rhinoceros, enacted over and over again, with the rhinoceros successively represented by a bit of fried bread, a pumpkin (decorated as above), and finally a goat that is sacrificed on the spot. Such elaborate enactments provide scope for visual and dramatic elaboration: sometimes the pumpkin is intricately painted, and often it is fanned by a female character, usually Nāgārjuna's sister, Nāgārjunī, but sometimes his mother, Vasudantā. The audience is of course aware of the impending violence of the sacrifice, and their dramatic anticipation is often heightened by the use of comedy in the buildup to it. The joker in this case is Bhagadatt, the grandson of Mother Earth, who knows the way to Nāgilok. Now "Datt" is a typical brahman name in Garhwal, and *bhag* (Skt. *bhaga*) means vagina, so this character's very name—a brahman called "vagina-born"—is considered humorous. Moreover, Bhagadatt's cowardly vacillation contrasts with the calm determination of the Pāṇḍavas. He is frightened of going to Nāgilok, so he must be flattered, cajoled, and finally bribed with a pair of golden ear-rings in order to act as guide. As the drummers' tempo increases, the three dancers approach ever closer to the goat, while Bhagadatt

tries to bolt in fear. But he cannot even flee successfully, either because he is overcome with greed for the proffered bribe, or loses his way, or becomes entangled in his own turban, or (in a bit of slapstick that is common in local folk dramas) receives the proverbial pie in the face. In the end, he turns away as Arjuna shoots the fatal arrow.

This is followed by the "Arjun-Nāgārjun dance," which is performed more than any other single item in *pāṇḍav lilā*. Virtually every surrounding village sends its best pair of dancers, and many men from the host village are also eager to display their terpsichorean talents, so that perhaps twenty pairs of dancers perform in a single night. The two men slowly circle each other as they perform the dance, which can be divided into two parts. In the first, the dancers mime the actions of bathing, drying, weaving, and then donning the so-called "sacred thread" (H. *janeu*), meditating, grinding sandalwood, applying the resulting paste to "the gods of the four directions" and then their own foreheads, and finally admiring themselves in a mirror. In the second half of the dance Guru Droṇācārya, who taught Pāṇḍavas the science of war, stands up. In each hand he holds a bow and arrow, to which a set of harness bells have been tied, so that they jingle loudly as he shakes them. The dancers embrace Droṇācārya and take their weapons from him, holding them horizontally over their heads, and slowly spinning around while shaking them furiously.³⁴ Droṇācārya resumes his seat and the two dancers enact a long battle, stalking and finally confronting each other. Expert dancers embellish their performances by alluding to various episodes in Arjuna's life: certain steps represent his shooting the fish's eye while looking at its reflection in a pot of oil, stringing the bow with his own tendon when no bowstring was available, and so on. The actual moment of Arjuna's death is ambiguously represented: as the drums reach their climax, the two dancers merely "hop" once or twice, and this is quickly followed by an embrace that, as informants are eager to point out, signifies reconciliation.

The slaying of the father by the son is often enacted in extended dramatic form on the culminating day of a *pāṇḍav lilā*, when the crowd's reaction can be overwhelming, as many people are spontaneously possessed by malevolent demons. Once I saw pandemonium break out as members of the audience—mostly women and

³² In Malla Chandpur, these shorter *lilās* are called *pāṇḍav roṇṭ* or *roṇṭ khājā*, terms that refer to the deep-fried bread (*roṇṭ*) and the dry-fried grain (*khājā*) that is offered to dancers and guests during performances.

³³ Sax 1991, 1995.

³⁴ At this point, many dancers enter a trance, and I myself once had a trance-like experience when I danced with these weapons: I felt as if they were causing me to move rather than the other way round. This extraordinary experience seems to have much to do with the bells' sound.

children, but some men, too—swooned, cried out, and exhibited other signs of demonic possession immediately following the “death” of Arjuna. During the moments of collective vulnerability before Arjuna is revived, malevolent beings hovering on the edge of the dancing square are thought to seize the opportunity to possess members of the audience. Normally a pumpkin is smashed and its pieces thrown in the four directions to appease these spirits, while members of the audience attempt to revive those who have swooned by uttering special mantras, sprinkling them with *pañcāmṛta*,³⁵ or hurling the ritually potent *śatanāj*, a mixture of seven grains, at their faces.

In summary, both the Rhinoceros tale and its ritual enactment are of central importance in *pāṇḍav līlā*. They are among the few elements that are found throughout Garhwal; the story is widely known and recited throughout the region; in Chamoli District it is the metonymic designation of, and the culminating episode in, a full-scale performance; the Arjun-Nāgārjun dance is the most frequently performed of the major dances;³⁶ and dramatic representations of the episode can have powerful and startling effects on the audience, as well as on uninvited guests like the malevolent spirits watching the performance from the shadows. Why is this episode so important?

I believe that the answer to this question has to do with the typically ambivalent relationship between fathers and sons in north India, and also with the ways in which the Rhinoceros tale encodes certain masculine values that are of surpassing importance to Garhwalis. But before explaining why this is so, I must first discuss the Sanskrit version of this story, and Goldman’s interpretation of it.

A FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION

The Rhinoceros tale is strikingly similar to the battle between Arjuna and his son Babhravāhana, found in the

³⁵ The five products of the cow: milk, buttermilk, butter, curd, and urine. Sometimes a mixture of urine and camphor is used instead. Containers holding one or another of these mixtures are always near at hand in order to counteract malevolent influences or inadvertent pollution.

³⁶ Other dance forms include the popular *cop* or circular dance, performed on many occasions; the “dancing” of Mother Kuntī’s *śat* (see Sax 1995); and other brief representations of such events as the dicing match. However the only dance to rival the complexity of the Arjun/Nāgārjun battle dance is Nakula’s dance, also performed by a pair of males. Here the dancers represent a series of actions related to agriculture and animal husbandry: cutting grass, packing it around the pole on

Pune edition of *Mahābhārata*. This story is contained in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* or “Book of the Horse Sacrifice,” which takes its name from the ancient Indian sacrifice that is its central event.³⁷ In classical times, the sponsor of the sacrifice would release a horse to roam over the land, and if it wandered into the domain of another king, that king had either to submit and offer tribute, or give battle. The horse moved in a “sun-wise” pattern—north, east, south, west—then returned to the imperial capital where its sacrifice consummated a series of rituals establishing the sponsoring king’s sovereignty. Its “wandering” was therefore hardly spontaneous; in fact, it was followed by a large army, and moreover the sacrifice seems normally to have been performed only after effective military control had already been achieved by the royal sponsor.³⁸

In the “Book of the Horse Sacrifice,” Yudhiṣṭhira is distraught after the great war, and Vidura counsels him to perform several sacrifices, including the *āśvamedha*, in order to expiate his sins. This requires immense wealth, which Yudhiṣṭhira obtains by recovering the gold left over from a previous sacrifice of king Marutta in the Himalayas.³⁹ Once the horse sacrifice begins, the five brothers assume various responsibilities: Arjuna protects the horse, Bhīma and Nakula protect the kingdom, and Sahadeva looks after invited guests in the capital. Arjuna goes to the north and the east, fighting a number of battles and defeating various rivals, notably the Trigartas, the Saindhavas, and Arjuna Vajradatta, son of Bhagadatta, king of Prāgjyotiṣa, who seizes the horse and takes it to his capital, but is defeated by Arjuna after a three-day battle. The fathers of most or all of these adversaries had already been slain by Arjuna in the great battle at Kurukṣetra, and in the battles recounted in the *Āśvamedhikaparvan* he is consistently chivalrous, sparing his opponents whenever possible, as indeed he was instructed to do by Yudhiṣṭhira.⁴⁰

The crucial episode occurs when the horse wanders into the kingdom of Mañipūra, ruled by Babhravāhana, son of Arjuna by the princess Citrāṅgadā. At first Babhravāhana does not wish to fight his father but goes to

which it is traditionally carried, feeding it to the cows, milking them, churning butter from the milk, making ghee from the butter, and finally offering the ghee to various deities.

³⁷ xiv.78ff. See note 5, above.

³⁸ For more on the *āśvamedha*, see Gonda 1969: 110–15, Caland 1932, Agastya 1928, and Puhvel 1955. Ramanujan reports that a popular Kannaḍa *yakṣagāna* play is also based on it (1983: 235).

³⁹ xiv.1–71.

⁴⁰ xiv.66–77.

welcome him instead; Arjuna is enraged and, as Goldman puts it, reviles him "as an unmanly coward and betrayer of the knightly tradition."⁴¹

The serpent princess Ulūpī, who is one of Arjuna's wives and thus one of Babhravāhana's "mothers," appears and urges Babhravāhana to fight Arjuna, telling him that this is the only way he will appease his father. So Babhravāhana fights, and Arjuna is indeed gratified, especially when his son shoots him through the collarbone. The battle rages until Babhravāhana kills his father, then himself succumbs to his wounds and falls unconscious. At this point, Babhravāhana's real mother Citrāṅgadā comes to the battlefield. She berates Ulūpī for inciting the fight and threatens suicide unless Ulūpī revives Arjuna. Babhravāhana revives and, overwhelmed with guilt at his parricidal act, he too proposes to fast to death. Ulūpī remembers a gem that revives the dead, and thus thought of, it appears. She informs Babhravāhana that he has not really killed his father, Arjuna, who is in fact invincible and has only come to test his son's strength in battle. The gem is employed to revive Arjuna, who embraces his son and then asks Ulūpī the reason for his "death." Ulūpī explains that she arranged it in order to help Arjuna expiate his sin of killing his own "grandfather," Bhīṣma, unfairly, as a result of which he would have gone to hell. The only expiation for this sin was death at the hands of his own son. The entire company is delighted by Ulūpī's resourcefulness, Arjuna invites Babhravāhana to the horse sacrifice, Babhravāhana accepts, and the reconciliation is complete.

Robert Goldman has referred to this story as "the only unambiguous example of parricide that I can find in the Sanskrit epic literature,"⁴² and has provided a brilliant interpretation of it in oedipal terms. As Goldman sees it, the story employs various techniques—notably Ulūpī's multiple explanations of the events—to "strip the story . . . of its central content," the slaying of the father by the son. Nevertheless, "the parricide and the horror that it engenders are hardly concealed";⁴³ moreover, Ulūpī's "final and most fundamental" explanation, invoking as it does Arjuna's own slaying of Bhīṣma, confirms the centrality of parricide to the story. Goldman goes on to interpret the episode as an example of disguised oedipal aggression, with the mother's role in the oedipal triangle played by Śikhandin when Arjuna slays Bhīṣma, and by Ulūpī/Citrāṅgadā when Babhravāhana slays Arjuna. For Goldman, these episodes are

positive oedipal material . . . at the very heart of the epic story itself . . . with the son in each case overcoming his filial deference and dread to conquer the father . . . Understood correctly, the stories of Bhīṣma, Arjuna and Babhravāhana provide dramatic evidence of the viability of the positive oedipal stance in ancient Indian literature.⁴⁴

Confronted with the material from Garhwal, Goldman would doubtless conclude that the Rhinoceros tale and its ritual enactment confirm his hypothesis. The battle between father and son is central to *pāṇḍav līlā*, and the dramatic representation of parricide induces extreme psychological dismay and spiritual vulnerability in the audience. This might well be regarded as confirmation of the existence of a positive oedipal stance, in which the act of parricide represents a real, underlying hostility toward the father that, because it is normally repressed, causes distress when it is overtly represented.

Consideration of this issue takes us into the heart of debates over whether there is or is not an oedipus complex in India, and if there is, what form it takes. The literature surrounding this issue is by now fairly extensive.⁴⁵ Like many debates relating to the psychoanalytic paradigm, this one is associated with the characteristic difficulty that the very things which cast most doubt upon psychoanalytical interpretations—explicit rejection of them by informants, inconsistent or plainly contradictory elements in the material being interpreted—are regarded by Freudians as evidence of "distortion, displacement, projection and various forms of substitution,"⁴⁶ or of repression, secondary elaboration, and so forth.⁴⁷ The more strenuously the Freudian interpretation is denied, the more confident the Freudian feels, leading to a fruitless dialogical impasse between defenders of the approach and its critics.

One way forward is illustrated by recent attempts, like those of Obeyesekere and Kurtz,⁴⁸ to modify psychoanalytic theory so as to take account of distinctive socialization patterns and family relationships,⁴⁹ a project

⁴⁴ Goldman 1978: 337.

⁴⁵ See Goldman and references therein; also Kondos 1986, Kurtz 1992, Spiro 1982, Obeyesekere 1990, Ramanujan 1983, Shulman 1993.

⁴⁶ Goldman 1978: 362.

⁴⁷ Even though the concept of repression is unsupported by any controlled laboratory evidence (Holmes 1990: 96, cited in Crews 1994: 54).

⁴⁸ Kurtz 1992, Obeyesekere 1990.

⁴⁹ Kurtz however finds that Obeyesekere's psychoanalytic approach, like that of others, inevitably tends to "pathologize

⁴¹ Goldman 1978: 330; see below for further discussion.

⁴² Goldman 1978: 329.

⁴³ Goldman 1978: 332.

which was even hinted at by Freud himself,⁵⁰ for whom the classical oedipal triangle was not the only formulation, but merely the culturally operative one, the one which “we are accustomed to regard . . . as the more normal.”⁵¹ It seems only reasonable to suppose that as patterns of socialization and family structure vary, so will the contents of infantile fantasy.

I am sympathetic to such attempts, and I hope that this essay will contribute to them in some small way. But in the main, my analysis is sociocultural not psychoanalytical. It relies upon empirically observable entities—public ritual performances, ideas about masculinity and father-son relationships, child-rearing patterns, and the complex institutions of family and caste—what a psychoanalytically oriented analyst might call “surface features,” to explain why the battle between father and son is central to *pāṇḍav lilā*, and why its dramatic representation evokes such a powerful response from the audience. If I can accomplish this central explanatory task in terms that would make sense to local participants as well as to outside observers, then why invoke the hidden messages and secret codes of psychoanalysis?

A LOCAL INTERPRETATION

Filial piety is a core value in Garhwal, as in Indian civilization generally. As Goldman notes, Indian epic literature represents the ideal son as utterly subordinate to his father.⁵² Ethnographers find that in life, as well as in literature, filial piety is a fundamental social value, inculcated in boys from an early age. Males must obey and respect not only their fathers but also their elder brothers and their father's brothers, all of whom partake to some degree in the father's authority. In north India the father's

elder brother is entitled to significantly greater deference than his younger brother, thus reiterating the age-based structure of authority. Among the world's cultures, this association of strong paternal authority with intense filial piety is hardly unusual, and in most of north India these features were traditionally underpinned (as they still are almost everywhere in Garhwal) by their association with agnatic descent, primogeniture, patrilocality, intra-caste hypergamy, and indigenous theories of the agnatic core group (Gwli. *svaurām*; Skt. *vaṃśa*) as a collective body, the authority and agency of which is concentrated in the senior adult male. Such features are broadly typical of north Indian Hindu families, for example, the Bengali *parivāra*, in which the father is both “generous and kind, at the same time he has to be harsh in the treatment of his sons; he is a disciplinarian, a figure of authority.”⁵³ Taken together, these values, customs, theories and institutions are the political and institutional foundation of male dominance amongst north Indian Hindus, and I have argued elsewhere⁵⁴ that they persist in part because they serve the collective interests of males.

The Rhinoceros tale is an explicitly and self-consciously moral tale about the value of filial piety: those displaying it are exemplary, while those who violate it are at best tragic, at worse demonic. The story begins with Vidyādhara's disobedience, as a result of which he is transformed into a demon. Appropriately enough, the demon renounces his own hard-drinking parents before finding a truly nurturing mother and father who acquaint him with his “real” identity. The main episode focuses on Arjuna's abandonment of his wife Vasudantā in order to attend his father's *śrāddha*, and his properly filial search for the rhinoceros hide that will enable him to release his father's spirit. The story culminates with a tragic and unwitting parricide, the perversity of which is indicated by the fact that it can only be accomplished using a weapon that explicitly resists the principle of filial piety, the “*gurū*-less arrow (*nigur bāṅ*), the arrow that doesn't obey the word of the *gurū*, that kills anyone, that has no discrimination.” This is quickly followed by a reconciliation between father and son. In every instance, the story valorizes filial piety and stigmatizes its violation: it is nothing less than a moral tale about the value and importance of respect for one's father.

This interpretation is confirmed by public ritual. I refer not only to the battle between father and son and their subsequent reconciliation, which I have already

non-Western cultures” (Kurtz 1992: 227–31) by finding them deficient with respect to its central (and eminently modern, Euro-American) goal of “individuation.” I myself am skeptical. By the time that Obeyesekere has extended the oedipal triangle to a “circle of oedipal relationships” (p. 98) and “subsidiary models” (p. 106), are we not left with the rather tame observation that mythology is associated with problematic family relationships?

⁵⁰ Freud 1923, n. 8.

⁵¹ Obeyesekere 1990: 85; quoting Freud 1923: 31–32. I find it difficult to reconcile this statement with Obeyesekere's assertion that Freud held “that the Oedipus complex is based entirely on the erotic nature of the son's tie with the mother and the sexual jealousy he has for the father, all of this reinforced, if not caused, by the witnessing of the primal scene” (1990: 71).

⁵² Goldman 1978: 337ff.

⁵³ Fruzetti and Ostor 1982: 39; see also Inden and Nicholas 1977: 6–7.

⁵⁴ Sax 1991.

shown to be central to *pāṇḍav lilā*, but also and equally significantly to Pāṇḍu's mortuary ritual (*śrāddha*), which follows the Rhinoceros episode. This is not a pseudo-rite, not a dramatic representation of a ritual, but rather an actual *śrāddha*, conducted by a qualified brahman priest and, so far as the villagers are concerned, authentic in every respect. In eastern Garhwal, in Lobha Chandpur, the Pāṇḍava brothers wander from house to house gathering materials required for Pāṇḍu's obsequies, as they do also in the far west, where *pāṇḍav lilā* is metonymically referred to as the *sarāddh* (= *śrāddha*). In many parts of Chandpur District, the sacrificial goat is cooked and distributed amongst the agnatically related core of the village, further confirming the episode's fundamental concern with continuity between fathers and sons. Now in the Sanskrit versions of *Mahābhārata*, Pāṇḍu has no biological sons. But in Garhwal, Nakula is believed to be the biological son of Pāṇḍu (by Mādrī), hence he performs the *śrāddha* along with the village priest. Once again, the tremendous local stress on father-son continuity goes far toward explaining this "local variation" in the *Mahābhārata* story: Pāṇḍu required a biological son in order to complete his mortuary rites. Both the Rhinoceros of eastern Garhwal and the *sarāddh* of western Garhwal culminate with Pāṇḍu's obsequies, which are in an important sense the *raison d'être* of the entire event. The rituals and dances, the feasts and ceremonies, and the Rhinoceros tale itself, are all clearly and explicitly about the moral and religious importance of fulfilling one's filial obligations.

Why is the father-son relationship so important in the *pāṇḍav lilā*? An unreconstructed Freudian would no doubt answer that the battle between Arjuna and Nāgārjuna is a working out in a specific cultural context of universal oedipal male fantasies of aggression against the father, fantasies that are forbidden and thus repressed. Thus Spratt; also Goldman, who "follows the classic Freudian argument that there is everywhere a positive Oedipus complex and that the Hindu is but a transformation of it."⁵⁵ Obeyesekere agrees that Indian Hindus have an Oedipus complex, and modifies the Freudian paradigm only to the extent of asserting that this complex is characteristically "passive" rather than "active," as in the case of the Sinhalese. He suggests a number of reasons for this, including the Sinhalese' pronounced "familial sacramentalism" (attenuated or absent in Buddhism); their predilection for joint families (Obeyesekere claims that nuclear families are more common in Buddhist societies); the differences in their respective kinship sys-

tems; and the fact that the Sinhala father is typically less distant than the Hindu father.⁵⁶ These observations are generally accurate for Garhwal; so how do we account for the centrality of the Rhinoceros tale, which enacts what the psychoanalytically oriented analyst would have to call an *active* oedipal complex, thus providing a compelling counter-example to Obeyesekere's hypothesis?

Let us take a closer look at social and familial patterns, and especially at relationships between fathers and sons. In north India, such relationships tend to be rather difficult. As has often been noted, north Indian fathers are normally rather formal and authoritarian toward their children and especially their sons. Especially within a joint family, fathers should not express overt, public affection toward their own children; these feelings are reserved for nieces and nephews. Anthropologists usually explain this norm in functional terms: the joint family must protect itself from the threat to its solidarity that might be posed by the development of strong affective links in any of its potential "nuclear" families, and so it discourages the formation of such links.⁵⁷

In Garhwal, as in the rest of north India, relations between fathers and sons are characterized by distance and formality: the loving and nurturing father is an anomaly. Inden and Nicholas contrast the "easy," egalitarian love between siblings and between spouses in Bengal with the "hard," hierarchical love between parents and children,⁵⁸ and Parish notes that among the Newars of Nepal, respect rather than affection is the norm governing relationships between fathers and sons.⁵⁹ Does the father's emotional distance give rise to feelings of ambivalence in the son? Are Garhwali sons frustrated because they receive so little affection from their fathers? I cannot say for sure; however the idea is strongly supported by the Indian psychotherapist B. K. Ramanujam,⁶⁰ who shows among other things that the absence or premature death of a strong father figure can have serious psychological repercussions for Hindu males, who display a vital need for a positive and nurturing father. Renuka Singh points out that Indian men often adopt surrogate "fathers" in later life (personal communication), and Sudhir Kakar writes of a characteristic "oedipal alliance" which has to do, not with attraction to the mother and hostility toward the father, but rather with the "deeply buried and unfulfilled need of many male patients for the firm support,

⁵⁵ Obeyesekere 1990: 82.

⁵⁶ Obeyesekere 1990: 160–61.

⁵⁷ Cf. Derr 1995: 42–47, 85–89.

⁵⁸ Inden and Nicholas 1979: 25–29.

⁵⁹ Parish 1994: 134.

⁶⁰ Ramanujam 1986.

guidance and emotional availability of the father."⁶¹ It is of course precisely this sort of relationship that is often absent in north Indian families, and certainly in the Rhinoceros tale, where Nāgārjuna's father gives no love to the serpent prince. As a result, Nāgārjuna aims to establish an enduring filial relationship. He is teased by his playmates as a bastard, and embarks on a journey to discover his real fathers, Arjuna and Indra. But, as Prakash Desai suggests (personal communication), there are no loving fathers in this story (and precious few in the *Mahābhārata*): Indra denies his grandfatherhood, challenging the young prince to prove it by taming the rhinoceros. Nāgārjuna swears that if he is a bastard, he will die, but if he is truly Arjuna's son, he will tame the beast, and tame it he does, by calling out, "I am Arjun's son." He transforms the fierce and warlike rhinoceros (with its prominent erect horn) into a soft and cuddly pet.

But Nāgārjuna's domestication of this beast is short-lived, because soon thereafter Arjuna kills it, exemplifying once again the absence of paternal love. Thus provoked, Nāgārjuna kills his father, but this is immediately followed by the latter's revival and reconciliation with his son. The distant and hostile Arjuna is finally and permanently transformed into a loving and supportive father, and the dance of Arjuna and Nāgārjuna culminates in their loving embrace. The Freudian model says that this final embrace serves only to disguise the fundamental hostility of the myth, but I would argue on the contrary that it is precisely the point of the story, which is about the recovery and replenishment of a stable and loving relationship between father and son.⁶² Can we not see in this final embrace a dramatic representation of just such a relationship? Do we really need the full-blown oedipal triangle to account for the power of this story? Is it not sufficient to interpret it in terms of a model that takes account of the characteristically north Indian tension between, on the one hand, a family structure that encourages paternal distance, and, on the other, the son's desire—and perhaps the father's desire as well—for mutual affection and friendship?

It seems to me that the answer to this question is: "No." Such an explanation, while perhaps accurate, is nevertheless insufficient, because it fails to take into account the specifically martial elements that are inseparable from both the tale and its ritual enactment. And

what are these martial elements? One can begin with the episodes selected for recitation and dramatization. I have already discussed in detail the Rhinoceros, which is found throughout Garhwal and especially in Chamoli District. Other comparable regional specialties include the *śamī* tree episode in which a pine tree is uprooted, carried to the dancing square and joyfully erected as a sign of the Pāṇḍavas' victory over the Kauravas, and the *cakravayūha* or "circular array," which enacts the encirclement and death of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu.⁶³ But the most significant martial element is no doubt the iron arrowheads (H. *bāṇ*) used in performance. They are fashioned in the dancing square by ironsmiths specially summoned for the purpose, and are regarded as extremely powerful and dangerous. Women, children, and lower-caste men are not allowed to touch them. Normally, either Guru Droṇācārya or Nāgārjuna's mother, Vasudantā, distribute them to the dancers during each night's performance, and I have seen them refuse to give them to someone who is drunk or ritually impure (because of a recent birth or death, for example). If a high-caste man takes them in his polluting left hand or, worse yet, accidentally drops them, the penalties can be severe (usually a goat or its cash equivalent). Not only is it disrespectful to drop them, but they are believed to be full of energy (*śakti*) which, like electricity, can be discharged into the earth if they come into contact with it. In effect, they embody the military power—the *kṣatra*—of the local *kṣatriyas*.

But that is not all. The arrowheads that are fashioned at the beginning of a *pāṇḍav līlā*, along with the other characters' "weapons" (Draupadi's dagger, Kṛṣṇa's discus, Yudhiṣṭhira's staff, Sahadeva's slate, Nakula's scythe, Bhīma's club, Arjuna's and Nāgārjuna's bows and arrows) are not the only weapons employed in a performance. There is also a second set that had been stored in some safe and secret place—usually under the eaves of a house—and then is brought out and kept on the altar until the completion of the performance, when it is disposed of in some pure location (often a spring or other water source) along with such ritually powerful objects as the *śamī* tree. In most villages, *pāṇḍav līlā* happens only once in a generation, so that this older set of weapons will have been used as many as twenty or thirty years before, by the previous dancers. Because roles in *pāṇḍav līlā* tend to be passed from father to son, this means that the

⁶¹ Kakar 1980.

⁶² As Inden and Nicholas put it, amongst Bengalis in their personal and family relationships "the maintenance of order (dharma) centers concretely around the problem of sustaining the proper balance of difficult and easy relationships" (1978: 22).

⁶³ Oedipal interpretations of the parricidal Rhinoceros episode seem to be undermined by the fact that the filicide of Abhimanyu by his uncles, the Kauravas, is of nearly equal importance in *pāṇḍav līlā* narrative and dramatization.

old weapons, taken out from under the eaves and present on the altar for the duration of a performance, represent the previous generation, now mostly deceased. The ancestors are thus virtually present on the central altar, in the weapons with which they once danced.

In effect, the interrelated patriline of the village are substantialized in the weapons, which are explicitly linked to the principle of agnatic descent. The martial energy of the deceased fathers is recycled through these weapons to their adult sons, who dance the main roles. Meanwhile, a third generation—the young men who will constitute the next generation of dancers—looks on. They, as understudies of their fathers, are not allowed to grasp the powerful weapons. My interpretation of the myth is unambiguously confirmed by public ritual: it is all about solidarity and continuity between fathers and sons.⁶⁴ It is a way of resisting death by ensuring the continued health of the patriline.⁶⁵

It is also about the honor of the *kṣatriyas*, which is intimately related to such martial virtues as bravery and an eagerness to fight. In Bachan Singh's oral version, Nāgārjuna first challenges the killer of the rhinoceros: "You thief—you've killed my rhinoceros! If you are a true *kṣatriya*, then come forth to do battle!" In the Pune edition, the challenge is issued by the father rather than the son. But it makes no difference who issues the challenge: the point has to do with the *kṣatriya*'s bravery—or lack of it. This was made clear in the telling of Śiva Singh, a bard from Sutol village:

When the child Nāgārjun (*bālo nāgārjun*) heard of the slaying of the rhinoceros, he was furious. He grabbed his *gāṇḍapī* bow [paradigmatically associated with Arjun], saying "I am of *kṣatriya* lineage. I must kill in war, or be killed. Today I shall kill him who shot our rhinoceros, or else myself be killed."

⁶⁴ Parish notes that among the Newars, "a father experiences his son as part of self" and that, like the Tamils discussed by Trawick, "the father longs for continuity, but the son longs for independence" (1990: 158)—that is, until the father dies, when the son then seeks continuity rather than independence. Similarly, Ramanujam has noted that the individual within Hindu culture "strives to maintain his place within the family and the community by following the traditions allowing for continuity from generation to generation" (1986: 82).

⁶⁵ Sudhir Kakar writes of a "mythological motif, depicted in some old temple relics, in which a boy holds fast to his father's penis to escape Yama, the god of death and the harbinger [sic] of that ultimate narcissistic injury—the extinction of the self" (1980: 52; cf. Kakar 1979).

His mother Vasudantā made one request, that he bring her a token of whomever he killed. He went and saw the slain rhinoceros; he circled the pond where the rhinoceros bathed,⁶⁶ but saw no one. Then he shouted:

If your mother was married, then come and fight;
if she was a unmarried, then stay and hide!⁶⁷

So Arjun came forth, and they began to fight with arrows. Nāgārjun shot his father and took his ring, and brought it to his mother Vasudantā. When she saw that it was Arjun's, she said, "Son, today you've killed your own relative: you've killed your father." And Nāgārjun replied "But mother, he killed our rhinoceros."

Note the importance in this telling of *kṣatriya* honor, which depends not only upon one's willingness to fight, but also upon the legitimacy of one's birth. Once again, the principle of agnatic descent is primary, not as an abstract principle of social organization, but as an intimate and crucial dimension of a man's personal identity. The bastard is the lowest of men, on the same plane as the despised untouchable, while a real man, a true *kṣatriya*, must be publicly and legitimately affiliated to his father. This point becomes even clearer in my translation of a recorded, competitive exchange between two bards representing Nāgārjuna and Arjuna. This exchange immediately followed the climactic slaying of the rhinoceros, represented by a sacrificial goat.⁶⁸ The dialogue takes the form of a riddle wherein each challenged the other (and implicitly the audience) to guess his identity. Note the importance here of being recognized as a "true *kṣatriya*."

N: Listen, O listen my warrior: you are not your father's son. You stayed with another for twelve months;⁶⁹ I think you are also a low-caste bastard! You are not the only son of your mother. Those weaklings Nakul and Sahadev have a different mother. Your mother bore three sons, and another bastard in her father's house.

⁶⁶ Here the bard referred to the pond as the "four *dhāms*," that is, the four sacred places of Garhwal: Jamnōtri, Gangotri, Kedarnath and Badrinath (or perhaps India's four *dhāms*: Badrinath, Puri, Rameshvaram and Dwarika).

⁶⁷ *rānī ko holo to raṇ paḍlo*
kumārī go holo chipī jālo

⁶⁸ This event was attended by one of the largest crowds I have ever seen at a public ritual in Garhwal; certainly the largest crowd for a *pāṇḍav tilā*.

⁶⁹ The reference is to Arjuna's stay with Indra.

A: Listen a while, O warrior, listen: we were not naturally conceived. We are the boon-children of dharma, not lechers like you. I had gone to the forest; I was wandering there for twelve years, but your mother didn't leave me alone for a minute. A princely man is never beaten; one of kṣatriya blood cannot be defeated; (but) you fled to Nāgīlok and hid, out of fear of me.

N: Listen, O man, listen: we'll see about your "kṣatriya blood"! You little bastard! Your mother gave birth to Karṇa in her natal home, and from shame she set him adrift in the river; then she married Pāṇḍu. She lived like an unmarried whore! Hai Rām! She never even slept with your father!

A: Listen, O listen, princely man! Why are you saying such things? Our father married our mother and brought her from King Surasen, who is also called King Kuntabhoj.⁷⁰ My mother prayed to the sage Durvāsā, who gave her a special mantra; that's how we were born. The half of which you've spoken—Nakul and Sahadev—that half was the boon requested by Mādri; and the other half were the boon-children of our elder mother [Kuntī]. Hai Rām! Who serves the gods receives such boons, but your mother rubbed Śiva's *liṅga*!⁷¹

N: Listen, warrior, listen! Today I will show you who's a princely man. I'll tear off your head and throw it all the way to Jayanti [Hastināpura], and leave your bloody trunk here! Today you will see a true kṣatriya! Beat the drum and blast the horns!⁷² Now see if I lie or not!

A: My mother is in far Jayanti, and I'm in Nāgīlok. If you cut off my head it will go to my mother's lap! Listen my warrior: such is a princely man, such is a true kṣatriya. I will return to the mortal world for a year; you stay that year in Nāgīlok.

N: You are a kṣatriya, a true kṣatriya.⁷³ You won't be able to reach your mother's lap until my mother comes

with her gourd full of ambrosia, bearing the reviving herb, to restore the breath of your life, and you touch your head to my feet—and then you'll take me with you.

A: Listen, O listen, my warrior: your name is Babhruvāhana! I must go to the mortal world. I recognize you as my own, and give you reign over Nāgīlok. O princely man, I must go, but you stay here in Nāgīlok. I will go to the mortal world.

N: Listen, listen O princely man! A true kṣatriya will now be seen. Your death is in my hands; I am your son Babhruvāhana; I am even more expert in the science of arms than you.

In this exchange, masculine honor as a "true kṣatriya" is clearly at issue. And "true kṣatriyas" are associated not only with the martial qualities of valor and bravery, but also and by extension with kingship, the prerogative of the kṣatriya class. This is revealed by the epithet *pāvaryā*, which I have translated as "princely man." The term is conventionally applied to a brave warrior, and I suspect that it derives from the patronymic Panwar (*paṃvār*), from which the royal dynasty of Garhwal takes its name. The duty of a kṣatriya king or warrior is to fight bravely, against his own relatives, against his father himself, if need be.⁷⁴ Is this not implicit in the *Mahābhārata*, and explicit in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, at its core? Textual and dramatic representations of fratricide or parricide are terrible, not because they enact suppressed wishes, but because they violate the values of filial piety and fraternal solidarity that are so deeply embedded in Indian culture. The tension between filial piety and the dharma of the warrior is precisely what provides the dramatic interest of the *Mahābhārata*, which is after all about a devastating fratricidal war. This is clear enough in the Pune edition, where Arjuna furiously upbraids his son for betraying the warrior's code. Here is Goldman's translation of Arjuna's speech when confronted with a son who is unwilling to fight:

Then the wise Phalguṇa (Arjuna), his mind fixed on what is proper, recalling what is proper for a warrior, did not approve and, angered, he said to him, "This conduct is not appropriate for you. You are beyond the limits of what is proper for a warrior. My son, why have you not attacked me who have crossed the border of your kingdom guarding Yudhiṣṭhira's sacrificial horse? Damn you! You fool. You know the rules for warriors yet you greet me peacefully when I have come to fight! Living here you accomplish none of the goals of a man greeting me gently, like a woman, when I have come to fight.

⁷⁰ In the Pune edition, Kuntī is the biological daughter of King Śūra, adopted by Kuntibhoja.

⁷¹ *mādev go liṅga mātyo*. This is an ambiguous, insulting double-entendre. It refers, not only to sexual play, but also to the fact that Nāgārjuna's mother Vasudantā had earlier received a boon from Śiva. It also calls to mind the Garhwali custom of rubbing ghee on the *śivaliṅga* at Kedarnath in order to obtain sons.

⁷² Literally, "let the 36 rhythms and the twelve instruments be played!"

⁷³ *khāsā kṣatriya*. This intriguing phrase is a double entendre: it could mean either a kṣatriya who is a *khaśa* (the so-called "tribe" from whom most local kṣatriyas are descended, a well-known but often-denied fact), or a "special" (*khās*) kṣatriya. Garhwali Rājputs sometimes say that the word "*khaśa*" actually means "*khās* (special)."

⁷⁴ Cf. *MBh.* 12.55.

Idiot! Lowest of men! If I had come to you unarmed only then would this conduct have been proper."⁷⁵

Ritual, oral recitation, and Sanskrit text are thus unanimous in placing father-son continuity and the kṣatriya's concern for honor at the heart of this episode. In Garhwal, the place of the kṣatriya is taken by local Rajputs, who are the "dominant caste,"⁷⁶ both politically and economically. Here as elsewhere in India, the dominant caste has in many respects taken over the ritual activities of erstwhile kings, so that royal and military virtues (and vices) have come to be strongly associated with it. As I have shown elsewhere in detail,⁷⁷ *pāṇḍav līlā* is intimately associated with Garhwali Rajputs, so it is no surprise that it should be so focused upon the honor of the kṣatriya/Rajput. Note that these martial virtues are consciously encouraged, not just in males

generally, but more particularly in Rajput males. The bravery, aggressiveness, and physical prowess of the Rajput are thought to contrast strongly with the detachment, passivity, and intellectual orientation of the brahman, and also with the cowardice, subservience, and aesthetic orientation of the lower castes. And this cultivation of martial virtues is true of Rajput women as well.⁷⁸

Why is the battle between Arjuna and Nāgārjuna so important in *pāṇḍav līlā*? I have tried to show that this question is best answered, not by invoking an unmodified Freudian paradigm according to which the battle expresses a universal but repressed hostility toward the father, but rather by looking closely at local family and social structure, at child-rearing patterns, and at Indian theories of person and caste. If these factors are taken into account, then we can clearly see that this is a didactic episode stressing the ambivalent tension between the principle of filial piety and the principle of kṣatriya valor, and thus consistent with the enduring themes of *Mahābhārata*.

⁷⁵ *MBh.* xiv.78.3–7, tr. Goldman 1978: 330.

⁷⁶ See Srinivas 1965.

⁷⁷ Sax 1995.

⁷⁸ Sax 1996 and forthcoming (b).

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