

DANCING THE SELF

*Personhood and Performance in the  
Pāṇḍav Līlā of Garhwal*

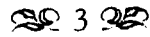


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## Hunting the Rhinoceros

### Pāṇḍav Līlā as a Man's Sport

It is not, however, the contents of the myth that keep analysis Freudian.  
It is the method. —Hillman 1991, [1987], 130

In this chapter, I will explore the way in which Garhwali men represent themselves in *pāṇḍav līlā*, to themselves and to others, as fathers and sons. This is an especially significant issue because for Garhwalis the most compelling of the many episodes dramatized in *pāṇḍav līlā* is the battle between Arjuna and his son Nāgarjuna. For reasons that will become clear in due course, this episode is known as “the Rhinoceros” (Hindi *gaiṇḍā*).

A parallel episode is found in the Pune edition of *Mahābhārata*,<sup>1</sup> where Arjuna's son is called Babhruvahana. That version has been subjected to a Freudian analysis by Robert Goldman (1978), and part of my purpose in this chapter is to provide an alternative to Goldman's interpretation, but 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 analysis of the corresponding episode in the Pune edition of the epic, then offer my own interpretation by taking into account Garhwali patterns of child rearing and Hindu theories of personhood, family, and caste. I conclude that the episode derives its extraordinary dramatic power from the ambivalent and highly charged relationship between father and son, which is represented, and in a sense “resolved,” by means of public, embodied performance.

In chapter 2, I discussed the ways in which *pāṇḍav līlā* varies in time and duration of performances, chief episodes dramatized, musicians' instruments, and other features. In later chapters, I will discuss another variation that amounts to a kind of inversion: a valley where the Kauravas rather than the Pandavas are the chief focus of worship. Given such regional variation, it is remarkable that one episode is consistently dramatized throughout

1. See n. 12 chap. 2.

Garhwal.<sup>2</sup> That episode is known as “the Rhinoceros,” and the following is the Rhinoceros Tale:<sup>3</sup>

#### The Rhinoceros Tale (as told by Bacan Singh)<sup>4</sup>

King Agnidhar's son Utkal was sick, so he sent for Atmadeva, his Brahman priest. Atmadeva pleaded that he was too old to come, and as he had sent his eldest son, Dharmishtya, to Kashi to study Sanskrit, he directed his younger son, Vidyadhara, to go the king's palace, instructing him to accept any gift from the king except for red garments. However, it was fated that only by accepting such a gift would the king's son get relief. The king tempted Vidyadhara with a golden scythe and a golden staff, and the Brahman youth accepted them along with the red cloth.<sup>5</sup>

But God did not approve of this. He took the form of a cow along the path, and when Vidyadhara approached, he threw rocks at her, but she did not give way. So he 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Many years later, Vidyadhara took birth in the home of a demon named Keshi. And Keshi named him Surya. One day, Keshi 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 Anasuya Devi were flying through heaven in their aerial cars. Anasuya said to her husband, “A child is crying from hunger.” She landed her aerial car and fed

2. The village of Sutel, whose *līlā* is described in chapter 2, is one of the very few villages where the Rhinoceros is not performed.

3. 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 *līlā* is most highly elaborated (see map 2). For convenience' sake, I will refer to this area as Chamoli. The Rhinoceros also predominates in Nandakini District and perhaps in the Pailkhanda region. It should, however, be noted that parts of Chamoli District located on the right bank of the Alakananda specialize in the *cakravyūha*, or “Circular Array,” the encirclement and death of Arjuna's son Abhimanyu during the great battle (see chapter 4). 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 (*gaḍhwāl*), “land of forts.”

4. Bacan Singh “Shastri-ji” is a loremaster from Toli village, Malla Chandpur, Chamoli District. The version translated here was told in Hindi.

5. Obviously the king requires Vidyadhara to accept some of his “negatives” in the red cloth, and he bribes him into doing so with the golden scythe and staff. The passing on of such negatives in the form of prestations to Brahmans is common in north India; see Raheja 1988b.

6. In a separate telling, Bacan Singh said that Vidyadhara thought that his father had gone senile: “He takes bags of rice and salt, and wants to leave this golden scythe behind.” So Vidyadhara took the scythe, along with a yellow cloth (not a red one), and the cow he killed with it was actually dharma, personified as an ox (*dhamarip bail*).

him a spoonful of nectar. The next day, the parents of Surya 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 meantime, 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.

Surya scrambled and climbed and crawled to Atri and Anasuya's ashram in the mountains. Atri said to Anasuya, "Devi, 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 Devasura. When Devasura 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." Devasura 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 Devasura searched and he searched and he searched and he searched, and finally he found the great boulder named Gomati at Gaya. Then he summoned all the gods, and they dug a large, deep pit and placed him in the bottom, and rolled a big stone over the top of it, and performed a sacrifice on top of the stone. When only Devasura's bones were left, they joined them together to make an effigy.

Then Vishnu said to his charioteer Dvaruka, "Go, and grab whatever you first see in the bazaar and bring it here." The first thing Dvaruka 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 sacrifice<sup>7</sup> between his eyes, and it grew and grew until it formed a horn. Since he was born in Gaya in the month of Bhadrapad, he was called Gayasura, the demon [asur] from Gaya. And because of the horn he was called "rhinoceros." He was the Rhinoceros Demon of Gaya [gayāsura gainḍā].<sup>8</sup>

7. Hindi *yajña-tilak*, black ashes from burned barley and sesamum.

8. According to popular religious literature available in Gaya, Gayasura 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 Vishnu, who directed Brahma to do a sacrifice (*yajña*) on the body of Gayasura. Afterward, Gayasura 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 Gayasura promised that he would not get up anymore if Vishnu and the other gods would continue to dwell on top of him (Pandeya n.d.; Prasad n.d.).

When the gods saw him, they were afraid. They 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 ornery 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 *dvāparayug*, the third age of the world. Once upon a time, King Pandu took his bow and went to hunt in a jungle where a rishi and his wife had taken the forms of deer so that they could enjoy sexual relations.<sup>9</sup> Pandu shot the stag, and the rishi'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 Pandavs were not born of Pandu's seed. Mother Kunti recited the mantra of Dharmaraja, and Yudhishtira was born. She recited the mantra of Vayu, and Bhimsen was born. She recited the mantra of the Ashvin Kumars, and Sahadeva was born. Once when King Pandu was observing the eleventh-day [*ekādasi*] fast, he thought, "I have two wives, but I have never enjoyed them sexually." His heart began to beat for his second wife, Madri, and he forced himself on her, had intercourse with her, and Nakula was conceived.<sup>10</sup>

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 Kunti is one of the deities—she can't be a *sati*. And Madri is pregnant. She can't be a *sati*, either." So King Pandu wasn't cremated for ten months, not until Nakula was born.<sup>11</sup> In our Hindu religion, we break the skull of the cremated corpse because the *dhananjaya vāyu*<sup>12</sup> 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 Pandu's skull was not broken, he became a ghost.

Now about this time, Narada the rishi was wandering in the forest, and he saw King Pandu on the path. He said, "King Pandu is dead. How is it that he has appeared to me on the path?" So he went to the Pandavas' capital and said to King Yudhishtira, "Your father has not reached heaven. I've seen him on the path. You perform a *nārāyaṇa*-

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

10. According to the Pune edition of *Mahābhārata*, both Nakula and Sahadeva were conceived by the Ashvina Kumaras, so that Pandu had no biological children at all. See discussion below.

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

12. For *dhananjaya vāyu*, Monier-Williams gives "a particular vital air supposed to nourish the body" (1976, 508).

*bali*,<sup>13</sup> and he will reach heaven." So Yudhishtira asked Narada, "How should I do it? What do I need?" and Narada said, "You need the earth from an elephant's footprints, soil from Malari, barley from Jauras,<sup>14</sup> sesame from Sesame Grove, gold from Tibet, and the hide of a rhinoceros."<sup>15</sup> So the Pandavas held a council and decided that they would do Pandu's *nārāyaṇa-bali śrāddha*. Mother Kunti called her four sons, but Arjuna wasn't there. Why not?

Once upon a time, they would tell stories in the Kauravas' capital of Hastinapur. At that time, Arjuna was just a child: he filled their hookah and so forth. Afterward, Lord Krishna 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 Kunti asked Arjuna what stories they were telling there, and he said that he didn't understand the stories, but afterward Shri Krishna would arise and ask if anyone was willing to go to the gates of death, and they would all refuse. Mother Kunti said, "Son, one day you agree; tell Shri Krishna that you will go to the gates of death." So one day Arjuna said to Shri Krishna, "Yes, I'll come," and the gods were upset by this.

Now there was a girl named Vasudanta, the daughter of Vasuki the Serpent (*nāga*). She performed asceticism for Shiva 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 Shiva-ji concocted an enchantment. . . . Shri Krishna and Arjuna came to Shiva's realm. Shri Krishna began to play the drum, and Arjuna began to dance the *kāñcani* dance. Shiva-ji was charmed and said, "Kanchani, tell me what boon you seek." Arjuna said, "First you give your oath." Shiva gave his oath, saying:

13. The *nārāyaṇa-bali* is mentioned in the Hindu ritual manual *Dharmasindhu*. In Garhwal, it is performed for any person whose last rites have not been completed. An effigy made of *ḍāba* or *kusā* grass is placed on a bier and taken to the cremation ground, while the bearers chant "Rāma nāma satya hai, satya bolo gaya hai" (Rama's name is truth; speak truth; this is everyone's destiny). All other, related rites are observed, including tonsure and *kapala-kriyā*.

14. 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.

15. It is said that a rhinoceros-hide ring may be substituted for the more conventional *kusā*-grass ring in *śrāddha*, the obligatory mortuary rite, and that such rings were often employed in Garhwal in times past. In some parts of Kumaon and Garhwal, Brahmans use either a ring made of rhinoceros bone or a small piece of rhinoceros hide during their *śrāddha* performances. Such rings are also mentioned in the *Dharmasindhu*, a Hindu ritual manual (Mihirachandra 1984, 576). The *Mānavadharmasāstra* (3.272) gives a list of oblations to the ancestors, asserting that those of rhinoceros flesh are the most effective, satisfying the ancestors forever and thus obviating the need for future *śrāddhas*. Although rhinoceroses are not now found in the Tarai region adjoining the central Himalayas, historical evidence shows that they were once common there (Bautze 1983).

I swear once, I swear twice.  
May Brahma and Vishnu,  
the banyan and pipal trees, bear witness:  
if my oath wavers, may I go to hell!<sup>16</sup>

"Tell me what you want!" And Arjuna said, "I want Vasudanta for my wife." Then Shiva-ji asked Vasudanta what she wanted, and she said she wanted a husband like Arjuna. So Shiva placed Vasudanta's hand in Arjuna's and said, "This is your wife." And he placed Arjuna's hand in Vasudanta's and said, "This is your husband." Then they returned to Hastinapura along with Shri Krishna.

At Caupanthi Caukhal [lit. "four paths, four passes"], Vasudanta said, "Revered husband, we are husband and wife only because Shiva-ji gave us to each other as a boon. Let us visit my father Vasuki in Nagiloka [Skt. *nāgaloka*], 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."<sup>17</sup> Then we'll be man and wife." From there, Vasudanta and Arjuna went to Nagiloka, and Shri Krishna went to Dvaraka.

Now mother Kunti said, "Arjuna should bring the rhinoceros skin, but he's not here." He had gone to Nagiloka. She sent a letter to Dvaraka saying "Hey, Krishna, my nephew, Arjuna was with you. Where has he gone?" And Shri Krishna sent an answer, saying, "Father's sister, your son has gone to Nagiloka with Vasudanta."

So Mother Kunti rolled some of the dirt from her body into a ball, breathed life into it, and made two bumblebees. She wrote a letter to Arjuna and placed it beneath their wings. Then she said, "Go, bumblebees, to where my Arjuna is." So the bumblebees went to Nagiloka: "*gaum-gaum-gaum-gaum*." Arjuna was sleeping next to his wife on his cloth bed. She was fanning him with a yak-tail whisk.<sup>18</sup> 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. Vasudanta thought, "O God, what will I do now?" and fled.

Arjuna's conch shell, named 'Devadatta', was lying on his chest, and it sounded a note from the breath of his nostril. Arjuna awoke and said, "Where have these bumblebees come from?" He struck the

16. *ek bācā, do bācā*  
*baramā viṣṇu bākī*  
*baḍ pipal sākhī*  
*bacan jālegā to narak paḍegā*

17. elements of an orthodox Hindu wedding

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

earth and said, "If they are from my mother, let them become as many as were sent from Hastinapur. If they are from my enemy, let their number remain as it is." The thousands of bees became two, and alighted on Arjuna's lap. He stroked them and found the secret letter. His mother had written, "Son, come quickly. Your father, Pandu, 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."

Arjuna said to his wife, Vasudanta, "My mother has sent these bumblebees—I must go to Hastinapura." Vasudanta said, "The male of the species is very bad. You will forget me and marry again. Give me your token." Now, Arjuna had a special ring that enabled him to travel very quickly, and his ten names were written on it. He left it with her, and therefore it took him twelve years to reach Hastinapura. And the child Nagarjuna was born in Nagiloka and grew to be twelve years old.<sup>19</sup> When Arjuna reached Hastinapura, he touched his mother's feet and asked her what was wrong, and she said, "Narada the rishi 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 Gaya. You go and bring it from Indraloka."

Meanwhile, Nagarjuna 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 Arjuna, who lives in Hastinapura. And your grandfather is Indra, who lives in Amaravati."<sup>21</sup> So he asked, "Which is farthest, Hastinapura or

19. It is odd, to say the least, that Arjuna gave up his ring and thus took so long to reach Hastinapura. This detail is anachronistic: it facilitates the aging of Nagarjuna, 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? A more satisfying explanation is given by a bard from Agast Muni. He says that Nagarjuna was going to attend the *rājasūya yajña* but lost his way at Caupanthi Caukhal. He went to Indra's city of Amaravati by mistake and danced before Indra, who was pleased and gave him a boon. He asked for the rhinoceros, knowing that Arjuna would come to get it from him. When the *rājasūya yajña* begins, Arjun is sent to obtain the rhinoceros hide. Indra tells Arjuna that Nagarjuna has already taken the rhinoceros, but he does not tell him that Nagarjuna is his son.

20. Gwli. *cor-jar putra*, lit. "son of a thief," a common term for "illegitimate son" in the local dialect.

21. This is similar to the penultimate story in the *Kathasaritsāgara* (retold by Doniger 1988) of the thief Muladeva, who leaves his pregnant wife with a ring with his name on it, which the son, when taunted about his illegitimacy, uses to find his father.

Amaravati?" His mother answered, "Your grandfather's house is closer; your father's house is very far away."

He said, "I'll go to Amaravati." He went there and did obeisance to his grandfather. Indra was disturbed, saying, "Why does he call me grandfather?"<sup>22</sup> Nagarjuna answered, "I am Arjuna's son." Indra said, "Why are you calling me by this false name? If you are Arjuna'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 Arjuna's son, then bring him here."

Nagarjuna said, "If I am truly Arjuna's son, then the rhinoceros 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 Arjuna's son." The rhinoceros answered him, and then Nagarjuna went in, stroked him, untied him, and led him to water. The rhinoceros drank, and Nagarjuna brought him back and tied him up again. Indra said, "This is surely Arjuna's son. My troubles with the rhinoceros are over." Indra had a new hat and suit of clothes made for Nagarjuna, and gave him sweets and fried grain.<sup>23</sup> "Go," he said. "And take the rhinoceros with you."

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

"Why have you come?"

"I've come to get the rhinoceros."

"Your son has taken him to Nagiloka."

"What son?"

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

Arjuna got angry: "What son?"

Arjuna returned to Kunti in Hastinapura and said, "Mother, a thief has stolen our rhinoceros and taken him to Nagiloka." Mother Kunti said, "Go to Nagiloka and bring him back." Arjuna got angry with his mother and said, "You always send me to such difficult places! First you sent me to Indraloka, now to Nagiloka!" He left angrily, without even doing 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; 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

22. Note how fathers (and grandfathers) consistently fail to recognize their sons (and grandsons) throughout this story. Cf. Ulbricht, who in his discussion of Indonesian shadow puppetry and especially the "Pandwa Cycle" of *lakons* (dramas), notes that "Ardjuna's own encounters with his unknown sons likewise give rise to much confusion and many surprises" (1970, 60).

23. Such prestations are typically made to close kin in Garhwal at the conclusion of a visit.

to go. She has a son named Bhumasura, and his son is named Bhagadatta. He will go with you." So Arjuna returned, called on Mother Earth, and asked her which way to go. She said, "This is my grandson Bhagadatta. He will go with you."

Where the four paths and four passes meet, in one place there is nothing but stairs, stairs, stairs . . . that path goes to heaven. And where there are elephant prints, that path goes to Amaravati, where Indra lives. The bull hoofprints lead to Gandhamadana Mountain, where Shiva lives—Mount Kailash. 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 Nagiloka, the Serpent Realm. So Arjuna followed the path to Nagiloka.

Now on the day that Shiva-ji gave Vasudanta to Arjuna, he also gave her a quiver full of arrows as a dowry. Arjuna and Vasudanta had left it at a place called Dharmashila.<sup>24</sup> So when Arjuna went to Nagiloka to get the rhinoceros, he stopped at Dharmashila and took out the blood-drinking arrow. When he reached Taluka Pond, he built a hunting blind in a tree.

Now the rhinoceros woke up very thirsty, every morning. Nagarjuna would untie him, send him to Taluka 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.<sup>25</sup> Arjuna was sleeping in the blind, and when the rhinoceros cast the water toward heaven, some of the drops fell on Arjuna'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!" Nagarjuna heard the cry and said, "Oh, mother, someone has killed my rhinoceros." So he went to that place and called out, "Who are you? You thief—you've killed my rhinoceros! If you are a true Kshatriya, then come forth and do battle!"

They were father and son, and they both had the same weapon—the one that Shiva had given to Vasudanta. They shot their arrows, but the arrows did not strike home. They met in midair and then returned. They fought fiercely, but the arrows did not strike home. So Nagarjuna went to Kaliya the ironsmith and had him make the *gurū*-less arrow [*nigūr bhā*], the arrow that doesn't obey the word of the *gurū*, that kills anyone, that has no discrimination [*vivek*]. He struck Arjuna

24. This detail is repeated in many tellings of the story throughout Garhwal, emphasis being laid on the fact that during his first sojourn in Nagilok, when he conceived Nagarjuna, Arjuna had been without weapons. He is armed only when he returns to hunt the rhinoceros.

25. Similar to the morning ritual that orthodox Hindus are supposed to perform: this is a very pious rhinoceros!

with that arrow, and Arjuna fell mortally wounded. Then Nagarjuna took Arjuna's *gāṇḍāpi* [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 Kunti came there, and so did Shri Krishna. They revived Arjuna with the "laughing barley" and the "speaking leaves."<sup>26</sup> Then Nagarjuna fell at his feet and said, "Oh, father, I didn't know you were my father." Nagarjuna lifted Arjuna on to his shoulders and carried him about, dancing and playing. He said, "Please forgive me for my errors." Then Arjuna took the rhinoceros hide, and Nagarjuna came with him to perform Pandu's last rites.<sup>27</sup>

### The Rhinoceros Ritual

By itself, this episode might seem rather obscure and unimportant.<sup>28</sup> However, the Rhinoceros Tale is not only a myth but also a public ritual performance that lies at the very heart of *pāṇḍav līlā*. 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 līlā* but rather of "going to see the Rhinoc-

26. See chapter 1, note 7.

27. According to an extensive oral version of *Mahābhārata* collected by D. R. Purohit, the rhinoceros lived in the Thick Woods (*gājuli van*), not in Manipura or Nagiloka. The pond where he grazed along with 239 other rhinoceroses (*bārah bisī gāṇḍā*) was called Nandani Pond (*nāndani baḍar*). When Arjuna shot it from his blind, the other rhinoceroses stampeded over to where Nagarjuna was sitting, and he noticed that the white rhinoceros, his favorite, was not among them. So he killed Arjuna with a bow made of *kunḍā* and an arrow made of *tāchḍiyā*. Then he went to the home of his mother, whose name was Subarnika. There a garland had withered, and the milk had turned to blood. His mother informed him that he had just killed his father. She went and danced before Indra, who was pleased and asked who she was. She replied that she was the wife of Arjuna, that the five Pandavas were her brothers-in-law, and so forth. He offered her a boon, whatever she wished, and she asked him to revive Arjuna.

28. The rhinoceros episode is known in Rajasthan, where, as in Garhwal, it is associated with the *śrāddha* (see later discussion). On the twelfth or thirteenth day after death, certain communities hold a nightlong ritual called *rātri-jug* (all-night wake), where they tell one or two out of a repertoire of twenty-eight stories. One of these stories involves the rhinoceros and is called *sāvakarāṅ ghoṛā* (Hindi *syāmakarāṅ ghoṛā*, that is, the "golden" (*asvamedha*) horse (a variant of the Rhinoceros Tale in Garhwal also involves the *syāmakarāṅ ghoṛā*) (Komal Kothari, personal communication). This ritual is performed mostly in eastern Rajasthan by Muslim Jogis and is probably the source of the "folk *Mahābhārata*" collected by J. D. Smith in which Arjuna slays a rhinoceros in order to make a shield from its hide so as to deliver Pandu from Nagaloka, and is slain in the attempt by Nagiya, his son by a Naga princess (Smith n.d.). Similarly, in the oral *Mahābhārata* of the Bhils of *tahsil Dāmtā* in Gujarat, Arjuna goes twice to the underworld (*pātāl lok*). First he goes to obtain gold for the *yajña* of his father's *śrāddha*, then he goes again to make a shield of rhinoceros skin in order to obtain success in war (Patel 1997: 48–55, 91, 92, 104–5). Clearly the Rhinoceros tradition is widespread in north India.

eros." 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,<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

The performance culminates when Arjuna slays the rhinoceros and is in turn slain by Nagarjuna, then magically revived and reconciled with him. Full-blown, nine-day *pāṇḍav līlā*s include a number of elaborate enactments, including the uprooting and erection of the *samī* tree (see chapter 4), the slaying of various demons, and blessing-visits to individual households by the Pandavas and their entourage. 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 described earlier), 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 Nagarjuna's sister, Nagarjuni, but sometimes his mother, Vasudanta (see note 18). The audience members are 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 Nagilok. 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 Pandavas. He is frightened of going to Nagilok, so he must be flattered, cajoled, and finally bribed with a pair of golden earrings 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, 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 "joking" that is common in local folk dramas, and must have been derived from Western slapstick via the Hindi cinema) 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-Nagarjun dance" [plate 7], which in Chandpur is performed more than any other single item in *pāṇḍav līlā*.<sup>31</sup>

29. In Malla Chandpur, these shorter *līlā*s are called *pāṇḍav roṅṅ* or *roṅṅ khājā*, terms that refer to the deep-fried bread (*roṅṅ*) and the dry-fried grain (*khājā*) that are offered to dancers and guests during performances (see chapter 2).

30. Few, if any, of these mountain dwellers have ever seen a rhinoceros, so the effigy is a bit odd.

31. Other dances are more prominent elsewhere. For example, the dance of Arjuna with his son Babarik (see chapter 4) is more prominent in Nagpur *paṅṅi*, across the Akakananda River from Chandpur, and the *cakravayūha līlā* (see chapter 4) is also more prominent there than the rhinoceros *līlā*.



Plate 7. Arjuna-Nagarjuna dance in Bhatg wali village. Photo by William S. Sax.

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 dance can be divided into two parts. In the first part, the two male dancers slowly circle each other, then mime the actions of bathing, drying, weaving, and then donning the so-called sacred thread; 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 Dronacarya, who taught the Pandavas the science of war, stands up. In one hand he holds a bow and in the other an arrow, to which a set of harness bells have been tied, so that they jingle loudly as he shakes them. The dancers embrace Dronacarya and take their weapons from him, holding them horizontally over their heads and slowly spinning around while shaking them furiously. Dronacarya 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 an arrow through a 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 quick 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 līlā*, when the crowd's reaction can be overwhelming, as many people are spontaneously possessed by malevolent demons. Once I saw pandemonium break loose as members of the audience—mostly women and children, but some men, too—swoon, cry out, and exhibit 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*,<sup>32</sup> or hurling the ritually potent *satanāj*, 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 Arjuna-Nagarjuna dance is the most frequently performed of the major dances;<sup>33</sup> 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 Babhravahana in the Pune edition of *Mahābhārata*. This story

32. 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 to counteract malevolent influences or inadvertent pollution.

33. The only dance to rival the complexity of the Arjuna/Nagarjuna battle dance is Nakula's, the dance of the cowherd (see chapter 2). Other forms include the *cop*, or circular dance, a popular dance form performed on many occasions; the “dancing” of Mother Kunti's *sat* (see chapter 5); and other brief representations of such events as the dice game.

is found in the *Āsvamedhikaparvan*, or “Book of the Horse Sacrifice,” which takes its name from the ancient Indian sacrifice that is its central event.<sup>34</sup> In classical times, the sponsor of the sacrifice would release a horse to roam over the land; if it wandered into the domain of another king, that king had to either submit and offer tribute or give battle. The horse moved in a “sunwise” 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, the horse 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.<sup>35</sup>

In the “Book of the Horse Sacrifice,” Yudhishtira is distraught after the great war, and Vidura counsels him to perform several sacrifices, including the *āsvamedha*, to expiate his sins.<sup>36</sup> This requires immense wealth, which Yudhishtira obtains by recovering the gold left over from a previous sacrifice of King Marutta in the Himalayas (XIV.1–71).<sup>37</sup> Once the horse sacrifice begins, the five brothers assume various responsibilities: Arjuna protects the horse, Bhima and Nakula protect the kingdom, while 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 Pragjyotisha, 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 Kurukshetra, and in the battles recounted in the *Āsvamedhikaparvan* he is consistently chivalrous, sparing his opponents whenever possible, as instructed by Yudhishtira (XIV.66–77).

The crucial episode occurs at XIV.78–81, when the horse wanders into the kingdom of Manipur, ruled by Babhravahana, son of Arjuna by the princess Citrangada. At first Babhravahana does not wish to fight his father and goes instead to welcome him but Arjuna is enraged and, as Goldman puts it, reviles him “as an unmanly coward and betrayer of the knightly tradition” (1978, 330).

The Serpent Princess Ulupi, who is one of Arjuna's wives and thus one of Babhravahana's classificatory “mothers,” appears and urges Babhravahana to fight Arjuna, telling him that this is the only way he will appease his father. So Babhravahana fights, and Arjuna is indeed gratified, especially

34. Ramanujan reports that a popular Kannada *yaksagana* play is also based on it (1963, 235).

35. For more on the *āsvamedha*, see Agastya 1928; Caland 1932; Dumont 1927; Gonda 1969, 110–15; and Puhvel 1955.

36. See chap. 1 n. 25. For more on the expiatory functions of both the *āsvamedha* and the *rājasūya* sacrifices, see Keith 1925, 343ff.; and Oldenberg 1988.

37. Residents of the upper Tons basin claim that Marutta's sacrifice occurred in their region, which will be the only part of the earth to survive an imminent nuclear holocaust.



when his son shoots him through the collarbone! The battle rages until Babhrvahana kills his father, then himself succumbs to his wounds and falls unconscious. At this point, Babhrvahana's real mother, Citrangada, comes to the battlefield. She berates Ulupi for inciting the fight and threatens suicide unless Ulupi revives Arjuna. Babhrvahana revives and, overwhelmed with guilt at his parricidal act, he, too, proposes to fast to death. Ulupi remembers a gem that revives the dead, and thus thought of, it appears. She informs Babhrvahana that he has not really killed his father, 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 Ulupi the reason for his "death." Ulupi explains that she arranged it to help Arjuna expiate his sin of killing his own "grandfather" Bhishma 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 Ulupi's resourcefulness, Arjuna invites Babhrvahana to the horse sacrifice, Babhrvahana 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" (1978, 329)<sup>38</sup> and has interpreted it in oedipal terms. As Goldman sees it, the narrative employs various techniques—notably Ulupi'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" (332); moreover, Ulupi's "final and most fundamental" explanation, invoking as it does Arjuna's own slaying of Bhishma, 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 Shikhandin when Arjuna slays Bhishma, and by Ulupi/Citrangada when Babhrvahana 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 Babhrvāhana provide dramatic evidence of the viability of the positive oedipal stance in ancient Indian literature" (337).

Confronted with the material from Garhwal, Goldman would no doubt 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.

38. In a Telugu women's telling of the *Rāmāyana*, however, Rama's sons Lava and Kusha kill and then revive their father (Narayana Rao 1991).

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.<sup>39</sup> Like many debates relating to the psychoanalytic paradigm, this one is associated with the characteristic difficulty that the very things that cast most doubt upon psychoanalytic 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" (Goldman 1978, 362), or of repression, secondary elaboration, and so forth, even though the concept of repression is unsupported by any controlled laboratory evidence.<sup>40</sup> The more strenuously the Freudian interpretation is denied, the more confident the Freudian feels, leading to an impasse between defenders of the approach and its critics.

One way forward is illustrated by recent attempts, like those of Obeyesekere (1990) and Kurtz (1992), to modify psychoanalytic theory so as to take account of culturally variant socialization patterns and family relationships,<sup>41</sup> a project that was even hinted at by Freud himself for whom the classical oedipal triangle was not the only formation but merely the culturally operative one, the one that "we are accustomed to regard . . . as the more normal."<sup>42</sup> 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 hope that this chapter will contribute to them in a small way. But in the main, my analysis is ethnographic, not psychoanalytic. My central question is, Why is the Arjuna-Nagarjuna episode so central to *pāṇḍav līlā*? I rely upon empirical entities such as 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 līlā*, and why its dramatic representation evokes such a powerful response from

39. See Goldman 1978 and references therein; also Kondos 1986; Kurtz 1992; Obeyesekere 1990; Ramanujan 1983; Shulman 1993; and Spiro 1987.

40. See Holmes 1990, 96, cited in Crews 1994, 54.

41. Kurtz, however, finds that Obeyesekere's psychoanalytic approach, like that of others, inevitably tends to "pathologize non-Western cultures" (Kurtz 1992, 227–31) by finding them deficient with respect to its central (and eminently modern, Euro-American) goal of "individuation." As for Obeyesekere's model, I am skeptical as to whether, by the time he has extended the oedipal triangle to a "circle of oedipal relationships" (p. 98) and "subsidiary models" (p. 106), we are not left with the rather tame observation that mythology is associated with problematic family relationships.

42. 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).

the audience. If I can propose an explanation that makes 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, and in Indian civilization generally. As Goldman notes, Indian epic literature represents the ideal son as utterly subordinate to his father (1978, 337ff.). Ethnographers, too, find that in life as well as in literature, filial piety is a fundamental social value, inculcated in boys from an early age. A male must obey and respect not only his father but also his elder brothers and his 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 much greater deference than the father's 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 throughout Garhwal) by their association with agnatic descent, primogeniture, patrilineality, intracaste hypergamy, and indigenous theories of the agnatic lineage (Gwli. *svaurām*; Skt. *vamsā*) 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" (Fruzzetti and Ostor 1982, 39; see also Inden and Nicholas 1977, 6–7). Taken together, these values, customs, theories, and institutions are the political and institutional foundation of male dominance among north Indian Hindus, and I have argued elsewhere (Sax 1990b, 1991a) 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 worst demonic. The story begins with Vidyadhara disobeying his father's explicit command, 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, Vasudanta, 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 (*nigūr bān*), 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 performance. I refer not only to the battle between father and son and their subsequent reconciliation, which I have already shown to be central to *pāṇḍav līlā*, but also and equally significantly to Pandu's mortuary ritual (*śrāddha*), which follows the Rhinoceros episode. In Chandpur this is neither a pseudo-rite nor 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.<sup>43</sup> In Lobha Chandpur, the Pandava brothers wander from house to house gathering materials required for Pandu's obsequies, as they do also in the far west, where *pāṇḍav līlā* is metonymically referred to as "the *śarāddh*." In many parts of Chandpur, a sacrificial goat is cooked and distributed among the agnatically related core of the village, further confirming the episode's fundamental concern with continuity between fathers and sons. Now in the Pune edition of *Mahābhārata*, Pandu has no biological sons. But in Garhwal, Nakula is believed to be the biological son of Pandu (by Madri); 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: Pandu required a biological son in order to complete his mortuary rites. This also explains the fact that in Garhwal, the Arjuna-Nagarjuna episode is consistently linked to the *rājasūya* sacrifice, whereas in the Pune edition of *Mahābhārata* the Babhravahana episode takes place in the *Āsvamedhika parvan*. In fact, the most extensive oral version of *Mahābhārata* to be recorded in Garhwal to date contains little on the horse sacrifice.<sup>44</sup> Once again, the importance of father-son relations explains the "discrepancy": Pandu's *śrāddha* must be performed before the royal installation can take place. Both the Rhinoceros of eastern Garhwal and the *śarāddh* of western Garhwal culminate with Pandu'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 *pāṇḍav līlā*? An unreconstructed Freudian would no doubt answer that the battle between Arjuna and Nagarjuna is a working out in a specific cultural context of universal oedipal male fantasies of aggression against the father, fantasies

43. In other regions, attenuated versions of the *śrāddha* are performed.

44. D. R. Purohit, personal communication. See, however, note 55, where the bard Gautam associates the battle between Arjuna and Nagarjuna with the horse sacrifice. We may be faced here with a widespread north Indian oral tradition of the hunting of a rhinoceros, which is sometimes associated with the *rājasūya yajña*, and elsewhere with the *āsvamedha yajña*. However, my fundamental point remains valid: that the crucial issue here is the relationship between father and son.

that are forbidden and thus repressed. This was argued by Spratt (1966), whom Goldman cites approvingly, and also by 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" (Obeyesekere 1990, 82). In fact, Obeyesekere agrees that Indian Hindus have an Oedipus complex, and he 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 Hindus' 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 systems; and the fact that the Sinhala father is typically less distant than the Hindu father (1990, 160–61). 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* Oedipus complex, thus providing a compelling counterexample 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 particularly their sons.<sup>45</sup> Within the 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 in functional terms: the joint family must protect itself from the threat to its solidarity that would 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 (cf. Dern 1995, 42–47, 85–89).

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 (1977, 25–29); and Parish notes that among the Newars of Nepal, respect rather than affection is the norm governing relationships between fathers and sons (1994, 134). 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 (1986), 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

45. "The Punjabi daughter's early experience of her father . . . is indeed very different from that of the Punjabi son; the mutual adoration and idealization characteristic of the former relationship is missing in the latter" (Kakar 1982, 140).

that Indian men often adopt surrogate "fathers" in later life (personal communication), and Sudhir Kakar writes of a characteristic "oedipal alliance" that has to do not with attraction toward the mother and hostility toward the father but rather with the "deeply buried and unfulfilled need of many male patients for the firm support, guidance and emotional availability of the father" (1980, 47). It is of course precisely this sort of relationship that is often absent in north Indian families, and certainly in the Rhinoceros Tale, where Nagarjuna's father gives no love to the serpent prince. As a result, Nagarjuna 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 Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*): Indra denies his grandfatherhood, challenging the young prince to prove it by taming the rhinoceros. Nagarjuna 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 Nagarjuna's domestication of this beast is short-lived because soon thereafter Arjuna kills it, exemplifying once again the absence of paternal love. Thus provoked, Nagarjuna kills his father, but this is immediately followed by the latter's revival and reconciliation with his son. The distant, hostile Arjuna is finally and permanently transformed into a loving, supportive father, and the dance of Arjuna and Nagarjuna culminates in their loving embrace. The Freudian would say 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.<sup>46</sup> 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 hand, the son's desire—and perhaps the father's as well—for mutual affection and friendship?

Actually, I believe that the answer to this question is no. Such an explanation, while perhaps accurate, is nevertheless insufficient because it fails to take into account certain martial elements that are inseparable from both the tale and its ritual enactment.<sup>47</sup> These elements, and especially the episodes

46. As Inden and Nicholas put it, among 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" (1977, 22).

47. Oedipal interpretations of the parricidal Rhinoceros episode are also undermined by the fact that the filicidal slaying of Abhimanyu by his uncles the Kauravas is of considerable importance in *pāṇḍav līlā* narrative and dramatization (see chapter 4).

that are chosen for dramatic elaboration, will be discussed at length in the next chapter. For the moment, I will concentrate on just one such element—the weapons, and especially the iron arrowheads (Hindi *bān*)—which are without doubt the most sacred and powerful objects in a *pāṇḍav līlā* performance. They are fashioned in the dancing square by ironsmiths specially summoned for the purpose, and they are regarded as extremely powerful and dangerous. Women, children, and lower-caste men (other than the ironworker) are not allowed to touch them (plates 1, 8).

Normally, either Guru Dronacharya or Nagarjuna's mother, Vasudanta, distributes arrows to the dancers before 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 the arrows in his polluting left hand or, worse yet, accidentally drops them, the penalties can be severe (usually a sacrificial 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 *kṣātra*—of the local Kshatriyas.

Each of the major characters dances with a particular weapon: Yudhishthira with a staff, Bhima (and sometimes his son Babrik) with a club, Arjuna and his sons Nagarjuna and Abhimanyu with bows and arrows, Nakula with a herder's stick or a grass-cutting scythe, Sahadeva, "the pandit," with a student's slate,<sup>48</sup> Draupadi and the other female characters with womens' grass-cutting scythes, Krishna with a discus, and the Mohars (companions of the Pandavas) with bamboo baskets filled with flowers used to make garlands. In some villages, the Pandavas' mother Kunti dances with a strongbox or its key,<sup>49</sup> but usually she needs no weapon other than her own truth, or *sat*. In addition to these weapons, there is also a second set that is removed from some safe and secret place—usually under the eaves of a house—and kept on the altar until the completion of a performance, when it is disposed of in some pure location (often a spring or other water source) along with other ritually powerful objects. In Taintura in 1990, for example, the deity Diba possessed his oracle on the first day of the performance<sup>50</sup> and distributed new weapons to the various performers. The old weapons were removed from a small, locked armory, the key to which was in the care of the woman playing the part of Nagarjuna's mother, Vasudanta, and placed on the altar, where they remained for the duration of the performance. A priest, who had inherited this duty from his father, was required to stay by the altar twenty-four hours a day, even in the pouring rain, and

48. Tamil tradition also considers Sahadeva "a great astrologer" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 321).

49. Traditional Garhwali keys are made of iron and often are more than a foot in length, making rather effective weapons!

50. Actually, it was the first day of the second half of a performance that had been interrupted by the death of a respected local man.



Plate 8. Wooden weapons being ritually bathed in Jabari Village. Photo by William S. Sax.

to properly dispose of the older set of weapons after the conclusion of the performance. 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 earlier, by the previous set of dancers. Because roles in *pāṇḍav līlā* tend to be passed from father to son, this means that the 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.

These themes are all illustrated by a fairly typical sequence that occurred in the village of Gugali in Nagpur *paṭṭī* in 1991. The local ironworker came to the dancing square at 9:30 A.M. to forge the new set of weapons, assisted by his son on the bellows. The village deity Kshetrapal possessed his medium, who led a procession to the god's shrine below the village. This was a crude structure, consisting merely of a few large pieces of slate standing in a kind of A-frame, on the hillside below a huge pipal tree. The procession was led by drummers from the musician caste, followed by horns, Kshetrapal's oracle, and other participants. No females whatsoever participated. The medium worshiped Kshetrapal's sign (*nīṣān*), consisting of two copper and two silver images hanging from a trident, and then brought it up to the dancing square. Almost immediately another procession formed, again consisting solely of males. It passed by the Shiva temple and proceeded to a wild cherry tree on a hill above the village.<sup>51</sup> Incense was lit, the tree was cut down, and leaves and grass were placed on the stump to cover the "wound"; this was done "out of respect." The tree was cut into lengths, which were brought back to the dancing square, where they were fashioned into clubs for Bhima and his son Babarik [figure 3]. One young man explained the significance of the weapons: "If an arrowhead falls to the ground, even by accident, then the whole affair may be ruined. We are afraid, because great misfortune [*hānikār*] may befall us. Because we are doing this after twenty-four years, we must be especially careful. Most of us don't know exactly how it's done, and we must rely on the old men to show us the way. Then when we are old, we in turn will show the way."

Now the old weapons were brought to the dancing square, covered with white cloth. Most of them had nearly rotted away; one especially large and fierce-looking weapon was taken out and given to the ironsmith to reforge—this was Draupadi's dagger. A man turned to me and said:

This is the real thing. We have to join our hands before them in respect. Nowadays, intelligent people say it's all a fake [*dhakosā*], but our older people say that at one time, these weapons would return to the hands of their owners. Someone would be going for a [ritual] bath,

51. The wild cherry (*pyyām*) tree flowers in winter and is used extensively in local rituals.

and all of a sudden the arrowhead would disappear from their grasp, only to reappear later just as suddenly. So when we see such things with our own eyes, we are compelled to join our hands before them. This is why we go to so much trouble and expense to do a *pāṇḍav līlā*.

After the weapons were prepared, they were rinsed in water, then bathed with a mixture of turmeric and oil to make them strong and lustrous. The Brahman priest performed a purifying ritual on both the weapons and Kshetrapal's four "signs," using turmeric, water, sesame seeds, barley, milk, vermilion powder, flowers, *dūba* grass, and sugar. For the rest of the performance, the old weapons remained on the altar, while the new weapons were used in the Pandavas' dance. I did not stay for the closing rituals in Gugali, but at the conclusion of a *pāṇḍav līlā* I attended in Kaphalori in 1990, villagers took the older set of weapons along with the *samī* tree (see chapter 4) in procession to a small spring at some distance from the village, where they could be left undisturbed. This was described as a "funeral procession" because the tree went headfirst, "the way a corpse is taken to the cremation ground." The oldest set of weapons was thus truly "dead," while the new set of weapons, which had been handled by the dancers in the just-concluded performance, were hidden under the eaves of a local house.

By means of such practices, 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, members of a third generation—the young men who will constitute the next generation of dancers—look on, as understudies of their fathers, and 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.<sup>52</sup> It is a way of resisting death by ensuring the continued life of the patriline.<sup>53</sup>

It is also about the honor of the Kshatriyas, which is intimately related to such martial virtues as bravery and an eagerness to fight. In Bacan Singh's oral version, Nagarjuna first challenges the killer of the rhinoceros: "You thief—you've killed my rhinoceros! If you are a true Kshatriya, then come forth to do battle!" In the Pune edition, the challenge is issued by the father

52. Parish notes that among the Newars, "a father experiences his son as part of the 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, who has now taken his father's place, seeks continuity rather than independence. Similarly, Ramānujam 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).

53. 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).

rather than the son. But whether it is the father or the son who issues the challenge, the central point has to do with Kshatriya bravery—or its lack. This was made clear in the performance of Shiva Singh, a bard from Sutol:

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

His mother, Vasudanta, 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,<sup>54</sup> but saw no one. Then he shouted:

If your mother was married, then come and fight;  
if she was unmarried, then stray and hide!<sup>55</sup>

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

Far away in Gith *paṭṭī*, at the headwaters of the Yamuna River, almost identical words are sung by the local bards during the enactment of the Rhinoceros *līlā*:

O my champion, who has killed my rhinoceros,  
which kingdom are you from, which *thāt*<sup>56</sup> are you from?  
Tell me how many ancestors you have.  
And why did you hide?  
If you are the [legitimate] son of your mother and father,  
then come forth and stand!<sup>57</sup>

And in Taintura village, in December 1990, the bard Gautam Singh recited this version:

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

55. *rani ko holo to raj padlo  
kumari go holo chipi julo.*

56. In western Garhwal and the adjoining areas of Himachal Pradesh, each village is associated with a *thāt*, a ritual platform connected to a particular deity, where sacrifices are performed to ensure village prosperity.

57. *he merā māli yab tuj kai raj ko chan kai thāt ko chan?  
jena mera gāṇḍo dhārū deni sun re māli  
āpūṭ saṅkhyā gotar lagayi dīn, kai raj ko chan kai thāt ko chan?  
aur corō kyūn mari tūjo?  
āpāri māta-pitā ko jāi hvalō tūjo  
hab mero yab khayō julo hot*

Krishna sent the warrior to Nagilok to shoot the rhinoceros.  
There live nine million Nagas.  
There lives the girl Nagarjuni  
and her brother Babhruvahana, who is Nagarjuna  
the son of Vasanta, who was the warrior Arjuna's woman  
for twelve years, and now lives in Nagilok, in Manipur.

There you married Vasanta,  
and two children were born.  
But you abandoned them,  
and they were left fatherless.

And you came to the mortal world,  
and their mother did not tell them that they were of a Rajput lineage.  
And when the day of the tragedy came,  
the warrior loosed the horse  
with a copper plate on its forehead,  
and the horse wandered  
through the earth's nine regions,  
but no one could capture it.

Finally Arjuna reached Manipura,  
and the warrior Babhruvahana saw the copper plate  
and said, "This is my father's horse."  
So he took the horse and led it to his father.

When he took the horse back, there was an earthquake,  
and the warrior Arjuna went searching for his horse,  
and the son Babhruvahana took lamps and incense and went to his father.  
Arjuna said, "You bastard! From whence have you come?"  
He was furious and asked if his son was truly a Kshatriya.

Babhruvahana said, "I am not a bastard: I will fight with you!"  
Then they had a battle; they fought a *Mahābhārata* there.  
Babhruvahana knew more of the science of weapons than Arjuna.  
Arjuna fell to the ground, then mother Vasanta went there.  
She told her son that he had killed his father.  
Then mother went to the warrior Hanumant.  
She sent him to Sumeru mountain for the life-giving herb, for the pot of ambrosia.  
Then mother sprinkled the ambrosia on Arjuna and revived him.  
He was revived, and then he returned to Jayanti palace.  
Tomorrow you will see this all in detail.  
Joining my hands, I serve you in this way.<sup>58</sup>

58. Note that the bard should have recited "Hastinapur" rather than "Jayanti," and that he has incorporated elements of the *Rāmāyana* into his recitation.

The duty of a Kshatriya king or warrior is to fight bravely, against his own relatives, against his father himself if need be.<sup>59</sup> 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 king 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. Idiot! Lowest of men! If I had come to you unarmed only then would this conduct have been proper."<sup>60</sup>

The martial virtues dramatized in *pāṇḍav līlā* are consciously encouraged not just in males generally but more particularly in Kshatriya males. These men's honor depends not just on their willingness to fight but also on the legitimacy of their birth. This was implied all along in the myth, where Nagarjuna was plagued by uncertainty about the identity of his father Arjuna, who actually called Nagarjuna's legitimacy into question when the two finally met. The filial relationship is not just an abstract principle of social organization; it is a fundamental basis for a man's personal identity. It is not only socially necessary but also psychologically foundational. The bastard is the lowest of men, on the same plane as the despised untouchable, while a real man, a true Kshatriya, must be publicly and legitimately affiliated to his father. Questions about legitimate filiation are also questions about female virtue. Many South Asian customs and institutions are concerned primarily with protecting female virtue to ensure the integrity of the patriline and the caste (Liddle and Joshi 1986; Yalman 1967). As the Garhwalis say, "Only Krishna knows the Gita, and only the mother knows the father[!]"<sup>61</sup>

59. Cf. MBh 12.55. This point is also developed in Ghoshal 1966, chap. 12.

60. MBh 14.78.3-7, as translated by Goldman 1978, 330.

61. *Kṛṣṇa jāne gītā, mātā jāne pitā.*

These points become even clearer in my translation of a recorded, competitive exchange between two bards representing Nagarjuna and Arjuna. This exchange immediately followed the climactic slaying of the rhinoceros, represented by a sacrificial goat.<sup>62</sup> The dialogue took the form of a riddle wherein each speaker challenged the other (and implicitly the audience) to guess his identity. Note the importance here of being recognized as a Kshatriya of legitimate birth.

- N: Listen, O listen, my warrior: you are not your father's son. You stayed with another father for twelve months;<sup>63</sup> I think you are 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.
- 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 Kshatriya blood cannot be defeated; [but] you fled to Nagilok and hid, out of fear of me.
- N: Listen, O man, listen: we'll see about your "Kshatriya blood"! You little bastard! Your mother gave birth to Karna in her natal home, and from shame she set him adrift in the river; then she married Pandu. She lived like an unmarried whore! Hai Ram! 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 Kuntibhoj.<sup>64</sup> My mother prayed to the sage Durvasa, 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 Madri; and the other half were the boon-children of our elder mother [Kunti]. Hai Ram! Who serves the gods receives such boons, but your mother rubbed Shiva's linga!<sup>65</sup>
- 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, and leave your bloody trunk here! Today you will see a true

62. 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 līlā*.

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

64. In the Pune edition, Kunti is the biological daughter of King Shura and was adopted by Kuntibhoja.

65. *mādev go ling māyo.* This is an ambiguous, insulting double entendre. It refers not only to sexual play but also to the fact that Nagarjuna's mother, Vasudanta, had earlier received a boon from Shiva. It also calls to mind the Garhwali custom of rubbing ghee on the *śivalinga* at Kedarnath in order to obtain sons.

Kshatriya! Beat the drum and blast the horns!<sup>66</sup> Now see if I lie or not!

A: My mother is in far Jayanti, and I'm in Nagiloka. 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 Kshatriya. I will return to the mortal world for a year; you stay that year in Nagiloka.

N: You are a Kshatriya, a true Kshatriya.<sup>67</sup> 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 Babhravahana! I must go to the mortal world. I recognize you as my own, and give you reign over Nagiloka. O princely man, I must go, but you stay here in Nagiloka. I will go to the mortal world.

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

Why is the battle between Arjuna and Nagarjuna 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. Ritual, oral recitation, and Sanskrit text all place the continuity between father and son and the Kshatriya's concern for honor at the heart of this episode. The battle between Arjuna and Nagarjuna can thus be seen as a didactic episode stressing the ambivalent tension between the principle of filial piety and the principle of Kshatriya valor, and thus consistent with the enduring themes of the *Mahābhārata* story.

66. Literally "let the thirty-six rhythms and the twelve instruments be played!"

67. *khaśā kṣatriya*. This intriguing phrase is a double entendre: it could mean either a Kshatriya who is a *khaśā* (the so-called tribe from whom most local Kshatriyas are descended, a well-known but often-denied fact—see chapter 2); or a "special" (*khaś*) Kshatriya. Garhwali Rajputs sometimes say that the word *khaśā* actually means *khaś* (special).

## A Theater of Hegemony

### *Pāṇḍav Līlā as a Rajput Tradition*

*Pāṇḍav līlā* is part of the dharma of the Kshatriyas. Krishna taught the eighteen chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā* to Arjuna: that no one kills anyone else; that one dies only when one's time comes; that the earth from which we are made must die, but the soul [*prāṇ*] that speaks and flies away is immortal, and only changes bodies as one changes clothes; that everyone must die one day. Krishna taught all of this to Arjuna in the eighteen chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and Bhishma also taught it to him in the teachings concerning kingship [*rajanīti*], and it inspires our Garhwali youths with enthusiasm. Why shouldn't it? It's true. One must either fight or die. But one only dies when one's time [*āyū*] is finished. And if you win, so much the better. This is why Garhwali soldiers do so well in the military.  
—Padam Singh Negi

In this chapter I analyze the ways in which *pāṇḍav līlā* constructs peoples' identities as members of the warrior class (*kṣatriya varṇa*). In Garhwal, the various castes that make up this class are collectively known as Rajputs. They are politically and economically dominant, and like dominant castes elsewhere in India, they fulfill the "royal function" in several important respects. In what follows, I will show that *pāṇḍav līlā* does not simply "express" the dominance of the Rajputs but actively reproduces it through the medium of embodied performance. This is because in performances of *pāṇḍav līlā*, entire communities not only represent a set of virtues that are paradigmatically associated with warriors and kings but also dramatically embody and valorize a village polity in which Rajputs are dominant. Once again, *pāṇḍav līlā* has strong affinities with its classical antecedents; as Pollock (citing Oldenberg) points out, the Sanskrit epic literature was originally "composed by more or less professional poets for the politically dominant group, the kshatriyas" (1986, 15; cf. chapter 2).

But this drama is not so straightforward as it perhaps seems. The classes of Hindu society, like the persons who constitute them, have many strands, not all of which are in harmony with the others. Close attention to the Rajputs' language and practices reveals that they consider themselves to be like Brahmans in certain important respects, and I will show in detail later that this similarity is an important (though submerged) theme of *pāṇḍav*